Visions of violet: Hollywood images of lesbians in The Color Purple and Boys on the Side

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Visions of violet: 

Hollywood images of lesbians in The Color Purple and Boys on the Side 

by 

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1
THE FILMS 17
CONCLUDING NOTES 50
WORKS CITED 53
WORKS CONSULTED 55
INTRODUCTION

“This association [between the color violet and lesbianism] goes back to 600 BC, to the poetry of Sappho, who wrote of the violet tiaras she and her lovers wore in their hair. The fairy Puck, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, gathers a magic purple flower to change sexual inclinations, and men and women in sixteenth-century England wore violets to indicate they had no intentions of marrying. As pansies came to signify love between men, violets (related to pansies in the Viola family) came to refer more directly to love between women.”

--Andrea Weiss, Vampires and Violets (1)

While allusions to the flower and the color continue to hold significance for lesbians themselves, the association between lesbianism and violet still eludes the heterosexual majority of American society. The color violet has often served as a secret code of identification for lesbians and as a marker for lesbianism which, historically, only lesbians could identify. Since the invention of film, lesbians have been forced to identify similar markers in the movies in order to construct a lesbian subtext with which they could identify. When they actually did appear on screen in traditional Hollywood movies, until recently lesbians were limited to a few roles, such as those of the vampire or pathologically repressed woman.¹ More often though, they were not seen at all. In regard to this sparse history of lesbians in

¹ For a comprehensive survey of the history of lesbians in film and the reactions of lesbian spectators, see Andrea Weiss.
film, Weiss notes:

The task of uncovering traces of a lesbian visual history is mindboggling, since not only is evidence of lesbian presence in the historical record negligible, but even evidence of its absence, erasure, or repression is elusive. (2)

While many lesbian theorists have argued correctly that visual images of lesbians have historically remained invisible, emerging only through subtext and spectator re-visioning, the decade from 1985 to 1995 has seen a dramatic rise in the number of visual images of lesbians in popular culture in the United States. This rise of visible lesbianism in the context of mainstream America would seem to suggest a level of tolerance and understanding of lesbianism, but the suggestion is contradicted by the images themselves.

The recent emergence of lesbian images in film creates the challenge of this study in that they present a paradox by their very existence. While the marginalized status of lesbians in American society cannot be denied, the existence of these visual lesbian images in mainstream films seems to do just that. However, close examination of two films--The Color Purple (1985) and Boys on the Side (1995)--reveals that the increased visibility of lesbian images in film, rather than challenging the marginalization of lesbians, actually perpetuates it. Furthermore, the position of lesbians in the margins that is imposed on them by mainstream society results not from sexuality alone but from its intersection with race and gender. Lesbianism cannot be understood fully outside of its gendered
or racial context, and narrative films provide invaluable exploratory texts for understanding the complexity of lesbian images.

The narrative film stands as a powerful medium for the expression of cultural meaning because it includes a combination of sensory experiences with which to affect the viewer. The film as a text is comprised of the visual imagery within the frame (action, costumes, setting) as well as the technical aspects behind its production (camera work, editing), combined finally with what the viewer hears (sound effects, music). Unified in the film, these components then function in relation to the viewer who brings her set of prior experiences and assumptions to the viewing experience, resulting in a socially constructed meaning of the film. While this description represents only a basic model of the film's form and function, it nonetheless introduces the film as a text to be examined and suggests the need for a unique set of tools for doing so. Film theory provides a framework for looking at the way film functions, both technically and narratively, for individual viewers and within society as a whole. Studies of film often provide dramatic insight into the way the combination of technology and visual imagery represents human action and thought and emotion, and how these visual representations are constructed in ways that reflect on and respond to the context in which they were constructed.

Film theory has been used most dramatically in conjunction with feminist theory in order to explore the means by which film images and the form of film itself work to perpetuate a definition of woman. Feminist film studies began with a
widespread study of the visual images of women, which revealed the limited categories of female images available for women throughout the history of movies. Works such as Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* (1974) catalog the historical progression of the depiction of women in film and look at general types of women, like the "virgin" or the "whore." This type of analysis parallels the resurrection of lost writing by women taking place in literary studies in the early 1970s by paying attention to female images which had either been taken for granted or forgotten. While Haskell's work marked an important step in recognizing the significance of visual images of women and how they were used both in perpetuating oppressive categories of women and in forging new and liberated ones, it falls short of providing a comprehensive model for understanding the complex functions of these images within the film and their impact on the viewer. Thus, the complexity of women's oppression, including their own complicity in it, combined with the fact that women, too, enjoy films, called for a more sophisticated way of studying films and the viewing experience.

Drawing upon the tools of psychoanalysis, Laura Mulvey, in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in 1975, provided a revolutionary model for understanding the ways that visual pleasure functioned in the Hollywood film experience, namely in presenting the female body as a spectacle for the male viewer to behold. She argues that cinema provides voyeuristic pleasure for the male viewer in simply looking at the female subject, while also presenting the human body as a source of identification and thus, narcissistic pleasure. Mulvey
notes the origins of her model in the issues raised by the women's movement of the 1970s:

Women's struggle to gain rights over their bodies could not be divorced from questions of image and representation. The mythology of the feminine under patriarchy set up a series of problems in which the woman became a phantasm and a symptom. These problems called out for the vocabulary and the concepts of psychoanalysis. Analysis of the representation of femininity in popular culture had to become an analysis of collective fantasy under patriarchal culture. (xii-iii)

The tenets of Mulvey's essay have provided the groundwork for the use of psychoanalysis in the particular context of narrative film. She explains the unique function of the film:

Going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. (25)

Mulvey's significance for feminist film theory and specifically for this study lies in leading the way for adopting a psychoanalytic vocabulary in the discussion of film. The model itself proved useful for a time, but Mulvey's essay, like much feminist theory, did not account for variations in the presentation or perception of women
based on race or sexuality and falls into the trap of assuming the existence of the essential woman it critiques.

Other feminist film theorists took up where Mulvey left off, addressing issues of socially constructed definitions of woman, the plurality of women’s identities and female spectatorship. Constance Penley, for example, points to the pitfalls of earlier feminist work, including that of Mulvey. On the subject of defining women’s identities she writes:

A further problem posed for feminists writing about classical film, and one that had already suggested itself in the earlier work, was how to argue that there was a contradiction between the “feminine” and the classical system, without falling back on an essentialist notion of “femininity” or “Woman” as an eternal and naturally subversive element. There would be no feminist advantage to positing either a historically unchanging feminine essence or a monolithic patriarchal essence of that essence. The idea of an essence is ahistorical and asocial, and suggests a set of traits not amenable to change . . . (44)

Penley’s argument demands that special attention be paid to the technical and narrative vehicles through which women’s identities are constructed in mainstream films. Specifically, lesbian identities do not simply emerge in movies as a reflection of a “natural,” or “essential,” state of lesbian existence, but are instead constructed by the film according to a prevailing set of societal norms.

While it is necessary to examine the images of women contained within the
film, those images do not exist in a vacuum and must be considered, at least in part, in relation to their cultural context, which includes spectators and other cultural images. The work of feminist film theorists like Mary Ann Doane addresses the issue omitted from Mulvey's model, that of a female spectator. Focusing on so-called women's films of the 1940s in her 1987 work The Desire to Desire, Doane explains how female viewers could find pleasure in watching films, despite the claims of earlier theorists that narrative cinema assumes a male gaze. Doane examines the women's films as distinct from classical Hollywood movies:

The label "woman's film" refers to a genre of Hollywood films produced from the silent era through the 1950s and early '60s but most heavily concentrated and most popular in the 1930s and '40s. The films deal with a female protagonist and often appear to allow her significant access to point of view structures and the enunciative level of the filmic discourse. They treat problems defined as "female" . . . and, most crucially, are directed toward a female audience . . . The scenarios of the woman's film somehow seem immediately accessible in their presentation of the "obvious truths" of femininity with which we are all overly acquainted. (3)

Although Doane's work provides the necessary tools for understanding women's viewing pleasure, it is often too genre-specific to be used as a comprehensive model for feminist film criticism. Furthermore, the films of the forties to which Doane refers present images of straight white women, neglecting issues of difference except that of gender itself.
In their introduction to *Immortal, Invisible* (1995), Diane Carson, Linda Dittmar and Janice Welsch have presented the need as well as the problems associated with a focus on difference. They note:

On one side lie reductionism, essentialism, and the further oppression of women by women, since an undifferentiated focus on gender reduces all women's experience to a false common denominator . . . On the other side loom the risks of disagreement, demoralization, and the appropriation of gender identity to serve antifeminist agendas, for a heightened attention to differences threatens potentially useful coalitions. (2-3)

Carson, Dittmar and Welsch speak for a majority of feminist film theorists in citing the need for a middle-ground between complete differentiation and a homogenous category of woman in feminist film criticism.

