Sisterhood as a Strategy for Survival and Solidarity in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*

by

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Abstract

Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* (2016) both depict strong female relationships, whether familial or chosen, and how those relationships become central to the main character's survival. In *The Color Purple,* the letters written between Celie and Nettie create the narrative, not only providing Celie with hope, but sustaining a bond of sisterhood even though they are a long distance apart and living their own lives. The epistolary portrayal of the narrative represents a dialogue of survival and resilience; it allows Celie to claim her own voice as time progresses.

Similarly, in *Fierce Femmes,* Thom uses the nameless main character's letters to her younger sister to drive home the familial bond of sisterhood but also extends these ideas into a broader community of femmes and trans women who become a part of a chosen family. This community gives readers an inside look into how sisterhood plays an important role in the main character's life not only by depicting the girl gang sharing their stories rather than remaining silent, but by sharing positive and negative experiences that forge bonds between them that are just as strong as if they were biologically related. Together, these two texts show that whether sisterhood is shown through private letters or through the solidarity of communal storytelling, it functions as a lifeline for women; they can use these types of sisterhood to survive, and even to become the best versions of themselves with the help of their sisters.

In finding solidarity and sisterhood, Walker and Thom's protagonists are able to persevere despite enduring violence and the societal silencing of women and their experiences. By placing these works in conversation, this thesis will examine how feminist literature portrays sisterhood as a strategy for survival and solidarity.

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Introduction: "The Sister Love Flame"

In recent years, it has become a normalized practice to celebrate found, or chosen, family. One of these practices is called "Friendsgiving," which is typically around the same time as typical Thanksgiving celebrations. This is specifically important to those in marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQ+, where more often than not, chosen friends and families outweigh the importance of biological ties. For those in the LGBTQ+ community, chosen family is a necessity, especially in a society that tends to reject them, or deem them as outcasts. Found families become a means of survival in the community, forming familial bonds where each member is able to feel seen and cared for.

While the idea of a "Friendsgiving," and found or chosen families has become more popular in recent years, literature has modeled these ideas longer. In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Kai Cheng Thom's *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir,* writing letters to biological sisters is used to bridge biological, or blood, relation and the idea of metaphorical, or chosen, sisterhood. While heroines from both texts are involuntarily separated from their biological sisters, they form metaphorical sisterhoods with chosen family.

In *The Color Purple*, Celie and Nettie are separated by not only distance, but by societal acceptance and patriarchal ideas; Celie suffers abuse, is forced into a marriage, and is prevented from hearing from Nettie for years. Celie is isolated from her sister and is left alone to believe that she is being forgotten, but writing saves her. While she first writes to God, the one being she was told will listen to her, she begins writing to her sister, Nettie, once she learns that their correspondence has been prevented by her husband. When writing to both God and Nettie, Celie describes female relationships that have become something she can lean on through all the

trauma that she endures. These bonds of sisterhood, along with writing to her sister, help her to find her sense of self and form long lasting relationships through the creation of found family.

When discussing the bonds of sisterhood present in *The Color Purple,* it is important to note that the trauma Celie endures is caused by men. This is discussed in "Toward the Survival and Wholeness of the African American Community: A Womanist Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," when Terrence Musanga and Theophilus Mukhuba point out that most, if not all, of the traumas and negative experiences that Celie goes through show men as the perpetrators. From the beginning of the story, readers learn that not only has Celie been a victim of rape by her stepfather, the children that come from these assaults are torn from her and sold. Musanga and Mukhuba state, "this echoes the history of enslavement where African American women were projected as 'breeders' and not 'mothers'" (391). The acts of men in her story show why Celie is able to find more solace in her relationships with women than any relationship she has with a man.

Similarly, in *Fierce Femmes,* the transfemme unnamed narrator's separation from her biological sister, Charity, is rooted in cultural expectations, lack of acceptance, and transphobic views. While it is unclear whether or not abuse is the sole factor that drives the narrator away, she does choose to leave her hometown, which is necessary to find a safe space; she needs to find somewhere that is more accepting of her experiences and struggles with gender. The letters that she writes to her biological sister, the few that there are, depict her hope of recognition and allows her to deal with the estrangement from her family, even if the letters are not being received.

Both the unnamed narrator and Celie also seem to absorb trauma in order to keep their biological younger sisters safe. The unnamed narrator writes stories to her sister Charity, though

they may not be true, in order to protect her from how scary the world can be. This is apparent in a letter where she describes taking abuse from their father with a wooden back-scratcher so that he would harm her *instead* of Charity. At the same time, Celie protects Nettie from being sexually abused by "Pa," and from marrying an abusive man by doing so herself, allowing her sister to find more freedom than Celie experiences in her lifetime.

For feminist writers, storytelling is never used to remain neutral; it is a method of survival, a space where women find solidarity and, together, can resist patriarchal structures that often leave them silenced. Sisterhood emerges as a vital form of connection which is expressed through female bonds, friendships, and mutual recognition. Both Walker and Thom use their main characters' writing – letters to their sisters – to model the importance of sisterhood and found family in general.

Prior to the second wave of feminism, Simone DeBeauvoir argues in "The Second Sex" that women in the 1950s did not view themselves as a unified social group, which allows their oppression to persist. She states that women's "humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being" (26). Due to this idea of women's existence being male-centric, social bonds depend on, and are represented solely by, a woman's relationship to the men in her life; women did not find a sense of community with other women.

Debeauvoir takes this a step further, discussing how women are 'othered' due to men being the ideal. She states, "and she is nothing other than what man decides … She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (26). Because men were, and are, considered the ideal or absolute within society, there is no room for women to be

considered anything but secondary.

Since their existence is male-centered, women lack a sense of community, they "have no past, no history, no religion of their own; and unlike the proletariat, they have no solidarity of labor or interests; they even lack their own space" (27). When the second wave of feminism became prominent, women began pushing against these ideals, finding community in woman-centered relationships and creating a sisterhood. Women often use sisterhood as a way to survive in a world that caters to the patriarchy. These themes are present within the texts *The Color Purple* and *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*, both presenting sisterhood as a strategy for survival and solidarity. Letters are used as a form of communication in both texts, which depicts how the main characters, Celie and unnamed narrator, are able to survive in a world that has not been kind to them.

Radicalesbians (1970) discuss the idea of finding solidarity and support in other women and femmes in their article "The Woman Identified Woman" by stating:

> Only women can give to each other a new sense of self. The identity we have to develop with reference to ourselves, and not in relation to men. This consciousness is the revolutionary force from which all else will follow, for ours is an organic revolution. For this we must be available and supportive to one another, give out commitment and our love, give the emotional support necessary to sustain this movement. (3-4)

In the article, Radicalesbians coin the term "woman-identified-woman," to represent the importance of sisterhood in the feminist movement.

According to their definition, it "is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women's liberation" and that, "together we must find, reinforce, and validate our authentic selves. As we do this, we

confirm in each other that struggling, incipient sense of pride and strength, the divisive barriers begin to melt, we feel this growing solidarity with our sisters" (4). Finding solidarity in sisterhood is one of the most important ways for women to create bonds and find their senses of self; rather than falling into the idea that women should solely live by the patriarchal labels and guidelines forced onto them, the "woman-identified-woman" finds her sense of selfhood in the relationships that are created with other women, whether this be familial bonds, friendships, or romantic relationships. According to Radicalesbians, being a woman-identified-woman pushes against this idea of self-hatred by showing that women, their relationships with other women, and femininity itself, are what truly establish a sense of self and allow women to grow.

Similar to the idea of the woman-identified-woman discussed by Radialesbians (1970), Alice Walker discusses the definition of 'Womanist' through her work in "In Search of our Mother's Gardens," stating, "A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength" (45). This definition confirms the idea that women need other women in order to survive; community creates strength and uplifts women.

It is through woman-to-woman, or womanist, relationships that women are able to truly thrive, finding safety and strength and feel fully seen and understood. Womanist relationships are depicted in both *The Color Purple* and *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir*; Celie's relationship(s) with Nettie, Sophie and Shug, and the unnamed narrator's relationship with her sister, Charity, and the other transfemme women who become her family represent these woman-identified, or womanist, ideals. In both novels, the main characters' relationships with other women in their lives are what help them find their senses of self throughout their journeys; while none of the relationships or friendships these

women have are perfect, without other women, it is likely that this growth journey would not have happened, or would have taken way longer.

Four years after Walker published *The Color Purple* and three years after she defined "womanism," bell hooks adds to the discussion of sisterhood, arguing that it should not be defined by shared victimization, or a common enemy, but on the basis of political commitment to a feminist movement whose aim is to end sexist oppression (129). While Radicalesbians and Walker did not discuss "enemies," hooks' definition of "Sisterhood" as "Political Solidarity between Women," like Walker, recognizes that a simple gender binary should not cause separation within the community; she believes that both Black men and women should stay in community with each other because of societal racism.

Exclusion based on gender would further drive a wedge in the community; that being said, these types of sisterhoods are still useful now, and are even applicable to trans women. In a similar regard, hooks states:

> We would no longer accept a simplistic good girls/bad boys account of the structure of sexist oppression. Before we can resist male domination we must break our attachment to sexism; we must work to transform female consciousness. Working together to expose, examine and eliminate sexist socialization within ourselves, women would strengthen and affirm one another and build a solid foundation for developing political solidarity. (129)

While hooks' ideas here do not mention working against the gender binary, it does show that men should not be put on a pedestal; sexist socialization can only be eliminated if both parts of the binary are willing to expose, and fight, against it.

While explorations and theories of trans sisterhood are still developing, social scientists

are beginning to identify the ways in which trans youth of color are creating organic communities as found families; this is specifically found in literature about trans women of color in Asian countries. For example, in "Double-Edged Sisterhoods: Transgender Identity, Peer Groups and the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Transgender Girls" by Arnie Trinidad, and "A Sisterhood of Hope: How China's Transgender Sex Workers Cope with Intimate Partner Violence" by Eileen Yuk-ha Tsang, the authors examine how trans sisterhoods, or found families, are often created as a pushback to sexual exploitation and housing insecurities present within the community. Often, trans women have to leave their homes due to a lack of acceptance, and from there, they create sisterhoods and friendships with people they meet along the way. Found families and sisterhoods create safe spaces and a community of individuals with shared life experiences.

