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Dismantling and (Re) constructing notions of masculinity and femininity in African women literature

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ABSTRACT

HUMANITIES

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DISMANTLING AND (RE)CONSTRUCTING NOTIONS OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN AFRICAN WOMEN LITERATURE

Committee Chair: Georgene Bess-Montgomery, Ph.D.

Dissertation dated May 2011

This study examines gender (re)presentation in three carefully selected works: Brown Girl, Brownstones; The Color Purple; and When Rocks Dance. Employing the scholarship of women writers of the Diaspora, I contend that the works dismantle and (re)construct gender identities. Where traditional notions of sexuality depict men as masculine and women as feminine, this analysis interrogates and subverts the traditional paradigm. Methodologically, the dissertation combines literary analysis, post-colonial studies, and gender schema theory into an interdisciplinary approach. I begin by exploring gender construction to establish a theoretical perspective for characters who reject traditional heteronormative paradigms. I then extend recent critical discussions on gender and post-colonialism by examining the relationships between the men and women in each literary text. I contend that traditional notion of characters as homosexual or lesbian is dismantled and (re)constructed, thereby resulting in characters who embrace their femininity or masculinity in a more balanced construction of personality, which is the key to their self-actualization.
Dismantling and (Re)constructing Notions of Masculinity and Femininity in Africana Women Literature

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Clark Atlanta University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Arts

By

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May 2011
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In literature, gender issues are traditionally perceived in heteronormative terms, with homosexuals as feminine men and lesbians as masculine women. However, in Paule Marshall’s, *Brown Girl Brownstones*, we see how this literary pioneer subverts the world of heteronormativity. *Brown Girl Brownstones* introduces a new literary perspective on gender construction, one that attempts to (re)represent in literature characters that are both feminized and masculinized. Marshall’s characters embody new ideals that also dismantle the traditional family hierarchy. Silla is the breadwinner of the family; her husband [Deighton] is more passive and unconcerned with the affairs of the family. These characters enabled me to (re)consider gender roles in literature and how African Diasporic women writers approach this topic in their works. In an effort to rethink the previous construction of gender, I explore additional texts that reveal commonalities to *Brown Girl Brownstones: The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *When Rocks Dance* by Elizabeth Nunez. Employing gender and postcolonial theory, I believe that Marshall, Walker, and Nunez seek to empower women by masculinizing them, ascribing to them roles as the breadwinner or property owners. Correspondingly, they feminize the men in order to rebut patriarchal notions prevalent in the twentieth century.

skillfully devises a plan to sell the land without Deighton’s consent so that she can purchase a brownstone—a high-rise single-family home that characteristically resembles townhomes in southern states. Though land ownership is traditionally a male’s birthright, Silla steals Deighton’s land in order to acquire homeownership, evidencing masculine attributes. Her present job in the factory is also an indicator of her masculinity. Selina, like her mother, is another character that exemplifies masculine characteristics. Selina is aggressive and her relationship with her best friend Beryl during their youth resembles that of man and wife, with Selina assuming the dominant role in the relationship. While Silla and Selina are significant to understanding Marshall’s gender depiction, so is Deighton. His feminization is signified by his desire to dress up in lavish clothing as well as his lack of participation as the breadwinner of the family. After cashing the check from the sale of the land, Deighton purchases fur coats and trumpets. Thus, Marshall inverts normality with Silla as the masculinized figure and Deighton as the feminine.

Alice Walker’s The Color Purple is an exploration of the need for balance. Walker portrays characters who are imbalanced because of their disconnect from their feminine selves. These characters cannot be whole until they embrace both their feminine and masculine selves. Celie is at first a quiet passive character who has no fight in her. In fact, she “makes herself wood,” (23) which means she not only does not fight back, she does not feel. This passivity and apathy evidences her imbalance of masculine and feminine characteristics. Unlike Celie, Sophia is a fighter; she is assertive, aggressive, and has no feminine softness. She builds and repairs her house and will stand up to anyone despite his physical strength or race, which eventually leads her to prison. In order for Celie to become whole, she must embrace a more masculine
approach to life. Likewise, Sophia must embrace her feminine self. These counterparts form a diptych, whose missing central panel is the fully-empowered woman at the center of the triptych.

Shug Avery is another character by which Walker examines the trope of masculinity. Upon first meeting Shug, she exhibits a mean and hateful personality. Although Shug is loved, she is neither loving nor nurturing. This hardness is perhaps a masculine characteristic, but one which she learns at home from her masculine mother, who is stern, undemonstrative, and strict. Her father, however, is like a woman, loving, compassionate, and generous in spirit. Not a nurturer, Shug berates and criticizes, thinks only of her own needs and places them first. She responds to Mr. ___'s statements with aggressive militant verbiage, using language “unbecoming” for a lady.

Not only does Walker masculinize the women in the novel, she also reveals the men’s feminine selves. However, this feminine self is typically rejected in favor of a devastating machismo, leading to a comparable imbalance in their lives. Both Albert and Harpo mask their femininity by aggressive acts such as beating and berating their wives. But Albert’s femininity is exemplified as he describes to Celie his desire, as a young man, to sew, rejecting it when he is ridiculed by his male peers. Later in the novel, he embraces this skill as he and Celie sew together. Harpo’s femininity is characterized by his desire to perform domestic roles. Although he works in the fields, he appears happy in the role of cooking and cleaning and rearing the children. Because both Harpo and Albert reject their feminine selves, they are abusive. In masculinizing and feminizing her characters, Walker seems to suggest that it is only in the marrying of the feminine and masculine selves that the characters can find balance and wholeness.
Elizabeth Nunez’s novel *When Rocks Dance* also shares commonalities with Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Like Marshall, Nunez weaves a story wherein land ownership is the coveted good that drives characters to do what it takes to attain land; this, too becomes evidence of gender (re)construction. As a young girl, Emilia impresses upon Marina the importance of owning land, a masculine attribute, and thus Marina’s drive to be a landowner masculinizes her. When her feminine prowess is not enough, Marina employs the power of Obeah to ensure that she takes possession of the land, which further suggests her masculinity. While Marina’s determination is a display of masculine characteristics, one perceives her husband Antonio as feminized. He allows passion and intimacy to cloud his perception of reality. By marrying Marina, Antonio feels that he will finally be successful in having a son. Because of an alleged curse, each of Antonio’s wives die during or shortly after childbirth. But what is noticeable is the gender (re)construction that Nunez employs to present characters that reject traditional norms of masculinity and femininity.

To interrogate this dismantling of gender identities, I employ scholarship by noted psychologist Sandra Beam who coins a theoretical paradigm entitled Gender Polarization, which is utilized in psychological developmental studies. Beam argues that “to interrupt the social reproduction of male power, we need to dismantle not only androcentrism and biological essentialism but also gender polarization” (329). She finds that this drastic paradigmatic shift is needed in order to deconstruct notions of masculinity and femininity as the norm. Additionally she postulates, “[…] we need to sever all the culturally-constructed connections that currently exist in our society between what sex a person is […]” (329). I assert that Beam’s observation is applicable to Walker, Marshall, and
Nunez’s characterizations; each writer approaches roles of masculinity and femininity deconstructively.

Gender Polarization is the dismantling and reconfiguration of how one perceives the biology of a sex, masculine or feminine. This perspective does not mean that “males and females would merely be freer to be masculine, feminine, or androgynous, heterosexual, [and] homosexual […]” (329). Rather, Beam argues that the “distinction between male and female would no longer be the holistic dimension whereby culture is organized” (329). Other scholars—for example, Vicky Greenbaum, a high school teacher—provide discourse in this area of gender deconstruction. She finds that among 8th graders, the discussion of gender is inevitably shaped by social stereotypes. Subsequently, Greenbaum assigns students various articles and asks them to discuss their perception of the characters as masculine and feminine; not surprisingly they classify characters based upon conventional heteronormativity. In her article, “Seeing through the Lenses of Gender: Beyond Male/Female Polarization,” she argues for a (re)construction of how gender should be discussed in literature. Greenbaum invokes W. E. B DuBois’s metaphor of “lenses,” the ability to see one’s self through the eyes of another in order to understand and/or develop self-awareness (96). Both Beam and Greenbaum argue against gender normativity and for an end to seeing men as completely masculine or women feminine. By applying the paradigm articulated by Beam and Greenbaum to Marshall, Walker and Nunez’s novels, I seek to reveal commonalities whereby they too argue for a (re)representation of gender.

Although each text has received critical attention, very few criticisms address the texts from my perspective. Most critics examine the texts with a focus on male-female
relationships, sexism, racial and cultural oppression. For example, Michael Cobb, author of “Irreverent Authority: Religion Apostrophe and the Fiction of Blackness in Paula Marshall’s Brown Girl Brownstones,” affirms that the novel presents the characters’ plight of racial oppression. He finds that the characters, specifically Silla Boyce, encounter the plight of being black in the United States. Cobb affirms that “the American context of blackness is often simplified under a rubric like African American-- a rubric often synonymous with being Black, and therefore neglectful of the variations of black experiences within the Diaspora” (17).

Gavin Jones’ article “The Sea Ain’ Got No Back Door”: The Problems of Black Consciousness in Paula Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones” suggests that the novel takes on the construction of a prism-like sense of selfhood. The prism is a self-reflection of the character’s development, rooted in racial oppression, gender and sexuality. Jones also probes the novel’s use of sea imagery which “resonates in so many different areas: most importantly, those of the diaspora, ethnicity, and sexuality. The sea has a thematic inclusiveness, a flexibility and fluidity; upon it float diverse ideas of difference” (598). His notion of sea imagery is derived from Marshall’s merging of immigrants from Barbados to the United States, which presents what he terms as “the space of diaspora, a further scattering of black people” (598) to the New World. In a final revelation, Jones asserts that the sea is “inherently ambivalent [...] because it holds together the various elements in Marshall’s conception of black consciousness. Not only does the sea have a specific racial agenda; it is also a gendered space and area of predominantly female sexuality” (599).

As a post-colonial work, Brown Girl Brownstones evokes sentiments of racial and
sexual oppression but also reveals the complexities surrounding land ownership. In an article by Stacey D. Gaines entitled “The Discourse of Ownership in Paula Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*” Gaines interrogates the significance of owning property. Gaines finds that “Marshall examines a crucial and compelling moment of post-colonial study; she shows how attaining physical property and emotional property can neither make the colonized person secure in his or her identity nor make him or her more of a man or woman” (43). Moreover, Gaines believes that Marshall offers in the novel notions of reconciliation whereby the formerly colonized can re-establish their identities. Gaines discovers that the novel “presents how the subjected person continues to experience oppression outside of the boundaries of the colonized land” (43). Through the exploration of Marshall’s fictional characters, Gaines contends that *Brown Girl Brownstones* is a novel that (re)presents the plight of the transplanted Barbadians to the United States and the undergirding ideology of racial oppression from which the Barbadians seek to be liberated.

In contrast to Gaines’ examination of ownership, Lisa D. McGhill’s article “Thinking Back Through the Mother: The Poetics of Place and the Mother/Daughter Dyad in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*” explores the dynamics of mother/daughter relationships. Like much of the postmodern feminist approaches to women’s writing, McGhill finds that writers such as Marshall reflect on the theoretical framework known as “matrophobia,” which refers to the “erasure of the mother” (24). This framework enables theorists to argue “a discontinuity with past ideas of femaleness and hypothesize the burgeoning presence of autonomous female persona in American society” (24). McGhill asserts that Marshall incorporates the womanist perspective in the novel by
infusing a sense of sisterhood, although destructive, to celebrate the union between mother and daughters in American societies. She finds that the “black American mother/daughter dyad […] is presented as antagonistic, but loving; problematic, but central to the daughter’s creation of an affirmed self” (34). By theorizing the mother/daughter dyad, McGhill discovers binaries in the novel whereby mother/daughter relationships are the undergirding premise of the novel.

Shirley C. Parry interrogates Brown Girl, Brownstones from the perspective of female sexuality in “Female Sexuality and Community in Brown Girl, Brownstones.” Subsequently, she affirms that issues of gender relations and sexuality undergird all of Marshall’s works. She finds that when employing these notions in Brown Girl, Brownstones, Marshall creates “a fault-line that reveals the tensions and conflicts in the relationship between female characters and their communities” (41). Furthermore, Parry interrogates the significance of the female community and defines how this community of women becomes the catalyst to Marshall’s young protagonist Selina’s development into a woman.

Like Brown Girl Brownstones, The Color Purple yields several critical interpretations. Lindsey Tucker’s “Alice Walker’s The Color Purple: Emergent Woman, Emergent Text,” suggests that The Color Purple “represents the question of the making of a text by a black woman” (82). Moreover, she understands this work to be a truly “modernist” work in its use of language (the epistolary form) in shaping the plot and characterizations. By incorporating the epistolary forms, Tucker asserts that Walker creates “smaller texts” which include the speakers Celie and Nettie. It is Tucker’s assertion that these smaller texts combine to form the larger text “in which we, as readers,
view the disruption between speaker and listener (Albert appropriates Nettie’s letters to Celie) and the ways in which patriarchal society appropriates black discourse (Celie can only write to God, who is white and ill-equipped to hear what she has to say)” (82).

Subsequently, Tucker suggests that the joining of Celie and Nettie’s smaller texts into one larger text displays a “weaving of more than one woman’s voice” which metaphorically positions the women as “emerging” from the confounds of patriarchal societal rules.

