

BONDING AND MOVING ON: SOUTHERN FEMALE COMPANIONS IN MOTION (PICTURES)

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ABSTRACT

The early 1990s witnessed an outpouring of movies that follow southern heroines through various stages of development as they search for new “selves.” The intersections of gender, race, and class seem to define the selfhood of southern women, which more often than not comes into being through the agency of female bonding. Through “mothering the mind,” lesbianism, laughter, and getting outside, female bonding precipitates women’s growth, it sets them in mental motion that leads them to self-discovery, and in so doing it allows women to challenge the practices of the hegemony of white (heterosexist) patriarchy trying to define female existence. The films chosen for the analysis—Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (1985), Jon Avnet’s *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), Richard Pearce’s *The Long Walk Home* (1991), John Sayles’ *Passion Fish* (1992), Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991)—illustrate these essential functions of female bonding, which provide oppressed women with an avenue for self-expression, self-determination and self-discovery.

KEYWORDS

female friendship; the American South in cinema; “mothering the mind”; Adrienne Rich’s lesbian continuum; laughter; the outside

How each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.

—Anaïs Nin¹

The qualities and imperatives of the patriarchal definition of the feminine can easily be characterized by words beginning with the letter *c*. Code of beautiful behavior. Conformity. Containment. Conservatism. Confines. Female bonding makes southern women see these imperatives as threats to their sovereignty, and, what is more, it becomes a vehicle for neutralizing these threats. Through “mothering the mind,” lesbianism, laughter, and getting outside, female bonding precipitates women’s growth and sets them in mental motion that leads them to self-discovery, and in so doing it allows women to challenge the practices of the hegemony of a white (heterosexist) patriarchy trying to define female existence.

Even though the main female characters in Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (1985), Richard Pearce’s *The Long Walk Home* (1989), Jon Avnet’s *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991), Ridley Scott’s *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and John Sayles’ *Passion Fish* (1992) differ in terms of class, race, and sexual orientation,

1. Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1934–1939*, ed. Gunther Stuhlmann (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1967), 193.

they all begin journeys of self-discovery through the agency of female bonding. Put into a stiff corset of social expectations, women, with the aid of their female companions and friends, begin to question and consequently rebel against the stereotypical roles codified as “feminine,” those of white middle-class housewife, black wife/servant, and privileged white lady. A dramatization of the conflict between the desire to discover the self and the duties imposed by patriarchy unites all the portrayals of the southern women under analysis in this essay. All the movies share a transparent cinematic narrative which focuses on characterization and the relations among the protagonists rather than on an action-packed plot.² Hence, with female bonding as the center of gravity of the cinematic narrative, the time and setting in the movies supplement the female quest for self-discovery via female companionship or friendship. Three of the movies that are analyzed are set in the historical past and rural or small-town South; thus, as Myra Macdonald states, by “removing the unease of the modern city, these films replay the romantic values of community and family.”³ In those movies there is substantial evidence for the claim that the cinematic narrative priority given to gender and racial oppression was precipitated by the time and setting of the movies in question.

Friends who are able and willing to “mother the mind”⁴ pull oppressed women out of the surrender or extinction of their identity in uncongenial heterosexual relationships. Through all the functions of “mothering the mind,” such as “intercepting the world, conferring unconditional approval, regulating the environment, supplying missing psychic elements, and mirroring certain aspects of the self,”⁵ a woman ushers her friend/companion/sister into a journey of self-discovery. The decision to protect oneself and those close to one against the violence, oppression, and abuse received at the hands of men, if taken by a southern woman, is a contradiction in terms.⁶ Men certainly did not see

2. See Michael Z. Newman, “Character and Complexity in American Independent Cinema: 21 Grams and *Passion Fish*,” *Film Criticism* 31, nos. 1–2 (2006): 89–106.

3. Myra Macdonald, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media* (London: Arnold, 1995), 156–57. Respectively, small-town Louisiana in *Passion Fish*, small-town Alabama in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and rural Georgia in *The Color Purple*. Moreover, two of the movies—*Fried Green Tomatoes* and *The Color Purple*—record periods of time that fell within the first half of the twentieth century, and *The Long Walk Home* refers to the historic episode of the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955–56.

4. Ellen Barker uses the term “mothering the mind” about the relationship Celie and Shug build in Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* in her article “Creating Generations: The Relationship Between Celie and Shug in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” in *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*, ed. Ikenna Dieke (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 55–65.

5. Ruth Perry, introduction to *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Studies of Writers and Their Silent Partners*, ed. Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984), 5–6.

6. In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Evelyn Couch is instructed by her colleague that “what we really need instead of this baloney . . . is an assertiveness training class for southern women. But that’s a contradiction in terms, isn’t it?” Certainly, Evelyn cannot learn self-confidence from dry instructions on a course conducted by a stranger. Yet when Evelyn learns from Ninny Threadgoode, an octogenarian she befriends, about Idgie—Ninny’s sister-in-law—and Ruth’s

assertiveness as a desirable attribute in southern women, as without the need to protect their weaker dependants it would be harder to justify their fondness for violence. The patriarchy has it that women need protection, which only men can provide. However, the proponents of patriarchy conveniently forget that it is mostly men who are the perpetrators of aggression towards women. In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Idgie Threadgoode saves Ruth Jamison from her abusive husband by taking her under her roof, barbecuing her dead husband's body, and serving it to Curtis Smoote, a Georgia detective investigating his suspicious disappearance.⁷ In a similar fashion, though without the culinary component, in *The Color Purple* Shug Avery offers Celie emotional support once she learns that Albert, Celie's husband and Shug's lover in one person, beats her for not being his mistress. In the course of the movie, having realized the psychological abuse Celie has suffered, Shug takes her girlfriend to Memphis, where she offers her shelter and support, both emotional and financial.

