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## **Regardless, 'I' and 'You': Lessons from Black Feminist Literature**

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*Regardless, 'I' and 'You': Lessons from Black Feminist Literature*

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

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by

Jasmine Veronica Saucedo

June 2022

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### **Abstract**

This thesis analyzes Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* from a Black feminist perspective to demonstrate oneness as capacious being. This project explores an I-You dialogue that works toward future-making through the notion of *regardless*, an idea from Walker's definition of Womanist, deployed through sustained engagement with Kevin Quashie's notion of oneness. Thus, this work extrapolates lessons found in the selected texts to demonstrate what it means to embody a capaciousness of being and how this then fosters healing in the face of trauma. In so doing, this thesis demonstrates how the theoretical notions of *regardless* and oneness have implications for our lived, shared, and social experiences.

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## Introduction

In Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* she defines a Womanist as someone who "Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*" (xii). The union of love and *regardless* stands out to me.<sup>1</sup> First, Walker's definition is capacious. The use of 'loves,' in the present tense, suggests an 'already' and 'evermore' quality that bypasses temporality. It suggests an inherent presence of self that values being. Moreover, it holds space for multiple aspects of one's life: music and dance as forms of expression; the moon and the Spirit as entities of adoration; love, food, and roundness as pleasures; and Folk and herself as a love for 'You' and 'I.'<sup>2</sup> And all of this while *also* loving struggle.

Walker's definition of womanism relies on an understanding of love that spans from sensual to struggle. It ruptures binary—either-or—logic and allows for each aspect of life and its contradictions to coalesce and exist simultaneously. Thus, Walker aptly describes the version of oneness—the wholeness, the capaciousness, the survival—that I call to in this project. The art of loving the self, and thereby community, is a laborious

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, I circulate between the critical third and first-person as part of the I-You dialogue invoked in this work.

<sup>2</sup> The pronouns 'I,' 'You,' and 'We' express a progression from the personal, I, to the relational, You, to the community of We that encompasses characters, readers, and writer alike. Each distinct I and You come together in community as We, but we are always unique and expansive in our own right.

task from which whole worlds of becoming become possible. ‘I’ and ‘You’ come into relationship through our shared music, dancing, and roundness. We struggle. We love ourselves. We love, *regardless*.

Taking Walker’s idea of *regardless* further, I see how Kevin Quashie’s ideas of aliveness, oneness, relationality, and connectedness distinguish the innerworkings of Walker’s capacious *regardless*. Quashie’s work in *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* focuses on the idea of a Black world—a reality that values humanity at its core and thwarts distinctions of race. Quashie delves into the aliveness of texts then, from the positionality of “imagine a black world” (1+). On par with Walker’s expansive *regardless*, Quashie relates aliveness “as the being of us” (1), the “aliveness in a black world: the becoming of beingness, the sensations that inhabit one’s body in its existence and that constitute intelligence” (19). In naming the possibilities of “imagine a black world” (1+) Quashie focuses on Black feminist literature to deepen an understanding of the world-making labor of texts. Focusing on poetry and essays, Quashie discusses poesis and aesthetics to emphasize the subjunctive work of ‘imagine’—the consideration of endless possibilities. This emphasis, again, grounds Walker’s idea of *regardless* as employed in this project.

Thus, applying Quashie’s engagement with the aliveness of Black literature to Walker’s *regardless* enables new readings and new interactions with texts. Consequently, *regardless* and oneness show the expansiveness of characters and their being to highlight the intricacies of trauma beyond its symbolic, or representative, function in texts—

particularly works by African American<sup>3</sup> authors. In a scene that reverberates with the aftermath of trauma, Sethe, the main character of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, wishes she could burrow into her dead daughter's grave and rest with her. Yet, her status as a mother with other children who need her results in a reassessment of her being. Through the lens of aliveness, Sethe's being matters *regardless*. Her life is life for her family. I return to and elaborate upon this scene in a later section. In the meantime, it is sufficient to say that Sethe's aliveness, expressed as a mother's love, embodies the capaciousness of Walker's *regardless*. Aliveness thus relieves Sethe of being singly defined by her trauma. Instead, aliveness gives critics a way to engage with trauma to discover the abiding, capacious *being* that awaits below the surface.

As Sethe teaches us, this notion of being is predicated on a value of self that does not require definition or validation from external sources. I refer to this self-valuation as oneness whereby *being* constitutes a knowing of self and the potential of connection with others predicated on personal accreditations. Additionally, I define oneness to be capaciousness of being. I see the expansion of being presented in Sethe who operates in her oneness on her terms: ex-slave, mother, former wife, liberator. Moreover, she embodies these titles despite other's categorization of her as chattel, vessel, dreamer, killer. This expansion of oneness, as housed within *regardless*, amplifies characters

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<sup>3</sup> Use of African American is informed by the following statement included by Andrews and others in *The Concise Oxford Companion to African American Literature*:

The variety of terms available to apply to persons of African descent – Black, black, and African American, for instance – appear in this volume according to the individual tastes and purposes of the contributors. We have selected African American (deliberately unhyphenated) for the title of this volume because we believe this term to be an accurate descriptor of the intersecting ethnic and national literary traditions that form the purview of this volume. We also see African American as the best alternative to the “hyphenated American” designations and politicized naming agendas of the past. (xi)

purposefully inhabiting a breadth of space—then, now, and tomorrow. *Regardless* in conjunction with oneness permits an expansive characterization of trauma survivors to embody the whole character.

Solidifying this effort, Quashie theorizes oneness as a concept of relationality and connectedness. These terms further nuance Walker's *regardless* and elaborate on the relationships characters, like the central figure of Walker's *The Color Purple*, Celie, build with others. Although Celie always has her oneness to expand boundaries of thinking and existence, it takes moments like her dear friend, Shug Avery, redefining God for Celie to better understand all that she is and to imagine all she could be. Such relationality, or sharing of ideas, sustains the connections between Celie and Shug Avery—their respective 'I' and 'You.' As Lauren Oya Olamina, the protagonist of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, puts it,

All that you touch  
You Change.  
All that you Change  
Changes you. (Butler, *Parable 3*)

Thus, the ideas of relationality and connectedness allow critics to distance themselves from considerations of trauma victims as one-dimensional and instead invites a holistic examination of characters and their complex interrelations as survivors.

Accordingly, it is important to my study to focus on the connections of history presented in *Beloved*, the ever-presentness of *The Color Purple*, and the futurity of *Parable of the Sower* to round out my temporal understanding of oneness—its expansiveness to reach back into memory, conjure it to the present, and propel us into a new future. Moreover, many literary discussions engage these three texts spanning their

poetics, their wholeness, or their creativity; however, I notice a critical tendency to engage the trauma presented in the texts as representational. Rather than continue in a tradition that numbly describes trauma as familiar, this project follows the example provided by Saidiya Hartman<sup>4</sup> and invites a dialogue between character and reader to understand the implications of trauma. As Bessel van der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, writes, traumatic experiences “also leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems” (1). Consideration of the references to the trauma presented in these texts past their representational quality invites an active discussion of the implications of trauma beyond the fictive portrayal. As such, scholars can employ the theoretical work of *regardless* and oneness to understand characters holistically. In my study, I aim to focus on traumatic events and their residual influence on characters. As I will show in the sections to come, Morrison, Butler, and Walker value the wholeness of their characters and exemplify their capacious beings *regardless*—through and despite trauma. This dialogue invites an understanding of trauma itself to then allow for the subsequent lessons to guide ‘I,’ ‘You,’ and ‘We’ toward healing.

As part of the discussion on trauma, I employ the terms ‘survivor’ and ‘survival.’ For these terms, I welcome the invocation of survival as articulated by Black feminist scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs when she writes, “Survival has never meant, bare minimum, mere straggling breath, the small space next to the line of death.” Rather, she articulates, “Survival references our living in the context of what we have overcome.

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<sup>4</sup> See Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*.

Survival is life after disaster, life in honor of our ancestors, despite the genocidal forces worked against them specifically so we would not exist” (Gumbs). This thinking is expansive. In line with the ideas of *regardless* and oneness, this perspective of survival as *living*, the living after and *regardless*, intensifies my thinking of oneness as capacious.

Characters, like Sethe, in this mode of being, show ‘I’ and ‘You’ how ‘We,’ the community, all become whole, capacious, wonderful. Beings in community working toward radical new futures, *regardless*. Through a being that holds space and disrupts linear time, we gather what we have learned, see where we are, and look to enact what could be. As such, when we work to reframe our thinking of such ideas as survival and healing, we can better live into our being. And so, additionally, I will explore the idea of healing as a journey with no perfect end-goal or dictated path. I return to ‘We’ in the third chapter, “Journey of Healing,” and explore its implications in the “Conclusion: Future-Making.” As the characters who inspire this thesis demonstrate, healing is the act of recovery which may present as reconceptualizing, joining in community, or finding the feeling of happy.

Again, my version of oneness attends to the aliveness described in Quashie’s text but emphasizes the empowered sense of being in Walker’s *regardless* crucial for this study. This empowerment finds footing in the acceptance of our wholeness, our capaciousness. As Monica Coleman, a Black womanist theologian, writes, “Black women’s experiences of multidimensional oppression are overcome through the pursuit and achievement of wholeness” (18). I propose that the “pursuit” toward wholeness relies on repetition, tending to trauma, and working toward healing.

Like Walker's *regardless* and Quashie's oneness, Coleman's idea of wholeness invokes an expansiveness that holds trauma and healing within the same space. An example of wholeness is seen through Lauren, the protagonist of Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. Lauren expresses to a fellow traveler that caring for others is an avenue to healing. This moment of wholeness demonstrates Lauren's acknowledgement of her personal experience with trauma, from which she is still recovering. Lauren's capacity to help others expresses the mode of being that encompasses love and struggle. Such help does not diminish the past but heightens possibilities for the future. We see parallels with Coleman's "multidimensional oppression" and trauma in Black women's literature then when characters try to relegate pieces of themselves (trauma) aside. Such characters as those invoked in this thesis, lose out on the expansiveness their being could be when they suppress versions of themselves. Rather than work toward healing, they relegate 'I' into complacency. As characters hide themselves, they limit their perspective and what they offer to others. Yet, when the characters partake in the practice of healing, they are encouraged to imagine alternatives.

Therefore, the idea of 'imagine' is paramount to the future-making of oneness, because for one to partake in the act of future-making, they must be open to other alternatives of reality other than the ones they are accustomed to or familiar with. I term this the 'after' from *after* the look back and the look around to then look forward. The 'after' of oneness is enacted in the same breath of the work toward healing. As a character moves toward a better understanding of their wholeness, they simultaneously partake in their own future-making. The act of imagination thereby reiterates character's

oneness because it demonstrates a self-valuation which reconciles the past and present to inhabit space in the future as well.

Characters Sethe, Lauren, and Celie, and in turn, authors Toni Morrison, Octavia E. Butler, and Alice Walker have been instrumental in teaching me how to be a woman *regardless*. Invoking these authors as teacher, and, thereby, situating myself as student, I refer to each insight as a lesson. This term, lesson, serves as a reminder that we learn through our critical relationality with texts and their authors remain with us well-past the turn of the last page. This relationality is our open communication with one another—verbal or nonverbal. It manifests as a willed exchange of knowing, or our knowledge, to empower each other. Our oneness benefits from this exchange as we adopt and adapt these lessons—much like characters who learn from each other.

