

## التمييز اللوني كنسخة مستبطنة من التفوق الأبيض: قراءة مسرحية *Color Struck* لزورا نيل هيرستون وفقاً لنظرية تصنيف البشرة لمارجريت هانتر

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### الملخص

يتم تجسيد التمييز اللوني بشكل درامي كنسخة مستبطنة من التفوق الأبيض في مسرحية زورا نيل هيرستون ذات الفصل الواحد *Color Struck* (1926). تستخدم هذه الدراسة فكرة مارجريت هانتر حول تصنيف البشرة لتفسير غير إيماء، المأساة المركزية في المسرحية. علاوة على ذلك، فإن استمرار الهيكلية العرقية المؤسسية التي ترسخت منذ حقبة العبودية داخل المجتمعات السوداء بعد التحرر يشكل مصدر جنون الشك لديها ورفضها إنقاذ ابنتها المحتضرة، بدلاً من تفسير ذلك كمرض شخصي. من خلال القراءة المتأنية والتحليل التقاطعي، تهدف هذه الورقة إلى الكشف عن كيفية جمع الشخصيات ذات البشرة الفاتحة (إيفي) لرأس المال الاجتماعي والرومانسي، في حين يتم تقليل قيمة الشخصيات داكنة البشرة (إيما) بشكل منهجي، مما يكشف عن التمييز اللوني كألية جنسانية تدفع السود إلى مراقبة ومعاقبة بعضهم البعض وفق معايير الجمال والقيمة المستندة إلى التفوق الأبيض. تعمل العناصر الرمزية—كالمرأة، والعربة المقسمة على القطار، ومسابقة الكيك ووك، والطفل الميت—كمواقع يظهر فيها اللون الأبيض كمعيار خفي يُقاس على أساسه السود ويجدون أنفسهم ناقصين. من خلال تطبيق مفاهيم هانتر حول رأس المال العرقي، وامتياز البشرة الفاتحة، والعواقب النفسية لتقليل قيمة لون البشرة، يسلط التحليل الضوء على رفض المسرحية للقاء كموقف نقدي متعمد تجاه نظام يفتقر المضطهدين بتدمير أنفسهم وأطفالهم. تخلص الدراسة إلى أن *Color Struck* تظل ذات صلة عاجلة، مقدمة تشخيصاً مبكراً وحاداً لدور التمييز اللوني المستمر في تعزيز التفوق الأبيض داخل المجتمعات الأمريكية الأفريقية. كما تضع هذه القراءة المسرحية كنص أساسي في دراسات المسرح النسوي الأسود ودراسات التمييز اللوني، مؤكدة على قيمتها المستمرة لفهم تقاطعات العرق والجنس والتجسد.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المسرح الأمريكي الأفريقي، التمييز اللوني، التفوق الأبيض المستبطن، تصنيف البشرة، زورا نيل هيرستون

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## Colorism as Internalized White Supremacy: Reading Zora Neale Hurston's Color Struck with Margaret Hunter's Skin Tone Stratification Theory

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### Abstract

Colourism is portrayed dramatically as internalised white supremacy in Zora Neale Hurston's one-act play *Colour Struck* (1926). The study uses Margaret Hunter's idea of skin tone stratification to explain Emma's jealousy, the play's central tragedy. Furthermore, the institutional perpetuation of racial hierarchies from the era of slavery within Black communities after emancipation is the source of her paranoia and refusal to save her dying daughter rather than personal illness. Through close reading and intersectional analysis, the aim of this paper is to reveal how lighter-skinned characters (Effie) gather social and romantic capital while darker-skinned characters (Emma) are systematically devalued, revealing colorism as a gendered mechanism that compels Black people to police and punish each other according to white supremacist standards of beauty and worth. Symbolic elements—the mirror, the segregated train compartment, the cakewalk contest, and the dead child—function as sites where whiteness remains the invisible standard against which Blackness is measured and found wanting. By applying Hunter's concepts of racial capital, light-skin privilege, and the psychological consequences of skin tone devaluation, the analysis illuminates the play's refusal of redemption as a deliberate critique of a system that convinces the oppressed to destroy themselves and their children. The study concludes that *\*Color Struck\** remains urgently relevant, offering an early and incisive diagnosis of colorism's enduring role in perpetuating white supremacy within African American communities. This reading positions the play as a key text in Black feminist theatre and colorism studies, and underscores its continuing value for understanding the intersections of race, gender, and embodiment