Images of black lesbians in film present a rich opportunity to explore that middle-ground because they demand contemplation of issues of race, in addition to gender and sexuality. Black women, according to critic bell hooks, have historically occupied a position on the margins. Facing sexism from black men and racism from white women, they were excluded from political movements--most recently, the Black Power movement and the women's movement--where they could potentially have found a voice. These other oppressed groups, namely black men and white women, engaged in the oppression of black women instead of embracing them in their struggles. Consequently, black women were marginalized not once, but twice, and society left them with few opportunities for
social advancement. In the context of a discussion about rape, hooks writes:

As far back as slavery, white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last . . . Most Americans, and that includes black people, acknowledge and accept this hierarchy; they have internalized it either consciously or unconsciously. (52-53)

In addition to describing the basic foundation of the power structure in America, she raises the issue of black women’s role, not only in empowerment, but in their own oppression as well. Thus, the examination of images of black women and their impact on society must also account for the black woman’s agency, however small, in the construction of her own identity.

The marginalization of the black woman can be associated largely with the definition of her sexuality throughout American history. Due to the economics of slavery, black women were viewed as commodities, and their sexuality became a source of monetary gain. As the slave trade became more restricted, slave owners began to increase their property not by buying slaves but by breeding them. Thus, black women’s sexuality and their ability to bear children became their primary worth and the basis for their identity. Because of their value as breeders, black women became the victims of rape by white men. At the same time, white women were becoming the arbiters of morality and purity in American homes and society, in direct contrast to the position of black women. Hooks accurately describes the
situation:

As American white men idealized white womanhood, they sexually assaulted and brutalized black women... The deep hatred of woman that had been embedded in the white colonizer's psyche by patriarchal ideology and anti-woman religious teachings both motivated and sanctioned white male brutality against black women... Since woman was designated as the originator of sexual sin, black women were naturally seen as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust. They were labeled jezebels and sexual temptresses and accused of leading white men away from spiritual purity into sin. (32-3)

Thus, their bodies, as commodities, came to be viewed as dirty and undesirable. These negative connotations associated with black women has survived and often gets translated into sexual deviance in visual images of black women in popular culture, as in the case of the characters in the two films examined in this study.

Like black women, lesbians have found themselves in the sexual margins in a heterosexual social order that has left them without an identity at all. According to the opposition, widely assumed to be a natural state of existence rather than a social construction, women are defined only in relation to men, thereby eliminating the possibility for the inclusion of lesbians in a social order controlled by heterosexuality. Lesbians are excluded from the male-female opposition, according to Monique Wittig, because they are not considered women in a system in which sex is a political category:
The discourses which particularly oppress all of us, lesbians, women and homosexual men, are those which take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality . . . These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms. (24-25)

According to this logic, lesbian images in mainstream film can be understood only in terms of heterosexuality. Straight white America lacks the vocabulary needed to construct adequate descriptions of lesbians. Therefore, lesbians of color, in particular, find themselves forced into the margins, and we are left with insufficient and problematic visual representations of them.

This study examines the specific ways that film functions in the marginalization of black lesbians, thereby suggesting the hegemonic structure of the society which produced The Color Purple and Boys on the Side, and which perpetuates a hierarchy of difference. The examination of these cultural texts provides a means by which to explore the intersection of gender, race and sexuality within the contexts of other issues, such as female bonding and male violence against women. A look at the cultural context of these films provides insight into the broader role of popular entertainment in constructing a male-dominated social order that depends on denial of sexual and racial difference in order to function.

* * * *

The Color Purple and Boys on the Side frame a decade in which
mainstream America has attempted to deal with the existence of lesbianism. Because mainstream society cannot imagine a complex lesbian identity, lesbians remain in film and in life defined solely by their sexuality. Lesbians have appeared in the public eye recently in increasing numbers and in a variety of media, including, in addition to film, television, rock music and advertising. In many cases, these images show glamorous women representing an identity which offers a highly desirable alternative to the problems of conventional heterosexuality, thus creating the trend of "lesbian chic." Traces of this trend began to appear in the early 1990s, and Belinda Budge and Diane Hamer cite the August 1993 cover of Vanity Fair "featuring cross-dressing k. d. lang being shaved by supermodel Cindy Crawford" as an "internationally recognized symbol of the phenomenon of "lesbian chic"" (1). In addition to Crawford, other models such as Claudia Schiffer have posed in suggestively lesbian ads for such well-known clothing companies as Versace and Diesel. Furthermore, k. d. lang is not the only musician to publicly claim her sexuality. Melissa Etheridge, on her way to overwhelming success with mainstream audiences, came out in 1993 to a crowd at a gay and lesbian inaugural party (Cagle 28).

Well before the emergence of lesbian chic, in the 1980s, Sandra Bernhard broke new ground by publicly positioning herself as a lesbian icon and forcing at least a part of mainstream America to consider lesbianism. By performing stand-up comedy, appearing in film and television and implying an affair with Madonna, Bernhard has created an identity which insists that viewers reevaluate socially
accepted categories, often making them uncomfortable with what they discover. On the television sitcom *Roseanne*, Bernhard's openly bisexual character, Nancy, has prompted other storylines with gay and lesbian themes on the show. In one memorable and highly publicized episode, Nancy's date, played by Mariel Hemingway, kisses Roseanne, marking a milestone for lesbians as the first time that an openly lesbian character kissed another woman, straight or gay, on network television.

Although the situations for lesbians on *Roseanne* deal predominantly with a white experience, Bernhard explores the intersection of race and sexuality in her film, *Without You I'm Nothing* (1990), in which she performs for a largely black audience. Bernhard pokes fun at herself as a cultural thief, as a white performer who steals songs from black artists. Her privileged position as a white woman, combined with her marginalized lesbian identity, allows her to critique white America as she critiques herself. In describing her performance, Z. Isiling Nataf writes, "All the taboos and stereotypes and typical cross-race encounters are paraded out or parodied to the utter boredom of the black audience. White personae are also mocked, debased and deconstructed. In the process race categories reverse, collapse, merge and dissolve" (76). Going beyond race in the film, Bernhard attempts to deconstruct even the categories of woman and lesbian, by questioning their validity in her own identity.

Whoopi Goldberg represents another cultural figure who has proved problematic for mainstream America because her identity challenges societal
norms. However, mainstream society has accepted Goldberg because, in the end, she calms their fears about the threat of black women because she appears in a predominantly white context, in white films with white actors. Andrea Stuart assumes falsely that Goldberg's popularity comes from the fact that "she shares and reflects the mentality of shopping-mall America, whose black citizens, like its white, are not politicised or well dressed and whose only desire is to get on and get out, any which way they can" (67). Perhaps it is true that Goldberg chose "safe" roles in order to advance her acting career, but her acceptable public identity has been shaped largely by the perceptions imposed on her by society. For instance, she escapes the myths of sexual promiscuity placed on black women only because she is portrayed as completely asexual. Thus, when sexuality becomes an issue for her character, it is easily negated by the asexual identity that Goldberg brings with her as an actor. This public persona plays prominently in Goldberg's more recent roles such as Jane in Boys on the Side, although the roots of her current identity were present even in The Color Purple, which was her first major film role. Moreover, her asexuality makes her the logical choice for lesbian roles in mainstream films in which directors wish to avoid explicit sex scenes because viewers do not expect a love interest for Goldberg.

