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### Em(body)ing Autonomy: Black Women's Bodies and Self-Liberation in the Novels of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker

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#### Recommended Citation

Duttry, Caitlin Rose Riley, "Em(body)ing Autonomy: Black Women's Bodies and Self-Liberation in the Novels of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker" (2014). *Honors Theses and Capstones*. 198.  
<https://scholars.unh.edu/honors/198>

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English Literature Honors Senior Thesis

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Spring 2014

Embodying Autonomy:

Black Women's Bodies and Self-Liberation

in *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston are indelibly connected in literary history, both in their thematic presences as black feminist writers and in authorial kinship. Alice Walker, often credited with bringing Hurston's work back into print, cherishes Zora Neale Hurston as a literary model. Walker writes that if she were stranded on a desert island with one book, she would want *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for "there is no book more important to me than this one" (Walker 86). Moreover, Mary Ann Wilson describes Walker and Hurston as "spiritual sisters whose lives affirm racial pride and beauty" (Wilson 57). The sisterhood of these authors enters into their works; "Surely," writes Emma J. Waters Dawson, "Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Celie in *The Color Purple* are sister spirits" (Dawson 77). Lillie P. Howard describes the relationship between *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* in the context of the musical "call and response," in which Walker responds artistically to Hurston's call.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* are novels about black women navigating oppressive realities on a journey for self-liberation. In both novels, patriarchal abuse subdues the protagonists' voices and physical manifestations of oppression threaten to divest them of bodily autonomy. However, the women in these novels reclaim their bodily autonomy, subverting the oppressive hierarchies which seek to control black women. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple*, black women reclaim their bodies, often the site of their racial and gendered oppression: they *embody* their self-liberation. Hurston and Walker illuminate their protagonists' use of their bodies in their efforts for freedom through the intertextual motif of trees, oral creativity, and erotic autonomy.

### **Methodology: The Need for Black Feminism**

This analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* engages black feminist criticism to reveal the importance of bodies in the protagonists' journeys to self-liberation. Black feminist criticism is imperative to understanding works by black women, as it privileges experiences and modes of expression traditionally marginalized in literary study. Francis Smith Foster asserts that "from its beginnings, Anglo males dominated American literature" (Foster 12). Mary Helen Washington explicates the effect of such domination in suppressing black women's literary voices. She writes:

We women, the disinherited, do not fit in. Our 'ritualized journeys,' our 'articulate voices,' our 'symbolic spaces,' are rarely the same as a man's. Those differences, plus the appropriation of literary power by men, account for the failure to include the writings of Afro-American women in the development of literary history (90).

The voices of black women and their unique and universal experiences are obscured, disremembered in favor of literature valued by dominant, white male standpoints. Even within feminism, black voices have been suppressed and ignored, as white feminists "wittingly or not, perpetrated against the Black woman writer the same exclusive practices they so vehemently decried in white male scholars" (McDowell 167). Although the marginalization of black women's literature continues, *The Color Purple* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are widely read and studied novels. Walker and Hurston have forged solid places in feminist and African American literary canon. Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Feminist Thought*, affirms the importance of these writers, writing of Walker, "By reclaiming the works of Zora Neale Hurston

and in other ways placing Black women's experiences and culture at the center of her work, she draws on alternative Black feminist worldviews" (Collins 13).

Both novels follow the protagonist on a liberatory journey of self-reclamation and love. However, this paramount "ritualized journey" to freedom in *Their Eyes* and *Color Purple* is not visible to viewpoints that do not investigate an experience both racialized and gendered. Richard Wright dismissed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in a 1937 review as thematically empty, writing that "the sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought" (Wright 17). Yet themes and messages revolving around race, love, abuse, gender, and freedom are abundant in Hurston's folklore-informed novel, as with Walker's. Feminist perspectives, then, are necessary to understanding the novel. Hurston's messages are rendered invisible in the absence of sensitivity to the unique perspective of black and female experiences. Indeed, valuing the point of view of African American women elucidates in Hurston's and Walker's novels the theme of deliberate reclamation of self-liberation and self-love. Yet to Richard Wright, another genius creative writer concerned with liberation, this theme was apparently invisible.

Privileging black women's perspectives continues to be a radical practice in literary studies, even when identity politics are considered. For instance, Daniel Taylor's criticism of *The Color Purple* notes that the protagonist's "attractiveness as a character depends on her remaining for the reader a rounded human being, not a coatrack on which to hang a feminist ideology" (Taylor 109). Round characters are indisputably preferable to "coat racks." However, this mildly backhanded praise imagines feminist ideology as the progenitor of the experiences Walker represents in *The Color Purple*. His criticism risks obscuring the truth of those experiences by envisioning the ideology as a threat to the artistry. Of course, this is not to say that Walker and Hurston, or any feminist writer, is infallible. Cheryl Wall makes a valid critique

in “Writing Beyond the Blues” that *The Color Purple* has a “degree of sentimentality that threatens to undermine the utopian vision” of the novel (Wall 161). Also, bell hooks criticizes the invisibility of homophobia in the novel, describing Celie and Shug’s liberating lesbian love as “a fantasy of change without effort” (hooks 286).

In both Wright’s and Taylor’s examples of criticism, the experiences of the characters and the liberating messages within these sister novels are mystified by a literary vision that does not fully appreciate the cultural standpoint of black women. The stories Hurston and Walker compose are informed by the unique perspectives of black womanhood. The “ritualized journeys,” “articulate voices,” and “symbolic spaces” named by Washington cannot be analyzed when they are not fully seen. Mary Helen Washington writes, “both inside and outside the literary text, black women have been ignored, trivialized, subordinated to men and effectively rendered invisible” (Washington 92). This reality is apparent for the black women character in *Their Eyes* and *Color Purple*. Evaluating such representation with criteria designed within dominant perspectives necessarily perpetuates that invisibility and subordination. Audre Lorde’s iconic statement asserting “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde 41) applies here. The literary lenses of white-dominated patriarchy will never elucidate the power of black women’s works to subvert that white patriarchy. Thus, a resistant critical lens that justly examines black women’s literature is a necessity, both to properly see the works and to affirm their power.

