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THE LIBERATION OF GOD

WOMEN WRITING A NEW THEOLOGY

By Katie Omberg

April 28, 2008

"Laughter is the closest thing to the grace of God."

-Karl Barth

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Jane Crosthwaite, for bearing with me on this endeavor. Thank you also to John Grayson and Zetta Elliott, for being willing to read this over and for coming to my defense.

Thank you to my sister, who has stayed completely uninvolved in the whole thing. Having someone to talk to who is completely removed from this has made it much more doable. Thank you to both my mom and my dad for your support, love, and level-headedness about all the obstacles encountered en route to the completion of this project. And thank you to Nana and Papa, for the last-minute drive back up to school to write this whole thing, and for everything else.

Thanks to Morgan Trujillo for being a wonderful friend and peer throughout these four years. Also, to Eva Goodwin and Carmen Guhn-Knight for reading over my drafts, and to all of my other friends for your kind words (by which I mean, for all the times you've made fun of me).

Also, thank you very much to Roger Sneed, whose "Black Liberation and Womanist Theology" course I took the spring of my sophomore year. It is a class I think about nearly every day, and in it lay the seeds for this paper.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 7

Introductions to the theologians and literary critics I will be citing . 10

Martin Buber 11

Carter Heyward 12

James Cone 14

Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza 16

Gustavo Gutiérrez 17

Carol Christ 18

An introduction to The Color Purple and The Handmaid's Tale . 22

These books as part of the canon of feminist and Womanist theology 31

Why are these writers using fiction to discuss theology? . . 33

The development of a theology of a *God of the oppressed* . . 39

The requirements of a liberative theology 44

An outline of community, praxis, and action . . . 44

Community as the primary source of liberation theology . 46

The tie between social and theological liberation . . . 51

The importance of praxis 54

The issue of equality within community as made evident in The Handmaid's Tale 60

God in Gilead 63

When the *God of the oppressor* is the only God present, everyone is victimized 65

The God question: God in relation 72

The *God of the oppressed* is named by the oppressed as the True God 78

In The Color Purple a new theology is created 86

The characters within The Handmaid's Tale are unable to form a liberation theology 88

Laughter as the revelation of the I-You in the Bible, The Color Purple, and The Handmaid's Tale 92

Laughter in Genesis: Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar . . 95

Laughter in The Color Purple 99

Laughter in The Handmaid's Tale 110

Conclusion 125

Works Cited 128

INTRODUCTION

> That you need God more than anything, you know at all times in your heart. But don't you know also that God needs you—in the fullness of his eternity, you?[1]

It may seem like most of this paper will be spent discussing social or literary issues. The focus, however, is much more theological. One cannot discuss God without discussing the way it relates to humans and the way that humans relate back. Without a human framework in which to place God, there is no reason even to waste time thinking about God. God is nothing outside of a relationshipwith humankind. It is much more likely that humans exist in a God-less world than that God exists in a human-less world.

A God in a human-less world is pointless: there is no reason for a God to exist that does not interact with people. A God removed from the world is no God at all, but is some unrelated force that does not hurt or help humanity, that exists independently of our own experience. A God without a human community within which to participate is helpless.

A human world without God, however, is still a human world. People can still do good works for each other outside of the greater context of doing the "Godly

[1] Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970) 130.

thing." It is just as possible that there is no God as it is that there is one. It is also possible that God exists, but outside of the traditional divine attributes associated with it from the Religions of the Book: masculine, omnipresent, omnipotent omniscient, and eternal. It is possible that God, instead, so permeates everything that it exists in this world as an undetectable divine essence that extends beyond these limiting attributes.

If the world does, possibly, exist within God's permeating essence, it becomes clear why one cannot talk about God in a context removed from the nitty-gritty of human life. If it is true that God created us, and is therefore within us, then it is true that when discussing people, one is discussing God. It must be true, then, that when discussing the relationships between people one is discussing the relationship between individuals through God. When discussing the breaking of people from the oppressive systems in which they exist, we are talking about the ownership of individuals' holy *dunamis* (the self-licensed ability to take action) that allow them to act.[2] If people are working to be free, then it is God who is working to be free. God is thereby a victimized God who is synonymous with and a mirror of victimized people.

Thereby, an interesting question is raised. How is it that, if God is inherent within all people, people can oppress others? Is God both oppressor and oppressed? This is a valuable question, and over the course of this paper one that I will hope to answer.

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[2] Isabel Carter Heyward, The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982) 41.

Perhaps there is another God-option. Perhaps God does not exist *within* people, but *between* people. For those who are broken by the blows of oppression, disassociation, and isolation, there is no chance of relation to another human. But if bonds can be reformed and people can rid themselves of oppression and meet the other in a respectful community, the force of God acts between them. One cannot talk about God without talking about people.

INTRODUCTIONS TO THE THEOLOGIANS AND LITERARY CRITICS I WILL BE CITING

In my exploration of the theological distinctions generated by reading The Color Purple[3] and The Handmaid's Tale,[4] I will be referring to a number of theologians, philosophers and literary critics. In order to garner some insight of theological importance from these two novels, there must be some structure from which to analyze them. Using the works of the men and women listed below as a jumping off point, I hope to explore the links between these two works and others in the canon of liberation theology. I also hope further to explore the ideas of the *God of the oppressed* and the God that dwells within human relations, and eventually prove that these are one and the same God. The *God of the oppressed* is the God that works within the constructive, communal relations of victimized peoples seeking liberation.

The theologians and other scholars whom I will reference in this paper range from black liberation theologians to English literature scholars to philosophers. The following is a brief overview of who these people are and what aspects of their writings I am interested in.

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[3] Alice Walker, The Color Purple (Orlando: Harcourt, 1982).
[4] Margaret Atwood, The Handmaid's Tale (New York: Anchor Books, Random House, 1986).

MARTIN BUBER

Martin Buber, an Austrian Zionist philosopher, wrote the essay that I will be citing most extensively. He lived and worked in Austria and Germany until he left for Jerusalem in 1938. The first edition of I and Thou came out in 1923 and was translated into English in 1937. I and Thou will be used to expound the principle of right relation; the subjective and active I-You basic word, which stands in contrast to the objectifying and passive I-It relationship.

The idea of an I-You relationship is that one person can relate to another without thinking in terms of "named qualities," but can experience others directly for just who they are. Similar to the Exodus story where God names God's self "I am what I am," the You discovers itself and thrives in direct relation (Ex. 3:14). It is through the I-You relation with other people that one can gain anything. Just as Heyward identifies *dunamis* as unmediated power, Buber states that "the relation to the You is unmediated" and, therefore, is powered by *dunamis* (a word coined by Carter Heyward, the next theologian I will account for) (Buber 62). In the two texts I will be studying, the You and *dunamis* feature prominently. In The Color Purple, when Celie participates in the I-You with Shug, she learns of her own *dunamis* and is no longer the perfect victim. Offred, conversely, never encounters the You, only the It, and is left without any empowering right relation.

Another idea that Buber stresses and I will be using is the concept of realized freedom through freedom of thought. He states that "to gain freedom from the

belief in unfreedom is to gain freedom" (Buber 107). Because the women of The Color Purple become aware of a way out, of another way of living and of another view of God, they are able to become free from the complete oppression that under which they suffer. Although she has memories of a time before, Offred considers only her life in Gilead now. Her memories do not serve to empower her and she does not see any other way of living that is free and, therefore, lives in complete unfreedom as a total victim.

All assertions about relationships that I will make in my discussion are based upon Buber's own conceptualization of this empowering act of relation between people in community. Although some of what I say will be informed by Heyward's expanded theological reading of Buber and by liberation theology's interpretation of relationships within oppressive systems, all of these are based upon the two basic words I-It and I-You.

CARTER HEYWARD[5]

Carter Heyward's The Redemption of God is her doctoral dissertation for Union Theological Seminary in New York, published in 1982. It focuses on the relations formed between people through God. It discusses right relation and stands as a modern theological elaboration of Martin Buber's I and Thou. Heyward discusses at length the importance of love, and how the manifestation of

[5] Although The Redemption of God was written by Carter Heyward under her full name, Isabel Carter Heyward, her more recent work has been published under the name Carter Heyward, and this is the name that she is more well known by. Therefore, I will refer to her in my paper as Carter Heyward.

love is revolutionary and allows people to form solid relationships that empower them to act. She is now a professor at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

When I first read this book, I was completely struck by its restructuring of the subjectivity of God. In The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation, Heyward has completely broken God out of any physical limits and has re-imagined God as a being that exists not in relation *to* people but in the relation *between* people. As I read and reread this text, I realized that Heyward's book is not so much about the redemption of God, although it is about that as well, but about the redemption of people. Heyward's theology grants people power over their situation in the world, and asserts that liberation is only a matter of finding this power within oneself to reach outwards into a community.

The essential power intrinsic to all people is, as mentioned above, something Heyward calls *dunamis,* which is "a power unmediated by official social legitimization . . . experienced by others as raw power, spontaneous, uncontrollable" (Heyward 41). Heyward claims that this holy power is completely internally driven and unregulated by any external source. She associates *dunamis* with Jesus, who she understands as a person who has this power that is "God embodied," making sure to assert that Jesus "holds no monopoly on *dunamis*" (Heyward 46-47). Jesus acts in a Godly way that is obtainable by any human being who strives for it. Any person who lives in right relation to other people is

able to achieve this power that defies reason and associates them closely with the divine.

This internal power is useful in understanding how to create a meaningful, liberative theology, in any time or social context. It is through possession of this power that Shug and Celie are able to liberate themselves from oppression, and it is because Offred lacks this internal power that she cannot find a *God of the oppressed* through connections with others. Heyward does some work in defining the "ultimate victim," and Offred fits this mold perfectly. Celie is also a victim before Shug tells her that she is loved and Sofia tells her that she should stop waiting for God and act against Mr. ____ herself. Offred has no one to tell her what she should do to save herself. The importance of this helpful community in finding *dunamis* is something that is better defined by Carol Christ and Gustavo Gutiérrez, both of whom I will discuss later on.

JAMES CONE

James Cone is currently the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. A Black Theology of Liberation[6] was published in 1970 during his first year working at Union Theological Seminary, one year after his first book, Black Theology and Black Power, came out.

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[6] James Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

A Black Theology of Liberation is a source that I will use quite extensively, for it sheds helpful light on the essentials of liberation theology. I will use Cone to explicate the two parallel divinities present within liberation theology: the *God of the oppressor* and the *God of the oppressed*. My own writings will talk at length about how both of these Gods are at work within the environments of The Color Purple and The Handmaid's Tale. Cone theorizes that these two Gods exist, but more importantly, that the *God of the oppressor* is not a True God at all because God is always on the side of the oppressed. This is what he means when he asserts that "God is black" (Cone 63). In the context of black liberation, God is black because God is located amongst the oppressed in order to help in their struggle, and this group of the oppressed happens to be black. I will not go as far as Cone into the idea of the oppressor and of God becoming ontologically one with the oppressed, but I will consider a God who is aligned with the oppressed.

Cone assumes that God is male, and he fails to recognize the victimization of black women by black men, and as such I will not rely on him for council on the subject of women's liberation and women's oppression. Interestingly, Cone recants in his 1990 afterword to the twentieth anniversary edition of A Black Theology of Liberation, stating that some work remains to be done to eliminate this sexism within his text and within black liberation theology (Cone 196).
All of his dictums about oppression in general, however, and about the *God of the oppressed*, are quite useful and translate very easily from the oppression of blacks in America to the oppression of women in the American south and in Gilead.

Cone states that theology and the conceptualization of God "cannot be separated from the community which it represents" (Cone 8). The importance of the community that connects through God is another subject that I will undertake in coming to understand how constructive theologies of liberation are formed.

ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER –FIORENZA

Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza is currently the Kristen Stendahl Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School. She is also the co-editor of the issues of *Concilium* that focus on feminist theology and founding editor of The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion. What Cone did for black liberation theology, in explaining its inner workings and its theology, Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza does for feminist liberation theology in her introduction to The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology.[7] She defines this theology as beginning with "a systematic exploration of women's oppression and its ideological legitimization" (Schüssler-Fiorenza xvi). I have used this definition to support the belief that The Color Purple and The Handmaid's Tale are works of feminist liberation theology, even though they do not overtly develop a theology. No liberative God talk occurs in The Handmaid's Tale, but the story does indeed describe the legitimization that occurs in the construction of oppressive systems ideologically, socially, and theologically. These books are written because, according to Schüssler-Fiorenza, feminist theology cannot base itself upon

[7] Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

“kyriocentric [elite-male centered] Scriptures, malestream theological traditions,” but must be rooted in “the feminist experience of wo/men struggling against kyriarchal oppression” (Schüssler-Fiorenza xxii). My chosen books are within the feminist liberation canon, for they detail the experience of women within oppressive systems. I will use the work of Schüssler-Fiorenza to investigate how they detail the ways these systems theologically legitimize oppression.

Working on the same theological problems that Cone has regarding the theological contradiction of a *God of the oppressed* and the *God of the oppressor*—and determining which God(s) can be called “Christian”—Schüssler-Fiorenza asks a similar question: “‘in what kind of G*d do Christians believe?’”(Schüssler-Fiorenza xxx). This re-imaging of God is similar to the development by Cone of a *God of the oppressed*. Schüssler-Fiorenza urges Christians, specifically those following a feminist liberation theology, to re-image a God who can help them in their task of obtaining liberation from oppression.

Published in 1996, The Power of Naming represents a very recent documentation of the ongoing praxis occurring within the community of feminist liberation theologians. Schüssler-Fiorenza is interested in the construction of a Christian “G*d” who can help her and others victimized by kyriocentric systems.

GUSTAVO GUTIÉRREZ

Gustavo Gutiérrez was born in Peru in 1928 and was ordained there in 1959. He is now the John Cardinal O'Hara Professor of Theology at the University of

Notre Dame in Indiana. I will be citing his essay entitled “Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith” in the anthology Frontiers of Theology in Latin America,[8] a compellation of writings by various Latin American liberation theologians.

In this essay, Gutiérrez creates a framework for what is needed for a theology of liberation. I will use Gutiérrez’s method of development as a model of the construction of such a theology in The Color Purple and The Handmaid’s Tale. He states that theology comes out of praxis, and out of praxis also comes a community and an ability to act. I will switch the order in which these occur for my own argument, but will argue that praxis, community and action are the three fundamentals needed for the development of a theology of liberation.

CAROL CHRIST

Though sparingly, I will be referring to Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest[9] to build support for the renaming of God by oppressed women. Christ is currently the Director of the Ariadne Institute for Myth and Ritual in Eugene, Oregon and has done work on many texts regarding feminist theology. Christ states that “It is important for women to name the great powers of being . . . from their own perspective and to recognize their participation in them,” suggesting that the oppressed must shift their God to one of the oppressed, similar to Cone’s earlier assertion (Christ 10). She also describes the importance

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[8] Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Liberation Praxis and Christian Faith,” Frontiers of Theology in Latin America, ed. Rosino Gibellini (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979) 22.

[9] Carol Christ, Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980).

of community in constructing the image of a helpful God, an idea similar to that of Gutiérrez.

Christ is not someone I will be referring to often, but she does provide very good support for the arguments made. She is a landmark in feminist theology, asserting that women must remake the ancient religion of the Goddess in this world. She has also edited many compellations of feminist theology literature.

DOROTA FILIPCZAK

Dorota Filipczak is a Polish professor who specializes in Canadian English literature, so a reading of her analysis of The Handmaid's Tale provides a strong, close reading of the text in comparison to the text of the Bible. Filipczak is currently a professor of English Language and Culture at the University at Lódz in Lódz, Poland.

The article "'Is there no balm in Gilead?': Biblical Intertext in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale" by Dorota Filipczak in the book Literature and Theology at Century's End,[10] though cited sparingly, provides good background information for this paper. Filipczak goes through the entire novel and picks up the links between the text and any possible Biblical source that Atwood drew upon. I use her to demonstrate the power that Gilead has given itself through the references to the Biblical narrative, thus putting it as a seemingly natural progression from the kingdoms of the Bible.

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[10] Dorota Filipczak, "'Is there no balm in Gilead?': Biblical Intertext in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale," Literature and Theology at Century's End ed. Gregory Salyer and Robert Detweiler, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

DELORES S. WILLIAMS

Delores S. Williams is a retired Paul Tillich Professor Emerita of Theology and Culture at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk,[11] Williams' book, provides a great complement to James Cone's writing on black liberation theology. Where Cone ignores issues of gender, Delores Williams picks up and excels. She also talks at length about the interplay between God-Talk (theological discourse) and the necessary action here and now to help improve things for oppressed women. She claims: "all of our talk about God must translate into action that can help our people live," a view which Sofia seems to be parroting when she tells Celie to stop thinking about heaven and punch Mr. ____ in the face (Williams 203).

Williams' Womanist theology is embedded in the ground, with a God who is needed to help people end their current suffering, out of which a greater and complete liberation can occur. She describes the importance of the experiences of the oppressed in reimaging a *God of the oppressed* along the same lines that Christ and Schüssler-Fiorenza describe the necessity of a God who is subjectively useful. This interest in black women's stories, however, is tied to a historical, Biblical model. Williams sees Hagar as the quintessential black woman in America: she "goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child,

[11] Dolores S. Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

with only God by her side" (Williams 33). Though I will not belabor the Hagar story, it is an important key in the Biblical narrative to understanding how the God of the Bible treats the oppressed, and provides this treatment a shocking contrast to his favoritism towards the Israelite.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE COLOR PURPLE AND THE HANDMAID'S TALE

> As soon as dinner over, Shug push back her chair and light a cigarette. Now is come the time to tell yall, she say.
> Tell us what? Harpo ast.
> Us leaving, she say.
> Yeah? Say Harpo, looking round for the coffee. And then looking over at Grady. . . .
> Squeak not saying nothing. She got her chin glued to her plate. I'm not saying nothing either. I'm waiting for the feathers to fly.
> Celie is coming with us, say Shug.
> Mr. ____'s head swivel back straight. Say what? he ast.
> Celie coming to Memphis with me.
> Over my dead body, Mr. ____ say.
> You satisfied that what you want, Shug say, cool as clabber.
> Mr. ____ start up from his seat, look at Shug, plop back down again. He look over at me. I thought you was finally happy, he say. What wrong now?
> You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into the Creation. And your dead body is just the welcome mat I need. (Walker 199)

Within this statement Celie gets out from under Mr.____'s foot, and tells him all about it. Up until this point she has bent over backwards for her husband and for the rest of the world, helped by no one, human or divine. She is freed at this moment through her relationship with Shug, the blues singer.

