

2022

A New Politics of Black Regality: Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker's Monarchical Method

William Martin
Harvard University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/beyondthemarginsjournal>

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [American Literature Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America](#), [Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Martin, William (2022) "A New Politics of Black Regality: Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker's Monarchical Method," *Beyond the Margins: A Journal of Graduate Literary Scholarship*: Vol. 2, Article 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46428/btm.2.3>
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/beyondthemarginsjournal/vol2/iss1/3>

This Critical Essay (Special Topic) is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Beyond the Margins: A Journal of Graduate Literary Scholarship by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

A New Politics of Black Regality: Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker's Monarchical Method

Cover Page Footnote

I thank the Beyond the Margins Editors for their invaluable feedback on the first version of this paper. I also thank my G2: Proseminar classmates for workshoping an earlier version of this paper. I specifically want to thank Sam Bozoukov and Professor Kelly Rich for their assiduous review of the paper. Lastly, I want to thank Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. for encouraging me to write this paper when it was only a close reading encompassing a single page.

A New Politics of Black Regality: Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker's Monarchical Method

William Martin

The clothing-retail company H&M ignited a second set of fireworks to usher in the new year when they released a controversial advertisement in early 2018. The ad displayed a young Black boy modeling a green hoodie with the words “coolest monkey in the jungle” printed across the chest. Vibe contributor Lola Jacobs reported that people found the ad offensive and dehumanizing.¹ In response, social-media users began to Photoshop the image, amending it with crowns and other regalia. In what Jacobs describes as an “anti-campaign,” people contested the animalistic associations the ad implied with explicit regal associations. This anti-campaign sought to not only restore the child’s humanity—but also to elevate it. One user replaced the original offensive lettering with the words “King of the World.”

Such an incident illustrates the general reparative capability of what this paper terms “Black regality,” or the incorporation of monarchical symbols and titles in characterizations of Black people; moreover, earlier implementations of this strategy illuminate its gendered utility for Black women. Literary fiction constitutes one of these earlier implementations evident in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Hurston’s novel operates as a bildungsroman, tracking the self-discovery of her heroine Janie Crawford through her three marriages to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Vergible Woods (or “Tea Cake”). Similarly, Walker’s epistolary novel details the gradual progression of Celie, a Black woman from the Rural South, who overcomes spousal abuse and acquires subjectivity, friendship, and property. The matrilineal link between Hurston and Walker surfaces consistently in scholarship about their aforementioned novels.² Nevertheless, an analysis of their shared employment of monarchical symbols visible in scenes of adornment, discursive play, and public testimony remains unexplored. The cognizance of Black regality as a political strategy within their novels enriches readings of Janie and Celie’s subject formation. Black regality also proves itself as a viable method for these heroines to extricate themselves from the subjugation of their husbands and hegemonic male control at large.

While Janie and Celie’s liberation from patriarchal authority illustrates the promise of Black regality at the literary level, Hurston and Walker extend this liberty to their Black women readership. Dale Pattison’s spatial reading of *Their Eyes* reveals a collaborative impulse in Hurston’s work: “Recognizing narrative as a spatial practice that encourages readers to share authorship of the text and that exists outside of physical place, Janie invites us to participate as she negotiates her position against the politics of hegemonic space” (24). This “subversive act

¹ See “Artists, Social Media Users Reinsert Black Regality Into H&M’s Controversial Ad.”

² See “Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston.”

of narrative”³ shifts the search for liberation from a singular journey within the framework of the novel to a collective journey that encompasses representation and reality. Collaboration transforms literary symbols into legitimate strategies for Black women readers. Walker’s description of Hurston’s writing as “racial health” illuminates the bridge between literature and reader: “This was my first indication of the quality I feel is most characteristic of Zora’s work: racial health, a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature” (85).⁴ “Racial health” ameliorates the condition of the Black woman reader. It promotes dimensionality rather than flatness, which enables Walker to identify with Janie and declare *Their Eyes* as more important to her than any other book.⁵ *The Color Purple* conducts this same ameliorative work that arises from a Black woman reader’s identification with a Black woman protagonist. Salamishah Tillet discusses how Walker’s novel rescued her from an identity crisis and equipped her with a new vocabulary of racial pride and Black feminism in the introduction to her book, *In Search of the Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece*.⁶ Tillet’s title signifies Alice Walker’s 1983 prose collection of similar name titled *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. This linkage of Hurston, Walker, and Tillet illustrates the political import of *Their Eyes* and *The Color Purple* on their Black woman readership. More than representational, these novels assist Hurston and Walker in their attempt to amend and ameliorate the lives of Black women readers who identify with Janie and Celie. This paper contends that Black regality functions as a political tool that helps Hurston and Walker envision modes of self-expression and escape for Black women tethered to domineering men.

The unique position of Black women at the intersection of gender and race renders them susceptible to a parasitic relationship to Black men and white women. Barbara Johnson’s essay, “Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” offers a helpful elaboration of this susceptibility: “The black woman is both invisible and ubiquitous: never seen in her own right but forever appropriated by the others for their own ends” (122). A project that effectively liberates Black women from this parasitic bind amplifies their visibility and addresses their intraracial diversity. Hurston and Walker’s novels display an attentiveness to the intersectional nature of Janie and Celie’s condition. Intersectionality considers how multiple axes of social division collide to shape the world and an individual’s social and political life.⁷ Scholars like Terrence Musanga and Theophilus Mukhuba offer a womanist reading of *The Color Purple*, considering “the intersectionality of the condition of being ‘black,’ ‘poor,’ ‘ugly,’ and a ‘woman’ as leading African American women into invisibility” (389). Likewise, Pattison highlights the diversity of narrative voices in *Their Eyes*, which resists “the authority of a single master narrative of either race or gender” (23). An analysis of the instances of Black regality in these texts contributes to these fruitful conversations. Ideas of sovereignty or monarchy maintain an inextricable connection to ideas of dominion. Etymologically, dominion relates to

³ See “Sites of Resistance: The Subversive Spaces of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (24).

