



Symmetry as Conceptual Metaphor in Walker's *The Color Purple*

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ABSTRACT

The author analyzes three types of the conceptual metaphor of embodied symmetry in Alice Walker's novel, *The color purple* (1982). These metaphorical projections, perceived as equilibrium and its breakage in abstract phenomena, enable readers to reexamine issues of race, non-traditional families, and gender roles. The dis/equilibrium emerges in the novel's epistolary structure. Biological equilibrium breaks in incidents of rape and incest. Walker creates characters in the novel through default-concept opposites of black/white, submissive/dominant, male/female and others. These contraries foreground issues of race and gender. The novel's asymmetries engage readers, leading them to rethink individual character histories and motives. The removal of objects (e.g., rape, mothers deprived of children) suggests conceptual asymmetry and alerts readers to parallel themes of sexual and racial oppression. Subjugation sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant—manifests in simple oppositions. In epistemological terms, readers seek causal explanations for the asymmetries of the narrative, interpreting each to recover its history.

KEYWORDS: embodied symmetry, conceptual metaphor, narrative, causality, race, gender, class, asymmetry-seeking

Considering the many unconventional elements that comprise the novel, *The colorpurple* (1982), one might conclude that Alice Walker had written a bad novel, a chaotic and disjointed novel. The action of the novel spans forty years, enough passage of time for moviemakers in the novel's

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film version to mark the decades in screen captions. The settings of the novel span continents, from the American South to a tribal village in Africa. These two locations and the characters inhabiting them are presented to the reader through letters written mostly in African-American Vernacular English, a dialect many find difficult to understand. We might find the epistolary structure of the novel tenuous, with its broad expanse of time and space, and its letters never reaching their recipients or arriving too late for reply. The narrative line of *The colorpurple* convolutes when events in the characters' lives break traditional expectations of familial relations. The nuclear family disintegrates when mothers are separated from their children. Protagonist Celie's father, for example, gives away two of her children at birth; Sugar Avery has not seen her children in thirty years; Sofia's lengthy jail term and maid's work at the mayor's house prevent her from being with her children; and the missionary's wife cannot bear children. Expected biological relations are also violated when Celie's father, Pa. rapes and sexually abuses her, and again when Squeak's uncle, the white jailer, rapes her. Conventional expectations of marriage are broken when Mr. _____ brings his blues-singing mistress, Sugar "Shug" Avery, home to be nursed back to health by his wife, Celie. Although the novel is about family and relationships, Walker represents few conventionally. Indeed, keeping track of who is the father of whom, the child of whom, or the mate of whom is often difficult.

In spite of the gumbo of incongruent narrative elements, *The color purple* is not an inferior novel. It is a highly-acclaimed work of art, a Pulitzer prize winning book. How is it that the admiring reader of *The color purple* can derive a sense of order and aesthetic pleasure from the potential narrative chaos described above? In this paper I argue that it is the readers' tacit familiarity with symmetry and its comforting pervasiveness in the novel that enable Walker to present the unmentionable and the abominable to accepting readers by adeptly rocking them between the poles of conceptual symmetry.

An analysis of the various projections of conceptual symmetry in the novel reveals an architecture of conceits that causes readers to think about issues of race, gender and family in new ways. I will show that disparate elements such as those mentioned above and features such as the oft-criticized stereotypy of the characters in *The colorpurple* (see Harris, 1984; Puissant, 1993; Watkins, 1986) are examples of conceptual symmetries and asymmetries (henceforward, *a/symmetries*). At first glance, the novel might appear to simplify characters and issues. On careful examination, however, we can discover that the *a/symmetries* are employed by the author to disrupt conventional ways of thinking and to force the audience beyond passive readership (see Hooks, 1991: 56; Mariani, 1991). In interviews, Walker has talked about how she has purposely used stereotypes to induce black men and women "to think about conflicts of gender as well as race" (qtd. in Birkett, 1991: 126). To jar her readers, she intentionally uses a socio-politically loaded word such as "mammy" juxtaposed with a defiant, non-domestic black female like *The color purple*'s Sofia to "subvert the discourse of plantation kinship" (Selzer, 1995: 74). Some *a/symmetries*, I propose, are deliberately crafted by Walker, while others are perceived by readers as human beings inclined cognitively to detect complexities in their surrounding environment.

