Embracing Resilience and Reclaiming Happiness

Review of Lindsey Stewart, *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2021)

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Affect has always been central to African American representation. Blacks continually contend with assaults on their humanity and the centrality of affects towards reifying it. According to Palmer, "Black affective responses are only legible as signs of pathology, further reifying blackness as sub-humanity as a sign of both excess and lack" (31). The transatlantic slavery and the gruelling existence on the plantations elicited profound sorrow from the enslaved. Thus, the sorrow that found release in the sorrow songs into which Blacks poured their pains and hopes for freedom was the first assertion of Black people's humanity in the face of dehumanisation. As slavery gave way to emancipation, racial oppression morphed from physical enslavement to political and psychological subjugation. The result of this is generations of African American writings that centralise the pathos of Blackness. These writings exist in stark contrast to the minstrel tradition wherein Blacks are derisively portrayed as clowns whose expressions of happiness are synonymous with low intelligence.

Such portrayals made Blacks even more sensitive to the implications of Black affects in racial politics. Thus, when Zora Neale Hurston emerged during the Harlem Renaissance with an insistence on affirming Black humanity by refuting

the conflation of Blackness with sorrow, it roused the opprobrium of leading figures of the Renaissance such as Richard Wright who likened her to the minstrels offering up Blacks for mockery to whites, positing that "her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity" (25). Her works were deemed apolitical and counterproductive to the representation of the humanity of Blacks. For this, she was not as celebrated as her male counterparts, and she lay in an unmarked grave for decades until she was rescued from Alice Walker from ignominy. In the years following the redemption of Hurston, the theorisation of Black affects and representation has become more nuanced. Hurston's insistence on portraying Southern Blacks as joyful, far from being seen as naïve, is now being interrogated as political sophistication. The emergence of Afrofuturism and similar theories prove that affirming Black humanity does not necessarily have to be sorrowful.

Lindsey Stewart's *The Politics of Black Joy* is a very timely offering that interrogates the concept of Black joy as the key to Hurston's aesthetic of refusal. Therefore, this study aims to critically examine Stewart's theorisation of Black Joy based on Hurston's essays, which she intersects with the coeval in Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*.

Critical Reception of Lindsey Stewart's *The Politics of Black Joy*

Although *PBJ* has received minimal critical reception, it is imperative to foreground the critical reception of Stewart's *PBJ* towards highlighting the politics of joy in the African American context. According to Leslie D. Rose, Stewart states that "it's been hard to gauge the reception" of her book. The major critical works on Stewart's work are the review by Deborah G. Plant and Randal Maurice Jelks' "Joy of the Black South: Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Black Joy—A Review Essay." Others, like Stephen Pasqualina and John Protevi (who argue that neo-abolitionism cannot be completely off the table), are synoptic mentions of Stewart's work. Plant summarises Stewart's work and notes that it elevates "credible knowledge and philosophy of southern blacks to the arena of public debate and discourse" (411) and extends the scholarship about "Hurston's Political thought beyond … the Harlem Renaissance era" (412). Plant describes Stewart's effort at reading Hurston's "political vision as a remarkable feat" (412) and considers the inquiry "an invocation" (412). Plant's approbation is not surprising, bearing in mind that Stewart appropriates some of Plant's feminist work on individual expression in African American folk

ethos. This prioritises African American culture as a source of theoretical inquiry into racism and gender expression in the US.

Jelks analyses Hurston's commitment to the South, acknowledging that "Black people were symbiotic to the region … the place where Black joy was fearlessly exercised" (92). He states that Stewart's work turns to Hurston because her insistence on southern joy "is disruptive" (96). Jelks posits that Stewarts sees the "real power of Black southern community" (97) in root work that fosters internal self-love and self-regard. Jelks states that Stewart's arguments are "absolutely correct, Black people have every right to 'refuse' engaging with governmental and corporate media outlets in ways that steal their joy and make them objects of pity" (98). However, Jelks differs from Stewart's approach of the "either-or" approach to resistance as simply "seeking recognition from the dominant society" (98) and insists that the inward journey is not in "opposition to structural realities" (98). Jelks conflates refusing and resisting which I agree with. Refusing passively like John de Conquer is an act of passive resistance that Stewart insistently considers refusing. Jelks concludes that Stewart's work is a reminder that Black Americans still have profound work at hand "in refashioning our own narratives communally and individually" (99) to ensure joy and freedom.

