

DOMESTICATING VIOLENCE: RHETORICS OF DOMESTIC  
VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

by

Sumiko T. Martinez

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**STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL**

The thesis of Sumiko T. Martinez

has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

Leonard Hawes, Chair 3/1/3011  
Date Approved

Mary Strine, Member 3/1/2011  
Date Approved

Maureen Mathison, Member 3/1/2011  
Date Approved

and by Ann Darling, Chair of  
the Department of Communication

and by Charles A. Wight, Dean of The Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

Domestic violence as a social problem has been 'discovered' only recently. Over the past three decades, growing social awareness of domestic violence has been widespread throughout popular U.S. culture, including in mainstream films. A rhetorical analysis of three popular films (*The Color Purple*, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*) reveals the repeated use of several techniques that subtly legitimize domestic violence. These techniques include pathologizing the abuser, the victim empowerment frame, the troubled childhood and addiction narratives, mythologizing domestic violence, and exclusion by definition.

A combination of visual and traditional rhetorical analysis reveals the issues with discussing as complex a topic as domestic violence within the genre of popular film. More widespread, institutionalized problems are phenomena such as 'exclusion by definition,' where some victims experiences are held up as "domestic violence" and others are marginalized as "not domestic violence." If we are ever to move past this as a society, we must resist essentializing THE domestic violence experience, expand upon the definition of domestic violence, and recognize the severity of *every* instance of domestic violence as a crime, taking the appropriate steps to both react and prevent future incidents.

The key place to start is with our discourse. Adopting an inquiring, not judgmental, discourse is the first step down the path towards asking the right questions, acknowledging the immense complexity and irreducibility of domestic violence to a single model, and understanding and helping both victims and abusers move forward in productive ways.

For Mama, and for hope.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Personal Narrative

This first section, while not strictly academic, reflects my motivations for researching in the area of domestic violence. The abuse that my family experienced when I was a child was not often physical and was never sexual; it did not leave any bruises; it was not visible at all. I was 11 when I noticed that there was something awry in our house, and it was not until much, much later that I actually identified it as domestic violence.

I have few specific recollections of what exactly was said or done, but I remember these things: I used to walk to the beach late at night in the salty winter air and scream for help into the wind; I used to leave from the house for 18 hours a day, coming home only to sleep and eat; I watched my mother adopt a dog to fulfill her need for companionship and affection when my father calculatingly neglected her, and then watched her fall apart when the dog was hit by a truck and killed on a road trip; and at least once I covered my baby brother's ears as my father screamed at my mother. I picked him up and fled to the attic, where I sang him songs and tried to amuse him with toys so he would not hear what was happening downstairs.

When my mother filed for divorce, she was punished. None of our neighbors could believe that my polite, well-read, handy, all-American dad was an abusive husband and father. My paternal grandmother, who had actually encouraged my mother to file for divorce for the sake of us children, forbade my mother to cross her property across the street; it was a place where we spent much of our time. Years later, my mother told me that there were many times that she doubted herself, her own sanity, and the reality of what happened in our suburban neighborhood on a hilltop in a busy, cozy beach town.

My point is merely this: nobody thought it was abuse. The spiritual, mental, and emotional harms, as well as the sporadic physical harm, that were suffered, we dealt with in silence. Sometimes, my mother would wear the same clothes 4 or 5 days in a row, getting out of bed only to walk us to the bus stop at the end of our street. The abuse—our abuse—was invisible. The reality that we lived was becoming invisible. And when my mother made it visible by appealing to judicial structures supposedly there for the protection of the people, she was held responsible. Responsible for the destruction of her family. Responsible for the failure of her marriage. Responsible *for the abuse she endured*. That is why I do this work. Because, all these years later, my mother has still not had real justice served. Yes, we all got away from the abuse. But my father still will not acknowledge that the things he did may have been wrong. Once when I confronted him about it, he said, “You know, I’m not a monster.”

And he's right. He is not a monster. He is a human being who made terrible choices with invisible, enduring consequences for the people he was supposed to love most in the world, his family.

Domestic violence is one of the most misrepresented, and hence misunderstood, social problems today. The affected society is not limited by boundaries of geography, economic or social class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or age. Part of that legacy of invisible domestic violence is what I examine in this work. The silence surrounding the abused gives space to culturally privileged entities to tell the stories in place of the true narrators. Mainstream films are one of these culturally privileged entities, designed for profit. They are not meant to provoke much-needed social change, not meant to bring justice, and certainly not to tell the truth about domestic violence.

Here is my research, with a telos of making visible the invisible violence and helping to bring an end to domestic violence.

### Discourse and Violence

Domestic violence has been around for a long time, in many forms and all around the globe. Only in fairly recent years, however, has it been considered a social problem. Beginning in the 1970s, media began to devote attention to domestic violence and so the public "discovery" of domestic violence began (Berns 3). Given that the public has become increasingly aware of this issue over the past 40 years, it would seem reasonable that its incidence should decrease proportionately, but the numbers are still startling. According to the Center for

Disease Control in 2006, “Each year, women experience about 4.8 million intimate partner related physical assaults and rapes. Men are the victims of about 2.9 million intimate partner related physical assaults” (CDC 1). The 2009 update of the same publication from the CDC contains exactly the same language, indicating that either no new data are available or that domestic violence is occurring at the same rate. Domestic violence is an immensely complex social phenomenon, and to fully explain the causes and contributing factors is beyond the scope of any one paper. A complex, integrated web of circumstances, cultural tolerances, legal recourses, physical protections, emotional support systems, and financial stressors play roles in both the occurrence and the ending of violence in relationships. In this thesis, I examine three small factors in this web of issues: discourse, representations, and legitimacy of cultural representations of domestic violence.

Surrounded as we are by our cultures, we cannot help but to be steeped in their discourse. Discourse is a socially constitutive phenomenon; it constitutes us as we call it into being. However, discourse also acts as a constraint, forming a boundary between the speakable and the unspeakable. Judith Butler explains it well: “If the subject is produced in speech through a set of foreclosures, then this founding and formative limitation sets the scene for the agency of the subject” (139). The same discourse that allows for a speaking body to occupy a subject position constrains the things that the body can speak at all. The discourses of which we are a part necessarily shape our thoughts, our language, our actions, and our inactions. When widespread cultural discourses give credence and

legitimacy to the rhetoric of domestic violence, a ripple effect spreads out through the populace. It intersects with abusers, survivors, victims, families, communities, and ultimately feeds back into a violent society.

I study how specific cultural legitimations of domestic violence intersect with and influence the rhetoric of survivors and victims in terms of negotiating identities and larger social perceptions of acceptability and status. Through a critical analysis of mainstream films, I trace the subtle ways in which domestic violence is legitimated and normalized into an acceptable cultural standard.

For the purposes of this thesis, I define “cultural legitimation” as a phenomenon constantly occurring when popular cultural texts give credence and support to certain views of domestic violence. For example, there is a common theme of blaming the victim. I was talking with a family member, and he shared an email forward “joke” with me which went something like this: A woman goes to her doctor, badly beaten and bruised. The doctor, concerned, patches her up and says, “Does this happen often?” The woman says, “Yes, every time my husband comes home from the bar.” The doctor says, “Might I recommend some preventative advice? Next time your husband goes out, make some tea. When he comes home, swish the tea in your mouth until he goes to sleep.” Some time later, the woman goes back to the doctor for a regular checkup. The doctor asks the woman if the advice worked. The woman says, “Yes, but I don’t see how tea can prevent domestic violence!” The doctor replies, “Isn’t it amazing what keeping your mouth shut can do?”<sup>1</sup> I consider this an excellent example of

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<sup>1</sup> The actual text of the email is this: A woman goes to the doctor, beaten black and blue. Doctor: “What happened?” Woman: “Doctor, I don’t know what to do. Every time my husband comes

everyday behavior that legitimates domestic violence; in addition to blaming the victim for her own abuse, it belittles the seriousness of the issue by using humor. The person who related this joke to me is not (to the best of my knowledge) abusive towards his family, and he doesn't openly condone the use of force within families. Yet the story that he related to me (circulated by one of the most viral media types available) aptly embodies an unconscious cultural theme—that women provoke domestic violence through the act of *speaking*, one of the primary acts that make us human. Presented on its own, I think many people would agree that it is ludicrous to say that self-censorship is the solution to the problems of the world. Simply not speaking about wars will not cause people to stop fighting wars. But placed into the context of domestic violence, self-censorship becomes the solution currently expected of the victim or survivor in order to redeem herself or himself in the eyes of the public, which often includes neighbors, colleagues, family members, etc.

Placing responsibility on the shoulders of the victim is certainly not restricted to incidents of domestic violence, but is a response to many types of crime. Elizabeth Stanko's article, "Women, Crime, and Fear," demonstrates that most public campaigns to ameliorate violence against women offer solutions that are the victims' responsibility—gun ownership, restricting movements to certain "safe" areas and "safe" hours of the day, carrying personal alarms, and traveling

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home drunk, he beats me to a pulp." Doctor: "I have a real good medicine for that. When your husband comes home drunk, just take a glass of sweet tea and start swishing it in your mouth. Just swish and swish but don't swallow until he goes to bed and is asleep." Two weeks later the woman comes back to the doctor looking fresh and reborn. Woman: "Doctor, that was a brilliant idea! Every time my husband came home drunk, I swished with sweet tea. I swished and swished, and he didn't touch me!" Doctor: "You see how much keeping your mouth shut helps?" <http://palepage.com/?p=3460>

with another person—while largely ignoring the responsibility of the potential offender for his or her own actions. In the next section, I discuss the different types or techniques of cultural legitimation that are notable from my research.

### Cultural Legitimation Techniques or Types

Certain mediated representations of domestic violence are deeply problematic from a rhetorical stance. Many people first encounter an instance of domestic violence through a mediated source, such as a film, TV show, newspaper, or magazine. To the trained critical eye, these representations can be handled in an educated manner. However, to an untrained consumer, these representations can undergo a kind of synecdochic, eliding the fact that domestic violence is an ill-defined and extremely multifaceted issue. Through my examination of the texts I have selected (*The Color Purple*, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*), several main themes have become evident.

### Pathologizing the Abuser

The first of these themes of cultural legitimation of domestic violence is “pathologizing the abuser” by making the issue of abuse into single, discrete, specific instantiations of independent, “sick” individuals instead of a social problem to be addressed collectively. This is immensely interesting because it involves rhetorically denying the offender his or her own subjectivity. In his article “The Representation of Domestic Violence in Popular English-Language

Cinema,” Duncan Wheeler “examine[s] both common and specific representational strategies” of depicting domestic violence in mainstream cinema (155). Wheeler notes two strategies for what I consider to be cultural legitimization of domestic violence; pathologizing the offender and placing the problem squarely on the survivor’s or victim’s shoulders (also known as the victim empowerment frame). Frequently, these two techniques go hand in hand.

An example of this tactic is found in Melinda Rogers’ Salt Lake Tribune article dated October 6, 2009, regarding a woman’s death in a domestic violence incident. The article includes phrases such as “the Oliveras began arguing when they returned from their night out,” “Daniel Olivera threatened his sister and his sister’s roommate the morning of the stabbing,” “Daniel Olivera went into the house and came back with a large knife,” and an entire section in a separate box titled “Domestic abuse history.” The repeated focus on Daniel Olivera’s distinct actions and the calling out of his past history serve to effectively “other” him, pathologizing him into a bad person who happened to kill his wife rather than a person who committed illegal and unethical actions. This othering distances the perpetrator from the bulk of newspaper readers, allowing us to maintain that it is not a social problem so much as it is a problem of a single man who “is bad.” Such a frame is not constructive towards goals of understanding and preventing the root of domestic violence; rather, it deflects our attention to the criminal history of Mr. Olivera with a spectacle of voyeurism.

### Victim Empowerment Frame

Perhaps the second most common cultural legitimation technique is the use of the “victim empowerment frame,” which can be translated into blaming the victim. Nancy Berns’s analysis in *Framing the Victim* notes that 67 percent of women’s magazine articles related to domestic violence from 1970 to 2002 used a victim empowerment frame (57). This rhetorical technique, like that of pathologizing the offender, treats domestic violence as a universal single instantiation that does not need to be addressed publicly, because the victim in a popular representation such as a film or a TV show overcame her or his situation and is now a survivor. This is problematic partially because entertainment media prefer to portray happy endings to domestic violence narratives, which I think can give a false sense of optimism about the feasibility of leaving an abusive relationship, and partially because it places the burden of escape on the victim’s shoulders. Social factors such as economic privilege, education, family and community support, and the pressure to fit the mold of a “good parent” in a “good family” are largely ignored in such narratives.

