



PERFORMING RESISTANCE: QUEER PERFORMATIVITY AND EMBODIED DEFIANCE IN AFRO-AMERICAN FICTION

Ayesha Jadoon
ayeshajadoon43@gmail.com

MS scholar, English Department, University of Wah, Wah Cantt,
Pakistan.

Dr. Asim
asim.karim@uow.edu.pk

Dean social sciences, University of Wah, Wah Cantt, Pakistan.

Abida Akram
abidamalik048@gmail.com

MS scholar, English Department, University of Wah, Wah Cantt,
Pakistan.

Abstract

The article explores how queer performativity is used as a resistance by Afro-American literature by making a comparative analysis between *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *The Prophets* by Robert Jones Jr. Although the current literature has thoroughly explored issues of race, gender, and historical trauma in these books, the less obvious, bodily manifestations of resistance in the form of queer relationality and performative identity have been understudied. Using the theory of performativity by Judith Butler and the insights of bell hooks about love as an ethical and transformative practice, this analysis redefines queer intimacy as not only a sign of sexual identity but as a process of resistance that is constant and dynamic and is reflected in everyday life. The discussion shows that identity in both novels is built up in terms of repetitions of behavior, emotional expression, and relational interaction as opposed to intrinsic or predetermined traits. Under oppressive regimes like patriarchy and slavery, these recurring performances are places where the dominant norms can be broken and renegotiated. In *The Color Purple*, the changing relationship between Celie and Shug Avery renegotiates the definitions of femininity, desire, and selfhood via emotional and bodily recognition. Likewise, the relationship between Samuel and Isaiah in *The Prophets* defies the fixation on strict enactments of masculinity and the dehumanizing logic of the plantation by prefiguring care, vulnerability, and cozy presence. The paper claims that queer performativity is a kind of embodied resistance that is not dependent on open rebellion but is executed through daily acts of intimacy, communication, and emotional sustainability. These practices establish new ways of being in oppressive systems, exposing the unsteadiness of socially shaped identities and providing room for new ways of self-identification. Placing the concept of queer relationality within the context of Black aesthetics, the present study emphasizes the importance of lived experience, emotional richness, and community bonding in maintaining the resistance. Finally, the article adds to the literature of Afro-American literature by showing that resistance is not restrained in any overt political action but rather permeates the performativity and relational actions of mundane life.

Keywords: *Afro-American Fiction, Black Aesthetics, Embodiment, Identity, Intimacy, Queer Performance, Resistance*

Corresponding Author: Ayesha Jadoon (MS scholar, English Department, University of Wah, Wah Cantt, Pakistan)

Email: ayeshajadoon43@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The Afro-American fiction has been long used as a critical location to look at the real lives of the Black people within the systems of racial violence, gender domination and social exclusion. Although the themes explored by the majority of scholarship in this discipline have concerned race, patriarchy, or historical trauma, little has been done in terms of the fine-grained, mundane processes by which resistance functions at the identity and relational life level. Specifically, little has been done to understand how queer intimacy and performative identity contributes to developing alternative forms of resistance. This article will fill this gap by discussing how queer performativity is employed as a source of resistance in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *The Prophets* by Robert Jones Jr. Both novels are placed in repressive socio-historical contexts; in the first novel, they are the oppression of the patriarchy and in the second one, the oppression of slavery. Such systems control not just physical life but emotional expression, gender roles, and the ways of intimacy that are accepted. In this kind of context, it is the identity that is tightly regulated by the social expectations in terms of the way one should act, speak and the way one should interact with another. But these are not the expectations to which the characters of these texts are limited. Rather, they bargain identity by engaging in practices that are implicitly disruptive especially queer relations that break conventional patterns of gender and sexuality.

This paper posits that queer performativity in these novels is a form of resistance embedded in the daily experience and not the avenue of political rebellion. Based on theoretical concepts by Judith Butler and bell hooks, the discussion shows that identity is not natural or fixed but a process that is created through repetitive acts, behaviors, and of course through relational practices. Such repetitive performances produce the illusion of fixed identity, but it is also riddled with the possibility of breakdown. When people perform actions, which deviate off socially set standards, they reveal the artificiality of identity and open space to other possibilities. It is in this context that queer intimacy is not a manifestation of sexual difference. It becomes a form of performance, which opposes the ideological principles of exploitative structures. Queer relationships are spaces in both *The Color Purple* and *The Prophets*, as characters redefine their identities and their roles in the world. These relationships are not independent of structures of domination but occur in them, showing that even in the conditions of restraint, resistance can take place. The

dynamic between Celie and Shug Avery in *The Color Purple* is a major change in the narrative of identity and power. At the beginning of the novel, Celie is in a very marginalized state, which was the result of the abuse, silence and internalized inferiority. The sense of self is greatly shaped by the oppressive forces around her that place her on the passive and subordinate. Nonetheless, her friendship with Shug brings about another form of relational existence—that of emotional bonding, equality of recognition and physical consciousness. In this relationship, Celie starts to engage in new types of behavior that go against the expectations of her behavior. Likewise, the relationship between Samuel and Isaiah is formed in the plantation, which is highly regulated in *The Prophets*. This environment is defined by surveillance, control and the systematic denial of individual autonomy. In this kind of a setting, same-sex forms of intimacy are especially menacing to the status quo, as they challenge the prevailing discourses of masculinity and social power. In spite of these limitations, Samuel and Isaiah foster a relationship based on tenderness, fragility, and being together. Their association forms a platform through which they can affirm their humanity and challenge the dehumanizing logic of slavery.