Barbara Smith pioneered the theory of black feminist literary criticism in her 1977 article, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.” She writes, “beginning with a primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics in Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women’s writings, she [the critic] would also work from the assumption that

Black women writers constitute an identifiable literary tradition” (Smith 137). While keeping identity politics in mind, however, Deborah E. McDowell adds in “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism,” that “the Black feminist critic must not ignore the importance of rigorous textual analysis” (171). Therefore, black feminist criticism merges the social justice goals of feminism with the analytical goals of literary criticism. Ultimately, “because it is a cultural and political enterprise, feminist critics, in the main, believe that their criticism can effect social change” (McDowell 171). McDowell expresses doubt in this belief, citing the seemingly irreconcilable gap between activism and academia that has long divided feminists. However, Audre Lorde affirms the importance of literature, writing, “for women... poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence... Poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde 37). Certainly criticism that values the way women “give name to the nameless” has the potential to validate and amplify those women’s voices.

The focus on black women’s bodies is important for these texts as well as in the context of feminism. Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson note that “the relationship between literature and the body has been a central concern of feminist literary theory since feminism rose to academic prominence in the 1970s-1980s” (5). Furthermore, Daniel Ross outlines the importance of feminist reclamations of bodies in “Celie in the Looking Glass: The Desire for Selfhood in *The Color Purple*.”

One of the primary projects of modern feminism has been to restore women’s bodies. Because the female body is the most exploited target of male aggression, women have learned to hate or even fear their bodies... To confront the body is to confront not only an individual’s abuse but also the abuse of women’s bodies throughout history; as the external symbol of women’s enslavement, this abuse

represents for women a reminder of her degradation and her consignment to an inferior status” (60).

Bodies are important as the scene of black women’s oppression. Yet, as Hurston and Walker show with their protagonists, bodies can also be reclaimed. Black feminist criticism can reveal and justify the way in which Hurston and Walker reveal black women’s liberatory self-reclamations of their bodies.

### **The Intertextual Motif of Trees**

The intertextual motif of symbolic trees in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* illustrates the resilient life of black women by symbolizing black women’s bodies and bodily identities. In each novel, the lives of the black women protagonists are not only resilient but resistant, enduring in the face of constant oppression and abuse. The tree motif in Hurston’s novel connects black identity and feminine sexuality in a unifying image of life, especially through its link with the protagonist’s body. Janie, the protagonist of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, begins the narrative of her experiences with a vision of a tree: “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (Hurston 8). The tree, from the very start, is a signifier of life. Its image helps Janie conceptualize her experiences, the magnitude of which is apparent in the figurative language, “dawn and doom was in the branches.” Dawn connotes birth and beginnings, in contrast to doom, which suggests inevitable endings. Therefore, this tree encompasses both birth and death and everything between, the entirety of a life. But this dawn and doom may not simply be Janie’s birth and death. Rather, the ability of the tree to



encompass dawn and doom in its branches hints at a larger network of experience both sexual and emotional. This image establishes a larger motif of trees throughout the novel which connect Janie's black identity, physical body, and resilient life.

Janie's grandmother, Nanny, evokes a tree image in the beginning of her own narrative. Hers is a slave narrative, telling of her rape, abuse, and escape from slavery. Patricia Hill Collins points out that "the vast majority of African American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves in a situation of oppression" (4). Nanny's use of trees describes resilience in the face of such oppression. She tells Janie, "You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots" (Hurston 16). Here, the fragmented tree is a metaphor for the people of the African diaspora. Roots take on the figurative meaning of the place of origin, Africa. As the "branches" without the roots to fix them in that place, people of the African diaspora are mobile, disconnected, even vulnerable. However, consistent with the symbolism of trees as life, Nanny's narrative evokes resilient survival in her articulation of diasporic experience.

Branches without roots typically die. However, consistent with the symbolism of trees as life, Nanny's narrative evokes resilient survival. When she explains how she protected her baby during her escape from slavery, Nanny portrays trees as a survival mechanism. She recalls, "Ah wrapped Leafy up in moss and fixed her good in a tree and picked my way down to the landin'" (Hurston 18). The tree is life-preserving for the baby. Moreover, Nanny names her daughter Leafy. Such a name implies the growth of new leaves, revealing not only survival but flourishing, regenerative, and irrepressible life. The "branches without roots" do not perish in severance. Nor do they merely survive, but they reproduce and grow. The tree motif in Nanny's narrative reveals the resilience of African American existence by connecting her

survival and continuation with tree imagery. Importantly, Nanny's narrative launches a connection between trees and black bodies, the place of Janie's resilient and resistant life.

Hurston infuses the image of the tree with defiant life throughout the novel as Janie links trees with her own sexual identity. In the symbolic scene of sixteen-year-old Janie's sexual awakening, she lies under a pear tree and experiences her sexuality with vivid joy. This pear tree becomes integral to Janie's identity, especially in terms of her bodily and sexual selfhood. As Alice Fannin points out, "pear trees and other fruit-bearing trees symbolize the sexuality/fertility of women, and also... trees in general symbolize the life force itself" (Fannin 47). Janie identifies with the tree's life force as a sexual being. These meanings of the tree, its sexuality and life force, become integral to Janie's identity. The scene Janie recalls as the moment "her conscious life had commenced" (Hurston 10) occurs in the context of vernal rebirth and awakenings of nature. These figurative spring awakening parallel Janie's experience, conveying her blooming into sexual being through the erotic imagery of the pear tree.

Janie is fascinated with the pear tree's transformation "from barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom" (Hurston 10). The transformation from "barren" brown stems suggests the innocent infertility of childhood in contrast with the "virginity of bloom." The diction, "virginity," on the other hand, connotes the new, viable sexuality of young womanhood. Thus, the tree represents Janie's own puberty. Hurston even links vernal blossoming with pubescent blossoming by describing Janie, "she had glossy leaves and bursting buds" (Hurston 11). Janie's body acquires figurative tree attributes to illustrate her blossoming sexuality. Furthermore, Janie yearns specifically to embody the blossoming tree, thinking, "Oh, to be a pear tree – any tree in bloom!" (Hurston 11). Janie not only identifies with the tree, but strives to embody its bloom. Hurston illustrates sexuality

through the physical imagery of the pear tree, creating a corporeal connection between Janie and the tree.