In *The Representation of Domestic Violence in Popular English-Language Cinema*, Wheeler also discusses the “victim empowerment frame” and how it provides yet another out for social accountability (159). Angela Bassett, the actress who portrayed Tina Turner in *Tina: What’s Love Got to Do with It?* stated, “There are a lot of people in relationships now like the one she was in, but she was fortunate enough to be able to get out of it and go on to have a vital, creative life. It didn’t beat her down. It’s possible, for those who are still in it, to get out if

they *choose* [emphasis mine]” (166). While respect for individual drive is paramount in American culture, this statement places the responsibility for coming up with a solution squarely on the survivor’s or victim’s shoulders. Survivors who *choose* to do so can escape situations of domestic violence; the ones who stay or who are killed are in that situation of their own making—they did not *choose* to get out. Echoing outdated reasoning that women who stay in abusive relationships are masochists who enjoy the violence, this type of frame is dangerous in that it does not even acknowledge the myriad reasons someone may not be able to *choose* to leave an abusive relationship—economic, familial, psychological, etc. And yet this frame is hugely significant in media coverage of domestic violence incidents. Competitiveness is so ingrained within the American psyche that even personal empowerment narratives become cultural legitimations of domestic violence; if Tina Turner could escape an abusive relationship, all it takes is guts, grit, and determination (Wheeler 166). Anyone in an abusive relationship should be able to rise above. This extreme oversimplification effectively silences the many realities of domestic abuse, including economic dependence (of which there are *many* root causes), incapacitating fear, unsupportive communities and lack of law enforcement or governmental support or structure, and disbelief of the self-disclosure of abuse survivors.

An example of this seemingly inexplicable bond between an abuser and a victim can be found in another Salt Lake Tribune article, this one written by Andrew Maddocks and dated June 18, 2009. In it, a mother describes her

daughter's struggle with an abusive relationship. The article recounts, "White would leave Sebastian, and tell Andersen that she never wanted to see him again. The family asked him to stay away from White numerous times, but Andersen said her daughter would always go back" (1). This article is a classic example of the victim empowerment frame. It implies that White had the means and the nerve to leave an abusive relationship, but never permanently—thus the responsibility for finding a solution to her own, private problem was with her. This ignores the possibilities that White's community could have stretched out a hand and created a possibility of a permanent change; the article states, "Andersen thinks Sebastian was holding something else over her—perhaps a threat to hurt family members—that kept her coming back. Her daughter never told her" (1). Nothing more of this is discussed; the frame of victim empowerment precludes the possibility that a caring family member could have created a safe environment for the truth to come out, and the article precludes questioning of why that did not occur.

#### Troubled Childhood Narrative and Addiction Narrative

Two closely intertwined themes are the troubled childhood and the addiction narratives. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, one of the abusive characters is an alcoholic who has apprenticed his 16-year-old son in rape and murder. These themes present a problem: on the one hand, they perpetuate the idea that people can blame their decisions and abusive actions on a substance or a history; on the other hand, elements in the environment of the abuser during

childhood have been shown to play a role, and there is a high level of coincidence between domestic abuse and alcohol or drug abuse, both on the part of the abuser and the victim. However, a relatively small percentage of abused children grow up to be abusers; for instance, a longitudinal study of sexually abused children in the United Kingdom showed that only about 12% actually grew up to be sexually abusive (Salter 473). It is by no means overdetermined that the use of alcohol or drugs, or an abusive childhood, are excuses for the perpetuation of domestic abuse.

#### Mythologizing Domestic Violence and Exclusion by Definition

Other cultural legitimation techniques that I would like to address are mythologizing domestic violence and excluding by definition. If domestic violence fits into our cultural myths and scripts, it is easy to accept and dismiss the problem. This is woven throughout my argument; I contend that it *does* fit into these myths, which include the myths of competition, domination, and power as glorious struggles of which masculine (though not necessarily male) subjects are the most likely and most natural winners. Also scattered throughout my thesis are issues of exclusion by definition. When people (often experts occupying positions of power or authority) cast the problem by saying, "Sexual assault and partner violence continue to be widespread problems that significantly undermine women's health and well-being," it excludes by definition men and children from the problem (Macy 4). While I do not deny that the majority of adult-to-adult domestic violence is directed towards women by men, this assumption of male-

female normativity is not productive because it contains the issue within a set of already marginalized people. Rather than inclusively saying, “Domestic violence significantly undermines the health of *communities*,” the problem is framed by exclusion.

Although I have been unable to locate much published literature supporting this claim, I have noticed a trend in popular TV shows and in the culture at large of the fetishization of intimate partner jealousy, and sometimes violence. For instance, in the TV show *Bones*, some of the most “romantic” (or at least sexually tense) scenes are when Booth is jealous of a rival male over brilliant and beautiful forensic anthropologist Brennan, whether that rival be some kind of “evil adversary” like a serial killer (Epps) or a lover (Agent Sullivan). Handsome FBI agent Booth resolves his jealousy by asserting *his* influence or control over Brennan, by doing things like beating up or killing the serial killer or constantly interrupting Brennan’s vacation with Agent Sullivan. While Brennan verbally and physically contests and objects to being treated as a helpless, passive object, possessiveness is fetishized by the visual rhetoric at play in the scenes (Polletta 1503). Similarly, the popular book series *Twilight* features Bella, a teenaged heroine who habitually falls into the arms of her jealous, supernatural heartthrob, the vampire Edward. The rhetorical underpinnings are telling young girls that to have a man be jealous and possessive is a positive sign in a relationship, indicative of love and adoration. The series fails to address that extreme jealousy is a sign of a potentially abusive and unhealthy relationship, instead fetishizing it as a “romantic” construction.

All of these techniques allow concerned members of society to casually dismiss the problem of domestic violence without examining the underlying social structures and cultural environments that cultivate violence. The techniques are accomplished through various means: Wheeler and Berns both critique framing and Huckin demystifies textual silences, all in relation to ideologically underpinned deeper structures. Throughout this project, I will explore the ways that these techniques are supported through mainstream, popular film.

### Theoretical Grounding and Assumptions

My work draws heavily from feminist and postmodern theories of power, culture, and discourse.

Feminist theory as applied to battering emphasizes the role of violence in maintaining control over a female intimate partner. This 'violence' includes 'physical violence, emotional abuse, sexual violence, social isolation, and withholding of financial resources' to 'undermine a woman's autonomy and limit her power in the relationship' (Chalk & King, 1998, p. 37)" (Brewster 30).

Foucault's theories of power are crucial to my work, particularly his ideas about power and discourse. Many others use the idea that power circulates throughout discourse rather than simply being exercised from the top of a structure downwards, and I agree. In response to the question of "how does power work," Foucault explains:

Power relations, relationships of communication, objective capacities should not therefore be confused. This is not to say that there is a question of three separate domains. Nor that there is, on the one hand, the field of things, of perfected technique, work, and the transformation of the real, and, on the other, that of signs, communication, reciprocity, and the production of meaning; finally that of the domination of the means of constraint, of inequality, and the action of men upon other men. It is a

question of three types of relationships that in fact always overlap one another, support one another reciprocally, and use each other mutually as means to an end. (337–38)

This is important to my argument. I am not attempting to “blame” popular culture and mainstream films for the occurrence of violence in society; I contend that film and other cultural artifacts fall under the realm of communication, one of Foucault’s overlapping three realms, and that the occurrences of violence in the communicative realm have influence on the others, which influence is of material consequence in interpersonal relationships and in the power exercised over subjects by state structures.

Other influences are sociological and legal theories, including Evan Stark’s theory of coercive control, and social learning theory, which holds that people learn by watching and imitating others (Brewster 27).

### What is Domestic Violence?

The struggle to define domestic violence is an ongoing one. As Nancy Berns discusses in *Framing the Victim*, the term is problematic. “‘Domestic violence’ is criticized for not identifying the roles of the victim and offender.”<sup>2</sup> I think that any term chosen will carry its own set of advantages and issues; for this thesis I will continue to use the term *domestic violence*.

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<sup>2</sup> Berns provides an apt summary of the difficulty in naming the problem. “Similar terms criticized for this obfuscation include ‘domestic dispute,’ ‘family violence,’ ‘conjugal violence,’ ‘spouse abuse,’ ‘partner abuse,’ and ‘marital aggression.’ Other commonly used terms, such as ‘battered women,’ ‘abused women,’ ‘wife abuse,’ and ‘wife beating,’ identify the victim but obscure the offender. Terms like ‘wife abuse’ and ‘spouse abuse’ are criticized for ignoring abuse outside marriage” (Berns 33).

To parse the phrase: *domestic* implies that this occurs in the home. Along with that are connotations of betrayal, control, patriarchy, nuclear families, and implications of the structure that is “supposed” to exist within the home. In “The Myth of the Traditional Family,” Linda Nicholson interrogates the formation of the allegedly traditional family and traces its roots throughout history. She says:

The “traditional” family possesses no more claims to “naturally” or historical universality than do “alternative” families. In addition, what constitutes “traditionally” itself keeps changing. The “traditional” family of the 1950s is not the same as the one of the 1990s. These historical observations lead to the recognition that the distinction between the “traditional” and the “alternative” family functions not descriptively but normatively, legitimizing certain family types over others on the basis of dubious historical assumptions. (78)

This is significant because most abusers cling to notions of a “traditional” normative family which does not, and never really has, existed, in which one person (most commonly male) is the leader and decision-maker of the household, and whose word cannot be questioned or debated. There is a great deal of domestic violence that occurs between unmarried couples, between parents and children (and this type I am purposefully excluding from my research for this thesis), between cohabitating people of the same sex, and many other permutations. In short, the *domestic* in domestic violence can be misleading, seeming to indicate the violence occurring between a married man and woman. As I use the term, I intend *domestic* in its broadest definition, but remain open to the fact that there is no one final definition.

To continue the exploration of the term, *violence* is also a problematic word, which calls to mind physical or sexual violence, the use of physical force in an interpersonal setting, and often forecloses on the other kinds of violence—

emotional, mental, and spiritual—which can be equally injurious as physical violence.

Despite the complications, I use the term *domestic violence* because of its recognizability to the majority of the population and because I want to broaden awareness of domestic violence to include any violence between intimate partners, and to make abundantly clear that emotional, spiritual, and mental abuse are equally traumatic and deep forms of violence.

In sum; I will not be attempting to define once and for all what domestic violence *is*, partly because I believe it is impossible and also because I believe that there is a need for language to evolve. Butler makes a compelling argument in *Excitable Speech* that it is in the gap between recognition and repetition that discursive resistance can occur, thus giving hope of creating new meanings and new ways of thinking and acting on those meaningful signs.

### Approach

My scholarly approach is essentially rhetorical. I believe that human beings have a right to resist or be unthreatened by violence, especially violence enacted within the space of “home,” in the multiple ways that space can be constructed. In the spirit of self-reflexivity, I acknowledge that I ascribe to a social constructionist perspective, which heavily influences my ideas about the pervasiveness and seriousness of discourse. For instance, I believe that while we cannot directly read discourses, we can access them by looking at the texts of the discourse. From this, it follows that cultural legitimization of domestic

violence can be read in culturally oriented texts (contingent upon defining “text” as books, films, music, internet sites, and more). I think that rhetoric legitimating and promoting violence towards marginalized groups is subtly inculcated as culturally acceptable and hegemonic in nature and function. The way out of this hegemony is twofold: first, hegemony must be recognized before it can be resisted, and second, once hegemony is recognized, resistance can and should take many, multidimensional forms and approaches. One such form of resistance, and one which I will study in detail, is to rewrite or write against violence-promoting cultural discourses.

I strive to avoid essentialism of domestic violence survivors. While many people may self-identify as a part of this group, it is certainly not indicative that they all share the same experiences. Much as second-wave feminism constructed “womanhood” as a monolithic signifier and has now been acknowledged to be problematic in regards to class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, the same technique would be damaging to survivors of domestic violence. As Young explains:

Black, Latina, Asian, and indigenous women demonstrated that white feminist theory and rhetoric tended to be ethnocentric in its analysis of gender experience and oppression. Lesbians, furthermore, persistently argued that much of this analysis relied on the experience of heterosexual women. The influence of philosophical deconstruction completed the suspension of the category of “women” begun by this process of political differentiation. (714)

Young’s solution to navigate the gap between an essentialist conceptualization of “womanhood” and the apolitical diaspora resulting from the overindividualization of each woman is the idea of a serial collective. Borrowing from Sartre, she

creates a politically useful feminist serial collective of persons who are passively oriented together around practico-inert objects; from this collective, the persons in question have the option to form a group by banding together on the basis of action. Thus, the serial collective concept of people who have survived or are currently in situations of domestic violence avoids the essentializing trap of defining *beings* while focusing on how the people oriented passively around the issues of domestic violence choose to *act*. It is a feminist performative theory.