⁴ See *In Search of Mother’s Garden* (85).

⁵ See “Zora Neale Hurston a Cautionary Tale” (12).

⁶ See *In Search of the Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece* (14).

⁷ See *Intersectionality* (2).

the Latin roots “domus” or house and “dominus” or master.⁸ This paper demonstrates how Black regality complicates and transforms these ideas of “house” and “master” to improve the visibility and diversity of Black women. If unification and simplification operate as fantasies of dominion,⁹ then Hurston and Walker implement Black regality to underscore the plurality inherent in Black women’s realities.

The appropriation of an imperialistic framework with its top-down power structure appears antithetical to the aims of Hurston and Walker; however, mimicry serves as a convenient political tool for Black people throughout history. In his essay, “Making Noise: Marcus Garvey Dada, August 1922,” Robert Hill notes that popular and public entertainment in the Caribbean “entail a strong element of masquerade and burlesque of aristocratic and monarchical forms that hark back to the folk celebrations during slavery” (197). These celebrations later emerged in Harlem through the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) processions that Marcus Garvey led. Garvey’s appropriation of these symbols suggests a political objective: “Garvey was clearly not being naive even if at times his mimicry seems a bit ingenuous, smacking less of criticism than emulation. But in Garvey’s mimicry of monarchical and aristocratic symbols... one can also detect a powerful element of social striving” (200). Monarchical mimicry represents Garvey’s method of achieving middle-class respectability.

Nevertheless, Garvey’s mimicry limits the liberatory possibilities of Black regality. His UNIA processions celebrated Black manhood and marginalized Black women.¹⁰ In “The Emperor Effaces Himself,” Hurston critiques Garvey’s monarchical mimicry through a satiric rendering of the Black nationalist figure. She adeptly implements hyperbole to inflate Garvey’s leadership, altruism, and intelligence. These exaggerated qualities swell until Garvey stands on trial for mail fraud and decides to serve as his own lawyer and witness.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, the jury finds him guilty. Hurston’s story chides Garvey for his valuing of titles over truth. His “supposed” relinquishing of titles in section three exemplifies Hurston’s critique: “For himself [Garvey] he kept almost nothing. He was merely Managing Editor of the *Negro World*, Pres. Of the Black Star Steamship and Navigation Line, Pres.-General of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, Supreme Ruler of the Sublime Order of the Nile, Provisional Pres. Of Africa and Commander-in-Chief of the ‘African Legions’” (175-176). Here, the increasing authority of his positions, along with their accompanying adjectives, blatantly contradicts the adverb “merely” that operates as the sentence’s first modifier. “Merely” functions as a grammatical “mask,” hiding the self-aggrandizing nature of Garvey’s titles. Hurston’s Garvey fails to hide his hubris much like “merely” fails to disguise the multitude of Garvey’s titles. Her satire lambasts Garvey’s monarchical mimicry for reproducing an imperial framework. It lacks a crucial element of artistry needed for the mimic to retain a sense of originality.¹²

⁸ See “Dominion.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary.

⁹ “Unification and simplification are fantasies of domination, not understanding. The task of the writer, then, would seem to be to narrate both the appeal and the injustice of universalization, in a voice that assumes and articulates its own, ever-differing self-difference” (Johnson 123).

¹⁰ See “Making Noise: Marcus Garvey Dada, August 1922” (193).

¹¹ See “The Emperor Effaces Himself” (178).

¹² See “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (56-57).

This omission of originality casts Garvey in the mold of the “middle-class” Black person described in “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” as one who “wears drab clothing, sits through a boresome church service, pretends to have no interest in the community, holds beauty contests, and otherwise apes all the mediocrities of the white brother” (57). For Hurston, mimicry must reflect or suggest something in nature or human experience.¹³ One mimics, as Hurston writes, like the mockingbird.¹⁴ In other words, for the love of imitation—not the love of the imitated. Furthermore, Walker’s idea of the “model”¹⁵ resembles Hurston’s idea of mimicry. The mimic’s affinity for imitation parallels an affinity for the model’s “record of life.”¹⁶ Moreover, mimicry and the model engage a larger community. Mimicry considers a shared human experience, and the model fends off the successor’s fear of loneliness.¹⁷ A constitutive element characterizes mimicry for these authors. They challenge the assumption of mimicry as an individual act and demonstrate its collective utility. Thus, Hurston and Walker transcend the mere borrowing of quintessential conceptions of regality. They critique and expand regality, which crafts something original and liberating out of a familiar and fettering concept. The imperial framework of monarchy collapses in Hurston and Walker’s aesthetic implementation of Black regality.