Part of the exchange for this thesis coincides with Morrison, Butler, and Walker writing during the Black Women's Literary Renaissance which valued intersectional writing on gender and race. Their writings challenged perceptions of Black culture. As such, *Beloved*, *Parable of the Sower*, and *The Color Purple* are rightly regarded as seminal texts in the Black women's canon. As seminal texts, they speak volumes to contemporaneous issues. Surely other texts such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the second Earthseed novel, Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Talents*, may have fit into this study as well. However, the particular attentions to trauma and temporality presented in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* allows a conversation intersecting women, race, and trauma.

Further, to fully encapsulate the lessons my chosen texts provide, I bring oneness into close conversation with Black feminist criticism. Walker aptly portrays the uniqueness of the Black perspective in her response to Jean Toomer's observations of Southern Black women:<sup>5</sup>

But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women—our mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are. (Walker, *In Search* 235)

Walker details an important lineage of mother, grandmother, ourselves. When we look at our history, we see the work of the many generations that have come before. The grandmother who was denied an education. The mother who was “lucky” to get work as a secretary. Me, the one who is writing this thesis. This retrospective labor of searching for and finding the answers enables us to see the work that has been done and the work there is still to do. Attending to the past, knowing it cannot be erased, allows for the work of imagination because it provides a context from which we effectively endorse change. Drawing from our ancestor's experiences we recognize the importance of contextualizing the work we aim to do.

Furthermore, I relate the works by Morrison, Butler, and Walker to the Black feminist viewpoint because it offers a centering of the female characters from which I can then articulate how they, specifically, showcase healing. Moreover, Terrence Musanga and Theophilus Mukhuba, authors of “Toward the Survival and Wholeness of the African American Community: A Womanist Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*” offer, “[F]emale African American writers such as Alice Walker (1982) [and] Toni Morrison

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<sup>5</sup> See Jean Toomer's *Cane*.

(1970, 1987) [...] foreground gender in their works as they give meaning to what it means to be ‘black,’ ‘poor,’ ‘ugly,’ and a ‘woman’ in America” (389). Too, the Black feminist lens prizes community which is pivotal in the healing journey. With lead female characters who love, struggle, and live against all odds, Morrison, Butler, and Walker encapsulate the heart of *regardless* and oneness with characters who are substantive and whole.

Turning now to the selected texts, Sethe of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* provides an expansive interpretation of oneness and wholeness. Taking inspiration from Margaret Garner’s story, a woman accused of infanticide, Toni Morrison surely expands the notion of a capacious character. *Beloved* (1987) is a complex web of stories about pre- and post-slavery connected by “rememory.”<sup>6</sup> As Morrison writes in her seminal essay, “The Site of Memory,” memory “weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant” (91-92). As if in direct reply to Morrison, Louise Bernekoew writes in their 1987 contemporaneous review for *Cosmopolitan* that “objects shimmer at the edge of reality” as the book and Sethe’s house are haunted, and only Morrison could have written a story that “carries the weight of history” (48). The emphasis on history and rememory offer insight on the circulation of temporality as related to this project. Moreover, Sethe is a runaway slave who finds refuge at the house called 124 with her mother-in-law, two sons, and two daughters in Ohio. Accused of murdering her infant daughter, Sethe works to navigate her life of freedom with her surviving daughter, Denver. This life is then interrupted by one of the Sweet Home men, Paul D’s, return and,

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<sup>6</sup> Rememory is a term used within *Beloved* that Sethe calls to as she recollects memories. I employ this term because of the emphasis of ‘re’ as repetition as well as its connection to Sethe as she recalls her trauma.

again, by the presence of Beloved, a figure believed to be Sethe's dead daughter reincarnate. *Beloved* serves as a rich text offering insight on the pervasiveness of repetition through the return of characters as well as a circulation of ever-pressing memories.

Alice Walker, in turn, nuances the interpretation of oneness in *The Color Purple* (1982). As an epistolary novel, this text relays the stories of numerous African American women<sup>7</sup> as they encounter patriarchic norms and misogynistic partners in the U.S., post-slavery. Highlighting the oneness in this text, Jeanne Fox-Alston writes in their 1982 review, Walker writes "about [B]lacks in particular, but all humanity in general" (E3). Furthermore, *Kirkus Reviews* marks this novel as determinably feminist and "a lovely, painful book: Walker's finest work yet" (518). Centered around Celie's life, from girlhood on, she recounts her rapes and consequential children, sisterhood, marriage, sexual awakening, spiritual reckoning, and journey for healing in letters to God, and to and from her sister, Nettie.<sup>8</sup> Further demonstrating the work of Walker's *regardless*, Celie and her community offer a unique perspective on the importance of friendship.

Then, in a look to the future, Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) serves as the collection of verses and diary entries by Lauren Oya Olamina, a hyperempath.<sup>9</sup> Jackie Cassada reviews the book in 1993 for the *Library Journal*, writing,

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<sup>7</sup> Celie, Nettie, Sofia, Shug Avery, Mary Agnes, and Olivia

<sup>8</sup> Walker employs African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, in Celie and Nettie's letters, thus any direct quotations from the text will be honored in their original authority without the use of *sic*. to diminish the importance of this linguistic choice.

<sup>9</sup> Hyperempathy is a condition that causes Lauren, and others like her, to feel other people's pain. This can debilitate a hyperempath in instances of self-defense, and is, therefore, quite a vulnerable matter in Lauren's present circumstances.

“[s]imple, direct, and deeply felt, [which] should reach both mainstream and [science fiction] audiences” (93). In this science-fiction text, Lauren chronicles the depraved ruins of the U.S. in the 2020s. Navigating her coming-of-age in such a tumultuous time she decidedly rejects her father’s Christianity and explores her discovery of God as Change as a robust alternative. When Lauren’s family is murdered and her community burnt to ashes, she survives to start the first *Earthseed* community with the unlikely band of fellow survivors she meets along the way. Through Lauren’s work of redefinition, *Parable of the Sower* offers insight on oneness for the work of ‘imagine.’

As the framework for my analysis, then, I have created three sections of work: Repetition, Trauma, and the Journey of Healing. Each chapter is further divided by a series of lessons that expound on the overarching lessons of repetition, trauma, and healing. Thus, I will begin with an exploration of repetition, to offer insight on the use of the ‘cut’ and chiasmus in the texts. Next, I will delve into the pain of trauma. In this chapter, I note the breadth of “multidimensional oppression” these characters face. Then, importantly, I invite insights from each character’s approach, acknowledgement, and healing from their respective traumas. Thereafter, I mark the conclusion with proposals for the possibilities of a new future. One that we work together to manifest and create.

## Repetition

The foundation of my understanding of repetition in these texts comes from James A. Snead's influential article "On Repetition in Black Culture." In this article, Snead contrasts European understandings of repetition as an accumulation and Black understandings of repetition as a return, a circulation. Repetition in the selected texts takes numerous forms, from repeated phrases to cyclical structures of narration. I start with text-level patterns as a mode of entry into the texts. I also engage with memory as a form of repetition. From this textual groundwork I scaffold interpretations of the text in dialogue with 'I' and 'You.'

I begin with Snead's analysis of repetition in Black culture. Snead investigates the use of repetition from jazz to literature. This engagement reframes repetition as not merely economical in essence, but something as substantive as Walker's *regardless* and Quashie's aliveness. He writes, "In black culture, repetition means that the thing *circulates* [...] there in an equilibrium" (Snead 149). My use of Snead's appreciation of repetition is thereby founded on the idea of circulation and flow rather than accumulation. This distinction resituates repetition as an expansive literary device.

Therefore, repetition becomes a place of rupture in the texts for characters to fully realize their oneness. The protagonists notice their worth and importance through circulations of stories and ideas. As they look back on the lessons of mother,

grandmother, ourselves, they see what has been and, thereby, realize what can be. Accordingly, repetition's circulation and flow defy temporality through constant equilibrium. Such equilibrium coincides with the idea of oneness as capaciousness. Rather than Sethe, Lauren, and Celie becoming more as we read through each novel, who they are circulates throughout the text. We learn about them in the discoveries we make, but they are not more or less from the first to last page. As circulation and flow are capacious, so too does repetition open the possibility for re-membering, or reconstructing memories.

Snead then expounds on his idea of repetition and opens the possibilities for repetition as world-making. Snead writes that "given a 'quality of difference' compared to what has come before" repetitions of material existence "become not exactly a 'repetition' but rather a 'progression,' if positive, or a 'regression,' if negative" (146). His idea is echoed in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition (The Princeton Encyclopedia)*: "Similarly to the line break, [repetition] disrupts the linearity of lang., creating a counterpoint rather than continuity of narrative logic" (Repetition 1169). Snead's language reframes the concept of repetition and welcomes a grace into longstanding understandings of this literary device. Rather than insist that repetition only allows for the same thing on loop, the "quality of difference" afforded here conveys a similar idea to Quashie's subjunctive 'imagine' by providing a new possibility. Through this "quality of difference," repetition breaks cycles—of (generational) trauma, for instance—and invites opportunities for new avenues. Repetition expands to be a way forward. As such, we begin to see the importance of repetition as a tool to dissect trauma itself, and later, the healing that comes from this work.

Other versions of repetition also work to dissect trauma further. These forms of repetition showcase the varied work the characters do in expanding their perspectives. One vitally important tool is Snead's notion of the 'cut.' He writes, the goal "continually 'cuts' back to the start, in the musical meaning of 'cut' as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break [...] with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series" (Snead 150). I see this particularly in *Beloved* wherein Morrison's narrator returns to important stories, like the death of Sethe's daughter, from multiple perspectives. As the narrator returns "to a prior series," the one "already in progress," there is an "unmotivated break" that provides insight from a different vantage point. Characters, such as the narrator, Stamp Paid, and Sethe herself, add their understanding and thereby nuance the meaning of events, such that "[t]he momentum has elevated the initial material to a new level rather than merely re-presenting it unchanged" (152). As in *Beloved*, the persistent rhythm of stories retold 'cut' back to the undercurrent of the narrator's "willed return." The stories shared by the characters then compound "the quality of difference" and imbue the character's oneness with a quality of being coinciding with aliveness.

Another idea within the wholeness of repetition is expounded by chiasmus. Whereas repetition and the 'cut' look to futurity, chiasmus imposes a reflexivity that corresponds with oneness. Like oneness, chiasmus works to round out the past and the future, it demonstrates the capaciousness of text to set up *what will be* in preparation for *what has always been*. *The Princeton Encyclopedia* describes a feature of chiasmus which extends to "an entire poem or novel" (225). This additional distinction of chiasmus as part of repetition's work in the text attends to the scope of repetition in African American literature which Quashie also notes. He observes "that gradually the entire plot

of the novel itself has been all along tending towards the shape of return—the circle” (Snead 151). We see an example of this expansive work again in *Beloved* where Morrison arranges the text to have Sethe return to her initial act of protecting her children.

In this example, we can see each layer of my framework (repetition, the ‘cut,’ and chiasmus) enacted. First, the act of protecting her child, Beloved, is a story which has already been told by the narrator, Stamp Paid, and Sethe. The narrator repeats details like Sethe’s head being stuck by what feel like hummingbird beaks. Morrison then employs the ‘cut’ when rather than resolve to cut Beloved’s throat, Sethe instead takes an ice pick against the intruder posing a threat to her family. And finally, we understand the chiasmus fulfilled by “the circle” of return in the opposing stories. Further engaging these three ideas: repetition, the ‘cut,’ and chiasmus, I will show how each character approaches repetition differently. Nonetheless, they use each rendition to compel their being to recognize their oneness and accept their capaciousness.

From repetition, the ‘cut,’ and chiasmus, the characters find their voice. Specifically, Lauren recounts her observations on women’s voices to shape her own in lesson one. In lesson two, I explore how Celie gains her own voice through letter writing and reading. In these acts, Celie also demonstrates an expansive understanding of temporality which leads to lesson three: how traumatic memories recirculate—trauma as a narrative on loop. Then, for lesson four, I look to Sethe who also describes her strenuous relationship with repetition and rememory with a “quality of difference.” I apply the lessons on voice, letter writing, temporality of memories, and rememory to

lesson five to understand the vital role of repetition in literature. With these lessons we have a stable foundation with which to reckon with trauma itself.