Perhaps the visibility of lesbian characters is important to a long-lived progression toward the acceptance of homosexuality in mainstream society, but the future of social equality for lesbians and gay men remains uncertain. A recent issue of Entertainment Weekly featured a special report on homosexuality in
popular entertainment, calling the current decade the "gay 90s" and giving a sugar-coated version of the status of gay men and lesbians both within the industry and in public opinion. However, results of a Gallup Poll conducted for the magazine do not present a very encouraging view of mainstream attitudes, despite the conclusions of the writer, who asserts that, "The majority of Americans are not condemning this revolution--most don't even think about it at all" (Cagle 29). Perhaps the writer finds it acceptable that sixty percent of the group polled were willing to admit to a pollster that they would find it offensive to view a same-sex kiss on television or that twenty-nine percent of the group would be less interested in a film or television show starring a favorite actor if they learned s/he was gay (27).

The assumptions about the status of gay men and lesbians in America put forth in the Entertainment Weekly article merely deny the life experiences of an entire group of people. The box-office success of Philadelphia, a film about AIDS, or the popularity of the music of the Indigo Girls does not necessarily equate with increased tolerance of homosexuality in American society. Both the film and the music actually serve as examples of the way in which homosexuality has been accepted by the mainstream in a neutralized form that does not force straight America to deal with issues of "other" sexuality. This type of premature self-congratulation on the part of "liberal" thinkers that emerges in public discourse (like the Entertainment Weekly article) proves harmful to the advancement of gay rights issues because it lulls society into thinking the problem is fixed. On the contrary, close readings of cultural texts reveal a complex system of oppression
that is often perpetuated by the increased visibility of the homosexual images themselves.

In particular, *The Color Purple* and *Boys on the Side* support the claim that mainstream society's acceptance of lesbianism in films stems not from tolerance of or enlightenment about lesbians but rather, from a desire to coopt lesbianism in order to control it. Both films attempt to depict lesbians in an open-minded and unself-conscious manner, one which "naturalizes" homosexuality, but succeed only in imposing mainstream, and thus white and heterosexual, values on the lesbian characters.

The films function ideologically on several levels, the first of which is a conscious level which includes the story that the film thinks it is telling. At this level the directors, Steven Spielberg and Herbert Ross, endeavor to construct films which include characters who challenge the social system within which they live and thereby question the world outside the films. The directors, however, cannot control or even acknowledge all of the societal factors that have gone into constructing their own conscious minds, so the film develops at an unconscious level as well, one that eludes the control of the director and creates meanings of its own. It is at this unconscious level that the film makes the transition from a liberal text that attempts to challenge oppressive social systems to a text that supports the status quo. The tension created by conscious and unconscious aspects of the films is precisely what makes the study of lesbian images in mainstream film so fascinating and necessary.
THE FILMS

The Lives of Black Women

When *The Color Purple* was released as a feature film, critical response ranged from praise to outrage. White critics in popular publications applauded the film's insightful portrayal of black experience. Many black women were elated at seeing themselves portrayed sympathetically on the screen, while much of the outrage concerning the film came from black men who felt they had been portrayed unfairly. In discussing the film's controversy, Cheryl Butler describes the views of Courtland Milloy, a black columnist from the *Washington Post* who had not even seen the film himself but whose views reflected those of many other male critics. Butler says Milloy “discounted the barbarous abuse of black women by black men at the film’s core, deeming it unworthy of critical examination,” while on the other hand, he and other black critics felt the violence of the man was absolutely detrimental to the image of black Americans (64). While the critics were undoubtedly resorting to rhetorical ploys to make their point, the impact of the film was nonetheless dramatic, based on the explosion of discourse it created.

Controversy surrounding *The Color Purple* raised fundamental questions about the power of film to damage the image of black men in America.

Interestingly, the images of black men abusing black women provide the main source of contention among viewers of the film with little to no attention given to the lesbian relationship, with the result that the discourse that evolved about the film centered almost entirely on the differences in reactions between black male
and black female spectators. For the time, issues of race and gender overshadowed the other aspects of the film, forcing lesbianism to the margins. Jacqueline Bobo conducted interviews with fifteen black women, asking them questions about their reactions to the novel and the film. She states that one woman was "angry with those critics of the film who characterized the bond between Shug and Celie as a homosexual relationship" (115). In the woman's own words:

I was very offended by things people were saying about this movie. When people started talking about homosexuality and lesbianism, that really offended me. As I read the book both times, I really didn't have any reaction that "this was a lesbian situation." (115)

The scarce appearance of lesbians throughout the history of film and in society at large, however, suggests that a mild version of lesbian sex scene between two black women is to be expected from Steven Spielberg, a commercially successful, white, male director. In *The Celluloid Closet* Vito Russo calls the kisses between the two women "sanitized" and goes on to quote Whoopi Goldberg who says, "According to Steven, middle America simply would not sit still for me on top and Shug on bottom, so we made it less explicit. This way we won't offend anyone" (278-80). The lesbian scene is so clean in fact, that the women in Bobo's study did not recognize or could choose not to recognize it as a sexual encounter. While a lesbian reading of the film is still possible, and crucial to an understanding of it, the director of such phenomenally popular films as *E. T.* and
Raiders of the Lost Ark is not using this film to challenge his adoring audience and become a proponent of lesbian issues.

However flawed and unfulfilled the lesbian sexuality may be in the film, it nonetheless exists, thus creating a significant contribution to the history of lesbians in American film. Aside from Personal Best (1982), which often depicts lesbianism in terms of male fantasy, The Color Purple is the only film up to the mid-1980s by a well-known director that presents lesbians to a mass audience. It is precisely because of the film's and the director's high visibility that the film is so interesting in terms of its lesbian content, for why would a filmmaker take such enormous risks to depict a subject about which he is so obviously uncomfortable? Spielberg himself attempts to explain his motivations, while also talking around the uncomfortable question of race and completely ignoring sexuality. He says:

I realized that I knew a lot about people. And the book is about people. It leaps over stereotypes and over any sort of racial questions. I felt that if it was a racial question, if the book had dealt very heavily in black and white issues, one perhaps against the other, in conflict with the other, then I wouldn't have been the right director for the project and I would not have done the movie. (qtd. in Bobo 75-6)

So by his own admission, Spielberg set out to tell a "human tale," one which reduces human identities to universal types and ignores the specificity of black experience. In this sense, lesbianism remains problematic for him because he cannot reduce it to a universal identity.
Perhaps lesbianism actually functions, not as a threat to, but as support for the dominant ideology behind the film. A close examination of the predominant strains of meaning in the film reveals a complex network of relationships in which lesbianism constitutes important intersections of race and sexuality, and sisterhood and male oppression. While all of these themes work to construct a definition of lesbianism, the reverse is also true; the appearance of lesbians functions in structuring the logic of the film by solidifying the position of the other issues within a network of meaning.

The issue of race influences all of the other threads of meaning in a film in which the majority of characters are black and moreover, plays a key role in the depiction of a socially unacceptable behavior, lesbian sexuality, in a film made for mainstream audiences. While the film aligns the viewer with the black characters, by assuming their point-of-view or more obviously by telling their story, it nonetheless reminds us of their subservient status in a white-dominated world. Whiteness is the norm and blackness is other; similarly, men are the normative characters while women exist only in opposition to men. The violence inflicted on Sofia in the white mob, for instance, stems only partially from her role as a woman; the crowd and the sheriff attack her also because of her race. The mob encircling her during this scene voices both sexist and racist sentiments with shouts of “You black bitch!”