Previous scholarship on *Their Eyes* and *The Color Purple* overlooks the elements of Black regality present in both novels. Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s book, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), discusses the relationship between these texts in his chapter titled “Color Me Zora: Alice Walker’s (Re) Writing of the Speakerly Text.” While Gates examines the formal relationship between Hurston and Walker’s narrative strategies, this paper tends to the symbolic similarities across the novels. A focus on monarchical symbols exposes readers to new political strategies that work to liberate Black women from male patriarchy. Other scholars address subversive spaces,¹⁸ feminist imperatives,¹⁹ and shame²⁰ in *Their Eyes* and *The Color Purple*. Black regality not only meaningfully supplements these conversations but also explicitly traces the control and subjugation of Black women from a fictional level and institutional literary-critical level.

The reception of *Their Eyes* and Hurston’s personal experience with the publishing world illustrate the pervasiveness of hegemonic male authority. Richard Wright excoriated Hurston in his 1937 “Between Laughter and Tears” book review: “The sensory sweep of her novel carries

¹³ See “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (56-57).

¹⁴ See “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (57).

¹⁵ See “Saving the Life that is Your Own” (12).

¹⁶ See “Saving the Life that is Your Own” (12).

¹⁷ “In that story I gathered up the historical and psychological threads of the life my ancestors lived, and in the writing of it I felt joy and strength and my own continuity. I had that wonderful feeling writers get sometimes, not very often, of being with a great many people, ancient spirits, all very happy to see me consulting and acknowledging them, and eager to let me know, through the joy of their presence, that, indeed, I am not alone” (Walker 13).

¹⁸ See “Sites of Resistance: The Subversive Spaces of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.”

¹⁹ See “Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies.”

²⁰ See “Too Shame to Look: Learning to Trust Mirrors and Healing the Lived Experience of Shame in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*.”

no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is 'quaint,' the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior' race" (37). Here, he essentially charges Hurston with writing a vapid novel that exploits Black people for white entertainment. His preference for Hurston to "move in the direction of serious fiction" only underscores his circumscribing of her creative expression. Serious Black writers of the late 1930s publish protest novels, according to Wright. Anything contrary, then, finds itself lambasted and dismissed from serious literary conversation. Valerie Babb suggests that Black writers of this period gravitated to the protest novel genre as a response to the transformations of a nation recovering from the Depression and two world wars.²¹ Furthermore, Babb notes the confluence of the Black protest novel and the interests of the American mainstream: "The protagonists in these works articulated postwar alienation, and their engagement of privation voiced the insecurity of many across racial lines who had lost economic footing" (99) and "The novel that would define the standard of what a Black novel should be for years to come was such a success... because it unfolded against a background of Americana" (99). Despite the criticism of Arthur P. Davis, Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, and others,²² Hurston broke from this mold with *Their Eyes* electing to emphasize folk forms and the vernacular. The incorporation of history (folk forms or monarchy) as a rich source for aesthetic creation characterizes Hurston's literary method. Forms others discard as archaic possess a potentiality that promises to improve the contemporary. Interestingly, the editor of Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* disapproved of her political commentary on racism and imperialism, which led to the omission of those comments.²³ Indeed, Hurston's aesthetic use of the past, and regality specifically, illuminates a subversive method of critiquing the failures of her present era. Black male critics castigate her for looking backwards when the white patriarchal authority of the publishing industry rejects her view of the present. Hence, Hurston critiques the present through representations of older forms in her literature, which helps her flee from the pervasiveness of hegemonic male authority.

This pervasiveness spreads fifty years into the future, hounding Walker with similar criticism, which Tillet details in her book, *In Search of the Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece*. For Ishmael Reed, the representation of Black men tilted too far towards racist caricatures: "What was at stake for Reed were the representations of the black male characters— Pa, Albert, and Harpo— whom he and, by the time the movie came out, several other black film critics and activists saw as racist stereotypes, characters there only to fulfill long-standing white myths of black men being innately sexually aggressive and violent" (52). David Bradley even suggested that Walker's blind eye accounted for her "high level of enmity" towards Black men: "It is etched there by pain and sacrifice, and it is probably too much to expect that anything so violently created would be free of some distortion" (56). Both men attempted to control Walker's creative expression. Reed dictated the extent of Black male representation available to her, while Bradley psychoanalyzed Walker, reducing her artistic

²¹ See *A History of the African American Novel* (99).

²² See *A History of the African American Novel* (77) for Locke, Brown, and others. See "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston" (18) for Arthur P. Davis.

²³ See "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston" (19).

genius to an unfortunate childhood accident. These negative receptions demonstrate the extent to which men control Black women through literary-critical institutions. “Control” exceeds mere criticism of a text. It involves the dismissal and denigration of a text that also demonizes the author. Wright implies that Hurston created literary minstrelsy for white enjoyment, and Bradley and Reed accuse Walker of possessing an irrational hatred of Black men. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* features vernacular, the Rural South, and Black myths, which align it aesthetically with *Their Eyes* and *The Color Purple*. Yet, his novel receives a different reception. Brown considers the book an important novel even though he disagrees with the central metaphor of invisibility.²⁴ Locke’s review of the novel in *Phylon* heralds its style and conception as “‘a new height of literary achievement,’ while acknowledging its artistic flaws” (34-35). *Invisible Man* receives an impartial review directed squarely at the art. Such impartiality fails to extend itself to Hurston and Walker’s work. Hence, the demonization of these Black male critics proves critical for subjugating Black women because it forces the demonized to acquiesce to the standards and expectations of their accusers—Black men. The women possess no path to “redeem” themselves. Men invent an imaginary illness that only their satisfaction cures.

