


Spring 5-4-2022

## Reclamation: The Crown of African American Identity

Lindsey Kellogg

Georgia College & State University, lkellogg21@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/english>

 Part of the [Acting Commons](#), [African History Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Film Production Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Other Music Commons](#), [Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#), [Performance Studies Commons](#), and the [Playwriting Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kellogg, Lindsey, "Reclamation: The Crown of African American Identity" (2022). *English MA Theses*. 13. <https://kb.gcsu.edu/english/13>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Knowledge Box. It has been accepted for inclusion in English MA Theses by an authorized administrator of Knowledge Box.

Reclamation: The Crown of African American Identity

By

Lindsey Kellogg

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Literature

Georgia College and State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement

For the Degree of Masters of Arts

April 2022

**Acknowledgments:**

I would like to thank Dr. Flaherty for all of her patience and guidance through this trying time of covid and academia. I would like to thank Dr. Sevcik for introducing me to the theorists that have paved the way to the thought-provoking understanding of what it means to reclaim identity. I would like to thank Dr. Pilcher for always emerging film conversations and panel supports. I would like to thank Sherri-Anne, Julia, Rachel, Ashlee and Aron for looking at my thesis. I would like to thank Aidan for his support during this time. I would like to thank Amy for showing me that theatre is academic and that being brown in this world is not a crime. I would like to thank my parents for supporting me.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....1

Glossary.....3

Dedication.....6

Introduction.....7

Chapter One: *Crowns*.....13

Chapter Two: *If Beale Street Could Talk*.....29

Conclusion.....43

Gallery .....48

Works Cited.....60

**Glossary:**

| <b>Term</b>          | <b>Definition</b>  |
|----------------------|--|
| Subaltern            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Synonymous with the African American identity.</li> <li>2) This term is synonymous with African American identity due to this identity being a form of other, not white.</li> <li>3) Marginalized group known for not speaking.</li> </ol> |
| Subalternity         | <p>“Refers to a condition of subordination brought about by colonization or other forms of economic, social, racial, linguistic, and/or cultural dominance” (“Duke University Press”).</p>   |
| Colonization Mindset | <p>The mindset in which systemic racism, racial injustice, and exclusatory behaviors have been programmed into the mind of African Americans in order to strip them of their culture resulting in the automatic suppressional obedience of the colonizer’s way of life.</p>          |

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Exclusatory              | The exclusion of marginalized groups of color.   |
| Postcolonial             | References the colonizer and their racist behavior towards African Americans from the year 1970— to present day New York City.                               |
| Verbal Communication     | “The vocal tract, the larynx and the auditory systems to optimize mutual comprehension in our ancestors” (“Verbal Communication” 31).                        |
| Non-verbal Communication | “Tower of suggestion...from the implicit promise that our body has its own language which we can read, revealing sender’s hidden secrets” (Hall & Knapp 69). |
| Agency                   | The space given to African Americans to express themselves.  |
| Advocacy                 | The support of African Americans.  |
| Allyship                 | The support and acceptance of African American identity.   |
| Reclamation              | Reclamation is the reclaiming of one’s identity and true state of being.   |
| Identity                 | The core form of the African American being that contains the ancestral DNA of one’s historical and cultural context.  |

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Hattitude | A verbal idea of hat and attitude introduced which enables the women of color to freely speak and express themselves in church and their communities. |
| Orisha    | An African term derived from Yoruba. These are spirit guides that embody and lead them verbally on a spiritual path to find their identities.         |

**Dedication:**

To the hard-working voices who have helped guide and assist me through this process of storytelling. To the ones who have been at the forefront of all my academic stamina. To the ones who greet me with the sweetest movements of encouragement. To the ones who have aided me to be bold and stand in my truth. To the ones who have helped me become a better version of myself. To the trials that have tried to prevent me from succeeding. To the moments of endurance that paved the way to this moment. To the ones from each island whose bravery made it this far. To my family who has raised a being who would like to continue on being a person of impact. Most of all to the one who created me and gave me everything I need for this life, JC. To the most direct version of myself that is everchanging and continually evolving. Thank you for helping me find and reclaim by identity in you.

Thank you.



Lindsey Kellogg

Dr. Flaherty

Thesis

18 April 2022

**Introduction:**

African American voices have been the main sources of influence on society and culture. Having long dealt with systemic racism, our culture has been accepted but, racially we have been rejected. This has taken place through the use of unjust justice systems and systemic racism. For this reason, it is important that African Americans speak up and reclaim their voices in this new age North American era. Not only are their voices important, but the stories that lie behind the voices are what need to be amplified. With the application of postcolonial theory, this thesis takes modern stories located in North America depicting racist behavior towards African Americans from the year 1970 to present day New York City in order to fully amplify the process of social struggle. As these narratives are passed down through generations serving as a platform to understanding their identity, the realization of reclamation is present within the African American community. Reclamation is the reclaiming of one's identity and true state of being.

This thesis argues that African Americans reject the colonization mindset and reclaim their identity of voice and culture through verbal and nonverbal communication. The colonization mindset is the mindset in which systemic racism, racial injustice, and exclusatory behaviors have been programmed into the mind of African Americans in order to strip them of

their culture resulting in the automatic suppressional obedience of the colonizer's way of life. Verbal communication is the use of "the vocal tract, the larynx and the auditory systems to optimize mutual comprehension in our ancestors" ("Verbal Communication" 31). While the use of non-verbal communication translates to the "power of suggestion...from the implicit promise that our body has its own language which we can read, revealing sender's hidden secrets" (Hall & Knapp 69). These messages come in the form of bodily movement and eye contact. In conversation with both Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's "Decolonizing the Mind" we will explore how African Americans reclaim their identities through voice in Regina Taylor's *Crowns* and eye contact in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*. The film adaptation of *If Beale Street Could Talk* directed by Barry Jenkins, is the tertiary text in this conversation. This adaptation will act as an extension of the original literature text by Baldwin. Aiding as a visual text to help assist in the definition of nonverbal communication and intimate experience that amplifies the African American use of voice in relation to reclaiming identity.

These two major texts, *Crowns* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, are the academic pillars of art on which this argument stands. The first chapter will begin by dissecting, addressing and amplifying the reclamation of identity and salvation through voice. While the second chapter will address, dissect, and amplify the reclamation of love and identity through non-verbal cues. Both Spivak and Ngũgĩ will reside in each of the chapters giving a close reading and illumination to the argument. For this context, Spivak will be synonymous with the idea of non-verbal communication whereas Ngũgĩ will be synonymous with verbal. *Crowns* will be synonymous with verbal communication and *If Beale Street Could Talk* will be synonymous with non-verbal communication. The main theme is reclamation of voice. This is a crucial lens to peer through

because it addresses racism, communication, and connection. All of which are key players in the path of reconnecting with one's true identity. These are present to not only break the African American mindset out of colonization, but to also help amplify their stories.