Together, Walker and Thom show that whether sisterhood is shown through private letters or through the solidarity of communal storytelling, it functions as a lifeline for women; they can use these types of sisterhood to survive, and even to become the best versions of themselves with the help of their sisters. By finding solidarity and sisterhood, Walker and Thom's protagonists are able to persevere despite enduring violence and the societal silencing of women and their experiences. By placing these works in conversation, this thesis will examine how feminist literature portrays sisterhood as a strategy for survival and solidarity. In both novels, the main characters are able to find their sense of self by forming bonds of sisterhood. Both Celie and the unnamed narrator start off seeming lost and not knowing who they are, but with the help of sisters, both found and biological, they are able to become their own authentic people, outside of the male dominated ideas and expectations of the societal norms of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Chapter One: Your Sister Celie

Alice Walker's 1982 *The Color Purple* explores the intersectionality of race and gender through the main character, Celie, during the early 20th century. *The Color Purple* confronts issues regarding race, gender, sexuality, and abuse. In the novel, readers experience the main character, Celie, transforming from a silent victim to an empowered and strong woman who has found her voice. Through the character Shug, Celie somewhat comes to terms with the fact that she has romantic and sexual feelings for another woman rather than the husband she was forced to be with. In the early 20th century, the more accepted narrative for women was to get married and have children, and while Celie did fall into this category against her will, she was able to get away from it and become an independent and empowered woman by the end of the novel.

Throughout Celie's story, which is told through letters, readers are able to witness both positive and negative moments that affect her throughout her life, which gives us a more in depth understanding of the hardships that she faces. Audre Lorde states in an excerpt from *Sister Outsider*, "We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared" (37). This ties into the letters that Celie writes to both God and her sister, Nettie. Writing these letters gives Celie a way to talk through her emotions and the traumas she is experiencing, which in turn seems to give her a better understanding of herself. Because this character is living through the expectations of the south in the early 20th century, she deals with the assumption that women are meant to abide by those societal rules and cater to the needs of their husbands and children. With the help of her writing and her relationship with Shug, Celie slowly starts allowing herself to feel her emotions to their fullest extent and discover her sense of self.

While the novel confronts the issues of race, gender, sexuality, and abuse, *The Color*

Purple also contains aspects of spirituality within what is considered the 'God section' of the book. In the beginning, Celie writes to God because her spirituality is a source of strength and guidance for her. When she loses faith, she begins writing to Nettie, instead, and her journey transitions into that of self-discovery, as her tone shifts, with her new female audience.

As she writes to Nettie, she finds solace in the women around her, which defines the aspect of sisterhood and empowerment; she is able to begin exposing the harsh realities of sexism and misogyny in her life and to push against societal norms by beginning to accept her sexuality and standing up for herself against her husband. Through her writing, the empowerment Celie experiences within her woman-to-woman relationships, and the journey of self-acceptance, she speaks out against her husband and leaves to create her own life.

The letters written between Celie and Nettie are the foundation of the entire narrative, not only providing Celie with hope, but sustaining a bond of sisterhood even through long distance and living their own lives. Celie is also able to both form and maintain bonds with impactful female characters such as Shug and Sophie throughout *The Color Purple* which exhibits the strength of bonds of sisterhood and how women find solidarity within relationships, especially in intense situations of abuse. Celie is a depiction of both survival and of healing through the personal connections that she makes.

You Better Not Never Tell Nobody But God

"You better not tell nobody but God," the first line of Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, is declared by Celie's stepfather after he has been sexually assaulting her (1). This sentence is the only text within the novel that is not written as part of a letter. It is the beginning of Celie's story, a root to all of the trauma and suffering that she endures; and she is told to only tell God. She is conditioned to believe that he is the only person, or being, that will listen, the only one she can

really explain her thoughts to or question situations she does not feel she is allowed to discuss out loud. When she later begins writing to her sister, Nettie, she challenges the idea that she *must* follow the idea of God being a white man and that only he will care about what happens to her. Though he was all she could really look up to for a large portion of the book, after the men in Celie's life do nothing but harm and disappoint her, she begins finding God in the female relationships and sisterhoods that are created throughout her life.

While Celie's inability to discuss her traumas aloud isolates her from the outside world, writing becomes crucial to her survival and allows her to think more in-depth about the female relationships that she creates and maintains alongside the negative thoughts and experiences that she goes through. If nobody else is there to acknowledge her struggles, she is able to preserve her thoughts by writing these letters in order to talk about her suffering and to make sense of both positive and negative relationships present in her life.

For a majority of the novel, Celie begins her letters by addressing God. In "Black Sisterhood and Selfhood in Alice Walker's The Color Purple," Tannya discusses how Celie's relationship with God is not only a key part of her character development but allows her relationships with other women in her life, and self to go through a type of metamorphosis. In the society she lives in, being white or being a man equates to having power. This is depicted in her relationship with Mr. _____ but also in the depictions of his father and in his son. Tannya states that Walker specifically describes Celie as a black woman when she is being used as a servant, doing things for the men (77). When Celie starts getting angry about the way she is treated, she leans less on God and more on sisterhood; her relationships with Nettie, Sofia, and Shug become a key part of her development and acceptance of herself. The care that these women show for Celie leads her to believe God is just like every other man she has encountered in her lifetime;

and she loses interest when she decides that God is a white man.

A major turning point in this novel is when Celie begins questioning God and then chooses to write to her sister, Nettie, instead of God. Rather than writing to understand her suffering and discuss the wrongs done to her, she is able to begin processing her feelings and forging a deeper connection with her sister, even if she may never be able to see what Celie has written. While she has not seen her sister in years, addressing the letters to her allows Celie to strengthen the bond of their sisterhood.

Celie finds solace in the relationships maintained between herself and the other women. When she is no longer able to rely on God, who she envisions as a white man, writing, "When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest" (*The Color Purple* 194). After this discovery, the women in her life become even more important to her story; rather than viewing God as the divine chooser of her fate, she begins to acknowledge the divine feminine, which is represented in her relationships with Shug, Nettie and Sofia, but also with herself.

In "Irigarayan Sensible Transcendental in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*," Shiva Hemmati shows how Walker depicts a new vision of God in the form of divinity within women. This is present in the novel as Celie chooses to write to Nettie after no longer having faith in God. Hemmati states, "woman-to-woman relationships fit into the study of Walker's novel in which characters struggle against the impositions of "normal femininity" by expressing female desire" (546). She goes on to talk about how Celie is able to find her lost sense of self and ends up transforming her view from the masculine god to feminine divinity which is influenced by the support of the other black women she interacts with in her community. Hemmati says, "by the end of the novel, Celie is an empowered black woman who speaks her mind and realizes her subjective identity in a safe space of the black community" (547). Celie is able to recognize God

within herself, or as a divine feminine, because of the support she finds in other black women who help her break away from the stereotypical gender role she has been assigned.

When discussing Celie's transformation from recognizing only the patriarchal, masculine God to finding divinity within herself as a woman, Hemmati states that Walker "criticizes patriarchal oppression of female desire and the female body through her womanist idea of women's genealogy, women-to-women relationship, self-love, and the existence of a divine love through the empowered female body" (548). Through finding new woman-to-woman relationships and writing letters to her biological sister, Celie learns not only to appreciate herself more, but is able to see the divine feminine within herself and her relationships, the masculine idea of God is rewritten from a woman's perspective. Celie begins to see God in everything, rather than solely focusing on the masculine view of God that is valued within the Christian faith.

Celie's transition is also present within the letters that she writes throughout the novel. Hemmati discusses, "Celie's quest for divinity and her connection with nature and humanity, and with god as a part of "everything," through Celie's own voice and writing letters to the new god" (549). Celie begins her letters with more than 'dear god,' which is depicted when she says; "Dear God, dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear people, dear everything" (*The Color Purple* 285). Through this, she is able to take a deeper look into her spirituality and express that there is more to it than just the typical masculine depiction or idea of god. Hemmati's writing discusses the relationship between Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple,* expressing that through their relationship, Celie is pushed to accept the realizations that she comes to about herself, god, and her own identity. Celie's relationship with Shug shows her that she has a place, a sisterhood, a community, in which she belongs. Their relationship is a strong depiction of the importance of

sisterhood as an aspect of feminism.

The Epistolary Form: Discussions of Letters in *The Color Purple*

Writing letters or writing in a diary allows a writer to process emotions and trauma that they have experienced. In *The Color Purple,* Celie finds safety in writing to God throughout most of this novel because she is told from a young age that she better only address God. While this isolates her a lot from the outside world, writing is crucial to her survival and allows her to think about the female relationships that she has alongside all of the negative thoughts and experiences that she goes through. If nobody else is there to acknowledge her struggles, she is able to preserve her thoughts by writing these letters in order to talk about her suffering and to make sense of both positive and negative relationships present in her life.

Aside from the first line of the text, *The Color Purple* is an entirely epistolary text, which allows readers to know and understand what is happening in Celie's mind. Walid El Hamamsy discusses in his work on "Epistolary Memory: Revisiting Traumas in Women's Writing" that this narrative form "gives the author the chance to probe certain feelings and emotions that s/he would not be equally able to express in the case of first-/third-person method of narration. The time one takes to write about her/his feelings allows the space needed to discover how one is really feeling at a given moment" (152). As Celie is writing letters, whether they are to God or Nettie, she is able to process what is happening around her and better understand her own emotions throughout the story. Since her story starts with the idea that only God will care about what she has to say, she is able to find comfort in the midst of all the negative aspects of her life by writing it out.