A common cognitive response, notes Mark Turner, in *Reading minds: The study of English in the age of cognitive science*, is to recognize asymmetry and to attempt to understand why a prevalent symmetry has broken down (1991: 92). A basic cognitive response exercised in our environments translates to the aesthetic field, such that if we stop to consider an asymmetry in a line of poetry, or in the composition of a painting, we look for a causal explanation for that asymmetry. Thus, the degree of involvement in seeking the causal explanation correlates with our aesthetic response.

Michael Leyton in *Symmetry, causality, mind* (1992), discusses how the mind uses a/symmetry to seek causal explanation and to recover history from the shape of objects. He presents a number of cases illustrating that when objects have symmetry in the present, "one cannot deduce a past that is any different from it" (Leyton, 1992: 8). If the artist creates only symmetrical objects, the observer cannot deduce a past that is any different from the present symmetry. In *The color purple*, symmetrical and asymmetrical relations can be considered as objects created as art for the novel. As such, the relations are projections of a/symmetry which can be construed in the novel's structure, characterizations, and plot.

I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Conceptual symmetry and asymmetry

Cognitive scientists and psychologists have for many years made explanatory connections between bodily symmetry, cognition, and aesthetics (see Berlyne, 1971; Johnson, 1987; Leyton, 1992; Turner, 1991; Weyl, 1952). Turner, for example, in analyzing the verbal art of poetry in form and content (1986; 1991) explains that artists frequently create a type of disorder, a breakage of symmetry to cause readers to focus on particular aspects of their work. Turner writes, "We try to understand why a prevalent symmetry breaks down: when we have accounted for information by understanding it as generally symmetrical, we need a special account for those places where the prevalent symmetry breaks" (1992: 92). Correspondingly, to analyze several paintings, Leyton employs a theory of cognition, which posits that "[t]he mind assigns to shape a causal history explaining how the shape was formed" (1992: 2). The aesthetic response to an artwork, according to Leyton, is "the evaluation of [a] causal explanation" (1992: 581). Once discovered by experimental psychologists, the phenomenon of "complexity-seeking," or what Leyton more narrowly calls "asymmetry-seeking," was soon connected to art and aesthetics.

In the following sections, I describe embodied bilateral symmetry and its connection to asymmetry-seeking.

1.1.1 Embodied bilateral symmetry

Turner explicates embodied bilateral symmetry and its link to the underlying cognitive processes in which we perceive symmetry:

We have a felt, schematic, embodied understanding of bilateral symmetry, and we employ this schematic understanding constantly, moment to moment, in every aspect of our existence, to make sense of our world and to interact with it... This schematic understanding operates across modes of perception, activity, and imagination. (1991: 70)

In all instances, we move from our specific understanding of bodily symmetry to a generic and metaphorical application of that symmetry. This is a basic cognitive process or basic metaphor, GENERIC IS SPECIFIC (Turner, 1991: 70). Through this conceptual metaphor, we comprehend that the bilateral symmetry we experience specifically can be applied to various literary relations in a text. Below, following Turner (1991), I describe various metaphorical projections of symmetry.

1.1.2 Polar opposites, equilibrium, and stasis

When humans conceive of opposites, we are projecting our embodied bilateral symmetry onto ideas and entities. Contraries such as *black* and *white*, *weak* and *strong*, "are called 'polar' opposites because we conceive of them metaphorically as end points (or 'poles') of a spatial line segment that has a metaphoric equilibrium equidistant from each pole" (Turner. 1991: 79). We also tend to think of change as metaphoric movement along that imagined linear scale. We expect, owing to this metaphor, a balance of the two extremes of the scale and can anticipate change if the equilibrium is disturbed. Equilibrium or stasis may be defined as a state of rest when there is neither motion nor development due to the equal action of opposing forces. An entity, concept, or relation, which is metaphorically symmetrical, does not, by itself, have stasis, spatiality, or bilaterality; but any of these features can be metaphorically projected.

1.1.3 Automorphism

Automorphism is a mapping of elements, a structure-preserving mapping of elements to themselves, such that each element has a corresponding symmetry. It is a mathematical concept, which is not metaphorically bilaterally symmetrical, but which can be construed as such because it is an conceptual artifact of our embodied symmetry. A set or group of automorphisms can be viewed as a mirror world. A group of mapped automorphisms might also be viewed as a copy or an inverse copy.