Underneath the pillars of verbal and non-verbal communication, agency and advocacy are present to further illuminate the additional importance of allyship within the reclamation of African American identity. Allyship is the support and acceptance of African American identity. Identity is a core form of the African American being that contains the ancestral DNA of one's historical and cultural context. Agency is the space given to African Americans to express themselves. Advocacy is the support of African Americans. Advocates are the operational role allies have, with permission from African Americans, to speak on their behalf. The use of both agency and advocacy are key ideas that bring to life the verbal and non-verbal use of social and intimate communication. Communication is connection. This is done through the additional lenses of the importance of allyship, agency, and advocacy. For clarity, the terms African American and people of color will be synonymous in this text. The use of verbal and non-verbal communication will be heavily linked and synonymous with agency and advocacy. It is verbal within the context of the musical, where as it is non-verbal in the novel and film. The element of live theatre allows us to dive deeper into the vocal and verbal amplification of the African American voice. The film visually aids the viewer in intimately experiencing the non-verbal communication, while the novel uses the written word to also amplify the African American voice as well.

Within Chapter One, Regina Taylor's musical, *Crowns* as stated above, is synonymous with the idea of verbal communication. The story of Yolonda, our young African American protagonist, is expressed is through the use of song. Being a musical, it is crucial that the story is

told out loud. Ngũgĩ will be the main theorist I will be in conversation with in this chapter. I will once more amplify the importance of the use of verbal expression out loud. Spivak will add by reaffirming that this marginalized group or subaltern can speak out loud to use their voice for change. The idea Subaltern will be a present idea that will remain in this full text as a call to action or challenge. This term is synonymous with African American identity due to this identity being a form of other, not white. Subaltern is a form of identity. Subalternity is an additional category of Subaltern, which “refers to a condition of subordination brought about by colonization or other forms of economic, social, racial, linguistic, and/or cultural dominance” (“Duke University Press”). Deeming the audience accountable to answer the moral question of whether or not one should speak out; the Subaltern is used in this chapter to reaffirm that African Americans can speak out verbally. The platform of voice is expressed through the verbal lens that has several faces that speak to the ongoing historical injustice.

The story of Yolonda’s reclamation of African American identity and spiritual salvation is told through song, rap, and verbally through speech and additional verbal variations of communication. This communication is brought forth through the agency and advocacy given to and reclaimed by her female mentors. As these women of color guide Yolonda to her salvation, they give her permission to reclaim her own identity through the telling of their own stories. As they lead by example, Yolonda’s identity is reclaimed. Fully rejecting the colonization mindset, her voice is once more amplified out loud. This chapter will amplify the reclamation of identity and salvation through voice. Spivak and Ngũgĩ push to assist the importance of using one’s voice out loud to speak up.

Within Chapter Two, James Baldwin’s novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*, is synonymous with the idea of non-verbal communication. As an extension of the novel, Barry Jenkins’ 2018

film adaptation, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is the cinematic forefront of this conversation. The story of Tish and Fonny, young African American lovers, is expressed through the use of visually intimate cues. These cues include eye contact, bodily movement, and physical touch. Being a film, it is crucial that the story is told through the non-verbal visual context of acting and camera work. Additionally, the novel has heavy commentary due to the original text being written word and not spoken. This will further confirm the idea of non-verbal communication being just as crucial to the argument above. Spivak will be the main theorist I will be in conversation with in this chapter.

I will once more amplify the importance of the use of non-verbal expression through bodily movement. Spivak will add to the conversation by reaffirming that this marginalized group can speak in different ways. The term Subaltern is used in this chapter to challenge the idea that African Americans can speak out non-verbally. The Subaltern known for not speaking, will change its stance revealing the ability to speak in an unconventional way. This further amplifies the confirmation that they can speak out in different ways. Non-verbal in nature the use of allies and advocates make heavy stances in this chapter to aid in the subaltern speaking out in an alternate medium to use their voice for social change. The Subaltern is used cinematically in this chapter to reaffirm that African Americans can speak out non-verbally through the use of allies and eye contact. The platform of voice in the context is expressed through the verbal lens that has several faces to it.

Using all of these theorists and text in conversation it will further amplify my argument that African Americans reject the colonization mindset and reclaim their identity of voice and culture through verbal and nonverbal communication. It is important that we take a deeper look into these ways of rejecting the colonization mindset in order to assist African Americans in the

reclamation of their voices. The stories displayed here, directly confirm the argument as well as push the subaltern call to action “Can the subaltern really speak?” The term subaltern will be in full connection with the term African American in relation to identity. These theorists, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, both deal with major themes of societal rejection and acceptance that add to the conversation above. Challenging the use and importance of voice the following chapters fully emerge into the importance of voice and its entire communicative expression to reclaim African American identity. Deeming the audience accountable to answer the moral question of whether or not one should speak out, we are held accountable. As a result, we the reader, take on the role of allyship.

**Chapter One: Crowns**

In Regina Taylor's text, *Crowns*, the African American identity is tested, challenged and reclaimed. Through the retelling of stories and use of verbal communication the voice of Yolonda is amplified. The stories are the most important forefront of this amplification. These histories assist the young Yolonda on her path to salvation. The play itself is synonymous with verbal communication. The world of the play is the main source of verbal communication and its purpose is to speak out loud. The protagonist uses her voice to express herself as she continues to fight the colonization mindset that is plaguing her to assimilate in the midst of the loss of her twin brother. Trauma is a major factor that attempts to silence Yolonda from occupying her verbal space. Yet, throughout the show her amplification becomes louder and louder. Her thoughts are verbally put on display for the audiences to hear and experience from her within the live performance. The show opens with one form of verbal communication—rap. Rap is the first verbal medium of vocal context the audience is introduced to in order to connect with Yolonda as she uses her voice for the first time.