One of the primary insights in this analysis is that resistance can take place in subtle ways, without overt displays. Rather, it can be expressed through ongoing, subtle practices that alter identity and meaning. This analysis draws on Butler's notion of performativity. Butler suggests that gender and identity come about through "a stylized repetition of acts," and that they are not essential characteristics, but rather, products of performance. This enables the idea that changing these acts can challenge the norms that perpetuate oppression. In both texts, characters enact such shifts through their relationships, practices and desires. Celie's changing relationship with Shug, for instance, is a reperformance of femininity and of identity. Her growing willingness to speak, to express her desires, and to participate in alternative forms of intimacy reflect a re-enactment of identity. Likewise, Samuel and Isaiah's ongoing displays of care and vulnerability defy the narrow prescriptions of masculinity demanded by the plantation system. In doing so, they enact alternative identities that challenge dominant norms. And yet, bell hooks' work offers an important supplement by focusing on the importance of love, care and connection in the face of oppression. hooks suggests that systems of domination often depend on the isolation of individuals, making it difficult to form meaningful connections. By contrast, love and care can be understood as acts of resistance precisely because they reaffirm our connection with each other. In this context, queer relationships in both works can be seen as surviving strategies that defy the fragmentation imposed by systems of oppression.

The focus on relationships is especially relevant to the authors' understandings of resistance. Resistance is not an individual act but one that involves the formation of relationships that support alternative identities. These connections offer emotional reassurance and affirmation, allowing them to resist their categorisation. Resistance, then,

is an intersubjective process, realised through the interactions that constitute recognition. Moreover, this article places queer performativity in relation to the field of Black aesthetics, which is defined as a form of expression anchored in experience, emotion and survival. Black aesthetics, therefore, is not confined to the realm of art, but also to the ways in which people make meaning through their actions and interactions. The depiction of queer intimacy in the novels fits within this aesthetic framework by highlighting an experience that has often been overlooked. By emphasising these aspects, the article highlights the fact that queer performativity is a significant form of resistance that operates on several levels - bodily, relational and aesthetic. It contests the notion of resistance being overt or revolutionary, and emphasises the role of everyday practices in creating identity and enabling life in oppressive circumstances.

2. Literature Review

Afro-American literary studies has long focused on issues of race, gender, oppression and survival. Authors like Alice Walker and Robert Jones Jr. have built on this work by offering narratives that depict the lives of Afro-Americans in hierarchies of power. But while much has been written on racial identity, patriarchy and historical trauma in novels such as *The Color Purple* and *The Prophets*, less has been said about the significance of queer performativity and aesthetic practices as forms of everyday resistance. This review of literature examines existing scholarship on Black identity, gender and sexuality, queer theory and aesthetics in order to situate the current project within a contemporary scholarly framework. The first wave of scholarship on Afro-American fiction centred on the topic of racial oppression and representation. W. E. B. Du Bois' notion of "double consciousness" in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is still central to discussions of Black identity in terms of the interplay between self and other perceptions. Du Bois describes how African Americans must view themselves through the lens of a dominant white culture, creating a sense of dual identity. The concept has been applied to explore the ways characters in African American literature cope with oppression. This approach draws attention to the psychological effects of racism, but often emphasises internalised conflict rather than practices of resistance. Subsequent developments in Black feminist theory broadened the framework by addressing issues of race and gender. bell hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman* (1981) and *Black Looks* (1992), argues that black women face a specific form of oppression that is informed by race and gender. hooks challenges dominant representations of Black women that stereotype and tokenise them, and emphasises the importance of voice and self-definition. Her analysis is especially pertinent to *The Color Purple* in which Celie reclaims her voice and identity in a patriarchal framework. hooks also emphasises the role of love, care and community as acts of resistance. This approach highlights the importance of shifting focus from political revolution to relational practice, which is a key focus of the current study. Likewise,