### Lesson One: Voice

In *Parable of the Sower*, repetition is often used to reiterate Lauren's *Earthseed* verses to both reader and her fellow travelers, or to describe the depravity of the U.S. in Lauren's time. For the work of this thesis though, I concentrate on the patterns of repetition that circulate among the female characters. This focus draws attention to the importance of adopting and adapting practices which guide the characters to recognize their oneness. An important first step toward oneness is the use of voice and Lauren provides astute observations of the voices of women in her community. Lauren's observations on voice and the power it affords women is foundational to her own use of voice, and thereby, her power.

As Lauren and her family are led to presume her father's death, she delivers a sermon to the Robledo community. At the conclusion of this gathering, Kayla Talcott,<sup>10</sup> begins to sing a hymn. Lauren notes her own singing voice as fair and praises Kayla's voice: she "has a big voice, beautiful, clear, and able to do everything she asks of it" (Butler, *Parable* 135). Here, I recognize memory as a form of repetition. Lauren has witnessed the power of Kayla's voice before. By calling on her memory of Kayla's previous performances, Lauren lays the foundation for the work of 'imagine'—the

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<sup>10</sup> Mother of Curtis Talcott, Lauren's initial love-interest.

subjunctive position invoking possibilities. She considers what she wants to adopt or adapt for her voice—one that she too can train “to do everything she asks of it.” Although she led a sermon, Lauren distinguishes there is more for her voice to do. In this recognition, Lauren provides herself a store of potentials she may call on in future. We see here that the information is not regarded as accumulative, but rather bears evidence of Snead’s idea of circulation. The praise for Kayla’s voice then, serves as a springboard for Lauren’s other observations about women’s voices, and how she discerns her relationality—her open connection to others sharing their knowing, their knowledge.

For instance, the next mention of voice relates to Zahra, a sister-wife to Richard Moss (who has died along with Lauren’s family in the violent burning of their Robledo suburb) and Lauren’s roadside companion. Lauren notes that “Zahra has a soft, little-girl voice that [she] used to think was phony. It’s real, but it takes a sandpaper roughness when she’s upset” (Butler, *Parable* 168). Whereas Kayla’s strong voice clearly communicates her power, Zahra’s voice tells of the trauma she has witnessed so far, before and during her time in Robledo. Calling again on the repetition elicited by the past perceptions of Zahra, Lauren is able to make fruitful comparisons of the Zahra she knew and the Zahra she now knows. This distinction favors the concept of oneness that regards Zahra as the ‘You’ that always is this woman with a little-girl voice as well as the woman with a sandpaper voice. Lauren’s ‘I’ recognizes the connection and comes to a new understanding of the relationality between herself and Zahra. Again, relationality is our open communication with one another—verbal or nonverbal. As Lauren’s perception of Zahra’s voice being “phony” highlights the contrast she draws against a pillar like Kayla,

Lauren recognizes her capaciousness to see the interrelation of her interactions. As Lauren recognizes this wholeness, she exhibits a quality of her oneness.

Then, employing the ‘cut,’ Lauren takes lessons from the power of these women’s voices and constructs her authority by utilizing a steady voice. When Lauren’s morals are challenged by Harry, her other roadside companion, regarding stealing, she conveys her frustration for the circumstances: “I didn’t speak until I knew my voice would sound normal. Then, ‘I said I meant to survive,’ I told him. ‘Don’t you?’” (Butler, *Parable* 172). Because Lauren allows herself the space and the time to regain control over her voice, she articulates the lessons she has learned in her observations of both Kayla and Zahra. She uses her standpoint to demand respect.

Lauren is well on her way toward the ‘after’ of oneness as she is able to utilize the propulsion of ‘imagine’ to inform the version of herself she wants to be now. Lauren returns to this core understanding of her power and voice when she communicates her needs to Bankole, her future husband, who has just offered to have her live with him on his land. Lauren verbalizes, “‘I need you to understand me,’ I said. ‘I need you to take me the way I am or go off to your land by yourself’” (Butler, *Parable* 276). Because of who she is and what she has learned, Lauren is able to bargain her connection with repetition time and again to empower herself and her community in turn. With each emphasis of women’s voice, Lauren learns to employ the ‘cut’ and discern the “quality of difference” to help embolden her oneness.

## Lesson Two: Dear Sister

Lesson one of repetition showcases the importance of Lauren's voice to empower herself and her community. In lesson two, a similar concept is explored through letter-writing. Moreover, the characters rupture the bounds of time which furthers an understanding of repetition as circulation within the texts. Specifically, Walker's *The Color Purple* features repetition and the 'cut' through the epistolary nature of the novel.<sup>11</sup> For the initial part of the book, each letter begins with Celie writing "Dear God." However, the latter part of the book has letters entitled "Dear Nettie" or "Dear Celie" depending on which sister is writing/reading. This shift showcases the 'cut.'

Nettie, Celie's little sister, runs away from home and before she leaves, Celie tells Nettie to write to her. Regretfully, Celie's husband, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, intercepts every letter Nettie sends to Celie and conceals them in a hidden chest. Celie assumes a dark fate for her sister. However, Nettie's life continues well-past her time with Celie as she meets missionaries Samuel and Corinne and then moves to Africa with them to raise Olivia and Adam.<sup>12</sup> This reality is only encapsulated for Celie through Nettie's letters. When Celie becomes aware of the trove of Nettie's letters hidden away by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, she welcomes her sister's voice once more. As Celie reads Nettie's letters, Nettie lives her life all over

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<sup>11</sup> Nettie's letters offer many observations of Africa and the Olinka people that certainly present a wealth of starting points for discussions on decolonization/decoloniality, and religion as relayed by the Olinka community in addition to the individual stories of Adam, Olivia, and Tashi themselves.

<sup>12</sup> Olivia and Adam are explained to be Celie's biological children, Samuel and Corinne's adopted children, who, then, upon return to the U.S., are reunited with Celie.

again. This repetition is not accumulative. Rather, the letters serve as a channel of communication formally denied to either reading party.

I call attention to the repetitive epistolary nature of the novel because it helps ground an understanding of Celie and Nettie's relationality which burgeons into their respective oneness. Again, relationality is the exchange of knowing enacted by a willingness to share what 'I' have learned to empower another, 'You.' With Nettie's 'I' attending to Celie's 'You,' she opens her connection, and thereby relationality, to her sister in a way that supersedes locality and temporality. Celie introduces the first letter she reads of Nettie's to her divine, "Dear God" (Walker, *Color* 114). Then, we receive the first break in the "Dear God" repetition with "Dear Celie" (114). From this break of "Dear God" to "Dear [Sister]," I see the 'cut' once more. Up to this point, Celie has written to God because she does not recognize a viable alternative. God is the entity to whom she always penned her salutation. Without the possibility of another option, she is not privy to a knowing otherwise—a knowing that becomes possible in accepting her oneness. Shortly hereafter, the repeated "Dear God" form that had marked the start of each new letter transitions explicitly to each sister addressing the other.

From this mode of repetition, the novel highlights an important shift from Celie writing to a divine to Celie writing to her sister. Nettie reflects on the power of her letter writing to Celie: "Only the sky above us do we hold in common. I look at it often as if, somehow, reflected from its immensities, I will one day find myself gazing into your eyes. Your dear, large, clean and beautiful eyes" (Walker, *Color* 184). Here, Nettie employs her oneness. I understand their connection through the expansiveness of their shared relationality. A connection fostered by their memories of each other, the love they

hold for one another, and the refusal to allow time or physical separation impede on their shared knowing. Through repetition, Celie sees the parallel between her sister and God. To make a connection to the profound idea that her sister can become a stand-in for God as she is wholeness embodied. Celie's transition from "Dear God" to "Dear Nettie" showcases her initial attempts to live into her oneness to demonstrate her understanding of relationality and the expansiveness of implementing alternatives.

Nettie broadens the sisters' worldview even more when she describes temporality. She writes, "Time moves slowly, but passes quickly" (Walker, *Color* 161). In the countering dialectic of time's speed as both slow and quick, we see a roundness, a capaciousness, to time. This reconceptualization of time disrupts linearity in favor of a circular return that continues evolving similar to the circulation and flow of repetition. With a reframing of the subjectiveness of temporality, characters, like Celie, see the nuance of time when she reads through memories in Nettie's letters. There is a timestamp on the moment of Nettie's life, yes, but in being able to revisit that exact moment in the letter, Celie's attention to time's passing ceases. For instance, when Nettie writes of her discovery that Olivia and Adam are Celie's children, that momentous revelation happens early in Nettie's life. But for Celie, the repetition of that discovery exists in the present as she reads Nettie's words.

This disruption of time is enacted in every letter Celie reads. Therefore, I see a boundless flow of their being in communication with one another, even without direct response. I see the circulation of their power found in love that connects them in a way only the capaciousness of oneness allows. Although disconnected by years without a reply and although Celie has yet to fully embody her own wholeness, Nettie harkens on

the beauty of imagining a reunion with her sister: “I will one day find myself gazing into your eyes” (Walker, *Color* 184). In a sense, this act of future-making—the act of manifesting such a reunion—deepens the relationship Nettie forges with Celie in her repeated letter writing. Noting the power of connection even in the multitude of letters she does not receive a response to, Nettie reminds Celie that their respective oneness transcends an unrequited letter.

### Lesson Three: Talk and Cry

In this chapter on repetition, lesson one demonstrates how Lauren finds her voice by adopting and adapting memories of other women. In lesson two, Celie finds her voice as she writes and reads letters while also reconfiguring temporality. For lesson three, I explore how memory as repetition invites healing for Celie. Celie has experienced multiple traumas and been told to keep silent about them. Yet, Celie begins to share her stories through connections and relationality—an open exchange. This sharing leads to release and relief.

A notable example of this relationality occurs between Celie and Shug Avery, a singer first introduced as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s lover. Shortly after Shug Avery’s singing tour, Shug pays a visit to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and Celie. Celie breezily describes this time with Shug: “Me and Shug cook, talk, clean the house, talk, fix up the tree, talk, wake up in the morning, talk” (Walker, *Color* 106). Celie sees the value in communication through her time with Shug Avery. Musanga and Mukhuba, authors of “Toward the Survival and Wholeness of the African American Community: A Womanist Reading of Alice

Walker's *The Color Purple*," agree, "Dialogue is presented as an important step in Celie's therapeutic healing and self-discovery as the bond of love and affection is established in the way Shug guides and supports Celie toward self-discovery" (395). Celie's openness to talk is a noteworthy difference from her previous characterization as someone who is silent and again showcases the possibilities that stem from repetition.

For example, Celie emphasizes the healing power of repetition when she notes her other interactions with Shug Avery. After Celie and Shug Avery develop their friendship, Celie tells Shug about how her Pa first raped her when she was fourteen. His continual abuse eventually made her a mother of two. After Celie's revelation, Shug puts her arms around Celie, an act that serves to comfort Celie. Then Celie describes her reaction: "I start to cry too. I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise. How it stung while I finish trimming his hair. How the blood drip down my leg and mess up my stocking" (Walker, *Color* 108-09). Celie's memories of this initial trauma locate emotions, feelings, and physical sensations. Celie finds herself in the safety of Shug Avery's arms, but she feels the hurt, the surprise, the stinging, the blood all the same. Such potent recollections demonstrate a consequence of disrupted temporality. Rather than invoking the capacious time of Nettie's sweet letters, here Celie reckons with the capaciousness of circulating repetition which also manifests as disturbingly vivid sensations.