**Keywords:** African American theatre, Colorism, internalized white supremacy, skin tone stratification, Zora Neale Hurston

## . Introduction

In African American communities, colorism the privileged treatment of lighter skin tones and the systematic devaluing of darker skin in the interior of the same racial or ethnic group lasts to operate as one of the most tenacious mechanisms of intra-racial inequality (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Glenn, 2009; Hall & Mishra, 2024). Deep-rooted in the racial hierarchies of Jim Crow era, colorism functions as a form of internalized white supremacy that alters the external violence of white domination into self-policing hierarchies of worth. It is established during chattel slavery. (Hunter, 2002, 2007, 2013, 2016; Reece, 2018; Monk, 2021). Present-day empirical research reveals that lighter skin remains associated with calculable compensations in education, income, criminal justice outcomes, marriage markets, and health, while darker skin correlates with increasing hindrance across multiple life domains (Keith & Herring, 1991; Monk, 2015; Hargrove, 2019; Louie, 2020; Reece, 2021; Crooks et al., 2025; Ogbenna et al., 2025; Smart, 2025).

*Color Struck* (1926) Zora Neale Hurston's one-act play presents social consequences and the shocking psychological and of this internalized hierarchy with unwavering clarity. The play follows Emmaline (Emma), a dark-skinned Black woman whose weighty fear is to be rejected by lighter-skinned contenders leads to jealousy, paranoia, and the ultimate death of her child. A century ago it is written, the play remains extraordinarily applicable: current studies continue to document the permanent impact of colorism on mental health, sexual development, sleep quality, prenatal care, and criminal justice understandings among African Americans (Monk, 2021; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Slaughter-Acey et al., 2019; Crooks et al., 2025; Ogbenna et al., 2025; Gupta, 2025).

This article maintains that *Color Struck* produces colorism as a structural expression of internalized white supremacy, and that Margaret Hunter's theory of skin tone and social

stratification (2002, 2007, 2013, 2016) provides the most informative outline for understanding the play's tragic machinery. The analysis shows how Hurston renovates personal struggle into an evaluation of post-slavery racial trauma by applying Hunter's concepts of light-skin privilege, racial capital, and the gendered reproduction of white beauty standards. The outcome of a racialized system that has successfully taught her and the community around her to evaluate worth through skin tone shows Emma's tragedy is not simply individual pathology.

- How does *Color Struck* represent colorism as a legacy of white supremacist ideology and the institution of slavery?

- In what ways do the play's characters internalize and reproduce skin tone hierarchies, particularly through romantic competition and community judgment?

- How does Margaret Hunter's theory of skin tone stratification deepen our reading of the play's dramatic structure, symbolism, and tragic conclusion?

*Color Struck* combines close textual reading joining to dialogue, stage directions, and symbolism with Margaret Hunter's skin tone stratification theory as the key analytical lens (Hunter, 2002, 2007, 2013, 2016). Historical contextualization draws on scholarship examining the afterlife of slavery and Jim Crow in early twentieth-century Black Southern communities (Reece, 2018; O'Connell, 2012; Hudson, 2020; Hall & Mishra, 2024) multidimensional perspective integrates magnitudes of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 2013, as cited in Liu et al., 2023).