The novel is written in the form of letters, the first half of which she addresses to God. This God to whom she writes does not write back and does not help free her from any of the pain she suffers. Here, over halfway through the narrative,

Alice Walker allows Celie to gather the courage needed to defend herself from the oppressive advances of her husband. This episode at the dinner table is the smallest scale on which this liberation occurs. In denying Mr. ____'s controlling hand, she further denies the overarching oppressive social system a hand in controlling her life. She no longer sees herself as a triple victim—a victim of class, race, and gender discrimination. Instead, her world view shifts and she begins to witness this life, here and now, as the time and place where liberation can and does occur.

Mr. ____ cannot believe the transformation that has occurred in his wife. The mere suggestion that Celie is leaving him for a life of her own is so appalling to him that the reader can almost see his jaw go limp at the prospect. Mr. ____ is just as helpless as all the other men at the table in dissuading the women from leaving. When he encounters a look from Shug, he has no choice but to sit back down and surrender his rage to the powerful verbal lashing of Celie. Harpo and Grady, the husbands of two other women at the table, are equally impotent.

Shug and Celie, the two now-liberated women, do all of the decisive talking in this passage. Throughout their decision makingthey tell the men just how it is without getting too hot-headedor losing their tempers. They are calm and collected, knowing exactly what it is they want to say and saying it. Even when Celie snaps at Mr. ____, she is still in control over herself and knows exactly what she is saying. When the men speak, it is nearly always in the form of a

question. The women, on the other hand, are making directed and directive statements concerning their chosen future.

Thinking that he is in control, Mr. ____ unwittingly offers his dead body as a welcome mat for Celie's journey out. Never before has she even talked back to him, and now she threatens his life. She has realized the internal spark that Carter Heyward defines as *dunamis*. This power is something that Celie has made manifest through human, not divine, means; it is powered by her own free will and self-determination as fostered by Shug. Although this conversation occurs directly after one between Shug and Celie where they re-imagine God, the *dunamis* that Celie wields is something that she has realized herself and it is in no way something entrusted upon her by God or Shug. *Dunamis* exists within the individual and is not granted from some external force. It is human power, and with it she is able to change her position in human affairs.

Although the strength that underlies the actions of Celie and Shug in this passage is human, the change in the social dynamic of the group is of heavenly proportions. Celie declares that she is entering into "the Creation," a phrase that carries heavy religious overtones. But one must mind that it is not *His* creation that she enters into. It is not a world created by the Biblical God, or necessarily created by any God at all. There is no God who ushers her into creation. Instead, she takes her own two feet, steps over Mr. ____'s body, and walks herself into the Creation with the power of her own *dunamis*. She executes the command given by Martin Buber: "Creation—we participate in it" (Buber 130).

After this shockingly frank conversation, Celie continues to speak her mind to the men of the house:

> Hold on, say Harpo.
> Hold on hell, I say. If you hadn't tried to rule over Sofia the white folks never would have caught her.
> Sofia so surprise to hear me speak up she ain't chewed for ten minutes. . . .
> You was all rotten children, I say. You made my life a hell on earth. And your daddy here ain't dead horse's shit.
> Mr. ____ reach over to slap me. I jab my case knife in his hand. . . .
> Well, say Grady, trying to bring light. A woman can't git a man if peoples talk.
> Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh. (Walker 200-201)

In complete contrast to the docile Celie that existed earlier in the novel, this active Celie is determined to have her voice heard by any means necessary. She uses physical violence as a defense against the retribution spurred by her verbally violent offence. Although tense and argumentative, this heated conversation is finally broken by a round of laughter between the women of the house, signifying a moment of connection between them (later in this paper, I will discuss the importance of this laughter extensively). This deep, personal relation between members of the oppressed is pivotal in forming a liberative theology, and as I will mention in more detail later, something that members of the black liberation and feminist theologies find necessary in creating a constructive theology of liberation. In this female community that is now filled with the spirit of *dunamis*, all members are connected as equals around the table. The men of the house are also present at this table, but they are not members of the community of the oppressed and therefore do not become liberated, at least not in the same way.

Celie has broken the chains of the oppressive male society with help from Shug and her own *dunamis*, and now all the women at the table are incorporated into this freed community. Though the oppressors are present, they no longer have power over the oppressed. When the women begin to liberate themselves, the men can only stand back and watch them take action. This activity is the capstone of liberation theology—once action towards liberation has occurred, the oppressed are no longer victimized. In The Color Purple, the reader witnesses Celie, Sofia and Shug achieve liberation through the constructive implementation of their *dunamii*.

*   *   *

In complete contrast to the revolutionary change within The Color Purple, Margaret Atwood allows no such saving grace to her protagonist inThe Handmaid's Tale. This story takes place in post-apocalyptic North America, in a city that is never called by its old name but simply only by "Gilead." Offred offers its history in brief snippets to the reader,explaining that "It was after the catastrophe, when they shot the president and machine-gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency" (Atwood 174). She never discusses who "they" are or what exactly the "catastrophe" is, leaving the reader as ignorant about what exactly is going on as Offred is. Although never explained outright, she does allow some information that suggests that the catastrophe was some sort of nuclear Holocaust: "The air got too full . . . of chemicals, rays, radiation, the water swarmed with toxic molecules, all of that takes years to clean up" (Atwood

112). This extreme pollution lead to infertility, which is why the position of Handmaid was created by the new Gilead: to help ensure that people could reproduce at the desired rate.

Offred, the protagonist and one of these Handmaids, is subjugated by the whim of the oppressive government of Gilead. The system is neatly constructed to isolate humans so that no real connection is possible and everyone is dependent on the government for a purpose—it assigns each person a specific role to which they are obliged to conform. When people try to make connections with each other, their results are trite and impersonal, if not altogether thwarted. Surface formalities remain, specific greetings are permitted, such as "'Blessed be the fruit"' and "'May the Lord open,'" but constructive discourse is strictly forbidden (Atwood 19). After meeting with the Commander in his study for the first time after hours, Offred returns to her chamber:

> Then I hear something, inside my body. I've broken, something has cracked, that must be it. Noise is coming up, coming out, of the broken place, in my face. . . . If I let the noise get out into the air it will be laughter, too loud, too much of it, someone is bound to hear . . . Judgment: emotion inappropriate to the occasion. The wandering womb, they used to think. Hysteria. And then a needle, a pill. It could be fatal. I cram both hands over my mouth as if I'm about to be sick, drop to my knees, the laughter boiling like lava in my throat. I crawl up into the cupboard, draw up my knees, I'll choke on it. My ribs hurt with holding back, I shake, I heave, seismic, volcanic, I'll burst. Red all over the cupboard, mirth rhymes with birth, oh to die of laughter. (Atwood 146)

Laughter, in order to occur, must have a recipient. It cannot happen in a vacuum of relation (again, I will discuss this laughter at length later in this paper). The laughter that tries to escape her lips cannot be released because Offred is

completely isolated from any other person and is, therefore, completely without relation. The short, staccato phrases that compose this passage create an overall feeling of disjointedness and panic as Offred realizes that she will laugh, somehow, unless something is done to halt it. Gilead has so isolated her that she has forgotten what it feels like to laugh, to have a connection with others or herself. This ignorance is why it takes until the third sentence for her to realize that the "noise" coming up and out of her is, in fact, laughter. She uses startlingly violent imagery to describe her state: broken, cracked, the "broken place in [her] face;" her mouth. This violent imagery illustrates that this action has changed for Gilead from a sign of relational health into a dangerous shock of revolutionary and restricted energy. Her laughter and all laughter in Gilead is always an "emotion inappropriate to the occasion." Because it is "inappropriate," out of the control of Gilead, laughter must be silenced through possibly "fatal" means. Nothing outside of the micro-managing control of Gilead is appropriate; only what Gilead can control is allowed. Any human relationship or proof of its existence, including laughter, is outlawed.

The volcanic need for laughter implies the dire need for connection, a human experience that has been severed in Gilead. Instead of being a joyous event to be shared with others, laughter erupts when the need to connect overpowers the need to exist within the constraints of the theocracy. It is no coincidence that Offred needs to laugh after her first night rendezvous with the Commander. All he wanted was a connection on some level, and she was unable or unwilling to give

it to him. It was not sex that he was looking for, but a harmless game of Scrabble and a kiss "as if [she] meant it" (Atwood 140). But she did not mean it, she was not willing, or maybe not able, to engage in right relation with him. She is the oppressed, he the oppressor, and between them there is no safe common ground for connection. Alone in her room, however, she demonstrates how clear her need for human relation is. She needs to laugh, to be a person engaged with other people.

Towards the end of the passage, feeling as through she could explode with the great need to laugh, Offred describes herself as "red all over the cupboard." Depicting herself solely as the color that she is assigned suggests the extreme disassociation that has occurred in Gilead. Her old name and identity have been taken away, the individualism granted to her through her new name (even though "Offred" is simply a noun that associates her to the Commander) is stripped from her. She becomes nothing but red, the color of the Handmaids, anonymous and subjected. The fact that she has no individuality (much less the *dunamis* of the individual) and no community is what causes her moments of "laughter" to be in such stark contrast to those in The Color Purple. The women with Celie are connected persons in relation to one another, whereas Offred is an isolated individual stripped of her personhood, and thereby her power to relate. She is alone without others, and without God. In The Handmaid's Tale, she never encounters community. Offred, therefore, lives a life devoid of a theology of liberation, devoid of what she needs to really live.

*   *   *

In looking at these two starkly different passages, the two possible outcomes of women living as victims in a Godless existence become clear. Celie is a once-victimized woman who becomes liberated. Offred is a once-free woman so broken by the confines of an oppressive system that she has no *dunamis* to fight back and regain her freedom. Celie finally is able to voice her opinions and tell it like it is. Offred is left trying to drown out the sound of her own laughter. Neither the God that Celie wrote to in The Color Purple nor the God that Gilead claims as its own come to the aid of the victimized. This seeming abandonment by God is because the God that they are praying to—the God their social structure is linked to—is the *God of the oppressor*. The *God of the oppressor* has no interest in helping the oppressed. James Cone gives a helpful definition of the two Gods at work in A Black Theology of Liberation: "The *God of the oppressed* is a God of revolution who breaks the chains of slavery. The oppressor's God is a God of slavery and must be destroyed along with the oppressors" (Cone 58, emphasis mine). The God that Celie writes to and the God that exists within the power structure of Gilead is the *God of the oppressor*. The two victimized women, Celie and Offred, must find a new God to help them. They must find the *God of the oppressed.*

THESE BOOKS AS PART OF THE CANON OF FEMINIST AND WOMANIST LIBERATION THEOLOGY

These two novels exemplify feminist (and parallel to this, Womanist) liberation theology. They are certainly works of fiction, but the narratives within them are real: they tell of female subjugation and basic human enslavement by oppressive systems. Celie's story is set in the recent past and Offred's in the future, and between the two it is possible to see the present victimization of women. Although the characters may not have ever lived, the stories of their lives and the strategies the authors offer for how to survive a victimized life are compelling and informative. The tales of the women who failed to escape the oppressive systems are equally compelling as warnings to all victimized women around the world. In order to stop social oppression, the oppressed must become theologically liberated.

Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza has established a methodology of feminist liberation theology in her introduction to The Power of Naming. She first claims that "feminist liberation theology begins with a systematic exploration of women's oppression and its ideological legitimization" (Schüssler-Fiorenza xvi). If this documentation is the foundation of feminist liberation theology, then Walker and Atwood have clearly written pieces of feminist liberation literature. In

both The Color Purple and The Handmaid's Tale, oppressed women and the systems that oppress these women are examined in very close detail. Both systems—that of the poor black American south and that of the futuristic Gilead—are seen through the eyes of the oppressed. Instead of following Mr. ____ or the Commander, the reader is introduced to the world through the experiences of Celie and Offred, the lowest of the low. By bearing witness to these cultures from those on the bottom, Walker and Atwood are able to look up into the structure of these societies through the cracks. Though Schüssler-Fiorenza describes the exploration of the *ideo*logical legitimization of these systems, Walker and Atwood expose their *theo*logical legitimizations, as well as the actual execution of the oppression legitimized by these systems. By exposing the Godlessness of the environments of Celie and Offred, the two authors demonstrate the false theologies held by their captors. Walker and Atwood demonstrate that there is no liberation for the victimized within the context of these false theologies, but that liberation can only occur within a theology of liberation based upon a belief in the *God of the oppressed*. The *God of the oppressor* is a facet of the ideo/theological legitimization of oppression and, therefore, is not at all helpful in escaping oppression. Women, and any oppressed community, can and must redefine God.

WHY ARE THESE WRITERS USING FICTION TO DISCUSS THEOLOGY?

> Women's Spiritual Quest takes a distinctive form in the fiction . . . of women writers. It often begins with an *experience of nothingness*. . . . the experience of nothingness often precedes an *awakening*, similar to a conversion experience, in which the powers of being are revealed. . . . Through the awakening to new powers, women overcome self-negation and self-hatred and refuse to be victims. . . . Women's mystical experiences often occur in nature or in community with other women. Awakening is followed by a *new naming* of self and reality . . . (Christ 13, emphasis of the author)

Celie is one of the quintessential examples of a woman in women's fiction who has gone on this Women's Spiritual Quest, beginning with an "experience of nothingness," followed by an awakening and a "new naming" of oneself and of reality (which can be understood as God). She starts as nothing in Mr. ____'s house, is awakened to the *God of the oppressed* by her relationship with Shug, and finally escapes the nothingness she was to become self-reliant and productive economically, socially and emotionally. She renames her reality, most apparent in the renaming of "Mr. ____" to "Albert."

Offred, conversely, experiences only nothingness. Although she does encounter a number of people more intimately than others out of her free will, namely Oflgen and Nick, these vague relationships do not have the chance to develop into something that supports praxis or leads to action. There is no strong community or nature for her to participate in. Every minute of her life is regimented by Gilead or by her superiors. She has no chance for liberation.

This Women's Spiritual Quest is not isolated to the realm of women's fiction, but is apparent in any narrative interested in women. Hagar is a Biblical figure, for example, who participates in the Women's Spiritual Quest. She is initially nothing, just Sarah's handmaid, is awakened to God's saving presence when she flees into the desert, and escapes her nothingness through the promise of a lineage. She renames her reality, renaming God "El-Roi" (Gen. 16:13). It is no coincidence that Walker writes Celie's story to have this clear parallel to Hagar's, where a nothingless woman grants herself—through community—the authority to rename her world. Womanist theologian Dolores S. Williams titles her work Sisters in the Wilderness to suggest the sisterly bond between the oppressed black woman of America and the enslaved Egyptian Hagar of the Bible. Both Hagar and the American population of black women are oppressed and left in the wilderness to fend for themselves. This victimization of the female other is something with a deep history, but with it comes a deep history of God's action in these situations to save women from obliteration.

The Color Purple and The Handmaid's Tale, when examined parallel to each other, inform the reader of the necessity of a Women's Spiritual Quest for victimized women looking to escape subjugation. The reader witnesses Celie's escape from nothingness and her return to full humanity through this Quest. The reader also witnesses Offred's abandonment within the premier stage of the "experience of nothingness." These are both stories that need to be told. Walker provides hope for her readers, while Atwood gives a grim warning of where

oppression can lead: into a Godless world where any hope for connection to one another is hopeless and abandoned.

Though these two narratives are works of fiction, their stories are relevant because they are *real* stories: women abused sexually, emotionally and physically, trapped from any healing by a system that not only allows, but encourages, this torment. Women are victimized by traditional theology into believing the history of the status quo. The Handmaid's Tale dives deeply into this conception of the history and culture that oppresses women as being a cultural history made by the oppressor. Dorota Filipczak asserts that "in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the author uses the possibilities of distortion to the full, thereby pointing to the dangers lurking in the process of institutionalization of the sacred text" (Filipczak 215). Atwood gives the reader the worst-case-scenario of subjugation and state-sanctioned sexism. The Color Purple, however, grants the reader way out: it redefines God, instead of simply being forced to abandon hope in it. When God has been redefined as the I-You relation (or, if not as this relation itself, certainly as present within it) and this relation is made available to the characters of Walker's novel, it is also offered to the reader.

Women are reclaiming their stories through fiction. The books are not focused on the men that the women encounter, but on the women themselves. After Celie is abused by her father and Mr. ____, Walker places the reader in Celie's room, to see how she feels and how she reacts. After Offred plays Scrabble with the Commander, the reader returns to her chamber to watch her try and stifle her

laughter. But in the Bible, when Sarah "dealt harshly" with Hagar, the reader is not allowed to see how the victimized slave woman copes (Gen. 16:6). We do not know how she feels in Sarah's house, in Abraham's bed, in the desert by herself with meager bread and water (Gen. 21:14). Walker and Atwood are creating narratives that, had their subject been Hagar, would have told a very different story of the covenant between God and Abraham, the birth of Ishmael and the birth of Isaac. But they do not choose to appropriate a Biblical narrative into their own repertoire. Instead, they write new stories that focus on the experiences of women in nearly-modern or post-modern Christian societies, supplying both helpful instruction and disturbing warnings to this audience.