1.2 Aesthetics and cognition

1.2.1 Asymmetry, causal explanation, and the recovery of history

Leyton (1992) has studied how symmetry and the mind work in aesthetics and cognition. Leyton's work does not start with embodied bilateral symmetry, as does Turner (1991), but rather with the observation that humans seek out asymmetries as a cognitive response. Leyton remarks that humans are confined to the present. He posits that "all cognitive activity proceeds via the recovery of the past from objects in the present. Cognitive activity *of any type* is, on close

examination, the determination of the past" (Leyton, 1992: 2). From the objects in our present, we attempt to recover history. One might say, then, that asymmetry is the memory that processes leave on objects. In recovering the history of an object, we seek causal explanation for the present shape of the object. If an object has a regular shape, if it is symmetrical, we can infer no past. However, if an object, for example, the fender of a car, is dented (i.e., asymmetrical), we seek a causal explanation for that dent; perhaps the car collided with a garage, a deer, or a cyclist? Leyton explains the "Asymmetry-Seeking Principle" and supports it with evidence from research in experimental psychology from the 1950s and 1960s on rats and humans. He reviews research from experimental psychology, which demonstrates that individuals and rats have a preferred level of environmental complexity which they seek and which they find appetitive (Leyton, 1992: 569-571; 575-576). According to Leyton, that which people consider to be the "artistic content" of a work is the "process-history" they recover from it, and "...the aesthetic response to an artwork is a response to the causal explanation assigned to the work's shape-structure, i.e., to the asymmetries in the work" (1992: 477). Thus, an artwork is an object from which we cannot only draw enjoyment, but also from which we can extract a maximal amount of history. If artworks were purely symmetrical, the inference of history would be prevented. Totally symmetrical artworks would be equally boring.

L2.2 Political prisoners and the removal of objects

In his final chapter, "Political Prisoners," Leyton illustrates how the Asymmetry-Seeking Principle applies to the history-recovery problem for political prisoners, slaves, and refugees (1992: 585-604). Political prisoners, for example, live in cells from which all objects, indications of the past, have been removed by the subjugators. Leyton describes the history-recovery problem:

Each of us is completely confined to the present—and thus the present is, in a very real sense, a prison that isolates us from the past. It is only from the contents of this prison that we might be able to infer prior events. In particular, since we are confined to the present, we are separated even from our own past. And, thus, it is only by examination of the objects within this prison that we can discover what we ourselves have undergone. (1992: 586)

Political prisoners, slaves, and refugees cannot build up any external memory because, when objects are removed, the past cannot be reconstructed. The removal of objects creates a perceived asymmetry; it may manifest in the form of the exile or extermination of persons, the taking or destruction of physical objects, or in the wresting of abstract concepts such as dignity, honor, and identity.

Bridging Tumer's work on conceptual symmetry to that of Leyton on asymmetry-seeking and the recovery of history, I will now examine the various metaphorical projections of a/symmetry in *The color purple*.

II. METAPHORICAL PROJECTIONS OF SYMMETRY IN THE COLOR PURPLE

Conceptual asymmetries in *The color purple* engage readers, leading them to rediscover individual character histories and motives, or in Leyton's epistemological terms, to seek causal explanations for the asymmetries. Literary critics have discerned in the relations and themes in *The colorpurple* what they have referred to variously as "duality," "doubleness," and "parallels." Berlant, for example, considers the narrative of *The colorpurple* to have been accomplished with an "aesthetic/symbolic logic"; that logic uses "correlates" and "conventional links which map race relations to gender and also race relations to class" (1988: 833). Selzer's thesis is that Walker uses two narrative strategies to link class and race: "an embedded narrative line on the post-colonial perspective" and "a carefully elaborated trope" which links family relations to race relations (1995: 68). Through what Selzer calls a "layered narrative line, Walker's text is capable of another form of 'doubleness' a n ability to signify upon itself" (1995: 80)¹. Each of these various literary techniques detected in *The color purple* is underpinned by conceptual a/symmetry.