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Margaret Hunter's Skin Tone Stratification Theory

In the United States, Margaret Hunter's work (2002, 2007, 2011, 2013, 2016) bids the most empirically and systematic grounded sociological theory of colorism. This article adopts her framework as its key analytical lens as it goes beyond individual bias to treat colorism as a

structural system that imitates white chauvinist values within people of color. Colorism is defined by Hunter: "the allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to the lightness or darkness of a person's skin" within the same racial and or ethnic group (Hunter, 2007, p. 237). Contrasting to racism, which chiefly functions amid racial groups, colorism as an intra-racial phenomenon with sovereign, measurable effects on life probabilities (Dixon & Telles, 2017; Hunter, 2007; Monk, 2021; Hall & Mishra, 2024).

At the heart of Hunter's theory, the concept of light skin as a form of adaptable social and cultural capital. Lighter-skinned individuals mainly women gather recompenses in education, income, occupational prestige, marriage markets, and criminal justice outcomes because their phenotype is served as nearer to whiteness (Hunter, 2002, 2013, 2016). Historically rooted in slavery-era, this capital divisions and continues to structure opening extended even after formal discrimination ended (Keith & Herring, 1991; Reece, 2021; Monk, 2015; Hargrove, 2019).

Colorism represents a particularly effective form of internalized white supremacy as Hunter claims, since the members of the oppressed group themselves impose the hierarchy (Hunter, 2007, 2013). Leading to reduced self-esteem, shame, depression, and, in severe cases, self-destructive behavior, Darker-skinned individuals internalize their own devaluation, (Monk, 2015; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Louie, 2020; Crooks et al., 2025; Gupta, 2025). While benefiting, Lighter-skinned individuals, often feel pressure to distance themselves from darker members of their community, by this means prolonging division (Hunter, 2002; Abrams et al., 2020).

Hunter's analysis is explicitly intersectional: colorism is intensely gendered. "Misogynoir" is rottenly described dark-skinned Black women experience compounded discrimination , the affects of mental health, physical health, romantic prospects, and maternal outcomes Light-skinned Black women gain greater access to hegemonic standards of beauty and heterosexual

desirability(Hunter, 2002, 2016; Hall, 2017; Rosario et al., 2021; Slaughter-Acey et al., 2019; Crutchfield et al., 2021; Cival, 2024; Ogbenna et al., 2025).

*Color Struck*, as example of dramatic text that frames on stage literally enact stratification movement where color capital is displayed, contested, and rewarded.: costume, lighting, blocking. Although Hunter’s framework developed within sociology, is highly productive for literary and performance analysis since it treats skin tone as an embodied, performative currency (Hunter, 2016). on the psychological internalization is what Hunter’s emphasis on, oppression on the hand, enables a reading of Emma’s jealousy and her ultimate madness not as personal failing but as the tragic outcome of a lifetime of structural deflation (Monk, 2021; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Gupta, 2025).

By grounding the interpretation of *Color Struck* in Hunter’s rigorously evidenced theory of skin tone stratification, this study reveals how a 1926 play offers an early and incisive diagnosis of one of white supremacy’s most enduring intra-racial mechanisms (Hunter, 2007, 2013; Hall & Mishra, 2024; Smart, 2025).

## **2. Colorism in African American History and Culture**

Colorism grow out the racialized labor divisions of U.S. chattel slavery and persevered as a machinery of post-emancipation stratification (Reece, 2018; Reece, 2021; Hall, 2010; O’Connell, 2012). The product of sexual violence by white enslavers were often gavin Lighter-skinned enslaved people, domestic tasks, while darker-skinned individuals were committed to field labor, creating the first established skin tone hierarchy (Reece, 2021; Russell et al., 2013). After liberation, these hierarchies were strengthened through “paper bag” tests, church and social club eliminations, and privileged access to education and employment, ensuring that light skin continued to function as a form of capitalism (Hudson, 2020; Dixon & Telles, 2017; Hall & Mishra, 2024).