Alice Walker and Margaret Atwood are creating a new canon for women, an extension of the Bible. They are reclaiming women's stories of oppression and of liberation from this oppression. The Old Testament is understood as a record of God's acting in the history of the Hebrew people. The New Testament is a story of God's direct action on earth, of sending itself down to touch a human life with divine power. These books tell the stories of women's oppression and the story of God's touching the lives of these victimized women. The Color Purple is a story about a woman who is oppressed and finds liberation once she forms a constructive relationship, through which God manifests itself. In the Abraham-Sarah-Hagar story, one can see the precedent for this divine materialization in Abraham's relationship to the messenger of God. When Abram (as Abraham is called before the covenant is made) enters into the covenant, there is the promise

that Abraham will be the progenitor of nations and kings (Gen 17). Within this covenant, Abraham and "the word of God" are equals: they engage in dialogue and have a balanced relationship of give and take (Gen. 15:1). Out of this close relationship of unbounded *dunamis*, something described by many as a miracle happens. So too does it happen in The Color Purple: Celie is miraculously liberated through the *God of the oppressed* after she realizes that she needs to stop praying and start acting. She and Shug, the messenger of God, form a right relation that allows God to manifest in their liberative actions. Offred, on the other hand, never becomes aware of the *God of the oppressed*, because there is no messenger present. Walker and Atwood follow in the tradition of the Bible in reapplying this narrative, and thereby align themselves with it to become an extension of it. Women are to look to these contemporary stories of women's oppression just as much as they are to look to the Bible in finding sources of the history and the method of God's saving liberative action (Williams 154). This reflection is what praxis is, and Walker and Atwood encourage us to engage in it.

Just as Shug liberates Celie by educating her about the *God of the oppressed*, so does Alice Walker liberate the reader by educating her about the possibilities of action that the *God of the oppressed* participates in. Walker uses the example of Celie as oppressed by the American South's social system to propose what God can and does do with all oppressed peoples: answers their prayers once they stop praying and start participating in their world. The *God of the oppressed* is a saving God that works within the relationships between people in the basic word

I-You. Walker writes the story of an I-You relationship so that the reader knows what it is and the sort of power that it grants one through the ownership of *dunamis*.

Margaret Atwood, conversely, offers no salvation to Offred nor to the reader. She seemingly lets the reader sit with the knowledge of what happens to the isolated victim in a complete oppressive system. But this warning is necessary. The reader cannot ignore what happens to Offred and not think: "what if this happened to me?" Paired with a reading of The Color Purple, The Handmaid's Tale makes it even more obvious how a theology of liberation is necessary.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A THEOLOGY OF A *GOD OF THE OPPRESSED*

In contrast to a status quo of oppression, women and all other victims can find a way out, an escape, by discovering the *God of the oppressed*. In the literature of feminist liberation theology, not only is the ideological/theological legitimization of oppression explored, but so are the ideological/theological developments that foster freedom. Like two sides of a coin, the *God of the oppressor* necessitates the existence of a *God of the oppressed*. Oppression is theologically legitimized by the oppressor. In response, the oppressed develop a theological legitimization of their own existence and right to full humanity. James Cone states that “Black theology proclaims God’s blackness. Those who want to know who God is and what God is doing must know who black persons are and what they are doing” (Cone 65). Here, the word “blackness” can be replaced with the name of any oppressed group, i.e., God’s “womanness,” God’s “gayness,” God’s “poorness,” etc. Cone uses the particular word “blackness” because he is writing on liberation theology as informed by the Black American experience. This particularization does not mean that this logic does not work for all other particularized liberation theologies. These two novels, as examples, are expressing God’s womanness (above any other qualifier). They introduce the reader to the *God of the oppressed*

by showing her the oppressed: one can know the *God of the oppressed* only when one knows who women are and what women are doing. Informed by the life of Celie, one can better understand the necessity of the oppressed's awareness of a *God of the oppressed* in order to gain liberation. Informed by the life of Offred, one comes to realize the irrevocable need for a *God of the oppressed* in a world so broken that its inhabitants cannot muster the *dunamis* they need to free themselves; they suffer from the lack of freedom that a lack of knowledge of this God brings.

Not only do these books explain who or what the *God of the oppressed* is, but they assert that the *God of the oppressed* is the only True God. Although a *God of the oppressed* signals the existence of a *God of the oppressor*, for the latter, "God" is a misnomer. James Cone, for instance, having named this God, does not discuss the "*God of the oppressed*" at all, but only one "God." The only God in the world is the one who is with the oppressed in their struggle to gain freedom. Any other "God," including the *God of the oppressor*, is simply a tool created by a dehumanizing human agency. But the fact that the *God of the oppressed* shares the same name as "God" does not mean that this God is the inheritor of the divine attributes of the *God of the oppressor*. The first goal of any liberation theology is to make clear the distinction between the holy and the mundane. This distinction validates the experience of the oppressed as something that is the work of human hands, not as something that is divinely sanctioned. Oppression is caused by the wrath of *people*, not by an ill-willed *deity*.

Schüssler-Fiorenza discusses the methodology of feminist liberation theology as a response to the question of a God of liberation in a seemingly Godless world. She states that "a critical feminist theology of liberation is best understood as a sophialogy, as a critical reflection and exploration of G*d at work in the midst of structural . . . oppression and dehumanization" (Schüssler-Fiorenza xxxi). Here the contrast between the work of a Godly humanity and the work of a Godless humanity is clearly established. Instead of attributing the "oppression and dehumanization" that occurs in the world as divinely sanctioned by the *God of the oppressor*, Schüssler-Fiorenza attributes this inequality to a "structural" source that is inherently human, although the oppressors may refer to this source as "God." Oppression does not occur at the hands of a God who ignores the victimized, but at the hands of a people who have set up a human system of being in a human world.

A *God of the oppressor* is a false God, for one of God's divine attributes is to constantly fight for the liberation of the oppressed. Cone articulates this conflict between the True God and the false God as an issue of "truth," in which "truth may be described religiously as God; it is not the God of white religion [the *God of the oppressor*] but the God of black existence [the *God of the oppressed*]" (Cone 19). The *God of the oppressor*, therefore, is not the True God but the false God. Eliminating the option of a God who is a *God of the oppressor*, Schüssler-Fiorenza, like Cone,asserts that there is only one God, and that that God is on the side of the oppressed. Declaring that God "works in the midst" of the structures of

oppression, Schüssler-Fiorenza nods towards the God discovered by Celie and yearned for by Offred (Schüssler-Fiorenza xxxi). She claims that there is a God who works for the improvement of the social structures created by an imperfect human race. By defining the theology that comes out of this study as a "sophialogy," a term that claims the feminine within the divine, Schüssler-Fiorenza acknowledges the feminine attributes included within the name"God." The God of the oppressed woman, the only God who can exist, is the same God that James Cone describes when he declares that "God is Black" (Cone 63). Both are talking about the same God at different moments in human history. The *God of the oppressed* takes on the attributes of the oppressed in order to aid in the restoration of their full humanity.

When it comes to where liberation theologians place their faith, Schüssler-Fiorenza says that "they shift the question from 'how can we believe in G*d' to 'in what kind of G*d do Christians believe?' and asks if religion makes a difference in the struggle" (Schüssler-Fiorenza xxx). This liberation theologian and others do not reject God outright, but look to form a theology that articulates the presence of God in the experiences of the oppressed. Schüssler-Fiorenza has clearly not abandoned God. She has only asked questions that open the discussion about who and what God is. This fact makes recognizable how important the three founding objects of liberation theology are defined by Gustavo Gutiérrez, Peruvian liberation theologian: community, the ability to act, and praxis. On one's own, it would be very hard to have the ability to determine what God is the God

in which Christians believe. Schüssler-Fiorenza uses the noun “we,” not “I,” to emphasize the importance of community in this determination. There is an underlying second question to whether or not religion has any impact on the struggle: if it is not making a difference, how does one make a constructive religion that *does* help?

THE REQUIREMENTS OF A LIBERATIVE THEOLOGY

AN OUTLINE OF COMMUNITY, PRAXIS, AND ACTION

Although the *God of the oppressed* does exist as a liberative force, it is impossible for those unaware of this God to employ its aid.[12] They need to create a theology that givesthem the language with which to speak with God, a conversation that ushers in their eventual liberation. Gustavo Gutiérrez defines what is needed for that theology to come about. He claims that

> Theology, then, will be a reflection on faith as liberation praxis. . . . We seek to understand the faith on the basis of our real and effective [ontological] solidarity with the exploited classes . . . Our reflection, then, is rooted in a commitment to create a just and communal society . . . (Gutiérrez, Frontiers 22)

The liberation theology that Gutiérrez hopes to construct, as mentioned earlier, is divided into three main points of development: praxis, community, and action. He emphasizes heavily the importance of praxis: communal reflection on the shared history and experience of discrimination and bias. Because it is a reflection on a history that is constantly being written, praxis ensures an ever-evolving theology. Gutiérrez takes this thoughtful concept and places its feet on the ground, saying

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[12] This need for awareness of God is one of the disturbing downfalls of liberation theology. It allows very little room for revelation, for the spontaneous knowledge of the *God of the oppressed*. Instead, it requires a community to be present for a conception of God to be made. This fact puts those who are oppressed and isolated, such as Offred, in one tough spot with no clear way out, and no advice on the matter.

that out of this praxis should come communion with the oppressed and action towards the betterment of all peoples.

I believe, however, that the chronological order in which these elements can occur is slightly different than the order in which they are listed above. I believe that in order for action and praxis to occur, a community must first be present. Both The Color Purple and The Handmaid's Tale demonstrate the necessity of community before any other steps towards creating a theology can be taken. Individual victims cannot free themselves from bondage through a critical theology of liberation because they are broken and alone, without any knowledge outside of their own victimized existence. But once these individuals encounter each other, they are able to empower each other to take action through communal reflection on the oppression they endure and a mutual affirmation of each others' existence. The community of the oppressed can be understood better through the lens of Martin Buber's I and Thou. This text defines the term of right relation and explains what comprises it and how it is used. These characters encounter each other through the I-You relationship, allowing people to form right relation with each other and, thereby, create a community.[13] One cannot engage in praxis on one's own, for one has no knowledge of a common history of oppression and no person with whom to discuss this experience. But once the community has been formed, the group of the oppressed is empowered to act towards a new creation based on the thoughtful reflection of praxis.

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[13] In all references to this relationship, I will use the phrase "I-You" instead of "I-Thou," for this is how Walter Kaufmann translated the original German, and I find it to be a much less jarring translation of Ich-Du.

COMMUNITY AS THE PRIMARY SOURCE OF LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Carol Christ speaks about the importance of community in developing a theology of liberation: “A woman’s spiritual quest includes moments of solitary contemplation, but is strengthened by being shared” (Christ 8). By using the word “quest,” Christ implies that the spiritual experience is not one of concrete knowledge and permanence, but is something in flux as it continuously undergoes praxis. She does nod to individual reflection and its power, but openly states that theological discourse is much more profound when it occurs in a group setting. Without the connection to others, individuals can only progress so much, theologically or otherwise. There is much to be said on the subject of encountering other within a community, mostly by the German philosopher Martin Buber.

Martin Buber’s I and Thou is not only a work of profound philosophical significance, but it is also a very informative theological text. It deconstructs human experience and relegates it to two “basic words,” which are “I-You” and “I-It” (Buber 53). These two basic words are the two possible ways of being, and dictate the possible relationships that people have. A person can have an I-It interaction, where the relating is thought of as non-reciprocal. The I acts upon an object, or an objectified subject, the “It.” An I-You relationship, on the other hand, is one in which the relating goes in both directions. The I acts upon a subject, something that acts back upon the I. Buber states that there are thus two ways in

which one can participate in the world: “The world as *experience* belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-You establishes the world of *relation*” (Buber 56, emphasis mine). Therefore, in a world of I-It, there exists no relation for the I, just the encounter with an object. When only I-It relation is present, ones I is seen by others solely as an It, for this is the only option in the encounter.

But in a world of I-You, relation between the I and the subject is the only thing present. When Buber asserts that “the relation to the You is unmediated,” he says that the I and the You relate to each other without any guises (Buber 62). There is no social, economic or gender boundary between the I and the You, because the You is defined as having overcome the “bundle of named qualities”—the socio-economic class, gender, etc. specifications—that constitute the It (Buber 59). In an I-You relation, these qualifiers become unimportant because the You becomes a whole unique being that is indistinguishable from its parts. Therefore, it is impossible for an I-You relation to thrive where the You to one’s I is constantly being judged as poor or rich, male or female. It is not until these specifics have been nullified that the boundaries that prevent connection can be broken. Once the I sees the You as the You and not an It, connections can be made and the greater reality opens up. This I-You basic word is the relation that develops between Shug and Celie, and it marks the formation of a community of the oppressed. It is this I-You relation that is, in turn, filtered out of Gilead, and prevents Offred from receiving any help from other people or from the *God of the oppressed*.

In The Color Purple, Shug, Sofia, and Celie form the community of women that drive the theological evolution of the narrative. The fact that this community develops at all demonstrates their existence within the basic word I-You. A community is based on equal participation of all of its parts and, therefore, cannot exist within the basic word I-It, where the relating is not equal and non-reciprocal. Before Shug comes to visit, Celie is totally alone and without connection. She later explains to Shug: "My mama die . . . My sister Nettie run away. Mr. ____ come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ast me nothing bout myself . . . Nobody ever love me" (Walker 112). Celie's life is one of complete loneliness and lack of respect from all she encounters, save the brief mention of her beloved sister who (though not out of any malice) abandoned her. The most shocking part of this confession is that Celie is actually telling someone about her life, her own personal experience. The reader has witnessed all these things, yes, but Celie has never mentioned them to another person, much less talked frankly about her *feelings* arising from these events. Only when Shug arrives and provides an open ear and a caring heart is Celie able to confide in another human being.

It is quite telling that the exchange between Celie and Shug occurs when the two women are alone and the men of the house have left. It requires the removal of some for others to connect. This conflict between community/lack of community thereby takes on gendered overtones and prevents human connection. Gender, however, is not the only source of isolation, nor is it always one. But in Celie's early life, where she has no constructive theology and no compassionate

help, it is women (specifically, black women) with whom she must form community. Celie has been abandoned by the women in her life (her mother and her sister, although through no fault of their own) and thrown into a melee of uncaring men. But when another woman becomes present, she is able to have a meaningful conversation and form a community. Celie is safe from the abuse of men in this relationship with Shug. She is able to encounter an other as a You, and the other is able to encounter her as such as well: the two women move beyond named qualities and see each other for just who they are. Although it may be small, this community allows Celie to reflect on her victimized situation. Through the common reflection in the community, informed actions geared towards achieving liberation are made possible.

Celie feels that she has never before been anything to anyone but an object to be physically abused, sexually abused, and seen as a workhorse. Shug is the first to tell Celie exactly what she needs to hear in order to become an active participant in the liberation: “She say, I love you, Miss Celie” (Walker 113). These are some of the first kind words that Celie hears in the novel. Now that she is assured that she is important to someone and has individual worth, Celie can see herself as an active participant in the world instead of a “victim.” Carter Heyward describes victim as someone deprived of “the power to choose [whether or not to be a victim]: the voluntary power, or the freedom of will” (Heyward 88, emphasis of the author). Because someone has asserted her importance in a relationship, she can no longer be passive and inactive. To be in an I-You

relationship requires activity. Once she knows that her role in relation is necessary, she realizes that she counts as a self-willed person. And, once she realizes that she is an entity that has some power to act against or with those around her, she can start to act as a participant in the struggle towards liberation.

Without the presence of the I-You basic word, which is necessary for creating a community where liberation can occur, Offred is unable to assert herself in the way that Celie does. Offred is completely and utterly alone, without friends and without God. The liberation theology that Celie ascertains from her conversations with Shug cannot be formed in Gilead because there is no one with whom Offred can engage in praxis. Without a community, she is left to ponder the God question alone within the four walls of her chamber in the Commander's house. If it is true what Buber says in I and Thou, "I require a You to become," Offred can never be an I (Buber 62). She is never in relation, much less the all-embracing one of I-You, and therefore is never provided a You to counteract her I. Being an I gives a person her strength and ability to act ofher own volition; it gives her the ability to be empowered and active in creating change. Therefore, without community and its reflective praxis, Offred is prevented from ever reaching the point of becoming an active participant in the quest for liberation.

THE TIE BETWEEN SOCIAL AND THEOLOGICAL LIBERATION

When Celie recognizes that she is someone worthwhile, she is able to muster her internal *dunamis* and work to end oppression and gain liberation. Through self-reflection and Shug's love,[14] Celie is able to parse out why it is she must fight for liberation and what it is that she will be fighting against. One aspect of this liberation is social, but it is primarily theological. It is a liberation from the faulty, controlling, oppressive God that has been systematically enforced and reinforced upon her from birth. She needs to gather internal strength to overcome the God (of the oppressor)-sanctioned discrimination that she has been forced to suffer.

This overlap between the social and theological agendas of oppressive systems is not a new idea. Liberation theology necessitates a parallel examination of social oppression. When Schüssler-Fiorenza asserts that "My preferred definition of feminism is [that] theologically it understands . . . the visible presence of G*d at work in our midst," she defines a God who is very closely tied to the world and the struggle of the world's people (Schüssler-Fiorenza xxxiii). She asserts that feminism is not a movement that is removed from theology, but that it must use God to help woman-kind assume the role of participant in the world. Walker

[14] It is through *Shug's* love that Celie becomes empowered to act, not *God's* love. This discrepancy is demonstrative of the existence of God within relation. God's presence is implied within Shug's love for Celie. This aspect of God will be discussed in more depth later.

illustrates this point in The Color Purple by offering God to Celie through Shug. What Celie needs is liberation from the social oppression she faces, and the God force suggested to her by Shug is what drives this possibility. When Celie becomes aware of the fact that passivity equals death and that God will not come down to save her, she realizes that she needs to act for herself. Celie's reconceived God drives her quest for freedom: her theological and social liberation go hand in hand.