Along those lines, I feel that individual stories can be narrated or “written” as a form of empowerment, but that no one story should be labeled as “The Experience” of a domestic violence survivor. Serial collectives of people interested in ending domestic violence allow for avoidance of strategic essentialism or generalizations which would otherwise be necessary to mobilize cultural forces against the cultural rhetorical strategies that prop up and legitimize domestic violence.

### Methodology

I plan to employ multiple methods in this undertaking, namely rhetorical analysis and critical discourse analysis.

### Visual Rhetoric and Visual Discourse Analysis

I will conduct detailed visual rhetorical analyses of three mainstream films that deal with domestic violence in some capacity: *The Color Purple*, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. From these rhetorical

analyses, I will gain a larger picture of the discourse in popular American culture regarding domestic violence.

I recognize that film has only recently begun to be accepted as a legitimate text to serve as the basis of rhetorical and discourse analysis, but I think it is an important area of study. It is significant that film is a heavily circulated medium; because my aim is to better understand the cultural legitimation of domestic violence, it is important to my selection that the texts examined be widely viewed by a broad cultural audience within American popular discourse.

To properly tackle this, I first need to address the difficulties that rhetorically analyzing film presents; there is neither a widely acknowledged methodology to address visual rhetoric and visual discourse analysis, nor a theory emphasizing the importance of visual images. I propose that my line of inquiry into cultural legitimations of domestic violence make its first stop at this dilemma and address three questions. Where do visual images fit into discourse? What is a text? And how can we go about analyzing that which is not written using critical discourse analysis (CDA)?

It seems that the most prominent question about the validity of analyzing visual images attempts to define what counts as discourse. There is a great deal of debate and disagreement over the exact parameters of discourse. While many scholars offer definitions of discourse (including Foucault, van Dijk, Meyer, Ferrari, Reisigl and Wodak, and Jager and Maier), I am most drawn to Teun van

Dijk's handling of the subject. While tacitly refusing to define discourse, van Dijk characterizes discourse as

...a multidimensional social phenomenon. It is at the same time a linguistic...object..., an action..., a form of social interaction..., a social practice..., a mental representation..., an interactional or communicative event or activity..., a cultural product..., or even an economic commodity that is being sold and bought. (van Dijk 67)

Van Dijk's characterization leaves very little outside the realm of discourse, and I am inclined to agree with his anti-definition. I think it is also evident from van Dijk's definition that discourse is pluralistic and contextual, and cannot exist outside of a context; it is embedded within and bricolaged together with reality. Jager and Maier assert, "Discourse is a material reality of its own...discourse theory deals with material realities, not 'mere' ideas" (37). Drawing primarily from these three authors, I define discourse as a way of seeing and interacting with the world on multiple cognitive levels and under multiple cultural schema; discourse is materially expressed in the words that we say and think and write, in the texts we consume and produce, and the physical realities of our dealings with the world and its inhabitants.

Because discourse and text are so inextricably linked, the next question with which to tangle is, "What constitutes a text?" In my definition above, I mention "texts we consume and produce." A text is not limited to written words on a page or a transcript of a conversation, although both of those are examples of texts. A text, as I define it, is a piece of discourse that has been (often arbitrarily) given boundaries by a user of discourse. This includes not only written works, but spoken works, physical political demonstrations, photographs, music

performances, films, and dances. In the United States, we are increasingly adopting a heavily visual culture. One needs only glance at a newspaper or visit a news website to observe this. For instance, on NPR's home page, I count no fewer than 24 pictures and drawings, excluding logos and advertisements (Appendix 2). As the NPR home page aptly demonstrates, visual images help us to organize the vast quantities of information with which we are presented; they can be a sense-making tool and a thought-provoking medium. Technology has brought visual reproduction even further within the grasp of the average citizen; television, computers, cameras and digital editing programs, blogs, and websites completely dedicated to sharing one's photos are clear traces of that. Given the onslaught of visual images alongside our written texts, how can a discourse analyst say that images are not carrying messages, are not acting persuasively, are not just as ambivalent and polysemic as our words? The analyst cannot in good conscience bar images from modern discourse.

Having accepted definitions of discourse and text that include visual aspects, the next question is how to go about analyzing visual images using CDA. Visual images are necessarily different from written texts, and as such, we cannot use CDA as a wholesale approach; we must act as bricoleurs and pull together an approach that combines aesthetic, critical, and film theory, among others. While this approach may strike some scholars as too eclectic to effectively analyze discourse, I believe that because of our modern participation in so many discourse communities and use of information from so many different and conflicting sources, using a pastiche method is only sensible. The method

should suit the reality; reality is certainly not a single, elegant composition, but a collage of many varied texts working in or out of harmony at any given moment, and always in flux. As Huckin demonstrates in “Critical Discourse Analysis,” CDA is immensely useful for negotiating images in discourse because of its ethical underpinnings. When images have such ubiquity and power of persuasion and manipulation, it is imperative that CDA scholars contribute by fixing a critical gaze on how society uses them. Rhetorical theory is highly useful in analyzing visual discourse. For instance, a repeatedly shown image in a film can be understood as a metaphor for some constancy. Alternately, if an image in a film changes over time in correlation to something else, it can be understood as a metaphor for change. The film cannot use words to tell the viewer, “This is a metaphor for change,” but the visual image becomes significant and persuasive. Another thing to consider is that we do not necessarily process visual images in a linear-rational fashion; when one considers a photograph, different logics are at play, and the composition, the framing, the lighting, and the spatial relationships of the image become very important.

Visual rhetoric, however, is by no means limited to critical discourse analysis; it is making its way into spectacular interdisciplinarity, bridging gaps between many fields. Finnegan and Kang call our attention to the importance of visual images in public discourse:

Our argument is this: if the fullness of that capacity were embraced, if we shifted perspective and situated public sphere theory in a less iconoclastic, and more iconophilic way, we might be in a better position to rethink (and perhaps retheorize) our understanding of how images and vision operate in the public sphere. (397)

This shift to a visual culture is shared by W.J.T. Mitchell, among others. The scholarly work on visual rhetoric covers a wide disciplinary range—communication, English, education, art, film studies, architecture, and management studies to name a few. Echoing this multivocal conversation, Mitchell states that

This [visual] turn runs throughout critical history, philosophy, and political discourses of identity formation, sexuality, otherness, fantasy, the unconscious; it focuses on the cultural construction of visual experience in everyday life as well as in media, representations, and visual arts. It is a project that requires conversations among art historians, film scholars, optical technologists and theorists, phenomenologists, psychoanalysts, and anthropologists. Visual culture is, in short, an “interdiscipline,” a site of convergence and conversation across disciplinary lines. (540)

This observation is not only significant in that it discusses the inherent interdisciplinarity of visual rhetoric, but also assumes a visual culture which many scholars assume has risen significantly in recent years given the prevalence of electronic and mass media availability of images.

Going even further into the territory of visuality, we encounter metaphor.

Kennedy and Kennedy observe:

Many modern scholars view metaphor as the central trope of language, both in everyday, prosaic contexts as well as in literature and art. Visual art, also, is metaphoric representation, not merely literal representation, with a language of its own comprised of literal and figurative elements. Delineating the structure of visual metaphor is a task that is being undertaken in many disciplines. (149)

Kennedy and Kennedy do the important work of connecting metaphor with visual, a connection that is very important to my argument. Particularly in this section, I will focus primarily on what communication and rhetoric scholars have

contributed to visual rhetorical theory and practice, and attempt to make my own contribution to the same, particularly regarding evolving visual metaphor.

Rhetorical critics and communication studies scholars closely attend to issues of power as it produces and is produced by visual rhetoric. While visual criticism is a relative newcomer to rhetoric, it has been taken up with gusto. Visual criticism contends that nontextual discourse has rhetorical significance of its own right and needs to be evaluated as a powerful discourse. This form of criticism also insists that visuals and images can serve as self-standing rhetoric or as captions to other images or texts. Prominent among visual rhetoric scholars are Lora Sendechal Carney and Sonja Foss, who study monuments and memorials as rhetoric; Kevin DeLuca, who studies visual events related to environmental justice and political issues, notably the public screen (in conjunction with Jennifer Peeples); and Dana Cloud and Janis Edwards and Carol Winkler, who have written important pieces dealing with visual ideographs.

In “A Rhetorical Schema for the Evaluation of Visual Imagery,” Sonja Foss has proposed a framework for analyzing visual images; subsequently, Peterson and Mullen and Fisher have proposed alternative frameworks based upon Foss’s original schema. However, this does not fully address visual metaphors as deployed in popular films; the focus is mainly on still images or exhibits. In this thesis, I hope to participate in the conversations examining the visual rhetoric of film in the hopes of furthering our understanding of how rhetorical representations of domestic violence play out through other types of mainstream media.

Scholars have deeply explored icons, iconography, iconoclasm, and iconophobia—studying the images that are somehow important, culturally constitutive, widely recognized, and identified (Finnegan and Kang, Hariman and Lucaites). In similar spirit, work on visual ideography has come from Dana Cloud, as well as from Edwards and Winkler. I have written an essay during my coursework using a text that is not very iconic or ideographic. Working from a series of fragments from the film *The Color Purple*—fragments which all contain a mailbox on a rural delivery route in Georgia, I combined critical techniques of visual and metaphor criticism to address questions of power and silence in the film.

In making the case for visual rhetoric as opposed to textual rhetoric, Messaris aptly observes, “Visual rhetoric is a moving target, and, in an age of rapidly changing digital media, that target’s movements are getting faster” (212). He also conceives that the goal of visual rhetorical criticism is “not some essential property of images, but rather how the creators and viewers of images make sense of them” (212). This idea is shared by many scholars of visual rhetoric; I also eschew authorial intention, focusing instead on what meaning the audience can find in or bring to the visual metaphors within a text. Also discussing the cultural shift from words to images, Cyphert notes, “the heightened visuality of contemporary public address is more than merely the illustration of verbal content and instead represents a fundamental shift in rhetorical culture” (170). As visual culture becomes increasingly predominant, rhetorical critics have a responsibility to become fluent and literate in visual

rhetoric as well as textual rhetoric. Many important political and social arguments are made today using either visual rhetoric or a combination of visual and textual rhetoric, and to ignore one component would be a gross oversight.

### Justification of Text Selection

There exist a wealth of films created that somehow involve domestic violence. There are a few reasons I have selected *The Color Purple*, *Sleeping with the Enemy*, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. First, because I am embedded within and most familiar with Western-American discourse, I chose to look at films either produced in the United States or popular in the United States. *The Color Purple* is one of the first major films made in the United States to deal with domestic violence; *Sleeping with the Enemy*, following 6 years after *The Color Purple*, remains a well-known film, partly because of starring actress Julia Roberts; *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, while of Swedish and Danish origin, has grossed over \$10 million<sup>3</sup> in the United States as of September 12, 2010 (Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1132620/>). Anecdotally, enough people have mentioned it to me in passing conversation that I felt it merited a viewing for this project. Second, I wanted to have a selection of texts that are widely disseminated and are not documentaries. I feel that the fictional or narrative aspect of these films is an important contributing factor to their value as culturally legitimating texts; it is partly through their fictionality that these films contribute to our cultural myths. And finally, each film must have domestic violence as a primary theme or issue dealt with within the storyline.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* has grossed \$10,038,092 in the US since its release in 2009.

### A Timeline of Domestic Violence Awareness in the U.S.

Domestic violence has existed in many forms for a very long time. Phrases such as the “rule of thumb,” which permitted a man to beat his wife with a stick, provided it was no bigger around than his thumb, attest to our cultural heritage of family violence. “While legal records indicate that courts attended to the problems of many abused wives, wife abuse as a social problem did not receive national attention until the mid-1970s” (Straus and Gelles 10). Extensive public surveys conducted since 1975 by researchers such as Straus and Gelles have reported that a large, though shifting, portion of U.S. residents believe that a certain level of family violence is good and/or necessary. Even child abuse was legal in some states until 1968, when the last of the 50 states passed mandatory reporting laws.<sup>4</sup>

Haven House, a domestic violence emergency shelter in California, is purported to be one of the first of its kind in terms of providing support for victims of domestic violence. It opened its doors in 1964.

In 1994, the Violence Against Women Act was passed by the United States Congress and signed into law by President Clinton; this controversial legislation has been the subject of many critiques, both rhetorical and legal, and seems to act more as a bandage than a genuine attempt for change of any type.

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<sup>4</sup> *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family* by Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz, gives a brief account of the history of family violence on page 7.

As of September 2007<sup>5</sup> there were 1,949 identified domestic violence programs operating in the United States. While awareness of domestic violence as a social issue is growing, it is very often overshadowed by other concerns—the economy, wars in the Middle East, immigration debates, drug wars spilling into the neighborhoods of the U.S.—and many other topics. Now, however, connections are being forged between some of the most pressing issues facing our society, and domestic violence is being represented as an oft-unaddressed link in the chains of economy, human rights, public health, and our legal system. As awareness rises, we can hope that the incidence rates of domestic violence will decrease.