Martha J. Cutter presents an argument that focuses on the use of language, but from a different point of view in “Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker’s Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in The Color Purple. Her title refers to the myth of Philomela, who is raped and imprisoned in a tower of stones (162). Cutter asserts that the myth semiotically engages Walker’s narrative in that Walker “illustrates the way patriarchal society censors and erases women’s voices (162). By invoking the muse of Philomela, Cutter suggests that Walker creates a heroine that (re)positions one’s notion of rhetorical situation of “sender-receiver-message” and articulates Celie’s transformation from the victim in a patriarchal plot to the empowered omniscient narrator.

Whereas Cutter focuses on Walker’s use of language, Charles L. Proudfit approaches The Color Purple psychoanalytically in his work entitled “Celie’s Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. Proudfit seeks to elucidate Walker’s literary portrayal by exploring the development of relationships, especially the relationships between mother and daughter. He finds that mother/daughter relationships are pivotal to the psychological development of a young girl as she matures into adulthood; however, because of the absence of a mother in Celie’s development, she
“struggles to separate, individuate, to develop her own identity, and to make a final choice of love object” (13). However, Celie is not lost according to Proudfit, because throughout the novel she establishes ties with women who provide her the essential components she is lacking from her absent biological mother.

Daniel W. Ross provides a seminal work that metaphorically responds to Proudfit’s coinage of which he calls the “True Self.” Ross’ article “Celie in the Looking Glass: The Desire for Selfhood in The Color Purple reveals that “finding the courage to speak” is one of the most transparent themes in the novel. Ross posits that in order for Celie to find herself “in the Creation,” she must undergo several changes in which she discovers her speech. Within the construction of speech, Ross adds that Celie must undergo “the discovery of desire-for selfhood, for other, [and] for community” (70). In order for Celie to understand herself, Ross argues that there must be a “reappropriation of her [...] body” and in so doing, she will redevelop desire which was taken from her by men—first by her stepfather and then Albert (70).

Charles J. Heglar interrogates the patterns of surnames in The Color Purple in his article “Name and Namelessness: Alice Walker’s Pattern of Surnames in The Color Purple.” He affirms that through strategic maneuvering, Alice Walker erases the names of her characters, thus developing an alternative “that challenges, overturns, and regenerates the patriarchal society of the novel” (38). First, Heglar examines namelessness in the characters Albert and the Reverend whom Nettie later marries. According to Heglar, the exemption of Mr.‘s name demonizes the character and reinforces an overtone of male supremacy; on the other hand, he asserts that Walker’s naming of the character (who we soon learn is Albert) “diminishes and humanizes him”
Similarly, Reverend Mr.____ denotes a patriarchal undertone that marks him as a “representative of patriarchal religions and cultural powers” (39). However, when Reverend Mr.____ becomes Samuel, according to Heglar, he, too, transforms from this nameless ontological representation to one whose “concept of God becomes less Eurocentric.” Additionally, Hegler asserts that Walker’s employment of surnames is a “feminization of the world of the novel” (40). Hegler finds that Walker’s supply of the surnames in the novel empowers the women who live in a patriarchal society. He states, “…Walker uses surnames as a sign of ultimate powerlessness of patriarchal conceptions; for women, she reverses the traditional signification and gives surnames as a sign of their power to transform the patriarchal system” (40).

In contrast to the critiques surrounding the novel’s use of the epistolary form and speech as an emblem of power, Candice M. Jenkins explores notions of black masculinity in “Queering Black Patriarchy: The Salvific Wish and Masculine Possibility in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple.” The arguments presented by Jenkins speak to the very idea of dismantling masculinity, which is the premise of this research. It is Jenkins’ critique that Walker engages in a project of “queering the black family […] [and] reshaping it in unconventional ways that divest its black male members of a good deal of power, thereby reconfiguring the very meaning of kinship for black sons, brothers [and] fathers” (970). She finds that the disruption of kinship structure disrupts the characters’ gender development. Whereas men in society are perceived as domineering and aggressive, Jenkins argues that Walker refashions “heteronormative masculinity” so that men no longer dominate in the family. Furthermore, Jenkins posits that “Walker’s transformative
revision of the black domesticity in *The Color Purple* accomplishes no less than the emptying of ‘black masculinity” (972).

Additionally, Elizabeth Nunez’s novel *When Rocks Dance* has also engaged serious critical attention. Melvin B. Rahming offers a scholarly critique entitled “Theorizing Spirit: The Critical Challenge of Elizabeth Nunez’s *When Rocks Dance* and *The Limbo of Silence*.” Rahming postulates that there is a nexus between literature and religion, which is manifested in “spirit-centered literature.” Rahming argues that the spirit-centered movement in literature is “concerned with both the perception and the manifestation of cosmic oneness, humanity’s evolutionary consciousness of, and response to, cosmic intent” (2). By applying this theoretical paradigm to *When Rocks Dance*, Rahming problematizes some conditions of spirit-centered literature in order to “probe issues and situations in the novel […] and lay the methodological groundwork for a spirit-centered literary theory” (3). He affirms that Nunez’s work constructs a paradigm whereby the readers’ personal spiritual relationship can be heightened or enriched.

While Rahming presents evidence of the novel as a spirit-centered text, Thelma B. Thompson discusses the theme of motherhood in “Motherhood: A Literary Motif in Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell’s *When Rocks Dance*.” She affirms that the success of Nunez’s novel is the author’s “successful linkage […] of motherhood […] to strong rituals and myths of the Caribbean” (30). Furthermore, Thompson adds that Nunez moves beyond the paradigm of biological mother/daughter relationships; she affirms that the author examines the notion of land as the “mother-earth” dynamic, which correlates with the “womb/tomb” dyad. Thompson argues that the land and motherhood are synonymous because these literary devices give rise to the development of the characters in the novel.
Bahadur Tejani explores the effects of post-colonialism in “When Rocks Dance: Historical Vision in Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell’s First Novel.” The critic postulates that Nunez-Harrell’s novel “gives definition to the passions of African, Indian, and Caribbean cultures” (53) which are submerged under the auspices of Eurocentric ideals. Additionally, Tejani contends that When Rocks Dance is a representation of African ancestry that involves the acquisition of land as the impetus to the indigenous culture’s freedom and the affirmation of its spirituality, Obeah, which is perceived by Europeans as evil. Tejani believes that Nunez-Harrell presents characters “that interact, and seek fulfillment through the unified goal of freedom, while following diverse paths in their search” (54). Nunez-Harrell’s novel, then, is perceived by Tejani to merge binary societal clusters—the descendents of the Conquistadors and the children of the conquered (54).

Correspondingly, Karla Y. E. Fyre probes the issue of post-colonial identity formation in “Obeah and Hybrid Identities in Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell’s When Rocks Dance.” Frye asserts that Nunez-Harrell’s “rhetorical strategy establishes the dialogical opposition of dominant British culture and resistant, emergent African culture” (196). In so doing, Frye notes that Nunez-Harrell examines hybrid identities whereby the characters either dissociate from their ancestry to assimilate to Eurocentric views, or resist African spirituality to embrace Catholicism. Furthermore, Frye contends that Harrell-Nunez “creates tension that reflects the ambiguity and cross-currents at the core of a fractured, hybrid, New World African identity” (196). The critic finds that landownership is the impetus that enables Nunez-Harrell to construct a framework to explore the deeper emotions of misplaced or misguided characters. Fyre concludes that
Nunez-Harrell's linkage of land/power and religion/spirituality provides a contextual framework for understanding character identity in the text (196).

Critics who have examined *Brown Girl Brownstones*, *The Color Purple*, and *When Rocks Dance* employ various literary approaches to reading the novels. By dismantling the heteronormative conceptualization of gender identities depicting men as purely masculine and women feminine, this interrogation dismisses how one perceives masculinity and femininity. Moreover, This approach provides a revised gender schema that does not term characters as obviously homosexual or lesbian but allows one to approach post-colonial works from a different lens—a lens that is not a direct image of traditional heteronormative representations. The aforementioned critics provide insight into the plight of the characters on issues of land ownership, oppression, and sexuality. Marshall, Walker, and Nunez introduce characters that challenge heteronormative definitions. An examination of the novels presents a case in which the Diasporic women writers subvert what has become the heteronormative schema of the family—where the man is the breadwinner and the woman performs domestic roles. An interrogation of the novels reveals a dismantling of the family hierarchy, while also depicting gender representations that reject traditional heteronormative frameworks.
CHAPTER 2

DISMANTLING AND (RE)CONSTRUCTING NOTIONS OF

MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES

Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones presents a study of heteronormativity in which the men are feminized and women are masculinized. The novel depicts the lives of Bajans who are transplanted to New York City where they seek to assimilate into a culture from which they are estranged. As a disconnected people, the Bajans seek to assimilate to the Eurocentric paradigm of New York City. Some Bajans, specifically Silla Boyce, have lost sight of their heritage in order to embrace a culture and values where owning Brownstones, presumably, place her in a higher class. Brownstones are traditional single-family homes that share commons walls and foundational stability—primarily found in large cities such as New York. Acquiring a Brownstone drives the plot of Brown Girl, Brownstones. The novels’ primary characters—Silla, Deighton, Selina, and Beryl—evidence roles of masculinity and/or femininity. Marshall uses landownership whereby she constructs a non-traditional family hierarchy—one where the woman is the head of the household. The significance of this role-reversal reveals how the novel dismantles traditional gender representations to position women as owners of land, a traditional male right, and omniscient characters in the text.

Marshall’s depiction of Selina invites a close analysis. Though the novel centers on the quest for physical property, Selina rejects this quest as the sole basis of self-worth:
“Selina’s maturation occurs as a process of self-awareness, an ownership of self […]” (Gaines 44). Selina is at first presented as a young girl who is agile and full of life. Her house was believed to be “alive” to her. Marshall depicts Selina in boyish terms: “A ten-year old with scuffed legs and a body as straggly as the clothes she wore” (Marshall 4). This evidence of Selina’s physical composition and clothing is reminiscent of playful young males, in contrast to her sister, Ina, who is delicate and prissy and “thin but soft” (7). Not only is Selina’s physical appearance a depiction of her masculinization, but her behavior displays typical masculine aggression that reveals an imbalance of her feminine self. Selina’s response to Ina’s insult that she was an ugly baby evidences her masculine selfhood: “She [Selina] wanted to leap on Ina, pin her to the bed and then ground her fist and knees in that softness until the tears came and the whimpers and the apologies, until her own anger drained her” (7). This incident symbolically represents Selina’s struggle to rebut a softness that perhaps she envied and desired. Shirley Parry asserts that Marshall’s novel is a movement from “division to wholeness” (40). Selina does not identify with her sister, who is the representation of femininity; however, she embraces this difference in her relationship with Beryl.

The emotions that Selina expresses toward Beryl and their interaction represent Selina’s further development of her masculine self. The homosocial bond between the two girls is an indicator of gender misidentification, which Parry finds in a central theme of the novel. Parry states, “Selina Boyce’s connection with and immersion in community is fraught with tension and is deeply problematized” (41). Selina’s maturation is confused by her emotional attachment to Beryl, who understands her feelings:

Something in Beryl always soothed her and destroyed her anger. Perhaps
it was the way Beryl’s thick braids rested quietly on her shoulders or the way her tiny breast nudged her middy blouse. They made Selina shy, those breasts, and ashamed of her shapelessness. (Marshall 15)

Selina embraces her masculine self to enjoy the pleasure of looking upon Beryl’s body. This example evidences Marshall’s masculinization of Selina wherein Selina establishes a homoerotic bond with her friend, Beryl. In a more sexual suggestive trope, Selina “wished that her eyes could pierce Beryl’s skin and roam inside her” (15). This scene suggests Selina’s domination over Beryl and (re)constructs a gender identify that negates traditional roles of female interactions. Selina enjoys the phallic experience of power; she “grabbed her [Beryl], remembering, and felt Beryl’s warmth rush into her” (15).

Furthermore, Selina’s masculinization is reinforced by Suggie, who attempts to rid Selina of her masculine ways: “She [Suggie] returned with a small glass of rum. ‘Come,’ she beckoned, ‘I gon make you a summer woman too, just for your womanishness” (52). Suggie attempts to perform a self-made ritual, which she believes will feminize Selina; however, Suggie discovers that Selina is not the typical “summer woman” but she presents a reconstructed self-hood that is not rooted in sexual encounters with men—the female right according to Suggie.

Selina’s awareness of self is further problematized as she visits the park with Beryl. The park becomes an emblematic scene that further demonstrates the trope of masculinity in Marshall’s text. After receiving permission from their parents, both Selina and Beryl leave for the park:

Beryl, laughing, rushed around her, snatching at her dress to stop her.

Their hands met and Selina separated Beryl’s fingers and meshed them
with hers. Together, their hands closed into one fist, their bodies joined
in a single rhythm, they skipped the three blocks to the Tompkins Avenue
trolley. (56)

Marshall depicts this scene to represent a symbolic ritual or marriage ceremony. As the young girls clasp hands, like husband and wife, they become one. So the first act of clapping reifies the bond, which symbolically represents unity that commences after a couple has recited their vows. The act of running away happily presents the notion of a married couple that is now ready to begin their lives together. Marshall employs the rhythmic component that personifies the climatic moment after the groom kisses his wife. The scene also conveys religious connotations where the bodies become joined together, which metaphorically speaks to the story of Adam and Eve who are joined by his rib, thus making them one--Selina and Beryl become this (re)creation of gender representation. Marshall’s (re)construction of female sexuality here reinforces an imbalance that is shared between the two girls but one in which Selina appears to be the domineering character--she in fact represents a masculine self. I concur with Shirley Parry who affirms that Marshall’s work presents messages, messages that center on “the area of gender and female sexuality” (41).