Moreover, this sexual scene blurs the boundaries between Janie's body and the tree. In particular, the poetic moment of orgasm depicts Janie's body and the pear tree as inseparable. The role of the tree's imagery as sexual allegory is clear as Janie watches "a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom" (Hurston 11). The symbolic connection between flowers and vulvae, between pollination and fertility, illustrate Janie's acute sexual awareness. She perceives in this plant's reproductive process the penetration of sex. The feminine physicality of sex is conveyed in the diction choice of "sanctum." Sanctum implies a place of inner privacy, connecting the pear blossom image with vaginas. Hurston describes the tree in the terms of a woman's body after describing a woman's body in terms of a tree.

Janie's observations convey her own sexual climax through the symbolism of the tree's orgasm. She sees the "ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight" (Hurston 11). The tree enacts the experience of an orgasm – its encompassing ecstatic shiver is the personification of sexual peaking. Furthermore, "creaming in every blossom," which reveals that the tree has figuratively come. Yet Janie is the one who has experienced an orgasm; watching the pear tree, she "felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid" (Hurston 11). This physical sensation and her subsequent exhaustion imply that although the tree enacts the orgasm, Janie feels it. As Janie lies under the tree in a post-coital bliss, her body and the apparent sexual pleasure of the tree are merged into one experience. Therefore, sexuality links Janie's corporeal being with the tree.

The pear tree resurfaces later in the novel when Janie meets Tea Cake, the man with whom she has a loving and comparatively egalitarian relationship after two violently patriarchal

marriages. Janie imagines that Tea Cake “looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring” (Hurston 106). He seems to have stepped out of a masturbatory fantasy and thus he conjures in Janie a sexual desire which reaffirms her sense of life. Janie’s fantasy is conveyed in the metaphor from the scene of her sexual awakening, one which she put away during her abusive marriages which “took the bloom off things.” Her desire for Tea Cake echoes the erotic imagery of the pear tree. Therefore, Janie continues to define herself as a blossoming being even after many years and two abusive marriages. Usually a blossom connotes newness and youth, even “snowy virginity.” Janie’s self-identification with blossom imagery defies conventional notions which conceptualize female sexuality as a youth-confined phenomenon. The image of the tree becomes a signifier not only of the resilience of African American life but of Janie’s sexuality itself, resilient in her own body. More importantly, identifying with the tree reveals that Janie continues to flourish, like the leaves on the rootless branches in Nanny’s narrative.

Janie continues to embody the pear tree even beyond the specific moment of her sexual awakening. While awaiting her arranged marriage to Logan Killicks, “Janie asked inside of herself and out. She went back and forth to the pear tree continuously wondering and thinking” (Hurston 11). The literal back-and-forth movement to the tree parallels Janie’s internal “back-and-forth” motion as she asks “inside of herself and out,” a phrase that figuratively implies cognitive and literally implies sexual self-searching. In these mirrored motions, Janie’s consultations with the pear tree imply are a physicalization of her consultations with herself. Beyond its corporeal symbolism, the tree has now become an integral part of Janie’s identity as an autonomous, thinking being.

The pear tree resurfaces later in the novel when Janie meets Tea Cake, the man with whom she has a loving and comparatively egalitarian relationship after two violently patriarchal marriages. Janie imagines that Tea Cake “looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring” (Hurstun 106). He seems to have stepped out of a masturbatory fantasy and thus he conjures in Janie a sexual desire which reaffirms her sense of life. This is evident because Janie’s fantasy is conveyed in the metaphor from the scene of her sexual awakening, one which she put away during her abusive marriages which “took the bloom off things.” Her desire for Tea Cake echoes the erotic imagery of the pear tree. Therefore, Janie continues to define herself as a blossoming being even after many years and two abusive marriages. Usually a blossom connotes newness and youth, even “snowy virginity.” Janie’s self-identification with blossom imagery defies conventional notions which conceptualize female sexuality as a youth-confined phenomenon. The image of the tree becomes a signifier not only of the resilience of African American life but of Janie’s sexuality itself, resilient in her own body. Identifying with the tree reveals that Janie continues to flourish and bloom like the leaves on the rootless branches in Nanny’s narrative.

The motif of trees in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* echoes that of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Walker links trees poetically with the protagonist’s body. Reading Walker’s motif of trees in the light of Hurston’s illuminates their significance as symbolic images of corporeal black womanhood. Like Janie, Celie, identifies with trees and draws connections between trees and her body. Celie initially compares her body to trees as a survival tactic to conjure strength. However, the connection also becomes a mode of self-definition as it allows her to differentiate her body and her selfhood from others in an environment in which her individuality is neither valued nor validated.

Celie first evokes her identification with trees when she is being abused. She records in her epistolary narrative, “He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them... It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree” (Walker 22). Celie not only imagines but defines herself as a tree, seeking physical fortitude in her body. Janie, too, used trees as an imaginative escape from an abusive marriage, when “one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about... prostrating herself before [her husband], while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair” (Hurston 77). These modes of imaginative escapism are different, but Janie and Celie both use the image of a tree to subvert the patriarchal power exerted as abuse upon their bodies.

Although Celie summons a connection with trees in order not to cry, she is not attempting to emulate an inanimate object. Emma Waters-Dawson writes that Celie “goes through a mock death [when] she becomes a fearful tree” (79). However, this tree is a survival tactic and an affirmation of life. Celie’s environment of objectification is clear when her sister-in-law points out that Celie needs new clothes. In response, Celie’s husband looks at her “like he looking at the earth. It need somethin? his eyes say” (Walker 20). The simile exemplifies the objectification in her husband’s gaze. He sees not a living thing – not even a tree – but ground and dirt. While earth could suggest fertility as a potential place to grow things, Celie is infertile after experiencing sexual violence. The earth which her husband’s eyes reflects, therefore, suggests barrenness and inanimateness. It is the same kind of “earth” which Hurston’s Janie channels when she when Janie “got so she received all things with the stolidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference” (Hurston 78). That earth produces nothing, merely absorbs. It does not signify life or survival.