The expression of approval from a friend, another function of "mothering the mind," often emboldens women to challenge and verbally oppose the right of the patriarchy to subordinate them. Those who have access to language are able to define and shape reality. Language is not repressive in itself, though. It gains the characteristics of oppression once it is used by those in power to subordinate others. Thus, for female friends finding a voice or access to language it may become a vehicle for opposition and resistance. It is no coincidence that in *Thelma & Louise* Thelma attempts to reject Darryl's power to decide about her life by saying "Darryl, you're my husband, not my father. . . . Go fuck yourself."⁸ It is even less of a coincidence that Thelma opposes Darryl only after she ventures outside of her household with Louise—her entry into the space of the open road empowers Thelma to actively define her own identity.

loving and supportive relationship, she develops an alter ego, Towanda the Avenger. This alter ego frees Evelyn from the role of a victim in her contacts not only with men but also with younger, impudent women. This and all further quotations from the movie are taken from the DVD subtitles of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, dir. Jon Avnet (Universal Pictures, 1991).

7. The initial confrontation about Ruth's safety takes a different turn. Upon Idgie's first visit to Ruth once she is married, it is, paradoxically, Ruth who is protecting her best friend. Realizing her husband's abusive nature, Ruth begs Idgie, "If you care about me, if you really do, you'll turn around and leave this minute. You understand?" Realizing Ruth's need to protect her own mother, who is living with the newly-weds (neither of them would forsake their own families), Idgie honors her friend's wish. After her mother's demise, Ruth recognizes her own vulnerability and sends a letter to Idgie with her mother's obituary and a fragment from the Bible. This excerpt is from the Book of Ruth: "And Ruth said, Whither thou goest, I will go; Where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people." Using the metaphor of a journey and the promise of fidelity, Ruth gives Idgie a clear sign that she is ready to follow Idgie from Frank's domination and abuse into the safety of Idgie's friendship and the shelter of her family household. This veiled message sets Idgie in motion, and with the help of Julian (Idgie's older brother) and Big George (the son of the Threadgoode cook, Sipsey) off Idgie goes to Georgia to protect her friend. (Idgie's threat to Frank, "If you ever touch her again, I'll kill you," seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.) Idgie helps Ruth to move on by moving out of this abusive environment.
8. All the quotations from the movie are taken from the script of *Thelma & Louise*, dir. Ridley Scott (MGM, 1991). Hereafter cited in text as *TL*.

Also muted by patriarchal oppression, Celie from *The Color Purple* begins her quest to find a speaking voice. Because of her race and class, Celie's process is quite different, though. As a poor black girl she is abused, both physically and sexually, first by the man whom she believes to be her father and then by her husband. Celie understands her position as an object of exchange between two domineering men (the future husband offers a cow in exchange for a new wife/servant); therefore she does not even dare call Albert, her "owner/husband," by his first name. She simply refers to him as Mr. _____. Despite the limitations of her own youth and gender, Celie, upon her sister's visit, makes her first shy attempts at reducing Albert's power over her personhood. By mimicking and making fun of Mr. _____'s movements and voice, Celie and Nettie attempt to challenge the distribution of power which is transmitted through language. Mr. _____ not only hushes Celie up through marginalizing her presence in his household, but also, and maybe more importantly, he severs the bond between the sisters, once Nettie is made to leave after not returning Mr. _____'s advances.⁹ Mr. _____ seizes the letters the girls exchange, knowing that the interception of the letters will be a blow to Celie's self-esteem that she will not be able to recover from.

The next stage of Celie finding her voice consists of long conversations with Sofia and Shug. Those talks with her stepson's wife and husband's mistress, respectively, endow Celie with enough confidence to acquire an oppositional voice against patriarchal abuse. During her last dinner at Albert's home, Shug announces that Celie is leaving with her. Initially, this scene looks like other moments in her life when Celie has been told what to do. Albert's reaction to the announcement is also not a surprise; he tries to devalue her personhood: "You're ugly. You're skinny. You're shaped funny. You're too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do is be Shug's maid. ... You ain't that good a cook anyway" (CP). Albert appropriates the naming power, that is, the ontological power to intimidate Celie, and thus to discipline his wife. At this point Celie can see her reflection in Shug's face, which gives her the courage to accuse Albert of prolonged psychological cruelty: "Any more letters come?" (CP). Celie's newly-found voice is such a shocking development to Mr. _____ that he is virtually left speechless, spluttering with indignation, "You're black, you're poor, you're ugly, you're a woman! You're nothing at all!" (CP). Celie utters the words of her newly-discovered self-worth: "I'm poor, black. I may even be ugly and can't cook. But dear God, I'm here! I'm here!" (CP) while stepping into a car with Shug, which will take her to liberty and the safety of Memphis. She appropriates the language and concomitant power at her husband's expense, and here her assertiveness is born.