Celie's letters are discussed further as El Hamamsy states, "the letter acts as a medium through which Celie can voice her thoughts and feelings which no one else would be interested

to know about. Her only solace becomes the pen and paper she uses to write her letters. They thus provide her with an interlocutor and an outlet" (154). Celie is unable to discuss the horrifying situations she deals with out loud; not only does she have to take care of everyone around her, but writing is the only thing she seems to be able to have for herself. In every other aspect of her life, she is a caregiver, taking care of the children, her husband, and even her friends Shug and Sophie; when she writes, she gets to be alone, she is able to discuss all of the thoughts she is not allowed to share, and through that, she is able to understand her feelings and relationships with the other characters in the story.

Celie has spent most of her life under the control of men; Mr. _____ using her for her body and having control of her. However, through writing, she is able to question the patriarchal authority in her life and society and uses it to take back control of her own narrative. Writing becomes an act of resistance, allowing her to grow as a character by reclaiming her sense of self; this is what gives her power. Writing these letters allows her to grow as a person and as a woman; switching from addressing the letters to God to writing them to Nettie is not only a developmental part of the story but shows that Celie is beginning to take charge of her own life, her decisions, and her sense of self. Without writing, it may have taken Celie ages to experience that kind of growth.

As she begins writing to Nettie, she is even able to push against the patriarchal form of spirituality that is forced onto her. She writes, "I don't write to God no more. I write to you," and, "he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again … the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgitful, and lowdown" (191). This proves that based on her experience with men, learning that God was likely in control of the events and traumas she

experiences, steers Celie away from her spirituality. In choosing to transition to writing to Nettie, Celie is taking control of her story. Through writing to her sister, she also describes an interaction with Mr. _____ in which he says he will not give her any of Nettie's letters; she writes:

> Any more letters come? I ast.
>
> He say, What?
>
> You heard me, I say. Any more letters from Nettie come?
>
> If they did, he say, I wouldn't give 'em to you. You two of a kind, he say, A man. try to be nice to you, you fly in his face.
>
> I curse you, I say.
>
> What that mean? he say.
>
> I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble. (205)

Celie's discovery of self and spiritual change in perspective allows her to resist what were once perceived as normal behaviors. She begins using her voice and pushing back against Mr. _____ and the version of God she is taught.

In a conversation with Shug, Celie begins further explaining her distrust in God. When she opens up to Shug about her feelings, Shug pushes back, saying, "You better hush. God might hear you," which Celie follows later with "if he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place" (191). Celie is breaking away from what she is used to; because of everything she has experienced while God has been watching, she is unsure she should fully follow him. Though she does still believe he exists, she resists the aspects of spirituality that were forced onto her as a child, and later an adult, who suffers from abuse.

Though Celie's writing is a form of resistance and reclamation of self, it gives her a voice

to discuss her various traumas. In "Lettered Bodies and Corporeal Texts in The Color Purple," Wendy Wall discusses her belief that Celie's letters are used as more than an outlet; they are a way of redefining herself in a sort of 'second body' that is used to give her a voice (83). When Celie first starts writing, she talks about the sexual assault and abuse that she has suffered from the hands of her stepfather, and then the abuse she endures from her husband. When discussing a sense of self developing within Celie's letters, Wall states the following:

> The epistolary style divides as it unifies; it consists of a series of discrete entries that form a whole. Likewise, the 'self' that emerges from Celie's development is a decentered one, precariously poised against and rift with a sense of Otherness … Celie's texts are born when she is raped and silenced; the epigraph to *The Color Purple* consists of an unattributed, pervasive threat against speech. (83)

Writing is often used as a means of understanding what has happened, and to digest or process traumatic events that have happened in someone's life; since Celie is silenced by men and the society in her story, writing letters is a way for her to give a voice to herself.

While Celie uses writing as a way to find her voice, it also helps her understand the importance of the woman-to-woman relationships within the novel. In "The Subversiveness of the Letters from Africa: Alice Walker's The Color Purple," Minjung Kim discusses the epistolary form of Walker's *The Color Purple,* and how Celie's relationships with other women in the novel push her to finding her own personality and self-confidence; Celie is able to take charge of her life and make her own decisions with their help. When discussing these woman-to-woman relationships within the novel, Kim states, "Just as Celie's relationship with Sofia and Shug enable her to envision alternatives, her sister Nettie's letters from Africa have a critical function in encouraging her to reexamine her own life" (109). Nettie's letters not only prove to

Celie that her sister has been alive the entire time, but show her that she needs to get out of the situation, or marriage, that she is in. The very first line from the first letter Celie receives from Nettie says "You've got to fight and get away from Albert. He ain't no good" (125). Her husband chose to conceal the truth from Celie for fear that conversing with Nettie would lead her astray, and the discovery of her letters does exactly that. Celie begins reevaluating her role as a wife and mother and begins taking the steps to discover who she is.

While Celie spends much of the novel writing letters to God, toward the end she decides that he is no better than the men in her life and swaps to writing to her long-distance sister, Nettie, who has been living in Africa. Albert, Celie's husband, kept Nettie's letters from his wife not only as a form of control, but to separate her from her sister out of jealousy. Kim writes that within Nettie's letters to Celie, she discusses her move from the U.S. to Africa as a missionary and dissecting various myths about Africa. She states, "The process of Nettie's interrogation of various dominant discourses not only enables Celie's exposure to a larger racial history of black people in the context of white racial domination but allows her to reflect on her own identity as a black woman" (110). If Celie had access to these letters sooner, she may have been able to reflect on herself and her life sooner, which would have further pushed her to leave Albert and create her own life and accept herself as a person.

Black Feminist Discussions of Sisterhood

Both Audre Lorde & Michelle Wallace suggest in the 1970s that there is not a Black feminist Sisterhood, but they outline the possibilities for a community. For example, in 1974, Michelle Wallace writes:

> for now, Black feminists, of necessity it seems, exist as individuals--some well-known, like Eleanor Holmes Norton, Florynce Kennedy, Faith Ringgold, Shirley Chisholm, Alice

> Walker, and some unknown, like me. We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle--because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world. (7)

Wallace not only calls for Black women to work together but notices a commonality in other Black feminists, even naming Alice Walker as part of this community of Black feminists. While Wallace calls attention to this community, she does not call it a sisterhood. Due to societally accepted roles and norms, she does not feel there is an environment in which the Black feminist struggle can be understood yet.

Four years later, Audre Lorde similarly argues that "Often we give lip service to the idea of mutual support and connection between Black women because we have not yet crossed the barriers to these possibilities, nor fully explored the angers and fears that keep us from realizing the power of a real Black sisterhood" (153). This confirms Wallace's idea that while there can be a Black feminist community, a sisterhood, specifically, has not been created yet.

With both Wallace and Lorde's discussions in mind, Walker uses her writing in *The Color Purple* to showcase how important and powerful a Black sisterhood can be. Each woman in the book has suffered in various ways, ranging from abuse to being separated from their family, and they use their trauma and experiences to form bonds of sisterhood and find solidarity within their woman-to-woman relationships. It is through these relationships that each of the women, and Celie, are able to further find and understand their senses of self and find comfort in each other.

In society, Black women are the most marginalized and misunderstood group; always

being compared to white men and women but also battling sexism and internalized misogyny from other Black individuals. Black women are forced to face racism from the white community along with sexism in the Black community, which does not make it easy for a bond of sisterhood to be created. In "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," Michelle Wallace discusses how racism and sexism cause solidarity amongst Black women to seem unnatural. In her writing, she states that as a child, "being feminine *meant* being white," which calls to attention that femininity is only understood as something exclusive to white women; this idea forces Black women into a box; if they push against the narrative, or do not follow societal rules, they are considered as lesser than (1). Wallace further discusses this when talking about wearing her natural hair outside. After receiving judgment from another woman, she writes, "I fixed my hair and was hack [sic] to normal by the next morning. Letting the world in on the secret of my native naps appealed to my proclivity for rebellion but having people think I was not a 'nice girl' was The War already and I was not prepared for it" (1). Stepping outside of the societal norms quickly led to her being punished for her self-expression.

These social constraints, and the policing of Black women, are also present within Black feminist spaces. Wallace writes that "the 'new Blackness' was fast becoming the new slavery for sisters," (3) and that "the message of the Black movement was that I was being watched, on probation as a Black woman, that any signs of aggressiveness, intelligence, or independence would mean I'd be denied even the one role still left open to me as 'my man's woman'" (2). Being forced to follow the white ideals of society left virtually no space for Black women to comfortably exist. Within both the Black and feminist movements, Black women are pushed into roles that limit their ability to define themselves and negatively impact their ability to relate to each other outside of the set societal expectations and roles.

Walker's writing in *The Color Purple,* reflects the societal conditions that Wallace discusses in her writing. Throughout the novel, Celie accepts submissive roles as a survival strategy. This is seen when she expects Sofia to submit to her husband, Harpo, in order to save their relationship, saying he should beat Sofia when discussing with Harpo and Mr. _____ how to ensure she would submit to him. Sofia is the first woman to really confide in Celie, discussing family dynamics. Though their relationship has a rocky start due to Celie telling Harpo to beat his wife so she will mind him, they later bond over it; Sofia confronts Celie about what she said, stating, "All my life I had to fight … A girl ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house" (39). After this, she and Celie bond over Celie reminding Sofia of her own mother, who took abuse and always obeyed her husband, which turns into a joke about how they should beat the men back.

Celie's expectation for Sofia to submit to her husband fits in with the ideas that Wallace describes in "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," where she states "we had no strength to give to one another" and later on that "we exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle - because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world" (4). While these concepts emphasize the feelings of isolation, *The Color Purple* shows how the feeling of isolation can be overcome through the protagonist, Celie. Celie's relationships with Shug and Sofia show that finding solidarity and sisterhood in the community requires mutual recognition and challenge to normalized societal ideas. Their relationships also show that, even though Wallace depicts constraints, sisterhood and solidarity can be found through shared lived experiences.