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<sup>5</sup> From the publication *Domestic Violence Counts:07*, a census of domestic violence shelters and services across the United States.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE COLOR PURPLE

*The Color Purple*, set in the early to mid-1900s and released in 1985, was one of the first feature films including the topic of domestic violence as a main theme. This is particularly significant because it sets forth a standard of normalizing domestic violence in the lives of its characters. Mister, in giving relationship advice to his newly married son Harpo, says,

How you 'spect her to mind? Wives is like children. You have to let them know who has the upper hand. There's nothin' can do it better than a good sound beatin'. Sophia thinks too much of herself. Needs to be taken down a peg or two. (00:41:58–00:42:27)

When Harpo asks Celie the same question—“What I’m gonna do about Sophia?”— Celie gives him the same answer, “Beat her.” (00:42:59–00:43:26). Afterwards, Sophia confronts Celie about it. The audience learns that Sophia had to fend off her father, her uncles, and her brothers, and she refuses to be beaten in her own house. But even as the audience is disgusted by the behavior occurring onscreen, the characters take a long, long time to question the naturalness of the situation. This places the audience in a rhetorical double bind. Do we accept the violence onscreen in order to empathize with the characters, or

do we reject the implied naturalness of the violence and distance ourselves from the film?

To conduct this analysis, I will include transcriptions of spoken texts as well as visual texts from the film. In the introductory section, I addressed some of the concerns over using images as texts. However, it is not only by my definition that we can include visual images as texts. In “What is a Text?” Titchner states that “[we can]...define a text as a ‘communicative event’ that must satisfy several conditions, namely the seven text criteria that we consider in detail below. According to this definition, a traffic sign, a newspaper article, an argument, and a novel are all texts that correspond to the differing rules of particular genres or text types” (21). The seven criteria to which Titchner refers are cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality. To give a representative example of these criteria, I will consider *The Color Purple* (rather than all three films) to determine if a film can be considered a text. The cohesion of the film is much like the cohesion of a written text; metaphors, recurring actions and film sequences, and conjunctions all exist within a film, sometimes represented visually, sometimes represented orally through lines delivered by actors, and sometimes achieved through the film editing process. For instance, the recurring representation of the Johnsons’s mailbox serves as an evolving visual metaphor for the state of Celie and Mister’s marriage.

The next principle is that of coherence. According to Titchner, “every text relates both synchronically and diachronically to other texts, and this is the only

way it achieves meaning” (23). *The Color Purple* creates meaning through this process; internally, the storyline is knit together by referring to itself (as in the mailbox example). The film is also coherent in its relation to external events: the realities of domestic violence, the history of racism in the United States, and the ongoing struggles of poverty.

Intentionality and acceptability are fairly easy to deal with; clearly, a finished and widely disseminated studio film is an intentional production; it was no accident. With that in mind, we can say that Spielberg produced the film intentionally. Acceptability, what Titchner defines as “the mirror of intentionality,” refers to how the text is received (23). *The Color Purple* has been viewed by millions of people, and has been the topic of reviews in newspapers, conversations, and scholarly study. All of this indicates that the text was found acceptable according to the conventions of the genre of popular film.

Informativity is more difficult to gauge. Since the film was based on a book, some of the information in the film is necessarily repetitious. However, rendering the story visually with a film brings to bear new information. The audio and visual elements of the film add a dimension previously unknown, and therefore make the text informative on at least one level. I therefore contend that the modification from novel to screenplay adds new information, and argue that the film is a significant milestone in publicly addressing the struggles of survivors of domestic violence.

Situationality and intertextuality are both fairly evident in *The Color Purple*. Titchner states, “Situationality means that the talk-constellation and speech

situation play an important role in text production” (23). Since a film is created in a nexus of speech situations (discussions between director, producer, actors, technical crews, artistic crews, etc.), it is easy to see why that element of textuality is acceptable. Intertextuality is similarly evident. As a film, *The Color Purple* is related to other films, to the novel by Alice Walker from which it was adapted, and also to movements of feminism and antidomestic violence. In short, the film is intertextual both in form and content.

Now that I have established *The Color Purple* as a text, I will move on to discussing the cultural legitimation techniques used in this film. It hints at a troubled childhood narrative to explain why Mister is abusive to Celie, and uses a twist on pathologizing the offender to make the violence more palatable, but the main technique employed here is the victim empowerment frame. Despite the fact that Celie is married off to Mister ostensibly without her consent, it becomes Celie’s responsibility to remove herself from the situation. After all, expecting Mister to change his behavior would be ludicrous.

### The Troubled Childhood Narrative

One particularly easy and very common cultural legitimation technique is a troubled childhood narrative. Blaming a difficult childhood, or one that does not live up to expected norms, is a simplistic way to excuse unacceptable behavior in adult life, such as domestic violence. This technique often shows up hand in hand with the addiction narrative, by which an abuser is ‘excused’ because he or she using alcohol or drugs during the abusive episode.

In the audience's first encounter with Mister's father (Figure 1), we see a subdued but clear power struggle occurring between a grown man trying to assert himself over his aging father.

Old Mister: (walking through the field up to the Johnson's front porch, yelling) Hey boy! Hey boy! Ain't nobody here to greet your pa! Hmmm. (muttering) Nobody in the fields, that's for sure.

Mister: (walks out the front door onto the porch, circles father, sits down on porch swing)

Old Mister: (puts foot on swing between Mister's legs, and leans in close) (see Figure 2) Just couldn't rest 'til you got her in your house, could ya? (kicks swing)

Celie: Cool drink? Take you hat?

Old Mister: (sits down in rocking chair) What is it with this Shug Avery? She black as tar, nappy headed, got legs like baseball bats, her own daddy won't even have nothing to do with her...

Celie (voiceover): Old Mister talkin' trash about Shug. Folks don't like nobody being too proud or too free. (spits in glass of water)

Old Mister: ...why, she ain't nothin' but a juke joint Jezebel. Why, she ain't even clean. And I hear she's got that nasty women's disease.

Mister: You ain't got it in you to understand. I love Shug Avery. Always have, always will. Should have married her when I had a chance.

Old Mister: Yeah. An' throwed your life away. And a right smart o' my money with it. Plus, I hear all her children's got different daddies. All too trifling' and confused.

Mister: All Shug Avery's children got the same daddy, I can vouch for that.

Old Mister: (interrupting) You can vouch for nothin'! Shug Avery done set the population of Hartwell County a new high. You just one of the rusters, boy. (pauses) Celie, you has my sympathy. Ain't many women's louty husbands ho' to lay up in they house.

Mister: Celie, hand Paw his hat. (57:06–1:00:01)

Critics have argued that Old Mister's placing his foot between Mister's legs and kicking the swing back is symbolic of castration. "The film emphasizes the near-castrating power of Mister's father by its staging of the scene from the novel: the father slams his foot onto a bench between the spread legs of his seated son" (Dole 13). Indeed, Dole's argument centers on the fact that Spielberg had to make several notable adaptations from Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple* in

order to make it amicable to mainstream audiences, including softening up Mister's character. Says Dole, "The film's vilification of Mister's father thus removes part of Mister's responsibility for his mistreatment of his wife" (13). This cultural legitimation through a troubled childhood narrative is strengthened by the scene in which Celie leaves Mister.

Shug: Celie is coming with us.

Mister: Say what?

Shug: Celie is comin' to Memphis with us.

Mister: Over my dead body.

Shug: You satisfied, that's what you want?

Mister: *stutters* W-w-what NOW what's wrong with you?

Celie: *quietly, looking at her plate* You a low-down dirty dog, that's what's wrong. It's time for me to get away from you, and into creation. And your dead body be just the welcome mat I need.

Old Mister: You can't talk to my boy that way.

Celie: (bitterly sarcastic) Your "boy." Seem like if he hand't been your boy he might have made somebody a halfway decent man.

Mister: *chuckles nervously*. S-say what? (1:58:55–1:59:31)

These hints at Old Mister's poor skills as a father serve to excuse Mister's abusive behavior as a husband. In the scene described above, Celie's interpellation of Old Mister rhetorically opens up the topic of parenting and the resultant person for question. She then goes on to answer the question herself (see Appendix A for full transcription of the scene).

Not only does Celie accuse Mister of being a "low-down dirty dog," but she questions Old Mister's work at raising his son. In one single scene she upsets the known order for two generations of men, and potentially a third (Harpo, who has already lost Sophia because of his violence towards her). However, it goes no further than this. There is no discussion of how to raise future generations of children, no suggestion that smacking someone in the face may not be the best

way to communicate complex emotions like frustration, inadequacy, fear, anger, or impatience. *The Color Purple* is content to mention an unsatisfactory upbringing, then brush past it as though this is a sufficient explanation of family violence.

Old Mister finally acknowledges that he may have had some impact on the way his son's life has turned out to this point. After Celie leaves Mister, his house, his farm, and seemingly his whole life fall to shambles. Old Mister comes to visit one day and finds Mister passed out on the floor, a bottle of moonshine clutched in his hand. (A hint, though not much of one, at the addiction narrative cultural legitimization technique.)

Old Mister: I hear you been spendin' more time at Harpo's and less in the fields. Well, I guess I just raised you wrong.

Mister: How's that, Paw?

Old Mister: How's that? Fields overgrown, animals ain't tended to, this house is a wreck, and what you doin' bout it? Nothin. Just sittin' here drinkin', ruinin' your life.

Mister: My life already ruined. This house is dead. They ain't no Shug, ain't no children, ain't no laughter, ain't no life, just me.

Old Mister: I ain't heard such nonsense in all my life. Now listen to me. I know just what you need. You needs you a woman. A nice, little, young girl, clean up the house, iron your shirts...

Mister: Bye, Paw. (picks up Old Mister's hat and cane)

Old Mister: ...clean up this kitchen...

Mister: Goodbye, Paw. (gently pushes Old Mister out the door)

Old Mister: Now you listen what I tell you...

Mister: Goodbye, Paw, bye, goodbye.

Old Mister: ...young girl. You need your daddy's advice, now.

Mister's rejection of his father's advice is a further flourish on the troubled childhood narrative, one supported by the rest of the film. By rejecting the values learned in his childhood home, Mister can go on to redeem himself by anonymously facilitating the reunion of Celie, Nettie, and Celie's children Adam

and Olivia (see Figure 3). His redemption is the lynchpin in the troubled childhood narrative used as a cultural legitimation technique; since he has made good on a long overdue debt, he can be forgiven.

I hold that forgiveness is an admirable goal and often is crucial to healing processes. While I do not encourage holding grudges eternally, I do not support the use of the troubled childhood narrative in *The Color Purple* that overshadows the years of pain caused by a long, abusive marriage. Perhaps it is not really too little, too late, but in comparison it certainly seems trifling. However, when lit with a Southern late-afternoon sun, set in a field of purple flowers (see Figure 3), and backed by a sentimental soundtrack, Hollywood delivers an acceptable token of apology. Yet again, what is missing is serious discussion of reparation or a way forward to raise future generations without domestic violence. While Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple* addresses these issues, they have been edited out for Hollywood (Dole 14).

In *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family*, Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz trace the effects of witnessing older generations' family violence.

Men who had seen parents physically attack each other were almost three times more likely to have hit their own wives during the year of the study. In fact, about one out of three had done so (35 per cent) compared with one out of ten (10.7 per cent) of the sons of non-violent parents. We found roughly the same statistics for women. Women whose parents were violent had a much higher rate of hitting their own husbands (26.7 per cent) as compared to the daughters of non-violent parents (8.9 per cent). (100)

The juxtaposition of the troubled childhood narrative in *The Color Purple* with the statistics from Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz's study is startling. According to the study, a household where violent parents are the norm is dramatically more likely

to produce violent children. However, using statistics such as these as an excuse is a weak gesture. Growing up in a violent home is not an automatic sentence to a lifetime of abusive, destructive relationships. There must be other factors that figure into whether an adult behaves violently towards intimate partners, and the technique of the troubled childhood narrative forecloses on the possibility of investigating the social implications involved. While this narrative is used to rhetorically overdetermine the chances of growing up to be an abuser, it elides the more complex realities of the majority of children who become adults and choose differently for their own lives.