Similarly to Celie, who, according to Ernece Kelly, "eventually moves from being ashamed and silenced to living proud and in full possession of her

9. In the pivotal scene of the process of her emancipation, Celie will accuse her husband: "You took my sister Nettie away from me. You knew she was the only person in the world who loved me." All the quotations from the movie are taken from the DVD subtitles of *The Color Purple*, dir. Steven Spielberg (Amblin Entertainment, 1985). Hereafter cited in text as CP.

voice,”¹⁰ Mary Agnes also asserts her identity through the acquisition of a voice. Once Sofia left Harpo, her husband and Albert’s first-born, Mary Agnes replaces her in Harpo’s heart and bed. As the exact opposite of the militant Sofia, Mary Agnes, now Harpo’s second wife, is gladly welcomed in Alfred’s home. Because of her hysterical and squeaky voice, nobody treats Mary Agnes seriously. Her nickname—“Squeak”—aptly reflects both her elfin figure and her meekness. During the family dinner at which Celie announces her departure, Squeak’s assertion of liberation from patriarchy also takes the form of verbal nonconformity, she says: “I’m going with Shug. . . . With Miss Celie and Shug. I’m fixing to sing,” followed by “My name ain’t Squeak. My name is Mary Agnes” (*CP*)—she not only informs the family about her plans reaching beyond the position of being an appendage to a man, but also rejects the trivialization and marginalization that come with her diminutive nickname.¹¹

Apart from protection and unconditional approval, the supplying of missing psychological elements is another key component of “mothering the mind.” A feeling of acceptance and understanding is necessary for self-disclosure, which in turn is conducive to revealing the needs of a damaged psyche. By supplying those missing psychic elements, a friend acknowledges those needs and attempts to answer them. The first woman whom Celie befriends in *The Color Purple* is Sofia. Married to Harpo, one of Celie’s stepchildren, she refuses to be subordinated by any man. When Sofia walks she looks as if she were going to war, and when she talks she assertively looks her interlocutor in the eye (unlike Celie, who habitually avoids eye contact). Hence, her movements and posture disclose her defiance of patriarchal authority. But for all her militancy in asserting her rights, Sofia does not actively stand by Celie when she is oppressed. She may shake the foundations of Celie’s consciousness but she does not get personally involved in improving Celie’s lot. Sofia is more concerned with her own pride and life. The offer of a job as a personal maid coming from Miss Millie, the Mayor’s wife, was intended as an honor for Celie; however, Miss Millie’s earlier comment, “Your children are so clean” (*CP*), reveals patronizing racial superiority. Sofia knows how to fight both physically and verbally—the bluntness of “Hell, no” (*CP*) and the right hook to the jaw of Miss Millie’s defender—however, what she learns from Celie’s experience is that docility and submissiveness are sometimes a good survival tactic—Celie says earlier to her sister Nettie that she cannot fight; she admits “All I know how to do is stay alive” (*CP*). It is Celie’s meekness which complements Sofia’s list of characteristic

10. Ernece B. Kelly, “Paths to Liberation in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982),” in *Women in Literature: Reading through the Lens of Gender*, ed. Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 75.

11. At this point it may not be amiss to note that apart from the dinner scene, Mary Agnes also “finds her own voice when she intervenes to release Sofia from prison. . . . Mary Agnes fights for her man; symbolically, after acting on Sofia’s behalf by satisfying her jailer’s sexual demands, ‘Squeak’ triumphantly discards her diminutive nickname” (Kelly, “Paths to Liberation,” 75–76).

features. Acquiring these features of character turns out to be life-saving for Sofia in prison.¹²

Central to *The Long Walk Home* is another relationship, between Miriam Thompson, an affluent white female employer, and Odessa Cotter, a black maid, which supplies a missing psychic element in Mrs. Thompson's integrity during the Montgomery Bus Boycott.¹³ The issue of motion in connection with raising social/racial awareness is essential in this relationship. However, the transformative impetus of their bonding seems to be imbalanced on both sides of the color line. Mrs. Norman Thompson is not a typical white establishment housewife. On the one hand, she attends bridge club meetings with pretentious housewives and, despite her higher education, she seems complacent about her career choice (running a house). On the other hand, she demands that a policeman apologize to Odessa for evicting her from an "all-white park" where she was taking care of a white woman's children. However ethically sound her reaction is, Mrs. Thompson demands the apology on the basis of her own sense of self-worth; in a conversation with her husband she says: "It's not like she was paradin' her *own* children around the park, for heaven's sake!"¹⁴ Moreover, when the bus boycott commences, Miriam, behind her husband's back, drives Odessa to work; she does it mainly for her own convenience (Odessa's decision to walk to work may affect her performance at the Thompsons'). Odessa's walking to work, as an example of dignified stoicism, perseverance and integrity exhibited not only during the bus boycott, spurs Miriam into action. Not only does it open Miriam's eyes to problems greater than organizing a cocktail party, but also, and maybe more importantly, it motivates her to be personally involved in the racial cause. Miriam's decision to drive any black person in Montgomery needing a lift is not simply an act of opposition to her husband's dominance and of defining her selfhood in marriage, but, more importantly, it is also a bold statement about the need to stop ignoring any institutionalized social inequality.