Rap music itself has had a major impact on African American Culture. This form of vocal communication is “the most influential cultural movement...from a scholarly perspective”

(Gansinger 14). This scholarly perspective comes from not only the creative mind of Taylor, but also the theorists in conversation with her. Myself, Ngũgĩ and Spivak are all coupled together to dissect the importance of rap in *Crowns*. Rap is important because it speaks to the larger demographic of people of color familiar with this form of music. African Americans within, this text, have a connection to this form of musical speech. Yolonda uses it to express herself to the audience and others around her. Rap also links her deeply to her religious purpose. Rap is the physical word that connects her to the verbal impartation of her ancestors that have spoken over her. Rap is spiritual, “The influence of religion and spirituality on Rap music” is a present idea within this musical (Gansinger 25). It acts as a guide to lead her to her identity. This identity is found within her salvation as she identifies with her religious heritage, derived from Christianity and Yoruba religion.

The use of rap music is coupled with the importance of storytelling. Within each act of the show Yolonda increases her connectivity to her past experiences through the expression of rap. This impact of rap music is a direct medium linking her to the use of her voice to verbally tell her life experience. This is important because this form of sharing is jeopardized due to trauma. She has the opportunity to be silenced in the face of trauma, but rap allows her to connect with herself in her body movements, vocally, and spiritually. This also gives her full agency to express her traumas and emotions as she processes them outwardly. It allows her to create in the face of trauma, mirroring God creating her. Christianity emphasizes the power of speaking out loud and how God used it create the world. This outward expression is a healthy form of processing her grief and connection with God.

The use of spoken word is also a verbal form Yolonda uses to communicate with her emotions. Here, spoken word and rap are not the same in delivery. Rap is a form of words put to



music and is assisted with rhythm and beats. While, spoken word is spoken individually to help lead the listener to a more spiritual truth. The connection of spoken word to the religious context in the play is linked to spirituality. Spoken word is spiritual as well. The triad of verbal cues comes in the form of singing. Singing is a large part of the movement of story telling within this musical. Call and response is a form of singing present within this text as the cast members sing out, “*Eşe O Baba eşe*” to which they respond, “*Eşe O Baba*” (Taylor 3). This mirrors their connections with their ancestral roots as they declare “We thank you, Father we thank you” and respond “We thank you Father.” Derived from enslaved field hands, verbal call and responses were an exchange of different vocal cues. These cues included instructions to alert of their colonizer approaching and additional messages. These were also used to verbally pass down stories and express feelings of grief.

The women of color, familiar with grief in this play, heavily use this technique to pass stories down to Yolonda. The use of field hollers is also used by Yolonda as she participates within the verbal expression of her own grieving process. The use of call and response also brings the notion of spirituality back into the conversation allowing it to be crowned as spiritual in nature as well. Even though Yolonda is not enslaved she is still dealing with the metaphorical chains of griefs trying to silence and enslave her. This form of theoretical slavery is the colonization mindset attempting to keep her from reclaiming and reconnecting with her identity. The use of rap, spoken word, verbal impartation, call and response, and singing are all forms of verbal communication that assist her as she is freed from suppression. These elements walk directly alongside Yolonda as she regains her confidence to reclaim her identity.

The African American identity is first tested, as our protagonist first establishes where her identity resides, “Teddy my brother/Myself I see /When I look into his eyes /No need to

worry/No need to disguise” is the declaration of identity in the form of a human (Taylor 2). Here Taylor is relaying that Yolonda finds her identity within her brother. The connection between them is amplified as she is deliberate with her movement and verbally places her identity within him. Yolonda and Teddy are so close that they are like “twins” (Taylor 2). The importance of a twin is to mirror one’s personality and to house your partner’s identity. Here the term partner means other half of a relationship. This is not romantic, but more so operational. Yolonda and Teddy move about with one another in sync as she declares, “he got my back whatever mess I get in” (Taylor 2). This means that as she starts a task, he comes to finish it. This is their sibling support shown through protective bonding within the text. This mirror relationship comes to a shatter to test Yolonda’s vocal ability to express herself as she is plagued with the grief of the tragic loss of her brother (Taylor 3). The loss of her brother forces her to recognize that she has also lost a form of her identity. This example illuminates that African Americans cannot reclaim their identity if it has not been lost or taken away.

Yolonda establishes her reclamation of identity by placing her comfort in origin and identity she states, “Brooklyn New York/That’s where I was born /Brooklyn New York/ That’s where I belong” (Taylor 2). This confirms that African American identity is tied to geographical location, but is not defined by it. She is taking claim to the specific location in order to vocally mirror her passion for her home. This first verbal expression acts as a mirrored image into her thoughts. The world of the play flips on its own axis to give the audience access into her internal thoughts. The power of this amplification is pushed through the outward expression of her freedom in using her voice to set the stage. Here in the introduction, we are introduced to two main ideas. The first being that Yolonda is already outside of the mind of colonization as she states, “You can be an individual there/Do what you want nobody care” (Taylor 2). This acts as

the anthemic rise of understanding that is her not adhering of assimilating to any type of cultural norm as she expresses her freedom of expression rooted and experienced in Brooklyn, New York. The second presented is the idea of her dissecting, addressing and amplifying the reclamation of identity and salvation through the claim of this geographical location as home.

Additionally, the connection to her lifestyle and comfort is explicitly expressed to inform the audience of where her internal thoughts and behavioral patterns reside. The idealistic place of Brooklyn, New York is projected to the audience. Yolonda establishes, this is “where I belong”



*Figure 2. Yolonda mourning the loss of her brother Teddy.*

as she restates her geographical location of Brooklyn, New York as home (Taylor 2). The repetition of this phrase is significant to show the importance of her persistence to be heard on this point of her origin with the implication that she will not be moving. She associates the assertive declaration of telling the audience where she belongs in efforts to prevent the movement to her grandmother’s house out of state. This state, is not only a physical state from

New York to South Carolina, it is also a theatrical and mental state of comfort and stability in the midst of a traumatic time in her life. Here their relationship with identity is amplified through her voice. The relationship between her and her twin brother Teddy acts as an additional mirror to reveal the importance of connection between

African Americans. As seen in *Figure 2.*, here we see depicted Yolonda mourning the loss of her brother. The narrative of their sibling history is verbally put on display in order to reveal her vulnerable moment of connection. “Myself I see when I look into his eyes no need to worry no need to disguise” is Yolonda establishing her identity and finding herself within her brother Teddy (Taylor 2). There is no question of hesitation here when it comes to her love for her brother. Taylor used this connection to establish the meaning of relationship and the placement of African American identity found within them. It is clear that identity lies within relationship. Here is where their relationship full of identity shifts from connected to disconnected. This impartation is the moment of challenging and breaking of her connection to him through the vicious life cycle of racial injustice and gang violence that claimed Teddy’s life.