Although the film presents only a few white characters, their presence is enough to define the traditional black-white opposition, which positions the black
characters, especially black women, on the outside of society. The white woman, while presented as silly and incompetent, also possesses the social standing and power which allows her the luxury to act any way she chooses. She makes a fool of herself by attempting to drive but only managing to run people off the streets and crash the car into the curb. Despite her comical depiction, her position in the social hierarchy allows her to dominate Sofia as if she were a slave, even though the film begins in 1909. For instance, Sofia is forced to go to work for the woman in return for being released from prison, simply because the white woman demands it. The mob's attack on Sofia and her subsequent imprisonment, both in jail and as the white woman's maid, emphasizes the utter lack of power possessed by black women.

The incident involving Sophia is indicative of the position of the other black females in the film, as well as representative of a greater reality that existed in American society at the time and continues today. As noted previously, some black feminists have drawn attention to the marginalization of black women by both black men and white women throughout the history of the United States. The film exposes this position of black women while simultaneously exploiting it. According to the assumptions of society which impose a subservient role on black women based on their roots in slavery, their sexuality must also be relegated to the fringes. Such thinking insists that all black female sexuality, including heterosexuality, is deviant, and therefore, the shift to lesbianism is not so shocking. Thus, a film such as The Color Purple can present lesbianism as an option for
black females whose sexuality could never conform to the boundaries defined by a society dominated by straight white males.

Sexuality cannot be separated from issues of race, but the lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie is also tied up in the issue of sisterhood, a highly visible thread in the film, which motivates much of the action of the plot and offers a positive alternative for women outside of traditional male-dominated relationships. The two literal sisters, Celie and Nettie, provide the framing for the film, thus creating a powerful bond that is tightly constructed and visually dramatic. Creating a cyclical framework for the narrative, they begin the story playing together as children in the same field of purple flowers where they are reunited in the end as grown women. The opening scene shows the two girls singing a song that says, "Me and you must never part," and playing a hand-game which introduces a recurring visual image of sisterhood, the hands, and foreshadows their separation.

This scene also foreshadows the lesbian relationship and provides an interesting moment in the film during which the lesbianism emerges unchecked by Spielberg or the narrative. The scene fits perfectly within Spielberg's lush visual imagery and was undoubtedly included primarily for its aesthetic value, as well as for its reference to the film's title. Despite Spielberg's intentions, the suggestion of an association between lesbians and the color violet cannot be ignored, either by lesbian viewers or by an enlightened audience. From the beginning then, the imagery of the purple flowers imposes lesbian overtones on the theme of
sisterhood, which is not to imply a sexual relationship between the two sisters but to introduce lesbianism as an aspect of the realm of sororal bonds. On this level, lesbianism not only subverts the control of the film but also manages to avoid cooptation by the mainstream.

After Celie marries Mr. __, an often violent man, Nettie comes to stay with her and the girls play the hand-game in the yard with Mr. ___ looking on. With an over-the-shoulder camera angle from the porch, he tries to divide the girls visually by moving the newspaper to block Celie's entire image from the frame. However, he fails to erase her because her hands are still visible and in contact with Nettie. The next shot is a reverse angle in which the girls' hands are placed prominently in the frame, and Mr. ___ is a tiny figure beyond them. Although he appears to sit between the sisters, thus dividing them, their hands continue to touch and actually clap together on top of his body. In another scene, the sisters are in the bedroom at night, and we view the interaction of their shadows on the wall and hear their voices, mocking Mr. ___'s affections for Nettie. This visual image depicts the private nature of relationships between women. The bond between them becomes complete when they hug, and the shadows on the wall merge into one. As an outsider Mr. ___ stands listening on the stairs outside the room, unable to accept the sororal relationship that does not require a man and again unable to divide the girls.

The threat to male authority means that the theme of sisterhood is constantly being tried and "its resiliency put to the test" (Butler 66). The paramount test
comes when Mr. ___ physically rips the girls apart, and they are forced to maintain their bond across great distances. Hence, the film is consistent with Cheryl Butler's claim that sisterhood is perceived as a threat by those who remain outside of it, namely men. She says:

The lesson is that sisterhood and the strength it fosters must remain secret, and the structure of *The Color Purple* makes silent communication and blind sight possible. (67)

Although Celie and Nettie are being punished for openly nurturing and celebrating the bond between them and although they must endure a separation, their relationship survives across decades and continents, though without the strength achieved through physical proximity. The language of the hands nurtures a strength in sisterhood that fades with physical division. The first thing Nettie and Celie do when they reunite in the end is touch hands in order to renew the sororal bond that suffered as a result of their separation.

The ocean between the sisters, when Nettie goes to Africa, forces Celie to find strength elsewhere. Since Mr. ___ intercepts all of Nettie's letters, Celie has no idea that their sisterhood survives, except in her own hopes. Once Shug and Celie find all of the letters, the sisterhood is revived. The act of writing by Nettie and the act of touching the letters by Celie, both performed by the hands, again unites the sisters, although not as strongly as before. The use of editing to connect the United States and Africa presents Celie and Nettie in parallel scenes, which visually renews the theme of literal sisterhood. In an interesting use of
juxtaposition, when Celie hears a noise behind her and turns to look, an elephant bursts through the reeds. When Celie sits in her church she looks up to see a bulldozer come through the wall. These parallels between Georgia and the Olinka village, with Nettie’s voice-over narration of the letters, again develop the strength of the bond between two sisters despite thousands of miles and many years of distance. This sequence also serves to remind the viewer of the historical link between the black characters and their African heritage, thereby emphasizing racial difference in a film that does not explicitly dwell on race. Moreover, these scenes also speak to the assumptions that black Americans, like Celie, may have had about Africa and about its wilderness and so-called uncivilized landscapes.

Despite the priority given to actual sisters, the theme of sisterhood exists within relationships between all kinds of women, even those who have cause for contention, which usually arises as the result of a man. However, the women overcome these superficial quarrels and subvert the divisions created by men. For example, Celie and Sofia form an intimate sisterly relationship despite the fact that Celie tells Harpo to beat Sofia to teach her a woman’s place. Though she is complicit in the perpetuation of male oppression through Harpo, she learns from Sofia that a woman can have an independent self. Men, namely her Pa and then Mr. ___, have taught Celie the logic of abuse, and Sofia must revise these lessons by appealing to Celie’s sense of sisterhood.

The bond formed by this exchange expresses itself in the scene in the general store when Celie gathers the groceries for the weakened Sofia. Sofia is
physically unable to perform the task given her by her white employer, so Celie does it for her, using only her hands, not words to carry out the act of kindness. Celie uses the language of the hands that she used with Nettie, to foster strength in sororal bonds. When the women leave the store they communicate silently: Sofia mouths the words “Thank you,” and Celie motions with her hands for Sofia to keep her chin up. The love between them does not need words, suggesting the existence of a truly sisterly voice which is spoken with the hands and with unselfish acts of kindness. Since spoken language exists in the realm of men, women must find their own ways of communicating in order to find a sanctuary within the male world. Sisters, both literal and figurative ones, create a language through their hands, using hand games and encouraging gestures to communicate their bond. Moreover, the language of the hands is one that does not exist among men and can thus provide security from them. This separate language allows women to create a world that is secluded from the male-dominated world.