Bessel van der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score*, writes of this facet of repetition when he describes how trauma leaves "traces on our minds and emotions" (1). Walker's deliberate emphasis on the repeated act of crying thus serves multiple functions. It represents the release of memories and encapsulates the numerous forms of crying

Celie experiences in this moment—the “quality of difference” in “I cry and cry and cry.” Again, the “quality of difference” is described by Snead as a “momentum [which] has elevated the initial material to a new level rather than merely re-presenting it unchanged” (152). First, Celie has broken the cycle of her silence. Next, in this moment of memory as repetition, Celie acknowledges what sensations she felt, both physical and emotional, and how her life changed after that encounter. Reckoning with this truth, Celie then confronts her past. In contextualizing her past, she adapts her present toward her well-being.

Additionally, Celie’s crying elevates the initial memory from sadness, to grief, to reliving her pain, and to relief of finally having told someone. Celie notes how admitting this truth brings it all back to her and, therefore, highlights the role of the ‘cut’ in healing because this return allows her to recognize the traces of her trauma and realize her oneness. As Shug Avery comforts and respects Celie’s individuality, she advances Celie’s recognition of her oneness as a wholeness that circulates. After being vulnerable with someone she trusts, Celie starts to see the wholeness of her being and realize the importance of loving her ‘I.’ Shug Avery and Celie recognize the communion of their oneness in repetition. As such, Celie realizes an alternative trajectory for her life. The shift from ‘talk’ to ‘cry’ creates opportunity for healing—simultaneous love and struggle.

#### Lesson Four: Rememory

Lesson one of repetition describes how Lauren adapts her voice. Lesson two details Celie’s letter writing and reading and how this disrupts linear time. In lesson three, I show how Celie moves from ‘talk’ to ‘cry’ after recognizing that the temporality of

circulation also conjures troubling sensations associated with memories. In lesson four, I demonstrate how Sethe's rememory, or memories re-constructed, also exhibits the circulation of past sensations. Again, rememory is a recollection of memories. It is also a re-remembering of the sensations associated with memory. Furthering the discussion on temporality, rememory permits Sethe's daughter, Denver, to relive Sethe's life, an idea similar to Celie reading Nettie's letters.

The narrative development of *Beloved* mimics Sethe's rememory as it relies on the repetition of memory signposts. Sethe remembers too much of the horrible tragedies of her life, too little of the features of her own children, and still always has room for more. Sethe scorns her brain for this betrayal. The narrator describes how Sethe

shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite? I am full God damn it. (Morrison, *Beloved* 83)

Sethe's relationship with repetition is strenuous. It continually calls forth the past and has no interest in the future. Because Sethe has recognized the capacity of her brain, she demonstrates a partial understanding of her oneness. However, because she feels her brain is limited to merely remembering what she would rather forget, Sethe does not recognize her wholeness.

The repetition of Sethe's memory works in her daughter's favor though, as Denver has been repeatedly granted access to stories about herself. Namely, Denver's interest lies in the story of how she was born. After growing up with the story, she retells it to Beloved, a character assumed to be Denver's dead sister. As part of this retelling,

Beloved (acting as a supernatural medium<sup>13</sup>) allows Denver “to see what she was saying and not just to hear it: there is this nineteen-year-old slavegirl—a year older than herself—walking through the dark woods to get to her children who are far away” (Morrison, *Beloved* 91). Denver’s rememory of this story signifies a “quality of difference.” Namely, Denver is not Sethe, but she is able to recognize the similarities and differences that separate her from this memory. This compelling image of the connection Denver makes with Sethe works to express a portion of Denver’s oneness toward recognizing her own wholeness.

As Denver convenes with the image of her mother on this journey to freedom—a ‘cut’—Denver collects lessons from the past that may propel her forward. Because Denver lives into Sethe’s story, she demonstrates the intensity of their relationality. Of course, Denver is Sethe’s daughter, but the work of relationality is founded on a recognition of ‘You’ as an individual entity. Which is to say, Denver is not subsumed into her mother, but inhabits her own space that grants her a vantage point from which she chooses to enter a relation with her mother. The power in the connection of Denver’s rememory, seeing herself as her mother, is forceful because Denver does not minimize Sethe as mother, but can see who Sethe *was* in conjunction with who she *is*. When she notes Sethe’s age in the memory as only “a year older than herself” (Morrison, *Beloved* 91) she distinguishes her ‘I’ from Sethe’s ‘You’ and still holds space for the impact of the interaction. This new claim to self positions Denver as a great aid to her mother in the trials to come.

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<sup>13</sup> Beloved affords Denver the opportunity to become her mother, Sethe, in the retelling of her story: “Denver was seeing it now and feeling it—through Beloved” (Morrison 91).

## Lesson Five: Repetition

This chapter on repetition begins with lesson one where Lauren adopts and adapts observations on voice. In lesson two Celie also learns of the power of her and her sisters' voice while highlighting repetition as defying temporality. In lesson three, Celie shares her story with Shug Avery, and she demonstrates the 'cut.' In lesson four on rememories, Sethe and Denver demonstrate repetition's role in their lives. For lesson five, I integrate each of these lessons to show how Sethe's memory as repetition fuels the narrative of *Beloved*. I focus on the most compelling rememory scenes in *Beloved* which revolve around Sethe's actions in the shed with her children and the handsaw.

Stamp Paid, the man who aids runaway slaves and saves Sethe, initiates one of these rememory scenes. He takes it upon himself to inform Paul D of Sethe's past in Ohio. Paul D is a former fellow resident of Sweet Home, the estate where he and Sethe were enslaved, and he and Sethe share a close bond because of their shared experiences. Yet, Stamp Paid feels obligated to tell Paul D what Sethe did after she left Sweet Home. Prior to Stamp Paid's rememory of events, the narrator also provides their own rendition of the scene. When Paul D confronts Sethe and demands to know the truth, Sethe vocalizes her version of the story, the third iteration. Although the varying perspectives lend clarity to this scene, and thus illustrate the circulation and flow of repetition, these retellings demonstrate a chiasmatic function—each memory reflects the other. In this reflection, the memories have a definite roundness that provide clarity. Yet, each reiteration revolves around the same story furthering the circulation of chiasmus.

In the third iteration especially, Paul D describes how Sethe's approach to the story disorients him. The narrator explains, "[i]t made him dizzy [...] he thought it was her spinning. Circling him the way she was circling the subject. Round and round, never changing direction" (Morrison, *Beloved* 189). I see this moment as the innermost circle of the chiasmatic work done in *Beloved*. Sethe does not permeate the inner-layer of her circle ("never changing direction"). The repetition of her movement, "round and round" inspires a distortion of temporality. In this rememory, Sethe reconstructs the sensations of her fear, her desire to protect her children, and the sense of urgency she feels when the four-horsemen of slavery come to take her family back to Sweet Home. This repetition draws attention to the act itself which Sethe feels she must justify. However, Sethe's "circling the subject" as a form of "chiasmus expresses the unresolved and unresolvable matter of ethics" (Quashie 107). Sethe recognizes the justification for her actions likely will not coincide with Paul D's understanding of the situation, as Stamp Paid also doesn't understand.

Even so, Sethe conveys her version of events. Repeating key details from the first iteration provided by the narrator, Sethe's version provides a "quality of difference." The narrator describes the sensations Sethe felt as the four horsemen approach and approximates Sethe's thought-process:

Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nonono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (Morrison, *Beloved* 192)

There are two phrases Morrison uses to describe how Sethe thinks of this rememory: “collected every bit of life she had made” and “all the parts of her.” Even in this moment of panic, Sethe recognizes she has made life, much of it. She has a multitude of ‘parts’ that deserve to be saved. Not only are they worthy, but they are “precious and fine and beautiful.” It is because of their preciousness then that Sethe determines they will be protected at all costs.

Sethe comprehends the scope of implications when she kills her daughter. She loves her daughter. She wants better for her daughter. She saves her daughter. And still, she doesn’t get to the middle of the ethics. Instead, in this scene we are able to see that Sethe grasps that her life—the before-Sweet-Home, the after-Sweet-Home, the crawling-already? baby’s spit turned blood, and life thereafter, are all a part of who she is. Through the chiasmus, we see the capaciousness of her oneness as she uses her voice, returns to this memory, shares her feelings, and rememories the context that situates what happens in the shed. Here, Sethe attunes with her oneness and wholeness. She has grand space for her identity as mother, wife, daughter-in-law, ex-slave, and ex-convict. This certainly calls to survival as reimagined by Black feminist scholar Alexis Pauline Gumbs. Sethe’s life of *regardless* “despite the genocidal forces [working] against” (Gumbs) her and her loved ones.

Sethe’s passionate motivation to protect her children is repeated at the end of *Beloved*, but here, Sethe uses the ‘cut.’ In this iteration, rather than look to kill Beloved, Sethe aims to take her ice pick against the intruder himself. Sethe chooses not to pick-up a handsaw but instead wields an ice pick. This ‘cut,’ in conjunction with the chiasmus of the novel, represents the expansiveness of Sethe’s oneness. Her becoming of being

speaks to her aliveness and her wholeness in love and struggle. Through her engagement with repetition, Sethe articulates the importance of momentum as temporality is distorted.

These lessons of repetition serve as a steppingstone into the discussion of trauma—the narrative on loop. Considering how repetition, in sharing stories and rememory, conjure sensations and emotions, I connect the literary device to the concept of trauma in the next chapter. This connection will highlight the prominence of repetition in the texts while focusing on the literary themes. From this framework, I will begin to demonstrate similarities among the texts. These similarities will then be expounded in the third chapter, *Journey of Healing*, to showcase the lessons gained in reading these three texts collectively.

## Trauma

Similar to Celie who closes herself off from feeling the weight of her trauma for so many years, a limitation is enforced when characters compartmentalize their emotions, feelings, and bodily reactions to trauma. Rather than live into her oneness, Celie remains confined to silence while she awaits someone to show her otherwise. Such a response coincides with ideas of trauma described by Bessel van der Kolk, author of *The Body Keeps the Score*. He writes, “overwhelming experiences affect our innermost sensations and our relationship to our physical reality—the core of who we are” (21). van der Kolk, provides critical insight on the developments of the science on trauma and post-traumatic stress. He relays his personal experiences with patients and their traumas. From his findings, he asserts, “Trauma is not stored as a narrative with an orderly beginning, middle, and end” (137). Therefore, as trauma is a product of repetition, it is important to keep in mind Snead’s understanding of repetition—“the thing *circulates*” (147). From this touchstone, I present Sethe, Lauren, and Celie’s experiences with traumatic events to then move into the work of healing.

An important aspect of trauma is the sense of isolation it enforces. van der Kolk articulates, “After trauma the world becomes sharply divided between those who know and those who don’t” (18). Sethe, Lauren, and Celie struggle with their sense of community because they feel isolated in their experiences. There is a sharp divide among

those who understand and those that don't or won't try to. Sethe is ostracized by her community for the death of her daughter. Lauren is discounted for her uncertainty in adapting outside the Robledo walls. Celie faces a physical isolation from her sister and lacks a model for her oneness. Yet, each character eventually breaks out of these regressive cycles and softens, if not eradicates, the sharpness of the divide between 'I' and 'You.'

It is important for the characters to recognize the similarities they do share with one another so they can step out of presumed loneliness. Celie does this when she talks to and cries with Shug Avery. To this end, van der Kolk writes, "The critical issue is reciprocity: being truly heard and seen by the people around us, feeling that we are held in someone else's mind and heart" (81). For example, Celie is emboldened when she is "heard and seen" by Shug Avery. She feels cared for in "mind and heart" reading Nettie's letters. In this reciprocity, Celie realizes her oneness is not meant to be sequestered. Instead, characters like Sethe, Lauren, and Celie, further embrace their oneness to sustain exchanges of repetition's circulation and flow to see past the divide.