#### Pathologizing the Family/Abuser

Pathologizing the abuser involves rhetorically sealing off the problem of domestic violence into a single body, effectively isolating it from the rest of society and giving an easy out to avoid careful consideration of other cultural factors that may be contributing to the violence. Along these lines, *The Color Purple* substitutes an entire family for a single offender, but rhetorically performs the same maneuver. By isolating the problem of domestic violence to a poor, rural, minority<sup>6</sup> family, it is isolated from society at large. In Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz's study for *Behind Closed Doors*, they found that "when social factors

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<sup>6</sup> From *Behind Closed Doors*: "Our survey of American families did support the claims made in official statistics that black men had the highest rates of wife abuse. Black males could be using acts of violence on their wives to compensate for resources such as income or prestige from which they are culturally deprived. Or, black male violence may be a reflection of the macho image of man which condones and encourages acts of physical and sexual aggression" (134-5). The results here are from Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz' study of 2,143 families where the parents were married. As with any survey of this magnitude, there are issues with the findings. Another thing that the authors of the study bring up is that the official statistics are likely to be skewed based upon widespread cultural assumptions about deviance and deviant individuals.

were considered, most people looked on family violence as a lower class problem” (123). *The Color Purple*, then, uses this synecdoche to comfort the audience and allow us to deny our own culpability in a society that systematically denies its responsibilities to the least fortunate and least powerful citizens.

The only nonminority couple showed in the film are the mayor and Miss Millie, his wife. Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz also observe:

Despite the fact that families from all social classes are violent, researchers and the public alike have recognized that violence may be more common in the homes of people with little education, low incomes, and among those who are either unemployed or hold menial, unskilled jobs. (145)

Playing upon this perception, *The Color Purple* substantiates and legitimates the cultural myth that domestic violence is a class problem. As with any problem designated to a particular socioeconomic class, domestic violence is dismissed by other classes as ‘not our problem’ and hence unworthy of sustained and serious attention.

#### Cursing and the Victim Empowerment Frame

*The Color Purple* is perhaps more honest than other Hollywood films in showing how crucial female support-networks are for breaking through the cycle of domestic violence. It is through Celie’s loving, reconstitutive discourse with her sister Nettie, her friend Shug, and her ex-daughter-in-law Sophia that Celie is able to stand up to Mister, reclaim her voice, and leave him. In this respect, it does not fit into the mold that many other films do, where the burden of the relationship is entirely on the victim’s shoulders.

One of the complexities of *The Color Purple* is the contradiction in Celie's life. On one hand, she is isolated geographically and discursively from her sister Nettie, who for many years was the only person in the world who cared about Celie. Mister had been hiding Nettie's letters from Celie, attempting to silence the conversation between the sisters across space and time. On the other hand, she does not live an isolated life. She has friends and family—albeit not a 'happy' one—and is part of the fabric of her rural town's existence.

Celie deals with the victim empowerment frame in a singularly interesting rhetorical manner—by using a curse. In one particular short scene near the end of the film, the existing power relations between Celie and Mister are completely upended. This scene occurs when Celie announces that she is going to Tennessee with Shug and will be leaving Mister (1:58:07–2:06:39). The entire family and their guests are sitting around the dining room table, having a lavish dinner—roast chicken, cranberry sauce, black eyed peas, potatoes. Towards the end of the meal, Shug leans over and quietly tells Mister, "It's time for us to go...Celie is coming with us." The argument that ensues is rotten with performative, violent speech from all sides, seeming to culminate when Celie seizes a carving knife from the remains of the chicken and presses it into Mister's throat, saying, "I curse you! Until you do right by me, everything you even think about is gonna crumble" (2:04:21–2:04:29). Shug manages to get Celie outside and into the waiting car, but not before Celie has a chance to reiterate her curse at the door: "Until you do right by me, everything you even *think* about gonna fail" (2:04:56–2:05:03). Celie is climbing into the rumble seat of Shug and Grady's

car, and Mister comes out of the house, screaming denigrations at her—“I shoulda locked you up and just let you out to work!” Calmly, icily, Celie says, “The jail you planned for me is the one you gonna rot in.” Suddenly, Mister comes running down the house steps towards her, fist raised. Celie stretches out her arm—thumb, index, and middle finger pointing—towards Mister, who freezes (see Figure 4). **Error!**

And again she curses, “Everything you done to me, already done to you” (2:05:30–2:05:40). And for the first time in their relationship, Mister is unable to physically strike Celie. He lowers his fist, staring transfixed at her outstretched hand.

From this point onwards, Celie is a free woman, and we watch Mister’s life crumble. Celie goes on to inherit a house and a shop, which she manages successfully, and to make many close friends. On the other hand, Mister’s family abandons him, his home and farm fall into disarray, and he lives in regret and loneliness. The convenience of this is certainly because in Hollywood endings are as easy to control as editing a script. However, there are practical applications and new ways to theorize the rhetoric of domestic abuse that we can glean from this mediated representation. Disregarding for a moment that this can still be considered part of a victim empowerment frame, I will focus on the questions of how those short, repeated sentences work to undermine the carefully reinforced power structure built upon Mister’s masculinity and enacted through his verbal and physical abuse. How does a curse perform subversively

and in the performing exert real power? And how can we use this theory to better understand and dismantle the hegemonic rhetoric of domestic abuse?

Butler's discussion of Althusserian interpellation in performative speech offers an interesting first look at this. According to Althusser, the speech act hails and interpellates a subject, constituting the subject by the speech act. Formerly, in Mister's relationship with Celie, he was the person performing the speech acts and interpellating and constituting her subjectivity, a discursive relationship [ideology] that she implicitly accepted by acknowledging the hail. Celie's curse interpellates Mister and at once constitutes him as a subject who is capable of receiving a curse. The speech act constructs Mister in a new power structure, one in which he is not immune to violence. This speech act, by virtue of its performativity, reverses the discursive [power] relationship between Mister and Celie. For the first time, she is hailing him—the illocutionary strength of her interpellating act seems to startle him into acknowledging that he has been hailed. In Butler's words, "The act of recognition becomes an act of constitution; the address animates the subject into existence" (25). In other words, Celie's performative utterance has allowed her to, for the first time, interpellate Mister into a subject position which is part and parcel of an ideology which does *not* include masculine power over females and which resists the assumption that wives are subject to the abuse of their husbands.

In the scene described above, Celie repeats various iterations of her curse. After the fourth time she speaks, Mister freezes in his place, unable to act further. This speaks to the ritual elements of the curse. In reciting a spell or

placing a curse on a person, repetition is important. Celie is citing ancient traditions, powerful in their very mystique, and each repetition adds to the historicity of force in the performance. However, it is important to note that ritual meaning is not fixed, but mutable and open to resignification. Celie effectively reverses the 'curse' that she has lived under for so many years (being African-American, a woman, poor) by performing the curse that she places on Mister.

Butler tells us that "in having a speech act silenced, one cannot effectively use the performative" (86). Throughout the entire film, Celie is unable to effectively use the performative to make her case, much less to make it a compelling one. In the moment, however, when she stands in the rumble seat and curses Mister, her contingent subjectivity as a sovereign, performing, rhetorically powerful character is activated and she frees herself with the subversive resignification of the power structure behind the words she utters. Crucially, Mister is deprived of his performative power in the same instant that he physically freezes, unable to come up with an effective reply to Celie's curse. Everything that he utters after the curse is first vocalized seems like a desperate attempt by a man who knows that everything is slipping out of his control.

If "the one who speaks performatively effectively is understood to operate according to uncontested power," how does Celie, whose power is both contested by Mister and self-effaced for the entirety of the film, speak with such astonishing effects (Butler 49)? Never before has Mister acknowledged or respected Celie's power—what in the curse changes that? Butler, citing Austin, shows us how performative utterances have both illocutionary and perlocutionary

power. Celie's utterance finally succeeds because the illocutionary power of her speech act effectively overcomes and silences Mister's perpetual performative spoken violence. The key to Celie's success is that the historical force of the utterance cannot be separated from the speech act. In saying, "I curse you," her speech act has the illocutionary force with the whole of history behind it, hailing Mister into a subject position that he has never before occupied. Citing tribal ritual utterances, witchcraft, mythology, and a heritage from virtually every human culture, Celie's words sum up centuries of meaning and direct them forcefully towards one person. The very fact that Celie has managed to speak performatively turns the abusive-hegemonic discourse on its head.

At this point, I need to mention a critical orientation that I take: crisis provides opportunities. Rather than conceptualizing crisis in terms of lack, we can think of it in terms of abundance. Domestic violence as a crisis need not be addressed strictly in terms of a lack of safety or stability, although they are undeniably crucial considerations; as a social issue it can be addressed through a lens of abundance. I contend that the space that Butler posits between the perlocutionary and illocutionary can be conceptualized as a space wherein crisis can be made into an abundance of opportunity for resignification.

Performative speech is an excessive rhetoric. It exceeds the body of the speaker who performs it, the confines of language, and mere symbolic or expressive 'everyday' language. There is something special about performative speech. Celie's curse is excessive: embodied but not confined to the body, linguistic but not bound to language alone. Her performance spills over the

boundaries of her body, flowing into the body of Mister and causing him to halt in his advance and lower his clenched fist. I would like to suggest that perhaps we can understand this mysterious excess by borrowing from Žižek's illustrations of the Real. The Real is that which escapes signification; impossible to reduce to language, impossible to express in embodied experience. Celie's curse is an instantiation of the Real.

In their piece on Anglo-Saxon curses, Danet and Bogoch observe that "stylization is mobilized, then, to strengthen the performativity of the curse itself" (157). The very style of Celie's curse is an additional kind of power, a visual rhetoric, adding to the illocutionary force of her performative speech act. The stylization of her excessive, embodied pose, of her repetition of the curse in various formulations, and the stylization of her intensity all combine themselves behind the historicity of force.

To continue with the link between stylization and excess, I'd like to cite Della Pollock's article "The Performative 'I'". Pollock recounts a spellbinding performance of *Hello, Dolly!* in which Carol Channing repeats the first scene of the play, to the shock and delight of the audience. She says,

Repetition, for Butler, is meant to secure the illusion of "character" or identity under disciplinary threat. In this breakout performance, Channing was doing the thing done—repeating grin for grin, slide for twirl—the established and explicitly scripted protocols of the musical play. She did so, however, to the point of almost unbearable excess, revealing and reveling in the repetition at the core of a performance aesthetic, in the process undoing what could have become merely mechanical reproduction, abandoning all of us to the ever-more human pleasures of repetition. (244)

This performance, while on the surface having little to do with a curse uttered by a hitherto-silenced African-American woman, beautifully illustrates a facet in

which the performative is excessive. The same excess runs through Celie's performance of cursing Mister, albeit in a slightly different way.

Pollock suggests the "performative 'I' thus has a politics and an ethics. Performing displacement by error, intimacy, others, it moves beyond the atomization, alienation, and reproduction of the authorial self toward new points of identification and alliance" (252). Although she is explicitly discussing the reclamation of the first person in scholarly writing, her claims bring weight to the issue of performative resignifications for other groups as well.

Traditionally and historically, curses come from or reaffirm the power of the powerful. Celie's curse problematizes this quite nicely; she is neither a powerful character before her kairotic performance, nor is she reaffirming the existing power structure laid out in the film. I think that Foucault can speak to this question with the ideas about the subject and power.

While it is definitely impractical and potentially dangerous for victims of abuse to go around laying curses upon their abusers, there are some valuable practical points I think we should seriously consider. Speech acts have illocutionary and perlocutionary power, which can be implemented to various levels of effectivity. This we already know from instances of verbal abuse in which the victim is incapacitated and deprived of the ability to imagine the world otherwise. As such, acts of verbal abuse, which are performative, are always already open to resignification. Just as Celie appropriates and reverses Mister's rhetorical techniques of enacting power through performative speech, I believe this outcome can be implemented in smaller, less obtrusive ways in situations of

domestic abuse. Importantly, when Celie comes to this realization and makes the performative utterance, *she is able to imagine the world otherwise*. This realization, no matter how insignificant it may seem, makes a tremendous difference in breaking down the hegemonic discourse through which abusers channel their performative power. I have tried in this paper, while investigating the rhetorical strategies used to show effective performative utterances in widely-disseminated media, to suggest a small foothold for theorists and practitioners to use in thinking about ways that we can deconstruct domestic abuse's hegemonic discursive assemblages.

Along those lines, I would like to be so bold as to propose that a form of therapy for survivors of domestic violence should be resignificatory therapy. Having internalized verbal abuse and being subjectified as powerless, inconsequential, worthless, etc., survivors stand to benefit hugely from resignifying their identities through speech therapy. Butler specifically resists censorship because of its stultifying effect on the dynamism of evolving language. The primary hopefulness in her theory is in her ideas about resignification. I do not want to suggest that wishing for harm or destruction is productive in a healing process, as I do not have the means to back it up. While it is problematic that cursing at its root is a wish for harm to befall someone else, I want to take what we can learn from the performative power of cursing, and use it to generatively resignify subjects into more positive constellations.

The first lesson I think we can learn is that cursing does indeed provide opportunities to envision and shape the world as other than it currently exists.