While Wallace depicts the societal restraints that impact Black sisterhood, Hemmati

discusses how a woman is represented outside of the male gaze or societal constraints. Hemmati uses Irigarayan Sensible Transcendental, an idea formed by Irigaray, who was "a second wave feminist who challenged the monopoly of masculine sex by creating the possibility of a different space of divinity and a mirror image for a woman according to her sex and gender specificity" (545). Essentially, the idea that a woman/a woman's body is a representation of the divine outside of the male gaze and the societal acceptance of the masculine.

Hemmati also states that Walker's womanism is "a gender-crossing view, to resist the dominant culture, beyond the essentialist models of male and female, marking black women's differences from mainstream white American feminism" (546). Walker used womanism as a response to the oppressive tendencies of feminist movements created by middle-class white women, pointing out the strengths of black women; she points out that the black community, which is often devalued and dismissed, should be taken into consideration alongside the rest of the women within these movements.

According to Walker's work on "In Search of our Mother's Gardens," womanism is "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength" (45). This idea is confirmed through Celie's relationships with other women in *The Color Purple.* Without her relationships with Nettie, Sophie, and Shug, Celie may not have been able to realize the divine femininity present within her life; however, she also would have had a harder time discovering her sense of self. The women present in Celie's life are her safety net, with them she finds solace and is able to experience the full range of her emotions and process everything that has happened to her, ranging from abuse to understanding her own sexuality and spirituality.

In the only scholarly article specifically devoted to sisterhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the author, Tannya, discusses the implications of women being left out of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s alongside the feminist movement being racially exclusive, leading to the rise of the Black feminist movement. In discussing Black feminism, Tannya states, "black women are situated inside power structures in fundamentally different ways than white women. Walker makes the argument that a person's identity is considerably more nuanced and comprehensive than their race" (75). *The Color Purple* depicts a Black sisterhood that had not yet been discussed, or portrayed, in literature, pushing against the racist structures of what feminism once looked like.

Discussions of Sisterhood in *The Color Purple*

In *The Color Purple,* the biological sisterhood between Celie and Nettie is negatively impacted by Celie being forced to marry and rear children. This happens, in part, because Celie was protecting her sister, Nettie, from having to suffer in the same ways that she did. This is apparent when Mr. _____ wants to marry Nettie, but Celie does not let him do that, offering herself instead. She writes, "I ast him to take me instead of Nettie" (7). Once he finally decides to marry Celie months later, she writes, "All I thought about was Nettie. How she could come to me if I marry him and he be so love struck with her I could figure out a way for us to run away" (9), then soon after Nettie's first visit to Celie and her new family, she is not heard from again, leading Celie to believe she has died. However, later in the novel, it is discovered that Nettie's letters had been hidden from Celie.

Though Celie does not hear from Nettie until years later, it is not her fault. Not only does Albert hide Nettie's letters to prevent her correspondence with Celie, when Nettie visits her sister, he is the reason she leaves. When Nettie flees to Celie's house after running from her

abusive Pa, she is met with Albert making passes at her. When she does not accept, he gets angry. Celie writes, “he try to give her a compliment, she pass it on to me. After while I git to feeling pretty cute. Soon he stop. He say one night in bed, Well, us done help Nettie all we can. Now she got to go” (17). When Nettie is made aware of the situation the next day, she is only upset about having to leave Celie, stating, “I hate to leave you here with these rotten children … Not to mention with Mr. __. It’s like seeing you buried” (17). Albert pushing Nettie away drives a wedge between the two sisters, and hiding Nettie’s letters keeps Albert in control of Celie, making her think her sister is dead or has abandoned her. When Celie does not hear from Nettie, she begins cultivating relationships with the other women around her, Sofia, Shug Avery and Mary Agnes.

While Nettie was writing letters that were not making it to her sister at first, she still has a strong impact on Celie’s self realization. Nettie knew that Mr. _____ would likely prevent them from corresponding with one another as well, as she states in her first letter to Celie that Mr. _____ was attempting to kiss her and drag her into the woods, Nettie writes, “I started to fight him, and with God’s help, I hurt him bad enough to make him let me alone. Be he was some mad. He said because of what I’d done I’d never hear from you again, and you would never hear from me” (125). She writes, “I read where the African sold us because they loved money more than their own sisters and brothers. How we came to America in ships. How we were made to work. I hadn’t realized I was so *ignorant*, Celie. The little I knew about my own self wouldn’t have filled a thimble,” and later, “Oh, Celie, there are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa and Albert, or beaten down like ma was” (131). Once Celie is able to read about Nettie’s missionary work and her ideas about what are considered the societal norms, Celie is able to not only find herself, but to

feel that closeness with her sister through reading her written words.

Nettie spends part of her time as a missionary, and as a girl learning more about the history of black people, choosing to share this newly learned information with her sister even though she does not receive responses from Celie because of Albert. As Nettie is in another country, learning about their background and making discoveries about herself and society, she makes sure to let Celie know that there is more out there than what Celie has been given. There is hope for more, for better. According to Tannya:

> Celie, Nettie, Shug Avery, Sofia, and Mary Agnes are among the women characters in *The Color Purple* forming a close-knit sisterhood. Their sisterly bond makes it possible for Celie to grow up and become free to be herself. Women are shielded from the negative impacts of physical exploitation, domestic abuse, and political instability by their emotional connections and shared understanding. African women relish their friendship. Folktales are told, quilts are knit, gardens are adorned, and songs are sung. (78)

Through creating this metaphorical sisterhood, all of these women were able to find and maintain a safe space through their relationships with one another.

Likewise, in "Serving, Quilting, Knitting: Handicraft and Freedom in *The Color Purple* and A Women's Story," Catherine Lewis discusses both the shared trauma of the women in *The Color Purple*, but also how quilting and sewing are often shown as a form of bonding between each of the female characters. It is first seen toward the beginning of the story when Celie is bonding with Sofia and is present later on with Shug.

The women in *The Color Purple* are then able to reject the societal and patriarchal norms that allow them to be mistreated and stand up for themselves. When discussing the selfhood

present in *The Color Purple,* Tannya discusses how alliances are where the community's 'real power' is discovered (80). The women in the story are all forced to endure various types of abuse and sexism from their male counterparts, which ties into the idea of common oppression that bell hooks discusses in her work "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women." Because each of them deal with this oppression from men, though they may not get along at first, they find solidarity in their relationships due to those shared experiences. In further discussing common oppression forming bonds between women, Hooks writes:

> Women who are exploited and oppressed daily cannot afford to relinquish the belief that they exercise some measure of control, however relative, over their lives. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as 'victims' because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. It would be psychologically demoralizing for these women to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization. They bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources. This is the woman bonding feminist movement should encourage. It is this type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood. (128)

Readers are able to see that this common oppression is present in both Celie and Shug's close relationship but is even depicted in the letters from Celie's sister who is a long distance away. In this regard, Tannya points out, "Nettie's letters, which discuss the relationship between the Olinka wives of the same husband, are one example, and Celie finds Shug her best ally" (80). The theme of sisterhood is also present toward the end of *The Color Purple,* specifically in the letters Shug and Celie find from Nettie, which had been hidden for some time by Mr. _____.

While Shug Avery dislikes Celie at the start of their relationship, the treatment both of them receive from men allows them to grow closer, forming first a friendship and then a

romantic relationship. When writing about finally meeting Shug Avery, Celie writes that, "she look me over from hear to foot. Then she cackle. Sound like a death rattle. You sure *is* ugly, she say, like she ain't believed it" (45). After this initial introduction, Celie begins taking care of Shug because she is sick, and, Shug starts warming up to Celie's presence a small bit at a time.

Tannya points out that Shug is depicted standing up for Celie multiple times and rebels against the accepted patriarchal norms that seem to threaten their connection (81). In regard to the epistolary narrative, Tannya also states, "Celie's letters serve as a testament to the Black sisterhood's spirit while they endure oppression and patriarchal dominance" (81). Through Celie's bonds with her chosen family, Shug, and her biological sister, Nettie, she is able to discover and accept more of herself; which is something she has not been able to do before as the primary caretaker of all the men and children around her.

Tannya believes that without Shug, Celie may not have found these letters which helped her to discover more truths about her life; finding the letters not only gave her the opportunity to discover her sense of self, but shows readers how strong, and even how important, bonds of sisterhood were for Celie. Tannya points out, "Her relationship with Shug gives her strength and a sense of identity. They have a strong female friendship that gives Celie the confidence she needs to live freely and embrace her uniqueness" (84). This shows that there are strong bonds between women with no blood relation.

In "Toward the Survival and Wholeness of the African American Community: A Womanist Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, " Terrence Musanga and Theophilus Mukhuba use Alice Walker's concept of womanism to talk about the novel. According to the authors, Walker provides a gendered perspective on what it means to be a black woman in America, a perspective which is often dismissed and marginalized in African-American literature

by male authors. A key concept that is present in womanism is the idea of sisterhood, or the relationships that are present between women. Musanga and Mukhuba state, “This concept of sisterhood is central in Celie’s transformation from being a ‘nobody’ to a ‘somebody’ as it marks her independence from oppression” (390). The theme of sisterhood is present in each of the woman-to-woman relationships that Celie experiences throughout the novel and is depicted in her conversations with Sofia and Shug, but also within her writing to her biological sister, Nettie.

Although all of her letters to Nettie are returned to Celie unopened, Celie is able to reunite with her sister by the end of the story. No matter what traumas they went through during their time of separation, the authors say, “Celie and Nettie choose to *remember* each other through the letters they write to each other” (391). Celie and Nettie’s relationship/sisterhood is protected and maintained not only by their love for each other, but by the letters that they write to each other; they refuse to forget each other - no matter how far or long they are separated from each other. Throughout Celie’s story in *The Color Purple,* the woman-to-woman connections she makes all lead her to the outcome of reuniting with her sister, all the while finding sisterhood in women who are not biologically related to her.