Feminist theology is never static. It is always evolving and becoming relevant through continual praxis. Women interested in their own liberation must learn to witness the work of God in their plight, and must continually reflect on God's past activity in order to make the most educated plan for the next move towards freedom. By bridging the gap between past and present activity, feminists can work most effectively towards liberation. When Schüssler-Fiorenza states that "theology is an ongoing activity," she is speaking about the praxis and continuous renewal that happens within the community (Schüssler-Fiorenza xvii). An example of praxis and the evolution of liberation theology is heard when James Cone states, "God is black" (Cone 63). Through his reflection on the theological and social oppression of black folk in America he has discovered a *God of the oppressed* who is black and participates in the struggle for black liberation. Likewise, feminists have sometimes defined God as a woman, citing their own experiences of God being on the side of the oppressed, a group who they see as

women (Christ 128). But even this definition changes as the theologians of the movement continue to engage in praxis and rework their conceptions of the divine.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAXIS

Praxis is a vital element of liberation theology: without it, no informed action can take place. Just as we must learn from our own mistakes, hearing about the mistakes of others is equally helpful. It is also worth knowing where each member of the community has succeeded. It takes a group of people to engage in praxis, and this is why it is necessary for a community to exist before praxis can occur.

Both Alice Walker and Margaret Atwood reveal the importance of this group reflection, they write it into their stories. In The Color Purple, Walker makes sure that praxis occurs between Celie and Shug, when they tell each other about their experiences (Walker 112). Atwood, in contrast, gives Offred no real chance to connect with anyone over shared experiences, and the reader becomes painfully aware of this absence as the book goes on. Celie and Shug's relationship serves as a model that women can follow in order to start forming communities and reflecting upon their experiences, and Offred offers a warning on how life may be without praxis.

In a communal setting Celie was able to find a God suited to her struggle, a True God interested in liberation. Shug informs Celie that another God exists, that "God is inside you and inside everybody else. . . . God ain't a he or a she, but a It"

(Walker 195). This preliminary redefinition of God is a prime example of the oppressed re-imaging a God that applies to their experiences. The imaging of this God comes out of the context of praxis. Celie has known of the God in church, but has realized through conversation with Shug that this God is unhelpful to her. Now, she takes up the God that she has imaged through a synthesis of individual reflection and her education from Shug. She is meeting a God that is present in personal experience, yet universal in scope. Celie, hearing about this new God, has no choice but to undergo another praxis event where she reflects on her life in the context of this newly imagined God. She reflects on this internal process: "now that my eyes opening . . . I feel like a fool. . . . Us [the *God of the oppressor* whom she used to write to, and Celie] fight" (Walker 197). Celie looks back at her old, victimized life and her old personal theology that was highly affected by the traditional theology of God the oppressor, and reexamines them with the new tools that she has received. Thus, Celie and Shug are engaged in communal praxis, which as the reader shall see, leads to action. Because it includes these valuable three elements of community, praxis and action, The Color Purple is a book that stands within the context of liberation theology. Not only do Shug and Celie undergo events that lead up to their creation of a Womanist liberation theology, but by reading this novel, the reader becomes aware of the histories of other women and the ideas, both theological and otherwise, of other women. With this book in hand, people in the real world can begin to discover and to construct their own liberation theologies.

In sharp contrast to the hopeful theological shift that occurs in The Color Purple, Offred in The Handmaid's Tale has no community and cannot engage in the praxis necessary to create a relationship with the *God of the oppressed*. Utterly alone, she is unable to plan the right action to break through the patriarchal male oppressive system she is held by. Her lack of community and lack of any human connection persists even when someone else, namely the Commander, reaches out to her. All she is aware of is her own experience, and with this limited knowledge she is unable to form any coherent or helpful theology.

Even if she were to try to think of a liberative theology, she would be unable to do anything about it because the True God has been so far removed from Gilead that it is no longer of any help to the people there. The only God that remains is the "God" of Gilead, which is the *God of the oppressor*. The absence of God raises the question—how can God be totally excised from society? Gustavo Gutiérrez describes what is needed for God to be present: "The God of biblical revelation is known through interhuman justice. When justice does not exist, God is not known; God is absent."[15] Gutiérrez's assertion implies the great power that humanity has over the existence of God within human-constructed social systems. The lack of justice is caused by a system instigated by humans to subjugate others, not by a *God of the oppressor*, although such a God is the result. This human-made oppression has resulted in the complete expulsion of God from the society and the complete isolation of Offred in her suffering.

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[15] Gustavo Gutiérrez, Essential Writings, ed. James B. Nickoloff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996) 131.

In The Handmaid's Tale, in contrast to The Color Purple, there is no community for Offred to fall back on to support her search for freedom through a liberative theology. She is a woman all on her own. In the first chapter, Atwood sets the tone of isolation that will permeate the entire narrative:

> We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semidarkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed . . . (Atwood 4)

In the "Red Center," community is not only discouraged but is also not allowed. This place is an institution where the Handmaids are strictly taught how to perform their civic duties and are brainwashed by the "Aunts," the superiors at the center, into thinking that it is for their own good. The Handmaids are not allowed to touch or to talk to each other and all interaction that they do manage is meager—a fleeting touch of a hand, a whispering of a name in the darkness. The women have been silenced, and live in a dismal world of nearly eradicated connection. Offred and the other women must hide any desire for community and, therefore, also for the praxis that involves reflection and awareness. The small moments of connection that they experience in the night are all that they have. Not only is this isolation a social detriment to the Handmaids, but it also prevents theological development. If a community is necessary in creating a theology of liberation, then those who are without community are also without hope.

Since Offred is isolated and without community, there is no basis for action or praxis. Removed from others who can validate her existence, Offred is left by

herself to ponder her own worth. Offred has no Shug to tell her that she is loved and that there is a God who supports her. Without people to talk with, to reflect on experiences with and to learn from, she is left ignorant of any theological, emotional, or physical escape route. In The Handmaid's Tale there is no I-You basic word, excising relation and allowing only objective experience to take place. There is only I-It in Gilead, a point extenuated by the punishments administered by the Aunts at the Red Center: "It was the feet they'd do, for a first offence. They used steel cables, frayed at the ends. After that the hands. . . Remember, said Aunt Lydia. For our purposes [becoming pregnant] your feet and your hands are not essential" (Atwood 91). The Handmaids are not intended to be active in any way, besides sexually. The idea that hands and feet are disposable asserts that connection is equally negligible, for hands are used to reach out to touch others.[16] Hands are used to express desires and feelings, expressions that Gilead finds frivolous and problematic and therefore forbids. The Handmaids are thus prohibited from being emotionally active beings. Even their names imply their acted-uponness, for they are referred to as Of-their Commander. They are always thought of as secondary to something else that acts upon them. Buber states that "Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it," revealing the activity that is intrinsic within an I-You relation (Buber 67). If Handmaids are static

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[16] This lack of physical connection connotes greater, theological isolation. Heyward states that "To pray is to construct a bridge to someone who enjoys my loneliness" (Heyward xv). If praying is bridge building and the bridge builders have no hands, there is no way to link the chasm that has formed between individuals in Gilead. The elimination of the I-You and the interest in relation is made physical in the disinterest in preserving the acting features of the populace. It is also worth considering how hands and feet are used in prayer: the position one automatically assumes in kneeling, with hands clasped.

persons, they cannot possibly relate to others. They are just Its, things that are "essential" only when it comes to having children that they are not allowed to keep. If they cannot form right relation, there is no chance of engaging in praxis. Because the Handmaids are seen in the objectifying "It," they can be related to only as the I-It basic word. The system is set up so that all people who are not Handmaids are to see them as Its and are, therefore, prevented from having meaningful, human relation with them. Internalized, this It-dom adds to the barriers between the individual Handmaids themselves. If they are true believers in Gilead, they see each other, as well as *themselves*, as Its that do not deserve (or are incapable of having) right relation. If a woman sees herself as an It, she cannot relate to anything or anyone, for she can never be a You to someone else's I.

Again, the oppression that arises is both social and theological, for community forms between members of the I-You basic word, and praxis emanates from this community. When the voices of the handmaids are silenced, they are unable to reflect on past experiences and are therefore unable to create any plan for constructive action towards liberation.

THE ISSUE OF EQUALITY WITHIN COMMUNITY AS MADE EVIDENT IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

In order for a community to form, there must be some level of equality between the individual people who are eventually to come together. If liberation necessitates a community, then equality between people also necessitates liberation. Therefore, liberation is impossible in a top-down community such as in Gilead where those in charge, such as the Aunts, talk down to the Handmaids and instill in them their own lessened value. If people are not seen as equals, they cannot become members of a community. One example of the dichotomous relation between those on top and those on the bottom of Gilead is at the Salvaging towards the end of the novel. At this event, the Wives, Econowives and Handmaids are all present. Offred meditates on how Aunt Lydia addresses them: "'Good afternoon, ladies,' she says again, her voice now tinny and flattened. It's *ladies* instead of *girls* because of the Wives" (Atwood 274). The reference to the Handmaids as "girls" suggests that they are seen as less than "women" and are less important than the Wives who are "ladies," prim and proper. No community can form between the Wives and the Handmaids, for the Wives see themselves as

superior and the Handmaids have been taught that they are inferior. Neither sees the other group as their equal.

People never willingly assign themselves a lesser value, but through society's insistence that one is of lesser worth, a lessened self-image can develop and the development of community is made impossible. Because the Handmaids are treated as objects for which justice does not apply, they come to see themselves as such, and so do others. In a conversation between the worker women of the house, Cora and Rita, the It-ness of Offred in the Commander's home is established:

> "Who's doing the bath?" says Rita, to Cora, not to me. "I got to tenderize the bird."
> "I'll do it later," says Cora, "after the dusting."
> "Just so it gets done," says Rita.
> They're talking about me as though I can't hear. To them I'm a household chore, one among many. (Atwood 48)

There is only one real purpose for the Handmaid to be in the house, and that is to have children. She is not to be a friend or companion. Cora and Rita discuss the bath of Offred without including her in the conversation. Offred has become an object in the house that is a duty *to* them, not a human being *with* them. Because they do not see Offred as equal, there is no hope of connection, of Godliness, between the three women. The Handmaids are banned from relating to others by virtue of their It-ness, preventing any community from forming. This isolation in turn prohibits the development of action and praxis, denying Offred of any hope for knowledge of a liberative theology.

Having been exposed to and sometimes convinced of the teachings that they are objects, the Handmaids have similar difficulty creating any real relationship

between themselves. The relationship between Offred and her shopping partner Ofglen, for example, takes an excruciatingly long time to develop into something beyond parroting the strictly orthodox greetings of Gilead. At the beginning of the novel Offred remarks that “her name is Ofglen, and that’s about all I know about her” (Atwood 19). Even though the two women are of equal status and spend a good amount of time together, they do not engage in any kind of real relation until much later in the book.Not until midway through the text do Offred and Ofglen have any sort of meaningful discussion, where they discover that they are both non-believers. “You were always so stinking pious,” Ofglen comments to Offred (Atwood 168). Finally, Offred and Ofglen have had a fleeting moment of connection. But it must quickly dissipate as they are required to go their separate ways back to their Commanders. No substantial connection of I-You is permitted in Gilead, circumventing any hope of community and liberation.The fact that these two women have some glimmer of hope for a constructive relationship makes it all the more poignant when there ultimately is none.

GOD IN GILEAD

In the article "'Is there no balm in Gilead?': Biblical Intertext in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale," Dorota Filipczak, a Canadian literature scholar, comments on the God-claiming by which Gilead achieves authority. She asserts that "'There is a balm in Gilead' [a statement made by the futuristic Gilead] claims that the state possesses some moral value that is a remedy for the corruption of the former permissive culture" (Filipczak 218). The song quoted is one used by the Gileadean government to instill faith in its power. The title harks back to the Biblical question "Is there no balm in Gilead?" that asks about the hopeless state of the Israelites, rhetorically wondering if the healing balm from Gilead is powerful enough to right them of their profound moral wrongs and other mistakes (Jer. 8:22). This new government rises as a coup, taking the reins of a post-apocalyptic society. By claiming that there *is* a balm in Gilead, the new government asserts its ability to right the newly-deemed"wrongs" of its people under the former system (such as going to University, women leaving the house on their own, etc.). Even in the name chosen for itself—Gilead—the new system asserts a Biblical validity and importance.

By putting their own government in the context of Holy Scripture, the rulers of Gilead give themselves the theological credibility that they need to control an entire population of people.[17] Gilead's rulers have given themselves divine sanction to take charge. And, by giving themselves this rubber stamp from God, they usurp from the populace any hope in a saving God. If the only God available is the Biblical one, and that God has been hijacked by the government a victim is trying to escape, the victim is stuck at quite the crossroads. The people of Gilead are all alone, except for the presence of the false God who cannot and does not answer their prayers. It is impossible for people to be liberated by a God imposed upon them by their captors, for this God is undoubtedly a *God of the oppressor* and will only serve those in control. This is why the God of Gilead cannot help Offred and why the old God of Celie cannot help her, but instead these Gods are constantly working against the humanity and freedom of these oppressed women.

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[17] This dynastic device itself is taken from the Bible. In the Gospels, the authors trace the family tree of Jesus of Nazareth back to King David, who himself is traced back to Adam, who came directly from God (Mt. 1:1-17). By quoting this device, the leaders of Gilead give themselves an even more powerful dynastic tradition that roots them to the Bible and, therefore, to God.

WHEN THE *GOD OF THE OPPRESSOR* IS THE ONLY GOD PRESENT, EVERYONE IS VICTIMIZED

A vicious circle is created where this lack of a *God of the oppressed* results in the complete lack of community which is caused by the lack of equality which causes the absence of God. When people are forced by an oppressive system into different castes, there is no chance for liberation. It is only once people have bridged the social divide that a complete liberation can occur. While it is true that a theology of liberation can develop between people of the lower castes, that is, within the communities that develop between people who are equally oppressed, they cannot become liberated until the caste system is done away with.

This lack of equality is present in both The Color Purple and The Handmaid's Tale. In Atwood's novel, by making the Handmaids lower than the Wives, the Wives lower than the Commanders, and the Commanders lower than the Eyes, castes have been set that divide the population in order to conquer it. With so many different levels of respect and importance, there are many more buffers in place to hinder the development of a community. Even within these castes very little community exists, making the formation of cross-caste relationships nearly impossible. If people are not allowed to relate to others in situations similar to

theirs, how are they expected to form meaningful relationships with people outside of their experience? From this lack of community, everyone suffers.

Because not all are equal, people are unable to form the communities necessary for praxis and action to develop and for liberation to occur. One of the main reasons the caste boundaries are unbreakable is that the oppressors, those on the upper echelon of society's ladder of power, have no interest in being brought down to the level of the oppressed. Because the oppressor wishes to remain on top of the social system, the development of a constructive-thinking community is prohibited. True liberation of the oppressed has never harmed the oppressor, some would argue; all it has done is taken away his control over the victimized. Although the oppressor is no longer the powerful caste, the social, moral, and theological offering of the oppressed enriches the life of the oppressor. When all are equal, there is no distinction between high or low caste, so the oppressor has not necessarily abandoned a high placement for a low one. If the *God of the oppressed* is the True God, the oppressor is much better off theologically when aware of this God and rid of the false God of oppression. Liberation of the entire society occurs when the entire society participates in the liberation of the oppressed. Cone makes this point when he states that "To receive God's revelation is to become black with God by joining God in the work of liberation" (Cone 66). To free society completely, all members must participate in the liberating action with the *God of the oppressed*.

By suggesting that even men fall victim to oppression from other men, implying that there are levels of oppression that occur within any given society, Schüssler-Fiorenza states that “feminist conscientization makes one realize that cultural common sense . . . [is] not only androcentric but that[it is] kyriocentric, that is, elite male or master-centered” (Schüssler-Fiorenza vxii). Instead of the caste system being only male vs. female, multiple layers of oppression can be instigated. For example, in The Color Purple, the white men have placed themselves in a caste higher than the black men. Women are also victims, but not the only ones. Black women are the most oppressed within the system, but this does not mean that black men are not also victimized.[18] If liberation is to occur, relationships must be set up across victimized classes to form communities that engage in a wider praxis event, for there will be more perspectives and experiences present at the table.

The I-It relationshipbetween different castes makes liberation impossible. One clear example of the oppression of one group of the victimized to another occurs in The Color Purple when Mr. ____ talks down to Celie when she tells him that she is done living under him. Mr. ____ goes off on her, saying “You black, you poor, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all,” and lists all of the “named qualities” that he sees Celie as (Walker 206). He does not encounter her as Celie, but as a black, poor, ugly woman who amounts to nothing; he sees her as an It. But at the end of the novel, having been freed by Celie’s own

[18] This victimization of black men, however, does not at all excuse them from their own oppression of black women.

liberation, Albert sees her as a You. Eventually, through the liberating actions taken by a community informed by their own experiences and the *dunamis* that they possess, along with a knowledge of the God the oppressed, this I-It relationship across castes can become an I-You relationship.

One example of the change from an I-It to an I-You relation surrounds Mr. _____'s own personal interest in sewing. Towards the end of the novel, Mr. ____ confides in Celie: "I use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me" (Walker 272). Primarily, this passage exemplifies the community that has now formed between Celie and Mr. _____. He feels close enough to her that he is able to talk to her about his feelings, just as Celie was able to confide in Shug earlier in the novel. Secondly, it is no coincidence that Walker places this moment of revelatory connection within the context of sewing. Because the system in which he lived prevented him from sewing, dismissing it as women's work, he was unable to pursue this interest. He was unable to do something that he wanted to, and thereby he suffered. Not only did he himself suffer, but anyone who may have worn the clothing he would have made suffered. This lost promise is inherent in oppressive systems and is why everyone, regardless of caste, must work towards the liberation of the victimized. Because sewing is judged as unimportant women's work, Mr. ____ is determined by society to be "above" it because he is a man, and therefore is prevented from doing it. Without this judgment, Mr. ____ would have been allowed to sew. But,

as long as he remained within the constraints of society, he was forced to conform to its rules and gave up this hobby.