The importance of “thinking otherwise” cannot possibly be underestimated in this. As we are constituted in and by discourse, the capability to change the discourse is crucial for any type of change to individual or collective letters. As Danet and Bogoch suggest, curses are *not* “matching words to the world,” but utterances with potential (137). In performing identity differently and reconfiguring existing structures and flows of power, subjectivities are also reconfigured and hegemonies disrupted.

Rhetorically, then, *The Color Purple* tells us that in order for victims to escape domestic violence relationships, they must reclaim their voices, be able to lay claim to the power of the curse within them. So once again, we are faced with the victim empowerment frame. If Celie can do it, so can you! While *The Color Purple* is not as sodden with cultural legitimations as might be expected, it sends mixed messages. domestic violence survivors should be independent, yet strongly supported by networks of friends and family; they should speak powerfully without having practiced it in day-to-day life; they should have the courage, if not the practical means, to stand up to their abusers and leave behind the only life they have ever known.



Figure 1. Old Mister and Mister on front porch (Spielberg 1985)



Figure 2. Old Mister's foot between Mister's legs on porch swing (Spielberg 1985)



Figure 3. Mister's redemption scene: reuniting Celie with Nettie, Adam, and Olivia (Spielberg 1985)



Figure 4. Celie cursing Mister (Spielberg 1985)

## CHAPTER 3

### SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY

“Oh God, no. That would make you a monster.” (Laura, 00:18:22)

Released in the early 1990s, *Sleeping with the Enemy* tells the story of a white, upper-middle class woman’s struggle to escape her abusive husband. The major cultural legitimization techniques in this film include pathologizing the offender and the victim empowerment frame.

Laura and Martin Burney appear to be a happy, successful couple living in Boston, with a beautiful vacation house on Cape Cod. The film opens with Laura digging clams at sunrise, and Martin walking along the shore to tell her he has to go into work for the day. They embrace and kiss, and then he leaves for the day with lighthearted banter. However, it soon emerges that all is not as peaceful as it seems. When Laura dresses for a dinner party in a white dress with her hair pinned up, Martin comes in and mentions that he prefers a backless black dress instead. The next scene shows them at the party, Laura wearing the black dress and her hair let down (see Figure 5).

As they return home that evening, Martin puts on Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique* and surprises Laura (who is getting food out of the refrigerator) with amorous advances. As the bowl of strawberries falls out of her hands and rolls

across the floor, the dark music and the backlighting render a popular fruit strikingly ominous (see Figure 6).

The audience sees Martin in a different light the next morning. Martin is exercising when Laura pauses by the door of the room, seemingly to ask him a question. The expression on her face and her rapid exit, coupled with the camera panning around the VersaClimber to see Martin's intense expression and sweaty face (see Figure 7) give the audience an unsettled feeling. The harsh, quick sliding noise of the climber and his heavy exhalations give the audience an auditory clue that something is amiss.

The next unsettling sign is Martin reprimanding Laura for failing to straighten the towels on the bathroom towel rack. Laura, self-monitoring, nervously straightens all the cans and jars in the cabinet. The first incident of physical abuse occurs only hours later, after Martin goes down to the dock and speaks with a renting neighbor, who mentions that Laura is beautiful and that Martin has a beautiful house.

John (the neighbor): Oh, so that must be your wife I keep seeing, staring down from the window.

Martin: Laura.

John: You're a lucky man. I've been admiring your house, it's one of the best on Cape Cod.

Martin: Thanks! (*Sleeping with the Enemy* 00:09:09–00:09:18)

This seemingly innocuous conversation sparks the first on-screen physical violence of the film. When Martin returns home, Laura is arranging white flowers, orchids and gladioluses, in a black vase, and he accuses her of infidelity and backhands her across the face, knocking her to the ground, screaming at her, and kicking her in the stomach, then apologizing and kissing her, and persuading

her to go sailing with the neighbor that evening. Laura, who nearly drowned as a child, cannot swim to the best of Martin's knowledge.

Laura seizes her opportunity to escape that evening, faking her own death when a storm rises up and Martin is not watching her on the sailboat. As is typical of mediated accounts of domestic violence, the responsibility is the victim's to escape. The planning that Laura does leading up to her "drowning" attests to this; she breaks two lights on the boardwalk so she knows where to swim home, she has a bag packed and ready to go, and six months prior she moved her elderly, blind mother from the nursing home in Minneapolis that Martin knew about into a different one near the small Midwestern town of Cedar Falls. She leaves on a Greyhound bus, the epitome of the fleeing battered wife. The last thing she does in the beach house is wipe up her sandy and wet footprints, virtually erasing herself from the home.

This is the extreme instance of placing responsibility with the victim; not only is Laura the one who must rescue herself, she must figuratively give up her entire life in order to do so. This theme is repeated so often throughout our culture that it has been completely naturalized. In conversations about friends or family members suffering through domestic violence, the question inevitably comes up: "Why doesn't she just leave him?" With films, newspapers, magazine articles, and prominent television talk show hosts parroting the same line, it is easy to forget that the line itself has been manufactured and has roots somewhere (Burns 1). In *Sleeping with the Enemy*, it is easy to forget that Laura is not a representative victim of domestic violence. She has economic privilege.

The house she rents in Cedar Falls is \$700 a month. Adjusting for inflation<sup>7</sup> the \$700 of 1991 is \$1,124.07 of 2010. And given that Laura pays her first and last month's rent up front, that means she has over \$2,200 in cash (adjusted for inflation) available for housing alone. She also has no children, and the only family member that Martin knows about, he thinks to be deceased also. Laura's fictional situation is just that—a fiction. Particularly given that financial deprivation or control often accompanies physical violence (which the audience learns when they find out that Martin will not allow Laura to work at the library more than three mornings a week), it is highly unlikely that a person could stage such an escape.

However, the victim empowerment frame is a mediated frame used ridiculously frequently, supposedly to “empower” women and victims to step right up and solve their own problems. Reading with all the gusto of a self-help book, this frame asks people often with little or no economic independence, few marketable job skills, and children, as well as severe psychological dependence on their abuser, to simply leave. While it is indeed important not to deny victims of domestic violence their own subjectivity, it is important to remember that rhetorical subjectivity comes with two sides. A subject position can be filled by a person who so chooses, but in that position, a person is also subject to other things and people.

The victim empowerment frame used in *Sleeping with the Enemy* grants Laura subjectivity, and with that subjectivity comes a set of expectations that are frequently unrealistic outside of movies. And for a public wrestling (or ignoring) the issue of domestic violence, showing “The Solution” as simplistic as “Empower

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<sup>7</sup> Using the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' online calculator, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.

the victims!” does a tremendous disservice to the millions of people in the United States and worldwide who are struggling with the real life complexity of the issue, entangled in the webs of family structure, social ideologies, and economic dependencies.

The other predominant technique of cultural legitimation in *Sleeping with the Enemy* is pathologizing the abuser. This technique involves the rhetorical (verbal or visual) isolation of domestic violence as a problem contained within one “sick” individual, thereby absolving society of its complicity with the issue. As Straus and Gelles point out in *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family*, “A second reason for overlooking social factors as reasons for family violence was the deep conviction on the part of many professionals and laymen that only mentally disturbed people could possibly be violent towards those they love. The notion that abusers and violent people are mentally ill gains credence when one hears about some of the things family members do to one another:

Mr. Timmons grew angry at his son for constantly knocking into things around the house and breaking valuable objects like lamps and ashtrays. One evening, his son banged into a table and broke yet another lamp. Mr. Timmons, enraged, dragged his four-year-old into the basement and held him down while putting the whirling bit of a power drill through the boy’s chest. His son died instantly.

Mrs. King had long tried to teach her daughter not to touch hot objects. When the little girl wandered near the stove and tried to play with the knobs on the front of the stove, Mrs. King grabbed her hand and held it down on the gas burner until the hand was burned beyond recognition.

Mr. and Mrs. Pall routinely used a bicycle chain to whip their eight-year-old foster son. His body bore new and old scars from these beatings. (Straus and Gelles, 124–125)

This is a common, yet subtle, technique. Interestingly, this rhetorical technique is not localized to popular entertainment media, but pervades the news media as

well. Many articles reporting on domestic violence cases include past criminal offenses of the perpetrator, while leaving out background information about the survivor or victim. Duncan Wheeler aptly describes the technique in relation to *Sleeping with the Enemy*: “Martin is depicted as a bad man who happens to be a wife beater rather than as a man who is bad because he is a wife beater.

Therefore, domestic violence is contained by the actions of a deviant individual thereby localizing the malaise and refusing to hold society responsible in any way” (162). However, in *Sleeping with the Enemy*, we find out that Laura has turned to social structures without success before making a run for it: the police and a lawyer told her she could make a citizen’s arrest, or that she could get a restraining order.

Martin’s “pathology” is visually demonstrable in the scenes when he is tracking down Laura in the midwestern town to which she has relocated; amidst scenes of sunlight, tree-lined avenues, and children riding their bicycles, Martin appears, wearing a long black overcoat, a blot on the bucolic scene (see Figure 8). The pathology of domestic violence, contained in the ominous person of Martin, only moves temporarily through the happy scene, demonstrating that it is indeed the removal of persons and not a change in the fabric of social norms that will “solve” the problem of domestic violence.

The audience also witnesses Martin’s willingness to lie in the advancement of his obsession with Laura. He lies to an attendant at the nursing home where Laura’s mother (Chloe Williams) is residing:

Martin: Excuse me. I wonder if you can help me.  
Attendant: I can try.

Martin: My younger sister used to work for the lady in Room 14. She's returning to the area, and I know she'll want to visit Mrs. Williams.

Attendant: Then, you'd like to leave a message for her?

Martin: Well, the thing is, my sister married someone the family didn't approve of really, and we grew apart. I was wrong to let that happen. If she knows I'm here, she won't see me or take my calls. I want to surprise her. What I need is someone just to let me know she's here, someone I can trust to keep a secret. Here's my name, and motel number. It would sure mean a lot to me.

Attendant: (taking the slip of paper) I'd be glad to help.

Martin: Thanks. (walks away) (*Sleeping with the Enemy* 1:10:25–1:11:19)

This scene fulfills another purpose as well; seeing how well Martin's charm, good dress, and apparent class affect the attendant allows the audience to sympathize with how Laura got sucked into the relationship, as well as further pathologizing Martin as a sick, obsessed individual who will stop at nothing to get to his wife. His ease with lies prove to the audience that Martin is, indeed, a bad man, but *not* primarily because he abuses his wife.

What for many audience members might clinch the pathologizing of Martin in *Sleeping with the Enemy* is his inferred attempt to kill Laura's elderly, blind mother, Chloe Williams. The following is a transcript from one scene, in which Martin impersonates a police officer in order to get information from Chloe about how to find Laura (see Figure 9). After Martin learns what he needs to know, he appears to be attempting to smother Chloe with a pillow; the timely intervention of a nurse bringing around the evening medicines prevents him from carrying out his plan.

Martin: (speaking with a false accent) Will you let me help you with your supper? It does look delicious.

Chloe: Who are you?

Martin: My name is Darryl Walker, ma'am. I'm a police officer.

Chloe: Am I under arrest?

Martin: No, no, I just have some questions. Shall we start with some steak? You had a visitor yesterday.  
 Chloe: Yes, my nephew. He's from Wisconsin.  
 Martin: Good girl. Laura should be proud of you. Carrots. We have to get word to her ma'am. The Boston police have called us, and they say he's in this area. We think he wants to harm her. So if she calls, you have her ring the police in Sioux City and...  
 Chloe: She won't call, not til Sunday she said.  
 Martin: That's a long time.  
 Chloe: He's a crazy man.  
 Martin: I know that. He's very dangerous. (gets up, grabs a pillow). Help us find him, Chloe. For God's sake, we have to warn her.  
 Chloe: I..I don't know where!  
 Martin: (pacing slowly around Chloe's bed, holding the pillow) THINK! Think. Is she with someone, a man perhaps, someone we could contact?  
 Chloe: He teaches dramatics.  
 Martin: Where?  
 Chloe: At a college in Cedar Falls.  
 Martin: Thank you, Chloe. (Raises pillow, walks towards her) (see Figure 10)  
 Chloe: (weakly) Help her. Please.  
 Attendant: Excuse me, Chloe, it's time for your medicine.  
 Martin: (changes trajectory with pillow, tucks it behind Chloe instead of aiming for her face) Here you go, Chloe. Don't worry. (leaves room) (*Sleeping with the Enemy* 1:13:36–1:15:59)

This scene demonstrates the Machiavellian character of Martin's obsession—further implicating him as a “sick” individual. After all, who but a sick person would prey upon a weak, elderly, blind woman who has had a stroke and is living in a nursing home?