The conspicuous interconnectedness of Miriam's life with that of black women, revealed in her childhood photos in her family album¹⁵ and an honest

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12. The final irony of the situation is that "after many years, they let Sofia out of jail just to put her in the next. She had to be Miss Millie's maid after all. Mayor bought Miss Millie a car, and she had Sofia teach her how to drive. Poor Sofia, stuck with Miss Millie for the rest of her life" (CP).
 13. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, as a social and political protest against the policy of racial segregation in the public transportation of Montgomery from December 1, 1955 till December 20, 1956, is a suitable setting for the action of *The Long Walk Home*. Odessa Cotter and other fictional African American women, inspired by the very real Rosa Parks, took an active stand against "the back of the bus" rule—that is, the unconstitutional segregation of buses. This social milieu precipitates Miriam Thompson's greater understanding of the predicament of other women over the color line.
 14. *The Long Walk Home*, dir. Richard Pearce (Miramax Films, 1990). Hereafter cited in text as *LWH*.
 15. Sharon Willis observes that Miriam is "holding the hand of a black nurse, the top of whose head is cut by the upper frame of the photo. She is emphatically *not* its subject." "Race as Spectacle, Feminism as Alibi: Representing the Civil Rights Era in the 1990s," in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, ed. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo (London: Routledge, 2001), 109.

conversation with Odessa, awaken Miriam to greater self-understanding, personal growth, and moral integrity. Recollection of the past allows Miriam to reach the depths of empathy and humanity in her soul and, in the course of time, to become genuinely concerned about Odessa's plight. Their honest conversation, initiated by Mr. Thompson's outburst upon learning that his wife is driving their maid to work, ushers Miriam into reaching out instinctively to a woman who can supply her missing psychic elements. Odessa's bold statement—"What scares you is who you are, who Mr. Thompson wants you to be" (*LWH*)—acts as a catalyst for Miriam's awakening. In the final, pivotal scene, Miriam and her daughter join black women at the carpool station and start singing "Walking with Jesus" as an act of passive resistance to racial oppression.¹⁶ She literally and metaphorically "walks over"; she steps over the line—the color line and gender line. Even though, as Willis writes, "Miriam directs our gaze to Odessa and symbolically allows all the other women to fade away,"¹⁷ suggesting that Miriam joins the opposition against racism only for and because of Odessa, she does it nonetheless, thus proving that her bonding with her colored maid facilitates her own emotional, ethical, and moral growth.

The complementarity of May-Alice and Chantelle's characters and life choices in *Passion Fish*, which initially add to the complexities of a hierarchical patient-caregiver relationship, also allows the employer/employee dependence in this hierarchical relationship to be transcended, and in so doing sets their companionship in mental motion. If it were not for her being an invalid, career-wise, May-Alice would seem to have it all; she is rich, successful, and famous. By moving to New York and becoming an actress May-Alice has rejected her white, privileged upbringing in Louisiana. Now, after having suffered a paralyzing accident, she is back home in the South. Not much is known about Chantelle, though, except for the feeling that being a nurse to some spoiled, sarcastic soap-opera star is not her dream job. Midway through the movie Chantelle's problematic past (drug addiction) surfaces. Where initially Chantelle plays an important role in defining May-Alice's emotional trajectory after the accident, now, after the revelations about Chantelle's past, May-Alice begins to pay attention to her companion's emotional well-being.¹⁸ The awareness of a recovering addict (thanks to Chantelle, May-Alice is recovering from alcohol

16. The lyrics of this hymn seem particularly appropriate in the context of the rhetoric of motion and institutionalized racism in the South. Singing this hymn unites black women in the face of an angry mob of white men shouting "walk, Nigger, walk," but it also gives them courage to continue boycotting the buses. By evoking the religious aspect of African Americans' fight for equality, the lyrics of "Walking with Jesus" locate the civil rights struggle not only in a moral and ethical context but also a religious one. In the hymn, as in life, they have Jesus on their side. Therefore, rather than taking "separate but equal" buses to work, a more comfortable but less ethically sound option, these women decide to walk to work, because they know Jesus accompanies them in their endeavors to gain freedom and equality.

17. Willis, "Race as Spectacle," 112.

18. In his article Michael Newman notes that as "the film progresses, we come to see that Chantelle is also undergoing a process of recovery and that May-Alice is helping *her*, giving her an opportunity to grow into herself." "Character and Complexity," 101.

addiction), combined with knowledge of the destructive power of stereotyping, allows these women, whom Michael Newman sees as “both ambivalent about their past and anxious about their future,”¹⁹ to transcend fixed gender and racial roles by empathizing with each other without unnecessary and uncomfortable sentimentality. Their friendship allows them to move towards more flexible gender and racial roles.

Idgie Threadgoode and Ruth Jamison’s friendship in *Fried Green Tomatoes* also functions, to use Rita Felski’s words, “to complement and extend the protagonist’s sense of self rather than to threaten it by absolute otherness, and thus to provide a framework within which a gendered identity can be meaningfully located.”²⁰ In their friendship each woman discovers herself through the other. As a maternal type, Ruth is able to tame the drinking, male-dressing, poker-playing bee-charmer Idgie and bring her back to society; as Idgie says “I’m as settled as I ever hope to be” (*FGT*). She reciprocates by infusing Ruth’s personality with doses of assertiveness, energy, and determination. Their shared experiences of the outside—literally, outside their homes, and metaphorically, outside fixed gender roles—accentuate the complementarity of their characters, which paves the way for their respective self-definitions.