While the lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie develops within this sororal context and in ways similar to those between “sisters,” their bond exhibits itself in different ways, perhaps in order to propose an alternative to traditional forms of female bonding. In the beginning Shug and Celie too must overcome contention caused by a man. They become friends and develop a sexually intimate relationship because of the fact that they are both having sex with the same man. Interestingly, a strong connection and a heightened understanding is achieved between the two women in the context of a discussion about sex with Mr.
After a game of dress-up in which Celie wears Shug's clothes, Celie reveals the fact that Mr. ___ beats her because he wishes she was Shug. The dress-up game and the reference to Mr. ___'s preference for Shug only emphasizes what the film has already established, that is, the physical opposition between the two women. Whereas the film defines Shug as light-skinned, feminine, graceful and beautiful, it presents Celie as dark-skinned, masculine, clumsy and ugly. Louise Allen's discussion of a film starring kd lang carries significance in this instance as well. She argues, "Performative racial identities in Salmonberries are interconnected with performative roles of butch and femme which position the femme as a version of ideal white womanhood and the butch as the 'other'--as in the discourse of racial difference" (82). Thus, while Shug remains marginalized simply because she is black, she is superior to Celie because she is closer to a white woman and therefore higher on the social scale. The distinction between them is compounded by how ridiculous and awkward Celie looks in Shug's ultra-feminine dress. The scene progresses from a childlike game to a more mature sexual encounter. The camera only remains on them long enough to show a few passionless kisses before it pans to a shot of windchimes in the corner of the bedroom, a move which is intended to imply that the sexual encounter continues but that the audience will be spared from actually witnessing it. Here the juxtaposition of sisterhood and lesbian sex is problematic in presenting sex between women not on its own terms but rather within the realm of sisterhood.

However, this is not to imply that the intimacy between Shug and Celie
develops purely as a result of a common sexual partner. Their relationship grows over a period of time for a variety of reasons, as seen in several episodes in the film. The first time the women are alone together is during a bath scene, in which Celie attends to a naked Shug, suggesting the intimacy that develops later. Unlike conventional bathing scenes in which the woman's body is objectified purely for the male viewer, this scene defies the male gaze and replaces it with Celie's gaze; she is the one looking at Shug's naked body. The camera angle favors Celie's point-of-view until it presents the women together in the frame. Thus, the desire for the woman is shifted from the male viewer to the female character and consequently to the female viewer. Although the sexual relationship is not yet explicit in this scene, the privileging of the female gaze is significant in expressing an intimate bond between women.

The relationship between them begins to flourish when Celie comforts Shug by brushing her hair, and the two women hum a song together. As he does earlier when Nettie and Celie are whispering and laughing in the bedroom, Mr. ___ listens from outside of the room and recognizes his exclusion from the realm of sisterhood. In fact, the process of bonding here closely resembles that earlier scene between Nettie and Celie in that they both create a protected space within the man's house in which sisterhood can flourish. Andrea Weiss sees these parallel scenes as problematic for a lesbian reading of the film:

Celie's lesbian relationship with the sexual Shug is minimized in favor of Celie's sororal longing for Nettie, and in fact the former can best be
characterized as an inadequate substitute for the latter. (80)

This point then raises the issue of the purpose of lesbianism in the film. Its inclusion could be to present an unsatisfactory alternative to traditional bonds of sisterhood, as Weiss suggests, thereby discouraging women from stepping over the conventional boundaries of emotional expression between women and into lesbianism.

While it is true that Celie longs for the love of her sister, I would argue that her relationship with Shug serves a purpose other than that of a substitute. The sexual relationship between them is a vehicle for Celie to create an identity for herself that she did not know was possible. With the attention given her by Shug, Celie begins to view herself as a whole person who is worthy and capable of feelings such as desire and self-love and pleasure and who learns the lesson expressed by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, that "you your best thing" (335). It is precisely this awareness of self that becomes a means of escape from the confines of heterosexuality for Celie. Once the realization that she is worthy of respect and adoration comes, she is able to break Mr. ___'s hold on her and move beyond even the protected spheres of sisterhood. Although her relationships with women continue to give her strength, she can finally move on to a phase of self-reliance that exists outside of both heterosexuality and lesbianism.

Shug begins to help Celie find her own worth in the scene in the juke joint, immediately preceding the kiss scene, when Shug again defies the male gaze, this time intentionally, in favor of Celie's gaze when she sings "Miss Celie’s Blues."
During the preceding song the men in the audience attempt to attract Shug's attention by leering and shouting sexually explicit comments at her, but she ignores them. The only person she addresses directly is Celie, and she sings the entire song to her alone. She sings the word “sister” but follows it with the line, “I'm keepin' my eyes on you,” thus invoking the language of sisterhood to imply an intimate bond. These lyrics, both sororal and sexy, represent the fundamental connection between sisterhood and lesbianism.

Later, when they are alone, Shug helps Celie overcome a lifetime of shame about her smile, which begins early in the film when Celie's step-father tells her, “Celie, you got the ugliest smile this side of creation,” as a means of keeping her under his control. However, during the kiss scene, Celie lowers her hands and laughs, and in a sympathetic response Shug covers her own mouth, as if to shoulder Celie's responsibility momentarily. Consequently, Shug is the first one to be allowed beyond the wall, and when Celie finally lowers her hands and smiles openly, she gives herself completely to Shug. Their sexual encounter is marked by expressions of the mouth, the smile and the kiss, as opposed to the hands which are the means of communication between sisters. Finally, it is the lesbian relationship, not the sororal one, that serves as the catalyst for Celie's self-discovery, thereby distinguishing further between the different bonds between women. Shug is not merely a substitute for Nettie but rather, a partner for Celie in her own right.

At its most powerful moment, however, lesbianism stands in direct contrast
to the violence of males. When the intensity of overt male oppression is most apparent, so too is the passion of the lesbian relationship. During the second scene in which Celie shaves Mr. ___ on the porch, Celie's hateful and murderous emotions build to a climax in which Shug grabs Celie from behind and prevents her from cutting Mr. ___'s throat. Shug's hold on Celie and their heavy breathing create a heightened degree of sexual tension that exists in no other part of the film, even in the scene in the bedroom. While the kiss scene stands as a significant moment in the history of lesbian images in film, it lacks the sexual excitement present in this scene which is not marked explicitly as a sex scene. The passion of lesbianism arises not in the seclusion of a feminine space but rather as a direct and desperate response to male violence. Passion, like language, between women can only exist within a male context.

While the relationship between Shug and Celie provides an escape from a violent relationship with a man, one that is distinct from the relationship between sisters, the film does not present lesbianism as a viable alternative to traditional heterosexual bonds. In order to assure the subordinate status of sexual relationships between women, the lesbian scenes are framed by displays of heterosexual power. Just after Shug's performance of "Miss Celie's Blues" Shug pulls Celie out of the juke joint when a huge fight breaks out. As they leave the images of the women are bound together between the looming shadows of two fighting men on the wall. The enlarged size and the physical action of the shadows of the men symbolize the power of masculinity and the threat of
heterosexual domination over the women. The women escape, together, through the door between the shadows, temporarily eluding the male domination displayed by the barroom brawl. Recognition of the male's position and the strength of the patriarchal order is never far from the women's seclusion since they discuss heterosexual sex before their sexual encounter, and the following scene is Shug's attempt at reconciliation with her father. Hence, lesbianism functions only within the confines of the heterosexual power structure, which defines the extent to which it can be considered an alternative to traditional male-female relationships.

Conversely, lesbianism defines the bounds of acceptable heterosexuality. While the film maintains the position of power of males throughout the film and restores the credibility of the male figure in the end with the redemption of Mr. ___'s character, it certainly does not condone male violence as the means of establishing such power. The pivotal Thanksgiving dinner scene in which Celie finally confronts Mr. ___ concerning his abuse of her, including both the physical beatings and her enforced separation from Nettie, indicates the film's own condemnation of male violence toward women. Furthermore, the viewer sympathizes with Sofia when the sheriff knocks her unconscious and disfigures her face, thus reinforcing the film's criticism of physical male dominance.

On the other hand, the film endorses seemingly benign forms of male domination that are intrinsic to the structure of heterosexuality. For example, the relationship between Harpo and Sofia does not function while he attempts to overpower her with physical force. It could be argued that their relationship fails to
function because Sofia is a strong woman who does not allow herself to be dominated. While this point is valid, it is also true that Harpo possesses the option of beginning a new relationship, as he does with Squeak, while Sofia falls victim to the violent potential of the patriarchal system and her strength is suppressed. Thus, even when violence is removed from male-female relationships, male domination still manifests itself but in much more subtle forms.