After arriving at Prospect Park, the scenery for Selina transcends that of anywhere she has visited. She saw the colors as attributing to another world or place and she murmurs softly, “I’m free” (Marshall 56). The scenery depicting various colors correlates to the prism that Jones affirms elucidates as a freedom for Selina. It is only in the park where Selina can freely embrace her masculine selfhood with Beryl. Jones notes that colors/images are important in the novel:
Marshall’s images work differently: Rather than imposing any definite subtext or pointing to any consistency of interpretation; they are inclusive of multitudes and conflicts; they work by bringing differences together in a prism meaning. (598).

While in the Park “with her hand in Beryl’s and the sun shimmering before her eyes, she was drunk with freedom” (Marshall 56). When Selina witnesses lovers in the Park, her lips “parted, blindly her [and] hand groped for Beryl” (56). In this journey through the park, Selina experiences a disconnect from her feminine self; something in her moved as she watched the lovers kissing: “tears stung her eyes” (58). This evidences her conflict of selfhood:

Pushing Beryl away she raced into a small wood near by and bounded up a low ridge there. Yelping, she plunged up and down the rise, the shrubbery cracking loud and the twigs whipping her legs, while Beryl stared open-mouthed below. [...] From this height she [Selina] felt a profound detachment from them, from everyone, even Beryl. She was no longer human, she told herself. (58)

Furthermore, Selina’s rejection of her femininity evidences Gavin Jones’ notion of the “prism-like sense of selfhood” (597). Jones maintains that prism-like reality is implicit in the novel because Marshall reflects a “series of differences that are rooted in issues of gender, and sexuality” (597). The Park scene reveals Selina as struggling to understand the conflict embedded in her gender identity. In a climatic moment Selina exhibits a masculine self as she lay with Beryl:

After a time Beryl came and lay close to her. She placed her arm
comfortingly around her. ‘What was that poem you wrote about the sky?’ she asked. And always her voice calmed Selina. Her disappointment, her anguish tapered slowly until finally her tears were gone and she turned to Beryl and held her so that they were like the lovers on the slope.

(Marshall 62)

This instance in the novel portraits Selina as acquiescing to a self-awareness that is more masculine but also more conducive to her inner feelings. Her struggle to achieve a balance between her feminine and masculine self appear problematized in this scene. One might argue that Marshall employs this scene to present a paradigm in which Selina becomes one, not only with Beryl, but also with nature; her expressions and poetic depictions of being in nature reflects an ideal of longing for self, a self that she persistently questions:

Whispering, Selina recited then to the rock, to the dome of the sky, to the light wind, all the poems she had scribbled in class, that came bright and vivid at night. […] Just then the sun rose above the rock. The strong light seemed to smooth the grass, to set the earth steaming richly. They were all joined it seemed: Beryl with the blood bursting each month inside her, the sun, the seared grass and earth-even she, though barren of breast, was part of the mosaic. With a dry cry she buried her face between Beryl’s small breasts, and suddenly her happiness was like pain and a long leap into space. (62)

The unity that Marshall establishes here does not center on heteronormativity, but in a unity wherein Selina embraces her masculine self. Moreover, Selina does not include
herself in the process of menstruation, which makes Beryl feminine, or having breasts, which portrays femininity. Selina states, “It’s never gonna happen to me” (61); this scene of liberation portends Selina’s rejection her feminine self. Parry notes,

The novel makes very clear that Selina’s [...] vision of unity is not based on femaleness per se or on her own potential sexual generativity. [...] Rather, her inclusion is based on her ability to be generative in her own individual way: to create poems. (42)

This example is significant because Parry reflects Selina’s rejection of her feminine self. By places Selina in nature, which undergird post-colonial discourse in the novel, Selina transforms to a selfhood that is not highly sexual as Suggie protests but one where Selina is “free” to embrace a self that is divested of rituals of a transplanted Bajan people--a self that is androgynous and devoid of traditional feminine or masculine ideologies.

While previous scenes portray Selina’s masculinization, Marshall further problematizes the characterization as Selina becomes involved with Clive and struggles to embrace an emerging feminine selfhood. Her body begins to change during the winter, and she transforms. This new yearning for a boy causes Selina to question a once constructed reality wherein she rejected the softness that she despised in Ina. Talks of boys or their touch was not a reality that Selina before considered, but now she discovers that something in her, “which has always been closed, was slowly opening like a fan, shimmering with color, and that his touch was the long-awaited signal” (232). Although Selina initially embraces a masculine self, she discovers that she must have balance in order to be fully liberated. Selina’s sexual encounter with Clive evidences her transformation, which she hesitantly experiences: “He raised his face and rested his lips
lightly against her [Selina] cheek. For a time she permitted this with the same startled passivity, then turned away” (238). Though Selina acquiesces, her hesitation demonstrates her struggle to reject her feminine self.

While Selina’s initial awareness of self is constructed by what she perceives as feminine and soft and hard and masculine, Marshall introduces a dichotomy wherein Selina establishes herself as an individual whose maturation is not rooted in the Bajan paradigm of ownership. Jones notes that “Marshall implies that Selina’s self is based on the interdependence of races, or least on a bringing together of contradictory cultural characteristics” (602). I agree with Jones and assert that Selina’s relationship with Clive represents the contrast between her cultural reality and the individual selfhood that Selina seeks. But while Clive allows Selina to embrace a feminine awareness, Selina finds that Clive’s masculinity is not truly genuine. As with Beryl, Selina becomes the domineering figure in her relationship with Clive. By exerting her control as the masculine figure, Selina merges the binaries of her masculine and feminine selfhood. She becomes the central authority in the relationship, which consequentially evidences a further testament of her androgyny but also Clive’s femininity. Clive’s femininity is evidenced by his passion to become a painter. Clive, too, struggles for a feminine self that he was not allowed to embrace: “Years back he wanted to go to some art school, but I know the mother burn every last one of the so-called pictures and dash his tail to college” (Marshall 259). This scene is pivotal to Selina’s development because she discovers that her awareness of self is actualized when she embraces both her femininity and masculinity, in so doing, Selina changes the conceptual framework of Bajans and rejects a reality of which they have created: “I [Selina] won’t be cut out of the same piece of cloth” (264).
Clive rejects his femininity, which causes his maturation to be clouded by a reality that his mother attempts to construct for him; he cannot be whole because his desire for the arts is unacceptable to his mother. Clive states, “she just couldn’t understand how I can go to some art school even if they had given me a scholarship instead of to Columbia to study law” (262). As a result, Clive does not embrace attending art school, so he joins the army. The complexities of Clive’s life mirrors Selina’s life; although he does not embrace his feminine attribute by attending art school, he becomes balanced by his interactions with Selina; she enables him to stitch his own pattern to life so that he, too, will not “be cut from the same cloth” (264). The climatic moment of Clive’s self awareness ensues as he dusts off his old piano and plays for Selina: “[...] he got up, opened the scarred and dusty piano and began playing a soft melodic piece, which he started over again when she was ready” (273). At this moment in the novel, one finds that Selina and Clive become balanced, and they become one. Clive’s reiteration of the piece “which he started over again” provides evidence that he, for a brief moment in time, embraces a feminine self that has been suppressed by his mother, while Selina discovers embraces both her femininity and masculinity.

Correspondingly, Silla, like Selina, reveals masculine characteristics, which Marshall elucidates through Silla’s aggressive temperament and her drive to acquire a Brownstone by selling Deighton’s land in Barbados. Silla is a complex character whom critics view as “strong, bitter, frustrated, disappointed, loving, [and] vindictive” (Harris 57). Marshall creates a division of marital unity between Silla and Deighton to introduce a masculine awareness where possessing land becomes the premise of Silla’s being. Moreover, Marshall presents an obvious replacement of love marred by the determination
to own land, which necessitates a hard demeanor, which Silla transforms. Silla's
determination to sell Deighton's land, her boisterous attitude, and factory job are all
components that reveal Silla's masculinity. Her self-awareness is established by a need to
own property; this becomes Silla's drive to transcend the life of poor Bajans thereby
assimilating into a culture wherein ownership determines one's economic and social
classification. Marshall creates a binary where land and socioecomic status presents the
plight of immigrants, like Silla and her family. This example transparently reveals the
post-colonial attitude that many immigrants developed as they integrated into large cities
like New York. Silla's determination to become a landowner reflects this post-colonial
attitude but also creates a family structure that opposes the traditional heteronormative
hierarchy.

Marshall provides several examples whereby Silla's masculinization is
manifested. The first evidence of Silla's masculinization is perceived as she and Selina
walk through the park. In walking through the park, Selina discovers her mothers'
command as the masculine figure, which she observes between Silla and her father, but
now Silla's hardness is further validated when juxtaposed to nature:

Silla Boyce brought the theme of the winter into the park with her dark
dress amid the summer green and the bright-fingered housedresses of the
women lounging on the benches there. No only that, every line of her
strong-made body seemed to reprimand the women for their idleness and
the park for its senseless summer display. Her lips, set in a permanent
protest against life, implied that there was no time for gaiety. And the
park, the women, the sun gave way to her dark force; the flushed summer colors ran together and faded as she passed. (Marshall 16)

The poetic language that Marshall employs reinforces masculine characteristics. The phrase “strong-made body” personifies Silla as masculine; her physical exterior rebuts the softness of women to present a woman who is like a man, devoid of femininity. In order to become a participant in the American Dream, Silla must dismiss her feminine attributes and embrace a masculine self, a self that is driven to do what it takes to secure a home for the family and become known in the community as affluent.

Another example of Silla’s masculinization is evidenced when Silla learns that Deighton, her husband, plans to keep land that he has inherited in Barbados. Marshall titles this section “The War” to represent the Depression and World War II; it, however, also symbolizes the war that Silla fights to secretly sell Deighton’s land. Every day is a new day in which she conspires to sell the land: “I gon sell it” (75). Passion for selling the land engulfs Silla, and she affirms her intent to Selina: “Wait till I finish with him. He gon be Christ crucified” (77). The “war” ensues daily as Silla strategizes to discover a way to sale the land, which makes her more resistant to her femininity. Silla’s treatment of her husband is boastful and non-nurturing, and she constantly berates him about not having a job: “With a look both cruel and pitying she [Silla] said, ‘You don’t want no job [...] Instead of going to some small office where he might have a chance-no, he got to play like he’s white” (82). This display portrays Silla’s lack of softness toward her husband and thus a suppressed feminine self.

Additionally, Silla’s occupation at the “old-fashioned lathe” in the factory further depicts her masculinization. Marshall presents Silla as the breadwinner of the family,
which undercuts the traditional family hierarchy where the man is the breadwinner to one where the woman is the head. When Selina visits her mother at the lathe, this scene reinforces the physical embodiment of Silla’s masculinization:

Silla worked at an old-fashioned lathe which resembled an oversize cook stove, and her face held the same transient calm which often touched it when she stood at the stove at home. Like the others, her movements were attuned to the mechanical rhythms of the machine-mass. She fitted the lump of metal over the lathe center and, with a deft motion, secured it into the headstock and doved the tailstock into position. The whine of her lathe lifted thinly above the roar as the metal whirled into shape. Then she released the tailstock and held the shell up for a swift scrutinizing glance before placing it with the other finished shells. Quickly she moved into the first phase of the cycle again. [...] Only the mother’s own formidable force could match that of the machines; only the mother could remain indifferent to the brutal noise. (100)

As Selina watches Silla take possession of the machinery, she sees the domineering agent who controls her household. The image of metal and steel further symbolize Silla’s masculine traits, while the rhythmic motion in which Silla works not only personifies the “masculine” drive and sacrifice that Silla brings to her job, but also metaphorically speaks to Silla’s strategizing to sell Deighton’s land. By positioning Silla as the steal worker, Marshall skillfully presents the case for a hardened protagonist who rebuts domestic roles and patriarchy to obtain the ultimate goal, landownership.
In a final representation of Silla’s masculinity, Silla proves her masculine prowess by selling Deighton’s land. Silla states, “It done now […]. ‘And it can’t be undone’” (109). Significantly, Marshall titles this section, “The War,” suggesting that Silla has devised a strategic plan and followed through to become as victorious as a skilled military officer. Silla’s victorious demeanor confirms her masculinization: “The mother smiled had burgeoned into a laugh by now and she sat there holding a slip of paper and laughing with hollow, frightening triumph” (109). Silla is not remorseful for selling Deighton’s land as she affirms she would “do it tomorrow-self if I had to” (112). After Deighton realizes that Silla has sold the land, Silla recounts the meticulousness of her plan to sell the land without his knowledge:

> While you was running with your concubine and taking trumpet lessons I figuring how to do this thing. I say to myself that you don’t write to the sister so I gon write for you. I sat at the this kitchen table late ‘pon a night practicing to write your name till I had it down pat. (113).

The suggestion of power that Silla exhibits demonstrates Marshall’s critique of traditional heteronormativity. Not only does Silla become the breadwinner, but she is also shown as more intelligent than her husband, and it is she who makes sacrifices for her family. This sacrifice, though, ironically demonizes Silla, as she now becomes the patriarch in actions and in deeds. In Silla’s climatic moment, she explains in more detail how she was able to sell Deighton’s land:

> The poor sister was glad to hear from you and I begin writing her regular. She [Silla] scooped up the letters. ‘Bout the children, the job, the war, the trumpet lessons […]’ She tossed one at him and it struck his face. ‘Then
three months ago you write and tell she you lose the job and was having it 
very had and needed money bag and beg she to sell the land for you. [...] 
Yes, 'she [Silla] concluded triumphantly, taking the brown envelope from 
her pocket and slapping the air, 'nine hundred odd dollars waiting in a 
bank in New York and you piece of ground that you could throw down 
anything and would grow, gone!' (114)

Trudier Harris writes that there are "powerful emotions at war in Silla—love, and hate, 
acceptance and rejection, desire and denial of desire, aspiration and defeat [which] keep 
her forever in a state of simmering rage" (57). I support Harris’ thesis as it reveals the 
premise of a masculinized characterization of which Silla is perceived. Though Silla’s 
life centers on hard work and lost of femininity, she provides a case for a reinvented 
female heroine who is not awaiting her knight to rescue her but she in turn is the night 
who recues her family.