In a similar fashion, Thelma and Louise balance each other. Thelma Yvonne Dickinson runs wild when she leaves the domestic cage. At the beginning of their journey she is hysterical and disoriented when Louise kills her near-rapist. However, during their journey Thelma slowly but gradually enters a previously uncharted area of her personality: she imitates her friend, learns self-control from her, and even takes charge—she robs a convenience store, locks a policeman in the trunk of his car, and orders Thelma to shoot a police radio. Under Louise’s influence, Thelma metamorphoses from a submissive, sheltered housewife at large to a woman who values freedom and independence more than the security and complacency of a patriarchal society. Thelma reciprocates by mirroring her friend’s qualities of character, which confirm Louise in her decision to go down the path they have chosen.

A point of reference in female friendships can also fluctuate between commonality and complementarity.²¹ Intuitively sensing the need for either of these personality enhancement strategies, women help their friends with the process of self-definition and self-discovery through either showing the strength and celebration of opposing/complementary features or reflecting “mirroring certain aspects of the self.”²² A mixture of commonality and complementarity seems to be an organizing principle of Thelma and Louise’s

19. Newman, “Character and Complexity,” 103.

20. Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 132.

21. Judith Gardiner stated that “the categories of commonality and complementarity reverse themselves like figure and ground.” “The (US)es of (I)dentify: A Response to Abel on ‘(E)Merging Identities,’” *Signs* 6, no. 3 (1981): 436.

22. Ruth Perry, introduction to *Mothering the Mind*, 6.

friendship. Their transformed images are a metaphor for the changes in their mentalities.²³ Thelma and Louise discard the attributes of femaleness—clothes, mannerisms, jewelry—in a defiant gesture to eradicate associations with passive and complacent femininity and “appropriat[e] the cultural markings of masculinity.”²⁴ The freeze frame of the final scene, in which the women, having sped towards the abyss of the Grand Canyon, are suspended in the air above it and the scenes recording their transformations running through the duration of the credits, are metaphors for the changes in their mentality.

THE L-WORDS

The patriarchal definition presents female friendship without an erotic/sensual component of lesbianism. Thus, from a patriarchal perspective, female comradeship is a platonic union of souls, while lesbian relations are understood to be predominantly concerned with the sensual.²⁵ Adrienne Rich professes that a lesbian existence includes not only sexually charged behavior, but, more importantly, embraces “many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support.”²⁶ In a society where marriage defines women’s identity, “heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment.”²⁷ *Thelma and Louise* subverts that claim by showing that female friendship can be equally, if not more, adventurous and fulfilling, and definitely more liberating and eye-opening.²⁸

Adrienne Rich’s claim that “[i]f we think of heterosexuality as the ‘natural’ emotional and sensual inclination for women, lives such as these [lesbian] are

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23. Yvonne Tasker identifies the analogy between physical and psychological metamorphoses: “[t]he rites-of-passage narrative that situates women in relation to health or body culture defines the heroine’s transformation through the body.” *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 137. In *Fried Green Tomatoes* Evelyn Couch’s transformed body image also parallels her becoming more conscious of her needs, expectations, and desires. The heuristic value of listening to Mrs. Threadgoode telling stories of Idgie and Ruth’s love, understanding, and support is visible in the transformation of Evelyn’s image: a new haircut, clothes, and weight loss mark the next stage on her journey to self-understanding and the discovery of her self-esteem. From a meek, submissive, and self-indifferent housewife Evelyn metamorphoses into the assertive Towanda the Avenger. She admits her debt to Ninny Threadgoode in a conversation with her husband: “Somebody helped put a mirror up in front of my face. And I didn’t like what I saw one bit. You know what I did? I changed. And that someone was Mrs. Threadgoode” (*FGT*).
24. Lynda Hart, “‘Til Death Do Us Part: Impossible Spaces in *Thelma and Louise*,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 3 (January 1994): 436.
25. Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 650.
26. Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 648–49.
27. Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 654.
28. Thelma confesses to Louise: “I feel awake. . . . Wide awake. I don’t remember ever feelin’ this awake. Everything looks different. . . . I know you know what I mean. Everything looks new. Do you feel like that too? Like you’ve got something to look forward to?” (*TL*).

seen as deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived”²⁹ is exemplified in *Thelma and Louise*, which identifies lesbians with female criminals.³⁰ From the patriarchal perspective, their shooting and blowing up of a truck is a sign of emotional deprivation, whereas their intimate look and final kiss on the lips before driving off the cliff bear the signs of sensual deprivation. The price to pay for transgressing socially accepted behavior is often the death of one of the friends or of both, as in the suicide pact in *Thelma and Louise*.³¹ Heterosexual cinematic narratives present the death of one of the female friends as a final resolution to the subversive nature of women’s camaraderie. It is interesting to note that patriarchy endows female friendship with contradictory powers: on the one hand, female bonding can bring a wayward girl back to a “decent” community—for example, Ruth is able to tame and slightly feminize the wild and strong-minded Idgie; on the other hand, once its function has been fulfilled, society expects their bonding to move back into the background of heterosexual romance.³²

In *The Color Purple*, Celie and Shug’s friendship illustrates Rita Felski’s theory that “the transference of allegiance from a heterosexual relationship to one of intimacy between women involves overcoming the negative value which women have been conditioned to place upon their own sex; the recognition of the other woman serves a symbolic function as an affirmation of self, of gendered identity.”³³ The initial dependence—that of a guest and a maid/nurse—that was established between Celie and Shug when Shug comes down with “a nasty woman’s disease” is replaced by a conscious companionship. Independent and self-confident, Shug teaches Celie self-respect and confidence. Shug, who treats her sexuality as a tool in her relations with men, realizes that a lack of acceptance of one’s body can have a damaging effect on a woman’s self-esteem. Once she learns that Celie is reminded all the time that she is ugly, that her sexuality is virtually non-existent—Celie was raped by Pa and is used by her husband to relieve his sexual tension—Shug begins to teach Celie the pleasures connected with her body. The lyrics of Shug’s song to Celie, “Miss Celie’s Blues,” focus on the sisterhood of women, which offers safety and acceptance, and reflects women’s commonality. This important step on Celie’s journey to self-discovery takes place outside the house, in public. Celie’s breaking free from the repressive domestic space into the public space of Harpo’s juke

29. Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 652.