These two reviews show approbation and in-betweenness that favour joy and freedom. This means portraying racism can be politicised for personal goals that may undermine or empower Blacks, especially from the gender perspective. Therefore, race, place, and womanhood are connected in appropriating Black joy, although this does not mean that Black joy cannot drive racial freedom. There is a need for liminality, hybridity, or syncretism, which accommodates the two sides of the spectrum: the Black tragedy and Black joy, an approach favoured by the African American ethos.

Black Joy and its Tenets

Stewart's theorisation of Black Joy in *PBJ* connects race (mainly the White-Black taxonomy), place (the North-South division), and womanhood, which excavates the gendering of narratives to relegate women and render them victims. In the introduction to *PBJ*, Stewart reveals that the South has always been associated with Black tragedy in the "national imaginary" (2) of the United States of America (USA) and reifies the argument of place in terms of regionising racism

as a Southern phenomenon. The South as a paradoxical place is simultaneously rendered as a space of Black tragedy or enchantment. The enchantment is conceived as negative too because of the infantilisation of pleasure but Stewart asserts that Black tragedy does not capture the whole story of the South which the northern liberals and their abolitionist compatriots usually focalise. She recounts her childhood that is "sewn with scenes of Black joy" (3) and asserts that many of the Black southern everyday lives do "not revolve around white folks" (3). She complains about the misappropriation of Black joy as enchantment to justify slavery and points out that this occludes the critical power of Black joy in the South.

Stewart also explicates the contradictory representations of the Black South as a Black enchantment that separates it from its tragic status in emancipatory politics and connects these paradoxes to the critical reception of Beyoncé's aesthetics in *Lemonade*. She accentuates the reluctance of many to connect Black southern culture "with Black emancipatory politics in the public sphere" (4) and connects it to the tensions in "the academic recovery of Zora Neale Hurston's work" (5). Despite the contestations, Stewart explores Hurston's fiction, like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as valorising intra-racial gender politics that accentuates Black womanhood and contradicts the masculinist Black nationalist agenda of Black tragedy and sorrow. She explains that Hurston and Beyoncé create a Southern Black aesthetic of joy and affect in the public sphere. This reifies the nexus between *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Lemonade*.

Stewarts traces the "political devaluation of southern Black joy" to the abolitionist movement that weaponises the tragedy of slavery for political gains. Albeit the wariness of the misuse of Black joy, she contends that this should not be an excuse to confine Black southern stories to "racial sorrow" (6). She focalises place in the argument of Black joy and Black tragedy by revealing how abolitionists accentuate white supremacy through northern, white political intervention as the only source of southern emancipation. Thus, there is a rivalry between the Southern and Northern writers premised essentially on whether to represent Black southern life as tragic or joyous. She asserts that this is the politicisation of representing Black southern life in the public sphere which necessitates the "politics of joy" (7) as a response.

Beyoncé's *Lemonade* provides Stewart with a contemporary premise for examining Hurston's debates and arguments about Black joy. Stewart analyses the sub-textual theme of Beyoncé's "Sorry" as America's betrayal and posits that the response to it is "southern Black Joy" (27) as reified by Beyoncé's "enthronement"

at the Destrehan plantation and apathetic indifference. She views Beyoncé's joyous bus ride as her participation in root work. Hence, there is a nexus between southern Black joy and the politics of indifference which Stewart focalises in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*.

In Chapter 1, Stewart starts with an epigraph extracted from Hurston's essay "Art and Such" to accentuate Hurston's complaint about the pressure for "African American artists to only represent Black tragedy" (29) rather than Black joy. She states that Hurston criticises this leaning in Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*. Significantly, Stewart opines that Wright's tragic portrayal is symptomatic of regional dynamics and gendered undertones, which signify the nexus between race, place, and gender (womanhood). Wright's plot satisfies Black male readers; gender, females as victims, and northern neo-abolitionists (place). Stewart argues that Hurston's privileging of broad Black southern life contradicts her contemporaries' expectations and complicates her racial politics. Hurston privileges intra-racial politics that Black joy manifests to correct the erasure of Black women in important spaces. Stewart asserts that Hurston's interventions elucidate the masculinist inter-racial politics of Black liberation movements (Black men against white men) over intra-racial "concerns of gender and class" (32) which characterise womanhood. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* characterises "self-fulfilment, love, and happiness" (32) in Janie's search for Black joy in her marriages to subvert intra-racial, patriarchal oppression.