Close analysis of Selina and Silla ultimately present them as embracing an 
androgynous self, which problematizes the family dynamic. However, whereas Selina 
and Silla are masculinized, Deighton is feminized, subverting the machismo image that 
are traditionally applicable to men. By feminizing Deighton, one finds that Marshall is 
successful in redefining the hierarchy of the family. Gaines speaks to Deighton’s lack of 
masculinity when Gaines affirms: “Deighton sees the land as a place he can call his own, 
a place where his manhood will no longer be threatened” (45). Although Deighton’s land 
ownership perhaps evidences his manhood, he is more concerned with his physical 
appearance than he is at acquiring a job, which evidences his femininity: “He had 
shouted, entering the kitchen that morning impeccable in a white shirt, a dark-figured tie
that blended well with his dark suit, his hair brushed flat and his shoes gleaming in the
gray morning light” (Marshall 82). One finds that Marshall creates a duality in which
Deighton struggles to understand a masculine and feminine selfhood concurrently;
however, Deighton’s perceived male authority weakens his masculine self as he embraces
a feminine self that enjoys the pleasures of music and dress.

Several instances throughout the novel reveal Deighton’s feminization; for
example, when Deighton studies the trumpet instead of focusing entirely on finding work.
His playing could be heard outside of the family’s old Brownstone:

Outside of the hall again she [Selina] pressed her face against the cool
paneling to still the voices of Miss Mary and Suggie swirling inside her
and to prepare for the onslaught of the trumpet. It was her father’s
trumpet. He was studying the trumpet now that his correspondence course
in accounting was finally over. (82)

Though Deighton attempts to look for work, he is unsuccessful and he even questions his
masculinity as compared to the mother when he states to Selina, “[...] Do you think that I
could get one of these war jobs [...] and learn good like yuh mother [...]” (81). While the
War had created several factory and other physically demanding jobs, Deighton chooses
not to seek jobs that are labor intensive in contrast to Silla’s choice of traditionally
masculine work.

Deighton’s feminization is even more evident when he learns that his land has
been sold without his consent. His reaction to the sell of the land personifies his lack of
masculinity and authority as a husband:
[...] He groaned, covering his face with his hands. Suddenly, standing there with his face hidden behind his hand he was transformed. His body seemed to shrink so that he was merely a stick upon which his clothes were draped; his burnished skin became ashen. He staggered to the table and sank down; his head dropped to his arms and he didn’t even notice his sleeves were in the flour. (112)

In this scene Marshall renders Deighton mute, which Deighton evidences by covering his face with his hands. Additionally, Deighton’s response to Silla is not of anger or wrath; after agreeing to take the check to New York to be cashed, Deighton’s actions provide an even closer exploration of his feminization when he cashes the check from the sale of the land. First, Deighton’s appearance changes; he purchases a new coat that seemed to accentuate his shoulders, which was accompanied by a hat positioned just right (124). Deighton brings in boxes of gifts that he purchases with the money from the sell of his land; his gifts consist of books, gowns, furs, and a new trumpet:

[...] Deighton began tearing open the boxes, flinging dresses, skirts, blouses, lace petticoats, shoes at the with a grand gesture, and all the while chatting, ‘Somethin’ fuh everybody. Step right up, ladies and gentlemen, somethin’ fuh everybody [...] (130).

Deighton demonstrates his rejection of masculinity by showcasing a feminine self that desires lavish gifts and expensive clothing. Gaines contending supports that Deighton purchases the furs, coats, and other objects because he believes that “his daughters and wife are ‘better people’ in the eyes [of a] society based not on houses that they own, but on the outward appearance that they project” (46).
Deighton’s feminization is further revealed when he experiences a physical loss of nerves in his arm crushed by the machine (Marshall 155). Marshall perhaps shapes this scene to serve as pivotal moment of Deighton’s feminization as Silla, whom Selina observes, masters the machinery, while Deighton succumbs to its demise. Through employment, Deighton seeks to become the dominating figure of his family but his injury, instead, renders him feminine for he is now physically unable to work. Because of shame, Deighton did not desire for his girls to see him: “Don’t let the children some here.” Those the only words he had for me and then he turn ‘way his face” (156).

Deighton recounts his days in the hospital, and he remembers his attire as feminizing as he states, “I was up there in a nightgown like some woman,” (159) which contrasts to his previous attire wherein he was immaculately dressed. Gaines states, “With the father’s physical deformity comes his emasculation. The little pride that he had in his appearance dies like the nerves in his arm forever damaged from the accident” (46). Marshall strips Deighton of his top hat and nice suits to mark the moment of his demise. Additionally, Deighton comes to embrace the preaching of Father Peace, a man who purports to be a prophet and divinely inspired figure in the community. The bond that Deighton enters with Father Peace is one of submission. In one profound example, Selina experiences her father succumb to the beckoning of Father Peace:

Impatiently she [Selina] tugged at her father’s sleeve to rouse him, but his eyes were fixed, worshipfully, on Father Peace. Now he stared not at the benign face of Father Peace but at his forefinger. It was crooked invitingly in his direction, beckoning Deighton with a slow hypnotic motion. […]

Deighton pitched forward, trembling, and Father Peace suddenly turned
his head Deighton’s way and smiled and pointed casually to a vacant chair at his [Father Peace] right. (Marshall 167)

In this moving scene, Deighton becomes submissive which confounds Selina because she saw Father Peace a man just like her father, yet Deighton allows Father Peace to seduce and control him through use of religious dogma (169). Subsequently, Deighton’s submission to Father Peace becomes Marshall’s final intimation of Deighton’s feminization; she incorporates this final scene to render Deighton powerless to religion and his wife.

*Brown Girls, Brownstones* is a post-colonial work that refashions how gender and sexuality are viewed. Marshall interrogates cultural specificities of Bajan immigrants who seek to better their lives in New York. Many of the inhabitants retain their former ways but some desire to change, as does Silla Boyce. Marshall examines the impact of post-colonialism on the Bajan immigrants. Stacey Gaines affirms that land ownership is critical to understanding the plot of the novel. Marshall employs the theme of ownership, which drives Bajans like Silla Boyce to work tirelessly to acquire a Brownstone in New York. Gaines believes:

Marshall examines a crucial and compelling moment of postcolonial study; she shows how attaining physical property and emotional property can neither make the colonized person secure in his other identity nor make him or her more of a man or woman. (43)

Silla’s reality of ownership and hard work resonates from the memories that her mother instills in her about owning land and working hard. The mother, as Selina refers to Silla, proves to be masculine by her secret selling of Deighton’s land and her aggressiveness.
Although Silla’s hard work is successful as she acquires a new Brownstone, she loses her husband Deighton. On the other hand, Silla’s daughter, Selina, undergoes several changes in which she embraces a masculine self, evidenced by her relationship with Beryl. Additionally, she attempts to embrace a feminine self by making love to Clive—creating a case for an androgynous conceptualization. Selina later discovers that she and Clive are similar in that they both seek a self-awareness not rooted in a traditional paradigm. Deighton seeks to embrace a masculine self, but he is unsuccessful; he loses his land through trickery, and he succumbs to the religious dogma of Father Peace. And Deighton loses his sense of self after his tragic accident where his arm is crushed in the machines.

In Brown Girl, Brownstones Marshall disrupts the traditional family hierarchy; furthermore, she reveals women who are masculinized and men who are feminized.
CHAPTER 3

DISMANTLING AND (RE)CONSTRUCTING NOTIONS OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN THE COLOR PURPLE

Alice Walker’s novel, The Color Purple, like Marshall’s Brown Girl Brownstones, presents oppressed characters where balance is essential to the discovery of their masculine and feminine selves. While The Color Purple expresses the plight of blacks in the Jim Crow South, a close examination of the novel yields a deeper interpretation in which gender reconstruction is a significant theme. Traditionally, men are perceived as hard workers, breadwinners, and masculine, while the women are domestic, meek, and feminine. Celie, Sofia, Shug, Mr. ___ and Harpo exhibit gender characteristics that are non-traditional and Walker has taken great care to subvert the traditional gender roles of men and women in the novel. I contend that Walker presents this study of balance wherein the characters reject their feminine or masculine selves in a mistaken attempt to find solace.

Like Brown Girl, Brownstones, The Color Purple characters rebut traditional gender roles. Readers of The Color Purple may assert that the novel is a lesbian tale or a work depicting oppression of Blacks in the South. Linda Abbandonato states, “Celie’s sexual orientation provides an alternative to the heterosexual paradigm of the conventional marriage plot: her choice of lesbianism […]” (1108). It takes abuse, displacement, and reevaluation of self, to learn the value of inner balance thus changing
the characters by the close of the novel. While these are viable themes in the novel, the novel is also a study of gender (re)presentation that results in characters who eventually acquiesce to embrace their feminine or masculine selves.

Celie is a central character who presents evidence of gender (re)construction. Upon first meeting Celie, one pities her because she has been repeatedly raped by her step-father and Mr. __, and she has not been nurtured by her constantly ill mother. Her stepfather consistently degraded her: “She ugly he say” (9). Celie’s self-perception for years has been the resonating thought that her step-father had drilled into her head. Celie’s only solace is in companionship with her sister Nettie whom she attempts to protect during their adolescent years from their step-father and Mr. __. She writes to God to soothe her hurt, but she learns how to love through her relationship with Shug: “Dear God, I am fourteen years old [...] I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me” (1). Celie’s use of language becomes pivotal to her development. King-Kok Cheung maintains that her Black English becomes her rite of passage into selfhood:

Celie’s Black English enables her to assert her self-hood
forcefully [...] Along with her other breaches of norms—wearing trousers, leaving her husband [...] [moreover] it frees her from the demands and strictures of dominant mores. (170)

Celie evolves from a passive woman to one who is independent; she struggles for balance through a clouded paradigm, which is initially constructed by brute patriarchy norms.

The first indication of Celie’s masculinity is evident in the opening pages of the novel. After Mr. __ repeatedly asks for Nettie’s hand in marriage, the step-father finally
answers by offering Mr.____ Celie. The imagery that the step-father uses to describe Celie exemplifies masculine characteristics and strips her of her femininity. The step-father states,

She ugly. He say. But she ain’t no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain’t gonna make you feed it or clothe it [...] Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie.

But she’ll make the better wife. She ain’t even smart either [...] But she can work like a man. (Walker 9)

The step-father presents a case that Celie is not a woman, and she is not to be perceived as human but as an animal. This characterization proves detrimental to Celie’s self-worth and is a reinforcement of her lack of femininity. The man she thinks is her father provides a flawed notion that becomes her reality. His description of Celie’s ability to do manual labor is a depiction of masculinization. By informing Mr.____ that “God done fixed her” further masculinizes Celie. As a woman, she can no longer menstruate, so Mr.____ does not have to worry about impregnating her. Although Celie cannot menstruate, she metaphorically births her story. Lindsey Tucker contends that while Celie has been deprived of the right to the creative process, her pregnancies metaphorically provide the reader an autobiography of her life through gestation periods, which is evidenced in her letters (85). Although Celie has the physical anatomy of a woman, she can no longer conceive, which essentially is pivotal to Walker’s assertion of her lack of femininity and subsequent masculinity.

Another profound example of Celie’s masculinization is evidenced when she meets Shug Avery. The name Shug Avery constantly pierced the lips of Mr.____, and
Celie becomes intrigued by this mystery woman, even more after seeing a picture of Shug. When Celie finally gets the opportunity to hear Shug sing, her reaction exemplifies masculine characteristics. Celie states, “All the men got they eyes glued to Shug’s bosom, I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress [...] Shug, I say to her in my mind, Girl, you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do” (Walker 85). Charles Proudfit considers this notion of female bonding necessary to Celie’s psychoanalytic development:

Such a psychoanalytical development reading help illuminate Walker’s literary portrayal of the importance of the mother for the female infant, child, and adult as she struggles to separate, to individuate, to develop her own identity, and to make a final choice of love objects. (13)

Although I support Proudfit’s assertion about female bonding, I add that Celie’s attraction to Shug demonstrates her masculinity, which causes her to look upon Shug as a man would. When Celie first looks upon Shug’s naked body, she considers herself a man. Celie states, “First time I got full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turn into a man” (Walker 51). Celie’s response to another woman’s physical body reveals her rejection of her feminine self. To perceive Shug as men do further reveals Celie’s masculinity. When Celie feels her nipples harden, she begins to purge her mind of her father and Mr._____’s abuse to redirect attention to perhaps a place where it might be reciprocated.

While Walker’s depiction of Celie early in the novel expresses the masculinization of her emotional self, one finds that Celie’s pants business speaks to the masculinization of her mental self. Traditionally pants have been the signifier that
separates men and women. However, Celie’s decision to make pants further signifies her transition from femininity to masculinity. At first Celie is apprehensive about making pants, but Shug coerces her: “Well, she [Shug] say, looking me up and down, let’s make you some pants” (152). Although Celie retorts saying, “What I need pants for? I say. I ain’t no man” (152), the exchange between the two women is pivotal because it reinforces Celie’s notion of masculinity. When Shug looks Celie “up and down” infers that Shug, too, perceives Celie’s masculinity. Celie’s response to Shug exemplifies her struggle for balance as she seeks to assert her femininity and reject her masculine self. Celie’s liberation is apparent as she begins to make pants, and she rebuts conventionality by not only making the pants for her customers, but she, too, wears them. Significantly, the pants are for men and women, a physical embodiment of balance.