Patricia Hill Collins' notion of "Black feminist thought" underscores the significance of experience for knowledge and identity. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Collins suggests that knowledge is created by Black women through their lived experiences, including through relationships, storytelling and interaction with their communities. This approach reinforces the connection between identity and everyday life. Collins also emphasises other forms of knowledge that challenge dominant discourse. Her analysis offers many insights into the topic of gender and race, but it does not address the phenomenon of queer identity as a performance, which is the focus of this research. The emergence of queer theory brought about new ways of thinking about identity as constructed and permeable. As part of this, Judith Butler's performativity theory is introduced in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler proposes that gender is not an essential or permanent trait but rather is constructed through repeated practices. Butler suggests that identity is something that is performed, rather than inherent. This has had a profound impact on the field of literature, helping us understand how characters enact and construct identity within social limitations. Butler's argument is especially valuable for exploring the ways in which queer relationships contest normative gender and sexuality. Within Afro-American literature, queer theory is used to examine the portrayal of non-normative identities and relationships. But such studies have tended to focus on visibility and identity categories, rather than performance. For instance, studies of *The Color Purple* tend to highlight the lesbian relationship between Celie and Shug Avery as a case of sexual liberation. This is significant, but it can also reify queer identities rather than explore their performative nature. In the current study, we build on Butler's insights to shift attention away from identity categories and onto the role of queer performativity as resistance.

Over the past few years, there has been increasing engagement between queer theory and Black studies. Hortense Spillers' seminal essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987), considers the ways that slavery interfered with kinship and identity. Spillers suggests that slavery has a lasting impact on black identity, especially through the breaking of family and social bonds. Her essay offers a historical framework for this study of *The Prophets*, where the plantation system seeks to regulate and redefine relationships between enslaved people. But Spillers' work is more interested in disruption than in the construction of identity, as is this study. Another major influence is the work of Michel Foucault, who has impacted both queer studies and literary analysis. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault suggests that power is not just repressive, but productive of knowledge and norms. This helps to understand how dominant systems control identity by constructing norms and standards of acceptability. Foucault's notion of power as pervasive and embedded in practices resonates with Butler's theory of performativity. But Foucault does not discuss the role of emotional and relational practices in contesting power, which is where Bell Hooks comes in. Studies of *The Prophets* are fairly new but increasing.

Scholars have highlighted its portrayal of slavery, memory, and Black queer life. Several analyses emphasise the connection between Samuel and Isaiah as a model of resistance to the plantation's inhuman conditions. These readings tend to highlight the emotionality and vulnerability of these characters, countering more traditional representations that consider enslaved people as lacking interiority. But there has been less work that engages these representations explicitly with theories of performativity and Black aesthetics in a more sustained manner. In a comparable way, critical writing on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* has devoted considerable attention to the novel's engagement with male dominance, the wounds of racial hierarchy, and the gradual self-possession of its women. A familiar line of reading follows Celie as she moves, painfully and unevenly, from a state of imposed voicelessness toward a speech that is finally her own — a trajectory most critics interpret as a freeing of the self (see, e.g., Abbandonato, 1991). Her closeness with Shug is typically read along similar lines: as something that unsettles the assumed dominance of heterosexual norms and as the spark that reshapes who Celie believes herself to be. Such readings have a good deal to recommend them, but they tend to picture resistance as an arc that bends neatly toward freedom, rather than as something a person has to keep doing, over and over, in order for it to remain true. The argument pursued here takes a slightly different angle, proposing that what really drives Celie's shift is the slow accumulation of repeated acts — what Butler (1990) would call the performative — rather than a single decisive break.

The idea of a distinctly Black aesthetic matters just as much when one turns to writing from the African-American tradition. Classical theories of the aesthetic have, for the most part, occupied themselves with matters of form, proportion, and beauty considered in the abstract; a Black aesthetic, by contrast, takes its bearings from somewhere much closer to the ground — from what people actually live through, from memory passed down across generations, and from the pressure of sustained political struggle. hooks (1990) suggests that what we call aesthetic expression is never really walled off from the rest of existence; it is stitched into the ordinary ways human beings come to know themselves and make themselves visible to others. Read through that lens, the familiar textures of daily life — a story told aloud, the care taken in what one wears, the give-and-take between two people in conversation — begin to register as aesthetic gestures in their own right. Adopting such a view opens up fresh terrain for thinking about where, and how, resistance actually takes shape inside a literary text. Rich though the existing criticism undoubtedly is, a certain gap persists within it. Scholars have tended to work along separate tracks — some examining the interplay of racial and gendered oppression, others concentrating on questions of non-normative desire, still others drawn to matters of aesthetic form — and the conversations among these tracks remain thinner than one might hope. The present study sets out to do something about that by reading

Butler's (1990) account of the performative together with hooks' (1990) thinking on a Black aesthetic, and by treating queer performativity itself as a practice through which resistance gets done. Keeping the focus on the small and the everyday — moments of closeness between people, the back-and-forth of how they speak, what gets carried and remembered in the body — the analysis tries to offer a richer account of the ways a self is assembled, and quietly disputed, within African-American fiction.