Darker-skinned African Americans pass through higher levels of apparent discrimination, lower self-esteem, depression, delayed prenatal care, poorer sleep outcomes, and increased stress-related morbidity—all refereed by internalized anti-Blackness. As a result, the present-day research constantly documents the severe psychological and health consequences of colorism. (Monk, 2015; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Louie, 2020; Slaughter-Acey et al., 2019; Ogbenna et al., 2025; Crooks et al., 2025; Gupta, 2025). On the other hand , black women and girls, experienced serve symptoms of scales and standers of gendered beauty norms, producing what scholars describe as “skin-tone trauma” and “misogynoir” (Hall, 2017; Abrams et al., 2020; Rosario et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2013; Cival, 2024).

Since the Harlem Renaissance, appearing in works such as Wallace Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982). The intra-racial color prejudgment has been a recurrent theme in African American literature. These texts, however overstate the psychological violence of color hierarchies and their roots in slavery-era divisions (Russell et al., 2013; Glasker, 2014; Morgado, 2022).

Hurston scholarship has habitually highlighted her ethnographical contributions carnival of Black vernacular culture (Kennon, 2021; Seth, 2025). However recent studies, showed her analysis of intra-racial conflict, plus colorism, as a deliberately connection with post-slavery social structures (Ghani & Joody, 2016; Sykes, 2016; Akbar, 2022; Encarnación, 2025).

In spite of colorism studies and Hurston criticism depth , however no published work so far has showed a continual, theoretically, and rigorous reading of *Color Struck* over Margaret Hunter’s skin tone stratification framework (Hunter, 2002, 2007, 2013, 2016). This absence, is precisely the phenomena Hunter theorizes, where the psychological consequences of internalized white supremacy given the play’s explicit dramatization of intra-racial color

hierarchies, gendered desirability politics. This article signifying the gap of how Hunter's perceptions gendered color privilege, racial capital, and internalized oppression lighten the play's symbolism, dramatic structure, and tragic conclusion in ways that previous literary analyses have not fully explored (Hunter, 2016; Monk, 2021; Crooks et al., 2025; Smart, 2025).

### 3. Afterlives of Slavery in Early 20th-Century Black Life

In 1865, Sharecropping, debt bondage, and the convict-leasing system kept vast numbers of Black Southerners constrained to circumstances that severely look like the intimidation and corruption of slavery and near-enslavement. Great Migration offered only partial escape from systemic poverty and violence the economic, social, and psychological structures continual to form African American life though chattel slavery officially ended, up till the twentieth century. (O'Connell, 2012; Reece, 2018; Hudson, 2020). Within Black communities, slavery's color-based labor divisions. lighter-skinned individuals assigned to domestic roles, darker-skinned individuals to field labor. This in turn had solidified into durable hierarchies of status, occupation, and marriageability (Reece, 2021; Hall, 2010; Russell et al., 2013). These hierarchies were actively maintained through churches, lodges, and social clubs that employed "paper bag" tests. And other skin-tone criteria for membership, ensuring that light skin continued to function as a form of capital long after emancipation (Hunter, 2007; Monk, 2021; Hargrove, 2019).

Lynchings, poll taxes, and literacy tests reminded African Americans that freedom remained conditional (Hudson, 2020). *Color Struck* represents that the world is rigidly isolated Jim Crow South of the mid-1920s, where legal separation reinforced the fiction of Black subsidiarity while instantaneously limiting multiracial contact that might challenge it. In this environment, whiteness reserved its position as the invisible standard of beauty, morality, and citizenship. Black newspapers, churches, and performing venues frequently internalized these standards,

celebrating light skin and “good hair” as markers of decency and racial advancement (Hunter, 2002, 2013; Hall & Mishra, 2024). The cakewalk itself—formerly serves as a subversive slave-era parody of white homestead manners—had been altered into a formal contest where Black performers contended to display the most “refined” (i.e., whiteness-adjacent) behavior for collective approval and material prizes (Ghani & Joody, 2016).

colorism became one of the most effective mechanisms of social control within Black Southern towns, since the absence of direct white oversight. Lighter-skinned Beauty contests, church socials, and even funeral arrangements often operated under implicit or explicit color criteria (Russell et al., 2013). African Americans excessively occupied leadership roles in churches, schools, and businesses; marriage patterns reflected deliberate “marrying up” in skin tone; and community gossip ruthlessly policed darker-skinned women’s perceived worth (Keith & Herring, 1991; Hunter, 2013; Reece, 2021). Hurston, who grew up in the all-Black town of Eatonville, Florida, understood these dynamics as the “afterlife of slavery”—a phrase that captures how homestead color logic survived emancipation and migrated into supposedly autonomous Black spaces (Reece, 2018; Monk, 2021; Hall & Mishra, 2024).