The pants business is one indicator of Celie’s masculinization, but one finds that her response to Mr. is her final liberating moment. After Celie finds that Mr. had hidden Nettie’s letters for years, Celie comes alive. She is no longer passive or “makes herself wood”; instead, she displays her liberation from Mr.

You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. Say what? He ast. Shock. All round the table folks mouths be dropping open. You took my sister Nettie away from me, I say. And she was the only person love in the world. Mr. start to sputter […] But Nettie and my children come home soon, I say. And when she do, all us together go whup your ass […] Hold on, say Harpo. Oh, hold on hell, I say. If you hadn’t tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught
her [...] You was all rotten children, I say. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain’t worth dead horse’s shit. Mr. ____ reach over to slap me. I jab my case knife in his hand. (207)

Celie declares her freedom from the auspices of patriarchy. She initiates into selfhood which Daniel Ross perceives is evidence of Celie’s “newfound identity; further, Celie is able to break free from the masculine prohibition against speech [...] freeing herself from dependence on and subjection to male brutality” (71). Celie’s response to Mr. ____ confounds both him and Harpo. Walker masterfully constructs this climactic moment to (re)construct the role of her female protagonist. In Celie’s next letter to Nettie, she recounts the incident that took place during dinner, ending her speech to mister by cursing him. Celie states, “Until you do right by me everything you touch will crumble” (Walker 213). She takes control of her life once framed by abandonment and abuse. At this moment in the novel Celie attains balance; she now feels, speaks, and loves.

Unlike Celie, Walker portrays Sofia as a character who is so overly masculine that she is disconnected from her feminine self, similar to Silla in Brown Girl, Brownstones. In contrast to Celie, Sophie handles her childhood abuse differently. She does not submit to her male counterpart’s control, but she is courageous and fights for her freedom: “She [Sofia] say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and uncles” (42). Lauren Berlant concludes that Sofia is an “amazon” and is the voice of sexual and racial resentment (843). Sofia’s masculinizing traits are first identified when Harpo brings her home to meet Mr. ___. Celie remembers seeing the couple “marching hand in hand like going to war with Sophia in front” (Walker 32). The physical position of Sofia introduces her role in the marriage. I argue
that Walker makes Sofia dominant in this example as a preface to Sofia’s masculinity.

The conversation that ensues between Sofia and Mr.____ personifies her boldness and authority:

She say, How you, Mr.____? He don’t answer the question. He say, Looks you done got yourself in trouble. Naw, suh, she say. I ain’t in no trouble. Big, though. She smooth wrinkles over her stomach with the flats of her hands. Who the father? he ast. She look surprise. Harpo, she say. He know that? He know. She say. Young womens no good these days, he say. Got they legs open to every Tom, Dick, and Harry....Mr.____ say, No need to think I’m gon let my boy marry you just cause you in the family way [...] She say, What I need to marry Harpo for? He still living with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy [...] She stand up, big, strong, healthy girl, and say, Well, nice visiting, I’m going home [...] She say, Harpo, you stay here. When you free, me and the baby be waiting. (33)

The first encounter between Sofia and Mr.____ presents a case for the battle of manhood.

Mr.____ has the preconceived notion that women should be subservient to their husbands, but he finds that Sofia is not that type of woman. Sofia’s response to Mr.____’s accusations evidence her freedom from patriarchal control and represents Walker’s conscious effort to masculinize Sofia.. As a little girl, Sofia fought her brothers and other men in the family. So, Sofia’s response to Mr.____ is not one of cowardice because she is accustomed to fighting; however, this exchange between Sofia and Mr.____ foreshadows her arrest and imprisonment.
Also unlike Celie, Sofia is depicted as a strong woman based upon her physical attributes. Celie observes that Sofia “looks half her size [...] [and] her arms got muscles” (36). Sofia’s physical abilities are not limited to yard work, but she fights to protect herself from being dominated. Celie states, “Just when I was about to call out that I was coming in the yard, I hear something crash [...] I open the door cautious, thinking about robbers and murders. But it was Harpo and Sofia. They fighting like mens” (39). Moreover, “He try to slap her. What he do that for? She reach down and grab a piece of stove wood and whack him cross the eye” (39). The constant fighting between Harpo and Sofia is a metaphor for the liberation of women from the control of their patriarchal societies. Walker builds upon this trope by also making Soña a physical laborer. While Celie works in the cotton fields and plows, Sofia works on houses. Celie is mesmerized by Sofia’s ability to work as a man:

I go visit Sofia, she still working on the roof. The darn thing leak, she say.

She out to the woodpile making shingles. She put a big square piece of wood on the chopping block and chop, chop, she make big flat shingles.

She put her the ax down and ast me do I want some lemonade. I look at Her good. Except for a bruise on her wrist, she don’t look like she got a scratch on her. (68)

The above lines reveal the hard exterior and masculine characteristics that Sofia embodies. Sofia’s engagement in building a roof for their house symbolically constructs a reality that Walker perhaps intends for her women; Sofia is constructing a new reality for women, one where women are independent and liberated. Despite the difficulty of wielding a heavy ax and boards, Sofia rises to the challenge. Celie states, “I see Sofia
draggin a ladder and then lead it up gainst the house. She wearing an old pair of Harpo pants [...] She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer in nails. (64)

Shug Avery is another character who, though also feminine, has been rendered masculine. Jerry Wasserman finds that The Color Purple presents the case for an androgynous ideal of manly women with Shug serving as the paradigm (306). She is not like Celie or Sofia, physically depicting her masculinity; Shug simply exudes her physical masculine characteristics through her carefree nature. Shug’s masculinization perhaps results from the lack of love that she experiences from her mother. Like most men who reject their lover after sexual intercourse, the Queen Bee kills the male bee once he impregnates her. Moreover, Shug’s title, Queen Honey Bee, renders her both feminine and masculine; her honey makes her femininity irresistible. Wasserman posits that “Walker’s Queen Honeybee is resolutely bisexual [...] and The Color Purple moves toward an androgynous ideal of manly women and womanly men of which Shug is the paradigm” (306). Always a little wild, Shug is rejected by her parents when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock. Further, Shug’s overly sexual behavior produces future rejection by her parents and others when she becomes ill: “Shug Avery sick and nobody in town want to take the Honeybee in. Her mammy say She told her so. Her pappy say, tramp” (Walker 45). Shug’s arrival to Albert and Celie’s house, due to her illness, is unapologetic; she seduces Albert or any man for that matter. She befriends Celie and helps her through her stages of development. Yet, several instances throughout the novel portray Shug’s masculinization. Each encounter that Shug has is her attempt to balance out her life; she goes from man to man. Shug’s abusive language is an example of her masculinization:
Turn loose my goddam hand, she say to Mr.____. What the matter with you, you crazy? I don’t need no weak little boy can’t say no to his daddy hanging on me. I need a man, she say. A man. She look at him and roll her eyes and laugh. (49)

The characteristics exemplified above are not representative of traditional women. Shug’s explosive temperament is similar to that of men who berate women or who initiate sex frequently. The manner in which Shug speaks to Mr.____ portrays Walker’s intent to empower her black women but also to depict a contrast from the other women in the novel. Shug is the only woman in the novel who uses sex in a way that perhaps a man would. Unlike Celie and Sofia, Shug embraces being a woman because she knows that she can beguile men; however, she is also cognizant that she possesses an aggressive nature similar to that of a man. Shug reinforces her masculinity when she states, “...I used to put on Albert’s pants when we were courting” (153). This conversation that Shug has with Celie reinforces her dominance and defiance. Walker’s portrayal of Shug in this example frames the discussion of Shug’s role as nurturer and protector of Celie.

Another example of Shug’s masculinization is the portrayal of the homo-social bonding between her and Celie. While scholars present the case that both are openly homosexual, I disagree. I argue that this is another example whereby Walker masculinizes the women to express how women should be treated but also to enable Celie to learn aspects of herself she did not know. After Shug learns of the Celie’s physical abuse by Mr.____, she begins to nurture and protect Celie, and she metaphorically becomes her husband. One profound example of this husband-wife relationship is described when Shug states, “If you was my wife, she say, I’d cover you up with kisses
stead of licks and work hard for you too" (115). Shug takes on the role as Celie’s masculine protector and teacher. After Celie laments about the instances of abuse, Shug states, “Oh, Miss Celie, she say. And put her arms round me [. . .]” (117). By expressing to Celie how she would nurture and provide for her, Shug refutes the traditional feminine construction. Shug’s defiance of patriarchal control is seen near the close of the novel: 

Man Corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box or grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, your think he God. But he ain’t. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. (204)

Shug’s declaration is a reflection upon years of oppression that women have experienced, but Shug gives hope to women by advising Celie to inform man that he needs to “get lost.” As Shug protects Celie, she also does the same for herself. Shug allows Celie to take care of her while she is ill, which is strange to Shug because her father was the only person who genuinely cared for her.

Whereas Walker presents women that reveal masculine selves, the men in the novel are unbalanced which evidences their feminization. Mr.’s rejection of his feminine other both problematizes and informs his concept of manhood. Mr.’s abuse of Celie reveals his need for balance, which he discovers after Celie’s curse. Like most men, Mr. demonstrates masculine characteristics by working in the fields and providing for his family, but he also exhibits feminine characteristics, which he rejects. Mr. employs anger and authority to mask the softer side that he once embraced. After Mr. is redirected from sewing, which he liked to do, he detaches from his feminine
self, which creates an imbalance in his life. He states, “When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with mama cause that’s what she was always doing. But everyone laughed at me. But you know, I like it” (278). Mr.__ cannot express his desire for doing a woman’s job because it would go against the machismo of his culture. His true feminine nature is not only evidence of his desire to sew but also his emotional attachment to Shug Avery. When Mr.__ learns that Shug Avery would be coming to town, he carefully adorns himself so as to impress her:

He dress all up in front of the glass, look at himself, then undress and dress all over again. He slick back his hair with pomade, then wash it out again [...] He tell me, Wash this. Iron that. Look for this. Look for that. Find this. Find that. He groan over holes in his sock [...]. (25)

Walker breaks Mr.__’s hardened exterior by depicting his softer side. Mr.__’s high regard for nice clothing and socks metaphorically speaks to his passion for sewing. His connection to the sewn object, such as his pants and socks, portrays his hidden desire to affiliate with women’s culture, a desire that would be condemned by his male counterparts.

In order for Mr.__ to embrace his feminine side, he must undergo a catharsis; Celie’s curse for his mistreatment of her provides the catalyst. After the curse takes full effect on Mr.__, he begins his transformation from the hardened man to one who has softened, thereby revealing his feminine self: “He [Mr.__] still in that little house. He been there so long, it look just like him. Two straight chairs always on the porch, turned against the wall. Porch railing with flowers on them. He keep it painted now though. Fresh and white” (260). By embracing his feminine self, Mr.__ gains an appreciation
for Celie and asks for her hand in marriage in the “spirit as well as in the flesh” (290); however, Celie rejects Mr.____, but she acknowledges his change. Celie begins to notice the change that has taken place in Mr.____, and she observes his change closely. These changes evidence his transition from masculine to feminine. Celie states, “The first thing I notice about Mr.____ is how clean he is. His skin shine. His hair brush back […] He out there in the field from sunup to sundown. And clean that house like a woman. Even cook, say Harpo. And what more, wash the dishes when he finishes” (229). Celie’s curse enables Mr.____ to revert back to his youth wherein roles of domesticity were enjoyable and not just a woman’s duty. At this point in the novel, one perceives that Mr.____ embraces the feminine characteristics that finally make him whole. Not only does he become softened in his feelings toward Celie, Mr.____ displays his affection towards his son Harpo. Celie states, “one night I walked up to tell Harpo something—and the two of them was laying there on the bed fast asleep. Harpo holding his daddy in his arms” (231). Now that Mr.____ is “softened,” the transformation begins to take root. His desire is not only to sew, but he begins to collect shells as a hobby, and his careful handling of the shells reinforce is feminine embracement that negates his former self: “He don’t say much about them while you looking, but he just hold each one like it just arrive” (260). Mr.____’s careful regard for the sea shells demonstrates his development as a nurturer. Candace Jenkins states, “I read his participating in this traditionally ‘female’ activity as an indication, perhaps more striking, that his character has divested from the patriarchal behaviors which marked him as tyrant […] In other words, his acceptance of traditional gender roles goes along with his humanization of the text” (985).
Although Mr.'s preparation to see Shug and his new hobby of sewing define his balance, Mr.'s reconciliation with Celie marks the climax to his newly embraced feminine self. After sewing for many days with Celie, Mr. embraces learning and confides in Celie on the perils of life that he has experienced. Before Mr.'s transformation, discussing issues of life and his place in it were impossible:

Speaking of learning, Mr. say one day us was sewing on the porch, I first start to learn all them days ago I use to sit there on my porch, staring out cross the railing. Just miserable. That's what I was. And I couldn't understand why us have life at all if all it can do most times is make us bad. [...] I tried to do something with my children after you left me. But by that time it was too late. [...] You ast yourself one question, it lead to fifteen. I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children come from. It didn't take long to realize I didn't hardly know nothing. (Walker 289)

Mr. learns to appreciate and respect Celie, and he views her as his confidant. In a discussion between Mr. and Celie, they both discuss the similarities between men in Africa and America, and they both agree that the notion of patriarchy remains the same; however, Mr. now rejects this historic notion to welcome his other reality—his feminine one. Mr. states, “When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with mama cause that’s what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I like it” (279). This acknowledgment of enjoyment of woman's work is the transformative agent that gives rise to Mr.'s epiphany. Celie affirms Mr.'s
conversion when she says, “Well nobody gon laugh at you now, I said. Here, help me stitch in these pockets. But I don’t know how, he say. I’ll show you, I said. And I did. Now us both sit sewing and talking. . .” (279). As Mr.____ reverts back to his youth, he embraces his femininity thereby dismantling patriarchal notions of manhood. With his newfound embracement of his feminine self, Mr.____ carves a wooden frog—a peace offering— for Celie in his attempts to reconcile with her for years of physical, verbal, and mental abuse. Mr.____ is not completely happy or sane until this conversion.