II.1 Epistolary structure and biological dis/equilibrium

Embodied bilateral symmetry and the related experience of our perception of equilibrium allow us to find order in the narrative structure of *The color purple*. Symmetry is the basis of the structure of the novel in the expected exchange of Celie's letters to God and of her sister Nettie's letters from Africa addressed to Celie. In the epistolary form, as in most types of symmetry, there is an "expectation of continuation" (Turner, 1991: 92). That epistolary structure is a frame, an idealized cognitive model of communication. Based on that model, we expect a coming and going of information. Celie initially writes to God and prays that he is listening. but this correspondence is static in that God never acknowledges her pleas and queries. In Celie's first letters to God, we learn that Pa, the man she believes to be her biological father. has raped her many times. She bears two children by him and he gives them both away soon after they are born. Celie initially writes to God because Pa forbids her to tell anyone else who sired her children. Thus, the father's violent and incestuous act upsets the biological balance and is the impetus for the novel's beginning, as shown in its epigraph: "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (*Purple*: 1). The expected symmetry of the epistolary is broken by a disturbance of the biological equilibrium. Biological disequilibrium, or incest. is the catalyst for Celie's letters and, thus, for the development of the novel's action.

Biological disequilibrium functions significantly to drive character development in Celie, and in Squeak, Harpo's second wife. Squeak, a young woman of mixed race. is timid and meek as her name implies. In an attempt to free Sofia from her jail term, Squeak leaves the private sphere of home and ventures to the public sphere to talk to her uncle, the white jailer. Her uncle rapes her "denying their kinship in the very act of perverting it" (Selzer, 1995: 75). Having suffered the rape and the racial and political injustice at the hands of her own family member.

Squeak radically transforms. After the rape, she insists on being called her birth name, Mary Agnes; she begins to sing professionally (flouting her former sobriquet); and she no longer tolerates her Harpo's domination. The incestuous act by Squeak's white jailer-uncle tips the balance of equilibrium at several levels. It exposes the myth of family solidarity, revealing that solidarity does not cross mixed blood lines. As uncle, he betrays the myth of the protective patriarchy as one to whom the "weaker" female could appeal. In a similar hierarchical vein, his act in the position of jailer reveals that even the Law, conventionally an equalizer, is not only untrustworthy but also abusive. At each of these levels, conventional expectations are shattered and tradition is broken.

11.2 The **dis/equilibrium** of presence and absence

In addition to biological equilibrium, another type of metaphoric equilibrium is at play in *The color purple*. This second type of equilibrium is a by-product of the bilateral epistolary structure, which by definition requires the contraposition of presence and absence (see Williams, 1989). In other words, it is possible to perceive metaphorical equilibrium and disequilibrium in certain relations when entities are either present or absent.

The antithesis of presence/absence is strong in the novel. The first example is the abstract notion of the removal of self. Various critics have written about Celie's act of writing as self-construction (Berlant, 1988; hooks, 1988; Williams, 1989), self-preservation or for self-knowledge (Hall, 1993; Williams, 1989), and as a means for Celie to regain her free use of language as expression of the self (Birkett, 1991; Froula, 1986). Berlant, for example, comments that Pa, in raping Celie, removes from her her sense of self (1988: 838), as shown in the first words of the novel when Celie crosses out "*I am*" to replace it with "*I have always been a good girl*" [emphasis added] (*Purple*: 1). Indeed, much of the novel is about Celie's search for her lost identity. Celie's search for who she is is further complicated with a second grave contrast of presence and absence. This begins when, shortly after their birth, Pa takes away and sells the two children Celie bore him. They are absent from her life for several decades until she discovers that they were adopted by the African-American missionaries with whom Nettie lives in Africa. Despite being kin, Pa sells Celie's babies away no differently than the slave owners sold the children of their slaves away.

Pa, as subjugator, deprives Celie of still more. He intentionally keeps traces of her identity from her through the significant details of her own history. After many years, she learns that Pa was not her biological father and, thus, that her children by him, although the product of rape, were not the product of incest. She learns also that her biological father had been a well-to-do farmer who was lynched by envious whites and that, upon her mother's death, she should have inherited a farmhouse, land, and a general store. Much like slave owners, Pa has a pattern of securing sexual relations through economic domination (see Berlant, 1988).