Lesbianism then, serves as an option only to abusive heterosexual relationships, a refuge from the violence of men, not as an alternative to the heterosexual bond. The lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie, for instance, provides security for Celie from the abuse inflicted upon her by Mr. _.__, but it does not endure because Shug always chooses sexual fulfillment with a man over that with a woman. Although the two women remain friends throughout the rest of the film, their sexual relationship vanishes in favor of Shug's marriage to a man. Even when Celie and Squeak both decide to leave their husbands, they do so only by attaching themselves to the married couple, Shug and Grady. The film, therefore, promotes the image of non-violent heterosexual relationships as the ideal form of human bonding, while it suggests lesbianism as an option, preferably a temporary one, only to be considered in extreme instances.

Women on the Road

*Boys on the Side*, produced a decade after *The Color Purple*, also by a commercially successful white male director, provides some insight into the current
position of lesbians within an ideology of a male-dominated society in America. Herbert Ross, director of Footloose and Steel Magnolias, attempted to make a film that would be perceived as representative of “women’s issues,” but what he actually accomplished was to make a film about women as seen through a male lens. He takes on the stories of three women--one a black lesbian, one a white heterosexual with AIDS and one a pregnant white woman--who are supposed to represent the diversity of female America. However, in a film that attempts to address controversial issues, the portrayals of the three main characters as well as the numerous secondary characters fail to cross conventional boundaries and come off as cliched representations. Moreover, the film is awkward in its self-conscious attempt to be unself-conscious, failing to directly discuss those issues which it most overtly addresses, such as lesbianism or race, both of which are tied up in the character of Jane, played by Whoopi Goldberg.

Similar to the bonds between sisters in The Color Purple, the friendships between women in Boys on the Side motivate much of the action of the film. As a result of individual crises in the lives of all three women and a murder in which they all have a role, Jane, Robin (Mary-Louise Parker) and Holly (Drew Barrymore) bond together both out of necessity and from a friendly attraction for each other. In this sense, the film is another attempt at creating a women’s version of the classic male buddy road film with the characters driving cross-country, building a relationship on a common desire to escape the law or achieve a sense of freedom. However, Boys on the Side aligns itself not with the tradition of male films, such as
Easy Rider and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, but with the female revision of the form. In fact, early in the film Jane makes a reference to Thelma & Louise (1991), the film that set a highly visible and controversial precedent for the creation of the female road film genre. Just after they take Holly away from her abusive boyfriend whom they have unknowingly killed, Jane says, "I am not goin' over a cliff for you two, so just forget it," referring to the last scene of Ridley Scott's well-known film. Jane's comment functions within the narrative to establish the boundaries of her friendships with Holly and Robin. Moreover, this touch of self-reflexivity serves as an acknowledgment both of the film itself as a form and of its place in film history. Ross knows that he is situated within a context of films containing leading women characters and openly notes his position. The sentimentality of the film also places it within a context of so-called women's films which value emotionality, with which Ross has already placed himself with previous films such as Steel Magnolias.

Boys on the Side actually resembles the latter category more than the former, which it initially introduces; in fact, it varies greatly from typical road films in that the characters settle in one place rather than developing their story on the road. The storyline focuses more on the enduring aspects of relationships between women than on the temporary facets of friendships formed on the run. Robin gives voice to the film's underlying logic concerning these uniquely female

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2 For a feminist discussion of the position of Thelma & Louise within the genre of the male road film, see Manohla Dargis.
friendships, during a scene in the courtroom where Holly is on trial for murder. In her testimony she says, "I don't know what it is, but there's something that goes on between women. You men know that because it's the same for you." The last part of this statement is full of irony when considered in its context in a courtroom, a symbol of the male Law. Robin performs the role of a respectful, cooperative servant of the law, while completely undermining its authority. For instance, she mocks the authority of the oath by lying and then asking God to strike her with a deadly disease if she fails to tell the truth, an ironic gesture for a woman with AIDS. Thus, while trying to appease the male prosecutor, by outwardly drawing parallels between men and women, she subversively establishes a distinction between male and female relationships.

Later in her testimony, Robin gives further insight into the nature of female relationships by saying that "like speaks to like" and that "love doesn't always keep," thereby espousing the naturalness of same-sex friendships and suggesting a universality among female bonds. Female friendships endure even when love, implicitly heterosexual in this film, does not. However, Robin's words, "like speaks to like," contradict the definitions of women previously established by the film through issues of race and sexuality. In fact, the color of a person's skin and her sexual orientation strictly determine the terms of friendship. In the first scene when Jane and Robin initially meet, the film constructs their characters as absolute representations of white and non-white. Jane establishes Robin as "the whitest woman on the face of the earth, singing Carpenters' songs and reliving childhood
memories." As the film progresses, we see her as a non-smoking mini-van driver who is obsessively clean, prissy and organized and who cries at the end of sentimental movies like *The Way We Were*. Jane's character then, stands in opposition to all of these qualities, and we see her as sloppy, foul-mouthed, anti-sentimental and aggressive. While the film presents the traditional logic of the dominant ideology in which whiteness assumes the position of the "norm" and relegates everything else to the margins of "other," it does not even allow Jane the blackness of her identity. Her character and her black identity exist not in their blackness but in their non-whiteness.

The same polarization occurs in regard to sexuality, which also determines the boundaries of friendship. Robin and Holly establish the normative female sexuality as heterosexual with lesbianism being marginalized. Even in its most problematic forms--Robin is dying and Holly is abused--heterosexuality takes the central position in relationships among women by defining their boundaries. The film establishes physical touch as the means by which these boundaries are set and relationships are categorized. Interestingly, touching does not exist in close relationships between women in which sexual attraction could be implied. For instance, Jane only touches Robin one time and that is in the hospital when she must keep her from injuring herself. Physical contact is not acceptable in their relationship because the question of sexual attraction, at least on Jane's part and possibly on Robin's side as well, exists and must be quelled. At one point Holly even asks Robin if she has been sleeping with Jane, thus raising questions about
the nature of their friendship both for the characters and the viewer. On the other hand, Holly and Robin touch often, since no suspicions exist as to the degree of intimacy in their friendship. In one of the car scenes, Jane drives while Holly and Robin sit close to each other in the back seat, painting each other's nails and dancing. The image of the two straight white women in the back seat, viewed in contrast to that of the black lesbian in the front, alone, represents the distance that actually exists between women rather than the universality that Robin suggests. Later, when Holly prepares to return to Pittsburgh, she hugs Robin but not Jane. Granted, Jane is furious with her for returning to her abusive boyfriend, but the contrast between the different relationships is nonetheless made visually clear by the hug. Thus, on an unconscious level, the film feels comfortable with straight women having physical contact, but lesbians cannot use touch in any form to express their feelings for fear of suggesting sexual excitement. Even in the hospital when Jane talks to Robin, who has tubes in her nose and an I.V. in her arm, Jane pulls her hand away when Robin reaches to touch it. On a conscious level, Jane's reaction suggests a knowledge on her part that she cannot have access to the touch of a heterosexual white women, even as an act of friendship.

The positionality of race and sexuality creates a hierarchy based on difference that emphasizes the categories of woman put forth by the film. The focus on these differences defines general types of women by making various assumptions about the nature of women of color or of white women or of lesbians. For instance, white women are naturally heterosexual, although they encounter
punishment when they act on their sexuality outside the established boundaries of marriage. Robin contracts the virus which causes AIDS when she has an affair with a bartender. In the world of the film, deviation from the heterosexual center results in negative social consequences and even death.

Accordingly, the deviance of black female sexuality again comes into play, much as it did in *The Color Purple*. Images of black women engaged in sexual activity have traditionally remained invisible and been treated as a taboo subject. Even when they do appear, their images are engulfed by some larger context, whether it is sisterhood or the Law. *Boys on the Side*, with all its liberal aspirations, stands as yet another example of this practice of suppression. As in the case of Celie, Jane stands outside of traditional binary oppositions. Again, Jane represents the position of black women as a group who are excluded from the male-female opposition which assumes white subjects and from the black-white opposition which assumes male subjects. She remains an outsider from the conventions of a society that does not know how to deal with her.