Walker’s feminization of Mr.____ is not only demonstrated by physical characteristics, Walker’s renders Mr.____ nameless by only referring him to him by his surname “Mr.____” instead of Albert. Shanyn Fiske asserts that by withholding surnames, Walker “diminishes their patriarchal authority [and] Walker uses ____ as a sign of the ultimate powerlessness of patriarchal conceptions” (39). One learns of Mr.____’s name only after Shug Avery arrives for the first time. Rendering Mr.____ nameless not only reduces his patriarchal authority, but it perceivably feminizes him, for as Charles Helgar states, “erasing and withholding men’s surnames diminishes their patriarchal authority” (39). I support Heglar’s assertion and find that the absence of Mr.____’s name enables him to embrace a self that was suppressed during his youth. Walker perhaps frames Mr.____’s transformation by depicting his maturation from adolescence to manhood. By incorporating the notion of sewing, in which an object moves from being nothing to a finished product, Walker bridges the gap between Mr.____’s pubescent development to adulthood.

Walker not only presents Mr.____ as controlling and assertive, she also does this with his son Harpo, who also undergoes a transformation to becoming a balanced man.
Harpo’s authoritative approach reflects his unsuccessful attempt to mimic his father. Harpo is depicted as weak-willed but also as one who evolves into a feminine other, not only in terms of the domestic roles of domesticity which Sofia acknowledges that he loves “a heap more ‘en me” (62), but also in succumbing to the control of his father and powerlessness to control his family. One example of Mr.____’s control over Harpo is revealed when Mr.____ denies Harpo his blessings to marry Sofia. Although he is an adult, Harpo demonstrates his feminized self by his inability to stand up for Sofia: “She pretty, he tell me, Bright. […] She smart too though […] Mr.____ won’t let us marry” (Walker 31). Harpo’s fear of his father elicits feelings of sadness and discontent. At this early point in the novel, one perceives Harpo to possess feminine characteristics manifested in his weak-will and traditional feminine aspect that is silent. This instance in the novel has caused scholars such as Candice Jenkins to react: “Harpo is ‘weak in will,’ controlled by fear and his father’s power. It is this fear that turn Harpo’s eyes ‘sad and thoughtful’ and that leads Celie to describe his face as feminine […]” (979). Jenkins’ position is appropriate here because it supports the notion of Harpo as being a weak man but one who is more sensitive and expressive than his father, which contrasts later to his attempt to control his wife.

Harpo’s portrayal as weak is further evidenced when he introduces Sophia to Mr.____ for the first time. Walker’s feminization of Harpo is foreshadowed as Celie observes the couple coming to the house: “I see’em coming way off up the road. They be marching, hand in hand like going war. She in front a little” (Walker 32). This portrayal of Harpo, as slightly behind Sophia, portends his lack of authority and is his later
muteness. During the meeting with Mr.____, Harpo expresses his desire to marry Sophia, but Mr.____'s response is demeaning to Sophia, while also declarative to Harpo:

Harpo look at his daddy like he never seen him before. But he don't say anything. Mr.____ say, No need to think I'm gon let my boy marry you cause you in the family way. He young and limited. [...] Sofia face git more ruddy. The skin move back on her forehead. [...] She glance at Harpo sitting there with his head down and his hands tween his knees. She say, What I marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy.(33)

Although Harpo loves Sofia and believes that he is ready begin a life with her and his soon to be born child, he rejects, at first, this possibility by sitting with his "hands tween his knees" (33). The lack of self-esteem is apparent here because Harpo is mute and cannot and will not look at his father directly. However, evidence of his silence further exemplifies Walker's portrayal of the paternal figure that dominates his son, thereby rendering the son weak and thus feminizes him.

During a weekend stay with Celie and Mr.____, Harpo confronts his lack of power over his wife: "Harpo got his head in his hands, tears and snot running down his chin. [...] He blow his nose, look up at me out of two eyes close like fist" (65). Walker's descriptive language informs one of the contrasts between Mr.____ and Harpo. Though the ideologies of patriarchy are presumably Harpo's reality, Walker rebuts this notion by Sofia's retaliation—the notion that the male is the head of his household. Harpo's continued dialogue with Celie espouses his fear of domination by his wife and his loss of control. Harpo's inability to challenge his father handicaps him, so he uses power and
abuse as a reinforcement of a masculine self that is not fully developed. Harpo states, “I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa. [...] When he say not to, you don’t. You don’t do what he say, he beat you” (66). In many ways, Harpo is confused about what represents real male domination. He intends to be his father’s son, while unconsciously evolving into a passive self. In Harpo’s superfluous attempts to exert his manhood, he becomes a caricature.

The notion of Harpo as a “caricature” is revelatory throughout several instances of the novel; however, there is one climatic moment that reinforces this postulation. During the dinner in which Celie inflicts her “curse” upon Harpo, the interaction between Harpo and Henrietta is revealing. Henrietta is described as “sullen, mean, mischievous and too stubborn to live in this world” (208). This personification of Henrietta is reminiscent of Sofia:

Henrietta he say.
She say Yessss... like they say it on the radio.
Everything she say confuse him. Nothing he say.
Then he say, Go git me a cool glass of water.
She don’t move.
Please he say.
She go git the water, put it by his plate, give him a peck on the cheek. Say, Poor Daddy. Sit back down. (208)

The lack of respect reflected by Henrietta’s refusal to obey Harpo also signifies Harpo’s feminization. The refusal of a young girl who is given a paternal directive clearly exemplifies the usurpation of Harpo’s power. By presenting the cases of two female
characterizations that negate patriarchal conventions, Walker metaphorically humbles Harpo. Instead of continuing this presumptions path of male-domination, Harpo acquiesces and learns to respect and love his Sofia:

Well, you got me behind you, anyway, say Harpo.

And I loves every judgment you ever made. He move up and kiss her where her nose was stitch.

Sofia toss her head. Everyone learns something in this life, she say. (289)

Celie, Shug, Sofia, Mr.____ and Harpo are central characters that manifest Walker’s feminization of the male characters and the masculinization of her female characters. The characters reject their masculine or feminine selves in a search for balance. The Color Purple, then, presents characters that encounter inner struggles because they possess character traits that are socially or traditionally unacceptable. The sentiments expressed by Harpo and Sofia provides closure and hope for the characters in the novel. I concur with Barbara Ehrenreich’s examination of novel when she states:

Patriarchy’s dissolution creates an opportunity for men and women to began to meet as equals without the pretenses involved in gender roles, and to get together against our common sources of oppression. [ . . . ]

For Walker demands a entirely new way of defining and understanding gender and male-female interaction [. . .]. (qtd. in Jenkins 994)

At the onset of the novel, Celie is presented as passive, and she undergoes several changes; however, she evolves into a liberated (wo)man at the end of the novel. Mr.____ embraces those days of sewing with his mother as he and Celie make shirts and pants
together. Shug’s arrival signals change for the town, and she becomes a matriarchal figure to Celie. Furthermore, Shug purges herself of underlying issues of abandonment that she experiences from her mother and father. Sofia learns to control aggression and anger which signals her new balance, while Harpo learns to love Sofia instead of trying to dominate her. Each aforementioned character is either feminized or masculinized, but they each find balance. By the close of the novel, the characters are in a sense “healed” from their pains of the past by a symbolic marriage of both their feminine and masculine selves.
CHAPTER 4

DISMANTLING AND (RE)CONSTRUCTING NOTIONS OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN WHEN ROCKS DANCE

Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell’s *When Rocks Dance* is a similar text to Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Nunez-Harrell embraces Trinidadian culture by illuminating the history of a once enslaved people, and she merges this history with that of the Amerindians. Bahadur Tejani contends, “Nunez-Harrell gives definition to the passions of African, Indian, and Caribbean cultures in her land, submerged under waves of European invasions” (53). The novel centers on the life of three main characters: Emilia, Marina, and Antonio. Although Emilia attempts to have babies several times, her babies die during birth. She later learns that she is cursed because she has rejected her heritage. Emilia’s curse results because she rejects Obeah and her Trinidadian roots to use sex as a means to give Hrothgar, her once owner, babies of which he promises to make them heirs to his land. It is not until after Emilia repents and embraces her Trinidadian roots that she finally conceives Marina. Emilia impresses upon Emilia the importance of landownership, and this message remains with her into adulthood: “A man who owned land was a sort of god [...] He was his own master” (Nunez-Harrell 30). Moreover, the novel centers on the life of Antonio and his mother Virginia. In order to free himself also of a supposed curse, which causes each of his wives to die in childbirth, Antonio marries Marina. Antonio believes that Marina is special and that she could withstand the pains of childbirth.
Central to the plot and theme of Nunez-Harrell’s novel is the employment of Obeah. The practice of Obeah, most commonly known as “voodoo,” (From “voudun,” the French Haitian term for the practice) represents the history of the Caribbean culture. It is use of Obeah that saves Emilia and Marina from dying in childbirth, but its usage also bewitches Antonio to sign over five deeds of land to Marina. Like Brown Girl Brownstones and The Color Purple land symbolically represents female empowerment, thus Emilia and Marina use the practice of Obeah to obtain land. While there are varying definitions of this cultural practice, Nunez-Harrell mirrors the definition postulated by a by Karla Frye:

[…] Obeah is a belief system divided into two broad categories. The first involves the casting of spells for various purposes, both good and evil: protecting oneself, property, family, or loved ones; harming real or perceived enemies; and bringing fortune in love, employment, personal or business pursuits. The second involves healing through the application of knowledge of herbal and animal medicinal properties. (198)

By developing the post-colonial theme of land acquisition, Nunez-Harrell weaves a story in which Emilia and Marina go to great lengths to attain landownership. Frye states, “As an actual symbol of material wealth and standing, landownership serves in the novel as a tangible text which is inscribed the meaning of wealth and power […]” (196). Since landownership is a traditional masculine prerogative, Emilia and Marina view land as their liberation and this evidences their masculinity. On the other hand, Antonio is feminized as he allows passion and lust for Marina to preclude his judgment.
While *When Rocks Dance* reflects postcolonial sentiments, I suggest that Nunez-Harrell depict men or feminized and women are masculinized and they, too, seek balance in order to be whole thus liberated.

Emilia Heathrow’s masculinization is perceived in her desire to own land. As a little girl, Emilia lived in the home of Hrothgar, while her mother worked as his servant. The mother was not only the servant but she satisfied Hrothgar’s sexual appetite whereas his wife chose not to and employed his servant to do so. But after the mother’s death, Emilia remains in the household with Hrothgar to later become his wife. Motivated by her knowledge of Hrothgar’s wealth, and the hope that he will not live much longer, Emilia endures long nights of sexual encounters:

He did not touch her until two months after her twelfth birthday and then he promised if she would bear him a son, old man that he was, he would will his cocoa estate and his house to her upon his death. She was not too young to know that at sixty he would not have long to live. That promise made her endure long nights of his body pressing roughly into hers. (Nunez-Harrell 5)

Emilia’s desire for land overrides the disgust she experiences during the nights with Hrothgar. She desires to own land so that she can pass it down to her sons and other generations. Emilia states, “What right had Hrothgar to the land? He and his people had crossed the seas and claimed it from her as though God had given them the right” (6).

Bahadur Tejani maintains, “the acquisition of a title to the land means freedom from the burden of slavery for her [Emilia]. It would allow her to plant new roots in fresh soil, a soil not of her choice but one which she, like millions of others,
must adopt consciously” (54). Frye affirms that Nunez-Harrell constructs the relationship between Hrothgar and Emilia to portray “female subjectivity in colonial society and intertwines the quest of African women for power and freedom [...]” (200). Indeed, Emilia’s self-definition through landownership personifies her as a militant leader who sacrifices herself, as a soldier, for her people: “She stayed in Hrothgar’s bed to reclaim that land [...]” (Nunez-Harrell 6).

Emilia’s yearning for land causes her to dismiss the possible reasons for her dying babies, to only focus on fulfilling Hrothgar’s wish for a male heir. One reason for Emilia’s inability to birth her children is her rejection of her ancestry. After learning that Hrothgar would leave land to his male heirs, Emilia forgets the importance of land to the Trinidadian culture and is driven by her personal motivations to attain land. Also, the land was connected to Obeah and Emilia did not practice the faith anymore but focuses on conceiving babies for Hrothgar. Land becomes the embodiment of life to Trinidadians; it is their sacred mother who gives birth and can take it away. To Emilia, landownership is the main objective:

The first time she accepted it. It could happen to anyone. She was not especially marked. And the second time, she grieved for the loss of them and she began to love them as if they had lived. She would make others to replace them, she said, consoling herself. The third time she was more determined, for then she knew that they wanted to live, that they fought against the strangling grip of the umbilical cord, accruing her with their anger. (6)
Though each baby dies during the birthing process, Hrothgar’s promise to leave his land to his male heirs reinforces Emilia determination to create babies. After the loss of Emilia’s first two babies, a sense of arrogance comes over her as she boastfully claims, “she can make more,” (6). However, one finds that this act of arrogance masculinizes Emilia. As her drive for landownership intensifies, her role as nurturer to her unborn children becomes more obsolete. When Emilia’s pain intensifies during her third attempt to conceive children, she solicits the help of the Ibo, a member of the Warahoon Amerindian Tribe, who informs Emilia that her desire for babies is selfishly motivated. Emilia states, “God owes me children. A woman must have children” (8). But the Ibo, who is a spiritual diviner and trader, does not accept this response; he responds, “You lie! Cocoa! Land. That’s what you want. [...] You sleep with that white man for land” (9). The Ibo acknowledges Emilia’s desecration of her body to those who have enslaved her people and taken their land: “You forget who you are!” (7). Furthermore, Emilia learns that the twins desire a resting place and that she will only be free after giving birth to live child: “I must give birth to a live child so that they can live in that child, If I don’t, they will torment me” (10). Driven by the hope of landownership, if she gives Hrothgar a son, Emilia loses sight of her heritage and her people.