Musanga and Mukhuba say, “the text’s epistolary form exemplifies this element of sisterhood as the letters are written between Celie and Nettie” (393). However, they also discuss that through the text, readers see that there is a focus on three female relationships that drive home the theme of sisterhood within the novel: Celie and Nettie, Celie and Sofia, and Celie and Shug. Celie is able to go through both a spiritual and personal transformation *because* of these relationships, which help her to discover herself and evolve as a character. While the other women in the story serve as positive models for Celie, the authors state that these relationships also address the gender oppression, domestic violence, marital rape, and physical abuse that are

present within the African American community in the setting the novel is written in (394). Throughout her lived trauma, Celie is shown desiring connection and love, which are things she does not experience with men in *The Color Purple*.

When Celie is writing out her narrative, readers are able to see the amount of trauma that she has experienced, but also get a glimpse into what other women in the story are forced to experience as well. Lewis states, "the central figures in the works are restricted by the lack of free expression and by men and the male institutions; these women are considered worthless unless codified by the presence of some male Other in their lives" (239). This is present throughout much of *The Color Purple* when Celie is depicted doing typical household, or wifely, duties for her husband. From childhood, Celie is taught to cater to men, even if it results in her own physical, mental, or sexual abuse. She is shown using writing as an outlet to process what all is happening to her and the other women in her life.

While she uses writing letters to both God and Nettie as an outlet, and later on as a way to find herself and take charge, she is also depicted finding stability and solidarity in the relationships she has with women, specifically through sewing and quilting. Lewis says, "She finds her voice louder and more clearly with them first, and then she is able to eventually face the men in her life. Many of the scenes in *The Color Purple* where Celie learns to bond are those in which the women share in sewing or quilting" (239-240). Every woman around Celie significantly contributes to the quilt that she begins making in the novel. Celie is able to make important connections with the women around her by finding this common interest, and that sense of community is part of what pushes her to discover her sense of self.

Lewis also argues that the letters from Nettie are also a key factor in Celie's self-discovery. Once Shug helps Celie find the letters that Albert had been hiding from her, she stops

writing to God as she was in most of the book and begins writing to her sister Nettie instead. Lewis discusses that Shug's willingness to help find the letters further forms a bond between herself, Celie, and Nettie; Shug also shows Celie how to turn the anger she feels about the letters being hidden into using sewing to create her own business (241). The sewing business, which is supported by Celie's newfound family, shows how this community of women have transformed by the strong bonds of sisterhood; like the quilt Celie and Sofia sew, they have become woven into each other's lives.

The ending of *The Color Purple* embodies the feminist sisterhood that is created between each of the female characters that become Celie's chosen family. Her ties to Shug, Sofia, Nettie, and Mary Agnes allow Celie to discover her sense of self and to leave behind the societal expectations and constraints that prevented her growth. Even her relationship with God becomes completely different than what she believed at the beginning of her story; rather than the white male version of God she had envisioned before, she sees the divine in the feminist relationships and connections that are created. Without the sense of community that forms throughout the story, it is likely that Celie would have remained stuck in the endless cycles of abuse and assault. The woman-to-woman relationships created within the novel depict a sisterhood that feminists in Walker's time dreamed of having.

Chapter Two: Your Sister

"For family, blood and chosen. And for fierce femmes, fighters, haunted girls, and liars everywhere"

- *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*

In Kai Cheng Thom's 2016 Canadian novel *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir,* a semi-biographical memoir of a transgender woman (who chooses to remain nameless) depicts sisterhood via the letters she writes to her younger sister, the poetry she writes, and her relationship with other members of the LGBTQIA+ community after leaving home to live on her own. Sisterhood becomes a survival tactic for the narrator as she joins a vigilante girl gang, known as The Lipstick Lacerators, who use their sisterhood as a way to get revenge on those who have harmed other members of the community.

The unnamed narrator in this story, while being depicted as escaping the town of Gloom where she takes care of her younger sister and deals with abuse from her parents, is able to find solidarity through the sisterhood she finds in the trans femme community when she moves to the City of Smoke and Lights. When discussing the community the unnamed narrator finds, Frances Lee states in "Authenticity of Social Bonds, Community and Empowerment Comes Through in Dystopian Novel About Trans Women," that "In her new surroundings in the City of Smoke and Lights, she quickly finds herself in a group of trans women sex workers of all races, sizes, and ages. Among outcasts of society, our protagonist is kindly taken in as a little sister" (F. Lee). F. Lee supports the idea that finding non-biological sisterhood can be a key component to someone becoming or realizing their sense of self.

While Frances Lee discusses sisterhood as a means of self-realization, Lee Pepper discusses in the interview "Writer Kai Cheng Thom on Learning to Love Monsters" that part of

self-realization is learning to accept the darker parts of ourselves that we choose to keep hidden. Thom discusses in this interview that everyone has a monster inside of them which consists of all the dark parts of ourselves that we tend to keep hidden. Thom says that monsters "represent the hungriest, most hidden parts of ourselves that we most often confine to exile. If I can love a monster, if someone can love the monster in me, then anyone is capable of loving and being loved. This knowledge only grows deeper within me over time, often in both beautiful and painful ways" (Pepper). A major component to Thom's story in *Fierce Femmes,* is that the unnamed narrator runs away from her old life where she did not feel like she belonged and where she kept all of her lived experiences and traumas hidden from others.

The unnamed narrator's sense that she did not belong at home with her family is likely impacted by societal ideas about the trans identity. In today's society there are a lot of negative portrayals and ideas surrounding the trans community. Thom uses her work on *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir* to show that the community contains much, much more than what social media and news may say. In her book, the main character is able to find what Lee Pepper describes as "a community of tough, loving, complex trans women, who work and fight and love together: sometimes having each other's backs, sometimes at each other's throats, in a way that will be very familiar to anyone who's spent time in the queer and trans communities" (Pepper). Thom's discussion about the monster within oneself may be interpreted as being about romantic relationships, but it could also tie in to finding a community that is loving and protective of you and chooses you, no matter what pain or trauma you may have experienced before. This is seen not only in the trans community the narrator finds, but also in the creation of The Lipstick Lacerators.

Scholarly Conversations of Trans Identity

While there is minimal literature discussing the existence of a trans sisterhood, according to Abigail Jinju-Lee's work in "What Comes after #StopAsianHate? Asian American Feminist Speculation," the Stop Asian Hate Movement was created as a call to action to end violence against the Asian American community in the United States; Jinju-Lee discusses societal responses to this movement, what comes next, and how Asian American feminists respond to this issue of violence.

Though her article is not specifically about transgender Asian-Americans, she does use her work to explore the connections between the two communities. Jinju-Lee discusses that Thom's work in *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* manipulates time and space in the wake of police violence that the girl gang and their community are facing; she further states that Thom "rejects linear futurities that locate trans safety and joy only in the future, and thus considers not simply how we might move past #StopAsianHate, but how we cultivate trans and femme Asian North American life and joy in the present" (94). While this work is not directly about sisterhood, it *does* show that even though the Asian American trans community suffers violence, Thom's work provides stories in which joy can still be found within the community through shared experiences.

It is also a reminder that, as bell hooks writes, "Bonding as victims created a situation in which assertive, self-affirming women were often seen as having no place in feminist movement… It was this logic that led many white women activists to abandon feminist movement when they no longer embraced the victim identity" (128). hooks further argues that fighting violence is not enough to create a "sisterhood," that

Solidarity is not the same as support. To experience solidarity, we must have a

> community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build Sisterhood. Support can be occasional. It can be given and just as easily withdrawn. Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment. In feminist movement, there is need for diversity, disagreement and difference if we are to grow. (138)

Although trans women currently fight against violence and shared trauma, that does not create a sustainable sisterhood. The bond *must* go further than shared victimhood, it requires working together as a community and creating unity through shared beliefs, support, and commitment.

While Abigail Jinju-Lee's work discusses Thom's story writing being used to move past the Stop Asian Hate Movement and working together as a community, Gwen Benaway's article "A Creation Story for Trans Girls, a Review of Kai Cheng's Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars: A Dangerous Trans Girl's Confabulous Memoir," discusses the importance of Thom's decision to tell fictional stories to portray instances that are based on real, lived trauma. She states:

> Folklore and fairy tales often function as exaggerated reflections of reality, allowing listeners to explore complex real-world issues through a fantastical world. This approach to confronting reality is common across cultures and narrative traditions, as it allows for different access points into subject matter which could be painful without the glaze of wonder over them. (Benaway)

The use of fairytale is particularly useful when Thom writes about the abusive Dr. Crocodile in her novel. Benaway discusses this in her review, stating that though he is "willing to prescribe hormones to trans women. It rapidly becomes clear that Dr. Crocodile's interest in trans women is sexual and predatory. He inspects the protagonist's body before proscribing [sic] hormones, an invasive body exam that leads up to an implied forced sexual exchange" (Benaway). In addition to the story of Dr. Crocodile, Thom uses other storytelling tropes, such as fantasy, mythology,

and magical realism throughout the novel. This typically occurs when she is describing various types of traumas that she or her trans sisters have endured; these ideas are explored later in the 'Sisterhood through Shared Trauma' section.

Thom further discusses how trauma inspired her fantastical stories in the interview "For Runaways, Survivors and Dreamers," where author, Merbruja, discusses with Thom her work on *Fierce Femmes* and how her personal trauma and literary choices went into the novel's creation. Before the interview, Merbruja gives a brief description where they say the book creates "a magical place for every trans girl to insert herself into the story. A place where we belong. The beauty of this pseudo-memoir … is that we get to identify with more than one character who's a canonically and unapologetically trans woman, and not sensationally named as trans in every sentence, either" (Merbruja). They follow this by stating, "For once, we get to insert ourselves as girl gang members, sisters, mothers, witches, and goddesses. We get to be bald sex workers and seamstresses and runaways and dancers and jealous friends. We get to be complex. We get to have a sisterhood of vengeance and victory" (Merbruja). It is important to note that there is not a lot of diversity in literature about trans identity, and none about trans sisterhood; this interview discusses that trans sisterhood is the most important part of Thom's novel and the importance of having trans literature, such as *Fierce Femmes,* to discuss the challenges that this community faces.