30. Lynda Hart quotes from Caroline Sheldon, one of the first film critics who noted the identification of homosexuality with “the criminal element—both as a warning to those stepping out of line and a method of containment of anti-social (anti-heterosexual) tendencies.” Hart, “Til Death Do Us Part,” 441.

31. The warning included in the movie that punishment awaits those who violate gender norms certainly locates the movie within the genre of the cautionary tale. Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 144.

32. Idgie and Ruth are unwilling to leave it behind them and form an even stronger bond of acceptance, understanding, and love. In this situation, the weaker one *has* to die.

33. Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 138.

joint allows her to experience sisterhood with Shug and produces enough self-confidence in her to listen to Shug's lessons about sexuality in the privacy of her room. The circumstances of their first passionate kiss—Celie wearing Shug's sexy red dress at night—are made possible by the transition from the repressive environment of both her Pa's and Albert's homes to the affability of Shug's private room. In return, as a maternal type, Celie encourages the development of a more responsible, sympathetic, and nurturing side in Shug. This presentation of female friendship invites an analogy with Felski's statement that "the other woman provides a mirror in which the protagonist discovers herself, finding her own female identity reflected."³⁴

Through their intimate bonding women can transcend relations based on subjugation and exploitation. They can create unions of body and soul that redefine heterosexual scripts of behavior. Once Shug opens Celie's eyes to the fact that her marriage is like chattel slavery, Celie begins to value the rights of the autonomous individual and realizes that her love for Shug cannot be possessive. Even though she cannot eradicate her feelings of jealousy, Celie does not act on her twinge of envy when Shug takes off with a young musician. Hurt though she is, Celie does not want to trade places with men who dominate, constrain, and possess women. Moreover, Shug knows that loving and being loved back are the prerequisites of growth as they are connected with acceptance, a sense of belonging, and support. Therefore, she moves beyond gender divisions in choosing the object of her passion; she is not very particular about whom she endows with her love and desire, be it Albert and/or Celie. Shug stirs Celie's development into motion by teaching her that, rather than eliminating men from their lives altogether, women should reevaluate the presence of men to further their own growth.³⁵

Heterosexual dependency and oppression simply precipitate a relationship that is inherent in women's nature. The instinctive bonding between Idgie and Ruth, Celie and Shug, and Thelma and Louise illustrates what Adrienne Rich called "an electric and empowering charge between women."³⁶ Thus, greater self-reliance, self-understanding, and self-acceptance are the direct result of a lesbian existence. Drawing on Rich's statement that a lesbian existence "is also a direct or indirect attack on the male right of access to women,"³⁷ we may say that Shug and Celie reject male definitions of sexuality. When Pa is exchanging Celie for a cow in a marriage trade with Albert, he describes Celie

34. Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 131–32.

35. Ernece Kelly explains in her article that "Walker eschews categories—thereby questioning social constructs such as heterosexuality, monogamy, and marriage—and instead delineates a relational universe in which the ability to give and experience love is more important to one's growth than *whom* one loves." Kelly, "Paths to Liberation," 76. Spielberg does not include the triangle Walker envisioned for Celie, Shug, and Albert at the end of her novel. His adaptation ends in a glorification of pure (read: platonic) female friendship, with a remorseful Albert in the distance, secretly making amends for what he has done to Celie.

36. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 658.

37. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 649.

as “not fresh”—she bore Pa two children. However, when Shug, instrumental in the formation of Celie’s sexual self-awareness, learns that her friend has never had pleasure in her sexual encounters, she calls her a virgin and then teaches Celie that very pleasure.³⁸

Overall, if we eschew a limiting patriarchal definition of lesbian relations while examining female friendships in the movies under analysis, we can see that Adrienne Rich’s observations perfectly describe the liberating power of the lesbian relations between Idgie and Ruth, Thelma and Louise, and Celie and Shug, as: “[w]oman-identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, violently curtailed and wasted under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and visibility to women’s passion for women . . . meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other.*”³⁹

Laughter is another L-word which moves and unites women, offers psychological support, and allows the venting of stored-up anger. All these functions combined together enable the process of self-determination to begin. Celie’s liberation from patriarchal oppression would not be possible without all those functions of laughter. Her natural joviality is hushed by Pa’s words: “Celie you got the ugliest smile I seen” (*CP*). In so doing, Pa deprives Celie of the self-expression so necessary in the process of identity formation. It is Shug, many years later, who teaches Celie how to laugh in an unhampered way, trying to cure her of a self-effacing gesture—covering her mouth when she smiles. Through laughter, Shug also welcomes Celie into the community of women, as Shug seems to be aware that laughter brings people together, especially in the recognition of common enemies. Therefore, Celie and Shug share rebellious laughter at the expense of those who abused Celie—men.