It is nearly impossible for Celie to know her own personal history or who she is because

all of the objects of significance to her are removed from her presence. These "objects" are her own human rights, her children, and knowing her father's own history, one of both racial and class oppression because of his prosperity and real wealth. Without these artifacts of a history external to her, Celie cannot share external memory with others, cannot know who she is nor gain any power. Celie's plight is much like that of the political prisoners of whom Leyton speaks, stripped of any trace of their identities (1992: 585-604). Her history of sexual oppression parallels the history of slavery and race relations in America. With the artifacts of Celie's history absent, she cannot infer her past.

The opposing forces of presence and absence are nowhere more apparent than in Celie's husband's hiding of all of Nettie's letters to her. Mr. _____, the man to whom Pa gives Celie in marriage, is just as abusive and controlling as he. (Walker gives Mr. _____ no name throughout the novel to signify his lowliness.) In Mr. _____'s house, Celie lives no better than a slave: cleaning his house, caring for his unruly, hateful children, serving his sexual needs, and suffering his verbal and physical beatings. Sister Nettie leaves for Africa essentially to avoid Mr. _____'s lecherous clutches. Before Nettie goes, Celie makes her promise to write, and she replies that only death would keep her from it. Decades pass. With the letters cruelly appropriated by Mr. _____, Celie can only believe that her sister is dead. Thus, Celie believes she has lost her last connection with her own history.

A key asymmetry in the narrative occurs when Mr. _____ begins to intercept the letters. Shug helps Celie find the hidden letters, and Mr. _____ knows they are aware of his deception. Celie, infuriated with Mr. _____ and empowered with some knowledge of her past, moves to Memphis to live with Shug. Not long after, she learns that Mr. _____ has become very ill, driven nearly insane by visions. His house falls into disrepair and, although once a vain man, he no longer takes care of himself. Sofia tells Celie Mr. _____ only improved after Harpo told him to return the rest of Nettie's letters, saying, "You know meanness kill..." (Purple: 231). The metaphoric equilibrium of the epistolary frame is regained only when Mr. _____ returns Nettie's letters to Celie. With that action, he regains full health and becomes a kinder person. At this point, in fact, all Mr. _____'s previous stereotypically and traditionally male characteristics invert a typical reaction in the symmetry of opposing forces. The domineering, non-domestic, wife-abusing man, Mr. _____, once redeemed, cleans house, sews shirts, shares recipes, "wonders," "asts," (asks) and even cries (Purple: 229-231; 289).

Mr. _____'s redemption is a classic trope, which can be traced to the Greek philosopher Anaximander (c. 611-c. 547 BC). Anaximander, discussing natural philosophy, posited that opposites interact with each other in the constant motion of a primary source (upeon). In metaphorical language, he said that the opposites encroach on one another and thus repay one another's "injustices" over a period of time ("Anaximander"). Walker's Mr. _____, so stereotypically brutish, inverts comically to an almost stereotypically sensitive-female persona. This inversion is not without design. The gender dimension to this inversion shows that equilibrium as a cognitive resolving force extends to resolve a series of polar imbalances

systematically. The return of the letters signals the return to metaphoric equilibrium. Giving Celie her letters also lays the ground for resolution in the lives of the other characters.

II.3 Polar opposites, characterization, and gender roles

Another type of symmetry metaphorically projected in The color purple involves polar opposites. Walker creates physical and psychological characterization in the novel through traditional and default-concept opposites. A productive way for Walker to invert paradigms based on racial stereotypy or gender stereotypy is to use polar opposites frequently. (Mr. _____’s redemption and subsequent "inversion" is an effective example.) When opposing values are switched, Turner notes, "...our interactions with the environment are definitely altered" (1991: 72). This means that when we are habituated to conventional thought and paradigms, or, in this case, particular opposites, extremes cause us to re-examine. What is sometimes perceived as male-bashing in The color purple (see Pouissant, 1993) is the deliberate use of stereotypes as diametrical opposites to force readers to react and to think differently about the roles the characters play.

For instance. in the various dyads or couples in the novel, polar characteristics are emphasized, at times exaggerated: Shug is very beautiful; Celie is very ugly. Sofia is very large; Harpo is very small. Celie is very domestic; Shug is very worldly. Table 1 shows characteristics of traditional gender roles. In The color purple, we find that conflict arises for the characters when a particular quality she or he possesses is not one which conventionally is assigned to that gender.