To draw things together, then: the scholarship that already exists furnishes a solid point of departure for examining questions of selfhood, domination, and representation in African-American literature. What seems still to be wanting is a more joined-up way of reading — one prepared to hold the performative and the relational sides of resistance in view at the same moment. Setting *The Color Purple* beside Robert Jones Jr.'s *The Prophets* (2021) and reading both through the double lens of Butler and hooks, this study hopes to add something worthwhile to the continuing discussion within literary studies, and to throw a little extra light on the part queer performativity plays in the making of Black selfhood.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Queer Performativity, Identity, and Relational Resistance

This article is informed by the theories of Judith Butler and bell hooks, whose thinking offers crucial insights into the nature of identity, body and resistance in Afro-American fiction. Butler's performative theory of identity explains how identity is formed through reiterated social acts, whereas hooks' focus on love, care, and connection points to the relational aspects of resistance to systems of oppression. These insights enable a complex analysis of queer performativity as resistance in everyday life. Butler's theory rests on the proposition that identity, especially gender identity, is not an essential or inherent quality, but rather something that is constructed through repeated practices, gestures and acts. Butler famously in *Gender Trouble* (1990) refers to gender as "a stylized repetition of acts" implying that gender identity is not natural but the effect of ongoing performance. These acts are governed by cultural norms that prescribe the appropriate ways of acting, speaking and interacting. The repetition of these norms over time gives the appearance of an essential identity, causing individuals to perform roles that have been socially imposed.

This notion of identity is crucial to Afro-American fiction, as characters often inhabit highly structured social environments. In these systems, norms for gender, sexuality, and relationships are policed through explicit and implicit measures. Paternal dominance, racism and normative expectations all play a role in identity performance. This means that characters may initially adhere to these norms, not because they are natural, but because they have been periodically repeated. But, as Butler suggests, resistance is also possible. Identity, being produced through repetition, is never completely fixed. Every

repetition has the capacity for difference and it is in these differences that resistance takes place. When people perform identity in a different way to what is considered normal, they help to demonstrate the normalcy of norms. This challenge need not take the form of overt confrontation, but can be accomplished through slight variations in behaviours, expressions, and relational practices. In this way, queer performativity is a potent form of resistance. By entering into relationships and expressions that defy heteronormative norms, people show that prevailing gender and sexual norms are not natural or essential but constructed. Queer identity, from Butler's point of view, is not a category, but a practice that challenges normative orders. It shows the possibility of alternative enactments, thus creating opportunity for change.

In *The Color Purple* and *The Prophets*, the queer performance of identity involves acts of intimacy, care and emotional connection that subvert normative identity categories. These seemingly mundane actions, through their repetition, transform perceptions of identity. These performances take place within systems, not outside them, suggesting the potential for internal resistance. While Butler's theory offers insights into the construction and resistance of identity, bell hooks complements this analysis by shifting the focus to the emotional and relational aspects of resistance. These systems fragment individuals and prevent them from forming alliances, limiting the potential for collective action. In the face of this fragmentation, hooks offers love as a political practice. In her book *All About Love* (2000), she conceives of love as both an emotion and an expectation of care, respect and recognition. Love, then, is a conscious effort to value the humanity of others. In systems that aim to dehumanize marginalised people, practices of love and care become a resistance to oppression by reaffirming the worth of human relationships. This approach is significant in the context of queer relationships in Afro-American literature. In the two novels examined, intimacy is not only an intimate or romantic practice but also an oppositional one. Through gestures of support, care, and recognition, characters forge alternative relational forms that resist the isolation and segregation imposed by oppression.

For example, in *The Color Purple*, Celie's friendship with Shug Avery is a transformation from isolation. To begin with, Celie is in a state of emotional and social isolation, a product of abuse and silencing. Through her relationship with Shug, Celie begins to experience a new relationality that is based on love and respect. Over time, Celie's relationship with Shug allows her to form a sense of self that is not predicated on domination. Likewise, in *The Prophets*, Samuel and Isaiah's relationship resists the divisions of the plantation system. Slavery attempts to regulate not just physical work but also feelings, the ability to form relationships. Samuel and Isaiah develop a relationship based on care and vulnerability to counter this. Their relationship offers a place where they can recognise one another as human, despite the system. Hooks' focus on community adds to this resistance. She suggests that identities are constructed in relation to others.

Affirming relationships offer the acknowledgement needed for people to maintain alternative identities. Both novels demonstrate how relationships provide networks of support that allow characters to contest the identities foisted upon them. Such networks may be minimal and vulnerable, but they are important for sustaining life and meaning within a system of oppression.