A relationality—open communication with one another—is fostered by the connections past the divide. Yet, as Celie requires Nettie, Sofia, and Shug Avery to tell her what they see in her, Celie must be willing to accept these connections and adopt or adapt them to support the relationality. Particularly for someone like Celie who does not have experience with power, it is important she connect to others who can offer guidance because "the brain is a cultural organ [and] experience shapes the brain" (van der Kolk 86). Joy after joy versus trauma after trauma will shape one's outlook—"progression,' if positive, or a 'regression,' if negative" (Snead 146). Therefore, I return to the scenes of

trauma in these texts to find room for the ‘cut:’ an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break [...] with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series” (Snead 150). Through the ‘cut’ characters look forward, and back, and around, and thus generate opportunities for new experiences and perspectives. Such engagement toward progression reveals a more expansive oneness.

In this chapter, I start with Lauren’s reality of the end of the world as she knows it in lesson one. Overwhelmed by circumstances, she processes her grief in lesson two. Sethe also grieves her old life on Sweet Home along with the weight of her daughter’s death in lesson three. I also delve deeper into Sethe’s individual oneness as she exhibits life *regardless*. Next, in lesson four, I explore Celie’s struggle with ‘alive’ as existence. In lesson five, I note the impact of relationality for Celie and Sofia with ‘I’ and ‘You.’ With these lessons, each character recognizes their trauma through repetition. As they recognize the narrative on loop, they embolden themselves to heal.

#### Lesson One: The End of the World

As part of a nation-wide catastrophe, Lauren is born into a world on the verge of total collapse. Climate change and corrupt government foster an environment of poverty and violence. From the first chapter of *Parable of the Sower*, Butler aptly sets the tone and expectations for the utter depravity rampant in Lauren’s world. Again, van der Kolk writes that trauma leaves “traces on our minds and emotions” (1). Joanne, Lauren’s friend, summarizes the horrible events that have befallen their Robledo neighborhood since the start of the novel: “‘Rape, robbery, and now murder. Of course I think about it.

Everyone thinks about it. Everyone worries” (Butler, *Parable* 53). Joanne’s “of course” insinuates an obviousness to the effects of the traumatic events. This demonstrates the lingering traces of trauma, the sensations and emotions readily remembered, or memories reconstructed. She expands this further, “everyone thinks about it.” Regretfully the traumatic events of the Robledo neighborhood are felt by everyone.

Consequently, Joanne herself is portrayed as a character who self-imposes her limits because she does not desire to do the work necessary to yield change, for herself or her community. Yet, she relates the trauma she, Lauren, and others in the community are acutely aware of. In this recognition, Joanne indicates an expansiveness to her world. She sees the connection between herself and her neighbors. However, her being remains in partial oneness because she does not risk opening herself up to relationality which could engage the momentum of the ‘cut.’ Instead, Joanne resigns herself to life as-is. Presently, there is no stimulus for relationality between Joanne and Lauren because of Joanne’s complacency. A relationality between these friends may have sparked a circulation that led to meaningful difference in the neighborhood—the product of ‘imagine.’

Instead, Lauren realizes she hasn’t reached Joanne, and conversely, Joanne is not inclined to meet Lauren. In her frustration, Lauren exclaims: ““Nothing is going to save us. If we don’t save ourselves, we’re dead”” (59). In direct counter to Joanne’s complacency, Lauren shows the scope of her oneness. She has recognized the calamity of the world, and with this contextualization, she has imagined what an alternative is. But she is relegated into a realm of her own because no one else dares enter an exchange of knowing with her. As it stands, although Lauren feels the imperative, there is no one else willing to connect to her ‘I.’ Eventually then, even Lauren joins the community and

settles into the complacency. Regretfully, in Lauren's world, this complacency begets disaster.

The walls of the Robledo neighborhood are bulldozed one night. Lauren watches her home be invaded and set on fire. She recognizes neighbors' dead faces as she scrambles to escape. The Robledo neighborhood is torched. Women and children are raped, or shot alongside the men of the community. Lauren manages to escape but she is separated from her remaining family and spit out into a daunting unknown. Furthermore, she no longer has a home to return to. From the moment Lauren is expelled from her home and its walls, she understands the imperative to keep herself alive. Without family or friends, she spends her first night alone with paranoia and terror.

Fortunately, Lauren teams up with Zahra and Harry, former inhabitants of the Robledo neighborhood. Jolted out of complacency, Lauren begins expanding her oneness with Zahra and Harry. By entering relationality with these companions, she is welcome to begin a generative phase of 'imagine' for their immediate survival, and then invite Alexis Pauline Gumbs's expansive survival: "living in the context of what [they] have overcome." While confined in the Robledo walls, people like Joanne refuse to partake in this generative process. However, Zahra and Harry realize that their survival is predicated on their ability to imagine how they survive to the next day.

Eventually though, this practice of imagine settles into an act of forward-thinking that guides Lauren, Zahra, Harry, and the fellow travelers they collect along the way, to their new community, Acorn. As part of Lauren's plan for survival, she demonstrates her willingness to adapt to the new circumstances outside the walls: "Everyone who's surviving out here [outside community walls] knows things that I need to know [...] I'll

watch them, I'll listen to them, I'll learn from them'" (Butler, *Parable* 173). Finally, although necessitated by such drastic means, Lauren sees the opportunity to enter relationality with every-one and every-thing to expand her wholeness.

## Lesson Two: Grief

With so much loss at the end of the world as in lesson one, there seems to be little time for grieving. Yet, as Black womanist theologian Monica Coleman writes, "Black women's experiences of multidimensional oppression are overcome through the pursuit and achievement of wholeness" (18). In lesson two, Lauren attends to her grief—the shock to the system that is being uprooted and orphaned in the same breath—to connect with her wholeness. After she learns of her family's death, Lauren notes how Zahra and Harry's shared "misery eases [her] own, somehow. It gives [her] moments where [she doesn't] think about [her] family. Everyone is dead. But how can they be? Everyone?" (Butler, *Parable* 167-68). Reckoning with her denial, Lauren begins to work through the stages of her grief. Even so, Lauren doesn't close herself off, as Joanne does, in the face of mounting trauma. Instead, Lauren takes "moments" to grapple with her grief as Zahra and Harry take their moments as well.

Because Zahra and Harry are willing to maintain an open connection to Lauren, they each rely on the community to share the burden of grief. Thus, Lauren sustains relationality through her connection with Zahra and Harry. Lauren realizes she does not have to bear her grief alone. Instead, the three allow a circulation of grief that calls to the repetition of memory. She remembers "everyone is dead." Similar to when Celie

recounts her story to Shug Avery, “Seem like it all come back to me” (Walker, *Color* 108-09). As Lauren feels this new truth, she embraces the beauty of oneness that allows for love and struggle to coexist. She realizes she does not have to compartmentalize her feelings and emotions.

Rather, in the moments she allows herself to grieve, she testifies to the power of the ‘cut.’ Each return to the grief allows for a “quality of difference” through the flow of sensations. Because Lauren reckons with her grief, she recognizes her oneness is capacious. She can grieve while she empathizes with her friends. She can grieve and imagine a new tomorrow. By the time Lauren and her companions make it to Acorn, she embodies the survival of Gumbs’s definition: “Survival [is] life after disaster.”

### Lesson Three: *Regardless*

In this chapter on trauma, I begin with lesson one at the end of Lauren’s world in the destruction of the Robledo neighborhood. After such a catastrophic loss, Lauren grieves and highlights the importance of the ‘cut’ in lesson two. Sethe, in turn, must also reckon with her losses for lesson three. By looking at her history and her present, Sethe demonstrates how “experience shapes the brain” (van der Kolk 86). As these points of past and present coalesce, we see how complex trauma is. This complexity provides insight on why healing is difficult for a character like Sethe.

Namely, *Beloved*’s narrator relays Sethe’s time as a slave at Sweet Home. Sethe recollects memories of her enslaved mother who is hanged, her one-armed caretaker from when she was young, and her eventual guardianship under Baby Sugg, her mother-in-

law, after she runs away from Schoolteacher. Schoolteacher is the nephew put in charge of Sweet Home after the former owner, Mr. Garner, dies. His rule means calamity for the slaves. The narrator summarizes, “They buttered Halle’s [Sethe’s husband’s] face; gave Paul D iron to eat; crisped Sixo [another of the Sweet Home men]; hanged her own mother” (Morrison, *Beloved* 222). Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, and Stamp Paid all reckon with their life as slaves and the sacrifices their lives entail. The narrator then relays the events that further contextualize the inner-circle of Sethe in the shed, “Everything rested on Garner being alive. Without his life each of theirs [the slaves’] fell to pieces” (259). It is imperative to acknowledge that the work Sethe does to heal from her trauma involves an embodiment of the self after slavery. Her self formerly denied autonomy from birth. Her self not regarded as human.

Sethe’s self is further disregarded even after her escape to freedom. In direct support of her decision to protect her children at all costs, one story of sexual abuse against Sethe is depicted quite early in the novel. Sethe remembers:

Ten minutes for seven letters [‘Beloved’]. With another ten could she have gotten ‘Dearly’ too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby’s headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. (Morrison, *Beloved* 5)

Sethe, recently released from jail, penniless, looks for closure for her baby. Rather than sympathize or offer grace to a woman whose child has died, the engraver chooses to manipulate the situation and take sex as payment. Sethe returns to this story many times throughout the novel, each with “a quality of difference.” Sethe shows the cruelty of her

past as a slave and the persistent difficulty in freedom—the chiasmic irony of freedom as a woman.

Sethe also remembers the aftermath of the headstone: “When I put that headstone up I wanted to lay in there with you [Beloved], put your head on my shoulder and keep you warm, and I would have if Buglar and Howard [Sethe’s sons] and Denver didn’t need me, because my mind was homeless then” (Morrison, *Beloved* 241). Sethe’s pangs of dejection reverberate through the text. And yet. Sethe’s love—for herself, her children, and her freedom as it is—shows the abundance of her oneness. Sethe’s ‘I’ recognizes her role in the community that merits life *regardless*. Despite the deaths of the dear ‘You’—her daughter, and, later, Baby Sugg—Sethe inhabits her oneness. Despite her losses, she rests in the wholeness that overcomes “multidimensional oppression.” Sethe sustains her being in her open relation with Beloved and Baby Sugg beyond the grave. Through this knowledge, Sethe lives into her oneness in love and struggle. She articulates her foundation of survival, a living *regardless*.

#### Lesson Four: I’m Alive

As this trauma chapter continues, we begin to see how lessons one, two, and three—the end of the world, grief, and living *regardless*—restore power to characters like Lauren and Sethe. In lesson four Celie recounts events of her past and struggles with the idea of being alive. In *The Color Purple*, we can track each character’s journey into oneness, namely Celie and Sofia. Celie has shouldered countless earth-shattering events:

her girlhood rapes, her children being taken away in the middle of the night, and being silenced by a disloyal husband.

Celie recounts her life in defeat in each letter addressed to God. To counter Celie's defeatism Nettie pleads with her sister, "You got to fight them, Celie, she say. I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself" (Walker, *Color* 21). Celie responds, despondently, "I don't say nothing. I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (21). Here, Celie highlights multiple aspects of her life with the traces of trauma on her mind and emotions.