In the end of the novel, however, Albert (Mr. ____'s first name, which Celie now calls him) sits with Celie on the porch. After she has taught him how to sew pockets into the pants she makes, they sit together "sewing and talking and smoking our pipes" (Walker 272). Albert is no longer the oppressor, and he is better off for it. Though he has lost his control over Celie, he has not lost any personal worth. In fact, he has *gained* worth. He is now allowed to sew because he has moved outside the oppressive society. He has stopped judging Celie and therefore she has been able to stop judging him. They can now enter into a I-You relationship. Although this simple scene of sewing together may seem like a social liberation that has no place in the theological arena, one must remember that social systems are set within a theological context. The *God of the oppressed* has liberated Albert through Celie just as Celie was liberated through Shug. Liberation never happens in isolation, but spreads throughout a group of people. The community has expanded from including only a few women to accepting men. The caste system has been overturned by the community, praxis, and action taken by the women in the novel. Celie forced Mr. ____ to reexamine his life when she cursed him that "Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble" and leaves him (Walker 206). Once he finally does do right by her and contemplates the world ("The more I wonder . . . the more I love," he says, suggesting his own rising within the I-You) they come back together and are open

and honest with each other (Walker 282). Celie comments to Albert: “You know how long it take some mens to notice anything, I say. Took me long enough to notice you such good company, he say. And he laugh” (Walker 276). Finally, after all that the two of them have been through, they are able to relate as equals and laugh with each other, a mutuality of the utmost importance.

In The Handmaid’s Tale, even the people who seem to benefit the most from the social system are in some ways its victims. For example, the Commander is prevented from having the meaningful relationships he desires. He invites Offred to his chamber one night, and she is at first not sure of his intentions. After their first Scrabble game, the Commander approaches Offred:

> Then he says, “I want you to kiss me.” . . .
> “All right,” I say. I go to him and place my lips, closed, against his. . . .
> He draws away, looks down at me. There’s the smile again, the sheepish one. Such candor. “Not like that,” he says. “As if you meant it.”
> He was so sad. (Atwood 139-140)

Through the systematic objectification of women by Gilead, the Commander is prohibited from having any relationships with the *people* who inhabit his house. Although kissing at the end of a Scrabble game does seem a bit out of context and slightly inappropriate, it demonstrates the abnormality of these platonic relationships. The Commander is searching for a meaningful relationship with a woman (elsewhere in the book he says that he and his wife have become estranged, so he turns to Offred), and he is unable to find one because of the constraints put upon his life by Gilead. All persons suffer when certain relationships are not allowed by oppression. This lack of basic relation prevents

community, does no good for anyone, and prohibits the Commander personally from having any meaningful relationships.The way of life of Gilead is so staunchly put in place that no liberation of the Commander by Offred can occur like the freeing of Albert by Celie. The caste system is so strictly in place that Offred is treated like an object by the very person that desires her as subject. He does not wait for her to kiss him, but instructs her to act in this way. Offred, unsurprisingly, cannot feign the connection that the Commander wishes to foster.

THE GOD QUESTION: GOD IN RELATION

So, the question must be asked: does God liberate Celie? When Celie thinks about her friend Sofia being locked away in jail, she imagines

> . . . angels, God coming down chariot, swinging down real low and carrying ole Sofia home. I see ‘em all clear as day. Angels all in white, white hair and white eyes, look like albinos. God all white too, looking like some stout white man work at the bank. Angels strike they cymbals, one of them blow his horn, God blow out a big breath of fire and suddenly Sofia free. (Walker 90-91)

But this divine salvation never comes to Sofia in her jail cell, or to Celie in her husband’s home. Celie’s moment of liberation comes at the kitchen table, surrounded by her family and friends. There are no angels, no horns, no cymbals and no High God. There is, however, Sofia, Shug and Squeak. They are the new heavenly choir that welcomes Celie to liberation. The moment of liberation is just Celie freeing herself from the shackles that she has lived in her whole life, and have been cast upon her by the men in her world: Mr. ____, her father, Harpo. She is the one who instigates her own liberation (though it is fostered and strongly supported by Shug) and frees herself. There is no divine outside party. The liberation of the oppressed happens when the oppressed liberate themselves and each other, discovering the God amongst themselves.

Thus it can be argued that God as an outside being has nothing to do with all of this liberative action. However, this God who exists outside of people has already been disproved as the *God of the oppressor* and as no God at all. If Celie discovers a liberating God, it is the *God of the oppressed*, the True God, one that exists within the basic word I-You. Shug is therefore an agent of God, having a handle on her own *dunamis* and seeing Celie without named qualifiers, experiencing her as the You. She is a messenger of God in that she carries the message of liberation from the status quo and opens Celie to the greater reality.

The God that may therefore be the source of the liberation of Celie is one that defies the qualifiers of the traditional divine attributes: anthropomorphic, male, white. It is, instead, an intrinsic God of relation. Although he has not been discussed in this paper, Jesus of Nazareth makes evident this conception of the divine as the "hyphen" between the I and the You. Carter Heyward describes the Christ event as "the ordinary human and the extraordinary power in relation" (Heyward 36). She models all people in terms of Jesus as the Christ, believing that any individual is able to become an epicenter of relation between the divine power and human condition. The God described by Heyward is much closer to the God described by Shug and believed in by Celie: "I believe God in everything, say Shug" (Walker 195). The power that Heyward describes is not God itself, but the power that people have within themselves and discover within others. When an individual and her *dunamis* come together and act to help liberate the oppressed of the world, this is where God is present. When Shug talks to Celie

and frees her mind from the confines of the society she lives in, Shug is a messenger of God. When Celie becomes liberated at the dinner table, it is by the *dunamis* within her, which has been sparked by her connection to Shug through the *God of the oppressed*. Although she has had this divine, raw power within her the entire time, not until she is in community and has reflected upon her life on the ground is she able to use this Godly power to act to achieve change.

Before Celie reimages God, there is no hope for her liberation. Is this because she was praying to the wrong God or because she did not permit the one true God the room to free her? The old God she prayed to ignored her pleas for help. Celie claimed that "long as I can spell G-o-d I got somebody along," but there was never any proof of this God's being with her (Walker 17). She was completely isolated from any meaningful relationship and was engaged in only I-It relations. Because God is present in the I-You, there was no God around for her to talk to. She addressed a being who does not exist. There is no God outside of herself or her community, so when she prays to this entity, no one responds. It is when she stops addressing her letters to this static and uninvolved God and begins relating her story to her sister, Nettie, that she is liberated. It is when she writes these letters to Nettie, however, that she begins to write through the True God. When Celie participates in the I-You with Nettie God manifests itself, and her letters are sent through the God of her liberation. This newfound freedom coincides with her shift to writing to someone with whom she was engaged in an I-You relation. Within this relation, which she also has with Shug, God is truly present.

One would traditionally think that if God were the liberating force behind her emancipation, that when she wrote her letters to God, worked in the church, and tried to be a Good Christian Mother and Wife, that this is when she would be freed by God, that by trying to be as Godly as she could be, that God would "swing down" low in a chariot to save her. But this is clearly not the case. Once she talks with Shug, Celie begins to ignore this God, to think independent of that male, objectified formof God, to create her own ideas of how the world works, and to formulate a new theology. The new beliefs that she now holds drive her to reform her life.

While Shug is a crucial driving force behind Celie's new theology, she is not the only one who helps open Celie's mind to the possibility of liberation. Sofia, the wife of Celie's step-son Harpo, is another powerful, self-willed female character. Sofia has a theology that pays little attention to the theology of passivity that is traditional to women. Once when they are discussing their lives, Celie tells Sofia about how Mr. ____ treats her:

> well, sometime Mr. ____ git on me pretty hard. I have to talk to Old Maker. But he my husband. I shrug my shoulders. This life soon be over, I say. Heaven last all ways.
> You ought to bash Mr. ____ head open, she say. Think bout heaven later. (Walker 42)

Sofia asserts the notion I defend in this paper: that a social and a theological liberation are intrinsically linked. James Cone states that "The white God will point to heavenly bliss as a means of detouring blacks away from an earthly rage," and Sofia looks to get Celie to stop looking for comfort in this white God and his

rules (Cone 57). When Mr. ____ beats her, Celie prays to God and dreams of a future where she will not be hurt. Instead of commending this passivity and faithfulness, Sofia critiques Celie's "faithfulness" as allowing Mr. ____ to get away with this violence. Neither of them blames God for what is happening to Celie, but at the same time, neither of them excuses God. Sofia takes Celie to task, and demands that she takes the reins of her own life and stop shrugging her shoulders to Mr. ____'s blows.

In this passage, the link between social passivity and theological passivity is clear. When James Cone discusses the difference between the fields of study of theology and philosophy of religion, he says that the basic difference is that theology is "committed to a community" (Cone 8). Theology is not just concern for God, but is something that "Cannot be separated from the community which it represents" and that is completely integrated with the people (Cone 8). Therefore, the *God of the oppressor* (the God that Celie believed in the past) cannot be separated from the community is represents: the oppressor. This God cannot help her and will continue to hurt her. But, a God who is connected to *her* community of oppressed women is her True God, one who is concerned only with the liberation of Celie and other victims. Once Celie develops an active theology of liberation, she stops writing to God. This is "God" as Celie originally defined it in the first section of the book when she addressed her letters "Dear God." But at the very end of the book, her last letter is addressed "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God" (Walker 285). This change in

naming demonstrates the larger shift in how Celie perceives the divinity. Once she has abandoned a passive God that must be prayed to and not acted with, she thinks about fighting back and how to make her life here on earth better. She begins to think about liberation.

By thinking and living in the here and now—that is, through praxis and practice—Celie is able to relate much more thoroughly and honestly with all that surrounds her. Out of this awareness of the immediate, she becomes more and more aware of the God that inhabits her relationships with all of these external elements. She stops waiting for the traditional God, for Heaven, for anything. She stops waiting for Mr. ____ to be kind to her. She stops waiting for Harpo to understand her, for Shug to love her, for Nettie to come home. Instead she starts acting in order to get what she wants and what she needs now. She is a person with her own volition and her own free will. She has her own hopes and desires that she seeks to accomplish.[19] She is tired of answering to Mr. ____and to God, and goes so far as to strike back when Mr. ____ attacks her. The new theology of liberation of which she is now privy frees Celie in the manner described by Buber: "To gain freedom from the belief of unfreedom is to gain freedom" (Buber 107). By the sheer awareness of another way of life, one where women can act thoughtfully in a world that they can affect, Celie is free to make the decisions and take the actions that allow other this new life to take shape. And she does.

[19] One example is her pants business. Shug teaches her how to sew pants, but Celie has the drive to turn it into a business. She calls it "Folkspants, Unlimited" and makes pants for all of her family and friends in Shug's kitchen (Walker 214).

THE *GOD OF THE OPPRESSED* IS NAMED BY THE OPPRESSED AS THE TRUE GOD

The *God of the oppressed* is the True God of the Bible. This is a God who does not obey the oppressors, but lives within the victimized and works towards liberation. Most importantly, this God is not constrained by its part in the Bible, but continues to participate in the liberation of the oppressed today. Liberation theologians are constantly linking the contemporary struggle of the oppressed to the Jesus event. James Cone, for example, figures that the purpose of theology is for “the community of the oppressed [to] recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only *consistent* with the gospel but *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ” (Cone 1). Cone takes the stagnant theology of the oppressor and turns it on its head. The Jesus event was not unique, but is something to be mimicked by the members of any oppressed group: take over your own *dunamis* and change your life today. Although Jesus did speak about the hereafter in his lifetime, he did works of amazing power in the mundane world.

By throwing away the Bible and throwing away Christianity, theologians of the oppressed would be doing themselves a great disservice. It is not that the story of Jesus is to blame for the oppression in the world. As Heyward says, the story of Jesus is a story of “God’s acting in history,” the story of one instance of God’s

touching earth through its presence in a human being (Heyward 28). This story is by no means inimitable, but is to serve as an example to the oppressed of exactly what Godly power can do for—and with—them. Jesus is not the first example of liberation in the Bible, but is the capstone of the narrative the entire text is centered upon; Cone says "the theme of liberation is reaffirmed by Jesus himself" (Cone 2). What Jesus did was live within an oppressed people to help save them from their pain. Sofia and Shug save Celie; the absence of such a gracious presence in The Handmaid's Tale is what makes the story so frightening.

In The Color Purple, we see Celie and Shug come to this conclusion in their own discussion of God, a discussion which embodies the question that Schüssler-Fiorenza asks about what type of God Christians believe in. They never say that God or Jesus is the source of their problems (interestingly enough, Jesus is never brought up in the book). When discussing the white God that Celie knows, Shug says that "if you wait to find God in church . . . that's who bound to show up, cause that where he live" (Walker 194). Shug does not follow this comment by dismissing God, but by redefining the divine presence. This conversation between the two women is a prime example of the praxis that an oppressed community must undergo in order to form a plan of action to become liberated. Once Celie has had this talk with Shug, she is able to get a firmer grasp on who exactly the God that she believes in is, and how it can help her. The concept of God is too good to throw out, but the way that it is conceived of in traditional (conservative) theology is no help to the oppressed; *that* God is not good enough. But the God

defined by Celie and Shug, by Heyward and by Cone, is just what the oppressed need.

So the question is posed: who exactly is the *God of the oppressed*? This question is slightly more difficult to answer than expected, for there is no singular answer. If God is always on the side of the oppressed, then who exactly God is changes with who the oppressed are. Although God is the "eternal You," it does make different appearances in different times and locations in human history (Buber 123). Depending on the circumstances, God will adopt the guise of a black man in America, of a woman, or any other oppressed group. God is, however, consistently with the oppressed, and those who know God are "on the side of the oppressed, becoming *one* with them, and participating in the goal of liberation" (Cone 65).

Carol Christ, for instance, will undoubtedly approach the God question through the lens of womanhood. She articulates the need of the oppressed to have a God like them by stating "it is important for women to name the great powers of being . . . from their own perspective and to recognize their participation in them" (Christ 10). Here, it is apparent how tainted the word "God" has become in her mind—that she does not refer to the divinity as "God" but as "the greater powers of being." This act of naming is a very important one with Biblical roots. By saying that women need to *name* the divine, Christ suggests the vast amount of efficacy that lies within this action. It also suggests the nature of eternal change that is present in God's being. Time and time again, God must be renamed by the

oppressed in order to be present in their struggle for liberation. Without a God that fosters an I-You relationship, there can be no liberation, and what is needed for an I-You relation to occur shifts from one group of the oppressed to another. God does not change too drastically, however, because no matter what community God is with, it is always a community of the oppressed.

The *God of the oppressed* is the God who is named by the oppressed at that current moment in time and place. There is significant Biblical precedent for this insight that lends credibility to the feminist liberation theologian's own naming of the divine. Hagar, the handmaid of Sarah, Abraham's wife, is the only person in the entire text ever toname God. Yes, other people do refer to God by names, but these are names that God has given itself. Even Moses, one of the most important figures in the Bible, asks the burning bush how he should refer to the one who has sent him:

> But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, `The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, `What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." (Ex. 3:13-14)

Even he who sees God in the bush and eventually comes into nearly direct contact with the deity on Mount Sinai cannot name the divine. He asks God how it should be called, and God gives a response.[20] But Hagar, cast into the wilderness and abandoned by all hope, is visited by a messenger of God: "The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness . . . And he said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?'" (Gen. 16:7-

[20] The response that is given follows the logic used by Martin Buber in defining the You as something without named qualities.

8). God reaches out to Hagar and calls her by name. In turn, "she named the Lord who spoke to her 'You are El-Roi,' for she said, 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?'" (Gen. 16:13). This is the only time in the entire Bible that God is named by a person, and it is by a poor woman who has been banished to the desert, the lowest of the low. When there is no hope left for Hagar, a person comes along that saves her by commanding that she return to Sarah's house where she will be given food enough to save her life. This person is a messenger of God who Hagar meets at just the right time, just as Sofia encounters Celie at just the right time to tell her to stop waiting for heaven (Walker 42).

It seems surprising that it is Hagar who names the divine, because the two other people involved in her story—Abraham and Sarah—have a pre-existing relationship with the deity. Both had previous conversations with God, but it is neither of these two that name God in the Biblical narrative. So why is it that a seeming stranger to God is able to name it? When the God of the Bible is understood as the *God of the oppressed*, it becomes clear why neither Abraham nor Sarah can name God, yet Hagar can. The *God of the oppressed* is with its people and as such can be named only by them. God is on the side of Hagar and is named by her. In this same vein, the God of The Color Purple is named by the community of the oppressed: Shug and Celie. Shug's "aha" moment in her own theological reflection is articulated as when she knew "just what it was," when she encountered the eternal You without named qualifiers (Walker 196). She and Celie talk about who God could be and make the pivotal paradigm shift of

referring to the deity as "it" instead of as "he," laying the ground work for a constructive theology to come. The men of the book never discuss God, much less name "it." It takes the oppressed to rename and reimage a God who is on their side.

The two women have successfully answered Schüssler-Fiorenza's question of "In what kind of G*d do Christians believe?" by extrapolating a new and usefuland caring God to believe in. It cannot be stressed enough that Celie and Shug do not abandon God but re-image the divine essence. A Christian God who does not help its people is not a Christian God, for the Christian God is a *God of the oppressed*. James Cone asserts in the first sentence of <u>A Black Theology of Liberation</u> that "Christian theology is a theology of liberation" (Cone 1). A Christian God is eminently concerned with the liberation of its people. The God (of the oppressor) who Celie prayed to early in the book was, therefore, not a Christian God. It was a God who ignored the pleas of the victimized that was seen as a man, just "like all the other mens I know. Triflin, forgetful and lowdown" (Walker 192). The God that helps Celie to empower her escape from Mr. ____'s farm to Memphis is surely the True Christian God. It, along with her the community and her realized *dunamis*, help her improve her life in the here and now. God is not satisfied with the promise of a heavenly retribution but with a liberated life on earth, for it too is oppressed when people are victimized.