Here their relationship is revealed in the world of the natural. In real time Yolonda is in heavy reflection about her loss in identity. Teddy and her identity are synonymous. The death of her brother results in the death or figurative loss of her own identity. Standing in vocal amplification of establishing her identity prior, Taylor allows the protagonist’s identity to be lost and challenged. Still seeking if she will regain it, the slate of reclamation is set. As the introduction concludes Yolonda confesses, “To Grandma’s house” (Taylor 3). This confessional is the realization that her identity has been placed somewhere else. Her verbal resistance is now in the shift to considering her relocation as a form of reclamation. The diasporatic element of moving from North to South is present within the text. North is viewed as a form of freedom where its inverse, the South, is a form of suppression and slavery. This historically was the case for run way slaves and enslaved people in the midst of that form of colonization. Weary about the potential change, she also reflects on the potential relationship she has with her faith. Faith and religion are synonymous here. It is implied that her grandmother has a strong tie to

Christianity due to the words directionally pointed to imply that she is going to her grandmother's house to consider her "sins" (Taylor 3). This is signifying that her journey in to southern migration is tied to a form of repentance of her actions as she prior referred to herself as being "buck wild" (Taylor 2). Here Taylor is setting the stage to allow Yolonda to reclaim her identity and move through her journey of salvation ending in a form of redemption. This time, her identity is not found within her brother, but in her relationship with God.

Religion is a pathway to the reclamation of African American identity within this context. Through the use of songs, hymns, and negro spirituals this type of identity is found. Not only is religion tied to the heavy impartation, but it stands as an active vocal guide. In relation to religious context each is also synonymous with an Orisha. The term Orisha is an African term derived from Yoruba. These are spirit guides that embody and lead them verbally on a spiritual path to find their identities. This African origin exists in the face of racial push back in the challenge within these characters to reject the colonization mindset. Within the text, African American ancestors derived from Yoruba or Yorubaland which is located in West Africa. Here a mix of several different religions are mixed together to create Yoruba faith. The midst of the Atlantic slave trade was forced to reject all forms of their life styles and religion. Their colonizer then superimposed their own religion, Christianity. So, their ancestors are not foreign to the idea is mixing religious beliefs to create a new one. Yet, this caused the marrying of both Yoruba culture and the new form of colonized Christianity. For this reason, the culture of both the colonizer and Yoruba is super imposed within the descendants of this text.

In relations to the religious origin of the ancestors mention above, the colonization mindset is still at play. In efforts to reject the mainstream and colonizer their religious beliefs the characters tell dual stories of origin. The religion living in the script takes the form of Orishas.

Each woman is directly connected with an Orisha or spiritual personality. These Orishas impact their story telling and influence their decision making. The Orisha is the establishing of historical identity. Orisha is synonymous with identity and temperament. Within the text the connections are: Wanda – Oshun, Jeanette – Yemaya, Velma – Oya, Yolonda – Ogun, Mother Shaw – Obatala, Mabel – Shango, and Man – Elegba. These personalities help them to achieve their goals of mentorship. Ibeji, is an additional orishas identity shared for twins Teddy and Yolonda. The Orisha is a direct tie to African American culture. As their Yoruban roots emerge, these temperaments use their voices to verbally speak out loud. They echo calls and responses to signal the other Orishas of their spiritual presence. The call is a verbal expression, acting as a trigger and sign, that reclamation is on the rise for Yolonda. While the response, is the spiritual movement that moves the story of her salvation forward.

African Americans within, *Crowns*, feel a call within themselves to speak out and express themselves verbally. This call is channeled through the presence of their Orishas. The Orishas translate over as helpers while also allowing the women to have a real-time, present day, relationship with God. Formally recognized in Christianity, the tradition of going to church is present. The use of hats as agency is also amplified to form an opinion and social hierarchy amongst the women in the church setting. This is shown through the continual expression of them recounting memories of church. The historical meaning of wearing a hat is expressed through Mother Shaw as she shares, “if you had something you wanted to show off and be in style, you'd wear it to church” (Taylor 7). This reveals the importance of hats as a lead accessory in terms of Church culture.

The hats are a form of identity. The women of color are leading Yolonda to deeply identify with this belief in a religious setting. Each woman mentor Yolonda through the telling

of their own story in relation to their hat history. These stories also contain major historical context that link back to moments within the Civil Rights Movement (Taylor 43). For example, as First Lady Mabel shares, “Some students would go in and sit at the “Whites Only” lunch counter and some like me, would march outside with picket signs” (Taylor 43). This reveals that their identities are found through the connection of their voice and cultures as they use their voices for social change. This form of social justice is present within each story and as a result Yolonda chooses to trust their hat culture as her own form of reclamation and identity.

Yolonda’s identity comes equipped with challenge she is moves to establish a new form of identity. Here her identity is found in clothes and physical expression. Yet, her ideal reclamation is the expression of herself through fashion. Within verbal context she declares, “Created my own/Way of clothes” (Taylor 2). Here the importance the creation of fashion and outward appearance is declared. Yolonda expresses her identity through the use of wearing different forms of clothing. She is even introduced to the use of hats as a form of identity as when she says, “cap or a derby on” (Taylor 2). This is the presence of hats as a form of identity present in her life before her transition.



*Figure 15. Mother Shaw in her Orisha form, directing the Orishas to celebrate Yolonda's salvation.*

The reclamation of identity within Taylor’s musical contains connections between the women on stage. The use of each song challenges the connection to salvation more and more.

Within the social context of church, Hattitude is a verbal idea of hat and attitude introduced to Yolonda that enables the women of color to freely speak and express themselves in church and their communities. Verbally, the women lend stories of identity to Yolonda guiding the way. Hinting, “*Hattitude is something you have to possess...*” (Taylor 13). The hats are personified to also give agency to these women of color. Each woman within the script is specially assigned a specific color. Depicted in *Figure 15.*, The following are the hat colors assigned to each woman of color in the cast: Wanda identifies with gold and yellow; Jeanette identifies with blue, Velma identifies with purple, Yolonda identifies with green and gold, Mother Shaw (Yolonda’s Grandmother) identifies with white, Mabel identifies with red and white, and Elegba (the one male) identifies with red and black. The colors of the hats are also linked to the corresponding Orishas mentioned above as well proving there is connection in the spiritual realm with the color of spirit guides. This leads to the role of each orisha’s assigned temperament to contain the color of identity as well.

The hats are given space to express themselves in color but also through the medium of personification. The hats are described with life like qualities and movements as Taylor reveals, “If the hats liked what the preacher said, they’d bob up and down. If the hats liked a song, they’d sway from side to side. If a hat thought a young lady wasn’t doing what she ought to be doing, it would whip around in your direction. And if a hat was *really* angry with you, its brim would dip just above a mother’s eyes, and those could be some *fierce* eyes” (Taylor 24).