First, Celie names her fear. She doesn't want to try to do things differently because she presumes her sister is dead. In comparison, Celie knows whatever she has done for herself so far has kept her alive. van der Kolk articulates a similar idea: "Rather than risk experimenting with new options they [trauma patients] stay stuck in the fear they know" (30). Celie's desire for preservation unfortunately wins out over any attempt to 'imagine.' Second, Celie names a 'cut' from her reality—Nettie ran away. But, because she deduces that Nettie's attempt failed, Celie is unwilling to enter 'imagine' and consider a viable alternative for herself. And still, "I'm alive." ... Although she acknowledges her fear and still can't picture a different future, Celie's aliveness, her being becoming, radiates. Even though Celie doesn't yet recognize her future is worth fighting for, she provides herself an avenue for being.

Nonetheless, there are many scenes where Celie dejectedly writes, "I know what I'm thinking bout [...]. Nothing. And as much of it as I can" (Walker, *Color* 119). Although Celie recognizes that she is alive, she struggles with the point in being alive.

This introduces a disheartening aspect of trauma in *The Color Purple* that is aptly repeated: silence. The act of silence itself is rampant in Walker's novel as characters also rely on retreat and passive acceptance as other forms of silence.

For example, Celie wants to greet Shug Avery the first time she meets her but stops herself. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ brings Shug Avery to his house after she has fallen ill with the nasty woman's disease.<sup>14</sup> Although Celie is unaware of this arrangement, she is excited for her chance to talk to her crush. Celie muses, "Come on in, I want to cry. To shout. Come on in. With God help, Celie going to make you well. But I don't say nothing. It not my house" (43). This act of silence encapsulates a voicelessness for Celie. Additionally, Celie retreats into a state of numbness when she faces a traumatic event, or memory. Her retreat can be understood as an act of protection from further hurt. Celie has yet to learn of the relief in circulation of grief and the strength of *regardless* in her wholeness.

#### Lesson Five: Trauma

In lesson one of this chapter on trauma, Lauren survives the end of the world. In lesson two she grieves her losses through circulation. In lesson three, Sethe scorns her rebellious brain as she remembers her past. Yet, neither Sethe nor Lauren is categorized as quiet in their recovery from trauma. In comparison, Celie and Sofia are both presented as characters who stifle their voice in response to trauma. For lesson five, I show how

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<sup>14</sup> See Walker's *The Color Purple* 41.

Celie and Sofia reckon with their traumas to establish the framework for healing as expounded in chapter three: Journey of Healing.

A particularly important representation of the voiceless reactions to trauma—silence, retreat, and passive acceptance—are present when Nettie recounts her final memories in the U.S. Prior to this encounter, the mayor’s wife suggests Sofia (Celie’s daughter-in-law) be her maid, noting how remarkable it is that Sofia’s children are so clean. Sofia’s dissent sparks an uproar with the mayor and the police. Sofia is brutally beaten and imprisoned. When Nettie sees Sofia, it is after Sofia’s imprisonment and release into the mayor’s decade-long custody to work as his spouse’s maid. Nettie writes, “[J]ust speaking to me seemed to make her [Sofia] embarrassed and she suddenly sort of erased herself. [...] One minute I was saying howdy to a living woman. The next minute nothing living was there. Only its shape” (Walker, *Color* 126). Sofia’s aliveness fades away under the thumb of the mayor. The trauma she has experienced serves as an end of her world. Her previous freedom is renounced, and it is no wonder Sofia struggles to feel the same wholeness that she once embodied.

But something important happens with Walker’s use of “sort of erased herself.” I see a similar idea reflected in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* when Walker writes: “I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, *almost* to the point of being invisible—*except as* Creator: hand and eye” (241, emphasis added). So too, do I see Sofia’s retreat as the “almost” “except as Creator.” Although Sofia “sort of erased herself,” the impossibility of erasing herself is founded in the truth that she is a being regarded as whole and capacious, ‘You,’ by Nettie’s ‘I.’ Moreover, Sofia knows her wholeness, her shape, as witnessed in many scenes where she stands up for herself

throughout *The Color Purple*. So, there is an aliveness that disallows an invisibility, even when Sofia can no longer recognize it for herself. Though Sofia may not feel she can exude her oneness at this time, Nettie's recognition of Sofia's 'You' serves as a reminder of the complete oneness available to Sofia when she feels ready to embrace her wholeness once more. When Sofia is ready to grieve, she can rely on women like Nettie to circulate the memories and offer her "moments" of relief.

While Nettie's perception of Sofia's aliveness attends to oneness, other character's perceptions of Sofia work to do the opposite. In *Beloved*, Paul D notes, "When he looks at himself through Garner's eyes, he sees one thing. Through Sixo's another. One makes him feel righteous. One makes him feel ashamed" (Morrison, *Beloved* 315). Similarly, Sofia sees herself through the mayor and his wife's eyes, she surely feels ashamed too. Though hard for her to conceptualize at this vulnerable time in her life, Sofia could also see herself through Nettie's eyes and recognize that Nettie beholds an indispensable being.

Likewise, Celie is perceived by many others to be timid and afraid—to a large extent, one can presume she sees herself this way too. Yet, her self-perception is largely based on the input of others: an object by her Pa and a disappointing housewife to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. This self-perception is ruptured when she voices to Shug Avery, "Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself [...]. Nobody ever love me" (Walker, *Color* 109). This scene is an extension of Celie's crying in Shug Avery's arms. Celie is sharing her stories and accepting the release of circulation.

Again, Celie finally allows herself to name her sorrows out loud, to acknowledge that she feels unlovable because of the overwhelmingly negative examples she's been

provided by people like Pa and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. And then she meets the ‘cut’ when Shug Avery declares: “I love you, Miss Celie” (109). This ‘cut’ fosters momentum for Celie and opens possibilities for her to see herself outside of the regressive patterns enforced by Pa and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Thus, Shug Avery’s ‘I’ attends to Celie’s ‘You’ in much the same way Nettie’s did for Sofia.

Though trauma invites silence in Sofia and Celie’s responses, their recognition, by others and themselves, as whole beings helps ease the tension of the traces left on the mind and emotions (van der Kolk 1). As Shug Avery affirms her love for Celie, Celie is presented with the potential to embrace the capaciousness of oneness to hold both the knowing of herself as Pa and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ have regarded her *as well as* how Nettie, Shug Avery, and the other women of her community regard her. Yet, Celie’s acceptance of oneness does not happen instantaneously. Celie’s categorization by such influential figures as Pa and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ coincides with her struggle to understand her self-worth. Moreover, Celie’s traumas “affect [her] innermost sensations and [her] relationship to [...] physical reality—the core of who” she is (van der Kolk 21).

Which is to say, Celie must open herself to a community that will allow her oneness to flourish so she may readily expand her knowing of ‘I.’ When Celie can take this morsel of understanding and embrace it in conjunction with her self-worth and the use of her voice, Celie unlocks a new level of her oneness. And with this oneness, Celie prepares herself for the best part of the journey to come—she is ready to begin healing. Celie requires examples by other women to learn that survival after the end of the world includes her voice being heard. To learn that grief is necessary at times and there is a community willing to shoulder the burden in circulation. A community to demonstrate

that, through oneness, there is a whole world of possibilities in *regardless* and “I’m alive.”

## **Journey of Healing**

Up to this point, I have explored the work of repetition and trauma in the selected texts to demonstrate the lessons Sethe, Lauren, and Celie present about their work in oneness and wholeness. Ideas like the ‘cut’ and *regardless* lay the groundwork for healing. I look now to specific examples of healing, or recovery, toward survival: “life after disaster, life in honor of our ancestors” (Gumbs). I establish how the characters engage their oneness as a prerequisite for imagination, ‘the after.’ To recognize oneness, characters like Sethe, Lauren, and Celie recognize the wholeness of their being. Such a wholeness relates to aliveness: “Simply, every black one is already worthy since they are on earth and worth is a human legacy” (Quashie 108). The inherent worth of characters like Sethe, Lauren, and Celie is something they carry in their lives—aliveness. But the characters’ aliveness becomes something they attune to when they expand their appreciation of oneness. The characters who inspire this thesis accept this truth and work to shape their futures to champion relationality, or shared knowing.

The practice of healing necessitates a regard for oneself as whole. Again, van der Kolk writes, “After trauma the world becomes sharply divided between those who know and those who don’t” (18). The act of healing serves to rupture this divide and implement relationality in its place. Relationality is a willed exchange of knowing, or a character’s knowledge, to empower each other. With others in oneness, characters like Sethe,

Lauren, and Celie circulate their stories “to tell, to refine and tell again” (Morrison, *Beloved* 322). The characters demonstrate how the work of healing takes many forms. Through active attendance to live into worthiness, the characters position themselves to imagine what could be and learn that they don’t have to face tomorrow alone.

In lesson one, I will highlight the importance of the backward glance—looking at the past, reckoning with trauma. With this information, I will show how the characters reconceptualize core beliefs to bolster their autonomy in lesson two. Next, I move to lesson three which showcases the power of community to empower the characters. From the discussion of community, I then demonstrate how the gift of trust permits previously voiceless characters to share their knowing with others in lesson four. In lesson five the characters tenaciously embody their oneness and guide themselves and others to future-making projects through these acts of healing.

#### Lesson One: The Backward Glance

Before the characters that inspire this thesis think of their tomorrow, it is important they reflect on their past. Sethe, Lauren, and Celie look back on their history, their trauma, and consider what could have been. Through repetition, they invite circulation and flow, the ‘cut,’ and the “quality of difference” to contextualize their present. As they do so, they adopt and adapt this information to strategize for the future. This engagement stimulates community. Characters like Sethe, Lauren, and Celie begin with the aliveness of their worth to see the value of what they and their community have overcome. They dare for a future that removes such obstacles for their successors.

Specifically, Sethe, Zahra, and Walker take a glance backward to forge a new way forward. Sethe remembers the sacrifices of her life as a slave while at Sweet Home. She acknowledges her power to overcome that era of her life, but she makes an active decision to end the cycle for her heirs: “And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own” (Morrison, *Beloved* 296). Similarly, Zahra, Lauren’s travelling companion in *Parable of the Sower*, wields her worth to manifest an alternative worth living in:

“But if you want to put together some kind of community where people look out for each other and don’t have to take being pushed around, I’m with you. I’ve been talking to Natividad [a fellow traveler and former neo-slave]. I don’t want to live the way she had to. I don’t want to live the way my mama had to either.” (Butler, *Parable* 223)

Both Sethe and Zahra illustrate a knowing they correspond with from their personal histories.

The women contextualize their pasts by noting “she and others lived through and got over it” (Morrison, *Beloved* 296) and “I don’t want to live the way my mama had to” (Butler, *Parable* 223). Sethe and Zahra use this knowing through capacious oneness to hope for the ‘imagine’ that precedes a new future. In their oneness, the women look back to dare for a new way forward because Sethe will “never let it happen to her own” and Zahra says, “I’m with you.”

Walker illustrates a similar point in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*: “And so I understand the subtle programming I, my mother, and my grandmother before me fell victim to. Escape the pain, the ridicule [...] any way you can. And if you can’t escape, help your children to escape. Don’t let them suffer as you have done” (Walker 291). Sethe, Zahra, and Walker emphasize that life has been hard, and they survived. Again,

Gumbs's invocation of survival is "our living in the context of what we have overcome." It is not "bare minimum," but, instead, a life contextualized by the burdens of the past. Even in this aliveness though, these characters hope for the lives of their children to not be contextualized by the same past. If there's hope for a new future, they are going to be the ones to enact it. In each woman's recognition of the oneness their life has permitted, they desire a 'cut' from the characterization of oneness afforded them, to one that expands even further for each generation to come.