Therefore, envisioning herself as a tree (rather than earth) allows Celie to continue to see herself as a living being. Not only does her identification with trees facilitate her sense of survival and life, but also of selfhood in terms of individuality. This is visible when Celie comforts her stepson Harpo. Celie, who has been denied relationships with her own children, performs intimacy physically in this forced mammy role. However, she reveals that “patting Harpo on the back not even like patting a dog. It more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe” (Walker 29). This simile illustrates Harpo as furniture, whereas Celie qualifies the tree as “living.” By comparing Harpo to an inanimate wooden object, she solidifies her own self-definition as a tree, as alive, as non-object. Thus, Celie affirms her own status as a living being using the image of a tree.

Furthermore, Hurston employs personification of trees when Celie’s husband brings Shug Avery, a down and out blues singer, home. When the ailing Shug steps out of the wagon, Celie observes, “she look so stylish it like the trees all round the house draw themselves up tall for a better look” (Walker 45). Celie personifies the trees in a manner that mirrors her own reaction. “Drawing themselves up” suggests that the trees are trying to physically see, but also that they attempt to match Shug’s impressiveness in stature and body language. Celie shares this reaction, trying to alter her bodily appearance upon Shug’s arrival. When she sees the wagon coming, she writes, “the first thing I try to do is change my dress” (Walker 45). She is “drawing herself up” in her own way. Again, Celie’s body and the trees unite through figurative language, defiantly alive.

The link between Celie’s body and trees also foreshadows Celie’s physical intimacy in her liberating relationship with Shug Avery. Celie is fascinated by the name Shug Avery from the first time she hears it. When she inquires about her, Celie’s stepmother gives her a photo of

Shug, “the first one of a real person I ever seen” (Walker 6). Holding this photograph is the first physical interaction Celie has with Shug Avery, a foreshadowing of future touch. Shug’s image so captivates Celie that “all night long I stare at it... I dream of Shug Avery” (Walker 6). The physical connection between Celie and the photograph and the latent eroticism in her gaze hint at her reclamation of bodily autonomy through her sexual relationship with Shug. The foreshadowing is solidified by the physical link of this bodily connection with trees.

Shug’s image resurfaces symbolically in the form of advertising flyers. She comes to perform nearby, and “the trees tween the turn off to our road and the store is lit up with them” (Walker 24). This image echoes Celie’s possession of the photograph, as the trees, which embody a symbolic connection with Celie’s body. Additionally, there is double meaning in the phrase “lit up.” Initially, it conveys the image of the flyers’ brightness and connotes the coming excitement. It also personifies the trees in a way that Celie can empathize with. Celie herself is “lit up” with anticipation and delight at the prospect of seeing Shug. In the context of Celie’s identification with trees, the image of Shug’s flyers on the trees recalls Celie’s possession of Shug’s photograph. More significantly, though, the physical connection of those trees with Shug’s forecasted presence foreshadows the physical connection between Celie and Shug. In this way, the tree motif in Walker’s novel reflects the tree motif in *Their Eyes* by evoking the erotic. Eventually, Celie begins to embody the pear tree with which Janie identifies, that symbol of resilient life. The motif of symbolic trees establishes the bodies of Celie and Janie as living, autonomous, resistant entities.



## Creativity through Orality

In “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” Alice Walker poses the question, “How was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write?” (Walker 234). The deliberate silencing of black women’s voices in traditional artistic outlets necessitated alternate avenues of creativity, in order to “keep alive” their creativity. In *Their Eyes* and *Color Purple*, creativity is imperative to self-liberation as an affirmation of autonomy through self-expression. Valerie Babb reveals the importance of words in both novels, as “the ability to find and use [words] to create a language of self-definition symbolically indicates the degree of a character’s self-knowledge and self-love” (Babb 84). Beyond words, acts of orality utilize voice through the bodily act of speaking or singing. The protagonists in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* utilize their bodies in by vocalizing creatively experience. These acts of creative orality subvert impositions of silence, revealing the reclamation of the body.

Hurston frames Janie’s story as Janie’s own vocal narrative, an act of speech. The subversive nature of her speech is apparent in contrast to imposed silence, which parallels restrictions of her bodily expressions of sexuality. Janie’s husbands, especially Joe Starks, use their voices to subdue her vocal and sexual self-expression, linking orality and corporeality. Firstly, Joe Starks silences Janie figuratively by limiting her bodily expression. Shortly after Janie arrives in Eatonville, a man named Hicks feels snubbed by Janie’s lack of receptiveness to his advances. Defensively, he surmises, “‘Tain’t nothin’ to her ’ceptin’ dat long hair” (Hurston 38). Janie’s hair becomes an object of attraction under the male gaze. Jealous of other men observing and even covertly touching Janie’s hair, Joe “ordered Janie to tie up her hair around

the store” (Hurstun 55). In effect, Janie hides away an image of youth and sexuality. Although the sexualization of Janie’s hair is manmade and potentially objectifying, Joe denies Janie’s bodily autonomy by demanding she hide it under a head rag.

This bodily control parallels how Joe silences Janie. In “I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands,” Mary Helen Washington describes *Their Eyes* as “a novel which represents women’s exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech” (Washington 98). Joe deliberately denies Janie this power when he intercepts an invitation for Janie to make a speech, saying, “mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’”(Hurstun 43). In doing so, Joe considers neither Janie’s true abilities nor her perspectives, assuring that she fulfills the role of traditional femininity being seen and not heard. He dehumanizes her by denying her a perspective or a voice, and seeking to render her inanimate by silencing her. Janie recalls that this moment “took the bloom off things” (Hurstun 43), meaning that the sense of vivacious sexuality Janie identified with in the pear tree wilts. Thus, Joe’s usurpation of Janie’s bodily autonomy and voice diminishes her own bodily liveliness. The silencing of her body and voice bruises Janie’s experience of her erotic self, and thus her bodily self.

The connection between speech and sexuality increases as Joe’s escalating abuse of Janie leads to her sexual and vocal suppression. Janie represents the connection between speech and sexuality when “she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush... she wasn’t petal-open anymore with him. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man” (Hurstun 71-72). Janie’s enforced vocal silence coincides with her bodily and sexual inhibition. Voice manifests as a bodily act as much as sex. Her vocal orifice closes in jaw-clenching as “she pressed her teeth together.” Simultaneously, her sexual orifices or “blossomy openings” close in

self-defense. Her body closes itself orally/vocally and vaginally/sexually, although Janie never ceases to identify with the living pear tree.