Table 1: Polar opposites in The color purple: Traditional gender roles

| <i>Female</i> | <i>Male</i> |
|------------------------------------|---|
| submissive (subjugates, fights) | dominant (obedient, does not fight) |
| private (domestic, tends children) | public (worldly, owns capital, conducts business) |
| weak | strong |
| small size | large size |
| uneducated | educated |
| ugly | beautiful |
| one mate | many mates |

For example. that Sofia possesses a much larger body than her husband Harpo is a source of great conflict for him. It is exactly when we find a female characterized by one of the features in the right-hand column of Table 1 (traditional male qualities) that antithesis occurs in the novel. Sofia is a large woman who would rather fix the roof of her house while her husband takes care of the children (Purple: 62-63). Independent and strong, she has interests that are traditionally male, such as wanting to be a pall bearer at her mother’s funeral (Purple: 216). Harpo is a small man, who throughout the novel is depicted as the more domestic of the pair. That the small-large opposition weighs on Harpo’s mind is evident when at one point he eats obsessively in order to make himself as large as Sofia (Purple: 63-64). Although the pair clearly cares for each other,

Harpo is disturbed that he does not fit the traditional male expectations of large size and physical and mental dominance of his wife. Sofia physically fights with Harpo after he first attempts to beat her into submission. Harpo's binge-eating is an unsuccessful attempt at achieving physical dominance over Sofia. When Sofia eventually moves out, Harpo begins a relationship with Squeak, a small woman, not outspoken (as her name indicates). and one whom he can dominate. at least for a while.

Sofia is a threat to the traditional paradigm not only for gender, but also for race. She has the traditional qualities of the male gender which cause her problems in her own race, but because "she is bound to live her life and be herself no matter what" (*Purple*: 276), those same traditionally male qualities which lead her to resist sexual oppression in the private sphere accompany her as she resists racial oppression within the public sphere (Berlant, 1988: 462). Sofia is unsuited for the "mammy" role in her own home and in the home of the Mayor (Selzer, 1995: 74). Sofia replies, "Hell no," at the mayor's wife's inquiry as to whether she would like to be her maid and care for her children (*Purple*: 90). The mayor and his men savagely beat Sofia for her lack of subservience. They further dominate her by giving her a fifteen-year jail term. She is released from her imprisonment only to become the maid of the mayor's wife.

Because Sofia so blatantly breaks traditional gender and race paradigms, she suffers the most of all characters. Men and women of her race seek to oppress her for her "manliness" while the whites essentially make her a political prisoner whose spirit they attempt to crush (Berlant, 1988: 462). The mapping of race and sexual oppression is easily perceived through the polar opposites of Sofia's character.

The dyads of Celie and Pa and Celie and Mr. _____ also clearly illustrate gender roles portrayed in polar opposites. Pa and Mr. _____'s dominating and controlling ways have been described above in the discussion of equilibrium. Both men seek to keep women in submission, to keep them in the private sphere where they can clean house, tend children, and serve the men's sexual needs. These men have many mates. but the women should only have one mate. Celie. before loving Shug and recovering her history through the letters, exhibits all the traits on the left-hand side of Table 1. She is the perfect traditional opposite for her dominating Pa and husband. She is so submissive that other female characters, who must feign obedience, refer to Celie saying, "I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say" (*Purple*: 93). Celie is very domestic and very unworldly, at first not even knowing "where Africa at". She is kept from an education by being "needed" at home, but also because the traditional gender role dictates that "If women learn too much no man will want them" (*Purple*: 161).

Celie and Shug are exact opposites as well. Shug is beautiful, strong, feisty, articulate, financially independent, sexually aggressive, and worldly. Celie initially has none of these traits. The gender roles begin to blur, however, under Shug's influence for, in Mr. _____'s words, "Sofia and Shug not like men...but they not like women either" (*Purple*: 276). Shug disrupts the traditional paradigm because she is like a man and like a woman and also because she is bisexual and polygamous. She is a fascinating paradox for those men and women with traditional views

who love her. Since Shug possesses both male and female traits, she creates a kind of synergism in the lives of those she touches. Her ambiguous gender role makes obvious and laughable the rigid male-female gender roles of the other characters.