During their interview, Thom discusses that while the book contains the word "memoir" in the title, it is not one; she states, "The narrator's emotional experiences … are ones that I've all lived and experienced. The facts, or the details of the narrative are heightened and embroidered upon. Some of them are drawn from my life, but then brought into this mystical place" (Merbruja). She follows this by discussing the aspects of other characters in her novel,

stating, “I brought my own perspective to each of those characters. Most of them started off based on real life trans women, and then, much like the narrator, the details of their life stories, their appearances, or their personality have been heightened and mythologized to evoke a story that has a real feeling,” after this, she states one of the most important statements of the interview, which is, “it plays with this idea of fiction being able to express truth better than fact” (Merbruja). At the end of this interview, Thom discusses that she sees *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars* as an ongoing conversation that is “just starting to happen between trans women, and particularly trans women of color, who are storytellers of any kind. The trans lit movement is white-dominated sometimes, and shuts us out” (Merbruja). This quote confirms that while there is minimal trans literature, it is often overtaken by white narratives.

Although there is little trans literature, there is even less trans literature about people of color. The unnamed narrator in *Fierce Femmes* is also aware of the lack of trans voices being heard, as early in the novel, she asks:

> Where are all the stories about little swarthy-skinned robber trans girls waving tiny knives made of bone? About trans teenage witches with golden eyes who cut out their own hearts and lock them in boxes so that awful guys on the internet will never break them? About trans girls who lost their father in the war and their mother to disease, and who go forth where Death lives and make him give it back? (3)

As the unnamed narrator is asking these questions, she is watching a white trans woman on her boyfriend’s television who is giving a speech, she decides that someone needs to write a transgender memoir that is different, something that strays from the typical story. She says, “Looking at the ivory face of the trans lady on the TV, I decided then and there that someone had to write us girls a dangerous story: a transgender memoir, but not like most of the 11,378

transgender memoirs out there, which are just regurgitations of the same old story that makes us boring and dead and *safe* to read about" (3). This depicts the narrator's frustration at the white washing of trans narratives; because of the lack of diversity in trans stories, or trans literature, many stories go untold.

In their article, "Lipstick Lacerators and Loving Justice: The Magical Abolitionist Transfeminism of Kai Cheng Thom's Fierce Femmes," E. Ornelus and Jigna Desai discuss the narrator's frustration in this moment and how it ties to the racist and heteronormative ideals of society. They write:

> Thom's hyperbole provides an important insight into a particular cis-centric formation of 'the trans memoir'—a narrative in which trans people become legible and recognizable to cis readers. These representations of trans people follow certain logics and narratives, which in turn encourages liberal forms of validation, tolerance, and inclusion. Thom names the risk … In this sense, *Fierce Femmes* refuses, rather than proffers, a realist narrative of redemption, one in which the trans subject achieves security, assimilation, and inclusion. Her rejection is not of the 11,000+ trans memoirs, but of a prescriptive form and one-size-fits-all narrative for all trans memoirs, whether for cis or trans readers. (10-11)

While the unnamed narrator discusses frustration at the white trans woman's speech, she acknowledges that the woman is still a part of her community, a part of the overarching trans sisterhood.

This is depicted when she says, "I felt this hot spiky anger, like I wanted to kick right through the television screen … But ultimately, I just couldn't. Because at the end of the day, she's still my sister, you know? And as much as I don't like her … I still feel the need to keep

the sister love flame burning inside my heart" (3-4). This shows not only the importance of a trans sisterhood, but calls to attention that the trans community is still marginalized, and white people are still put on a pedestal. The unnamed narrator, as well as Thom, call for a sisterhood, but also point out the racism that is present within the community.

Trans Discussions of Sisterhood

Unlike *The Color Purple* that was written in a time when African American feminists were discussing the need for a Black sisterhood and what that should look like, as Thom points out in her interview with Merbruja, there are currently no feminist theoretical discussions on trans sisterhood in literature or in feminist theory. Although they can be found in a few articles about trans youth in Asian countries, specifically regarding trans girls who are sex workers and face housing insecurities, there is no discussion regarding what a trans sisterhood should look like. However, the discussions of sex work and housing insecurities do tie in with the story of the unnamed narrator as she is an Asian transgender woman faced with similar issues.

Just as a conversation is "just starting to happen between trans women, and particularly trans women of color, who are storytellers of any kind," there is a large gap in literature about sexual exploitation when it comes to transgender girls, as most child sexual exploitation (CSE) literature is about cisgender girls , however, Arnie Cordero Trinidad states in his work on "Double-Edged Sisterhoods: Transgender Identity, Peer Groups and the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Transgender Girls," that trans persons in general experience multiple types of violence throughout their lives, from childhood to adulthood; whether it be physical verbal, or sexual, and that "harsher social conditions trans children face compared to cis children push a number of them to CSE" which is "exacerbated by economic hardship, the absence of employment options, quitting school due to bullying, family rejection, and unstable housing

arrangements" (949-951). The narrator in *Fierce Femmes* fits into each of these categories, which are harmful to her well-being throughout the entirety of her story.

Trinidad's findings show that in participants who identify internally as female, all of them took steps to transition, or alter their physical appearance, by using HRT (hormone) pills, which transgender individuals are typically introduced to by older people in their community (956). In *Fierce Femmes,* the unnamed narrator's newfound friend, Kimaya, is the person who introduces her to Dr. Crocodile, which leads to her taking these pills. Trinidad also found that in this community, "adult trans friends openly talked about their involvement in sex work" which "normalized transactional sex" (958). When the unnamed narrator of this story needs healthcare access to transition, she learns that Dr. Crocodile uses his patients for sexual favors in return for the care that they need. Trinidad's findings, along with the story about Dr. Crocodile, show that this is something many people in the trans community face.

When Dr. Crocodile is introduced in the book, this becomes apparent. Because this is a normalized occurrence, many of the girls seem to think that they are voluntarily consenting to the doctor's behavior, due to having no other, more accessible, options. Trinidad's studies confirm this by showing that "even as trans girls interpret their participation as an autonomous choice their age-related vulnerabilities, the power asymmetries between them and older trans friends, their precarious situation and conditions, and their inexperience nullify their capacity to provide independent consent" (961). Through Trinidad's work, the conclusion shows that intersectionality is at play in victims of CSE; she states that individual, interpersonal, and community factors into CSE in trans girls (960). Most of the trans individuals in the City of Smoke and Lights go to Dr. Crocodile for their treatments; it is there that each of them suffer assault and abuse in place of having to pay.

When discussing how the trans community is impacted by the normalization of abuse such as that perpetrated by Dr. Crocodile, Trinidad states that “while the group provides protection and support in some aspect of their lives, the same peers insidiously introduce them to and reinforce their participation in CSE” (960). This is also shown within the novel; the unnamed narrator’s group of friends have fallen victim to the normalized idea that in order to become who they want to be, or even to find success in their journey or in life, sexual exploitation is just something that they all *must* deal with or accept.

While Trinidad’s studies are specifically about trans children (seventeen and younger), they could show that people who are new to their trans journey could be impacted and influenced by peers who are farther along in theirs. These kinds of relationships are what Trinidad refers to as a “double-edged sisterhood” in her work, stating “while trans friends lend stability to the trans girls’ lives and offer positive support functions, they also play a central role in the CSE and sexual abuse of the participants” (958). Trinidad also claims that "Other layers of vulnerabilities include stigmatization that leads to poorer access to healthcare (Roche & Keith, 2014), police brutality (Nichols, 2010), and problems in negoting [sic] gender identity (Ocha & Earth, 2013), among others" (951). The unnamed narrator in *Fierce Femmes* moves to a new city, and is new to starting transitional medications and living by herself; other trans women in the community are able to offer guidance based on their own experiences with this doctor. By being put into positions that may not feel comfortable, and may not even be okay, they are showing that this part of their journey is so normalized, it is hard to avoid the abuse and exploitation that they deal with on a regular basis just to become their most authentic selves.

In another study of sisterhood among trans women, “A Sisterhood of Hope: How China’s Transgender Sex Workers Cope with Intimate Partner Violence,” author Eileen Yuk-ha Tsang

discusses that the marginalization of this community causes a significant amount of abuse, mistreatment, and intimate partner violence than other communities face. Specifically in China, transgender sex workers are "vulnerable to the vastly under-researched area of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)" (2). Because of this community being so small and underrepresented, intimate partner violence has a higher impact as a whole. According to their work, being transgender is not an identity that is recognized in China, which leaves issues such as intimate partner violence under-researched and even unmentioned (2). While this work is mainly geared toward intimate partner violence, there is discussion about the importance of a trans sisterhood.

When discussing the bond of sisterhood within the trans community, Tsang discusses, "the most important function of the sisterhood is to provide a reality check and to help them feel 'normal.' The TSW community is relatively small and vulnerable; they do not make friends easily … The sisters may gossip and criticize each other, but in a life full of danger, struggle and mistrust, they learn to trust each other, knowing they are each on the same trans-journey in life" (11). Although the transgender community is a bit more accepted in the Canada, they still face day-to-day violence and discrimination based on societal expectations and norms.

When dealing with this amount of hate, it is important that a sisterhood, or a chosen family, is maintained. Tsang discusses this by stating, "The sisters offer assistance, support, and care, which helps them to subsist in a hostile environment" (12). The unnamed narrator not only finds her chosen family when she moves to the city, but the girl gang, The Lipstick Lacerators, is also a part of the sisterhood that attempts to keep the rest of the members safe. In Tsang's research, she states that "TSWs have also learned to mobilize their communities and work together when dealing with the police. Being in groups is the best way to bolster the confidence of the TSWs in advocating for themselves and minimizing the effects of stigma, violence, and

arrests from the police" (12). Tsang's work further proves that a Trans Sisterhood is something that not only exists but is necessary in order for this community to feel safe. Thom depicts exactly that in *Fierce Femmes*, showing that the journey of self-discovery the unnamed narrator experiences is heavily impacted by the solidarity found through sisterhood.