Celie and Shug have also adhered to Carol Christ's conception of women re-imaging God through "their own perspective" by re-imaging a God who is worth

something to them and to whom they are worth something. They are able to "recognize their participation in" God, as well as God's participation in them (Christ 9). As Carter Heyward states: "I . . . re-image . . . God . . . in order to speak *my* truth (Heyward 14, emphasis mine). The two women re-think God as a relational God, not some omnipotent Man in the sky to whom they must answer and do right by. Instead, Shug sees God on much closer terms: "People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back" (Walker 196). Shug, as a messenger of God's word of liberation from oppression, places God within the realm of the I-You. She suggests that one can have this close relationship with the divine in which one enters a covenant with it, much like Abraham does in Genesis. God is no longer defined strictly as something that people have to please but as something that pleases them in return. Shug develops this theology of mutual pleasure out of her own experiences of not finding God in church but seeing God out in a field, in a flittering moment of the color purple. She re-thinks God from her own perspective and renames it as something experienced outside of church, but within nature and one's experiences with other people. Even within Celie and Shug's conversation, God is present. Shug and Celie form a community and they are engaged in praxis. Through this I-You relationship, God is revealed.

The two women have done what the members of any oppressed group must do: re-think the God question. If God was of heavenly proportions it would be in command of the whole situation and, if God is the just and righteous God that we

have constructed it to be, such a God would prevent oppression from happening. But this is not the case. There is wrong in the world, and as Heyward states, "just as evil is the result of humanity's wrong choices, so too good is the result of humanity's right choice" (Heyward 159). Humans are the *only* agents that can bring evil or good into the world. People have the ability to take action, for better or for worse. If God is not the all-powerful as in traditional theology, a new God must be developed. God cannot be removed from the human-scale world. Heyward assesses that Jesus is Biblical proof of God's immediacy. She states that "I want to re-image Jesus because I see in what he did the human capacity to make God incarnate in the world, a capacity no less ours than his" (Heyward 33). Instead of seeing Jesus as Christ as a God among men, Heyward shifts her thinking to see Jesus as a man who has unleashed his own Godly potential, a potential all people have.

IN THE COLOR PURPLE A NEW THEOLOGY IS CREATED

Celie and Shug have created a feminist liberation theology that frees both themselves and God (of the oppressed) so that they can all exist within the right relation of the I-You. The *God of the oppressed* overwhelmed the *God of the oppressor*, because the right relation in which Celie and Shug participate opens the door to the greater reality within a world of human-instituted oppression. When Celie had relationships only within the I-It, the *God of the oppressor* was present, but now that these relationships have changed so too does the God that exists within them, between them, and beyond them. The *God of the oppressor* is, therefore, no help to Celie or to any women within The Color Purple or The Handmaid's Tale or within the world at large. The *God of the oppressor* is used only to keep women confined within oppressive systems.

But the *God of the oppressed* is a God who fights for the liberation of its self-determined people. The *God of the oppressed* is a God that lives in the relation between its people. Buber defines the spirit as something with "force" that cannot "[transform] the It-world. . . . until it has first returned to the essence of the spirit: being able to say You" (Buber 100). In order for there to be a liberating God who can help change the way people live, there must be a shift in the way that people

interact with one another. The "essence of the spirit" is the "I am what I am" of God: the indescribable limitlessness. It is impossible to tack down exactly what God is, and this is why Buber describes God's *essence*, instead of defining exactly what it is. And even this description is vague yet all-encompassing: the root of what God is is the ability "to say You." Once people interact in the I-You, then God is present. The ability to call another "You" is the active effect of a praxis that has discovered God's intrinsic importance to inter-personal relations. The *God of the oppressed* becomes the only God present and liberation is only a matter of time away.

Because Celie now has the ability to call an other You, she partakes in a world that is overseen by the God the oppressed. She is not able to call someone else a You because she has "found God," per se, but being able to call another person You is what leads her to a reality that exists with God. This seemingly backwards approach to God is in keeping with the theological developments of Gutiérrez. A theology of liberation does not arise out of nothing, but out of community, praxis and action. Community is the first step to approaching the *God of the oppressed*, because this is the point at which the basic word of the oppressed's reality changes from I-It to I-You. Therefore, without the creation of this I-You, there can be no social liberation and no theology of liberation.

THE CHARACTERS WITHIN THE HANDMAID'S TALE ARE UNABLE TO FORM A LIBERATION THEOLOGY

The *God of the oppressed* has no chance of reaching Gilead, for it is overwhelmed with the I-It relation of the *God of the oppressor*. The *God of the oppressor* encourages people to relate to other people in respect to their named qualities, which in turn discourages people from engaging in right relation. Because the basic word I-You is never heard in Gilead, the *God of the oppressed* is equally alien. Offred is unable to participate in any I-You relationship, and is thereby not able to imbue any such relation with Godliness.

If God is the "eternal You" (Buber 123) as Buber stipulates, and "Spirit [God] is not in the I but between the I and You," then Gilead surely is a Godless place (Buber 89). The "eternal You" is a conception of a higher plane of being, of a way of existing within the world that acknowledges the You within everyone, an event that taps into the greater being that is God. Every time someone approaches an other as a You, they do so through the *God of the oppressed*. Conversely, when confronting an other as an It, they do so through the *God of the oppressor*. Offred, in being both approached and approaching other people as It, *experiences* the world through the guise of the *God of the oppressor*.

Offred tries to connect with God through prayer, crying out in the wilderness, but even this level of relation cannot be achieved. If to pray, as Carter Heyward says, is to "... construct a bridge to someone who enjoys [one's] loneliness," then to pray to someone/thing is to engage that subject in an I-You relation (Heyward xv). Offred tries to pray in her room at the Commander's house, beginning with the Our Father. But before the end of the prayer, she strays from the traditional verse and starts a monologue to God:

> I feel as if I'm talking to a wall. I wish you'd answer. I feel so alone. . . . Oh God. It's no joke. Oh God oh God. How can I keep on living? (Atwood 195)

God does not answer. This passage is where the chapter ends. The reader is left with Offred's words ringing in her ears, wondering yes, how *can* she go on living like this? Try as Offred might, God has been completely removed from her life. Anyone who reads these lines can identify with Offred, the feeling of complete holy abandonment is something that everyone has experienced.[21] The fact that neither God nor anyone else, answers her is what makes this prayer so somber. Dolores S. Williams claims that

> . . . "wilderness" or "wilderness-experience" is a symbolic term used to represent a near-destruction situation in which God gives personal direction to the believer and thereby helps her make a way out of what she thought was no way. (Williams 108)

God does not send a messenger to Offred the way that Shug came to Celie, or the way that an angel comes to Hagar in Genesis to save her and her baby from dying

[21] This sense of abandonment is so universal to the human experience that even Jesus himself, the example of the Godliness and profound connectedness that any person is capable of being, experienced this sentiment. On the cross, he cries out "'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mat. 27:46).

in the desert. Instead, Offred is left alone in the wilderness with no aid from someone tied to the *God of the oppressed*. Because she is unable to participate in a relation between herself and a messenger of God, she cannot form an I-You relation, and God cannot come to her aid through its presence in her world.

Liberation theology is a covenant between individuals within the basic word I-You and therefore, is set in the presence of God. Liberation is something that requires two parties as equal participants. Dolores S. Williams presents four aspects of the black experience that allow for a black theology of liberation, one of which she calls a "Vertical Encounter" (Williams 154). This encounter is "the meeting between God and oppressed people. This meeting results in . . . freedom and liberation" (Williams 154). Along with community encounters, an ever expanding individual conscious and praxis, a liberation theology of the oppressed comes to be. Williams gives the I-You relation between humans and the messengers of God a clearer theological explanation. Offred looks for God, but God does not send her someone to relate to for God is completely gone—Offred is incapable of being a You, she is just a bundle of named qualities, so God cannot possibly present her an I. No I-You relation can form.

Not only is Offred unable to have an I-You relation with a messenger of God, thus eliminating any chance of connecting with the *God of the oppressed*, but there is no God present within Gilead at all. Dorota Filipczak asserts that "Atwood's Gilead is permeated with the total absence of God, which exposes it's Messianic claims as deceit. . . the sacred is completely withdrawn from life in

Gilead" (Filipczak 225). Though the sign at the Women's Prayvaganza reads "God is a National Resource," there is no divine resource anywhere in Gilead (Atwood 213). Because right relation has been expelled, so has God. There is no I-You relation between Offred and any other individual, so there is no presence of God surrounding her. Celie and Shug were able to rethink God within the context of their I-You relation, but Offred has no community within which to engage in praxis. She is utterly alone and is unable to bridge the gap between herself and other people or between herself and the God the oppressed.[22]

[22] It may seem odd that the *God of the oppressed* needs to be related to in order to help, for if it is a True God, should the *God of the oppressed* not be omnipotent and omnipresent? The answer to this question is that, in completely rethinking who God is, all of the divine attributes traditionally associated with the God of the Bible must also be rethought. Although the True God is a *God of the oppressed*, it helps the oppressed through its relationship with them, not through its striking down the oppressor.

LAUGHTER AS THE REVELATION OF THE I-YOU IN THE BIBLE, THE COLOR PURPLE, AND THE HANDMAID'S TALE

It is difficult to think of a Christian theology without the supporting spiritual text of the Bible, and liberation theology is certainly a Christian theology. It is, however, not a static theology and acknowledges the changing interpretations of the Christ event over time. It broaches the subject of Jesus as one instance of God's extreme connection with humans. I argue that Jesus was not one event of God being present in the world, but was solely a man in which a profound level of divine *dunamis* was present on this earth. Because *dunamis* is intrinsic to all people, and the I-You relation is present between people, there is no reason for Christ-like connection to be isolated to the Gospel. It is possible that any person can become like Christ, for he is a man made Christ by virtue of his handle on *dunamis*, a power that every single person carries within themselves. Because liberation is interested in the ever-present Christ potential of humanity, it does not depend fully on the Bible for a history of God's acting in human affairs. Instead, every action of the oppressed can be construed as God's acting in human history *now*.

Dolores S. Williams states that "Equally as important as the use of the Bible in black liberation theology is the issue of the nature and function of experience" (Williams 153). Williams does not isolate the Christ event to just Jesus, but couples this Biblical event with the events in the lives of the oppressed to construct a theology. James Cone gives six sources for black theology: black experience, black history, black culture, revelation, scripture and tradition (Cone 23-33). Both of these liberation theologians put the experience of the oppressed (specifically the Black oppressed, but this outline can be applied to any oppressed group) towards the top of the list of sources in creating a theology of liberation. They do not, however, negate the Bible. As such, liberation theologians can be expected to cite both the experiences of the oppressed and the Biblical precedent of these experiences.

In order to give weight to their own theologies, histories and experiences, both Alice Walker and Margaret Atwood use devices found in the Bible to heighten the theological scope of their texts. The most significant and thoroughly used device by both authors is laughter. By harking back to the traditional canon of Jewish and Christian writing, these two women authors place their own stories within the context of this sacred work through a common usage of this device. They become the inheritors of the divine word and develop a new canon for women that help women justify, rationalize and escape their own experiences of oppression. Laughter is used by both Walker and Atwood—and the Bible—to illustrate moments of connection, or lack thereof, between individuals. The laughter in the

Bible happens most notably in the Abraham-Sarah-Hagar narrative in the book of Genesis, when "the word of the Lord" promises a son to the couple (Gen. 15:4). Only during times of true relation between persons can laughter occur. Moments of laughter reveal the presence of the basic word I-You between people and keys the reader into the presence of a right relation.

Laughter occurs at the times when the I-It relationship becomes an I-You relationship. If "The It is the chrysalis, the You the butterfly," as Buber figures, the laugh happens at the moment the insect spreads its wings (Buber 69). People laugh when they are engaged in deep connection with others, and it expresses the sentiment of "I know just what you mean." When people relate to others as objects without a deep level of understanding, laughter cannot occur. Laughter is a mutual action that requires a sentient subject, a You, who has become a whole, ineffable being. When Mr. _____ tells Celie "You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman Goddam . . . you nothing at all," he is talking to her as an It, seeing her as ajumble of named qualities and not for whole independent self (Walker 207). Mr. _____ is talking at Celie in comparison to others (her poor, black womanhood exists only in opposition to rich, white, male hood, or any other mix of these qualities), and as such he cannot meet her as a You. But, when the novel comes to an end and their differences are reconciled through the help of a *God of the oppressed*, he can laugh with her on the porch as she teaches him how to sew pockets into the pants that Shug taught her how to make. It has required him to get beyond seeing only her specifications

and really encounter *Celie*, a whole person, for Mr. ____ to become Albert. The fact that Alice Walker uses renaming to further extenuate this point is also important on a Biblical scale, for this is what happens when Abraham encounters God's promise and relates to the divinity, and it is completely lacking from The Handmaid's Tale.

LAUGHTER IN GENESIS: ABRAHAM, SARAH AND HAGAR

The one sticky subject of the I-You in the Genesis story is who or what God is in the narrative and what role it plays. Abraham's encounters with the divine are referred to in a number of ways in the Bible. Sometimes Abraham hears "the word of the Lord" (Gen. 15:1), other times he speaks with "the Lord" (Gen. 15:12), and also "God" (Gen. 17:9). This language is quite difficult to understand, for there is no God who is other:

> One does not find God if one remains in the world; one does not find God if one leaves the world. Whoever goes forth to his You with his whole being and carries to it all the being of the world, finds him [God] whom one cannot seek. (Buber 127)

According to Buber, God lies within the I-You, and nowhere else in the world. Buber asserts that it is only through the I-You that one can encounter the divine; there is no other way. When ignoring the Bible, this statement seems perfectly valid. But when there is documentation of Abraham speaking to God, what is Buber to say?[23] In Genesis it states that "the word of the Lord came to Abram in a

[23] Perhaps it is best understood when the Bible is taken as a document that makes note of a people attempting to make sense of a seemingly supernatural occurrence.

vision," not that God itself came to Abraham (Gen. 15:1). Perhaps it was a person who told Abraham these things, someone who has a surprisingly strong *dunamis* that expanded his knowledge of the world through his deep I-You connection to it.

One of the most profound instances of the I-You relation in this narrative occurs in Genesis 17, when Abraham and God enter into the covenant. It is a moment of extreme connection, where a name change is made, a spiritual agreement reached, circumcision is instigated, and Abraham laughs. After the covenant is made, Abraham "fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" (Gen 17:17). This laughter is one of shock at the incredible closeness between Abraham and the word of God. He cannot believe what has been promised to him not because he doubts it, but because it is unreasonable. He laughs out of connection to God, which is inconsistent with Buber's assertion that God is not an isolated being but a presence in relation. The range of names used in referring to God, God's word, etc., reflect the uncertainty as to what exactly Abraham is encountering in the covenant. The meeting between Abraham and this unknown figure is much too complex to explicate in this essay, and as such I will consider the covenant to be between Abraham and a messenger of God.

This laughter of Abraham is followed by the laughter of Sarah at the news of the promised child.When she overhears aconversation between the messenger of God and Abraham where the child is promised, "Sarah laughed to herself" in

amazement (Gen 18:12). God hears her laughter and asks "'Why did Sarah laugh?' . . . But Sarah denied, saying 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh'" (Gen 18:13-15). When the messenger hears her laughing, she is quick to deny it. Sarah laughs for the same reasons Abraham does: the shock at the closeness to a God that is so powerful that it can grant her a child.

The last time that Sarah laughs is when she finally has the child. When Isaac is born, she says "'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me'" (Gen 21:6). Fittingly, the name Isaac means "he laughs." The whole family is thus associated with the laughter of those connected to others though the divine: Abraham laughs, Sarah laughs, and Isaac is named for this laughter. Abraham and his descendents thereby become permanently associated with the divine I-You connection which this laughter heralds. Their God is powerful, and this power of God is relayed to others: the laughter emanates from the family and spreads to all that hear of this wondrous event. The starting point of the I-You relationship between Abraham and the word of God has thus percolated down from one generation to the next, and from one immediate family to everyone who hears about them. Thus, everyone who hears about the miraculous birth of Isaac also bears witness to God's power to act on earththrough the relationships between people. It is within the context of this awareness that they laugh.

There is an instance of laughter within the New Testament, and this narrative is equally as problematic as Abraham and Sarah's laughter, for it is directed at Jesus in disbelief. It is a story of Jesus' unreasonable *dunamis* working in ways

that many people call “miraculous:” The people are gathered to witness the miracle of Jesus defying the boundaries of logic (a human-defined term) by bringing a girl back to life. When he asked the family “‘Why do you make a commotion and weep? The child is not dead but sleeping,’” they “laughed at him” (Mk. 5:39-40). This laughter is directed at Jesus and not with him, but it is consistent with the argument that laughter occurs when *dunamis* is present in the encounter (Heyward 53). Jesus uses his power to perform acts that are seemingly impossible, demonstrating the great power a person has when they realize this power.

The reader can, and should, interpret this Biblical passage to be revelatory of the possibilities available to any person, not solely to Jesus. If an individual becomes deeply in touch with others through God, awakening one’s *dunamis*, one can become like Christ and act in ways unprecedented. The Color Purple tells a similar tale of what can be achieved once *dunamis* is realized: liberation from the oppressive status quo. Celie is, though not physically dead, spiritually and emotionally dead before Shug uses her *dunamis* to awaken her to her own power. The miracle of bringing others back to life is therefore performed by women in this text, and is offered to the reader as a possibility of what she can achieve. Anyone who has realized their *dunamis* can use it to save others from oppression.

LAUGHTER IN THE COLOR PURPLE

In the same vein as the Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar Biblical narrative, in The Color Purple laughter occurs when right relations are formed by people who realize their *dunamis*. When the I-You is formed, God becomes present and liberation is possible. Celie laughs once she and Shug have parsed out their perception of God, because now Celie becomes free to engage in I-You relation. Once she has this new knowledge, she can laugh, and she can cause others to do the same. Celie's story has much in common with that of Abraham and Sarah—she herself laughs, and this laughter spreads to those she meets.

Shug asks Celie a pivotal question that changes the entire focus of the book from assuming the existence of the traditional God to one that is critical of this God: "have you ever found God in church?" (Walker 193). This is a question that Celie has never asked herself, because she never knew it needed asking. God has always been in church, God has always been a white man, and God has always been "just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful, and lowdown" (Walker 192). Celie always objectified God, seeing it as something outside herself and outside of everything with which she has come into contact.