Bringing together Butler and hooks offers a rich understanding of queer performativity as structural and relational. Butler's work offers a way of understanding how identities are constructed and can be contested through acts of repetition, whereas hooks reminds us of the importance of feeling and caring in sustaining acts of resistance. They show that resistance is not only expressed through overt acts of defiance but also in the day-to-day acts of everyday life, love, and relationships. Another key aspect of this theoretical approach is how the body is a site of control and resistance. Butler contends that the body is not a natural or biological given, but is socially constructed. Bodies are given value and meaning by society, with certain identities privileged and others excluded. Policing of the body - through behaviour, desire, and expression - becomes a key site of power. But the body can also be a site of resistance. Through the expression of desire, engagement in non-normative relationships and assertions of bodily autonomy, people resist the meanings imposed on them. In each novel, the body is a site of self-assertion and resistance. Tender gestures, such as touching and being present, are performative acts that challenge normative structures. Discussion and narrative are also important components. Butler notes that identity is discursively constructed; how one speaks and is spoken about affects one's identity. hooks also stresses the significance of voice in the process of self-definition. As people speak about their lives, they transform from being narrated to narrating themselves. In literature, narration is a site of resistance. Narration enables characters to recode their experiences and to assert their agency in the face of erasure. This is seen in *The Color Purple*, where Celie's letters serve as forms of self-recognition. In *The Prophets*, the narrative voice emphasises the emotional and collective aspects of experiences, countering the erasure of individuality in historical accounts. This double theoretical lens reveals that queer performativity is an ongoing process that is simultaneously bodily, relational and narrative in nature. It shows that resistance is not an isolated act but part of the everyday. Through its analysis of Afro-American fiction, this research identifies how identities are constantly negotiated and reconstructed within contexts of limitation.

4. Textual Analysis

4.1. Performing Queer Resistance in *The Color Purple*

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker develops a narrative of identity as it is progressively redefined by relational experience, embodiment and emotionality. The story starts with an intense silencing of Celie's voice, in which her life is characterised by

violence, compliance and invisibility. Her childhood is controlled by patriarchy that governs her body, voice and identity. In this context, gender is a constricted system that objectifies women. Yet, over the course of the novel, Celie transforms her identity through a repetition of encounters that challenge the status quo. We can understand this transformation as an example of queer performativity, in which resistance is not direct but occurs through changes in behaviour, desire, and relations. When the novel begins, Celie's voice is an expression of her internalised misery. The directive of her stepfather sets the terms of her being:

"You must not never tell nobody but God". (Walker)

This command imposes an enforced silence at the expense of Celie's voice. In this sense, the silence imposed on her becomes part of the reiterative performance of her identity, as Butler suggests. She becomes accustomed to her silence, perpetuating a social system that relies on her silence. Yet, even in this silence, Celie's letter-writing begins to cause a disruption. In sharing her story, she begins to participate in an act of self-expression that defies her silencing. As the story unfolds, Celie begins to redefine herself in her interactions with Shug Avery. Shug offers Celie a different paradigm of womanhood that is not premised on submission or obedience. Shug displays independence, sensuality and vulnerability that is absent from the women around Celie. This is not simply a representational difference; it is a performative one. Celie is exposed to new forms of being through her interactions with Shug, which transform her behaviour. A pivotal moment in this process comes when Shug affirms Celie's value and profess her love for her:

"She say, I love you, Miss Celie." (Walker)

This simple yet profound statement is a turning point for Celie. She is being spoken to with love and respect. According to bell hooks, this moment can be interpreted as an act of love that dehumanises. hooks highlights that love, as an expression of care and affirmation, complicates structures that fragment emotions. In this way, Celie's response to Shug's words can be understood as an act of resistance, helping to make Celie feel alive. This connection is heightened through sexual intimacy. Celie depicts her experience of being gently caressed:

"First time somebody made something and name it after me." (Walker)

While this line is in reference to Shug naming a song after Celie, it also signifies acknowledgement. Celie is seen; she is looked after. This signifies the start of her journey from object to subject, as articulated by Butler and hooks. Celie and Shug's queer intimacy further complicates normative modes of gender and sexuality. Her friendship with Shug speaks to the heteronormative model that categorises women in relation to men. As Celie engages in repeated acts of intimacy, talk and spending time together, she performs her identity differently. This is in line with Butler, who suggests that identity is not an essence

but created through repetition. In performing new relational acts, Celie begins to perform a different identity. This is especially true when Shug tells Celie to look in the mirror:

“Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, you nothing at all.” (Walker)

This statement seems cruel at first, but is a reflection of the oppression that Celie internalises. Shug's role is to challenge this view, urging Celie to look at herself. This gaze becomes performative as it breaks with the recurrence of negating the self and opens up the possibility of recognition. In doing so, Celie sees her body as means of identity and experience, rather than shame and subordination. Another pivotal moment of transformation is when Celie speaks back to male power:

"I'm poor, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook... but I'm here." (Walker)

This is a moment of transformation in Celie's performative identity. From muteness to voice, invisibility to visibility. From a Butlerian point of view, this is a moment that breaks with the repetition of submissive acts that constituted her identity up to that point. In speaking in a new way, Celie interrupts the assumed normalcy of the rules that would have governed her. Simultaneously, this represents hooks' self-recognition and voice. In speaking, Celie asserts subjectivity in a world that denied her. Her declaration is not just individual but also collective. It reveals the potential to claim identity through expression and affirmation. Queer performativity plays a significant part in this. Celie's relationship with Shug is not just a single moment but an ongoing transformation of her identity. Through practices of intimacy, care and communication, she acquires a new way of being that complicates patriarchal notions of womanhood. This is not done through a direct act of defiance but through practices that transform her. Art and fashion are also significant to this. As a pants maker, Celie exemplifies a change in gender performance. Conventional garments sustain gendered expressions associated with roles of men and women. In creating clothing that is comfortable and unique, Celie resists these distinctions. Her artistic work becomes an act of performative resistance, showing that there are other ways to perform gender.