The hat’s physical nature, can be deemed as non-verbal, the hat still speaks. Personified it is giving the space to speak for and with these women to amplify their voices. This is the hat theoretically speaking to situations. The hats act a disciplinary protector watching over the



church goers. This is specially hinted at as the hats assume the role of guardian or a form of a mother watching children. The disciplinary nature is corrective to bring order and growth, which mirrors the role of Orishas as well. The hats are more than accessories, they are key personalities and protectors of identities as they sit on the crown of these characters heads.

Yolonda lastly reclaims her identity at the end of the show. As she states, “We just know inside that we’re queens. And these are the crowns we wear” her quest for the reclamation of identity finally is achieved and celebrated (Taylor 47). Her identity is deemed royalty in the eyes of God, herself, mentors and peers. This only solidifies the notion that these hats are a symbol of royalty and this is the identity reclaimed here. Crowns, also the title of the text in conversation, is a term used to refer to a hat. It also holds meaningful impact and identity. Mother Shaw states, “Our crowns have been bought and paid for, all we have to do is wear them” (Taylor 7). This is the direct correlation between what goes on your head and identity. The direct implication that your hat makes you royalty. Placed within the religious context the crown is in tandem with the salvation Yolonda experiences.

In relation to the religious tie of crowns, African American identity it is further confirmed that all people have the ability to reclaim their identity. Here, once again, a crown is synonymous with identity. Both Mother Shaw and Jeanette declare, “I got a crown. You got a crown/Alla God’s Children got crowns /When I get to heaven/ Gonna Put on my crown” as a confirmation that crowns are for everyone, but it is African American’s choice to accept who they are in order to wear it ( Taylor 49). These notions also confirm that being a child of God makes one royal. This self-realization does not come without struggle and forms of resistance. In the reclaiming comes the negative colonization of the mind coming to suppress and discourage African

Americans from realizing their full potential. These voices locked behind hidden identities are waiting to be uncovered by additional voices.

The voices of suppression, negativity, and bullying are present in Yolonda's school setting as she verbally and visually expresses her differences. She is met with the backlash and verbal insults of her peers. She is verbally harassed by the students of her school. As they call her a "witch" and a "voodoo woman" she learns that this journey is not without cost (Taylor 27). This cost is the social acceptance of her peers within this racist society. Yolonda relates to Ngũgĩ's words, "as one of the most humiliating experiences" as she navigates through this verbal assault (Thiong'o 11). "The physical violence of the battlefield...followed by the psychological violence of the classroom" is the price Yolonda finds out must be paid in order to reside in this new space (Thiong'o 9). Here the colonization mind is active.

The moral societal pull places pressure for African American voices to assimilate as she connects with Ngũgĩ as he states, "I went to a colonial school. The language of my education was no longer the language of my culture" (Thiong'o 11). The separation of identity is made and reveals itself in her academic setting through bullying and disrespect. Two elements that African Americans have experienced for centuries. Yolonda can connect with Ngũgĩ about feeling out of place in a colonial educational setting due to the lack of receptive posture displayed by her peers. The importance to verbally speak up and out is locked into place as Yolonda reclaims her voice by declaring to her suppressors, "'You tried to make me change but I'm still me. I've had worse than this trifling teasing and I'm not going to crack.' They backed off after that.'" (Taylor 28). Here we see the full rejection of our protagonist defect the engulfing body of colonization that African Americans fight every day. Fully successful the moment is ensured that her identity is on her way back to her. This element of speaking out is important because it allows for the "voice

less” to verbally stand up for themselves in the face of any time of scrutiny and reclaim their vocal space.

Ngũgĩ’s direct point in “Decolonizing the Mind” is stating that African people have been colonized to the point of the “rejection of our own mother tongue and language” (Thiong’o 7). African Americans “prefer” to speak in a European language, English out of fear of societal rejection and systemic clause. This was also a learned form of communication not from the mother tongue, but from the colonizer successful in their efforts. There is a heavy implication of truth to this such as “any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded” (Thiong’o 12). This means that the use of English instead of a native tongue was rewarded and preferred in both the educational and societal settings. In review of society’s elitist views Ngũgĩ’s adds, “English was the official vehicle and the magic formula to colonial elitedom” (Thiong’o 12). This idea of elitedom or elite is synonymous with the use of the English language in order to mainstream all communication to reflect white counterparts.

These elements reveal themselves within Taylor’s text. The call and responses of the Native African Language of Yoruba are proclaimed through song, “*Eṣe O Baba eṣe.*” Met with the response, “*Eṣe O Baba*” (Taylor 3). Both sung, this verbal act of call and response is what makes it so important of amplifying one’s mother tongue. The issue, is still that the need to adhere and assimilate to colonizing customs brings both an issue of originality and national pride. These actions take the form of translating the meaning to English for the colonized society to understand. This leads back to the point of the colonizer mindset still desires to control the African Diaspora in order to mainstream it back to muted culture.

Racism is the container that drives racially rejecting behavior. African Americans are met with a form of scrutiny that has many faces. In relation this North American context from New

York to South Carolina, the divorcing of African American identity is amplified. I would also like to submit as well that it is a choice, under certain circumstances, to assimilate into a European culture in order to thrive through a society that has negative bias towards African Americans. This is not a direct choice to abandon one's identity, but a survival tactic taken on by generations of people of color in the United States. This drives the notion that there is a culture and identity that needs to be reclaimed. As stated previously, African Americans cannot reclaim something that has not been taken in the first place. I would like to clarify that African Americans do not desire to have identity and culture taken from them. The desire is not present. Peppered with Spivak's challenge of moral question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" having been concluded that the subaltern cannot speak, I answer yes. The subaltern can speak. Within the paly, Yolonda is considered subaltern in several different facts such as school and church, but she speaks anyway breaking the stereotype that the subaltern cannot speak. She is othered, but still moves forward and verbally expresses herself. The Subaltern is synonymous with the African American identity, as previously mentioned. Here, the importance of speaking up and out about suppression, mistreatment, and racism is present and strong. They are succeeding in doing this with their use of verbal competency, but this is not without the assistance of allies as well.