It is surely this historical period when slavery has come to its end but its ethnic and color beliefs remain fully operative—that *Color Struck* points. Microcosms of post-slavery Black society are presented through the segregated train car and the cakewalk hall: “spaces where the external violence of white supremacy has been adopted and redirected inward, producing the very self-destruction that white supremacy originally designed” (Hunter, 2007; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Crooks et al., 2025).

#### 4. Colorism as Internalized White Supremacy in *Color Struck*

The play beings in a Jim Crow train compartment, a reasonably all-Black space that should offer shelter yet immediately becomes a site of intra-racial stratification. The hierarchy they created continues to operate through Black bodies and Black gazes. Emma's first action clutching her darker-skinned daughter and glaring at the lighter-skinned Effie dramatizes Margaret Hunter's core dispute: even when white people are absent, (Hunter, 2002, 2007, 2013). The train stands as a symbol of forward movement, so it is a rendered ironic: Emma is physically roaming toward a new life but remains stuck within the color logic genetic from slavery's house/field divide (Reece, 2021; Hall, 2010; Monk, 2021).

Emma's repetitive accusations that John will abandon her for a "yaller" woman disclose a deeply coopted belief that dark skin concentrates her unworthy of love. When she cracks, "You just waitin' for a chance to throw me away for some yaller-skinned wench" (Hurston, 2008, p. 38), she willingly associations romantic denunciation to skin tone rather than character or behavior. Hunter describes this moment as the internalization of racial capital: Emma assumes Effie's lighter complexion inevitably grants her an advantage in the romantic marketplace, regardless of John's stated affection (Hunter, 2002, 2013). Her fear is not unreasonable jealousy but an knowledgeable recognition of a hierarchy that has consistently devalued women who look like her (Abrams et al., 2020; Rosario et al., 2021; Crooks et al., 2025).

Effie enters the contest and wins with minimal effort. Illustrating Hunter's reflection that light-skinned women receive unearned admiration simply by embodying a phenotype coded as closer to whiteness. Effie's victory is predestinated: her skin tone functions as currency that purchases romantic and social success without requiring exceptional talent or virtue (Hunter, 2002, 2016). The stage directions note that "the crowd gathers around Effie" and the host praises her "pretty yaller face" (Hurston, 2008, p. 44), (Hunter, 2013; Reece, 2021; Hall & Mishra, 2024).

John's slow move from Emma to Effie is not depicted as individual betrayal but as the foreseeable consequence of a system that imparts Black men to value lighter-skinned women as rank symbols (Hunter, 2013; Uzogara & Jackson, 2016). the confession is less about personal penchant than about the cultural equivalence of light skin with beauty and desirability ,when John finally admits, Emma's jealousy is therefore rational: she understands the rules perfectly and knows she cannot win "I reckon I do like Effie better" (Hurston, 2008, p. 46), (Monk, 2015; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Crooks et al., 2025).

The chorus, passengers and dancers function as a cooperative mediator of internalized white supremacy. Their chinwag "Look at that black gal think she can hold a man!" and final celebration of Effie's victory demonstrate how colorism compels Black people to police each other in service of white standards even in the absence of white people (Hunter, 2007; Harvey et al., 2005; Hall & Mishra, 2024). The cakewalk itself has been fully chosen into a ritual once a slave-era satire where Black frames strive to display the most "refined" guesstimate of whiteness for a literal cake, effortlessly enacting Hunter's argument that "colorism succeeds by making the oppressed enforce their own oppression" (Hunter, 2013; Smart, 2025).