A politics of Black regality operates as an effective remedy against the illness of institutionally enabled hegemonic male authority and control of Black women. Section One of this paper examines how adornment liberates Black women through an analysis of the color purple in Walker’s text and hair in Hurston’s text. Section Two focuses on discursive play through an analysis of Avery’s performance at Harpo’s juke joint and Janie’s playing of the dozens in front of the Eatonville community. Last, Section Three highlights the moments of public testimony from Celie before her trip to Memphis and Janie when standing trial. Hurston and Walker incorporate regal colors, thrones, and crowns in their simultaneous uplift of their Black women protagonists and readership.

Adornment

A politics of Black regality allows Black women to adorn themselves for whomever they choose, which contests the hegemonic male authority that exercises control over their appearance. *The Color Purple* highlights this when Albert’s sister, Kate, arrives and helps Celie purchase a dress. While Celie notices Kate’s well-dressed appearance, Kate notices how clean Celie keeps the house. Celie’s value as a wife stems from her ability to keep the house clean, take care of the children, and cook. These qualities serve her husband. Albert places no importance on Celie’s appearance, so the opportunity for adornment never presents itself. When Kate tells him to buy Celie clothes, his response encapsulates his apathy: “‘She need clothes? he ast. Well look at her. He look at me. It like he looking at the earth. It need somethin? his eyes say’” (21). Celie’s needs puzzle him because he only requires her to satisfy *his* needs. Hence, shopping allows Celie to scratch out some semblance of subjectivity. At the store, Celie attempts to model her outfit after Avery. Interestingly, she compares her to a queen: “‘She like a queen to me so I say to Kate, Somethin purple, maybe little red in it too. But us look an look and no purple. Plenty red but she say, Naw, he won't want to pay for red. Too

²⁴ See “‘Steady and Unaccusing’: An Interview with Sterling A. Brown” (819).

happy lookin. We got choice of brown, maroon or navy blue. I say blue” (22). Celie’s remark establishes Avery as a regal figure; furthermore, the association of purple with queens evokes several historic associations. In Roman history, laws forbid anyone outside of the imperial family from wearing purple, and violators faced death as a punishment.²⁵ Biblically, purple signifies royalty as several kings cloaked themselves, their temples, and their visitors in the color.²⁶ Economically, only Murex mollusk mucus produced the Tyrian purple dye (Murex mollusk is a type of tropical sea snail).²⁷ The eventual scarcity of this snail astronomically increased the price of the dye, so only the wealthiest families wore purple clothing. Purple, then, functions as a color capable of elevating Celie’s lowly position as a domestic servant. Walker foreshadows the significance of purple for Celie’s subjecthood in this early scene. The scene belongs to what Kimberly Love refers to as the “I am” section of the novel²⁸ characterized by “Celie’s splintered self-consciousness” (523). While Love connects the formal conventions of Celie’s letters to track the development of her self-consciousness, this paper examines how symbols of regality also perform this reparative work. The unavailability of a purple dress portends Albert’s continued subjugation of Celie despite Celie acquiring new clothes. Purple, then, with its regal associations, activates the repair of Celie’s self-consciousness. This activation and subsequent repair coincide with the abundance of purple she accesses at the end of the novel: “Well, here it is, I say, standing in the door. Everything in my room purple and red cept the floor, that painted bright yellow” (291). The transition from the unavailability of purple to its overabundance reflects Celie’s development from a character lacking an identity to a complex individual. No longer Albert’s domestic servant, she achieves a homeownership that parallels her full possession of personhood. This inundation of purple also underscores her liberation from Albert’s control as he gifts her a purple frog perch,²⁹ which indicates he acknowledges her transition from a domestic servant to a figure of regality. Hence, this purple adornment catalyzes a change of subjecthood and status. Black regality offers Celie self-expression and escape from male hegemonic control.

Adornment also equips Celie with a defense against men who diminish her presence through invectives aimed at her physical appearance. This debasement occurs in an early scene where Fonso presents Celie as a potential suitor for Albert: “Well, next time you come you can look at her. She ugly. Don’t even look like she kin to Nettie. But she’ll make the better wife. She ain’t smart either, and I’ll just be fair, you have to watch her or she’ll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man” (9). Fonso provides an unflattering description of his daughter that begins with an attack on her appearance. Even more, his last comment about her ability to work like a man demonstrates how ugliness disqualifies Celie as a woman but keeps her eligible as a wife. This erasure of her womanness speaks to Walker’s view of her mother:

²⁵ See “The Color Purple: from Royalty to Laboratory, with Apologies to Malachowski” (9).

²⁶ See “The Color Purple: from Royalty to Laboratory, with Apologies to Malachowski” (9).

²⁷ See “The Color Purple: from Royalty to Laboratory, with Apologies to Malachowski” (9).

²⁸ Love divides her paper into three sections: “I am,” which examines Celie’s fractured self-consciousness, “But I’m here,” which notes Celie’s position in the world, and “It mine,” which connects Celie to a usable past and allows her to claim herself.

²⁹ See *The Color Purple* (291).