The women of color are a direct source of advocacy. This translates, "to the question of woman as subaltern...female agency" is deliberately present through the use of storytelling (Spivak 78). These stories are the forms of oral tradition cultures are kept alive by being passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next (Hamlet 27). Here is it shown that African American communities are supportive of one another. The strength and close relationships Yolonda have with these women gives her full permission to find her own identity in the face of

scrutiny and trauma. These women of color guide Yolonda to her salvation. They do so by giving her permission to reclaim her own identity through the telling of their own stories. This is an avenue of healing and reclamation that reaffirms that that this marginalized group or subaltern can speak out loud to use their voice for change. They just need the right advocates to help them and speak out, verbally on their behalf.

Agency is also coupled with these ideals of allyship. Here in the text the hats act as a form of agency. They act as the transfer of agency between certain social situations and the women who wear the hats. For example, these situations range from religious to political. Religious in nature, “Church was the only place slaves were allowed to congregate. And after slavery there were "Whites Only" signs everywhere. So, if you had something you wanted to show off and be in style, you'd wear it to church” (Taylor 7). This statement also doubles as political in nature to reveal the harsh reality of segregation and racism. The historical context of hats as advocates dates back to these segregated times. There is historical context and connection to these hats and their stories. The importance of their personification amplifies, as they double themselves as advocates. The hats speak for themselves. The hat is viewed as subaltern as well. Can the hat speak? Yes, it can speak for itself, on behalf of others and volumes. The hat does not verbally speak, but its presence speaks volumes on behalf of the one wearing it. These hats tell stories that carry the weight of history and the hope of the future. Its amplification is the drive needed in connection with reclamation of historical identity.

In conclusion, *Crowns* is synonymous with the idea of verbal communication. The narrative importance of storytelling and speaking out are elements showcased in the African American experience. Expressed through the use of song, rap, spoken word and hymns Yolonda is a finite example of an African Americans reclaiming their identity and culture through verbal

communication. It is crucial that the story is told out loud. Ngũgĩ commented that we reject our native tongue in order to fit in. Spivak added that we see the subaltern and its extension of subalternity as not speaking. Yet, again, the choice to reject the colonizer's tongue is present to a degree and the subaltern can speak out loud in this context. Once more amplifying the importance of the use of verbal expression out loud. Spivak reaffirms this continually in compliment to this chapter's conversation. Subaltern is a present idea that remains in its full textual form. In this text subaltern revealed itself as synonymous with African Americans and their identity. Deeming the audience accountable to answer the moral question of whether or not one should speak out. The moral question is also answered in confirming that one should, especially in the face of injustice. The Subaltern is used in this chapter to reaffirm that African Americans can speak out verbally.

The platform of voice in the context is expressed through the verbal lens that has several faces to it. This communication brought forth agency and advocacy through her female mentors. These women of color aided Yolonda to her salvation and gave her permission to reclaim her own identity. Rejecting the colonization mindset, her voice is once more amplified out loud. It is important to note that the use of choices also appeared in this chapter to comment on taking of one's cultural identity. Here the point was proven that African Americans reject the colonization mindset and reclaim their identity of voice and culture through verbal communication. No longer attached to the ideal of the colonization mindset. The verbal use of their voices to set themselves free from suppressive thought processes results in verbal freedom for African Americans as the subaltern.

## **Chapter Two: *If Beale Street Could Talk***

Within this chapter's conversation, *If Beale Street Could Talk* is represented through two main pieces of art. The first is the 2018 Film adaptation, directed by Barry Jenkins. While second is the novel written by James Baldwin. These two adaptations when examined through the lens Spivak, declare that eye contact and non-verbal communication directly relate to the subaltern speaking. Theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak introduces the term Subaltern within her text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Subaltern is used to describe suppressed and marginalized groups that have been racially excluded from a society. Here this term, subaltern, is used to describe African Americans regarding their experiences with racism in North America, especially in New York City.

Our conversation with Baldwin, Jenkins, and Spivak amplifies the confirmation that African Americans speak out non-verbally through the use of eye contact, allies, and bodily movements. Additionally, the use of allies and advocates take direct stances in this chapter to aid

in the subaltern speaking out. The allies' voices are a key part of this process to impact social change. The term Subaltern remains fully woven in this full text as a call to action or challenge to the reader. Deeming the audience accountable to answer the moral question of whether or not one should speak out against racial injustice towards people of color. The Subaltern is identified cinematically through the use of camera work and intentional eye contact. This chapter reaffirms that African Americans can speak out non-verbally. Allies within both texts, the film and novel, are important assets to African Americans doing so. African Americans speak out non-verbally through the assistance of eye contact and allyship.



Figure 3. Tish and Fonny resist as Officer Bell grabs them, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 2018.

In addition, for contextual purposes the idea of non-verbal will be depicted as the following; the notion of non-verbal in relation to the film will be explored and explained through eye contact and bodily movement. This analysis addresses the

underlying social subtext of why certain characters look at *each* other while others look away. The idea of *looking away* from someone or something is shown in racially charged situations. For example, the Italian grocery store clerk chooses to visually engage with Officer Bell as he is posing a threat as he physical grabs Tish and Fonny (*If Beale Street* 01:20:08— 01:20:15). The idea of looking away is translated to avoiding or ignoring an uncomfortable event that should be addressed as an active bystander, such as racism or abuse. The avoidance of eye contact in this



film is all present as it reveals itself to be non-verbal while additional sense of fear and grief are heightened in this moment. While its counterpart, the novel, will be used to express non-verbal communication through the written word—manuscript. Written words are not audible unless they are verbally spoken out loud. When a book is physically opened, the words, themselves don't audibly say anything, but the meaning says everything. For clarity, these terms have been laid out to help further explain the flow and connective meaning of the use of eye contact as a non-verbal medium in the film; while the novel is expressing its ties to intimacy and non-verbal communication through the written word.

Moving as one thought, the idea of “Beale Street” is brought to life by the strong tie it has to African American Identity. Identity plays a major role within this story to reveal the reclamation of identity through allyship. Identity through allyship is synonymous with the idea of non-verbal communication due to it being in the presence of eye contact and body language. It is the non-verbal mouthpiece that drives the connection between Clementine Rivers (Tish) and Alonzo Hunt (Fonny) to reveal that African Americans can speak in different ways, other than verbally. In the novel, the reader is already plagued with the question, what is Beale Street and why is it significant? Baldwin crowns Beale Street as the diasporic home of every African American when he expresses, “Every black person born in America was born on Beale Street” (If Beale Street Could Talk 00:00:45). There is a diasporatic movement that occurs within the text. Moving within the lines of postcolonial theory, the migration from South to North is made. This migration represents a suppressive freedom through the use of allies. Moving from south to north is a historical movement representing African American liberation leading to a form of freedom for slavery. Here the slavery is the suppression of identity through the non-verbal use of vocal expression. The freedom is attained through the assistance of racial allies.