Colorism achieves what slavery could not: it sways Black people to destroy themselves and their children long after the legal chains are gone. That is to say, as tragic proof of Margaret Hunter's chief thesis: when skin tone delamination is fully internalized, white supremacy no longer requires external enforcers Hurston's tragic vision, Emma's final solitude on stage cradling her dead daughter while the cakewalk music swells. (Hunter, 2007, 2016; Monk, 2021; Ogbenna et al., 2025).

## 5. Skin Tone as Cultural Capital on Stage

In *Color Struck*, Hunter hypothesizes light skin as a form of changeable cultural capital that harvests social rewards (Hunter, 2002, 2013). This conversion is literalized through

performance. Confirming that her body alone commands attention and applause, Effie wins the cakewalk not because of superior dancing but because the crowd and juries respond to her lighter skin as an innate qualification of refinement. The stage direction notes that “everybody crowds around Effie admiring her” (Hurston, 2008, p. 44.) Emma, her darkness is treated as a discrepancy of capital, execution her romantically and socially invisible even within a segregated Black space so is visually marginalized: (Hunter, 2016; Monk, 2021; Hargrove, 2019).

Hunter’s intersectional analysis demonstrates that colorism is profoundly gendered: light-skinned Black women gain greater access to hegemonic standards of femininity and heterosexual desirability, while dark-skinned Black women experience compounded devaluation (Hunter, 2002, 2016). Effie embodies this gendered privilege: her body is celebrated as the ideal of Black womanhood soft-spoken, graceful, and sexually desirable. When the emcee praises her “pretty yaller face” (Hurston, 2008, p. 44), the language echoes slavery-era preferences for “fancy girls,” revealing how color capital structures romantic markets (Hunter, 2013; Rosario et al., 2021; Abrams et al., 2020). Emma’s darker body, conversely, is coded as undesirable and threatening: her anger is read not as justified pain but as confirmation of the stereotype that dark-skinned women are inherently unlovable (Hall, 2017; Crutchfield et al., 2021).

Hurston drenches the play with symbols that make whiteness the invisible standard:

“I’m too black ... I ain’t got nothin’ but my color” (Hurston, 2008, p. 37), The mirror on the train functions as the tool of internalized white supremacy. When Emma stares into it and mutters, she articulates Hunter’s concept of internalized depreciation: the mirror does not echo a neutral self but a body restrained and found wanting against white and light-skinned beauty norms (Hunter, 2007; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019).

The cakewalk, originally a slave-era satire of white plantation manners, has been fully co-opted into a ritual where Black bodies compete to display the most “refined” approximation of whiteness for a literal cake. The prize itself symbolizes the meager rewards offered for assimilation (Hunter, 2013; Hall & Mishra, 2024).

Emma’s refusal to subpoena a doctor “Let her die ... she black like me” (Hurston, 2008, p. 48) The dying child, dark-skinned alike her mother, develops the ultimate fatality of internalized colorism. Deciphers the empirical findings on delayed prenatal care and minor maternal outcomes for darker-skinned Black women into a primeval dramatic image (Slaughter-Acey et al., 2019; Ogbenna et al., 2025).

Emma’s trajectory, jealousy, paranoia, refusal of medical help, infanticide, Hunter warns that full bringing inward of skin tone depression harvests catastrophic psychological outcomes (Hunter, 2007; Monk, 2015). Emma’s final sanity is not individual pathology but the reasonable termination of a lifetime of messages that her dark skin makes her unworthy of love, motherhood, or life itself. "Emma rocks the dead child and hums while the orchestra plays the cakewalk music” (Hurston, 2008, p. 49) suggestions a chilling performing of Hunter’s thesis: white supremacy no longer requires external enforcers; when colorism is completely internalized, Black people become proficient of terminating their own children in its name (Hunter, 2013; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Gupta, 2025; Crooks et al., 2025).