This is consistent with Butler's view that gender is performed through the stylization of bodies. As a tangible expression of identity, clothing offers a place for norms to be challenged. In her fashion, Celie engages in the creation of a new symbolic language of gender, which aids the creation of new forms of identity. Additionally, Celie's interactions with other women, especially Shug and Sofia, provide her with a support structure to facilitate her change. These connections offer the affirmation needed for alternative identity. In hooks' view, these relationships are forms of collective resistance that counter the isolating nature of oppression. In these various dimensions - voice, body, intimacy and creativity - *The Color Purple* renders queer performativity as a resistance practice. Rather than Celie escaping the structure of her life, she reenacts it. She does not

have a fixed identity but one that is continually transformed through repeated acts of speaking and touching. In this sense, the novel suggests change can come from the transformation of daily life. In this process, queer intimacy is not marginalised. It offers a site for the enactment of alternative identities, in opposition to the norms that seek to circumscribe them.

4.2. The Prophets' Queer Performativity and Resistance

Robert Jones Jr.'s *The Prophets* is a story set in the violent and highly regulated system of racial slavery in which identity is closely surveilled, disciplinized, and dehumanized. In contrast to the domestic patriarchy of *The Color Purple*, the plantation is an all-encompassing apparatus of power that aims to control not just work, but also emotions, social life, and bodily autonomy. In this context, intimacies, including queer intimacies, are transformative. Samuel and Isaiah's relationship becomes a focal point for the queer performativity of resistance. The plantation system is initially demonstrated to be strict about "appropriate" behaviour and identity. Masculinity here is equated with stamina, muscularity and compliance with work demands. Sentimentality is eschewed, and interactions between male slaves are sometimes positioned within hierarchies or as competitive. These practices are not natural, but are enforced through repetition that solidifies the plantation's power. From a Butlerian point of view, these norms are maintained through performative repetition, which gives the impression of a natural social order.

But Samuel and Isaiah's friendship upends this repetition through the introduction of different forms of behaviour. Their relationship is defined by intimacy, nurturing, and interdependence, which is at odds with the dominant codes of manhood on the plantation. Through consistent expressions of tenderness and vulnerability, they enact identity in ways that counter normative gender expectations. A key element of their relationship is its focus on presence and endurance. This relationship is reflected in the narrative in the following simple yet eloquent statement:

"They had long ago learned the comfort of each other's presence." (Jones)

This statement reveals the ordinariness of their relationship. Rather than their relationship being punctuated by grand gestures, it is characterised by ongoing acts of companionship and support. For Butler, these acts are performative gestures that transform identities. Samuel and Isaiah's repeated actions, which go against the grain of normative expectations, constitute an alternative vision of relationality. At the same time, this intimacy can be understood in light of bell hooks' emphasis on love as resistance. In a world that would divide and render individuals helpless, the capacity to connect is an act of defiance. The intimacy between Samuel and Isaiah defiantly asserts their emotional and relational humanity against the dehumanising hierarchies of slavery. Their relationship

affirms that they are not just bodies bound to work but also capable of love, care and recognition of one another.

The physicality of this relationship is crucial. Touch, in the context of slavery, is often violent. But Samuel and Isaiah reclaim touch as a means of caring and communicating. At one point, the story reads:

“Samuel hugged Isaiah close to him.” (Jones)

By embracing the body, its meaning shifts from being an object of control to being an object of relational affirmation. Butlerianly speaking, this body transformation alters social meanings of the body. The body, instead of being defined by working or being controlled, is used to enact alternative subjectivities. The shift also resonates with hooks' highlighting of the body as an agent of recognition. Through acts of care and intimacy, Samuel and Isaiah use their bodies to create meaning and connection. Such gestures counter the dehumanising nature of slavery by recognising the value of their corporeality and emotions. The geographical aspect of Samuel and Isaiah's relationship also demonstrates queer performativity as resistance. The plantation system is premised on surveillance, restricting the possibilities for privacy and intimacy. Samuel and Isaiah create spaces for their intimacy, despite these restrictions. These places - often concealed and fleeting - become zones of resistance within the plantation.