This God is certainly not a *God of the oppressed* and does not help Celie become liberated from the society in which she exists, for this is the same society in which the *God of the oppressor* exists. Shug replies very matter-of-factly to Celie's depiction of God: "If you wait to find God in church . . . that's who is bound to show up" (Walker 194). By suggesting that the God in church is not the only God out there, Shug piques Celie's interest. When Shug says "I believe God

is everything" and that "you have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall," Celie begins to realize that she has been out of touch with Creation this entire time (Walker 195, 197). Celie's liberation begins at this moment of realization of her own oppression. Within the community with Shug, she has engaged in praxis and reflected upon her past experiences to realize that she needs to stop looking for God in church.

When Shug reveals the details of her experience becoming aware of God, Shug says that she "laughed" and ran around the house, overwhelmed by the emotional experience of figuring out who or, now, what, God is (Walker 196). Shug discovered the true nature of the divine from a moment of revelation, which is defined by Cone as "God's self-disclosure" (Cone 45), and can be understood as *dunamis* in that both are "unmediated [and] spontaneous" (Heyward 41). Shug laughs, therefore, because she is deeply connected to herself and to the divine power that lies within her. Never has she connected to this power, but now she engages it in the I-You and laughs at the connection's unreasonableness. Once she realizes her own power for connection, she can engage anything and everything in the I-You. Because she is now so connected to the Godliness in the universe, she confesses that "I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed" (Walker 196). Shug laughs because this deep relation defies reason, and is completely possible within the realm of *dunamis*.

Laughter in The Color Purple is important not only because it happens after the moment of revelation, but because that revelation comes through Celie's

relationship with another person. Without this community, she cannot become liberated, and without liberation, she cannot live within the I-You basic word. Even earlier in the book, before she has discussed God with Shug, there are a few times where Celie laughs. All of these events have taken place with other women, within a community. The community is necessary for liberation, and if laughter is the sign of liberation, then it is also a sign of community. Laughter rises out of the community that has been formed which, according to Gutiérrez, is one of the first things needed in order to form a constructive liberative theology. This fundamental quality of community is why Celie is not liberated the moment that she laughs with Sofia or anyone else; community is the first step towards social and theological liberation, and is by no means the last. Although this laughter is not a complete liberation in and of itself, she laughs because she becomes connected to them in unprecedented ways, allowing liberation to occur later on.

There are many people in the novel with whom Celie laughs; Shug is just one. Sofia is another woman who, through her friendship with Celie, participates in the liberation. The community founded between these women leads directly to liberation, for in it lays the seeds of praxis and eventual action. When Sofia confronts Celie about how mean Mr. ____ is to her, Sofia suggests that “You ought to bash Mr. ____’s head open. . . . Think about heaven later,” to which Celie remarks “Not much funny to me. That funny. I laugh. She laugh. Then us both laugh so hard us flop down on the step” (Walker 42). Celie is freed in this conversation in a sense of how Buber defines freedom as the freedom from

unfreedom (Buber 107). She understands that, if Mr. ____ is mean to her in the immediate world, it is in the immediate world that things must change. Instead of hoping for change to materialize in heaven, she must act now to become liberated in this immediate world. The idea of this personal power, of *dunamis*, is so staggering to Celie, and this moment of honest connection so profound, that it overwhelms her and makes her laugh. Sofia hears this laughter and laughs too, relaying the revelation from one person to the next (in a way reminiscent of the Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar narrative). The two women laugh together as connected people, engaged in the action of reaching out and being reached, of "[constructing] a bridge" between themselves (Heyward xv).

This laughter between Sofia and Celie happens when they are connected, though they do break apart again. A number of short-lived I-You relations happen between Celie and other people, including her husband. After Shug Avery comes to be nursed back to health in Mr. ____'s house[24] Celie makes Mr. _____ laugh. Shug has not been eating, and no one can convince her to. But after Celie has prepared herself a breakfast, Shug secretly eats some of the food when Celie's out of the room. Then "Mr. ____ ast me how I git her to eat. / I say, Nobody can stand to smell home cured ham without tasting it. If they dead they have a chance. Maybe. / Mr. ____ laugh" (Walker 52). This exchange occurs only ten pages after Celie and Sofia talk about how Mr. ____ needs to get his head bashed in, and the fact that he laughs at a joke about a dead person is an interesting reference to this

[24] This denotation of the house is made masculine because Mr. ____ owns the house much more than Celie does. Since he is in charge of it, it is his house.

threat against him. Perhaps this parallel interchange occurs to call attention to the fact that Celie can make a joke now that she has been in some way freed.

The joke that Celie makes is important not only because it provides laughter, but because it is a joke about power. No one can make Shug Avery eat but Celie. In order to stay alive Shug must eat, and the fact that Celie keeps her alive demonstrates the growing active power that Celie has over her world. Instead of simply praying for her to stay alive, Celie acts in the immediate world. It is arguable whether or not Sofia's advice to act is what prompted this reaction, but the two events happen in such close succession that a link between them is not unlikely. The power that Celie now realizes, her *dunamis*, keeps Shug alive and is surprising to Mr. ____. This shock is why he laughs. It is unreasonable for Celie to be able to keep someone alive, because she has no legitimized power within the social system. Mr. ____ laughs at this unreasonable power made real, and his seemingly powerless wife's ability to keep another person alive.[25]

Laughter is a way for an oppressed community to bond with each other and inform the oppressor that they do not have complete control over their victims. After the scene recountedat the beginning of this paper where the women erupt in laughter, even more laughter occurs. All of the characters are sitting around the table. Shug tells everyone that she and Celie are leaving for Memphis and Celie,

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[25] The usage of *dunamis* does not always need to be miraculous—sometimes very simple things can make great change. Just as Celie simply keeps Shug alive, so too does an angel of God in the Bible keep Hagar alive. In Genesis 16 Hagar flees Sarah's house and becomes lost in the desert. An angel of God tells her to go back to Sarah's house because there is no hope for her, or the son she is pregnant with, surviving the arid conditions (Gen.16:9). Through this simple act of sending her home to protection from the elements, food and water, both Hagar and her child are able to survive.

for the first time, really talks back to Mr. _____ and puts him in his place. This forceful execution of will is a vital moment in her breaking free of the unfreedom that she has been living in. Things are getting tense in the house and possibly even violent, when Grady decides to try and lighten the air of everything:

> Well, say Grady, trying to bring light. A woman can't git a man if peoples talk.
>
> Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh.
>
> Shug say, Ain't they something? Us say um *hum*, and slap the table, wipe the water from our eyes.
>
> Harpo look at Squeak. Shut up Squeak, he say. It bad luck for women to laugh at men.
>
> She say, Okay. She sit up straight, suck in her breath, try to press her face together.
>
> He look at Sofia. She look at him and laugh in his face. I already had my bad luck, she say. I had enough to keep me laughing the rest of my life. (Walker 200-1)

This laughter is seemingly instigated by a joke by Grady, a man. But when looking at Shug's reaction of "Ain't *they* something? (emphasis mine)" it becomes obvious that the reason the women are laughing is not because of Grady, but at Grady and all the other men besides. The laughter ripples from Shug and Celie—who know that they have no need for men because they have a community in each other—to the other two women at the table, Squeak and Sofia. The women laugh with the common understanding of how uninteresting Grady's statement is to them. He assumes that the women want a man, which they clearly do not. Shug and Celie are happy with each other, and Sofia has never shown any sign of needing Harpo (although he is involved in her life, and she does like him enough, she is by no means dependent on him for happiness). The women instead

have formed a community of the oppressed that no longer bends to the whims of the oppressive system, and they laugh at the men's unreasonable belief that they are interested in a system which dictates women must be dependent on men.

Although Squeak laughed with the other women, she is still a victim, as demonstrated by her subjugation toHarpo. The other women are truly free at this point in time and are able to laugh, but Squeak is still within the constraints of men. Harpo silences her laughter because he realizes that she is laughing at the men, which jeopardizes his absolute power over her. Just like Mr. ____ silenced Celie's laughter at the beginning of the novel, so too does Harpo silence Squeak's.[26] Squeak tries to hold in her laughter by pressing her face together, which contrasts starkly to when Celie laughs with Olivia's mother and the laughter "feel like to split my face" (Walker 15). The closed-ness of Squeak's face mirrors how closed off she is from thoughts of freedom, much less actual freedom itself. When the women slap the table, they are active in their world and are possibly even dangerous; the word "slap" suggests violence. But Squeak, conversely, sits as she is told and assumes an inactive role. She has not claimed her *dunamis*, and is therefore without any power over her situation in the world. Celie, Shug and Sofia have formed a community that has reflected on its existence

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[26] Also, just through using the name "Squeak" when referring to Mary Agnes, Harpo asserts his power over her. There is a moment towards the end of the book where she reclaims her real name, Mary Agnes, and this renaming parallels that of Mr. ____ to Albert and of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah; it is a renaming that concurs with a shift in relation. By forcing Mary Agnes to be subject to Harpo as Squeak, he gains the control over her granted to him by the oppressive social system. The contrast between Squeak's complete victimization and Celie's growing freedom is highlighted by Squeak's subjugated name.

and made a plan of action that has no place for women who care whether or not they can "git a man."

As the story progresses, the women's quest for freedom gains more and more momentum. They not only laugh at their immediate oppressors—the black men in their immediate lives—but they begin being honest and united against the white oppressor. Sofia's power in her freedom is well articulated in her instance of laughter during her interaction with Miss Eleanor Jane, the girl she used to be a nanny for, and her new child, baby Reynolds. Miss Eleanor Jane keeps pestering Sofia to say that the child is cute and that she loves him. Sofia goes off on Miss Eleanor Jane about how she does not love him and makes his mother cry. Sofia tells it like it is:

> Too late to cry, Miss Eleanor Jane, say Sofia. All us can do now is laugh. Look at him, she say. And she do laugh. He can't even walk and already he in my house messing it up. Did I ask him to come? Do I care whether he sweet or not? Does it make any difference . . . what I think? (Walker 264)

Sofia is liberated enough to articulate her problems with the system and is not afraid to call a spade a spade. She laughs at the unreasonableness that, in her current world, a person who is so helpless that they cannot even walk is already making her life more difficult. She knows that there is no hope crying at this bad situation, because crying is not in the least bit constructive. Laughter, the powerful and bridge-building action that is by definition boisterous, is the tool to be used to overcome the social systems that prevent personal relationships and growth. Sofia even invites Eleanor Jane into the community, encouraging her to

laugh too, and explaining to her the situation at hand. But Miss Eleanor Jane does not laugh—she does not meet Sofia there. Miss Eleanor Jane cannot have an I-You relation with Sofia, for even though she seems to love her, Miss Eleanor Jane does not approach Sofia as a You. She encounters Sofia as an It. Once someone has been liberated from an oppressive system, they are able to liberate others, even the oppressors. Because they can see the structure of the oppressive society, they are able to illuminate others. Sofia honestly shares her reality with Miss Eleanor Jane, but Miss Eleanor Jane is so comfortable in her own passively oppressive reality that she does not hear Sofia's truth. Because she is unwilling to listen to Sofia, Miss Eleanor Jane's relationship to Sofia does not change, although Sofia's has changed in respect to Miss Eleanor Jane. Sofia has become free, but Miss Eleanor Jane still sees herself as above Sofia and worthy of the utmost respect.

The most profound shift in relation in the entire novel, however, is that between Celie and Mr. ____. A moment of connection occurs between the two when they are sitting on the porch towards the end of the book and she teaches him how to sew pockets into pants. They are talking, holding a conversation in which both are active participants. Celie at one point is talking about the Adam and Eve of the Olinka tribe, which she has learned about through the letters from her sister Nettie. The conversation progresses: "You know how long it take some mens to notice anything, I say. / Took me long enough to notice you such good company, he say. And he laugh" (Walker 276). Finally, Celie is able to talk back

to Mr. ____ in an open and honest way that accompanies right relation. She is making fun of him the way that friends—two sentient beings engaged in an I-You connection—can, and he takes it in stride. Because she has been able to escape the position of oppressed, Mr. ____ is able to exist outside the limiting constraint of oppressor. This conversation is demonstrative of the community that has formed between the two fully realized humans, who see each other outside of named qualities, and purely each other.

Mr. _____ and Celie's new, deep connection becomes clearer when Celie shows Shug her room. Shug asks what a little figurine in Celie's room is, and Celie replies: "Oh, a little something Albert carve for me. She look at me funny for a moment, I look at her. Then us laugh" (Walker 284). This is the first time that Celie has ever called Mr. _____ by his first name. Like the Biblical renaming of Abram to Abraham, Celie renames Mr. ____ to a name that signals their new I-You relationship. The importance of this moment of connection is understood by the laughter that follows between Celie and Shug. They laugh at the name "Albert" because Celie has never referred to Mr. ____ as this before; it is surprising for Shug to hear Celie call him this.

The final moment of connection and signal of laughter comes at the very end of The Color Purple, underscoring the huge transition of Celie and her community from isolated and oppressed to in communion and liberated. On the next to last page of the book, once Nettie and all of Celie's children have returned to the house, a huge bout of laughter erupts. This laughter signals the connections that

have formed over the courses of the narrativeand the new propensity for liberation that all people have. Everyone is interested in Tashi, Adam's Olinka wife, and asks her questions about her home, looking to engage in conversation with her: "What your peoples love best to eat over there in Africa? us ast./ She sort of blush and say *barbeque*./ Everybody laugh and stuff her with one more piece" (Walker 287, emphasis of the author). This scene leaves the book with such a feeling of complete connection between the characters that has never before been encountered. Everyone asks Tashi the question in unison; everyone laughs and feeds her in unison. The fact that all the members of family have become one entity, acting in a way to include someone fairly other, is an amazing note on which to end. Earlier in the book, every individual was on their own, without any relation. But now, Tashi, who is quite other, is shown complete respect and inclusiveness. All of the characters within the community prove that they now possess the ability to confront each other as a You, liberated from the objectifying *God of the oppressor* and encountering individuals within the light of the subjectifying *God of the oppressed*. Even with a stranger, right relation can be had through the community first formed by Celie, Sofia and Shug. The characters of the book can now interact with each other within the basic word I-You because they have broken free of the qualifying barriers constructed by oppression. They have created a community, engaged in praxis and implemented action aimed at liberation.

LAUGHTER IN THE HANDMAID'S TALE

The Color Purple provides a wonderfully detailed account of women's struggle to become liberated and the possibilities that emerge when liberation occurs. Celie is able to form a community with Shug when the men of the family leave the house and give the two women some privacy, a safe space, through their absence. But what happens if there is no room for frank talking amongst the oppressed? In striking contrast to The Color Purple, there is no laughter in The Handmaid's Tale. Connections with others are outlawed in Gilead. It is the ultimate system of separation between individual human beings. Even among the Handmaids, conversation is regulated so that no connection can be made because it would set the strictly regulated social system out of balance. Conversations between superiors and subordinates are curt, as are those amongst superiors. The Wife and the Commander, the man and the woman who rule over the house, are not able to talk to each other in a way that allows an open and real I-You relation. Between the Marthas (house servants similar to cooks) and the Handmaids there is to be little talking at all, and what is to be talked about must follow a strict code of conduct. Everywhere that community could possibly form, Gilead systematically roots it out. The people are left powerless to make their own choices and are influenced only by the overwhelming power of the government and are made out of touch with their *dunamis*. Any hope of liberation is squelched, and so too is the laughter that accompanies it.

The underlying problem of this entire system is that humans always strive for connection, regardless of any boundaries placed in their way. Even if the whole system of Gilead is in theory a fine idea that provides a sense of purpose and justice for all people, it does not give room enough for individual happiness. Human happiness comes out of human relation, of which laughter is the purest form. Laughter comes from moments of connection and, unsurprisingly, in this novel they are very rare. The entire book is a hopeless history of Offred looking for an I-You connection in a world where only I-It connections exist. Offred is also looking for God, and since God exists only within the I-You, she is left without any holy help.

If laughter is proof of human connection and human connection exists alongsidethe *God of the oppressed*, than laughless Gilead should also be Godless. But it is not: it is a theocracy overwhelmed with Biblical references and where "God is a National Resource" (Atwood213). Both the religion of Gilead and the old religion in The Color Purple are "Christian" traditions that pacify the victims into thinking that the *God of the oppressor* is their only salvation. Celie is led to believe that happiness will come after she has been obedient, that she will be rewarded in heaven after she has suffered at the hands of her abusive oppressors on the immediate earth (Walker 42). Offred and the other Handmaids are told that they lead a privileged life within Gilead, that they are chosen ones who fulfill a unique function of the utmost importance. If they choose to fight back and not fulfill their duties, they will be destroyed as an Unwoman (Atwood 216). The

universal oppressive system, whether located in the American South or Gilead, tries to brainwash its victims into thinking that they are better off within the confines of their victimization than without these constraints. If they try to abandon this oppressive existence, the system asserts, they will be without any hope at all.