## Lesson Two: Personal Brand of Faith

After lesson one of the backward glance for healing, the characters recognize what they want to implement in their present for themselves and for those to come. Characters like Sethe, Lauren, and Celie see the history of their "mothers and grandmothers, *ourselves*" (Walker, *In Search* 235) and discern what work there is still to do. In lesson two, Baby Sugg, Lauren, and Celie enact the change they want to see through foundational shifts in core beliefs.

Baby Sugg employs a "quality of difference" to expand oneness for the future generations of never-slaved from that which she is permitted as an ex-slave. Enacting her hopes for this future, she "fixed on her own brand of preaching, having made up her mind about what to do with the heart that started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio River" (Morrison, *Beloved* 173). Rather than fall into the routine of strictly regimented

Christian religion,<sup>15</sup> Baby Sugg makes her own way. And she makes her own way despite sixty years as a slave. It seems Baby was ready and waiting for her heart to start beating so she could live into the oneness that she longed for. Through her willingness then to be a beacon of oneness and engage in connection and relationality with those who join her in the clearing, she demonstrates the power of self-healing. Her love and generosity promote healing for others in *Beloved*.

Sethe recognizes the power of Baby Sugg's teachings. Particularly, Sethe grows weary after Paul D comes back into her life and reveals how her husband, Halle, witnessed her brutal attack by Schoolteacher's pupils. After the rememory of this trauma—the unsolicited sensations and emotions—Sethe expresses how she misses the comfort Baby Sugg provided. She laments, “[n]ine years without the fingers or the voice of Baby Sugg was too much” (Morrison, *Beloved* 101). Sethe ventures into the Clearing where Baby had conducted her sermons. Sethe hopes the charge of the place will elicit a connection for Baby Sugg to help her. Although Baby Sugg is dead, the depth of relationality Sethe and Baby share allows Sethe to call upon the circulation of knowing with Baby to help her in her present. So, dreaming of Baby Sugg's healing, Sethe recalls Baby's voice, ““Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield”” (101). Because of the stagnation of Sethe's rebellious brain, Baby Sugg calls for Sethe to let go of the weight of her accumulations.

Sethe must first empty her hands, heart, and mind of all that does not serve her so she can heal. She must empty each of them into the capaciousness of her being that

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<sup>15</sup> See Morrison's *Beloved* 172-73.

recalls those things but in a flow, their circulation. Following Baby Sugg's directive then, Sethe does as she's asked, "Her heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt, she placed one by one on a bank where clear water rushed on below" (Morrison, *Beloved* 101). First, the rush of water materializes the idea of circulation. All the feelings and emotions Sethe retains take their "moments" and flow away as part of Sethe's healing. Next, in oneness, the "knives of defense" take on a similar physicality and they remain where they lay if Sethe ever finds herself circulating back to her defenses.

The capaciousness of love and struggle permit the defenses to coexist within the flow of repetition without erasing them. In Sethe's wholeness she heals because she recognizes that carrying her burdens is not her only option. Again, there's no need for Sethe to erase her defenses since the capaciousness of oneness communes with love *and* struggle. Rather, as Sethe embraces her expansiveness, she works to gain new defenses that better serve her wholeness. For instance, now that she has unburdened herself, Sethe can work on her healing.

In tapping into the remembered connection of Baby Sugg's presence, Sethe recalls Baby's practice of having children, men, and women gather to express their emotions through laughter, dance, and crying. Sethe enters this same communion and receives the grace of release. Sethe recounts one such particular sermon highlighting Baby's redefinition of grace: "She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it" (Morrison, *Beloved* 103). Baby Sugg's words echo Quashie's concept of inherent worth: "every black one is already worthy" (108). Because Baby intimates all are bestowed with grace, and they must determine how much they wish to possess, she describes how oneness

becomes wholeness. A character like Sethe must be willing to expand her notion of what capaciousness means, what it can hold. If she's willing, it holds all her worth, all her grace along, with her "knives of defense." From this knowing Sethe settles into what oneness means for her. She is the limitations placed on herself, just as she is the expanse she chooses to accept.

Similar to Baby Sugg's personal brand of healing, Lauren Oya Olamina reconceptualizes God and formulates an understanding that fosters her personal oneness. She reinterprets her role in the world through her genuine pursuit to define God. Lauren writes, "My God doesn't love me or hate me or watch over me or know me at all, and I feel no love for or loyalty to my God. My God just is" (Butler, *Parable* 25). Lauren's articulation of her concept of God enables her to acknowledge her position in the world as an agent of change outside of fatalism. Through this radical notion, she invokes a reconceptualization of core beliefs in preparation of healing. And, most importantly, indicates that the healing available to characters like Lauren is the healing she chooses—the grace she chooses. Her healing is not limited by an allowance from God. If she is not judged, loved, lorded for her relationship with God, then she has room to experiment, to try out her personal brand of healing. Lauren writes that her actions "can rig the game in [her] favor if [she] understand[s] that God exists to be shaped, and will be shaped, with or without [her] forethought, with or without [her] intent" (25). From this positionality, Lauren then understands that her role is to consciously or unconsciously orchestrate the series of events that distill the future she wants for herself and her community.

Therefore, Lauren posits that characters can either passively succumb to the inevitability of change, or actively work to manifest the change they desire. Lauren

describes that “God has been here all along, shaping us and being shaped by us in no particular way or in too many ways at once like an amoeba—or like cancer, Chaos” (Butler, *Parable* 26). I like Lauren’s syntax here. She begins with the single-celled amoeba, progresses to the collective of a cancer, and then to the abstract of capital-C Chaos.

Again, Lauren can prescribe her oneness to the smallness of a single-cell in her being, or she can redefine her wholeness to be the most capacious thing she can imagine—Chaos. Whichever she chooses, she engages in the practice of healing because she works to bolster her aliveness. As she substantiates her existence, she comes into being. And as Lauren recognizes her oneness, she makes a marked shift from complacency. As she recognizes her worth, the grace inherent, and the capaciousness of her being, she attends to her ‘I.’ In her definition of God, Lauren recognizes the world-making power previously attributed to a distant God as an attribute of the self thereby illuminating the ‘I’ of her oneness and reconstituting her worth. By such a reconfiguration, she illuminates the boundless possibilities for healing.

Like Baby Sugg and Lauren, Celie reckons with her faith. Celie initially interprets God as a White male with deaf ears. Near the beginning of *The Color Purple*, Celie mentions how her preacher praises her for her work in the Church. Despite the preacher’s assumption that Celie should be pleased by such recognition, Celie is disenfranchised by the lessons offered by the religious people in her community as they mistreat and disrespect her.<sup>16</sup> Again we recognize that in the same way Celie sees herself through the

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<sup>16</sup> See Walker’s *The Color Purple* 41.

eyes of Pa and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, Celie has not been provided a capacious understanding of the divine she wishes to rely on in her repeated salutation, “Dear God.” Celie’s conception of God is limited by what she understands God can be. From what she has seen and heard, God does not serve her.

Celie first illustrates why her religious perspective does not serve her well when she imagines God coming down to liberate Sofia after her arrest. To Celie, “God all white [...], looking like some stout white man work at the bank” (87). Celie’s dissonance with this male version of God reflects her tension with a closed loop of repetition. Celie is not connected to any-one or any-thing that can provide the catalyst for the ‘cut’ she needs to see herself and her God as *more*. As such, she continues to see God with contempt: “he gave me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won’t ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown” (187). Regrettably, Celie’s connection with her divine has let her down.

Her conception of religion has only enforced the repetition of what she has witnessed in her church. In frustration of the fruitless efforts praying to this disengaged divine, Celie proclaims, “Dear Nettie, / I don’t write to God no more, I write to you” (187). As Lauren resituates God as Change and thereby recognizes God-power in herself, Celie reinterprets the power of God in her sister, a divine presence she knows she can count on. This reallocation provides Celie another opportunity to expand her oneness because she is no longer immobilized by a) a male God and b) a disinterested God. Through this redefinition, Celie actively works toward her healing by ending a cycle that caused her so much frustration.

Moving away from the frustration then, Celie turns to Shug Avery for comfort. Shug Avery is, in turn, instrumental in remolding Celie's faith. Shug Avery recognizes Celie's resentment of the harsh male God and directs her to an understanding of a more all-encompassing entity—one that she regards in oneness and that fosters healing. In place of a white male god, Shug Avery offers Celie her ungendered version, It. Celie asks, "It?" to which Shug replies, "Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It" (Walker, *Color* 190). In Shug Avery's presentation of an alternative, Celie's connection to Shug blossoms into relationality. And, in true Shug Avery fashion, she is quite understanding of Celie's perspective and does not work to diminish her experience.

Rather, in this delicate restructuring of what God is, Shug's 'I' in caring for Celie's 'You' demonstrates how well Shug employs her oneness to share her knowing. Because Shug makes room for Celie's questions (and doesn't dismiss them), Shug reframes God to Celie in a way that speaks to their I-You relation based in mutual trust and respect. Celie is safe to enter relationality with Shug Avery to engage in the circulation of knowing proffered. Although It still carries a sense of care which Lauren's God-as-Change dispenses with, Celie is unbound from the limitation of a white, male God. Since Celie reimagines her God, she practices healing. Celie accepts an alternative—a practice that gains strength through repetition. Celie now sees the potential for imagination and works toward healing in the other aspects of her life.

### Lesson Three: Community

In this chapter on the journey of healing, we start with the first lesson of the backward glance. With such a contextualization, in lesson two, Baby Sugg, Lauren, and Celie reframe foundational beliefs. However, Sethe, Lauren, and Celie miss opportunities for circulation when they remain by themselves. Because fellow actors like Baby Sugg, Zahra, and Shug Avery are instrumental in circulating more robust versions of oneness in their community, in lesson three I attend to what community means and how it modifies experiences of oneness. Additionally, I invoke consideration of the ‘We’ created when ‘I’ and ‘You’ unite.

Sethe’s experience with community is unique as it largely works to ostracize her. Sethe’s community, therefore, dictates the extent of relationality available to her. Her daughter, Denver, by extension is subject to this isolation. However, once Sethe and Beloved have entered an all-consuming mother-daughter relationship, Denver must venture back out into the world to seek help. When Denver solicits help from the community, the townspeople learn of her mother’s condition, and this reignites the community’s interest in Sethe.

One particularly interested party is Ella. Ella, Stamp Paid’s assistant for aiding fugitives, is the woman who dismisses gossip about Beloved’s torture of Sethe and sees the importance of intervening instead. Earlier in the novel, the reader is informed of Ella’s sexual history involving two men keeping her hostage for their pleasure. Ella recounts this event with clarity, “You couldn’t think up [...] what them two done to me” (140). Thus, when Ella hears of Sethe’s suffering, “There was also something very

personal in her fury. Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present" (Morrison, *Beloved* 302). Ella sees her 'I' in Sethe's 'You' and commits to be the agent of change, the enforcer of the 'cut' to liberate Sethe.

Despite the community's previous aversion to 124, they assemble to help Sethe through Ella's leadership. In their constricted act of relationality, the women present the power of their voices to repel Beloved. "Building voice upon voice until they found it," the thirty women worked in unison, "and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (Morrison, *Beloved* 308). Therefore, when Ella and the thirty other women come to 124 to free Sethe of Beloved, Sethe rests in her 'I' as someone being looked after by 'We.' Then, Sethe spots the intruder, presumably coming to harm her family, and she gains the courage to fight the intruder with the power of the voices supporting her. The women of 124 join Sethe and Denver and empower them.