From the straight white perspective, lesbian sexuality is not a tremendous shift from black sexuality, since the black woman is already set against the norm and hence pushed to the fringes of society. It is no mere coincidence that the majority of lesbians shown in the film belong to a minority group. The woman at the hotel desk, with whom Jane is flirting, is black. Anna, the owner of the lesbian bar, is Hispanic. The other nameless, speechless lesbians in the bar are non-white as well but not even developed enough to possess a defined ethnicity. They
are all similarly situated on the fringes of society even though they exist within the frame. The film then uses Jane's character as the dumping site for all deviant behavior since the two white women still have some chance of conforming to the norm despite their histories of straying from the path of socially condoned behavior. Even Robin, whose fate cannot be reversed, has a chance for redemption simply because she is a straight white woman. Jane, on the other hand, can be as rebellious as she wants to be because she has no hope of ever being socially accepted. In the beginning of the film, Jane walks down the middle of a New York street, shouting ethnic slurs at a passing cab driver, and later, she has a physical confrontation with Nick, Holly's boyfriend, none of which is considered socially acceptable behavior by a film that values white femininity as defined by Robin.

During the course of the film Jane's sexual orientation becomes a key issue for the other characters. While lesbianism is discussed openly, gender and race become submerged in the film's self-conscious attempt to be "progressive." However, gender cannot be ignored in a film whose title constantly reminds us that women exist only in relation to men, that women can bond only after they put "boys on the side." And race is not invisible when the film repeatedly reminds the viewer of racial differences, such as when Jane mimics the mammy character from Gone With the Wind, telling Robin. "You free, Miss Scarlet, you free!" Race and gender are never dealt with on their own terms but only in relation to the dominant social system. Jane's location at the center of the film and at the intersection of race, sexuality and gender assures her a place at the bottom of the social hierarchy,
leaving her open to examination by the dominant culture.

The relationship between Jane and Abe, the policeman who marries Holly in the end, presents an example of how a marginalized character stands in relation to a mainstream institution, namely the Law. When Jane vents her anger at Abe for having turned Holly into the police for Nick's murder, he defends himself by saying, "I do know there is no kind of family without the law, none whatsoever, because the law that governs this society is the same law that holds the family together." The family about which Abe speaks is implicitly heterosexual and male-dominated, since it is controlled by the male Law. The film clearly ironizes Abe's character, depicting him as a fool and his speech as absurd. Thus, on the conscious level, the film attempts to ridicule Abe's complete devotion to the Law and to challenge the ideological assumptions of this hegemonic structure. However, on the unconscious level, the film defines adherence to the institutions of family and marriage as the only means of achieving a happy ending. Holly and Abe, with their marriage and the baby, and their conspicuous sexuality, are the only contented characters in the end because Robin dies, and Jane continues her journey to California sad and alone. The last shot of Jane driving leads directly into flashbacks of the film while the credits roll, thereby reviewing the steps which led to this ending and reinforcing, on an unconscious level, the film's position on the issues it has just presented. These final images, which are immediately preceded by Holly's marriage, Robin's death and Jane's departure, suggest that although their friendships have provided the impetus for the film, submission to the Law and
the family present the only desirable outcome for the characters.

Though Abe's statement relates specifically to his situation with Holly and his need for her to submit to the judicial process before they can be married, it also reflects significantly on Jane's position in the film. According to Abe's definition of the family and its necessary function in the realization of a happy ending, Jane could never find herself in a positive situation at the end of the film. Her exclusion from the straight white norm also excludes her from the happy ending, which is defined by the norm. Even Robin's alternative definition of family offers little possibility for Jane's outcome in the film. At the courthouse Robin tells Jane, as a means of reconciling after an argument, "You are my family and I love you," thus presenting a vision of a family that does not rely on marriage and heterosexual love and the Law. Instead, Robin's version of family depends on bonds created through trust and compassion and friendship. Finally, however, this kind of family cannot provide the happiness and endurance of Abe's version of the family, and Jane again fails to surmount the hegemony of heterosexuality.

The Law, as represented by the prosecutor in Holly's trial, also serves to define Jane by literally examining her character. When she is on the stand, he asks, "Are--you--gay?" to which she replies, "Yes--I--am, and I'm sure you hear that from women all the time, but in my case it happens to be true." Her answer makes a statement about openly acknowledging sexuality in a mainstream setting, a move that the film pretends to support by making the lawyer appear foolish. However, Jane's uncolseted lesbianism actually hurts Holly's case by raising suspicions
about Holly’s own sexuality and thus her credibility. Lesbianism may be commercially chic, but it still holds little power within the law of the dominant society. Furthermore, Jane’s implication that straight women had lied to the lawyer about their sexuality suggests that lesbianism provides an outlet for heterosexual women from unwanted advances from heterosexual men. In this sense, lesbianism becomes an abstraction rather than a reality for heterosexuals, who use it as a tool within their straight relationships, and it again exists only in relation to the norm.

Men are not the only characters to openly examine and critique lesbianism, and to define the criteria by which it is judged. In fact, the film depicts this examination by women of the lesbian identity in the diner scene where Holly tells Robin that Jane is gay. She reduces the entire lesbian community into a single identity that can be described in less than a minute. According to Holly, who claims not to be an expert but speaks with a tone of authority, lesbians are “very emotional, . . . love uniforms” and hate to have their hearts broken, all details that have either been omitted from or contradicted by the lesbian identity presented thus far. For instance, while Jane cannot be described as unfeeling, since she displays a temper as well as compassion, she also cannot be described as “very emotional.” In fact, she is less emotional than the other characters. Furthermore, no women specifically marked as lesbians appear in uniforms. And finally, it is doubtful whether lesbians hate to have their hearts broken more than anyone else. Robin speaks bitterly about her relationship with the bartender who betrayed her trust and gave her the AIDS virus, thereby exhibiting as much disdain for a broken
heart as Jane does. Thus, Holly's attempt at enlightenment says more about straight white America's failure to adequately describe lesbianism than about an existing lesbian identity. Jane herself never describes her lesbian experience so the viewer is left with the definitions of others who categorize and marginalize lesbians.

Holly continues her examination of lesbianism by placing it in relation to straight women, namely herself and Robin. She says, "I know, ooh gross, but don't worry, she won't try anything, especially not after me," thereby attempting to create a sense of security about the divisions of sexuality, while also hinting at a potential attraction that may never have occurred to Robin otherwise. This scene presents the first time that Robin consciously considers that Jane might be gay and that she might have a crush on Robin. It is also the first time that Robin, who had previously said, "Ooh," as well, at the mention of lesbianism, questions her own sexuality and perhaps begins to develop an attraction for Jane. Her sudden realization of the instability of the boundaries of sexuality marks the beginning of her examination of those lines, as well as the film's own experimentation with boundaries between women. The scenes that follow in which the friendship between Jane and Robin grows, actually provides more insight into lesbianism than the scenes that the film marks as explicitly lesbian.

Even the scenes in the lesbian bar offer little insight into any complex lesbian identity because the women there exist only in the periphery. When the camera pans around the bar, which is owned by an Hispanic woman, it reveals
lesbian couples who are comprised mostly of women of color. This camera pan, which only lasts a few seconds, functions in significant ways in the film, aside from its role as an expository tool. First, the camera movement is slow and smooth, implying an air of nonchalance, while the content within the frame reveals subjects about which the film feels uptight and self-conscious. The director exploits the marketability of lesbian chic most obviously in this scene which includes performances by the Indigo Girls, a widely popular and openly lesbian duet, and suggests an inside look at the secret lives of lesbians. The soundtrack comprised entirely of the music of female artists, many of whom are lesbians, permeates the film. However, the concept of lesbian chic actually acts as a distancing mechanism, constructing lesbian images that are glamorous and somehow just out of reach of the narrative. Lesbians pose a threat to the dominant social structure precisely because they are able to elude the definitions on which the structure is built and sustains itself. During one of the scenes in the car Holly describes her attraction to her ex-boyfriend and says, "I think there's something beyond sex," to which Jane replies, "Yeah, me." There is simply no room for her in a system constructed from a rigid set of oppositions. Furthermore, the film explicitly defines her as a lesbian but constructs her character as asexual, in direct opposition to Holly's hypersexual character. Therefore, the "something beyond sex" which Jane represents, is no sex at all.