Furthermore, in Hurston's depiction of Black joy in her works, she foregrounds individual expression and Stewart cites Deborah Plant to substantiate her argument. Plant traces this individual expression to African American folk ethos and Stewart connects it to the individuality of creative expression to reify Black joy as against the sorrow paradigm. Stewart further states that the Black joy represented in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is Hurston's acts of refusal of "southern interracial strife" (33) and dominant racism and sexism. Stewart conceptualises Black joy as acts of refusals that subvert resistance and recognition of racial domination and neo-abolitionist interventions. Root work also contributes to the aesthetic of Black joy through the "African American folklore and cultural traditions" (34) and Stewart employs Wright's John Henry as a trope of resistance that privileges inter-racial and neo-abolitionist impulse and this contradicts Hurston's depiction of John de Conquer who metaphorises refusals in the South through laughter/evasion and the glorifying of self. Black joy, thus, favours indifference to interracial conflicts. In subverting racism as restricted to the South (or a place), Hurston in "My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience" contends that racism is national /global to undermine the hypocrisy

of the northern liberals that regionise racism. Consequently, Stewart argues that Hurston's politics of Black joy in the public space prompts refusals to show the limitation of resistance to an "intransigent" (39) racism and de-centres racism by shifting attention to "other aspects of southern Black life" (42) to counter neo-abolitionism and white supremacy. The southern space (place) offers more modes of subverting racism than the north.

Black Joy as Subverting Neo-Abolitionist Mandates

Stewarts notes the setting of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* in different plantations, the absence of whites and the deployment of Black joy through "ancestral communion, feasts, and dancing" (45) which shows the essence of "place" in Black joy aesthetics and the de-centring of racism in Black spaces to privilege intra-racial relations, especially through root work. In Chapter 2, Stewart explicitly conceptualises neo-abolitionism as post-Civil War adherence to representations of Blacks "in terms of tragedy and pity" (47) which Black joy significantly undermines through Hurston's interventions in essays like "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals," "Art and Such," and "The Sanctified Church." However, Stewart focalises Hurston's critique of W. E. B. Du Bois' neo-abolitionist impulse in designating Negro spirituals "sorrow songs." Hurston deploys Black joy to contest Du Bois' representations of southern Black life as sorrowful in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Region, gender, and class connect Blacks and abolitionists in the north seeking to Christianise the South, especially in Du Bois' "Of the Coming of John" another chapter in *SBF*. Stewart analyses Black John as representing the abolitionist agenda of Black sorrow as against the *ab initio* happy Black John of the South. She explicates the connection between region and masculinity: Du Bois presents the North as masculine while the South is childish because of its exuberance and vivaciousness. The corollary is Du Bois' disavowal of Black joy for the political Black tragedy of Black John which Stewart compares to the masculine underpinnings of Frederick Douglas's narrative.

Stewart interrogates Du Bois' Hegelian dialectic conception of African American religion which follows "the transition from 'voodooism' (thesis) to Christianity (anti-thesis) to abolitionism (synthesis)" (55) and reveals Du Bois' manipulation of the dialectics to favour neo-abolitionism. Furthermore, Du Bois characterises the South as feminine while the North signifies masculinity because of its penchant for violence and resistance which connects class to gender in terms of regional

disappointment and inter-racial strife. Stewart also contends that Du Bois employs the "sorrow songs" to "authenticate … the inner lives of Black folks" (60) which originates from Douglas. Stewart states that Du Bois's racial politics exclude Black joy from Negro spirituals, especially secular ones, and derogate root-work practices such as shouting. Such acts are perceived as the political dimensions of neo-abolitionism. She further argues that Hurston deploys her essay "Spirituals and Neo-Spirituals" to mobilise elements of Black song-making "as resources for refusing assimilation" (65) and to refuse neo-abolitionist mandates of negatively representing Black southern life and culture.

The Methods of Black Joy

Stewart opines that Beyoncé's song "6 Inch" in *Lemonade* employs the blues woman tradition that is immersed in root work and reads the song as a performance of dissemblance that Black women wield in the public sphere. In Chapter 3, Hurston expounds on the methodologies of deploying Black joy and explores them in Hurston's *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* (1981) and "How it Feels to be Colored Me." Stewart traces the method of ethnographic refusal to Hurston's interaction with ex-slave Kossola (Cudjo Lewis) at *Barracoon* and connects it with Hurston's "ethnographic refusals of personal racial tragedy" (71) in "How it Feels to be Colored Me" to foreground Black joy as an approach to undermine the abolitionist discourse of rendering African American as an "object of pity." Appropriating Audra Simpson's ethnographic refusal in *Mohawk Interruptus*, Stewart argues that Hurston learned the method of ethnographic refusals from her African American respondents to her anthropological work which she documented in her works like *Barracoon*, *Mules and Men,* and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, her autobiography.