The inspiration of the novel's name and greater conceptual idea is derived from the physical location of Beale Street in Memphis Tennessee. Baldwin is reconnecting African Americans to the idea of home. He is calling Beale Street their home. Beale street is more than just one location, "The black neighborhood of some American City, whether Jackson, Mississippi, or in Harlem, New York" (If Beale Street Could Talk 00:00:47). He is saying that our home moves and is present in the idea of "legacy" and "Black neighborhoods" (If Beale Street Could Talk 00:00:47). This heavy emphasis on the origin of the African American location of home is the reconnection of African American identity. Out of this identity he echoes, "Beale Street is our legacy" (If Beale Street Could Talk 00:00:49). As a novel, the non-verbal expression of James Baldwin's word set forth the world on the page, which translates to the channeling African American identity. This results in the reclamation of African American legacy. These quotes are visually seen on screen as the audience make eye contact which observes this important theory.

Beale Street as a film acts as, "something of a sight" (Baldwin 81). It is the visual push to that helps the audience understand non-verbal communication as intimate. The intimacy is the most important aspect that Tish and Fonny fight to keep alive within the film. We see the "desire" each of the lovers holds in their eyes through the film (Spivak 74). This eye contact is made so prevalent by Baldwin that the film opens up with the two of them intimately and visually connecting as they stare into each other's eyes. (Jenkins 00:02:07—00:02:31). Further proving their love is strong. The use of eye contact is a direct connection to intimacy with the film. Eye contact is a link to African American identity. It acts as a bridge between two people to express their connection and communication, non-verbally.

“...it is more appropriate to speak of “gaze direction,” since what was measured was whether the subject looked up, regardless of whether the other person was looking back...gazed all the time at the subject, so that gaze-direction is the same as eye contact” (Argyle and Dean 290).

When Tish reveals the news of her pregnancy to Fonny she makes direct eyes contact with him (Jenkins 00:03:09—00:04:01). This implementation of gaze direction is a common occurrence within the film. Here we see it as play as she directs her gaze at her lover. Baldwin’s novel reveals the context of her thoughts, “I hope nobody ever has to look at somebody they love through glass” (Baldwin 4). Her expression here helps the reader see the love in her eyes for Fonny.

As he is wrongfully detained, Fonny looks back at her as her thought continues, “I don’t know why people always look down when they talk through a telephone, but they always do. You have to remember to look up at the person you’re talking to (Baldwin 4). The focus of this statement emphasizes the importance of intentionality with eye contact. As Tish talks on the phone this realization of internality and connection sets in. The idea of direct connective eye contact makes its link as she visually checks in with her lover. Here her thoughts are non-verbal and we see her identity within her lover. Her caring nature reveals that the love she has for Fonny directly drives her need to visually connect with him because she finds her identity within their relationship. We see her place her identity in him with the confirmation of their connection through the physical intimacy they share, which has taken the form of a baby. Here two things are revealed, eye contact is intentional and real people reside in the prison system.

In addition, I submit that this type of conversation directly comments on African American identity by declaring that African American Identity cannot be fully reclaimed without

intimacy. It also cannot fully exist without intimacy. This intimacy can come in several forms, it is not always romantic. Intimacy can take on the role of friendship or familial love and caring for a person. This leads to the racial intimacy between allies. In both the text and film, we see the use of allies to defend the honor of these two lovers.



Figure 4. Mr. Hayward pleading with Tish and Mrs. Rivers on Fonny's behalf, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 2018.

First, we see Mr.

Hayward, a young Caucasian lawyer, fight on behalf of Fonny in the racist justice system.

There is push back about him assisting the family of color due to the racist social climate of New York in the early 1970s

(Beale Street 00:39:02—

00:41:35). Within this context we see Mr. Hayward guide Tish and her mother (Sharon Rivers) through the injustice being projected through Fonny's case. He is present and caring in these moments of distress for Tish and her mother. Not avoiding the issue of racism, he visually attempts to prove that he is not racist by stating, "if I didn't believe in Alonzo's innocence, I would never have taken this case" (If Beale Street 00:40:07 — 00:40:09). His care for Fonny through the use of direct eye contact is a visual aid to help the two women know he is on their side.

As Mr. Hayward tries to connect with them, he addresses Fonny not by his nickname, "Fonny", but his legal name, "Alonzo." This use of alternate names creates a potential racial and distal divide between Mr. Hayward and Tish as she becomes less trusting of him. Mr. Hayward

used Fonny's legal name to give Fonny agency and room to reclaim his identity by addressing him as a real person via the use of his given name. Disapproving this attempt, Tish objects and states, "call Him Fonny...if you're gonna do this, you gotta be family" (If Beale Street 00:40:09—00:40:34). Here Tish pushes that when his names are used this way all she can see are, "the judge and the bars and the chains" (If Beale Street 00:40:18—00:40:22). This scene brings a direct theme of sight into the conversation. Sight, whether that is physical, theoretical, or imaginative is a heavy weight to navigate within this context. The use of sight is important. Here it can be used negatively to foresee a negative outcome or positively to depict a positive reality. Names are also an important theme present.

On both sides of this racial divide, names communicate pride or dishonor of either party. The cultural misunderstanding between Tish and Mr. Hayward, though uncomfortable, was an opportunity for Mr. Hayward to learn about the African American identity found in nicknames. It is made clear that the use of Fonny's legal name Alonso, implies distance and lack of intimacy. In using his legal name, the divide is still present. Though not his intention, Mr. Hayward can still maneuverer as a Caucasian man without taking personal or direct responsibility for his client of color. The use of Alonso's nickname Fonny, brings Mr. Hayward closer to him. This form of intimacy allows him to take on the role of an additional family member and wear a type of intimacy that causes him to bear the weight of Fonny's imprisonment. Through this familial access Mr. Hayward takes on an additional level of allyship.

Levy is the secondary ally that is present within this text. Acting as their landlord he is in relationship with the two lovers (Tish and Fonny). This relationship is non-romantic friendship of mutual racial respect and care. The fight for their intimacy and love spans beyond themselves as social acquaintances fight for their intimacy verbal and non. Further adding the importance of

allyship is the effort to thrive in a racially rejecting society within the context and care of racial allies. These cameos of allies reveal themselves to have many different faces as well. For example, we are shown allyship verbally as their young landlord expresses, “he really supports them and loves to see young love blossom and bloom” (If Beale Street Could Talk 01:08:03—01:08:34). While in relationship and conversation with Tish and Fonny, Levy makes a clear distinction. He does not subscribe to racist beliefs. In efforts to prove this, he looks directly at the two lovers and states, “look man, it’s pretty simple with me. I dig people who love each other. Black, white, green, purple it doesn’t really matter to me” (If Beale Street 01:08:04—01:08:14). This verbal affirmation and powerful visual engagement of racial acceptance sparks a non-verbal visual moment of in many and reassurance between the lovers as they look at each other in relieve. This is moment to that speaks volumes to the importance of allyship. Especially in the context of allyship between African Americans and those of Jewish heritage.