“Black was not a color on my mother; it was a shield that made her invisible” (124).³⁰ If blackness renders a Black woman invisible, then purple restores her visibility. Walker understands the power of colors—not simply skin color—to impact personhood. This explains the significance of purple in her novel. It decorates more than clothes. It decorates the self. The tonality of purple, regarding its closeness to black, explains why Walker titles her book *The Color Purple*. This outward closeness in shade helps her establish the deeper regal associations between purple and black. Whether clothes or bedrooms, Celie’s adornment protects her from the invectives of men that seek to dictate her physical appearance. It imbues her with regal associations that empower her to present herself to the world in a style of her own selection. Adornment allows her to silence the men that call her ugly.

Hurston elects for hair to serve as her primary object of adornment rather than clothes. *Their Eyes* includes several moments of men exercising control over women’s hair. The disclosure of a horrific experience from Janie’s grandmother underscores this form of hegemonic male control: “But pretty soon he [Master Robert] let on he forgot somethin’ and run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time” (17). This unsettling recount of sexual violation reveals how the letting down of hair signals a submission to the demands of a slave master. The long hair that accentuates a woman’s beauty becomes the exclusive property of men, existing for their sexual desire. This example of hegemonic male authority persists most notably in Janie’s second marriage. Joe Starks, mayor of Eatonville and Janie’s entrepreneurial-spirited second husband, encapsulates this subjugation of women through their hair. Joe forbids Janie from showing her hair in the grocery store they own and forces her to wear a head-rag.³¹ The removal of this head-rag after his death symbolizes her freedom from hegemonic male control: “She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. She took careful stock of herself, then combed her hair and tied it back up again” (87). This moment follows Janie’s recollection of a promise made to her younger self to search for her in a looking glass. While staring at her reflection, Janie realizes her growth into a handsome woman. The removal of Joe’s head-rag occurs immediately after this recognition scene. Pattison reads the mirror-image of Janie as a heterotopia³² or countersite that combats patriarchy’s desire to control her identity.³³ His analysis tends to Janie’s body as a site of resistance, but he neglects a substantial consideration of her hair, specifically. Dede Tete connects “the crown of glory” designation for African American women’s hair to African cultural traditions.³⁴ Tribes like the Mende, Mandingo,³⁵ and

³⁰ See “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?”

³¹ See *Their Eyes* (Hurston 55).

³² “Heterotopias are ‘counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Pattison 11).

³³ See “Sites of Resistance: The Subversive Spaces of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (18).

³⁴ “My crown and glory: Community, identity, culture, and Black women’s concerns of hair product-related breast cancer risk” (3).

³⁵ The Mali Empire, which includes the Mandingo or Mandinka tribe, codified the Manden Charter, establishing the empire as a constitutional monarchy. See “Mali’s History and Culture: The Keys to a Durable Solution.”

Yoruba use a variety of hairstyles as a form of communication.³⁶ An examination of Janie's hair reveals how hegemonic male authority implements non-oratory modes of silencing Black women. Even more, the adorning of Black women's hair offers them self-expression and personhood. Hurston demonstrates this through Janie, who wishes to see herself fully without the censorship of men. She achieves this full recognition when she adorns herself, taking "careful stock" and combing her hair. Although she covers her hair, it still indicates a choice of her own volition rather than a command from her second husband. A perspective switch occurs as she no longer considers how others see her but how she sees herself. Control of her hair doubles as control of her crown. Janie rules the kingdom of Janie.

Discursive Play

Adornment addresses the silence and invisibility that hegemonic male authority engenders to subjugate Black women; however, the sequestering of Black women from sites of communal formation serves as another method of control that discursive play combats. In the essay, "The Erotics of Talk: 'That Oldest Human Longing' in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Carla Kaplan's idea of "discursive reciprocity" explains how "Hurston resituates narrative reliability in terms of the reader rather than the narrator and makes fidelity to this discursive ethos an implicit principle of readerly competence" (119). Kaplan's emphasis on narration and the erotic overlooks the strategic use of speech to reconnect Black women to the community. Moreover, discursive play transforms this community into an audience receptive to their concerns. In *The Color Purple*, Albert initially prohibits Celie from attending Harpo's juke joint: "Mr. _ didn't want me to come. Wives don't go to places like that, he say.... Mr. - mutter, putting on his clothes. My wife can't do this. My wife can't do that. No wife of mines . . . He go on and on" (76). Albert claims that wives "don't go to places like that." However, the "that" needs further inspection. The juke joint functions as a social space where people drink, listen to music, and revel in the company of friends. Social spaces expose Black women to an alternative life from what presents itself within domestic spaces, which frustrates hegemonic male authority. Walker reconfigures the traditional role of the queen in this case. Instead of a jester, the queen becomes the center of attention. Avery, "Queen Honeybee," accomplishes this when she performs at Harpo's juke joint. Avery brings in a crowd of people, sings Blues songs from Bessie Smith, and adorns herself in a red dress with shining hair. Discursive play allows Avery to garner the affinity and admiration of all people: "Before I know it, tears meet under my chin. And I'm confuse. He love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug. But Shug don't love looking at but one of us. Him" (77). Here, Celie details her jealousy at Avery's competing admirers. Love frees itself in this scene as a husband and wife simultaneously desire the same woman. The restrictions on love imposed as a consequence of the heteronormative demands of hegemonic male authority relax, permitting new relationships. As Musanga and Mukhuba claim: "Walker represents black women's sexual relationships with and tutelage of one another as an alternative to being subjected to masculinist and dominative ideas of sex" (396). This point

³⁶ See "My crown and glory: Community, identity, culture, and Black women's concerns of hair product-related breast cancer risk" (3).