Emilia’s determination to give Hrothgar’s babies is only successful after she embraces Obeah, but her success is subverted by biological irony. Although Emilia finally conceives a live child, the child is a female; this infuriates Hrothgar as he desires a male heir. Frye posits, “Nunez-Harrell revises and expands the literary treatment of Obeah through metaphoric connection to issues of power [and] subjectivity (198). The Ibo states, “Obeah no good for you no more. That, that is why trouble follow you. This is
why you make twins. You spit us out" (Nunez-Harrell12). Emilia explains the pain of the twins as unbearable: “I can’t sleep. I can’t work. It’s their fingers. They claw at me and scratch me. I can feel their feet kicking, kicking. They know they going to die and they want to kill me first” (9). Emilia’s repentance wins over the Ibo, and then he performs a ritual to save her life:

‘Take off your clothes,’ he commanded. ‘Do as I say.’ Emilia felt no fear in the sudden terror of his voice. She felt no anxiety. [...] The Ibo did not look at her body. His eyes became glassy and they fastened themselves to her spirit. His hand reached behind his tin hut where a smaller tin shed stood hidden among the trees. [...] Inside he made her sit on a wooden stool next to a heavy metal tub full of leaves soaking in icy-cold rainwater. After the Ibo bathed Emilia with the same icy water with which he cleansed himself, and after he rubbed her body with the sacred leaves he had blessed on the holy days of his gods, he put on his robe and left her sitting there naked in the shed and went to his tin hut to pray. (11)

It is only after Emilia visits the Ibo and is repentant that she is able to escape the impending future death of her children:

But this time, if you prove yourself, you will have new life. This time your sons will live, but two weeks after they are born you must do as your fathers before you did. Leave your twins in the forest at the mercy of the gods. At the mercy of their divine wisdom. Do that and you will conceive again. (12)
After Emilia gives birth, she follows the Ibo's directions and takes her sons to the forest to die. This ritual of giving her sons back to the land, the creator, cures Emilia from the curse that plagues her with twins who continuously die.

The Ibo's advice to Emilia proves successful when Emilia gives birth to her daughter, Marina. By giving birth to Marina, Emilia gives birth to a masculine personality endowed with the spirit of her eight brothers, through the feminine power of Obeah. Nunez presents a masculine embodiment that makes Marina resistant to minor diseases that inflict minors. Marina's first masculine attribute is evidenced when de Nieves arrives to inform Emilia of the changes to Hrothgar's will:

[…] 'Hrothgar intended to give you [Emilia] a gift for his live sons. He never spoke to me [de Nieves] about the will, but-but-I'm not sure.' 'Why not, father? Did he tell you so? Do you think that he knew you had the will?' Father de Nieves fought back the bitter bile that stung his throat. He had no proof that at any time before his death, Hrothgar wished his will to be changed. (25)

Marina secretly listens to the conversation that ensues between her mother and the priest. The priest expresses his apologies for not arriving sooner to speak on behalf of Emilia, which could have perhaps allowed Emilia to retain Hrothgar's land and home after his death. The priest was the only one to know that Hrothgar had willed his land to Emilia.

An indicator of Marina's masculinization is evident when she causes the priest to topple down the steps: "He [de Nieves] felt a hand grab his ankle, and spinning around suddenly, he lost his balance and toppled down the steps. […] Marina […] said in a voice five times her age, 'Now leave, Father de Nieves” (27). Nunez-Harrell establishes
Marina's determination and stern demeanor early-on which portends Marina's further masculinization.

Like her mother, Marina’s emotional development does not center on sentiments of love but of determination and purpose. Additionally, her physical description suggests a masculine selfhood: “Tall and arrogant, her [Marina] face framed by light, almost golden hair—wild, unkempt uncombed hair” (66). Frye contends that Marina is a “character caught between two worlds” (195). Marina represents the hybrid nature of her heritage; therefore, she embraces an English and Trinidadian worldview. Thelma Thompson observes that Marina’s name itself suggests a hybrid nature—survival, the power of the earth and ocean, and the positive or negative forces of water (32). The narrator portrays Marina’s masculinization during her adolescent years, which Emilia observes:

It was the first of many times Emilia would see a hardness, a coldness in her daughter's eyes. The sort of expression that could only from someone who had never loved, or someone who would not let loving, or feeling, stand in her way of getting what she wanted. (Nunez-Harrell 29)

Additionally, the desire to own land is transferred to Marina by her mother:

Emilia clasped her daughter's hand in hers, and looking deeply into her eyes, she beat out for her the silent rhythms of her forefather's love for the land. The time had come for her to pass on the message of her people as each African mother in the Caribbean would do. (29-30)

Marina learns from her mother that land is man's most powerful possession, and that where as to give up land is a representation of slavery, ownership represents freedom
Emilia understands landownership as a symbol of masculinity and power, and she instills this understanding in her daughter, which also contributes to her masculinization. Melving Rahming affirms that Marina's life is "rife with critical challenges," challenges that speak to Nunez-Harrell's masculinization of Marina. Moreover, he posits that Marina is ungendered because her womanhood is not informed by her sense of womanhood but by the spirits of her eight brothers.

Acknowledging the importance of land to her culture, Emilia tells Marina she must never forget about land, as she was born from the land and will eventually possess it:

> A man who owned land, owned a part of the earth. He was his own master. He belonged to no one. He could be no slave. He could grow his own food, make his own bed on his land, Yes, land was his most valuable possession. Emilia taught her daughter this and more. A man, she said, owned land only if he owned the deed to it. But if a man had land, it did not mean that his woman had land. [...] ‘You were born,’ she said finally to Marina, ‘on the land. Beneath the cocoa. The land took you from my womb. Before I touched you, the land embraced you. You belong to the land and you will own land one day.’ (Nunez-Harrell 30)

Though only eight years old, Marina swears allegiance to her mother to let no one stop her from acquiring land: “No one, not even God, could stop her [Marina] from one day owning the deed to land” (Nunez-Harrell 31).

The source of Marina’s determination becomes the “fabric from which she is cut” and what drives her to marry Antonio de Balboa. In many ways, Marina considers herself to be untouchable; she had heard of rumors circulating that surround the death of
Antonio’s wives. However, Marina’s determination to acquire land supersedes the rumors she hears about Antonio. This aspect of her character further demonstrates Marina’s masculinity; she is not easily frightened by the possibilities of death because she realizes that she is different; she is a woman who embodies the spirit of her eight dead brothers. This embodiment represents a masculine selfhood that that Frye espouses as a “visible embodiment of a society whose history speaks strongly [and] her physical features—clashing, complementary, contradictory—at once symbolize the historical, social, and cultural processes, as experienced by African descendants” (196). In Marina, Nunez-Harrell gives rise to an archetypal empowered female character who consciously resists patriarchal conventions. In her hesitancy to marry Antonio, Emilia reinforces that Marina is “special” (Nunez-Harrell 47):

        Emilia got up quickly from the bed where she was sitting and stood close to Marina. ‘Listen to me, she said firmly, ‘he has land. A lot of land. It won’t happen you. You are special. […] Marina’s mind clung to just one word that she had heard. Land. De Balboa had land. (Nunez-Harrell 47)

Additionally, Nunez-Harrell’s depiction of Marina’s physical strength further evidences her masculinization. Emilia states, “You are a strong girl. No one knows this better than I. Nothing will happen to you” (48). Emilia validates Marina’s strength; and her memories of the Warao’s (an Indian native and priest) words resound in her mind: “No, a woman with the spirits of eight men in her could not be harmed” (48). In this example, Nunez-Harrell not only foreshadows the physical strength of Maria, but she suggests a masculine persona.
Like Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*, Marina also uses Feminine female power of seduction to control the men in her life, further exemplifying her masculinity. Marina learns that she possesses a powerful weapon that she could use to attain Antonio’s land. Employing her female power, Marina remembers how she tricked men by arousing their interest to later resist them before they could penetrate her:

> It gave her power. Men breathing heavily down her neck begging, pleading, as though their lives depended upon her. Some, it seemed, would die if they could not, if she would not let them, just a little, just the tiniest ever-so-brief second, enter her. And at the moment when they thought they had conquered her, she remained always and finally in control, brushing them off with a laugh, leaving them to stumble and and ejaculate in the empty air. (86)

In most occurrences, it is the man who dominates and controls situations, even sex. But Marina demonstrates, through her female prowess, that she is in control; and it is this mindset whereby she controls Antonio. At first Marina is apprehensive because Antonio “permitted himself only brief kisses on her hand and on her cheek” (87) and is emotionally bound to his mother, frequently visiting her bedroom to participate in nightly recitals of Shakespearean plays. However, Marina strategically devises a way to trap her prey with the ultimate objective of landownership:

> It would be a challenge to expose this man’s passion and to make him want her as he had never wanted or loved anything or anyone else in his life. But it was the fifteen acres of land in Tabaquite that drew her to him. The land, the land. That was why she married him. So she waited for him
in the bedroom, bearing her humiliation. She would not treat him as she
had treated others who had forced her to wait. When he came, finally,
telling of his mother’s plans, she acted no differently. She opened her
legs to him. Land. Land, She was born on the land. Land was her
birthright. She would not lose it as her mother. (87)

This scene personifies Marina as a femme fatale; no matter what it takes, the end result is
land ownership: “Fifteen acres her mother had said, seducing her to the inevitable like the
thirty hummingbirds to the glistening shell of the rotted hollow of a cocoa shell” (101).
Nunez consciously employs the term “seduce” to reinforce Marina’s plan to attain the
land, a symbol of masculine power, by an ironically feminine strategy. Thus, Marina’s
feminine body is the key to unlocking her masculine desires, in a way which recalls her
mother. Marina uses sex to manipulate Antonio, so when she finally lures him into her
web, she is well-positioned to achieve her ultimate objective.

In many ways, Marina is the head of the household, a traditional male position.
While Marina seduces Antonio to attain land, her premise is not only that she believes it
is her birthright; she also plans to leave wealth and security, as traditionally a father
would for his children. Thus, her role as a temptress is two-fold: to acquire land because
it is her birthright and to provide a patriarchal blanket of security for her children. In both
ways Marina is masculinized; though she is not laboring in an “old lathe” as Silla, in
Marshall’s novel, she is securing a future for her family:

She would not be like her mother. She would not be thrown out in the
gutter like dirty wash water. She would not have her children’s birthright
snatched from her hands. She would not let herself be forced to make her
way in the world by finding yet another man’s bed. No she would not let Virginia do that to her. She would not lose what was hers by right, a right she was entitled to by marriage. (101)

In this scene one identifies Marina’s determination. By declaring that nothing or no one can stop Marina from attaining what belongs to her, Nunez-Harrell is speaking for all women. Even after Marina learns that Antonio plans to sell the land, Marina’s scheming is not halted; his decision invigorates her:

She had to possess him first. She had to wait until he would deny her nothing. She took his hand and slid it down the front of her bodice in the canal between her breasts. Then, as she felt sweat gather on his open palm, she rubbed his hand first over her right breast, then her left, until her nipples stood hard and rigid. Antonio’s body offered no resistance. He let his hand travel where she would and then, when he felt his passion mount uncontrollably, he stammered without conviction. [...] Antonio was totally disarmed. He could not answer, but his body, firm and strong, told Marina all she needed to know. And for the first time in his life Antonio felt the cool breeze of the night play upon his buttocks as he entered a woman.

(157)

As a spider captures its prey, Marina executes her feminine prowess to entrap Antonio. After Antonio receives the bite, as afflicted by a spider, he is tranquilized by the passion of lust that he feels for Marina. Subsequently, Antonio allows himself to fall into Marina’s trap. The touch and smell and Marina’s body lure him into a dreamlike state
that evidences his femininity. Marina’s power as the temptress further demonstrates her masculinity and Antonio’s submission represents his feminine persona.

Additionally, Marina takes extra precaution by using the religion of her people, Obeah, to persuade Antonio to add her name on the deed. In this show of determination, Marina places a powdery divination or manumust in Antonio’s cocoa, so that she will finally control him:

> Turn my back and pour their cocoa at the stove. It’s not a good idea to put the manumust in the goat milk. It’ll float on top. One teaspoon in Antonio’s cocoa. Good. The blue cup for him. The yellow for her. Bring the cups to them. [...] Well, drank it all, Let’s see now, Emilia Heathrow. Let’s see your manumust at work. I’ll put on my wedding nightgown. [...] I’ll pull down the neckline a little further. [...] He can’t resist me. I’ll make him love it. Humble and sweet. That’s how I’ll be. (259)

By employing the power of Obeah, Marina further demonstrates her ability to succeed where her mother fails. One finds that Nunez enables Marina to understand her female power as seductress but also the power of her ancestry. It was not customary for a man to demand a woman’s name, namely his wife, to be added to a deed; however, Harold Smith adds Marina’s name to five acres of land at Antonio’s request (261). Marina’s masculinization does not consist in the way she uses her body and religion to trick Antonio, but rather in the conscious attempt to prove to her mother and other men that she can rebut patriarchal authority. As Marina lies in bed with Antonio, she realizes that her schemes are successful and at the moment of his climax, she asks Antonio, as she has
done in times past, for land. Finally he acquiesces and signs over five acres of land to her, by which act she embraces and achieves her cultural Marina.