Stewart conceptualises two forms of ethnographic refusals in *Barracoon*. The first is discursive refusals which include refusal to alter Kossola's dialect, silences about salient issues relating to root work and subtly remaking the South into "a site of joy and pleasure" (78) by referencing Black southern food like watermelon. The second ethnographic refusal is Kossola's narrative refusal which influence Hurston's refusal of the neo-abolitionist depiction of Black tragedy. Kossola reveals to Hurston the various dimensions of intra-racial betrayal from his sale to white slave traders by fellow Africans to the African American treatment of the *Clotilda* survivors as savages. Stewarts avers that Kossola performs disaffiliation with the state as an act of refusal

of the state's sovereignty and that Hurston may have learned emotional sovereignty (the premise of Black joy) from Kossola's refusals and she translates this to "literary sovereignty" (84) and refusing the meaning of neo-abolitionist conceptualisation of Blackness.

Stewart contends that in Hurston's "How it Feels to be Colored Me," there are four categories of refusals that can be traced to Hurston's Black joy praxis. The first is her rejection of Du Bois's notion of Blackness—especially as rooted in double consciousness—and her metaphorisation of race as an accidental feature. The second is the "joyful tendencies" of Hurston's childhood in the South which contracts Du Bois' racialisation of his childhood and valorises Hurston's "self-consciousness" (91). The third is the repudiation of the pity and pain of slavery and then the fourth is the jazz club scene that excites her womanhood.

The Praxis of Root Work in Black Joy

Stewart contends that Hurston accentuates root work as a cardinal part of Black joy. Using Beyoncé's Formation, Stewart posits that Beyoncé prioritises satisfying the interiority of the self for self-satisfaction and "focuses on how we relate to ourselves" (95), one of the tenets of Black joy. Root work, according to Stewart, exhibits Black Joy by "privileging self-determination" (97) or winning within over resistance which equates to ethnographic thinness. Stewart juxtaposes Hurston's "The Sanctified Church" to Du Bois's "Of the Faith of the Fathers" and notes Hurston's celebration of root-work practices in the Sanctified Church while Du Bois bemoans them. Root-work praxis—such as the ring shout, voodooism, and spirit possession—stimulates the development of an independent Black self and differentiates the Black southern church from their white-assimilationist New England counterparts. She argues that Black joy provides alternative modes of agency that obliterate the single story of white domination and Black tragedy.

In Hurston's "High John de Conquer," Stewart examines diverse hoodoo practices such as conjure, "ancestor reverence and the creation of mojo bags" (103) and their overlapping intersection of the past (the dead) and the present (the living). Root work centralises what one does with oneself after abolition and is emblematic of blending among Black women. Stewart analyses root work in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and evinces two functions of the practice: root work serves as alternative values to the dominant culture and suggests Black emancipation as transcending only

resistance. Stewart contends that John de Conquer symbolises the "winning within" paradigm, "the struggle to define ourselves" (114), an African American folktale and this stimulates Black joy. Stewart also opines that Black Joy offers alternative forms of reading narratives as she dissects "High John de Conquer" as "a meta-hoodoo tale" (114) that reflects Hurston's personal life and racial politics of conjuring.

Black Joy and COVID-19

Stewart avers that COVID-19 has revealed brazen gender disparities and neo-abolitionist impulses in depicting African Americans in the US media. Such tendencies entail the emphasising of Black New Orleans and the re-inscribing of Hurricane Katrina as well as the representation of the South as backward during the COVID-19 pandemic. These portrayals politicise racism and seek to undermine Black joy, especially in the public sphere. Stewart asserts that deploying Hurricane Katrina during the COVID era and derogating Mardi Gras, a Black southern cultural event, mobilises images of Black suffering that foregrounds neo-abolitionist legacies in the US national imaginary. Hence, Black joy extends Blackness beyond the dominant tragic frames to joyful tendencies that foster healing in a COVID era which subverts neo-abolitionist politics of Black tragedy that seeks white recognition.

In conclusion, Stewart traces the negativities that are symptomatic of blackness to abolitionism and neo-abolitionism and employs Hurston's works to evince Black joy as an alternative mode of agency for rendering Blackness in the public sphere. She believes the politicisation of joy and the contestation between Black joy and Black tragedy persist in the public sphere. Hence, racism is a national phenomenon that neo-abolitionists tend to regionise to the South to valorise gendered narratives of Black victimhood, especially Black women. While Stewart focuses mainly on Hurston's essays in examining Black joy and its contestation of representing Blackness in the US, this study extends the argument of Black joy by interrogating Black joy in Hurston's fiction.

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