11.4 The automorphic world of the African Olinka

A third type of metaphorical projection of symmetry in *The color purple* is the conceptual mapping of the African tribal world of the Olinka to protagonist Celie's American South. That Africa is a mirror world, or inversion, and a reflex of our understanding of symmetry. The set of parts and the relations which interest us in Celie's American South are just those which conceptually map onto the Olinka tribe with whom Celie's sister Nettie lives as a missionary. These correspondences represent automorphism, the structure-preserving mapping of elements to themselves. These familial and gender relations also map onto racial tensions between the Europeans and the Olinka and to the responses of subjugation and submission brought on by colonialist domination and exploitation of African resources.

Selzcr (1995) has recognized how Walker carefully embeds the narrative with race and class contextual information. Berlant (1988) points to the importance of Nettie working as a missionary in Africa because Nettie's position permits an entrance to the familial and private sphere while at the same time shedding light on colonial and capitalist expansion in Africa. Williams similarly identifies the "elaborately parallel experiences of racism and sexism" in the plots of the two sisters' fundamentally different lives (1989: 280-281). Although Africa originally held for Nettie a mythical and magical nature of her origins, the longer she lives with the Olinka, the more similarities she notices between the traditional ways of men and women on either continent. Nettie, disillusioned, writes Celie the following:

There is a way that men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women when they are speaking...The women also do not "look in a man's face"...a brazen thing to do...They look instead at his feet or knees...Again. it is our own behavior around Pa. (*Purple*: 168)

Nettie observes that the same traditionally gendered roles of submission and dominance exist in the Olinka culture. Nettie must slowly unlearn the myth of Africa the missionaries taught her. She discovers the Olinka world is a flawed paradise where "the mothers of the tribe collude with the patriarchs in the exploitation of their daughters" (Birkett, 1991: 142). To her dismay, she learns that in the Olinka patriarchal system, girls are also not believed worthy of educating because "[a] girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" and that Olinka men do not want an educated wife, for "who wants a wife who knows everything her husband knows?" (*Purple*: 161-162; 176). These Olinka adages echo those Celie and Nettie hear in the American South, when Pa declares, "If women learn too much no man will want them."

The patriarchal subjugation of man over woman maps to the race relations of white over

black. The same elements map between the African Olinka and the European colonizers and capitalists, with the Europeans taking on the stereotypically male traits. Table 2 shows polar opposites in the Olinka world.

Table 2: Automorphism and the polar opposites of the Olinka world

| <u>Traditional roles (female/black)</u> | <u>Traditional roles (male/white)</u> |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Africans | Europeans |
| submissive (obedient: don't fight when Europeans deforest roofleaf) | dominant (subjugate. control) |
| uneducated | educated (missionary) |
| generous (offer food, hospitality) | greedy |

Traditional gender roles between Olinkamen and women. for example, the submissive-dominant and uneducated-educated oppositions, map to Celie and Nettie's experience in the American South. The automorphic Olinka world is a set of elements matched for gender, race, and class relations in the American South.

Through automorphism, many events in the Olinka world evoke parallel events in Celie's world. These are metaphorical projections of symmetry. From Africa, Nettie's letters describe how the Olinka worship a type of vegetation, the roofleaf, as God. The roofleaf is an essential part of their belief system and is their livelihood. In spite of the plant's significance to the tribe, the British rubber company levels their homes and deforests their beloved roofleaf tree forest to build a road through the Olinka village. The villagers do not resist; rather, they generously offer food, drink and hospitality to their subjugators. When the roofleaf is destroyed, the tribe is then forced to purchase tin from the British to have roofs over their heads. The general Olinka reaction is submissive; the abuse is accepted with no resistance. (Some Olinka do, however, join the *mbeles*, a separatist group living deep in the jungle.) The removal of the roofleaf is the act of the subjugator for capitalistic gain. This act has its race-class parallel in the lynching of Celie's biological father by whites because of his capitalistic success. Berlant (1988) notes that the "racial inferiority and subhumanity" of blacks are invoked and serve as justification enough for whites —be they colonialists or southerners— to usurp resources. These class issues are not as overt as other relations in *The color purple* because they are embedded within or mapped onto the context of family and gender relations.