briefly bypasses Celie, who mistakenly believes that Avery only cares for Albert. Avery's song dedicated to Celie eliminates this misbelief:

Then I hear my name. Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. And I look up where she at. She say my name again. She say this song I'm bout to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out of my head when I was sick. First she hum it a little, like she do at home. Then she sing the words. It all about some no count man doing her wrong, again. But I don't listen to that part. I look at her and I hum along a little with the tune. First time somebody made something and name it after me. (77)

This paramount moment highlights the efficacy of a performing queen. Avery serves as Celie's inspiration. Discursive play provides Black women with a stage to empower other Black women suffering from hegemonic male authority. Celie hums along with the tune which creates harmony between the women. The isolation of remaining outside of the community social life vanishes as Avery uses her platform to amplify Celie. This reveals the collaborative value of discursive play. Its influence reaches beyond the woman on center stage. It pulls in all surrounding women, generating a sense of appreciation and elevation.

While Celie's sequestering confines her to the domestic duties emblematic of a wife according to Albert, Janie's sequestering confines her to an inert object as Joe equates beauty to idleness. Anne Cheng studies the "ornamental personhood of Asiatic femininity"³⁷ in her book *Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman*. Cheng uses Hortense Spiller's concept of "hieroglyphics of the flesh"³⁸ and Franz Fanon's concept of the "epidermal racial schema"³⁹ to argue that racialization reduces Black women to flesh. In contrast, Cheng argues that racialization reduces Asian women to the "decorative sameness of ornaments" (416). This divergent treatment of racialization on Black and Asian women collapses if one examines Joe's treatment of Janie in the store. After they find residence in Eatonville, Joe organizes the construction of a store and tells Janie to preside over it: "Jody told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as a bell-cow, the other woman were the gang'" (41). Joe's "doll-baby" comment from an earlier scene⁴⁰ comes to fruition as he reduces Janie to a mere decoration within the store. His need for her to operate as a "bell-cow" highlights a cosmetic form of hegemonic male control. Joe's demands disconnect Janie from the community as he designates a woman's place as the domestic space.⁴¹ This sequestering occurs most vividly when he forbids her from attending the mule ceremony: "Dat's right, but Ah'm uh man even if Ah is de Mayor. But de mayor's wife is somethin'

³⁷ "...the material, affective, and kinesthetic making of an aesthetic ontology that I will call the ornamental personhood of Asiatic femininity" (Cheng 428).

³⁸ "... training our gaze on the black female body and the ineluctable matter of ungendered, jeopardized flesh" (415).

³⁹ The denaturalizing of black skin as the product of a shattering white gaze (415).

⁴⁰ "You behind a plow! You ain't got no mo' business wid uh plow than uh hog is got wid un holiday! You ain't got no business cuttin' up no seed p'taters neither. A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo'self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" (Hurston 29).

⁴¹ See *Their Eyes* (43).

different again. Anyhow they's liable tuh need me tuh say uh few words over de carcass, dis bein' uh special case. But *you ain't goin' off in all dat mess uh commonness*" (60). Joe draws a distinction between the role of the mayor and the mayor's wife. Of course, the mayor defines the role of his wife. Critique flows in one direction. The irony of Joe's "stubborn as a mule" position about Janie's attendance at a funeral for a mule speaks to the wittiness of Hurston. Nevertheless, Black regality offers Janie an escape from her sequestered position.

Discursive play manifests differently in *Their Eyes* as Janie plays the dozens to extricate herself from hegemonic male control as opposed to singing. Nathaniel Mills's essay "Playing the Dozens and Consuming the Cadillac: Ralph Ellison and Civil Rights Politics" provides a useful definition of the term: "The dozens is a black vernacular speech ritual in which participants invent dueling insults, often of a sexual nature and often about each other's mothers" (147). This verbal duel commences between Joe and Janie after she poorly cuts a piece of chewing tobacco. Joe proceeds to insult her with a snide comment pertaining to her physical appearance. Janie fires back, however, with her own critique of Joe's body: "'You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' bout' me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life'" (79). The "'change of life'" refers to menopause, which suggests that Janie insults Joe's manhood. Furthermore, she embarrasses him inside of his own store. The store operates as the social center of the community, so their verbal duel generates an audience. Janie's participation in this duel challenges the ornamental role imposed upon her. Doll-babies normally refrain from retaliatory speech, unless they have a predictable script. So, Janie's unexpected retaliation destabilizes the world that Joe builds for himself inside of the store. She not only insults him, but she insults him in his store, in the center of his city, where he works as the mayor. This rupture of hegemonic male authority elicits laughter from the crowd of Black men. Mortified and ridiculed, Joe eventually dies of a "broken ego," which liberates Janie from his sequestering. Thus, discursive play provides a platform for Black women to verbally challenge and undermine hegemonic male authority. The queen as a whimsical discursive figure transforms her troubles into songs and jokes, which provide an emotional outlet that forms community for herself and other Black women.