This is where the similarities between the characters and their lives diverge. Celie, in a moment of eye-opening relation with Shug, becomes unconvinced of the lie she has been bending to. She is freed from the shackles of waiting for her heavenly reward and is now able to fight oppression imminently. Offred, on the other hand, has always been aware of how wrong the world she lives in is. Born into an environment much like our own that over time evolved into Gilead, she already has full awareness of how wrong her present life is, and how different it is than how it could be. However, she is so victimized by the acute systematic oppression of her kind that she has no option of liberation, because any possible liberator has been excised from society. Since there is no connection that can be made with any other, Offred's life is forced into the Godless territory of the basic word I-It. She is on her own in this world and lives presently in stark contrast to her past memories. Before, she and her friend Moira had a very close relationship filled with laughter, but now her life is silenced. The problem is that she is human, and as such still desires the I-You connection and the open Godliness and laughter that emanate from it. She cannot be satisfied with her lack of *dunamis* and lack of I-You, for she knows what they are because they used to be hers. Just like when

Celie learns that there is another way to live and she cannot help but quest for this, so too does Offred live with the desire to escape her social and theological captivity.[27]

Though few and far between, there are moments in Gilead where laughter may occur, or where Offred thinks about laughing. The first time that laughter is mentioned in the book is when Offred[28] first arrives at her new Commander's house. She is talking to Serena Joy, the Wife of the Commander:

> So old what's-his-face didn't work out, she said.
> No ma'am, I said.
> She gave what might have been a laugh, then coughed. Tough luck on him, she said. This is your second, isn't it?
> Third, ma'am, I said.
> Not so good for you either, she said. There was another laughing cough. (Atwood 14-15)

The Wife, Serena Joy, is afraid to laugh because she has no ability to connect to Offred. The possibility of sympathy between humans, which is a very powerful connective force, is so thoroughly destroyed that there is no ability to connect at all (Heyward 136). The Wife is extremely off-putting and is pointedly unfriendly to the new Handmaid, purposefully forgetting the name of Offred's old

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[27] This is true for the entire novel, excluding the last few pages. At this point, as Offred befriends Nick, she begins to accept her place in Gilead. She stops paying as much attention to her shopping partner, Ofglen, who is always looking for a way out of Gilead. She reflects on her own growing disinterest in liberation: "Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations" (Atwood 271). In an order reverse to that of The Color Purple, Offred grows more and more uninterested in liberation as the novel progresses. As her memories of the past fade, so too does her thirst for freedom. Unlike Celie, who is constantly prodded by the community that surrounds her to fight, everything in Gilead is telling Offred to give up. And she eventually does.

[28] At this point we do not know that this is her name. All we know about her is that she is a Handmaid. This lack of information is very telling about how important names are in this story: Handmaids are not important. Even though people are without connection, they are not without relation. Offred's only worth comes from the fact that she is of Fred, the Commander. The Wives are much more important than the Handmaids, however any individual name for them is equally unimportant. They are only important so far as they are the Wives of the Commanders.

Commander, and casting doubt over her ability to work out (to have a baby) in her new household. In a new and strange household, the Wife makes no attempt to reach out to Offred and make her feel more at home in the house she will be living in. The Wife perhaps attempts to laugh, but quickly covers it over with a cough. It is also possible that her laughter turns to coughing. It is also possible; however, that maybe she has been coughing all along. It is possible that it only sounds like laughing to Offred because she is so starved for an I-You relation that she hears laughter, the sound of right relation, where there is none.

If it was a real laugh that the Wife covered up with a cough, she dismisses any chance of friendliness by following the relational sound with an insult directed towards Offred. The second "laughing cough" does not even seem to come from the Wife, but exists on its own, Atwood stating quite simply that "there was another laughing cough." This sound is therefore not even connected to a human being but is independent, just like all the characters in the book. It exists within the world, but has no source, purpose or destination. The people of this society are just as lonely as this sound. Walls are always being put up in an attempt to isolate people and make them singular individuals who have no personal relationships with others. Without these relationships, there can be no community and no hope for salvation.

In sharp contrast to this relationship between Offred and the Wife, and to all relationships in Gilead, is Offred's relationship to Moira in the time before Gilead. Their relationship was ripe with laughter, for they truly connect on the I-You

plane. In one story that Offred remembers:"I'm laughing. She always made me laugh. . . . Come on, it'll be great [said Moira]. We'll all pee in our pants laughing" (Atwood 56). Moira laughs at her description of her new ploy to get money: to throw an "underwhore party," which she describes as being like a Tupperware party (Atwood 56). Just the fact that it is an "underwhore" party sets this story in a completely different and unimaginably distant past from Gilead. Instead of valuing moral chastity and sexy-less sex, Moira decides on her own to sell sexiness, something that this society allowed. She does all of these actions enveloped by laughter. Offred and Moira had a deep and sincere friendshipeven when the context was very light-hearted. They were free to make their own business ventures in whatever sphere they wanted and to talk and laugh as they pleased. Certainly, God was present in their I-You relationship. Through their friendship, each one was open to the other and to the greater reality of possibility. Gilead, through depriving them of this friendship, has isolated the two women, and countless others, from any possibility.

Moira's laughter in this scene demonstrates her complete liberation from any social constraints. The way she describes this laughter, of how they will all "pee in our pants laughing," is outrageous. She makes a joke and foresees the humor in what she has chosen to do. In the past, Moira had the power to make these choices of how to act. This power of self-will has been stripped away from her and from all women in Gilead. Moira and Offred (whose real name we are never told) were best friends and participatedin a very close relation. The laughter associated with

Moira through all stories told about her percolate through the novel as Offred flashes back to these memories. Moira and Offred's interactions were usually full of laughter, because most of the moments they had were of sincere connection obtained through the presence of the I-You.

In sharp contrast to these warm memories is the stark reality that Offred now faces. Several times over the course of the book she must suppress the urge to laugh, an urge she has because humans have an intrinsic desire for relationships. This laughter is a stranger to her, however, because it is out of place in both the immediate situation and the greater country of Gilead. One instance of this quieted laughter is at weekly Ceremony of the household. In this event, the Commander reads some lines from the Bible according to protocol and Serena Joy helplessly cries, which is not protocol, as she always does. Offred remarks to herself that "The tension between her [the Wife's] lack of control and her attempt to suppress it is horrible . . . I feel, as always, the urge to laugh, but not because I think it's funny" (Atwood 90). The reason Offred wants to laugh is because she sees the dichotomy within Serena Joy and recognizes it instantly, for it is also a rift that she experiences.

Both characters have a strong conflict between their human weaknesses and their required strength. When Offred realizes that Serena Joy also suffers from the discrepancy between what she wants to do and what she has to do, Offred instinctually desires to reachout to her through laughter. The realization of shared personal difficulty is a great vehicle through which people make connections. In

this moment, the Wife is completely human, unable to control herself when self-control is required. Offred recognizes this and has the basic instinct to laugh, but she cannot. No I-You relation is allowed in a world where the oppressed are segregated by the government-instigated *God of the oppressor*. Though they read from the Bible, God is clearly not present within this house. Offred and the Wife are each alone in their own private experience, any semblance of connection or empathy between them outlawed. Neither Serena Joy nor Offred can reach out and actually talk about how they feel and what they think. This action of reaching out requires *dunamis* and they have been separated from this power to relate (Heyward 45). Although Offred wants to laugh and wants to use her *dunamis* to interact with Serena Joy, she is unable to in this Godless world of the I-It.

Soon after, when the Handmaid is lying within the legs of the Wife with the Commander "fucking" her, Offred again gets the urge to laugh because of how ridiculous the situation is (Atwood 94). The jarring language is used by Atwood to suggest just how outrageous and inappropriate the whole event is. Offred remarks to herself: "There's something hilarious about this, but I don't dare laugh" (Atwood 95). The situation *is* hilarious: sex has become an absurd ceremony that is the antithesis of sexy and the relationship between the one man and two women is ridiculous. Offred is ingrained with the knowledge that she cannot laugh, that to laugh would be out of place and not allowed. She wants to laugh in recognition of out unreasonable this situation is, but at the same time it is not unreasonable in the way that *dunamis* is unreasonable. The ceremony is absurd, and Offred wishes to

use her own unreasonable power, her *dunamis*, to fight back. But she has no power of relation that comes from within, and so she must suppress this noise. No one present at the ceremony is happy about being there, we gather, and it is probable that all of them are on the same page about how ridiculous it is. If one of the three laughed, it would most likely break the ice and allow everyone to relate on the level of "isn't this just hilarious?" But no one dares. No one is allowed to act, either by themselves or by the rules of the oppressive social system within which they function; by the "what if?" of it all. This lack of action is exemplar of the lack of the presence of a liberation theology in Gilead. One of the things that this freeing theology gives the believer, along with a community and praxis, is the ability to act. Clearly, Offred has no community and cannot engage in praxis, so how could she participate in the action of laughter?

One of the very few moments of connection present in The Handmaid's Tale is at a Birth day. The Birth mobile comes to pick Offred up from her Commander's house to participate in the ceremony surrounding the labor of one of the Handmaids. Offred tells us about one of the other women sitting next to her on the Birth mobile:

> Impulsively, she grabs my hand, squeezes it . . . she turns to me and I see her face. . . . she's laughing, she throws her arms around me, I've never seen her before, she hugs me . . . On this day, we can do anything we want. (Atwood 111-112)

This moment of relation is like none other that has been witnessed thus far in Gilead. The Handmaids have let their guard down and are laughing the way that people who encounter each other in the I-You do. Even if they are strangers, they

know just what the Other is going through. The violent manner in which the other Handmaid touches Offred "impulsively," "grabs" her hand and "squeezes" it, and "throws her arms around" her hint at the release that the other woman is experiencing by being able to touch another person. Even during the act of sex, as examined above, touch is not the focus and what touch is felt is not an act of reaching out and caring. The hug that happens on the Birth mobile is the first act of reassuring and comforting touch that Offredexperiencesin Gilead. It is also the first time that someone laughs outright in the book. As opposed to the haggard laughter of the Wife earlier in the book, which is maliciously directed at Offred if it is laughter at all, this Handmaid laughs with Offred in her arms. Finally, an I-You moment is fleetingly experienced with a stranger. The fact that the touch happens "impulsively" suggests the immediacy of this relation, and therefore implies that it is within the basic word I-You, which the laughter confirms. This laughter is in part at how unreasonable this moment is within Gilead: here, in the Birthmobile, the women are allowed to touch, defying the rules of Gilead. The women of Gilead are so starved for personal relationships that they connect with people they have never met before, just to have a connection. Nothing comes of this moment of community, however, because it is not allowed the time to become something more. In a minute in a van, there is no time for praxis and certainly no time for action. There is no room for a theology of liberation to develop.

The most theologically important moment of desired laughter in the book is when Offred and her shopping partner, Ofglen, stop in front of the storefront windows of Soul Scrolls. They, for the first time ever in The Handmaid's Tale, are able to voice their own personal thoughts and theologies. Through discourse, the two women are able to connect in a way that is unmistakably I-You. When a moment of intimacy occurs with another Handmaid outside the safety of the Birth mobile, however, the laughter is not allowed. When Offred and Ofglen simultaneously realize that they are both not true believers, that they have a common awareness of the oppressive system in which they exist daily, there is no physical demonstration of the deep feeling of connectedness because they are in public (although, had this conversation taken place in private, it is unclear whether or not there would have been any physical sign of their newfound community). They are talking to each other on a public street outside of Soul Scrolls, where machines work constantly, reading over prayers paid for and sent in by the Wives of Gilead:

> "Do you think God listens," she says, "to these machines?" . . .
> I steel myself. "No," I say.
> She lets out her breath, a long sigh of relief. We have crossed the invisible line together. "Neither do I." . . .
> "I thought you were a true believer," Ofglen says.
> "I thought you were," I say.
> "You were always so stinking pious."
> "So were you," I reply. I want to laugh, shout, hug her. (Atwood 168)

Though their minds may be connected at this moment, Offred and Ofglen remain physically separated and subdued. By using the term "invisible line," Offred

acknowledges the clear division that is to lie between individuals, and between people and knowledge of the oppressive system. The line crossed by these two women together is one placed between the Handmaids and the awareness that they live in a world that is theologically meaningless. The fact that they cross this line together indicates an event of an honest mutual realization of freedom of thought.

The sharp feeling of the I-You between Offred and Ofglen is highlighted in a way that mirrors the event on the Birth mobile. The relation results in a need to laugh and to touch, a need that cannot be met on the streets of Gilead. Connection is forbidden, most certainly, within the context of a relationship based upon mutual understanding of how flawed the system is. This moment on the street is juxtaposed to a memory of Moira to highlight the connection that underlies this laughter: "Moira laughed. . .. We both laughed then, and when she left we hugged each other as usual" (Atwood 172). The casualness of this hugging and laughing points out with the utmost directness the serious lack of touch and closeness in Gilead now. The mundane event of touching each other and of laughing together is inflated to magnificent proportions when one is prohibited from doing it. The You is necessary to human happiness and its elimination eliminates human happiness. Atwood points out that this hug was "as usual," an event that happened unconsciously. The reader can surely identify with this sort of quotidian interaction, and the fact that it is outlawed is outrageous. The book certainly

serves as a warning as to what can happen when the I-You connection is forcefully severed and the oppressed have no choice but to remain victimization. The next time laughter is heard is in a much more private setting than on the streets of Gilead. It is also not between two equals, but a master and a subordinate. It is within the chambers of the Commander when Offred is visiting him for their late night Scrabble games, magazine readings and talks. She finally musters the courage to ask him about the phrase written on the cabinet in her room. She writes it for him, explaining that it may be Latin: "*nolite te bastardes carborundorm*."

> [the Commander looks at the phrase and] he begins to laugh, and is he blushing? "That's not real Latin," he says. "That's just a joke."
> "A joke?" I say, bewildered now. It can't only be a joke. Have I risked this, made a grab at knowledge, for a mere joke? "What sort of a joke?"
> "You know how schoolboys are," he says. His laughter is nostalgic, I see now, the laughter of indulgence towards his former self. . . .
> "Oh. It meant, 'Don't let the bastards grind you down.'" (Atwood 186-7)

The laughter of the Commander is not directed at Offred in any malicious way, but the fact that he laughs at something that she has identified as a prayer, something of utmost importance, shows just how deep the rift is between these two people. He calls the closest thing she has to the sacreda joke. What makes this even more painful, incidentally, is that he does not do this to be mean. The Commander is not trying to laugh at her sacred object, but he just is so oblivious to what this phrase means to her that he does not know not to laugh. He laughs because it is so unreasonable for this phrase to come back to light. It is a relic of his past, and he laughs at how outrageous it is that the Handmaid in his house has brought it back to his mind. The Commander is not trying to oppress Offred, in

fact he is arguably just as much a victim as she is in that he is equally starved for connection and controlled by Gilead. But he ends up being an oppressive force upon her by virtue of the position forced upon him. What she thought could be a prayer (a call in the wilderness, "to construct a bridge to someone,") is yet another meaningless throwback to Offred'spast (Heyward xv). Even when Offred finds something hidden, finds someone that she feels in relation to (the Handmaid before her), it is meaningless. The tone that he takes to it is even more tragic, pointing out that it isn't even "real" Latin. The use of the word"real" drives home the point that the phrase is meaningless, so the possibilities for using it to reach out to an other (be it a God she can pray to or, more necessary, a person to relate to) are equally meaningless and unreal. The phrase is completely unhelpful, and Offred is alone in Gilead. Ironically enough, the bastards *have* gotten her down.

Everywhere Offred turns over the course of The Handmaid's Tale is a dead end to the I-You basic word. No matter what she does, Atwood gives Offred and the reader no escape from the confines of Gilead. Whenever she wants to laugh, she is unable to. When others laugh, it is unclear exactly why: Serena Joy may not even be laughing, the woman on the Birthmobile is a stranger, and the Commander laughs at his past. There is no direction for Offred to turn for connection. This hopelessness is in sharp contrast to the joyous outcome of The Color Purple, where there is much hope for Celie and for the reader in the relationship between Celie, Sofia and Shug. Where Atwood writes a story about complete abandonment, Walker writes a text about salvation.

Both texts use laughter to make physical the spiritual connection occurring between people or to make evident the lack of any significant connection. It is a marker of the theological health of an individual and a community. Offred never laughs, because she is isolated and cannot create any theology. Celie laughs within the context of an ever-growing community that works with her towards a new theology of liberation. In the Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar Genesis narrative, laughter happens when the community is granted a child they thought could never be. Oppressed women laugh when they become aware of their oppression, and in turn, that the possibility of non-oppression exists. When one has been convinced of her own victimization, the idea of liberation is utterly unreasonable. Once made aware of the greater possibilities through the I-You, laughter happens in response to this *dunamis*-filled event.

CONCLUSION

By placing their own texts within the context of the Biblical canon through the common connective element of laughter, Alice Walker and Margaret Atwood have established a theological lineage for their stories. They did not throw away the baby with the bath water, they did not discard the Christian God completely. Instead, they followed the Christian tradition of reexamining the concept of God in order to define a God who is relevant to their specific moment in time. Walker and Atwood stress the importance of connection and do so by using laughter to highlight the illuminating moments of the I-You relation. The Biblical precedent of laughter highlights the connection between humans and the new conception of God who fosters the right relation of humans on earth. Walker and Atwood *do* write theologies that point to a Christian God, but they give this God new divine attributes. They have examined the *God of the oppressor*, and Walker has moved beyond this God. They have envisioned the Godliness that exists among people who are in right relation with others, which is the *God of the oppressed*.

The Color Purple and The Handmaid's Tale are necessary documents of women reclaiming women's stories. Women have historically, theologically, and Biblically been defined by men. In these two books, however, Alice Walker and

Margaret Atwood define women as women and located them in women's experiences. These experiences are not just mundane, either; they are, instead, experiences of women in relation (or looking for relation) with the divine. Walker and Atwood look at women who think theologically and act as best they can in order to achieve liberation. Even more fundamentally, the writing of these books is its own act of liberation. If it is true, as Buber states, that "to gain freedom from the belief in unfreedom is to gain freedom," then Walker certainly has given as much freedom to her reader as she has to her protagonist (Buber 107). The reader forms a community with Alice Walker; reflective reading is an act of praxis, and the reader becomes empowered to form a plan of action.

A theology of liberation is rooted in community, is rooted in the acknowledgement and appreciation of shared experience, and is rooted in relation through the *God of the oppressed*. Writing The Handmaid's Tale gave Margaret Atwood the opportunity to demonstrate how bad things can get in an oppressive society, teaching us that we must never let this happen. In taking away the *dunamis* of her characters, Atwood has made the reader painfully aware of the necessity to take control of her own life and community. In writing The Color Purple, Alice Walker has harnessed her *dunamis* and has found freedom from the belief in unfreedom and has allowed the reader access to another way of living, to another way of knowing, and thereby has allowed her freedom from the belief in unfreedom. Women must be liberated from the *God of the oppressor*, the God

who does not answer them, and utilize their own holy *dunamis* to achieve liberation.

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