Another important point about *Sleeping with the Enemy* is that Laura Burney, fictional though she may be, is the perfect victim. In a critique of the Violence Against Women Act of 1994, Caroline Picart notes, “The rhetoric...reifies the same picture of the monolithic woman as pure victim, one who must be protected from ‘evil’ and predatorial forces because she is incapable of any acts of agency to defend herself,...[and] fails to address the

complexities that victims live, with their divided loyalties and the chiaroscuro of agency and powerlessness they straddle from day to day. The simplifications characteristic of rhetorical constructions of victimhood and agency, in both legal and popular cultural constructions, have tangible effects on women's lives" (97).

In an analysis of current women's magazines, Nancy Berns notes that "Not only do women's magazines limit the portrayal of domestic violence by only focusing on the victims, they also create a narrow framing of 'acceptable victims.' This selection of 'appropriate victims' reflects the finding in public opinion research that indicates a public acceptance of some violence because the victims might be deserving" (93). In *Sleeping with the Enemy*, Laura is easily forgiven by the audience, perhaps because of her obvious education, her apparent sweet personality, or her strength in leaving an abuser. Translated into real life, the perfect victim does not exist...all people come with a backstory that is conveniently not within the frame of the film.

Within the film, there is a series of visual contrasts that also serve to emphasize the differences Laura's life embroiled within domestic violence and her escape from that marriage. The vacation house where she and Martin stay in Cape Cod is of modern architectural design, all angles and concrete and glass, decorated almost entirely in black and white (see Figure 11). Everything in the house gleams, including the black tile floor that Laura is knocked onto when Martin hits her onscreen for the first time. The furniture is also very angular and contemporary; not many soft surfaces are to be seen in the beach house (see Figure 12).

In the Cape Cod house, the only flowers around are sculptural white orchids and gladiolus, cut and arranged in vases, symbolic of the display function and death that Laura exists to fulfill (see Figure 13). Martin's influence is everywhere in the beach house; it is a space designed to intimidate and showcase wealth, not to welcome or truly live in. In contrast, the house that Laura rents in Cedar Falls is a small gabled cottage, white with green shutters and a big front porch. If there is a house that epitomizes the mythic freedom and security of the American Dream, it would be this one, nestled in the heartland.

The inside is decorated with squishy-looking armchairs, patterned wallpaper, and lace curtains. Laura has live, potted African violets adorning the kitchen windowsill in the cottage in Cedar Falls.

The choices Laura makes for her living space, when unconstrained by Martin's Spartan aesthetic, are homey, comfortable, welcoming, and nurturing. Her spaces represent a blossoming and a coming-to-self for Laura. This once again emphasizes the victim empowerment frame; happiness can only grow after Laura has gone to great lengths to escape Martin.

Other visual contrasts include the character Laura herself. In her life with Martin, she always dresses in solid colors. She seems to prefer flowing white clothing, but Martin implies a preference for more fitted black and red items, so she changes to accommodate his subtle demands (see Figure 4). When she moves to Iowa and starts over, she wears comfortable, holey blue jeans, long floral-printed skirts, and blousy shirts and cardigans. Her hairstyle with Martin was extremely long and relatively straightened. When she is in Iowa, she cuts

her hair shorter and wears it with its natural curl (see Figure 15). The audience experiences the visual journey of Laura coming into her own. Rhetorically, these visual changes add up to a bildungsroman for the abused woman.

It is precisely this fictional narrative that mainstream media grooms us to expect of real-life women; the economic means and psychological strength to leave an abusive relationship with or without support, and then the emotional fortitude to build up a cozy, nurturing life and fall in love with a new man in a new town all over again. In other words, the victim empowerment frame allows audiences to cheer on 'perfect victims' who are able to escape their situations while simultaneously eliding our culpability by leaving out possible alternative solutions or assistance that could easily be provided by communities.



Figure 5. Laura wearing Martin's choice of clothing and hairstyle (Ruben 1991)



Figure 6. Strawberries scattered on the floor; shadows of Martin and Laura (Ruben 1991)



Figure 7. Martin exercising; ominous reaction from Laura (Ruben 1991)



Figure 8. Martin on street in Midwest in springtime (Ruben 1991)



Figure 9. Martin impersonating a police officer, interrogating Chloe Williams (Ruben 1991)



Figure 10. Martin, presumably going to smother Chloe with pillow (Ruben 1991)



Figure 11. Martin and Laura's beach house on Cape Cod, Massachusetts (Ruben 1991)



Figure 12. Interior of the beach house (Ruben 1991)



Figure 13. Cut, sculptural flowers to decorate beach house (Ruben 1991)



Figure 14. Cottage that Laura rents in Cedar Falls, Iowa (Ruben 1991)



Figure 15: Living room of cottage (Ruben 1991)



Figure 16: African violets in kitchen (Ruben 1991)

## CHAPTER 4

### THE GIRL WITH THE DRAGON TATTOO

Recent films featuring domestic violence have become increasingly ambiguous, illustrating victims with complex agency, a phenomenon which Carrie Baker and Caroline Joan Picart both discuss. There are multiple layers of abuse in the recent film *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*: father–daughter sexual abuse (in two families), brother–sister sexual abuse, guardian (social worker)–client economic and sexual abuse, as well as extreme violence in non-domestic realms. Within these layers are two key characters whose agencies are confusing at minimum, and richly complex upon full appreciation.

The politics of domestic violence itself are complex. As mainstream films reflect the growing awareness of domestic violence, they have become increasingly reflective of the complexities in real life cases. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* problematizes many of the easy assumptions and cultural legitimating rhetorical techniques that many films use to discuss domestic violence.

The first way *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* complicates our understanding of domestic violence is in its portrayal of violent relationships themselves. Lisbeth Salander, the main character, is in a guardianship (in

Sweden, something akin to being a ward of the state). The guardian appointed to her is old enough to be her father, and certainly paternalistic in his attitudes towards Lisbeth. In their first meeting, he removes her finances out of her control and interviews her about her personal hygiene and sexual activity. So, while the relationship is not a typical familial relationship, it is comparable to that of parent and child. In the delineation and the evolution of this relationship, Lisbeth is violently abused. Similarly, Harriet Vanger, who was 16 years old when she disappeared 40 years earlier, was sexually abused by her father and her brother, often at the same time. Sibling abuse is often overlooked as a part of domestic violence, but *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* brings it to our attention.

An aspect of the film that deserves more inspection is the intersection of the 'ideal victim,' victimhood, and agency. As Carrie Baker discusses in her chapter for *Survivor Rhetoric*, "Battered women...have expressed a complex agency, encompassing both victimization and resistance" (42). The women in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* demonstrate this kind of complex agency; both Harriet Vanger and Lisbeth Salander physically assault (or kill) their abusers.

Complex agency complicates public conceptions of 'ideal victims' of domestic violence, who are typically Caucasian members of the middle-class and can be perceived to be very passive and suffering from some type of mental illness (Baker). Caroline Picart, in her rhetorical analysis of the Violence Against Women Act, states, "The rhetoric in both these cases reifies the same picture of the monolithic woman as pure victim, one who must be protected from 'evil' and predatory forces because she is incapable of any acts of agency to defend

herself" (97). Similarly, most women featured in films involving domestic violence are rhetorically cast as 'ideal victims' so the audience will sympathize with them. In discussing legal cases where women have killed their abusive partners, Baker states, "Sharon Allard argues that battered woman syndrome testimony incorporates a stereotype of a 'good,' 'normal' battered woman and that black women, inevitably classified by jurors as 'other' because they do not fit the mould, do not benefit from testimony that reinforces this white-identified stereotype" (52). This rhetorical specter of the ideal victim informs the portrayals of Lisbeth and Harriet; neither belongs to the middle class (Lisbeth grew up poor and Harriet extremely wealthy), and though neither is represented as actually mentally unbalanced (they are both in full awareness of their actions throughout the film), both are eccentric in different ways.

Lisbeth Salander in particular is not an ideal victim of domestic violence. She has several characteristics that may not endear her to a skeptical public; she smokes, she fights back when several drunk men attack her in a subway station, she does not dress or act in a feminine manner (see Figure 17), she is bisexual, she rides a motorcycle, and she earns her living as a computer hacker, researching persons of interest for a firm called Milton Security. Her personality is brusque, and from flashback scenes and conversation between her and the guardian, the audience learns she has a history of violence and psychiatric problems severe enough to land her in a psych ward at a hospital.

More importantly, Lisbeth's complex agency challenges the binary assumption that domestic violence survivors do not have agency. Complex

agency, as discussed by Picart, is the negotiation between victimhood and agency, which domestic violence victims who resist abuse must navigate. Rather than allowing herself to be censored and silenced by an abusive guardian, she speaks and acts in ways that allow her to create her own subjectivity and make her own decisions. Her rhetorical defiance of cultural assumptions is the first step to refuting decades of cultural legitimations about female victims of domestic violence.

One example of Lisbeth's complex agency at work is a dangerous move on the character's part—at the same time she endures a horrific physical assault and rape by her court-appointed guardian, she videotapes the abusive episode. (Previously, the guardian had been using her requests for money as opportunities to sexually abuse her.) This is precisely the kind of complex agency that was lacking in earlier film portrayals of domestic violence. She staggers home, bloody and shaking, and lights a cigarette with trembling fingers as she watches the assault caught on camera. Later, she goes back and assaults her guardian, subjecting him to a somewhat similar experience—with the difference that she tattoos on his torso, "I'm a sadist pig and a rapist." Then, using the videotape of the prior assault, she blackmails him into giving her back her financial freedom and leaving her completely alone.

Another scene in which she displays complex agency includes a flashback when she throws a match onto her father in a car, causing the car to burst into flame (see Figure 18). Later in the film we learn that her father abused her and her mother while she was growing up. As a child, her agency was limited by age,

ability, and legal responsibility, yet she purposefully commits the act of filial insubordination.

While *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* seems like it may be a way forward from the mainstream media's portrayal of domestic violence, it still incorporates many of the same cultural legitimations that have impaired its film predecessors. Like so many mediated accounts of domestic violence, it uses a victim empowerment frame to place the onus for getting out of the relationship onto the victims. In Lisbeth's situation, it is the law itself to which she cannot turn; as a girl with a troubled past, she cannot trust the police or the legal system to help her. Indeed, it is the probation court that carelessly assigned to her a violent and abusive guardian. In Harriet's situation, although she is a member of a wealthy and powerful family, she cannot turn to her advantageous social position for relief (see Figure 19). She only escapes her family's island home by lying under a blanket in the backseat of her cousin's car when the cousin leaves for college, leaving them all to assume that she has died or been murdered. Despite the fact that she fits the profile for the ideal victim, she felt she had no choice but to take matters into her own hands and flee. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* seems to asks us to take the next step and ask, "Why?" Harriet presumably would have been a sympathetic victim had the case gone to court; was it precisely her family's wealth and social status that would have prevented real justice for her? Was it something enclosed within her family, or something more endemic to society itself?

As in *Sleeping with the Enemy*, another cultural legitimization technique apparent in this film is pathologizing the abuser. While the film goes to great lengths (and successfully, I would add) to persuade the audience that the abusers are pathologically unstable, it nonetheless glosses over the flaws in a family cultural system that force a daughter (Harriet) to run away, or the systemic flaws of a justice department that can literally deliver a young woman (Lisbeth) into a situation in which she is economically deprived, then physically and sexually assaulted. The guardian, a character called Nils Bjurman, it is easy to see, is a 'sick' man, abusing his position of power and deriving sexual pleasure from the pain of others less powerful. In Harriet Vanger's case, her father Gottfried was a member of the Nazi party and has engaged in a series of pseudo-religious, racist murders of Jewish girls before attacking his own daughter. Her brother Martin (who participated in sexually abusing Harriet), at the age of 16, was taught by Gottfried how to strangle a woman, and has since gone on to a serial killing career. While the overt pathologies displayed by the abusive characters cannot be denied and are indeed compelling, the film fails to emphasize overall tolerance of violence. When Lisbeth violently strikes out at first her father and then the guardian, and when Harriet kills her father, the audience is led to sympathize with them. I am absolutely not suggesting that victims of domestic violence should refrain from this kind of resistance, as it is too often their only practical way out of the situation; I merely want to point out that when the solution mirrors the problem, we wrap ourselves into a spiral of habit, always requiring the same structure of aggressor/victim.

Despite its faults, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is a step in the right direction. Rather than succumbing completely to the same, tired stereotypes about abuse victims, it complicates our understanding by portraying complex agency and challenging the boundaries of what domestic violence can include, and whom it can affect. Picart states, “The simplifications characteristic of rhetorical constructions of victimhood and agency, in both legal and popular culture constructions, have tangible effects on women’s lives” (118). As we can see in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, mainstream films are coming closer to acknowledging the complexities of the spectrum of domestic violence survivors’ victimhood and agency. This rhetorical broadening of characters with complex, constrained agency is more reflective of so many lived experiences of domestic violence survivors.