The recovery offered in *Parable of the Sower* also comes through community for Lauren and her friends. Although hesitant to trust anyone at the onset of her travels outside the Robledo neighborhood, Lauren slowly finds herself sympathizing and learning the power of having a group to trust. Bankole, Lauren's future husband, notes the importance of Lauren's changed resolve when he tells Allison and Jill, sisters saved from an earthquake-collapsed building, "'You're very fortunate [...]. People don't help each other much out here'" (Butler, *Parable* 237). Lauren's willingness to help strangers is a radical concept in her present reality. Yet, Bankole's use of the word "fortunate" highlights the impact of Lauren's goodwill. Through her change of perspective, she

employs the ‘cut’ and utilizes the power of ‘imagine’ to transform her community for the better. Like Ella’s leadership to help Sethe, Lauren takes up the task to find a new way forward.

From her lessons of oneness then, she voices aspects of what she has learned in her journey to help other members of her ever-growing group. Lauren encourages Jill to lean in to taking care of Justin, an adopted orphan child, as she proposes that “‘taking care of other people can be a good cure for nightmares like yours’” (Butler, *Parable* 257). Jill replies, “‘You sound as though you know’” (257). As Lauren calls on her past and positions her oneness for a meaningful exchange with Jill, she confirms, “‘I live in this world, too’” (257). This exchange parallels Celie and Shug Avery’s conversation about God-as-It because Lauren also makes room for Jill’s experiences and offers her an alternative.

In this moment of encouragement with a fellow traveler, Lauren shares her secret to healing: “‘taking care of other people.’” Sharing this, Lauren’s ‘I’ in oneness readily establishes relationality with members of her group to address their individual ‘You’ while also naming the value of collaborative work in ‘We.’ As Lauren finds more and more people to share her lessons with, she continues to expand her and others’ horizons and enable a pattern of healing “‘to tell, to refine and tell again’” (Morrison, *Beloved* 322). Through the active engagement in the circulation of ideas and practices, communities establishes a new way of life that values each character’s whole being.

## Lesson Four: The Gift of Trust

Again, we begin this chapter on the journey of healing with the backward glance of lesson one. In lesson two, after the glance back, the characters reconstruct their understanding of core beliefs. Next, the characters prosper with the aid of their communities in lesson three. Through community, formerly isolated characters begin to seek ways to share what they have learned with those they trust. In lesson four, the gift of trust is offered to Celie and she, in turn, offers it to others. Quashie expounds, “The gift of relation is trust, but the gift is also work—the effort to inhabit the capacity to meet and be met” (145). Which is to say, although Celie and Shug Avery fall into an easy discourse, an integral part of Celie’s healing is predicated on her meeting and being met by the other women of the novel.

Celie opens herself to flow in the knowing offered by characters like Sofia. For instance, Sofia says, “To tell the truth, you [Celie] remind me of my mama. She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself” (Walker, *Color* 38-39). Though Celie often voices her responses to Shug Avery’s questions, this observation by Sofia requires Celie to listen instead. Celie expands her oneness when she strives “to meet and be met” in this manner (Quashie 145). She must both meet Sofia with listening ears and be met by Shug Avery’s sympathy. It is critical for Celie to notice her behavior and adapt the insights provided by her community through the gift of trust. Through the momentum of these repeated insights, the ‘cut’ propels her to new trajectories. When Celie attends to the relationality between women she trusts, like Shug Avery and Sofia, Celie enters into

‘imagine.’ She imagines who she is when she isn’t under anyone’s foot. She imagines how to make that her reality.

From her place in ‘imagine,’ then, Celie offers the gift of trust to others in her community. Just as Lauren shares her secret for healing as “taking care of other people” (Butler, *Parable* 257), Celie offers her version of healing to Mary Agnes. Harpo, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_’s son, dates Mary Agnes while Sofia is in jail. She easily becomes part of the community, but she is called ‘Squeak’ because of her voice. However, Celie tells Mary Agnes to correct Harpo from constantly referring to her with the diminutive, Squeak. Celie calls on a knowing that there is autonomy to be gained in being correctly named. Lauren embraces this truth as well: “Sometimes naming a thing—giving it a name or discovering its name—helps one to begin to understand it” (77). Though Celie’s ‘I’ recognizes Mary Agnes’s ‘You,’ Celie recognizes that Harpo does not attend to Mary Agnes’s oneness in her misnaming. And with this encouragement, when Mary Agnes informs Harpo she is leaving with Shug Avery and Celie to Tennessee, Harpo contends “Listen Squeak, say Harpo. You can’t go to Memphis. That’s all there is to it. / Mary Agnes, say Squeak. / Squeak, Mary Agnes, what difference do it make? / It make a lot, say Squeak.<sup>17</sup> When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public” (Walker, *Color* 198).

A few things happen in this space. Namely, Mary Agnes employs her voice to counter Harpo who attempts to silence and control her. Moreover, Mary Agnes exhibits a facet of her oneness when she says, “When I was Mary Agnes I could sing in public.”

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<sup>17</sup> It is regrettable that Celie herself does not permit Mary Agnes the name she requests to be called by, though it serves to show the work of healing Celie is still journeying toward. In the I-You of Celie and Mary Agnes, respecting Mary Agnes’s individuality is crucial for a sustained relationality.

Through her confrontation of Harpo, Mary Agnes redeems her wholeness as being a singer, lover, and woman. Mary Agnes regains her autonomy and agency by taxing the importance of *her name*. Most importantly, it's a moment where Celie sees her sharing power in force. In her exchange of trust, she offers Mary Agnes an alternative like when Shug Avery offers Celie one. In so doing, Celie expands the breadth of the circulation in her relationality. Each woman who willingly shares their knowing with Celie allows her to recognize the capaciousness of her oneness. Such an expansive oneness serves to empower Celie.

#### Lesson Five: Healing

Starting with lesson one and the backward glance, Sethe, Zahra, and Walker each stake a claim for a different future. Part of this future-making is rooted in changes for the present as in lesson two. Baby Sugg, Sethe, Lauren, Celie, and Shug Avery each attend to their core beliefs. These characters demonstrate that the worth and grace they choose to accept profoundly alters how they engage with themselves and everyone around them. For lesson three, we see women join forces to save Sethe. Lauren also extends the safety of community to those around her and helps others see the difference kindness makes in the world. In lesson four, we see Celie embody her oneness as she extends trust to Mary Agnes and herself. For lesson five, I show how integral the act of healing is for a character like Celie.

In each letter Celie writes, she chronicles her slow progression into power. After she reconfigures God as It, Celie discerns a new perspective on reality. She writes, "Next

to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s evil sort of shrink" (Walker, *Color* 192). God reframed as It enables Celie to change her perspective on a host of things—including Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s power over her. More importantly, here, she claims a portion of the property as her own. Up to this point, Celie regards the house as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s. She sees her body as object for use by Pa and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Besides her memories, there is little mention of anything being Celie's alone. So, she starts with the "little scrub of a bush"—"amoeba—[...] cancer, Chaos" (Butler, *Parable* 26). Although Shug Avery takes the lead to tell Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ that "[u]s leaving" (194), Celie fully embodies her oneness and initiates a 'cut.' Imagine.

Celie's rebirth manifests itself in an unexplainable power she wields to curse Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. She recounts the scene and Walker exhibits the power afforded a woman who comes into the capaciousness of her being:

A dust devil flew up on the porch between us [Celie and Mr. \_\_\_\_\_], fill my mouth with dirt. The dirt say, Anything you do to me, already done to you.  
Then I feel Shug shake me. Celie, she say, And I come to myself.  
I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here.  
Amen, say Shug. Amen, amen. (204-05)

The dirt here represents woman, amoeba, cancer, Chaos. Every being that has ever felt pain and betrayal. In an ultimate act of healing, Celie acknowledges her anger toward Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and she confronts him. Celie employs every piece of knowing that has been shared with her through her relationality with Sofia (take up space), Nettie (you've got to fight), Shug Avery (I love you), and Mary Agnes (name yourself). Quashie writes, "oneness authorizes one to be more and more human, to seek more and more capacity for

good(ness) and right(ness), an ever-widening pool of being that surpasses narcissism” (43). Celie’s capaciousness attends to her aliveness. Her worth. Her grace. Her ‘I.’

Again, healing is an active practice. A reiteration of *regardless* that holds space for both love and struggle. It is a movement that champions wholeness because it has room for all that Sethe, Lauren, Celie, Baby Sugg, Denver, Zahra, Shug Avery, Sofia, and Mary Agnes are, were, and will be, to coexist. Healing is surviving (Gumbs) our “multidimensional oppression” (Coleman 18). Healing is in what Celie writes to Nettie when she dares for more than she first thought life would ever allow her. She writes, “Dear Nettie, / I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time. And you alive and be home soon. With our children” (Walker, *Color* 213). Healing is capacious. In accepting her oneness, Celie’s ‘I’ feels “at peace with the world” (244). Beautifully, Celie offers, “Now. Is this life or not? / I be so calm. [...] And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn” (284). The characters find healing through the acts of resituating power within themselves, being together in community, and mutual trust. Through healing Sethe, Lauren, and Celie come into their oneness and in their oneness they find how they can love *regardless*. They forge a new way forward for themselves, for you, for me, for ‘We.’

## **Conclusion: Future-Making**

Repetition. Trauma. Healing. Oneness. Monica Coleman writes, “Whether you are a quark, an amoeba, or a person, you undergo this continual process of sorting through these three inputs: what you inherit from the world, what’s possible in your context, and what you do about it” (8). ‘I,’ ‘You,’ ‘We.’ Morrison, Butler, and Walker invite us to take the lessons, the gifts, offered by characters Sethe, Lauren, and Celie and transcend the fictive to apply the lessons to real life—you, the reader, and me, the writer. As Morrison writes, “Because, no matter how ‘fictional’ the account of these writers, or how much it was a product of invention, the act of imagination is bound up with memory” (Site 98). As we face our repetition, our memories, we call upon our ancestors and all who came before. We search for the knowing that provides an opportunity for the ‘cut’ so that future generations do not suffer as we did. As we look at our circumstances, we seek out the connections, the potentials for relationality, the oneness we find to help us lay down sword and shield so we may rest and heal. And as we consider what we do about it, we ‘imagine.’ We remember that our wholeness, like Sethe, Lauren, and Celie’s, exceeds expectations and we possess an infinity within ourselves to make the world over.

Thus, we’ve arrived at the time of ‘after.’ After looking back, and looking around, we look forward. And the look forward requires imagination. “Imagination,” van der

Kolk writes, “gives us the opportunity to envision new possibilities—it is an essential launchpad for making our hopes come true” (17). Which is to say, as we embody our oneness, our capacious being—well-versed in the ‘cut’ and open to our relationality and shared connection—we look to tomorrow: “Because, most of all, our tomorrow is the child of our today” (Butler, *A Few Rules* 264). We acknowledge that the work and effort to realize our wholeness serves to make the future, our future. Quashie reminds us, “We can’t will the violent reality away, nor can we not incorporate its impact. We have to live in the world and also live in the world of imagine” (Quashie 147). We live, *regardless*. We must allow an open circulation and flow of our rememory and remember that through our oneness we have ample space to hold that truth in tandem with our future.

By the lessons of these texts, Morrison, Butler, and Walker demonstrate the importance of connection to generate community and a flowing exchange of ideas. It is from this principle that we expand our oneness, our being, into wholeness and its power is momentous. The momentum we receive from our community compels us further, shattering our ideas of what we thought ourselves capable of. And, in turn, we realize how much more we can accomplish together.

Maybe we imagine as big as Lauren who suggests that the “[d]estiny of *Earthseed* is to take root among the stars” (Butler, *Parable* 77). Or maybe we dream bigger. Or maybe we start with the single-cell and do what we can to alter our trajectory one step at a time. In our healing, in our oneness, in our journey forward, let us imagine, *regardless*.

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