Hurston transforms a one-act domestic drama into a structural indictment of one of white supremacy’s most effective persisting devices: the influence of Black people to hate themselves and each other according to the very hierarchy designed to oppress them.

## **6. Colorism as the Engine of the Play’s Tragedy**

Margaret Hunter’s skin tone stratification theory demonstrates that Color Struck is not a tragedy of individual jealousy but a tragedy of structure. Every main dramatic event John’s

gradual withdrawal, the community's celebration of Effie, and Emma's refusal to save her daughter surveys logically a system in which skin tone functions as racial capital (Hunter, 2002, 2007, 2013, 2016). Emma's simply personal failing is a reflection on the destruction and the outcome of a racialized system that has successfully taught her and the community around her to evaluate worth through skin tone (Monk, 2015; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Crooks et al., 2025).

By making the cakewalk, the eventual symbol of enslaved satire turned self-subjugation the dramatic climax, Hurston disclosures how Black performance itself can become a site where white chauvinist values are recreated and rewarded (Hunter, 2007; Reece, 2021; Hall & Mishra, 2024). Spread on Hunter's framework shows that Hurston was staging a sociological row years before the perception of colorism was dignified. The play's rejection of refurbishment and its final image of Emma alone with her dead child while the community dances on underscore Hunter's central claim: when skin tone stratification is fully coopted, the oppressed become their own most effective persecutors (Hunter, 2016; Monk, 2021; Gupta, 2025).

Color Struck's tragedy is not limited to 1926. Darker-skinned Black girls and women in recent empirical research authorizes that colorism endures to shape social and psychological realities for creating measurable disparities in mental health, sexual development, maternal outcomes, criminal justice experiences, and overall life chances (Monk, 2015; Hargrove, 2019; Slaughter-Acey et al., 2019; Crooks et al., 2025; Ogbenna et al., 2025; Smart, 2025). Pending Black communities collectively challenge the white supremacist estimation of skin tone, the "cakewalk" logic of adopted oppression that Hurston stages in Color Struck will remain to shape the social and psychological realities of darker-skinned girls and women.

## 7. Conclusion

Through Margaret Hunter's skin tone stratification, the play reveals how slavery-era racial hierarchies lasted emancipation and became embedded within Black social and psychological life (Hunter, 2002, 2007, 2013, 2016). This piece of work has shown that *Zora Color Struck* functions as a powerful dramatic representation of colorism as internalized white supremacy. Emma's path from jealousy to paranoia to the refusal of medical care for her dying daughter is not individual pathology but the outcome of a system that has taught her, and the community around her, to measure human worth by closeness to whiteness (Monk, 2015; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019; Crooks et al., 2025). Effie's easy conquest, the chorus's complicity, and the cakewalk's celebration of light-skin privilege. Collectively explain Hunter's argument that colorism obliges members of an oppressed group to reproduce their own oppression (Hunter, 2013; Reece, 2021; Hall & Mishra, 2024). Reading *Color Struck* through Hunter's lens brings back the play to its rightful place as one of Hurston's most insightful critiques of post-slavery racial trauma. Long overshadowed by her novels, *Color Struck* emerges as a pioneering work of Black feminist theatre that anticipates twenty-first-century understandings of colorism by nearly a century (Ghani & Joody, 2016; Sykes, 2016; Akbar, 2022). Its refusal of redemption and its staging of Black bodies performing their own stratification, highlight the structural, rather than merely personal, nature of the suffering it portrays. By bringing Margaret Hunter's rigorously evidenced sociological framework into sustained dialogue with literary and performance analysis, this study expands the interpretive reach of skin tone stratification theory beyond empirical social science. It demonstrates that dramatic texts can serve as laboratories for observing the embodied, performative dimensions of racial capital (Hunter, 2016). Conversely, it enriches Hurston scholarship by providing a contemporary theoretical vocabulary capable of explaining the full force of her critique (Hall & Mishra, 2024; Smart, 2025).

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