Public Testimony

While adornment and discursive play help Black women control their image and form community, public testimony grants them freedom of movement. A restriction of movement accurately describes Celie's predicament in *The Color Purple*. Fonso sends Celie with Albert early in the novel. At his home, she cleans, cooks, and tends to visitors. Her lack of movement opposes the mobility of her sister, Nettie. Mobility rescues Nettie as she evades the clutches of Fonso in the woods,⁴² which rewrites the sexual violation of Janie's mother in the woods at the hands of a schoolteacher. And later, Nettie joins the American and African Missionary Society, traveling to Africa and ingratiating herself with the Olinka people. Avery also exercises mobility as she travels to different venues as a singer. She also leaves Celie at different times in the novel to pursue other interests. Walker uses these mobile women to contest the idea that a

⁴² See *The Color Purple* (131).

queen remains seated in her throne. For a politics of Black regality, queens need to access different spaces. They view the world as their castle. Public testimony enables Celie's mobility. When Avery announces that Celie will accompany her in Memphis, Albert vehemently refuses: "Over my dead body, Mr_ say" (206). The occasion presents itself for Celie to stand up to the man that sexually violated her, beat her, and hid her sister's letters. With a full audience, Celie lashes out at Albert: "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 just the welcome mat I need" (207). Albert attempts to regain control through violence, but Celie cuts that plan to shreds when she stabs him.⁴³ Albert tries to regain control of Celie through insults about her physical appearance, but his efforts fail. Celie's vocal protests become a curse: "I curse you, I say. What that mean? he say. I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble" (213). Albert's baffled response to Celie's curse illustrates his loss of power. He no longer defines Celie's reality. She formulates her own vocabulary, and he must implore her for clarity. Gates also acknowledges the liberatory nature of this moment: "Celie has conquered her foe, Albert, and the silences in her self, by representing an act of speech in the written word, in which she turns Albert's harsh curses back on him, masterfully" (253). Hence, public testimony frees Celie from Albert and grants her freedom of movement as her experience in Memphis—without him—details the next letter.

A substantive discussion of chairs in *Their Eyes* must precede an analysis of the nuances in public testimony that distinguish Janie's preservation of unfettered mobility from Celie's acquisition of this mobility. The mobility of Hurston's heroine appears assured for most of the novel. Her physical travel from Eatonville to the Everglades parallels her transition through different marriages. This mobility counters the romantic portrayals of sitting that other characters evoke to arrest Janie's movements. Chapter Twelve, the scene where Janie confides to Phoebe after Joe's death, details one of these moments where Black women contemplate the chair. In this scene, Janie describes her grandmother's conception of the object: "She was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn't sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat's what she wanted for me... Git up on uh high chair and sit dere" (114). Here, Janie suggests that her grandmother's understanding of the "chair" stems from slavery. Sitting on a chair signifies a Black woman's extrication from the toils of forced labor. From her grandmother's perspective, chairs and freedom operate as connotative cousins. Her grandmother maintains a quixotic view of the object. This limited perspective results from her grandmother "not having a pulpit" (16). The chair operates as the object of fantasy. She imbues the object with her ideas of a life better than slavery. Even so, her idea of "better" remains in the slave-and-master paradigm. Life as a slave master becomes the alternative to life as a slave. What the grandmother envisions, Janie lives. At Eatonville, she lives with Joe in a "big house" with servant quarters surrounding it. As a result, Janie displays a priviness to the chair's downsides. Speaking with Phoebe after Joe's death, she states: "Dis sittin' in de rulin' chair is been hard on Jody" (83). This knowledge of the hardships of the chair explains her critical rather than romantic view of the object. It "classes her off" (112), which she finds alienating. As the world whirls with activity, the chair

⁴³ See *The Color Purple* (207).

keeps her out of the loop. The superior view of the chair paradoxically blinds her from life's minutiae.

The novel's construction of the chair remains in flux, however. After the death of Tea Cake, her young and adventurous third husband, Janie sits in a new chair during the courtroom scene: "She just sat there and told and when she was through she hushed. She had been through for some time before the judge and the lawyer and the rest seemed to know it. But she sat on in that trial chair until the lawyer told her she could come down" (188). The trial chair drastically differs from the previously mentioned chairs. Instead of an object of romantic projection, the trial chair causes those in it to grapple with the potential loss of freedom. The trial chair also centers the occupant within the happenings of the world. Examining this exact scene in her essay "Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies," Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes it as a moment of "undepicted speech" or "moments when Hurston says that Janie spoke, but Janie's speaking is not rendered in Janie's voice when it occurs" (107). DuPlessis understands this form of speech as Hurston's narrative resolution to the conflicts between race, class, and gender within the novel. The undepicted speech represents Janie's "telling" of the story to white people, but she shares the true story of her love and life with a Black person—Phoebe.⁴⁴ A consideration of the trial chair enriches DuPlessis's reading of this resolution among different identities. Hegemonic male authority threatens Janie's mobility. The all-white male jury exercises power over her fate. Additionally, the Black men of the Everglades attempt to condemn her: "They sent word by the bailiff to Mr. Prescott they wanted to testify in the case. Tea Cake was a good boy. He had been good to that woman. No [n****r] woman ain't never been treated no better. Naw suh!" (186). Their desires remain unmet, however. The trial chair assists Janie in countering the threat of hegemonic male authority. It provides a space for the sharing of her public testimony and initiates a dialogue with the community. Unlike the "big voice" of Joe talking down to people or the pulpit that prioritizes the preacher, the trial chair allows an egalitarian form of speech to emerge. The trial chair as throne repositions the one sitting on it from above the people to amongst the people. The courtroom listens to Janie's story. The gaze flips as the occupant no longer views the world—the world views the occupant. This democratization of voice that allows a Black woman to contest hegemonic male authority in a court of law rescues Janie from jail. This rescue also redeems the chair as it demonstrates the significance of a Black woman's throne. The throne democratizes her voice and liberates her from hegemonic male authority and control. A politics of Black regality cherishes the chair.