She had returned to Tabaquite to see the land again after those five acres were legally hers. [...] nothing could take away from her the joy of owning land. She took off her shoes and let her toes sink into the greasy earth. She scooped the dirt up in her hands. The black soil caught in her fingernails. This was hers. Her piece of earth. [...] Yes, obeah had served her. (267)

This amounts to a transformation of her cultural identity, since the land that was once a sign of freedom to men is now Marina’s.

While Nunez-Harrell presents several ways wherein Marina is culturally masculinized, she also culturally feminizes Antonio. Unlike Harpo or Mister who portray their femininity by performing domestic activities and Deighton whose personal appearance is more important, Antonio’s feminization is evidenced by his lack of aggression and his European education. One observes Antonio’s feminine side as he dialogues with his father, who encourages Antonio to be a man: “No tears. Be a man. It’s time you’re a man. Your mother fills your head with dreams” (55). The dreams that the father refers to represent Antonio’s position as a teacher. Virginia, his mother, teaches Antonio about Shakespeare and through nightly recitations, Antonio and Virginia reenact lines from the playwrights’ works. Tejani states,

Nunez-Harrell sets out to hold a mirror of social and political realities up to the eyes of Virginia and her son Antonio regarding the significance of their past. The intention is to challenge their pose of ‘black skins, white
mask,' of a culture standard based on made-in-London esthetics and a pseudoscientific rationalism that makes believers reject everything African or black as primitive. (56)

Nunez-Harrell’s representation of Antonio portends his feminization because, he, like his mother who was formerly a teacher, embraces the value of the arts; his acceptance and participation depict the feminine traits which make it easy for him be dominated by his wife.

After Antonio’s previous wives die in childbirth, he is reluctant to marry again; however, Marina, who according to the townspeople possesses the spirit of eight men, would deliver him. Antonio’s initial plan is to marry Marina because she could save him from a perceived de Balboa curse; his passion awakens in him desires that he was not fully aware with his other wives. After the first few nights and weeks of his marriage, Antonio discerns that Marina is different:

With his other wives it took him at least three nights spread over weeks to break through, so fearful were they that he would hurt them. He was accustomed to tears, to shame, to pain. To the granting sensation of dry penetration. To the feeling of obligation and responsibility when it was finished. No so with Marina. She moved his hand over her body. She let him touch her everywhere. She pressed his mouth to her breasts and wrapped her fleshy thighs around his buttocks. Her desire was boundless, her pleasure interminable. She gave her total self to him. Without limits. (Nunez-Harrell 90)
In a very descriptive manner, Nunez presents Antonio’s response to his new wife. With his other wives, Antonio implies a notion of domination when he states that the women often gave themselves to him out of obligation, but Marina responds differently. When Marina moves Antonio’s hand over her body and wraps her thighs around him, she symbolically emasculates Antonio. He is not allowed or granted the time to dominate Marina, which is the heteronormative characteristic of male to female encounters. Nunez prefaced the scene by describing Antonio’s masculine dominance over his former wives, but she reduces his male machismo when he succumbs to the power of Marina.

Nunez-Harrell further feminizes Antonio when he succumbs to Marina’s sexual advances. His passion erodes his ability to resist Marina’s body, and he offers no resistance to her advances. In each sexual scene, Antonio is powerless, and he allows Marina to control his sexual desire: “He let his hand travel where she would and then, when he felt his passion mount uncontrollably, he stammered without conviction” (157). Antonio’s response to Marina signals her success each time he climaxes. Unaware of Marina’s plan to seduce him, Antonio is “disarmed [and] he could not answer, but his body, firm and strong, told Marina all she needed to know” (157). Nunez-Harrell creates a graphic conceptualization of Antonio’s worldview, a worldview that is not representative of masculinity and power, but of femininity and passion:

Antonio grunted and puller her closer to him. He should have known that something was wrong. He should have remembered the last time that she had asked that question. And perhaps he did. Perhaps it was the memory of the wind playing against his buttocks, Marina’s softness twisting and
grinding beneath him that made him ignore the cunning behind her words.

(205)

Antonio’s reaction to Marina further represents his feminization. The physical climax becomes the weakening of his male power. He allows sensuality to metaphorically cover his reality. The narrator unclothes Antonio by exposing his buttocks to the atmosphere. It is Antonio’s nakedness that makes him susceptible to attack by his feminine yet masculine counterpart.

*When Rocks Dance* is a study that centers on post-colonialism and the significance of Trinidadian history. Nunez-Harrell rewrites the history of Trinidad, one where women such as Marina no longer succumb to their oppressor. Additionally, Nunez-Harrell revisits an ancestral past whereby the characters seek after their identity, an identity that is not shaped by the English colonizers. While the characters oftentimes reject their culture, specifically practices of Obeah, Nunez-Harrell employs the religion to preserve the history of the Caribbean. One effect of post-colonialism is the Trinidadian’s drive to own land, for to them land represents freedom. The foundation of this discourse centers the history of Trinidadians, who were enslaved by the Portuguese and forced to work in the cocoa fields and become their maids; thus, land becomes pivotal to the psychological development of the novels’ characters. Emilia Heathrow is disinherited from the land after Hrothgar learns that she murders his sons, but she instills the love and need for land in Marina.

*Where Emilia fails in obtaining land, Marina is successful. Both women scheme and use their bodies to seduce their men. Nunez-Harrell, then, masculinizes the women using land as the premise; the women value land as the freedom but ultimately land*
represents the empowerment of African diasporic women. Nunez-Harrell allows her women to own land and secure livelihoods in the same way as men. And where the women are depicted as masculine, Nunez-Harrell comparably feminizes Antonio. His feminization marks his weakness; further, Antonio’s passion for his wife drives him to visit the warden and add Marina’s name to five acres of land. Nunez-Harrell revisits the effects of post-colonialism on the Caribbean, which is the impetus to the novel’s development, but ultimately she presents a study that expounds upon the characters’ discovery of self. This development of self, then, gives hope to women like Emilia and Marina who desire to own land. Nunez-Harrell depiction of balance is further demonstrated in the novel, like Marshall’s text. The depiction of balance is observable as Emilia, Marina, and Antonio resists cultural norms. While Emilia and Marina take on masculine personas, Antonio represents the feminine other, who later embraces his feminine selfhood through passionate lovemaking and his emotional attachment to this mother. Nunez-Harrell reveals gender reconstruction, which further liberates women in a patriarchal culture.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: PAST PERCEPTION TO CONTEMPORARY (RE)THINKING

As I have shown, the traditional heteronormative representation of men and women is systematically interrogated in this dissertation. Where the perception of men as masculine and women as feminine is the traditional portrayal, I dismantle this norm in order to assert a more contemporary understanding of gender. Employing works by contemporary African diasporic women authors, I argue that these authors (re)construct notions of gender. I strongly affirm that the men in this dissertation are feminized while women are masculinized. By presenting works that share a common theme, that is post-colonialism, this dissertation further explores the construction of masculinity and femininity within the context of patriarchal colonial opposition. Although I argue the case for masculinized women and feminized men, I affirm that the authors of the texts consciously introvert the family hierarchy to establish a woman’s tale—a story whereby women are empowered and the norm of gender identity, ideally, is an androgyny novel of both male and female hybrid, for which I use the term “balance.”

In Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl Brownstones, I explored the life of Silla, Selina, and Deighton Boyce and Clive. A displaced people, the Bajans desire to assimilate into the New York community where they desire to live as their white counterparts. Silla desires to achieve socioeconomic status by purchasing a new Brownstone in New York, and she works diligently to bring this desire to fruition. Her drive and determination to
own land, a traditional masculine attribute, portray her masculinization. Through careful plotting and scheming, I contend that Silla rejects her feminine self, a self that Marshall personifies as Silla works in the old lathe. Correspondingly, Selina adapts the same masculine qualities as Silla, and she embraces a masculine selfhood that nurtures Beryl during their childhood, while nurturing Clive, who also is feminized in the novel. Moreover, I argue that Deighton is feminized because his life initially centers around dressing nicely, while later he succumbs to the control of another male, Father Peace.

Using this text, I explored various instances whereby Marshall (re)constructs the family hierarchy. Additionally, I contend that Marshall’s text evokes subversive understandings of the role of respective men and women. The novel espouses a transformative vision that challenges the essentialist notion of masculinity and femininity.

Similarly, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* reveals gender (re)construction. I posit that Walker creates a novel where characters need, as I have said, the complementary gender construction I have termed “balance.” I assert that Walker either masculinizes or feminizes the characters’ and their lives are not fulfilled until they embrace both their feminine or masculine selves. Celie, once passive, emerges as a masculine figure that learns how to love through her relationship with Shug; by entering into a relationship with Shug, Celie embraces her masculine self. She learns to be independent and starts her own business, selling pants, which further symbolizes her masculinization. Moreover, Sophia appears masculinized because she prefers laborious tasks in the fields and has an aggressive nature. Shug, the Queen Honey Bee, is both masculine and feminine, which she demonstrates by being both Celie’s mother figure and lover; Shug thus represents, paradoxically, Celie’s husband. Additionally, I examine
Albert and Harpo to prove their covert femininity and its thematic implication. Albert is dissuaded from sewing/knitting as a minor, but it is this skill that enables him to embrace his femininity. While Harpo seeks to dominate his wife, Sophia, he also enjoys works of domesticity. The novel seemingly centers around sexual abuse, racism and loss of home; however, applying the theme of gender (re)construction invites contemporary critique of the text.

Elizabeth Nunez-Harrell’s *When Rocks Dance*, too, is an integral component to this dissertation. The narrator merges the Trinidadian and Indian cultures to present past issues of post-colonialism that impact the characters’ reality. This loss of reality causes characters to reject the legacy of their cultures and ancestors to embrace a European perspective, which they perceive is more “civilized” and empowering, thus, landownership (the symbol of patriarchy and colonialism) is the premise that drives the plot of the novel. Land is a powerful natural signifier representing economic achievement, political power and hope for the future. The employment of Obeah is also significant to the novel. Obeah is a cultural representation of the characters in Marshal’s text.

While the practice of Obeah is the impetus that gains Silla and Selina land, its applicability preserves the historical lineage of all Trinidadians. I strongly affirm that Emilia and Marina are masculinized in the text because they seek to own land, a traditional male right. I argue that these women use the cultural belief system, Obeah, to empower women, but they are then transformed to embrace the power of their lineage. Moreover, I contend that Antonio is feminized. His, mother, Virginia, who teaches him from a British educational system, feminizes Antonio; each night, for many years, he
reenacts Shakespearean works with his mother. Virginia feminizes Antonio in her pursuit to retain him in her life. The emotional attachment that Antonio feels for his mother perceives his feminization, as he only desires to satisfy his mother, an attribute that he retains from his youth. Marshall’s depiction of Antonio is subordinate, which is apparent as Antonio acquiesces to the authority of the women in his life.

This dissertation engages in a study that suggests the need for a close examination of women authors of the Diaspora. By engaging in discourse on the treatment of men and women in the each text, the theme of post-colonialism resonates. It is through this theme that the authors argue for liberation from its power—most importantly, the liberation of his women. While most current critics consistently view the above works as gender identity studies, this study lends scholars to revisit present notions of gender with a different lens, one that rebuts the heteronormative construction of masculinity and femininity. While the texts mentioned in this dissertation evidence various instances of gender (re)construction, I affirm that this interrogation also applies to Merle Collins’ Angel, also a work that espouses post-colonial ideals.

Collins presents Angel as a radical who opposes the political upheaval in Grenada and her fathers’ newfound religion. At an earlier age, Angel portrays masculine characteristics. She threatens to “mash up” a boy’s face for taunting her brother [Simon] (63). Further evidence of her masculinization is when she “pulled out her slate, and held it like a huge, square cutlass” (63). In many ways, a close analysis of Angel, as this study demonstrates, will reveal commonalities whereby Angel is “balanced,” by merging masculine and feminine realities. This interrogation of dismantling and reconstructing notions of masculinity and femininity engages the reader to reconsider traditional roles
where men are perceived as stereotypically masculine and women stereotypically feminine, thus enabling new discourse to contemporary literature. Applying this contemporary approach to texts by women will create new discourse that challenges readers to reconsider former approaches to postcolonial works by women.

Furthermore, I sought to integrate scholarship on gender (re)construction so as to provide a clearer understanding of issues surrounding masculinity and femininity among black males and females. Like Verta Taylor, who argues that scholars “universally adopt social constructionist perspectives to understand gender relations,” (11) this dissertation aims to speak directly to this concept. The discussion centering on social constructions of gender are oftentimes stereotypical, thus this dissertation dismantles the previous notions. Additionally, I defer to Taylor, whose point is critical to this dissertation: “The significance of gender may be more apparent for some movements than for others, for example, women’s and men’s movement seeking to rewrite the meaning of femininity and masculinity [...]” (13). Examining the novels in this dissertation allowed for a close interrogation of how the Diasporic women authors approach this idea of femininity and masculinity, and it is this contemporary exploration that invites a (re)definition of the social misidentifications by which the characters in the novels are subjected. Finally, I contend that by metaphorically marrying their masculine and feminine attributes, the characters achieve a more “balanced” personality structure, which in turn is the key to their self-actualization as complete human beings.
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