Their continued presence in these spaces makes them sites of alternate realities. In these instances, they are able to slip beyond the immediate control of the system, and participate in activities that would otherwise be forbidden. This spatial practice illustrates how resistance can take place through environmental negotiation. Even in a system that seeks to eradicate autonomy, the opportunity for concealment opens up new possibilities. Another key element of queer performative practice in *The Prophets* is its connection to community viewpoints and tensions. As Samuel and Isaiah's relationship offers them a sense of belonging and identity, it also challenges the norms of the slave community. Their relationship not only threatens plantation power dynamics, but also the norms of the community. This dynamic demonstrates the complexities of resistance, and reveals that alternative identities can garner support and contention. This tension, from a Butlerian point of view, reflects the precariousness of norms. The reaction or resistance of others shows that these norms are not fixed but subject to negotiation. Samuel and Isaiah's relationship draws attention to the artificial nature of these norms, even as it transgresses them.

Yet, hooks' work also explains why these relationships are important to maintain despite societal norms. She stresses that love is about persistence and commitment, especially in hostile settings. Samuel and Isaiah's commitment to each other exemplifies this. Despite the danger, their relationship is integral to their lives. *The Prophets'* narrative voice also plays an important role in representing queer performativity as resistance. Its

poetic and multi-perspectival narration emphasises the emotional and collective aspects of life. This style of narration breaks from historical narratives of slavery that objectify people. The novel's emphasis on interiority and relationality restores humanity to its characters. In one moment of reflection, the novel reads:

They found home in each other". (Jones)

This captures the importance of relationality to their struggle. Home is not a place but a feeling and a relationship. In a system that does not offer stability and home, Samuel and Isaiah establish home through their relationship. This reimagining of home is an example of performative resistance as it challenges the conditions of their lives. Through these various aspects of embodiment, spatiality, relationality and narrative, *The Prophets* offers queer performativity as a site of resistance. Samuel and Isaiah do not seek to overthrow the system but rather, find different ways of being within it. Their ritualistic acts of care and intimacy transform the meaning of their identity, and reveal that resistance can be found in the mundane. Comparing this novel to *The Color Purple*, the novel brings to light the parallels and distinctions of queer performativity. When Celie changes, it is in a domestic and patriarchal environment, whereas Samuel and Isaiah's love is cultivated in the extreme context of slavery. Nonetheless, both stories show how identities are not static, but rather are constantly produced through performative and relational processes. Thus, *The Prophets* confirms the main point of this article: queer performativity is a mode of resistance that occurs throughout the minutiae of ordinary life. Through acts of intimacy, care and presence, characters create new ways of being that defy the social norms that constrict them.

4.3. Comparative Discussion: Shared Mode of Resistance in Queer Performativity

Comparing *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *The Prophets* by Robert Jones Jr. it becomes apparent that queer performativity is a common yet historically and structurally specific mode of resistance. Despite the novels' differing temporal and structural settings - one rooted in early 20th century African-American womanhood under patriarchy and the other in the transatlantic slavery system - they share an emphasis on the nature of identity as produced, negotiated, and re-defined through repeated acts of relationality and embodiment. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Judith Butler and bell hooks, it is apparent that resistance in both novels is not so much defined by acts of rebellion, as it is defined by nuanced and persistent reshaping of intimacy, care, and identity. Perhaps the most obvious commonality between the novels is their representation of identity as performative rather than essential. Butler's conceptualisation of identity as "a stylized repetition of acts" is critical to this discussion. In each book, characters start out as identities that seem fixed and natural, but are actually outcomes of repetition. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's initial silence and passivity exemplify the internalized patriarchy. Her silence, bound by the injunction, "You better not never tell nobody but God" is an

example of how power works in the sense of repetition and creating a subject for whom obedience is a natural behaviour. Likewise, in *The Prophets*, the plantation structure dictates strict norms of manhood and behaviour on the enslaved men, whose bodies are reduced to working bodies whose identities are defined by stoicism and submission. Such norms are enforced not only through violence but repetition that renders them natural and inevitable.

Yet repetition is also a potential site for disruption, as both novels also show. Disruption occurs when characters start to enact identity in different ways, though ever so slightly. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's development is signalled by changes in her relational practices. Her encounters with Shug Avery portend a series of acts that defy the norms she has previously embodied by speaking more freely, expressing sexual desire and asserting her agency. Her assertion, "I'm poor, I'm black... But I'm here" marks a disruption in the repetition of silence that characterised her. This move does not signal a total break from oppression but a re-enactment of her place within it. A similar journey is played out in *The Prophets*, as Samuel and Isaiah's relationship challenges normative definitions of masculinity on the plantation. Their regular acts of care, touch, and vulnerability are a performative act that complicates normative conceptions of masculinity. The remark, "They had long ago learned the comfort of each other's presence," is an acknowledgement of these acts of intimacy over time. Their intimacy does not happen once, but is a process of identity-formation. Butlerianly, this repetition of difference highlights the precarity of the laws that attempt to govern them.