It is no coincidence, then, that a photo of a beautiful woman laughing on her husband’s bedside table is the first visual image of Shug that Celie has. Even though at this point they are not acquainted yet, Shug, through the mere fact of existing and symbolizing self-confidence and defiance through laughter, keeps Celie from sinking into despair. When Albert uses Celie as a sexual convenience, there is a voiceover, “while he on top of me . . . I think about that pretty woman in the picture and maybe she like it. I know what he doing to me, he done to her” (*CP*). Already Celie treats Shug as a point of reference on the road to self-determination. The more Celie can identify with Shug’s laughter, the more immune to Albert’s cruelties she becomes. This situation illustrates what Hélène Cixous stated: “[c]ulturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to

38. In the already-mentioned scene in the privacy of Shug’s room, Celie describes her sexual experiences with her husband: “most time I pretend I ain’t even there. He don’t know the difference. He don’t never ask me how I feel. He never ask me about myself. He just climb on top of me and do his business” (*CP*).

39. Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 657. Rich’s italics.

find in women—which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much further away than he has ever been seen."⁴⁰ Thelma's comments to the state trooper whom she and Louise are about to lock in the trunk of the police car also reveal this power of laughter to create ironic distance and defy male authority: "I swear three days ago neither of us would have ever pulled a stunt like this, but if you was ever to meet my husband, you'd understand why. . . . My husband wasn't sweet to me and look how I turned out" (*TL*).

Defiance of authority expressed through laughter is most visible in Sofia's giggle in *The Color Purple*. After returning from prison, Sofia has been further humiliated by compulsory work as a maid to Miss Millie, the Mayor's wife. During the aforementioned dinner, which marks the declaration of Celie's and Mary Agnes's self-recognitions, Sofia begins laughing after a period of non-responsiveness and confusion. The comment of Albert's father: "My God the dead has arisen" (*CP*) attests that laughter brings Sofia back to life. She can again actively participate and define her existence in opposition to institutionalized sexism and racism. Sofia says: "Old Sofia home now. Sofia home. Things are going to change here" (*CP*), as laughter, according to Hélène Cixous, is able "to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' . . ."⁴¹ Clearly, laughter, after a period of non-responsiveness, galvanizes Sofia into action. After Celie calls Albert names in the presence of his own father and firstborn—"Your daddy ain't nothing but some dead horseshit" (*CP*)—the women start giggling. Harpo's defense of his father's good name—"Shut up! It's bad luck women laughing at a man" (*CP*)—is prophetic, with the subversive potential of derisive laughter; nothing good for patriarchal hegemony comes of women laughing at a man. Laughter sets Sofia into mental motion and it brings back her principles, pride, and selfhood which men, prison, and Miss Millie unsuccessfully tried to annihilate; in so doing it acts as a catalyst for Sofia's self-empowerment.

THE OUTSIDE

Getting outside is another method used by female companions to encourage each other's growth and liberation. It is in line with Rita Felski's observation about the female *Bildungsroman* that "female self-discovery and emancipation is depicted as a process of moving outward into the public realm of social engagement and activity, however problematic and fraught with difficulties this proves to be."⁴² Thus, motivating each other to get outside the house, both metaphorically and literally, allows female friends to discover uncharted areas of their personalities. Celie, Miriam Thompson, and Thelma Dickinson all embark on what Felski calls a "journey from the enclosed realm

40. Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?" trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 55.

41. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 888.

42. Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 126–27.

of the familial home into the social world.”⁴³ Houses, both her family home and the one she was to run for Albert, are the site of humiliation, sexual abuse, and constraint for Celie. Moving out of “Mr. jail” (to use Celie’s words) to Memphis with Shug constitutes a milestone in Celie’s development. She ventures from the known, albeit oppressive world of the domestic to the unknown world of business. In Memphis, Celie blossoms as she is finally a member of a larger extended family of women, and, by extension, is reconciled with the world.

The outside used to be a proverbial part and parcel of May-Alice’s life in *Passion Fish*—an acting career in New York is quite unlike housewifery in a small Louisiana town. However, now May-Alice has to get outside her house to face her new identity. Drinking wine, watching TV, being bitter and self-pitiful is a defensive mechanism the actress develops in order not to deal with her paraplegic state. Chantelle understands that May-Alice has to confront her fears; therefore, she pushes May-Alice out of the house, near the bayou. Getting outside is, in this case, getting out of the hideout into the unknown, which offers both challenges and opportunities. The result of the ensuing verbal exchange, when May-Alice does not want to wheel herself back to the house (she orders Chantelle: “Now push me back inside”), and complains “But it’s all uphill,” and Chantelle retorts “So’s life,” suggests that the road to May-Alice’s self-discovery is going to be bumpy, but not impassable.⁴⁴

Suburbia instantiate the inside/outside and domestic/worldly dualisms. Being a suburban housewife was supposed to guarantee satisfaction and contentment with the domestic sphere. However, many women were dissatisfied as home connoted mind-deadening routine, oppression, even if veiled, and constraint. Housewifery, to paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir, is not productive as it is repetitious and monotonous.⁴⁵ In *The Long Walk Home* Norman Thompson feeds his wife with the illusion that she controls her life and that the domestic space is her domain, while he is the one who, through his business enterprise, occupies the public sphere. Yet, even though Norman allows his wife some unconventional behavior, he reminds Miriam of his being the provider—Norman asks his wife “Aren’t you forgetting who pays the bills around here?” (*LWH*). In reality, when Miriam serves him an ultimatum—either she runs the house her way or she finds herself a job—Norman would have the final say, if it were not for female camaraderie. A mind-opening conversation with Odessa motivates Miriam to oppose her husband, and it is Odessa who literally gets her employer outside, into the public domain. Her car is the locus of the dramatization of the conflict between the desire to discover herself and the wifely duties imposed by a patriarchal system. Miriam’s joining the carpooling action marks her move from benign

43. Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 134.