Joe's denial of Janie's voice is a restriction of her creativity. The townsfolk recognize Janie's creative voice, commenting, "Yo' wife is uh born orator, Starks" (Hurston 58). Still, Joe bars Janie from the masculine space of the porch where "mule talk" or the entertaining exchange of folk stories take place; "sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge" (Hurston 63). Janie cannot participate in creative storytelling. She still cultivates creative thought, but her stories have no outlet in voice. Moreover, Joe defines Janie in relation to himself, telling her, "Ah aimed tuh be uh big voice. You oughta be glad, 'cause dat makes uh big woman outta you" (Hurston 46). This subordinating definition of Janie as contingent to her husband's voice subordinates her in a patriarchal hierarchy which erases her autonomy and her own creative voice.

Janie reclaims her voice and orality and body jointly. When her husband begins targeting her body with verbal insults, she stands up for herself and criticizes his overpowering voice. She tells him, "[you] put out a lot of brag, but'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice" (Hurston 79). By revealing that Joe's voice, although big, is *only* voice, Janie finds her own vocal power. She challenges the voice which has suppressed hers for so long, she moves toward reclaiming her own, creating an avenue oral self-reclamation. Shortly thereafter, Janie's husband dies, and she "tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair" (Hurston 87), and later "burnt up every one of her headrags and went about the house next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist" (Hurston 89). She frees her hair and reclaims her bodily presentation as a sexual being. Together, she divests herself of the restraints upon her

literal body in the form of suppressed sexuality, as well as her figurative body in the restriction of her oral creativity.

No longer suppressed by her patriarchal husband, Janie begins to find outlet for her voice, using speech as an act of creation. She participates in the culture of oral tradition and storytelling until “she got so she could tell big stories herself” (Hurston 134). She employs narrative in the most self-defining moment, however, when she is on trial for killing her husband, Tea Cake, in self-defense. The black community is “all against her” (Hurston 185), and Janie’s voice, solitary and unsupported, must testify in her own defense. Janie’s concern is not with punishment, however. She “was in the courthouse fighting something and it wasn’t death. It was worse than that. It was lying thoughts” (Hurston 187). Although her voice is summoned by a white male authority figure in the courtroom, Janie uses her voice in her own fashion, for her own purposes. She *creates* a weapon against “lying thoughts” with her spoken words. Her testimony does not aim to prove her innocence, but to create her personal truth. By generating an oral narrative, Janie secures her freedom within the justice system, using creative orality to liberate herself.

Most significantly, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is structured around Janie’s narrative to her best friend, Phoeby. The oral creativity of the narrative supports a connection between Janie and Phoeby which Hurston conveys in bodily imagery. Specifically, Hurston presents physical imagery of oral activity which links speech with eating. When Phoeby sees Janie coming home after her long absence, she leaves the gossipers on the porch, saying, “You have to ‘scuse me, ‘cause Ah’m bound to go take her some supper” (Hurston 3). In doing so, Phoeby reveals her intent to nourish Janie’s body and implicitly nourish her orality by presenting herself as a listener. This act of feeding contrasts the predatory consumption imagery surrounding the

gossip of the porch. For instance, Janie tells Phoeby, “Ah reckon they got *me* up in they mouth now” (Hurston 5), assuming that the gossipers are talking about her. The image conveys speech as an oral activity, connoting eating. The cannibalistic connotations of this kind of eating show the gossipers trying to consume Janie by having her in their mouths.

Janie confirms the image of speech as eating when she replies, “so long as they got a name to gnaw on they don’t care whose it is” (Hurston 6). Gnawing, in particular, is a word that evokes eating not to nourish but to occupy the mouth. Such consumption contrasts Janie’s consumption of her “mulatto rice,” (Hurston 4). Although “mulatto” is usually used as a human descriptor for a biracial person, Phoeby brought the rice specifically to feed Janie. It is a nourishing and consensual consumption, connecting orality and body through the metaphor of speech as eating. Phoeby quells Janie’s physical hunger with the rice, but she brings her own hunger with her, too. She wants to hear Janie’s narrative. She facilitates Janie’s oral creativity: “Phoeby’s hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story” (Hurston 10). Thus, her hunger is motivating and supportive, rather than predatory. Although the narratives of the gossipers on the porch are likely creative, Janie creates her own oral narrative not to “gnaw” but to convey her truth to her best friend. Dawson suggests that “Perhaps, with her vivid imagination, in another place or time, Janie might have become an artist or writer” (Dawson 71). But Janie *is* an artist. Although she does not record her words in writing, she exhibits artistry through oral tradition. Her narrative is a physical act of creative orality, and exerts autonomy through this artistry.

Like Janie, Celie is silenced in violent, patriarchal settings. Celie’s body and voice are denied autonomy as she becomes passive and quiet for her own survival. Alice Fannin observes that “Celie seems to be an almost deliberate delineation of the mule of the world” (Fannin 52). Indeed, Walker draws a parallel to livestock in the treatment of Celie. Celie’s stepfather, Pa,

who rapes her repeatedly, trades Celie into marriage. He uses Celie's passivity as a selling point which illustrates her as a silent, sexual object, telling Albert, "You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed or clothe it" (Walker 8). Pa situates Celie's silence as passivity in a sexual context by referencing childcare. Thus her body, as the sexually passive object, is linked with her silence. He adds, "And another thing – she tell lies" (Walker 8). By saying that Celie tells lies, Pa defines Celie's voice as inherently dishonest before she has a chance to speak. He not only undermines but invalidates her voice. Logic suggests that Pa preemptively assures that Albert will not believe Celie if she discloses that Pa raped her. In this situation, Pa sells Celie's body into marriage and defines and undermines her voice.