Conclusion

Overall, Hurston and Walker articulate a politics of Black regality in their novels to liberate Black women from hegemonic male authority and control. Section One examines the significance of adornment for the self and not others. Celie accomplishes this through colors—most prominently, the color purple. Janie accomplishes this through the adornment of her hair, which functions as her crown. Section Two focuses on the power of discursive play to provide

⁴⁴ See "Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies" (108).

Black women an artistic outlet for self-expression and community formation. An analysis of Avery's song as a form of discursive play demonstrates how it creates a community with Celie that counters the sequestering of her husband. Instead of song, Janie plays the dozens to rejoin the community of Eatonville. In each case, the queen fulfills the role of the jester. The final section underscores the efficacy of public testimony. This grants Celie freedom of movement. For Janie, public testimony preserves her mobility. The redemption of the chair also refigures the throne as a democratic object. Hurston and Walker's implementation of Black regality in their novels generates an abundance of political strategies for members of their Black women readership seeking self-expression and escape from hegemonic male authority and control. *Their Eyes* and *The Color Purple* bestow upon their readers the tools necessary to construct a better kingdom.

Works Cited

- Babb, Valerie Melissa. *A History of the African American Novel*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- “Between Laughter and Tears.” *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, 2008, pp. 37–38.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. *Ornamentalism*. Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2019.
- “Dominion.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dominion. Accessed 19 Apr. 2022.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. “Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies.” *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 95–119.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Twenty-fifth-anniversary ed., Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Goldner, Janet. 2013. “Mali's History and Culture: The Keys to a Durable Solution.” *Hot Spots, Fieldsights*, June 10. Culanth.org/fieldsights/malis-history-and-culture-the-keys-to-a-durable-solution.
- Hill, Robert. “Making Noise: Marcus Garvey Dada, August 1922.” *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*. The New Press, 1994.
- Hill Collins, Patricia, and Bilge, Sirma. *Intersectionality*. Polity P., 2016.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1st Harper Perennial Modern Classics ed. New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 206. Print.
- Hurston, Zora Neale, et al. “The Characteristics of Negro Expression.” *You Don't Know Us Negroes: and Other Essays*. First edition., Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.
- Hurston, Zora Neale, et al. “The Emperor Effaces Himself.” *You Don't Know Us Negroes: and Other Essays*. First edition., Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.
- Jacobs, Lola. “Artists, Social Media Users Reinsert Black Regality Into H&M's Controversial Ad.” *Vibe (Online)*, 2018, pp. Vibe (Online), 2018–01-08.
- Johnson, Barbara. “Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.” *The Barbara Johnson Reader*, Duke University Press, 2020, pp. 108–25, doi:10.1515/9780822399070-012. Accessed 19 April 2022.
- Kaplan, Carla. “The Erotics of Talk: ‘That Oldest Human Longing’ in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.” *American Literature*, vol. 67, no. 1, 1995, pp. 115–42, doi:10.2307/2928033. Accessed 19 Apr. 2022.
- Krafts, KP, et al. “The Color Purple: From Royalty to Laboratory, with Apologies to Malachowski.” *Biotechnic & Histochemistry*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2011, pp. 7–35.
- Locke, Alain. “From *Native Son* to *Invisible Man*: A Review of the Literature of the Negro for 1952.” *Phylon*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1953, pp. 34–34.
- Love, Kimberly S. “Too Shame to Look: Learning to Trust Mirrors and Healing the Lived Experience of Shame in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.” *Hypatia*, vol. 33, no. 3, WILEY, 2018, pp. 521–36, doi:10.1111/hypa.12430. Accessed 19 April 2022.
- Mills, Nathaniel. “Playing the Dozens and Consuming the Cadillac: Ralph Ellison and Civil Rights Politics.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2015, pp. 147–172.
- Musanga, Terrence, and Theophilus Mukhuba. “Toward the Survival and Wholeness of the African American Community: A Womanist Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

- (1982)." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4, SAGE Publications, 2019, pp. 388–400, doi:10.1177/0021934719835083. Accessed 19 April 2022.
- Pattison, Dale. "Sites of Resistance: The Subversive Spaces of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Melus*, vol. 38, no. 4, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 9–31, doi:10.1093/melus/mlt050. Accessed 19 April 2022.
- Sadoff, Dianne. "Black Matrilineage: The Case of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 11, no. 1, University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 4–26, doi:10.1086/494197. Accessed 19 April 2022.
- Teteh, Dede K., et al. "My Crown and Glory: Community, Identity, Culture, and Black Women's Concerns of Hair Product-Related Breast Cancer Risk." *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 1, Cogent, 2017, p. 1345297, doi:10.1080/23311983.2017.1345297. Accessed 19 April 2022.
- Tidwell, JE, and JS Wright. "'Steady and Unaccusing': An Interview with Sterling A. Brown." *Callaloo*, vol. 21, no. 4, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 811–21, doi:10.1353/cal.1998.0239. Accessed 19 April 2022.
- Tillet, Salamishah. *In Search of The Color Purple: The Story of an American Masterpiece*. Abrams Press, 2021.
- Walker, Alice. "Saving the Life That is Your Own." *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. 1st ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Walker, Alice. "The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. 1st ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Pocket Books, 1985.
- Walker, Alice. "Zora Neale Hurston a Cautionary Tale." *Moving On*, 1978.