However, we still have a long way to go. Rather than essentializing victims of domestic violence to fit into our preconceptions, there might be another way. Iris Young, in her article “Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective,” provides a framework for rhetorically characterizing domestic violence survivors and victims. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, rather than finding an essential ‘Victim’ to represent, media accounts could consider the individuals who have dealt with this social issue as a serial collective.

My goal is not to accuse any one film of having a damaging impact on domestic violence victims’ lives, but to prove that that the sedimented strata of films reflecting specific cultural legitimations of domestic violence reinforce and recirculate the same rhetoric which they often attempt to dismantle or discredit.

Perhaps a logical next step is to recognize complex agency in more mediated representations and to use the practical organizing theory of serial collectivity to act politically on matters concerning domestic violence. As Young states, there is a pragmatic reason to be able to conceptualize and describe groups of people: political organizing and the ability to see systemic systems of oppression (718). However, assuming all groups of people share certain essential qualities is a mistake because the experiences and realities of some are inevitably privileged and become a norm within a subgroup. Drawing on Sartre, Young explains a social collective as a cluster of people who “do not identify with one another, do not affirm themselves as engaged in a shared enterprise, or identify themselves with common experiences” (725). The collective is not united by action, but rather around a practico-inert object that “enable[s] and constrain[s] different aspects of action” (726). In other words, the serial collective is not a group bound by overtly stated shared goals, but rather has the potential to form a group by agreeing upon solidarity and similarities in the name of forming a coalition. A conceptualization of domestic violence survivors and victims as members of a serial collective rather than a group has the advantage of being politically deployable and have the potential for becoming a group (as in therapy sessions), yet at the same time avoids essentializing “THE” domestic violence experience.



Figure 17. Lisbeth's mode of dress (Oplev 2009)



Figure 18. Lisbeth, after throwing flammable liquid and a lit match on her father (Oplev 2009)



Figure 19. Harriet Vanger as a young woman, before disappearing (Oplev 2009)

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

On the Utah Department of Human Services' webpage dedicated to domestic violence, the first paragraph reads: "Domestic violence is any criminal offense involving violence or physical harm or threat of violence or physical harm when committed by one cohabitant against another. Domestic violence can also be referred to as IPV or Intimate Partner Violence. Domestic violence is against the law. Domestic violence in the presence of children is also against the law. Domestic violence should be reported" (UDHS 1). Exclusion by definition (as discussed in Chapter 1) is institutionalized; it is no wonder that so many people do not recognize emotional, psychological, or other types of abuse as domestic violence. As with so many topics, mainstream entertainment media traditionally reinforce the official definitions, and so we see across the films in this thesis, definition by exclusion.

One of the commonalities between the films discussed is definition by exclusion. Films presenting nonphysical forms of domestic violence may not be dramatic enough to attract an audience; once again, this "exclusion by definition" highlights the perils of a public relying on popular media to understand complex social problems. One solution, such as it is, is to educate earlier and more

widely. Many domestic violence education programs are targeted at women, but programs about what men can do<sup>8</sup> are in existence and are a step in the right direction of changing the paradigm about exactly whose problem domestic violence is. Rather than addressing the symptoms, we should be spending our resources finding a solution nearer to the source of most domestic violence case. The cultural legitimization techniques discussed in this thesis often preclude the question, “Why do abusers engage in domestic violence?” and the alternatives of rehabilitating abusers through therapy.

### Reconceptualizing Domestic Violence

Like other scholars before me, I recognize that in order to make any substantial changes to the occurrence of domestic violence in our society, we need to make large-scale social changes. Recognizing mediated representations of domestic violence and being able to deconstruct and analyze them is a key component of this goal. The other key component is to reconceptualize domestic violence. Too many people only think of domestic violence as “wife-beating.” Certainly, this is one facet of the problem. However, the harm of any person at the hands of an intimate partner or family member is a harm to all of us, in terms of our humanity first and foremost, but also in terms of lasting harm to children raised in such families, in terms of economic costs to a struggling health care system, and in terms of being deprived of the full potential of the victims and survivors struggling with their own lives.

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<sup>8</sup> One outstanding example of this is the program “Men Can Stop Rape,” which focuses on enabling male youth to challenge ideologies of violent masculinity and ultimately to reject the idea that hurting other human beings is proof of manhood. (<http://www.mencanstoprape.org/>)

We need to expand the definition of domestic violence, as Evan Stark does with his theory of coercive control, to include mental, emotional, spiritual, economic, physical, and sexual abuse. Furthermore, we need to learn to recognize the signs of these kinds of abuse and to have the courage to step forward as resources and as networks of support for those who wish to cease their abusive behavior as well as those who wish to get out of the relationships. As saturated as we are with cultural legitimation devices like the victim empowerment frame, it may seem ridiculous to say this, but sometimes ending an abusive relationship is not the right solution. Each domestic violence situation should be treated as a singularity, and violent couples who choose to stay together and strive to engage in less harmful practices should be supported just as much as victims who choose to leave. As I hope I have demonstrated, it is staggeringly arrogant to assume from an outsider's position that we know what is best, and that what is best is always the same thing—that the victim must leave. If we buy into that mindset, we are no better than the mediated representations that I have just critiqued, willfully ignoring the complex agencies and realities involved.

### Future Work

I am committed to community-engaged scholarship. With this perspective, and also with a perspective partially rooted in critical discourse analysis (CDA), I want this thesis to both contribute to knowledge in the fields of communication and also to be publically usable. In addition to publishing this as an academic

thesis, I would like to make this information available through nonacademic venues, such as to the staff of local safe houses, and hopefully to the larger public audience through websites and traditional news media. Eventually, I would like to translate this research into a play or video about domestic violence that could be shown to communities to raise the subject for conversation, much as Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* have done for sexual violence. I feel strongly that domestic violence is not simply a private matter, but has deep and widespread roots throughout social practices to which we all contribute. As such, I feel that public awareness and education is crucial to the prevention of domestic violence for the improvement of lives of not only the survivors and victims, but also their families, friends, and communities.

The discourse and the rhetoric we use to publicly and culturally discuss domestic violence occludes the social nature of the problem, allowing us as individuals to distance ourselves from the issue, thus contributing to the cultural legitimization of domestic violence. If domestic violence is to decrease substantially, a rhetorically inventive reconstruction of what is culturally legitimate behavior towards family members and intimate partners must occur.

## APPENDIX A

### TRANSCRIPTION FROM *THE COLOR PURPLE*

(Transcription time: 1:58:07– 2:06:39)

Shug: Now come the time for me to tell you.

Mister: What?

Shug: It's time for us to go...

Grady: Mmm, you such good people. That's the truth. Salt o' the earth, but 's time to move on.

Shug: Celie is coming with us.

Mister: Say what?

Shug: Celie is comin' to Memphis with us.

Mister: Over my dead body.

Shug: You satisfied, that's what you want?

Mister: *stutters* W-w-what NOW what's wrong with you?

Celie: *quietly, looking at her plate* You a low-down dirty dog, that's what's wrong. It's time for me to get away from you, and into creation. And your dead body be just the welcome mat I need.

Old Mister: You can't talk to my boy that way.

Celie: Your "boy." Seem like if he hand't been your boy he might have made somebody a halfway decent man.

Mister: *chuckles nervously*. S-say what?

Celie: You took my sister Nettie away from me. *Nods and looks Mister in the eye*. You knew she was the only somebody in the world who loved me. But Nettie and my kids, they comin' home soon, and when we all get together we gonna set around an whoop your ass.

Squeak: *high pitched nervous giggles*

Grady: *laughs*

Mister: Nettie. Your kids. Woman you talkin' crazy. *Laughs dismissively*.

Celie: Oh, I got children. My children livin' in Africa. Africa. Learning different languages. Fresh air plenty a exercise. And they gonna turn out a heap better than these fools you never tried to raise.

Harpo: Now, now hold on here

Celie: No hold on, Harpo. If you hadn't tried to rule over Sophia, white folks never woulda got her.

Harpo: *excitedly* Now that's a lie. Now that's a LIE!

Celie: There's truth in it. Mmhm. Y'all was rotten kids. You was, you was ROTTEN kids. Made my life here hell. Course your daddy ain't nothing but some dead horse shit.

Squeak: *bursts out in high-pitched laughter*

Harpo: (to Squeak): Shut up! You know it bad if a woman laugh at a man!

Sophia: *low, slow chuckles, breaking into steady, loud laughter*

Old Mister: My God. The dead has arisen.

Sophia: I done had enough bad luck to keep me laughin' the rest of my life. Set in that jail, set in that jail 'til I near about done rot to death. I know what it like, Miss Celie. Wanna go somewhere and cain't. I know what it like wanna sing have it beat out ya. I wanna thank you, Miss Celie, for everything you done for me. I members that day I was in the store Miss Millie. I's feelin' real down, I's feelin' mighty bad. And when I seed you, I know there is a God. I know there is a God. And one day I's gonna get to come home.

Mister: (to Celie) You're not getting one penny of my money, not one thin dime.

Celie: *slams both fists on table and jumps up, shouting* Did I ever ask you for anything? Did I ever *slams fist* ask *slams fist* you *slams fist* for anything, I NEVER ASKED YOU FOR NOthin', not even your sorry-ass hand in marriage. Nothin'. I NEVER asked you for nothin'.

Sophia: *Hee hee hee HAHAHAHA!* Ohhhh, Sophia home now. Sophia home. Things gonna be changing round here too.

Squeak: I'm goin' with Shug.

Harpo: You goin' where?

Squeak: I'm goin' with Miss Celie and Shug. Cause I'm fixin' to sing.

Sophia: Too much racket goin' on round this house, pass me them peas, yeah.

Harpo: Now listen, Squeak...

Squeak: *squeaks, standing up* My name ain't Squeak! My name's Mary Agnes.

Old Mister: Mary what?

Squeak: *giggles* Mary Agnes.

Old Mister: Mary Agnes, Mary who gives a damn. Boy, if you gonna let this little nappy-head gal sit here and cuss you out like that, you sittin' at the head o' your own dinner table and you actin' like a waiter!

Sophia: Hush you old fool, always meddling in someone's business. Sophia home now. Just hush up!

Mister: *rises quickly from table, glaring at Celie* She'll be back. She don't got talent. Shug can sing. She got spunk. She can talk to anybody, she can stand up and be noticed. But what you got? You ugly, you're skinny, you shaped funny, and you're too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do is be Shug's maid.

Shug: *whispers* Albert, no.

Mister: Take out a slop job and maybe cook her food, and you ain't even that good of a cook anyway.

Old Mister: Well, she's a lot better than that first wife you married.

Mister: and this house ain't been clean good since my first wife died. And nobody crazy enough to marry you. So what you gonna do, huh?

Celie: *looks directly at Mister.* Any more letters come?

Mister: Could be. Could be not. Who's to say?

Celie: *grabs the carving knife from the chicken and lunges at Mister*

Shug: *strangled cry* Celie, no!

Celie: *sticks knife in table top* I curse you! *Holds carving knife to Mister's throat*

Until you do right by me, everything you even think about is gonna crumble.

Sophia: Don't do it Miss Celie. Don't trade places with what I been through.

Shug: *in a whisper* C'mon Miss Celie. Let's go to the car.

Sophia: He ain't worth it...he ain't worth it.

Celie: *lowers carving knife and lets Shug lead her away.*

Mister: Who you think you is? You can't curse nobody! Lookit you! You're black, you're poor, you're ugly, you're a woman, you're nothin' at all!

Celie: 'Til you do right by me, everything you even think about gonna fail. *Walks down the hall with Shug*

Grady: It's been a pleasure meetin' all of ya. Goodbye!

Sophia: Glad I done come back just in time look like I...

Old Mister: Well, we need some stability around here that's for sure.

Mister: *Runs out of the house, screaming* I shoulda locked you up and just let you out to work!

Celie: The jail you planned for me is the one you gonna rot in.

Shug: Celie, get in the car, get in the car.

Mister: *Runs down the house steps towards Celie, fist raised* I'm gonna knock you up on!

Celie: *Stretches out her arm.*

Mister: *freezes where he stands, arm raised and fist clenched*

Celie: *calmly* Everything you done to me, already done to you.

Mister: *stunned, lowers arm.*

*Car engine starts.*

Celie: *in rumble seat of car, looking backwards* I'm poor. Black. I may even be ugly. But dear God, I'm here! I'm here!

Mister: *runs across lawn after car driving away* Hey, hey you'll be back!

Hahahah! Hey, what you gonna do? Hey, you'll be back! *Stands staring after car in driveway*

Celie: *raises one arm in farewell, smiling, and disappears over the hill*



# APPENDIX B

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