*The Color Purple* brims with creative acts of orality, especially in Shug Avery's singing and Celie's narrative voice. Celie speaks in writing and through speech. Mary Ann Wilson suggests that Celie is "galvanized into being by the creative act of writing" (Wilson 60). Creative oral art, however, allows Celie to inhabit her body by speaking her experiences, inspired by a woman who sings her experiences. Shug Avery comes into the novel as the embodiment of creative orality as a blues woman. Her use of the blues and their eroticism is essential for Celie's reclamation of her voice. Shug's art is vocal in nature, producing song through voice. It is also physical, not only in its use of the body as an instrument, but in its inherent eroticism. Angela Y. Davis observes, "one of the most obvious ways blues lyrics deviated from that era's established popular music culture was their provocative and pervasive sexual – including homosexual – imagery" (Davis 3). Eventually, Shug Avery becomes Celie's erotic instructor and assists her in claiming bodily autonomy through autoeroticism. First, Celie helps Shug reclaim her own voice from sickness and defamation, and then Shug creates a safe space for Celie to harness her own creative voice.

Shug Avery, nearly dying of a sexually transmitted infection and ostracized for her sexually deviant lifestyle, comes into Celie's care when Celie's husband brings her home. From the start, their connection is bodily through the acts of caretaking. However, their bodily connection cultivates vocal creativity in Shug. When Celie is combing Shug's hair, Shug begins to compose a song; "she hum a little more. Something came to me, she say. Something made up. Something you help scratch out my head" (Walker 53). Celie's touch, her interaction with Shug's hair, is erotic although not overtly sexual. This touch inspires Shug's creative orality, not in words but in the form of music. The little tune becomes a full-blown song, which Shug performs at Harpo's juke joint, introducing it as "Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched it out my head when I was sick" (Walker 73). An oral artistic creation germinates in the slightest of erotic connections.

Walker connects Shug's singing to the creativity of quilt-making. Celie observes, "she sew long crooked stitches, remind me of that little crooked tune she sing" (Walker 57). The stylistic crookedness connotes the deviance of Shug's blues. Quilt-making is a pervasive motif in Walker's works, signifying an important outlet for black women's creativity. In "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Walker explores the alternative avenues black women's creativity takes in a society that denies them outlets through other arts. She describes a quilt hanging in the Smithsonian Institution, "though it follows no known pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling" (Walker 239). Walker recognizes the anonymous black woman who made it as "an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use" (Walker 239). Celie embodies a similar position, using a quilt pattern called "Sister's Choice" (Walker 58) to signify her

autonomous creativity. The quilt-making motif emphasizes the autonomous creativity in voice through the link in Shug's stylistic singing and stylistic, if unpracticed, sewing. Priscilla Leder draws the connection, "Quilt-making, self-fashioning, and the construction of the woman's text are all parts of the same process, not only in the life of Alice Walker, but also within the text of *The Color Purple*" (Leder 164). Conceptualizing the construction of a woman's text as an *oral* text, these processes of self-making are all subversive creative acts.

The erotic connection between Celie and Shug allows Celie to find her own voice which has long been suppressed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., explains the connection between the protagonists' narratives in *Color Purple* and *Their Eyes*, "Whereas Janie's sign of self-awareness is represented as her ability to tell Phoeby her own version of events, Walker matches this gesture by having Celie... write her own texts" and interact with her sister's written epistolary narrative (Gates 252). Although Celie does write herself into being, to paraphrase Wilson, her own oral creativity awakens in the novel. Shug Avery facilitates Celie's creative orality just as Phoeby's hunger assisted Janie's narrative. The space of her constant marital rape, Celie's bed, is the space of her narrative, when "Shug ast me could she sleep with me. She cold in her and Grady bed all alone" (111). The erotic space of the bed prompts the subject of sex, while the intimate space of her relationship with Shug allows Celie to find her voice as she recounts her experience as a survivor of rape. Celie says, "it hurt me, you know... I was just going on fourteen" (Walker 111). She goes, on, "I cry and cry and cry. Seem like it all come back to me, laying there in Shug's arms. How it hurt and how much I was surprise" (Walker 112). Although Celie has recorded her trauma in her written narrative, she exerts ownership of her body by speaking her narrative and breaking free from her stepfather's invalidation of her bodily and vocal autonomy. In articulating her experience for the first time, Celie uses her voice to create a



narrative. Her body, which has been used and dominated, becomes a vessel for creative oral testimony. She reclaims her physical self, exerting ownership through her creative orality.

### **Reclaiming Bodily Autonomy through Queer Erotic Love**

Black women's bodies are historically the sites of their oppression. Carol E. Henderson affirms the importance of bodies: "Basic to identity, self-image, and being in the physical world is the body, a source of conflict for black women whose ownership of its beauty, pleasure, and potential has been complicated where it has not been denied" (Henderson 13). Moreover, Patricia Hill Collins writes, "Patterns of exploiting Black women's sexuality have taken many forms. In some cases, the entire body itself became commodified" (Collins 133). Through queer eroticism, Janie and Celie reclaim that bodily ownership. In Hurston's and Walker's novels, the black women protagonists' self-liberation becomes deliberately corporeal through erotic intimacy with another black woman. This erotic love signifies a physical emancipation through the reclamation of sexual autonomy. This form of bodily reclamation subverts dominant ideologies that usurp or complicate black women's self-ownership through objectification or commodification.

The narrative frame of Janie's story occurs within her close friendship with Phoeby. Hurston conveys their intimacy through queer eroticism. Their friendship evokes the erotic in the figurative physical intimacy surrounding it. When Phoeby first follows Janie home, she "didn't go in by the front gate and down the plain walk to the door. She walked round the fence corner and went in the intimate gate" (Hurston 4). Phoeby navigates the setting of Janie's home in a manner that parallels her relationship with Janie, eschewing the formal and distanced of

route of the front gate. “Front” connotes not only the literal façade or public face of the house itself, but the figurate façade or projected outward image. Phoeby instead enters through the “intimate” gate, physicalizing the intimacy of her relationship with Janie.

Furthermore, Janie articulates their relationship in a metaphor that conjures an image of sexual intimacy. When Janie gives Phoeby permission to relay her story to the gossipers on the porch, she says, “Dat’s just de same as me ‘cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf” (Hurston 6). Figuratively, Janie expresses the unity of their voices in friendship through the metaphor of tongues. This unity of voice illustrates Janie’s in Phoeby to speak from Janie’s perspective, or in her voice. However, the literal image depicts kissing beyond the pecks of friendship. Rather, the image suggests passionate, sexual kissing. Again, this is not a literal image but a figurative one, the erotic present in what is a loving friendship. The presence of the queer erotic, however, illustrates a bodily reclamation in exertions of sexual autonomy.