Curiously, or, rather, automorphically, at the same time that the British are deforesting the Olinka lands, Celie, in the American South, learns that she has inherited a house, farm land, and a general store from her biological father. Celie visits her property to find it covered in row upon row of blossoming trees. When the Olinka world is being destroyed, its inverse, Celie's world, is coming into fruition. Celie, once a "poor, ugly, untalented woman," — in the words of Mr. ___ — at story's end, is financially, personally, and creatively free.

After many years, family members physically and spiritually reunite. Celie's two children return from Africa with Nettie and her husband Samuel, the missionary (who married her after his first wife died). Shug visits her children, whom she has not seen in thirty years. Harpo, Sofia,

Celie, Mr. _____, and Shug are all reunited as well, not as mates but as friends sharing in the mutual upbringing of each family's small children. Thus, the traditionally gendered functions of father and mother are blended. As Froula notes, the "formerly rigid family lines become fluid" (642).

Celie, at the end of the novel, is explaining the Olinka creation beliefs to Mr. _____. Some Olinka believe that white and black (or any groups with differences —Celie hypothesizes perhaps the "two-headed" versus "one-headed folks" of the future) will perpetually vie for dominance (Purple: 281-282). The oppressed group, "the serpent," will then be crushed by the dominant group. Celie recounts, "...some of the Olinka peoples believe life will just go on and on like this forever" (Purple: 282). Celie continues within the alternate view:

But some of 'em don't think like this. They think, after the biggest of the white folks no longer on earth, the only way to stop making somebody the serpent is for everybody to accept everybody else as a child of God, or one mother's children, no matter what they look like or how they act.
(Purple: 282)

Celie's simply-worded rendering of the creation myth reveals that some Olinka believe that the pattern of oppression will not repeat endlessly. In this view, the stereotyped lines will disintegrate in favor of everyone caring for and accepting everyone's children as though they were "one mother's children."

The inverse world of the Olinka metaphorically represents the possibility of endless repetition of categorizations in opposition to each other. The return of all of Celie's family members from Africa and the reuniting of all the families and former tormentors might have been just another cycle in the endless repetition if the members of the group like Squeak, Mr. _____, and Celie were not transformed individuals. Furthermore, Walker would have us believe, this group has the hope of not repeating the cycle of oppression, because its membership comprises complex and ambiguous characters like Sofia and Shug who blur the rigid lines of categorization.

III. CONCLUSION

Conceptual *a*/symmetry is pervasive throughout *The color purple*. In its various metaphorical projections, asymmetry bids the reader's examination. The many asymmetric relations of race, gender, family, and class in the novel cause the reader to ask why such asymmetries exist. The process of recovering the history or seeking a causal explanation for the asymmetries is a common cognitive response. It is something we humans unconsciously do every day and many times throughout the day. Fortunately for us, recovering the process-history of an object is linked to aesthetic pleasure and to survival. Under a theory of conceptual metaphor, readers of *The color purple* engage in interpreting each asymmetry to discover its history. With themes of sexual and racial oppression, it is important to have an awareness of the conceptual asymmetry involved in the removal of objects. The symmetry which results from the removal of objects deprives

individuals of indications of their past; without them, they cannot deduce a past any different than the present. Leyton best explains the significance of having objects of one's personal history present for examination:

People and cultures who have a long history of being subjugators possess vast amounts of external memory that has been obtained at the expense of those whom they have subjugated. Thus, for example, colonial powers have amassed their considerable external memory at the expense of colonies, men have amassed theirs at the expense of women, and whites at the expense of blacks. (1992: 593)

External memory is simply history. If we examine history books, we will find Leyton's words to ring true. Walker said in interviews that she wanted to write an historical novel, one which "starts not with the taking of lands, or births, or battles, and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear" (1983: 356). In *The color purple*, Walker has written an historical novel, but not because in it one woman asks another for her underwear, rather because of numerous other asymmetries equally worthy of investigating.

NOTES

Signifying is used here in the sense of the African-American verbal art of indirection. Signifying is often used as the "recognition and attribution of some implicit content or function which is obscured by the surface content of function" (Mitchell-Kernan, 317-18).

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