Dear Charity

Similarly to *The Color Purple,* in *Fierce Femmes* the unnamed narrator writes five letters to her younger biological sister, Charity; though it is clear in *The Color Purple* that Nettie does not receive any of the letters that Celie writes to her, it is unclear whether or not the unnamed narrator's sister, Charity, receives any of her letters. It is also unclear whether or not Charity exists. While there is no evidence of Charity receiving these letters, or that Charity exists, the letters to her are used as a way for the narrator to connect with a biological sister, even though she has removed herself from her old life and family.

The narrator writes to her biological sister, often telling her lies about what is going on in the new world that she has become a part of. This could be seen as Charity - though they have not been in communication - being a safe space for the narrator (even though the unnamed narrator does lie about what is happening around her by assuring that she is safe and nothing bad has been happening to her). For example, in her first written letter - which takes place after the narrator has a physical altercation with a threatening man at the bus stop, she writes, "I'm the liar in the family, not you," which is followed by "... things have been fine with the trip so far. I slept on the bus the whole way home, and didn't even talk to anyone or get into any fights or anything" (31). After lying to her sister about the fight, she continues by writing about how she took care of Charity when she was a baby, likely to distract from the lie and to protect Charity from the cruelness of the world. Since Charity is younger than her, and the narrator was at one

point responsible for her, she needs to be protected; this maintains the bond of biological sisterhood even though Charity is not receiving the truth.

The emotional bond of sisterhood present in the letters creates a space for the narrator to discover more parts of herself. In writing to Charity, the unnamed narrator keeps her past alive through their connection. While she is going through what seems to be the most life-changing and transformational part of her life, she is still tied to the past, which she cannot change. She is also unable to ignore the responsible feeling that she has for Charity.

In the second letter, she proves this. Though there is no evidence of Charity writing to the unnamed narrator, the second letters starts with the narrator asking, "YOU'RE GETTING INTO FIGHTS AT SCHOOL NOW??? … You care too much about school for that. Kid, this is so not your lane. I'm the delinquent one, remember?" (77). This reaction is typical of a protective older sister, however, later on in the letter, the narrator makes a dark connection between protecting her sister and the past trauma abuse they suffered from their father. She writes, "I've always been the fighter so you didn't have to" (77). To show this, she tells a story about the time the their father was angry at Charity for tripping over the television cord, causing it to become unplugged, and when the father was about to spank Charity with a back-scratcher, the unnamed narrator used her own hands to block the blow; this ended with the narrator telling their father, "try that again and I'll kill you, Dad" (78). By the end of the letter, she is once again telling Charity that things in the city are fine, though they have not been. She is choosing to further protect her sister by ensuring that she does not worry; she does so by writing lies.

The unnamed narrator's letters to Charity are further discussed in the article, "Lipstick Lacerators and Loving Justice: The Magical Abolitionist Transfeminism of Kai Cheng Thom's Fierce Femmes," by E. Ornelus and Jigna Desai as they discuss the importance of sisterhood and

solidarity in the trans community, but also the impact that the unnamed narrator's letters to her younger sister have on her and the readers, especially in choosing to remain nameless even in correspondence with Charity. While the narrator is unnamed through the entirety of the novel, she signs her letters off by writing 'your sister.' Ornelus and Desai discuss that the choice to name herself 'your sister' is a tie to the real world trans community, stating, "Your Sister could be any transfemme whose experience resonates with Thom's. Particularly, the call to refer to her as Your Sister is familiar, even familial. The protagonist is kin, *your* kin" (9). While the unnamed narrator is building metaphorical sisterhood with the other transfemmes around her in the City of Smoke and Lights, and maintaining the ties with her biological sister, Thom uses the narrator's character to connect with the transfemme community of readers as well. The sisterhoods and solidarity present within the characters' relationships goes beyond the bounds of the page, inviting trans women reading these stories to become a part of the sisterhood as well.

The Lipstick Lacerators

Thom's writing in *Fierce Femmes* uses confabulation, the unintentional creation of false memories or lying, to move the story forward. The unnamed narrator in the novel is a runaway, leaving what she calls the town of Gloom in order to find community in the City of Smoke and Lights. It is there that she meets her first new friend, Kimaya, along with Kimaya's 'lover,' Rapunzelle, Valaria, Azena the Witch, Esperanza, and the rest of the trans-femme sisterhood she becomes a part of. As Jinju-Lee states,

> While it is titled a memoir, this work is indeed a fabulous one that uses the structures of both the fairy tale and the memoir to create the confabulous. Combining a fairy-tale like archetypal setting - the narrator's hometown of Gloom, her escape to the City of Smoke and Lights, and the trans femme community she finds on the Street of Miracles - with

> poetry, epistles, and fictional memoir, the book depicts the creative, difficult, and joyful ways that trans women build community and survive in a dystopic, hostile work much like our own. (104-105)

Thom uses her work on this memoir as a way to call attention to the violence that the trans community faces and how the community responds to it.

When the unnamed narrator first arrives in The City of Smoke and Lights, she immediately becomes a part of the transfemme friend group that lives there. Though she meets Kimaya first, she soon meets the entire gang, finding a community that she feels she will be accepted and understood in. The unnamed narrator says, "Already, in less than three weeks, I have met so many femmes. They are a pantheon of goddesses, each one unique" (38). The City of Smoke and Lights already seems to have more to offer than the town of Gloom could; here she has become part of a community of women with similar experiences to her own.

The creation of the vigilante girl gang, The Lipstick Lacerators, takes place after one of their own is killed due to a hate crime. While not every character believes that responding to violence with more violence is the answer, this group seeks vengeance and justice for Soraya. When Soraya is introduced in the novel, the narrator writes, "Soraya is dead … Rumour has it she was beaten to death with a bottle, because tiny shards of glass were found embedded in her scalp and cracked skull. The police are refusing to release many details … They will not investigate further – why should they? A trans girl is found dead at least once every year in this city" (65). The narrator later explains, "Not a single lantern was extinguished, no one stopped for even a moment. She was not the first trans girl to die here praying to God and thinking of home, and she would certainly not be the last (70). Due to the violent nature of Soraya's death, her friends, the group of trans women living in the city, become disgusted by the fact that the police

are covering the murder up, refusing to investigate.

Although they have found comfort and safety within their sisterhood, they are often harmed by the societal norms of the surrounding city; rather than allowing it to continue, the girl gang, The Lipstick Lacerators, is formed. While some prefer violence, others prefer to create memorials or showcase political advocacy rather than fighting back against the forces that are against them. When discussing the response to violence in *Fierce Femmes,* Jinju-Lee states:

> This group attempts to meet the violence of cis men against trans women on the Street with violence, and while the characters succeed in striking fear into the city, they ultimately disband under the pressure of police repression and the psychological toll of embodying the violence that has been visited on their trans femme community. This choice to answer violence with violence ultimately fails to achieve the safety and power that the Lacerators had sought, while also breaking apart personal relationships that will only be healed later in the narrative. (105)

While the unnamed narrator finds a kinship, or sisterhood, in the girl gang that is created, she soon learns that the constant fighting of violence with more violence is not the solution to the issues that their group faces.

The unnamed narrator in this story is depicted killing a cop during one of the Lacerators' fights against the police, which leads to the group becoming more connected with the Street of Miracles, which is the street most of the girls work on. Jinju-Lee states, "Thom's imagination of the Street asks us to consider both the realities of violence - here, state, and police violence, as well as transphobia - and the possibilities for community that exist in the street" and that, "instead of abandoning the Street as a site of violence, the trans femme characters commit themselves to the Street" (106). The trans women in this novel decide to choose sisterhood and

community over the acts of violence and the hardships that they are facing. As mentioned earlier in this work, bell hooks also argued that sisterhood should not be defined by shared victimization, or a common enemy. Thom shows that her transfemme sisters can continue to fight back against the societal forces against them, they are the strongest when they act together and use their bonds of sisterhood to protect one another.

The idea that their bonds of sisterhood make them stronger rings true when the relationships, once ruined by part of the group choosing violence and the others being against that idea, are healed later on in the story. Jinju-Lee also discusses that the confabulation of the story is not only spatial, but temporal (106). After the unnamed narrator kills the police officer, time stops and the Street consumes the officer; upon this consumption, the narrator decides that she should turn herself in for what happened. Her sisters disagree, however, and they wash the blood off of themselves in the fountain in the center of the Street (116). Jinju-Lee states, "This moment of safety is both impossibly fleeting and impossibly expansive, and it is born out of this community, suggesting that the hard work of the community and being together in solidarity is a transformation not only of ourselves and our spaces, but of time and futurity" (106-107). This shows that for feminists, even more specifically Asian North American feminists, that solidarity does not need to come *after* occurrences of violence, or as a response to them; working together while these things are happening in the present is equally, if not more, important.

Sisterhood through Shared Trauma

As a young trans femme writer, Kai Cheng Thom's breakout novel not only tells her story, but provides readers and the trans community with a story that depicts healing through finding love and sisterhood. Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, "Thom maps the Street of Miracle's inter-community contours, where there's sisterhood, protection, and deep love" (Piepzna-

Samarasinha). Within this novel, the unnamed narrator is able to withstand and overcome violence and personal/interpersonal relationship struggles by finding her place within the community that welcomes her on the Street of Miracles. While there are a lot of positive depictions of the found sisterhood, Thom does not shy away from discussing the violence and oppression that the trans community faces.