More explicitly, Janie goes on to define the friendship in terms of kissing itself. She articulates the standpoint of intimacy from which she speaks when she says, “Phoeby, we been kissin’-friends for twenty years” (Hurston 7). This phrase deviates from the conventional term, “bosom-friends,” replacing the figurative emotional location of the heart (bosom) with “kissing.” Kissing is an action with the specific bodily location of the mouth, which is a sexual orifice as well as the bodily location of voice. By defining their relationship in this oral act, Janie challenges conventional relationship boundaries which restrict sexual intimacy to heterosexual romantic couples, especially those legitimated by monogamous marriage. The phrase “kissin’-friends” illuminates the simultaneous value of both communication and speech and bodily love in her relationship with Phoeby. Audre Lorde writes of the subversive power of black women’s close relationships, “of course, women so empowered are dangerous. So we are taught to

separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex” (Lorde 54). Janie and Phoeby’s friendship is not literal sex, but it is a vital area of their lives. The reclamation of the erotic, as Lorde describes, empowers them in their friendship.

The bodily love and queer sexuality in Janie and Phoeby’s relationship is not only defined by Janie’s words. Phoeby embodies the queer eroticism of their relationship in her physical response to Janie’s narrative. Janie begins her story by explaining that her lover is dead, at which point “Phoeby dilated all over with eagerness, ‘Tea Cake gone?’” (Hurston 7). Phoeby’s “dilation” initially conveys anticipation for Janie’s story. Her eyes, pupils, and mouth probably widen “with eagerness,” as do her ears, figuratively, opening to receive Janie’s story. However, Phoeby dilates “all over,” suggesting the sexual dilation of her vagina as well. In this physical response, Phoeby’s body becomes an integral part of the friendship, engaging with Janie’s physical act of speech through the erotic.

By utilizing their bodies in this queer friendship, Janie and Phoeby subvert hegemonic order. Patricia Hill Collins characterizes love between black women as challenging to hegemonic social order in *Black Feminist Thought*, writing, “loving relationships among Black women do pose a tremendous threat to systems of intersecting oppressions. How dare these women love one another in a context that deems black women as a collectivity so unloveable...?” (Collins 168). The love between Janie and Phoeby defies prevailing manifestations of femaleness in which the body is useful only in relation to the man who desires it. Janie and Phoeby use their bodies to define and sustain their own relationship, fostering a love that is queer both in the undertones of sexuality and in its potential to subvert dominant social hierarchies. In a culture where “to be heterosexual is considered normal” (Collins 129),

Janie and Phoeby demonstrate their subversive love through the queer eroticism of their figuratively physical friendship.

The liberating potential of Janie's queer relationship with Phoeby especially stands out in contrast to Janie's physical and vocal suppression by her husband, Joe Starks. Joe enacts the legacy of the commodification of black women's bodies outlined by Collins when he refers to Janie in terms that connect her to livestock. He insists that "she must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang" (Hurston 41). In this context, Janie exists in a space of socioeconomic privilege, but Joe clearly reminds her of her hierarchical place above the other women and yet animalized and therefore not fully human. Collins further writes that "controlling Black women's bodies has been especially important for capitalist class relations in the United States" (Collins 135). Here, rather than enforcing racial oppression by controlling a black woman's body, Joe seeks to climb into the middle class. Yet this means commodifying his wife's body as an asset, which appears in the comparison to livestock.

The simile connecting Janie to a bell cow implies that Janie may have some influence over the other women, since bell-cow is often a colloquial term for women leaders in social and political circles. However, Janie's power exists only so far as she is owned, as cattle would be, by the true leader, Mayor Joe Starks. Hurston exposes the link between chattel slavery and the continuing oppression black woman's body in this figurative language, which poetically echoes the "cattle" connotations of chattel slavery. By contrast, in the intimate context of her friendship with Phoeby, Janie and Phoeby's bodies subvert objectification and oppression. Although Phoeby's body demonstrates the physicalized erotic responses to Janie's narrative, Janie's creative orality is the guiding force of that erotic experience. Thus, both black women inhabit their bodies in physically autonomous ways within the erotic of their relationship.

In *The Color Purple*, constant abuse prevents Celie from enjoying her body and living as a full physical being. Alice Walker writes in “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” that black women in America, because of the abuse resulting from intersecting oppressions, “forced their minds to desert their bodies” (Walker 232). Certainly Celie did this when she imagined herself a tree, a survival tactic which left no room for developing erotic autonomy. Plagued by physical, sexual, and emotional violence, “Celie seems to be an almost deliberate delineation of the mule of the world,” writes Alice Fannin, quoting *Their Eyes*. However, through queer love with Shug Avery, Celie reclaims her bodily autonomy through sexual autonomy. Chery Wall observes that “Janie’s metaphor for her narration to her ‘kissin’-friend’ Phoeby... is literalized in the erotic relationship between Celie and Shug” (Wall 141). The implicit subversive erotic in Janie and Phoeby’s relationship becomes a literal sexuality between Celie and Shug. Celie’s queer sexual intimacy with Shug inspires Celie to achieve corporeal self-ownership through erotic love.

Celie’s body has been objectified and violated since adolescence. Wendy Wall describes the disenfranchisement of black women, writing that in *The Color Purple*, “a patriarchy maintains power by rewriting the female body into powerlessness” (Wall 261). Celie is raped by her stepfather, forced into marriage, and her husband exploits her body as an outlet for violent aggression as well as for labor. Walker even compares Celie’s experience to the bodily disenfranchisement of chattel slavery when Pa compares Celie to cattle, an object with etymological connotations of chattel slavery. As Pa trades Celie away in marriage, her new husband asks, “That cow still coming?” (Walker 11). This dowry, however, does not come. Instead, Pa replies simply, “Her cow” (Walker 11). Pa is not evoking Celie’s possession of the cow, but rather articulating her utter disenfranchisement by equating her with the cow.