44. All the quotations from the movie are taken from dialogue lines from *Passion Fish*, dir. John Sayles (Miramax Films, 1992). Hereafter cited in text as *PF*.

45. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989), 451–55.

indifference to racial consciousness, from a mixture of convenience and private altruism to a public expression of sympathy for the bus boycotters. In this sense, Odessa Cotter plays an important role in defining Miriam Thompson's emotional and moral trajectory.

Leaving the golden cage that is a suburban house and going outside is also a metaphor for Miriam's appropriation of the masculine space. Mark Clapson, using observations made by other sociologists, claims that cities are "male" as they are "thrusting, public and action-orientated. The suburbs, by contrast, are 'female': more inwardly inclined, and even submissive. They apparently signify 'domesticity, repose, closeness to nature, lack of seriousness, mindlessness, and safety.' . . . The suburbs have been deemed to 'conform to the Freudian conception of femininity.'"⁴⁶ Thus, by refusing to be "cooped up at home all day in comfortable coffins for the living,"⁴⁷ Miriam is transformed from a stereotypically passive housewife with a 'trivial' everyday existence into an active woman who enters public life with clear aims and motives with a vengeance.

Driving a car becomes a symbolic expression of rebellion against patriarchal abuse in *Thelma and Louise*. Similarly to *The Long Walk Home*, where a car is the site of the solidification of the bonding between Miriam and Odessa, Thelma and Louise define their hopes and desires and discover new depths and potentials of their friendship in a car.⁴⁸ These two female buddies move from the closed spaces of the house and diner (traditionally designated for women) to the open spaces beyond the city limits, which allow them to be themselves. They "move from the routines and confinement of everyday life to the freedom of the open road. In the process they move from the supposedly female space of the home to the freedom of the supposedly 'male' space that is the great outdoors."⁴⁹ On the road, they are "outside" society, beyond patriarchal restrictions and control. By escaping society and driving through open spaces Thelma and Louise express their disapproval of patriarchal constraints.

As *Thelma and Louise* tracks two women embarking on a crime spree, it is a variation on a buddy movie and road movie. From the road movie formula *Thelma and Louise* takes the idea of the road offering the possibility of search and self-discovery, as well as alternative choices to mainstream society. As a reformulation of the buddy movie, instead of a heterosexual, white male friendship, which was a mainstay of the cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, *Thelma and Louise* centers on female friendship, with lesbian

46. Mark Clapson, *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the United States* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 125.

47. Clapson, *Suburban Century*, 125.

48. Shari Roberts rightly observes that these two female buddies are trying to escape "outdated prescriptions for social roles, changing expectations for gender identities, and their personal goals, hopes, and fears for themselves, born out of a male-dominated society." "Western Meets Eastwood: Genre and Gender on the Road," in *The Road Movie Book*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1997), 65.

49. Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 136.

undertones. It appropriates “action, comedy and an exploration of the sexualized relationship between the two protagonists” from the buddy movie formula.⁵⁰ Moreover, as Lynda Hart observes, integral to *Thelma and Louise* is “the ideological heart of the buddy film, the absence of home signifying the security of ‘normality’ and the death of the protagonists as the most effective impediment to consummation of the same-sex relationship.”⁵¹ The suicide pact the women form—Louise accepts Thelma’s proposal “Let’s not get caught. . . . Let’s keep going” (*TL*)—is a decision not to get caught in the snares of the “normality” of the domestic space of heteronormative patriarchy.

Because male heterosexual (predominantly white) bonding has been the normative relationship preferred in US cinematography, female bonding was shown as “expedient, trivial, temporary, and secondary to women’s relationships to men.”⁵² In the late 1980s and early 1990s, movies began to offer a mimetic representation of supportive and empathetic female communities, where interpersonal attraction, acceptance, and caring assure security and a sense of belonging as a reaction to gender/racial oppression.⁵³ Indeed, female friendships can set women in mental motion to gain an awareness of selfhood and give the necessary motivation and support for a changing life. However, female bonding only enhances high self-esteem but does not create it; it gives shape to/defines an already-existing female sense of injustice and sets the consequent resistance into motion. It provides oppressed women with an avenue for self-expression, self-determination, and self-discovery. All the female friendships analyzed in this essay allow women to question, challenge, and move beyond stereotypes about female identity, desires, and hopes, though to varying degrees and with different consequences. All the functions of female camaraderie, such as “mothering the mind,” lesbian relations, the transgressive power of laughter, and encouragement to get outside, allow women to remove the infringement of social restrictions from their lives.

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50. Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 162.

51. Hart, “‘Til Death Do Us Part,” 432.

52. Miles, *Seeing and Believing*, 142.

53. In the 1980s women in America witnessed a backlash against the feminist movement. Society and the media were schizophrenic about women’s liberation, on the one hand, promoting it, on the other, negating its value. It is little coincidence, then, that in the 1990s female friendships would publicize women’s liberation. For more information about the backlash, see Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994).

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