The author states that the novel is about a "gritty struggle of making transformative justice real, where oppressed and powerful people think about how they can best strike back against the violence dealt them, where characters who choose violence grapple with how using it bring both power and trauma" (Piepzna-Samarasinha). When the unnamed narrator joins the vigilante girl gang, The Lipstick Lacerators, there is a large disagreement about whether or not they should fight violence with violence or if they should just work together to peacefully protest. This allowed for Thom to show the realness of the sisterhood aspect of the book by showing that they are not perfect; they have disagreements and nobody really knows what the correct answer is. In going through trauma, learning things in a hard way, and working together, the sisterhood is able to grow and heal together.

Not only do these "sisters" heal together after the death of Soraya, their experiences with Dr. Crocodile create a "trauma bond." As mentioned in both the "Scholarly Conversations of Trans Identity" and "Trans Discussions of Sisterhood" sections, although the unnamed narrator is in her late teens when she is introduced to Dr. Crocodile, her experiences with him are nothing less than abuse and exploitation. Dr. Crocodile gives her medication to help her blossom into a woman by allowing breasts to grow, and he does this in exchange for sexual favors; which he seems to do with each of his patients, allowing the creation of a shared sense of community to form between them. The fantastical elements in the story about Dr. Crocodile are used to depict

him as an animal-like predator taking advantage of his prey, which in this case are the trans individuals that he treats.

Dr. Crocodile is not the only instance of sexual assault that the unnamed narrator in the novel experiences; she has childhood assault trauma that she leads to stories about her experiences with the bees in her body and her ghost friend. During the unnamed narrator's first interaction with the doctor, where he claims he is having her undress for standard procedure, she says, "I was expecting something like this, but my muscles still clench up at the demand. And invisible ghostly hand lands on my shoulder, tugging gently but urgently, warning me away" (*Fierce Femmes* 57-58). The ghost friend from her past tends to warn her when she is about to be taken advantage of or is in a seemingly unsafe environment. Throughout Thom's writing, she uses fictional and mythological stories to discuss the unnamed narrator's life experiences. One of these stories, introduced early in the book, is what she calls her 'ghost friend' and the bees inside of her body, which represent sexual assault trauma.

During the "For Runaways, Survivors and Dreamers" interview with Merbruja, when asked about these two stories, Thom discusses, "Ghost friend is the flip side of trauma. We have the killer bees that are inside the protagonist's body. They're the sort of dark side or painful side of trauma, the part that keeps her from connecting to other people, the part that causes her to punish herself" and that "ghost friend is also a result of trauma, but the beautiful side. The side that allows her to connect with herself in particular ways. The side of her that really loves herself, that understands what she needs through the lens of trauma" (Merbruja). In the visit with Dr. Crocodile, the bees show up soon after the unnamed narrator's ghost friend, joining her during this trauma.

When experiencing an inappropriate examination, the unnamed narrator describes,

“angry killer bees swarm through my body, snarling and tingling. They boil beneath my nipples, inside my private parts. My arms and legs scream to get up, punch, kick, hurt. I could break Dr. Crocodile’s toothy grin in half … Ghostly fingers brush my cheek” (58-59). After this, Dr. Crocodile states, “I think you are going to make a very beautiful woman … You Asians are always the best treatment subjects for this sort of thing” (59). Thom’s writing during this interaction depicts not only the sexual abuse and trauma that the trans community faces, but the racism that takes place as well.

While the stories in this book are fictional, it is important to know that sexual traumas are prevalent as a shared experience within the trans community; Thom using these metaphors in order to make the stories easier to digest. This is also discussed in Ornelus and Desai’s work “Lipstick Lacerators and Loving Justice: The Magical Abolitionist Transfeminism of Kai Cheng Thom’s Fierce Femmes.” Ornelusand Desai argue that Thom is “illuminating alternative epistemologies of magic bonds … The author simultaneously acknowledges the reality of racialized, gendered transnecropolitics—from both interpersonal and institutional threats—while also illustrating the power of transfemme solidarity, even in death” (26). The bonds of sisterhood and solidarity are made apparent in the magical stories that the unnamed narrator tells, which represent the various traumas that transfemme women face.

While experiences of sexual assault are discussed in Merbruja’s interview, she also points out Thom’s choice to portray trans women characters as sex workers. In response, Thom shares,

> primarily, I wanted to represent a diversity of trans women, a diversity of trans women of color, and trans women who felt real. I knew that the only way I could do that was to draw from my relationships with real trans women and then fictionalize. One of the relationship dynamics that has been really present in my life, in various ways, is this

> concept of fishy or not. And experiencing my own jealousy towards other trans women that I feel are more passable than me, or more successful in terms of capitalist types of success … This is a rare thing, and it has a lot to do with my privilege as a light-skinned, East Asian trans woman of color who went to university. Grappling with that, and the disparity in relationships and the animosity and the jealousy and the sadness and the guilt that can come up, is really important. In terms of who the protagonist is, that conversation where the protagonist is named as fishy by Kimaya is an example of several of those conversations that have happened in my own life. (Merbruja)

Thom uses her real, lived experiences to create the stories that are told through the unnamed narrator.

In Pepper's interview, they discuss that Thom's idea for *Fierce Femmes* grew from the desire to write both a love letter and an apology for other trans women present in her life. In response, Thom discusses that within the community, "we are each others' only true siblings" which often means that there is a competition for resources and space. Thom also discusses that she has felt hurt and has been a source of hurt to other trans women, that her writing of this memoir was born from her struggle to understand and make peace with that reality (Pepper).

At the end of the novel, after the unnamed narrator has told the fantasy-filled stories of the Street of Miracles and the City of Smoke and Lights, after she has found love in a relationship with a transgender man named Jacob, she closes the story in the same way she started it, by running away. Though she has made it through a journey of finding not only sisterhood, but herself, the difference in her choice to leave this time is that she wants to seek a new adventure and to begin writing her story. This is apparent in the last story she tells, but also in her final letter to Charity. The unnamed narrator closes the last chapter by saying:

> Really? You still don't know why I'm leaving? Honey. It's because I ran away to find myself, and so that I would never, ever be stuck in a story someone else wrote for me. Because I said goodbye to my body full of bees and my heart full of ghosts, and now it's time to fill my body and my heart with something new. I'm putting on my short skirt and my candy-red heels, and I'm flying away to see if I know who I am, what I might still become, so I can find out how far I can get and if I can find my way back. Drawing a map of myself in the stars.
>
> And there is nothing – not a swarm of killer bees, not a crooked house in a city called Gloom, not a blue-eyed boy and his sweet kisses, not even a street full of beautiful sisters and violent miracles – that is strong enough to hold on to me forever.
>
> I am leaving them so I can love them. I am going so that I can return. (185-186)

Though the narrator is leaving the found family she became a part of, she has accepted that in order to further discover her sense of self, she must keep moving forward. While she has experienced the bonds of sisterhood and the acceptance within the trans community, she needs to find who she is on her own.

Although the unnamed narrator states her choice to leave in the final chapter, she closes her story off with her final letter to Charity. She uses this letter to tell her sister that she is moving on to a new adventure and discussing how she will gather stories about herself, and the trans community, and share them. She writes:

> Someday I'm going to write things, all kinds of things, things that nobody's ever thought of before and things that they'll never believe. Stories about girls who run away to find out where Death lives and come back holding skulls full of fire. About girls who steal blood-red shoes and find themselves dancing with the devil till the end of time. About

> boys becoming girls and girls becoming boys and dangerous, violent people learning to find love in the dark at last.
>
> I'll write it all: everything we were and are and are trying to become. I'll write for the girls who came before, and the girls who come next. For you and for me, for all of us dangerous girls. (188)

Through all of the love and hurt within the trans sisterhood in *Fierce Femmes,* the unnamed narrator makes it her job to gather the stories of other trans women, along with her own, and share them. Based on what she tells Charity in the final letter, she points out that nobody has been sharing, or hearing, stories about the trans community, or trans sisterhood. The conclusion of the book is open-ended. There is no telling where the unnamed narrator will end up, but it is clear that she *will* write; she will tell the stories nobody else has been able to.

Thom's ending to *Fierce Femmes* shows that the unnamed narrator is taking on the task of sharing stories of trans sisterhood, something that nobody seems to have done before, in the eyes of the narrator. Along with this, the open-ended nature of the conclusion suggests the lack of a concerted effort to dream up a Trans Sisterhood, which differs from Walker's *The Color Purple,* which was written in a time when Black feminists were actively trying to define a Black sisterhood. While there is a lack of trans literature present today, there are little to no works that discuss or attempt to define what a Trans Sisterhood looks like. Stories like Thom's, and the unnamed narrator's, have marked the beginning of the push for more acceptance, and for more visions of sisterhood within the community.

Conclusion: Amen

Finding solidarity in sisterhood is one of the most important ways for women to create bonds and find their senses of self outside of what "the Man" pushes onto them. Sisterhood is a key part of women finding both solidarity and survival; an idea that goes hand-in-hand with women being able to develop a sense of self. In *The Color Purple,* Celie's relationships with Nettie, Shug, and Sophie help her to realize she is a person outside of trauma or being someone's wife or mother. The vigilante girl gang that the unnamed narrator in *Fierce Femmes* joins, along with the community of queens and femmes, help her to find herself and figure out what her identity is outside of her trauma and the unaccepting society depicted in her story.

Both texts depict strong female relationships, whether familial or chosen, and how those relationships become central to the main character's survival. In *The Color Purple,* the letters written between the main character, Celie, and her sister, Nettie, create and maintain the narrative of the novel, not only providing Celie with hope, but sustaining a bond of sisterhood even though they are a long distance apart and living their own lives. The epistolary portrayal of the narrative represents a dialogue of survival and resilience; it allows Celie to claim her own voice as time progresses.

Similarly, in *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars,* Thom uses the nameless main character's letters to her younger sister to drive home the familial bond of sisterhood but also extends these ideas into a broader community of femmes and trans women who become a part of a chosen family. This community gives readers an inside look into how sisterhood plays an important role in the main character's life not only by depicting the girl gang sharing their stories rather than remaining silent, but by sharing positive and negative experiences that forge bonds between them that are just as strong as if they were biologically related.

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