Compared, like Janie, to livestock, she embodies the “mule of the world” as she is trafficked into marriage.

The love between Shug Avery and Celie manifests in a multitude of ways, but through erotic intimacy, Celie learns to love her body and claim self-ownership fully. Ellen E. Barker recognizes that “Because Celie has been the subject of repeated rapes and beatings, she has no desire to get to know her body” (Barker 60). Celie confesses what sex with her husband is like to Shug, saying, “I pretend I ain’t there. He never know the difference” (Walker 77). Celie removes herself from her body, as she did by pretending she is a tree when she is beaten. Unlike during her beatings, however, she does not imagine herself as a living being. She doesn’t imagine herself elsewhere, she imagines she “ain’t there,” rendering her body as negative space. Shug recognizes the dehumanizing abuse in Celie’s sex life, as she says, “You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you,” and Celie responds, “That what it feel like” (Walker 77). She articulates her total erotic disconnect from her body and her lack of pleasure in the face of abuse.

Shug Avery responds by becoming Celie’s erotic teacher, making Celie observe her own vulva. Visually interacting with her body leads Celie to erotic self-ownership. The erotic of Shug’s blues creativity becomes essential, for, as Maria Lauret points out, “as a blues singer Shug can teach Celie a lesson in sexual autonomy and desire” (Lauret 113). Shug tells Celie, “Here, take this mirror and go look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?” (Walker 77). When she sees her vulva for the first time, Celie observes, “inside look like a wet rose” (Walker 78). This simile reflects Hurston’s use of floral imagery surrounding Janie’s sexual awakening, during which “the rose of the world was breathing out smell” (Hurston 10). The intertextual link between the vulvic images of the rose contextualizes Celie’s moment of looking at her vulva for the first time as a kind of sexual awakening. This image is echoed later

in the text, when Celie observes, “Shug a beautiful something, let me tell you... look like a big rose” (Walker 195), defining Shug’s beauty in floral terms of feminine sexuality. Celie’s incipient sexual awakening is a step toward erotic autonomy, and consequently corporeal self-ownership.

As a black woman who has been denied ownership of her own body, Celie’s discovery of her clitoris is subversive as a claim of self-possession. The clitoris carries the symbolic meaning of autonomous eroticism because it need not be stimulated by heterosexual, penetrative intercourse. Its pleasure is neither dependent upon nor solely responsive to the type of sex associated with men, the type of sex that has been used only as violence against Celie. Thus the clitoris represents her body’s potential for pleasure outside of patriarchal domination. With men, Celie’s vulva is a space of shame and pain. It is a body part that she did not fully own in the face of repeated sexual violence. With Shug, on the other hand, Celie learns that her vulva can be a space of pleasure and that she owns it. When Celie first looks at her vulva in the mirror, she reacts by saying, “It mine” (Walker 78). She explicitly articulates ownership of her body, specifically the site of her body most violently exploited. Moreover, finding her clitoris, the only human organ with the sole purpose of bodily pleasure, allows Celie to locate a space of independent eroticism simultaneously masturbatory and lesbian in nature. This erotic moment takes place Celie and Shug, as Celie records, “I look at her and touch it with my finger” (Walker 78). Shug is present not only as instructor but as sexual partner, evoking sexual excitement in Celie. Shug’s presence teaches Celie that her body is capable of erotic pleasure.

Pleasure is a revolutionary feeling for Celie’s body. Her bodily experiences have been so painful and negative that erotic pleasure is new, affirming the wrongness of her abuse. Celie writes of the first time she sleeps with Shug, “It feel like heaven is what it feel like, not like

sleeping with Mr. \_\_\_\_ at all” (Walker 114). By comparing the pleasurable experience to the unpleasant experience with the dominating figure who abuses and uses her body, Celie illuminates the liberating implications of her queer sexuality with Shug. She realizes that she can feel bodily pleasure *free* of the presence of her husband. Cheryl Wall concludes that “under the protection of Shug’s love, Celie transforms herself from sexual object to sexual subject. Having attained autonomy in the sexual sphere, Celie is empowered to pursue it in other aspects of her life” (Wall 151). In bell hooks’s words, queer sexuality is for Celie a “catalyst for her resistance to male domination, for her coming to power” (hooks 285). Celie’s queer erotic experiences with Shug allow her to discover pleasure and recognize abuse. The queer eroticism of her sexual experiences instigates her reclamation of bodily autonomy by teaching her what that autonomy can feel like.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins calls for revolutionary love: “When Black women hold up new ‘mirrors’ to one another to enable us to see and love one another for who we really are, new possibilities for empowerment via deep love can emerge” (Collins 166). This mirror is a literal instrument in Walker’s work which allows Celie to see her body in new and empowering ways. In both novels, black women experience empowering, liberating love which facilitates their reclamation of bodily autonomy. Hurston and Walker illustrate this phenomenon by infusing the loves between black women with eroticism which affirms bodily autonomy in the face of oppression.



**Conclusion: Subversive Self-Ownership**

The interconnectedness of these novels is an instance of deep love. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., asserts that “Walker, in effect, has written a letter of love to her authority figure, Hurston” (Gates 294). Walker holds up a “new mirror” to Hurston by reflecting *Their Eyes* in *The Color Purple*. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Color Purple* are stories of freedom through love, including self-love. Within each novel, the black female protagonist navigates an abusive patriarchy and emerges a self-liberated, self-validated woman. Their bodies, which are, as Daniel Ross writes, the “external symbol of women’s enslavement” become tools for their reclamation of freedom. Firstly, Janie and Celie establish their defiant life force in an oppressive culture which seeks to subdue them. Hurston and Walker reveal this by connecting Janie and Celie to the life force of symbolic trees. Then their creativity manifests in the physical act of orality, through spoken narrative. Their bodies become their instruments to articulate and create their truths. Finally, in the queer eroticism, tacit in *Their Eyes* and literal in *Color Purple*, the protagonists act out the reclamation of their bodies, reclaiming their bodily autonomy through sexuality and threatening social order with love between black women. By embodying their physical selves, the black female protagonists in Hurston and Walker’s novels claim a power which threatens to subvert centuries of subjugation that has been written onto their bodies.

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