The film makes clear that the instability of a lesbian identity must be contained within the realm of heterosexuality, which is another function of the
camera pan in the bar. After showing the Indigo Girls on stage and a lesbian
couple slow dancing, the camera comes to rest on Jane and the straight white male
bartender who are discussing the viability of heterosexuality in America. The
bartender notes that the only people having sex anymore are homosexuals, and
when Jane suggests that he try it he professes his heterosexuality, commenting, “I
think heterosexuality is gonna make a comeback.” This statement implies that at
some point heterosexuality lost its place as the dominant form of sexuality and
gives the false impression that straight men have become a minority group. On the
surface, this position appears to hold some validity, since the bartender makes this
statement in a room where he is the only straight male. However, the sentiment
that he expresses comes not from the experience of oppression but rather from the
threat of losing his position of undeniable authority. The bartender attempts to
dismiss the importance of lesbians by referring to them as “girls,” as if they lacked
the maturity needed to make accurate decisions and that perhaps if they
possessed that maturity they would choose a straight identity. The irony of his
statement about heterosexuality gaining popularity and of his use of the term “girls”
speaks to the fear created in heterosexual society by the very existence of
lesbianism on any scale.

While the conversation between Jane and the bartender, and the friendship
between Jane and Holly, both provide instances of stark contrast between
heterosexuality and lesbianism, the relationship between Jane and Robin suggests
something in between. Robin calls it family, but as we have seen, she does not
mean it in the traditional sense. Perhaps what Robin calls family is actually a lesbian relationship without the sex but including the desire. The film makes no secret of Jane's desire for Robin, which is in keeping with her sexuality and what Holly describes as her problem with getting "crushes on straight girls." However, the film also hints at Robin's desire for Jane. In her courtroom testimony she denies a lesbian sexuality but adds, "at times I understand the inclination." In the context of her explanation of the universal relationships between women, her statement implies her desire to form bonds with women at the exclusion of men. She uses this final sentiment to achieve a degree of rebelliousness in the face of the law to which she had seemingly been so obedient.

In the context of her relationship with Jane, however, this statement has different connotations altogether. Here, Robin's understanding of the inclination implies that the boundaries between her heterosexuality and Jane's lesbianism are not as absolute as the film originally establishes. Early in the trip, Robin describes her sexuality implicitly in her version of the American dream. She says, "It's not very liberated, I know. I want a husband with a decent job, and I want two kids, a boy and a girl, in that order, and a soapbox colonial with three bedrooms, a sun porch, a stairway with a white barister and a convertible den," to which Jane replies, "You could've been Donna Reed in another life." Robin's original dream does not allow for any variations in the heterosexual order, although later the dream seems no longer to hold significance for her life, especially in the face of her death. Perhaps when the heterosexual dream becomes an impossibility,
lesbianism appears as an alternative, or as a last resort.

In fact, the first hint at a mutual attraction between Jane and Robin occurs when Robin is hospitalized and her illness is first made apparent. When Jane tells her, "I don't want you to worry about anything, 'cause you know I'm not after you," Robin replies that she is not worried but asks, "Why aren't you after me?" They continue with a discussion of the fact that Robin is not Jane's type, not because of a "black/white thing," but because of a "blonds, Carpenter thing," which for the film is the same thing. This scene provides an odd moment in a film that has thus far tried so hard to draw bold lines between identities. Although the film maintains the racial divisions, it toys with the boundaries of sexuality by exposing the possibility of a relationship that falls between lesbianism and heterosexuality.

In a parallel scene in the hospital, near the end of the film, further insight into the nature of their relationship is revealed. Robin leads into the discussion by confessing a childhood crush on a woman, and exposing the instability of her sexual identity. She asks Jane if it was her that she had loved, and when Jane replies that it was, Robin admits, "I loved you, too." The context of Robin's inevitable death and the use of the past tense in talking about their love for each other implies that lesbian emotions, when taken out of the context of an explicitly lesbian relationship, can only be consciously viewed retrospectively.

The instability of sexuality emerges in Holly's homecoming, with Abe and the new baby, and culminates in the baby herself. Appearing much like a married couple themselves, Jane and Robin come outside to greet Holly and the baby,
Mary Todd, with Jane pushing Robin in a wheelchair. When Holly places Mary Todd in Robin's arms, the baby, who is of mixed race, symbolizes the baby that Jane and Robin could never have; she represents the bond that they never fulfilled.

Finally, however, lesbianism in any form, even in an asexual relationship, does not result in a happy ending. As noted previously in the discussion of the family, only the married heterosexual couple finds contentment in the end, and regardless of the film's experimentation with the defined boundaries of sexuality, it nonetheless fails to forge any new ground in terms of understanding lesbian identities. Instead, it assumes a liberal stance while only achieving the maintenance of the status quo.
CONCLUDING NOTES

The recent emergence of "positive" lesbian images in film leads mainstream viewers to think that lesbianism has become an accepted aspect of society, even when it is combined with a non-white identity. Both *The Color Purple* and *Boys on the Side* point to the fallacy of such an assumption because they show how the lesbian images function mainly to emphasize other issues or define other identities. For instance, lesbianism in *The Color Purple* stresses the unacceptability of male violence against women, while shaping the boundaries of women's relationships. At times, however, lesbianism expands beyond the film's control and assumes a meaning of its own, subverting the director's intentions or the film's own logic.

While these two films provide fascinating representations of the intersection of race, gender and sexuality, they are by no means the only examples. A recent film which was commercially successful, John Singleton's *Higher Learning*, poses many of the same questions dealt with in this study while presenting a unique set of its own issues. The film was directed by a black man and focuses on the black experience on a college campus, but in the midst of racial strife sit two white lesbians. One of the women, a naive freshman, engages in a lesbian sexual encounter, presumably in reaction to a rape by a fraternity member. The other woman, who is older and more worldly, is categorized as a "typical" feminist, active in women's issues on campus and lesbian in her sexual orientation. The lesbian relationship is scrutinized by the other characters and finally overshadowed by a heterosexual relationship with a "nice boy." Furthermore, the inversion of the race
of the lesbians in *Higher Learning* presents a useful contrast to the two films which present the lesbians as black. Perhaps Singleton uses lesbianism as a tool in a film that is obviously didactic, to emphasize his assumptions about race and social hierarchy.

The framework provided in this study could prove useful in the examination of *Higher Learning* and other films depicting lesbian images. Moreover, race cannot be ignored in discussions of gender or sexuality, even with regard to films whose storylines do not focus specifically on race. Bell hooks reminds us:

> The assumption that we can divorce the issue of race from sex, or sex from race, has so clouded the vision of American thinkers and writers on the “woman” question that most discussions of sexism, sexist oppression, or woman’s place in society are distorted, biased, and inaccurate. (12)

Hooks’s statement is a practical assertion about the interdependent nature of the diverse aspects of women’s identities that we, as thinkers and writers, should not fail to recognize.

Although the claim that black lesbians are marginalized appears to be invalidated by their appearance in mainstream media, the context of their visibility actually maintains their original position on the fringes. Lesbian images in film function not to represent an autonomous identity within the mainstream but rather, as a sidenote to the dominant society. Perhaps the inclusion of lesbianism into mainstream films is an attempt to define lesbians rather than to allow them to define themselves. Perhaps, in the end, lesbianism cannot, or will not, be defined by the
mainstream and will continue to subvert the domination imposed on it.
WORKS CITED


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