These novels vary in the circumstances of queer performativity. In *The Color Purple*, resistance occurs within a domestic and social milieu that, though hostile, is open to change and the creation of new relationships. For Celie, the path is one of going from separation to inclusion, with an array of women providing relational and emotional support. Her relationship with Shug takes place in a space that, while circumscribed by social conventions, allows for a level of visibility and persistence. By contrast, *The Prophets* offers a much more closed space, in which the plantation system involves a continuous regime of surveillance and discipline. Samuel and Isaiah's relationship is confined to secret spaces, and made more vulnerable by the perils of punishment. Their relationship is thus characterised by danger. The need for concealment also adds to their performative act of resistance as their repeated acts of intimacy must be performed within a hostile space. This distinction underscores the capacity of queer performativity to adapt to its environment as a resistance strategy - rather than avoiding the oppressive system, it finds ways of co-existing with it.

5. Conclusion

The novel muses at one point: They found home in each other". (Jones) This speaks to the significance of relationality to their struggle. Home is not a place, it is a feeling and

relationship. In a system that does not provide stability and home, Samuel and Isaiah make their home with their relationship. This re-conception of home is an example of performative resistance as it subverts their conditions. Through these various elements of embodiment, spatiality, relationality and narrative, The Prophets puts forth queer performativity as a space of resistance. Samuel and Isaiah are not looking to change the system but rather, find alternative existences. Their ritualistic expressions of care and intimacy rework their identities and allows us to see how the small things can contribute to resistance. This novel, in comparison to *The Color Purple*, highlights the similarities and differences of queer performativity. When Celie transforms, it is in the domestic sphere of the patriarchy while Samuel and Isaiah form a relationship in the site of slavery. However, both narratives demonstrate the dynamic and ongoing production of identities through performative and social relations. As such, *The Prophets* confirms the argument in this article: queer performativity is a form of resistance that takes place in the minutiae of everyday life. Through intimacy, care and presence, characters enact new forms of being that challenge the confining social norms. Comparative Conversation: A Common Mode of Resistance in Queer Performativity Looking at *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker and *The Prophets* by Robert Jones Jr. it's clear that queer performativity is a common, yet historically and structurally contingent, mode of resistance. While the novels are set in different times and places (one in early 20th century patriarchy and African-American womanhood and the other in the transatlantic slavery system), their emphasis on the nature of identity as constructed, enacted and reenacted through recurrent acts of relationality and embodiment is common. By drawing on the work of theorists like Judith Butler and bell hooks it becomes clear that resistance in the novels is not so much characterised by acts of rebellion, as it is characterised by subtle and consistent re-definitions of intimacy, care and identity. Possibly the most apparent similarity between the novels is the performative nature of identity. Butler's notion of identity as "a stylized repetition of acts" is important here. In each novel, characters begin as identities that appear natural but are actually the result of repetition. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's passivity and silence is an example of the internalised patriarchy. Her silence, which is dictated by the law, "You better not never tell nobody but God" is an example of how power operates in terms of repetition and producing a subject who is obedient. Similarly, in *The Prophets*, the plantation system imposes norms of masculinity and behaviour on the enslaved men, whose bodies are reduced to labouring bodies whose identities are ruled by stoicism and obedience. These norms are not only established through violence but also repetition that makes them seem natural and normal. However, repetition can also be a site for change - as both novels also demonstrate. This happens when characters start to perform identity in different ways, albeit marginally. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's growth is represented by shifts in her relational practices. Meeting Shug Avery anticipates a series of acts that disrupt the norms

she has until now embodied by speaking out, asserting her sexuality and laying claim to her agency. "I'm poor, I'm black... But I'm here" is a moment of break from the reiterated silence that defined her. This does not represent a departure from oppression but a re-enactment of her oppression. This journey is echoed in *The Prophets* where Samuel and Isaiah's intimacy re-enacts normative conceptions of masculinity on the plantation. Their constant acts of care, touch, vulnerability, is a performance that resembles normative masculinity. They had long ago learned the comfort of each other's presence" acknowledges these acts of intimacy over a long period. Their intimacy is not a one-time act, but an identity in-formation. Butlerianly, this repetition of difference shows the vulnerability of the laws that seek to regulate them. The world of queer performativity differs for these novels. In *The Color Purple*, resistance takes place in a domestic and social context that, while hostile, is nonetheless malleable and enabling new relationships. For Celie, the trajectory is from exclusion to inclusion, with a range of women offering relational and emotional support. Her relationship with Shug occurs in a space, while constrained by social norms, which has some space for visibility and endurance.

On the other hand, *The Prophets* provides a more restricted space, in which the plantation system instates a constant surveillance. Samuel and Isaiah's relationship takes place in hidden spaces, and is punctuated by the threat of punishment. Therefore, their relationship is perilous. The secrecy also adds to their performative act of resistance as their acts of intimacy must take place in a hostile space. This contrast highlights the potential for queer performativity to be responsive to its environment as a survival strategy - rather than removing itself from the hostile environment, it learns to live with it.

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