The connection is the realization of identity and intimacy through social and racial

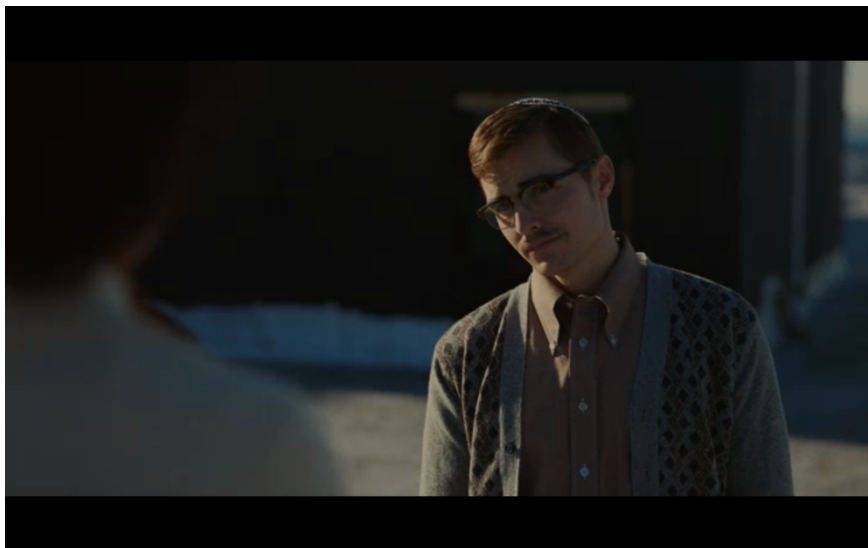


Figure 5. Levy sharing his views on racial equality and connecting with Tish and Fonny, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 2018.

acceptance is birthed out of a place of historical struggle. These two people groups are able to connect through the awareness and understand what exclusion is due to prejudice towards the color of their skin and racial background. They

share this connection of racial injustice. This is once more, confirmed by Levy stating, “I’m just

my mother's son...sometimes that's all that makes the difference between us and them" (If Beale Street 01:08:25—01:8:31). The use of "us" places Tish, Fonny, and Levy the same team, further confirming the allyship and intimacy of friendship they now share.

These moments are countered by the presence of Officer Bell within the story. He is the personification of racism and prejudice for African Americans in America. More direct to the context, he exists as these factors in the location of New York City. With his intentions to detain and provoke, he doesn't think twice before hissing to his racial profiled target, "I'm taking you down" (If Beal Street 01:20:04—01:20:04). Here his lack of clarification implies that he is intending to do more than just take Fonny down to the Police Station. The subtext here is that he is a racist police officer that wants to incarcerate innocent African American men.

Officer Bell's narrative is told through his hateful eye contact with Fonny in front of the grocery store (If Beale Street 01:19:13—01:19:59). We also see his eye contact with a direct visual aside he has with the camera. This acts as a visual aid to highlight his personality, revealing his unappealing stares and hateful non-verbal subtext of racism (If Beale Street 00:38:42—00:38:48). Met with the supporting this claim and exposing his dishonest nature Tish's mother, Mrs. Rivers, confirms with the attorney Mr. Hayward, "you're sayin' that that Officer Bell tells her what to say...There's no getting at the truth in this case?" (If Beale Street 00:39:52—00:40:00). This is all to which their allied attorney Mr. Hayward responds, "exactly" (If Beale Street 00:39:56). Further confirming the falsity, "Its Bell who swears he saw Alonzo running away from the scene of the crime" (If Beale Street –00:39:48). The focus on the use of eyes within this context is the key to understanding the racial divide. The use of the words, "saw" and "witness" only amplify the importance of eyes as a social justice visual aid. The eyes act as a form of justice standard and moral balance that are irrefutable in the eyes of the justice

system. This insinuates that if Officer Bell claims he “saw” someone he must be correct. The use of a lie and eye contact in the face of the justice system are deemed as absurd. This reflective context is in relation to Officer Bell being the “key witness” in this case of the rape of a Puerto Rican woman named Victoria Rogers, in which Fonny is falsely accused and incarcerated by Officer Bell (If Beale Street 00:39:33—00:39:36). She is not the only “key witness” as Officer Bell, without punishment, is revealed to have told her what to say in favor of his accusation against Fonny (If Beale Street 00:39:31). This further locks in the notion of his abuse of authority and negative agenda towards African Americans. He is the counterweight of allyship shown within this narrative, as he prevents African Americans to speak up for themselves and avoid incarceration.

Additionally, Tish and Fonny are shown the same allyship and kindness as the Italian grocery store clerk defends them from the antagonizing racial heckles of a police officer (If Beale Street Could Talk 01:20:42). His heckles are met with her declaring, “Oh, no you’re not!” (If Beale Street 01:20:13) The woman stands in between their danger and her store. She continues, “I know both these young people. They shop here very often. What the Young Lady has told you is the truth. I saw exactly what happened” (If Beale Street 01:20:16—01:20:23). Unphased by the racial ignorance of the police officer, her bravery continues to blossom as she stands in allyship to defend their honor. The use of the word “saw” is the same lever of moral compass used, but in this case justly as the grocer is telling the truth to defend Tish and Fonny against racism.

Even in the face of his disrespectful response, “That’s a funny way to run a business, lady” she rebukes him (If Beale Street 01:20:24). Stepping closer to him with direct eye contact she protects, “You’re not gonna tell me how to run my business” (If Beale Street 01:20:26).





Figure 6. Italian Grocer defends Tish and Fonny, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, 2018.

Reassuring him, “I was on this street long before you got here” and confirming “I will be here long after you are gone”, she puts the disrespectful officer back into his place (If Beale

Street 01: 20:29—

01:20:33). The use of her standing in between the two parties acts as the presence non-verbal communication. “Taking the stand is a risk” she is willing to take as she stands firm in her allyship (Nielson 76). Her allyship is fully engaged in this moment revealing her desire to protect African American voice and human rights. Additionally, her defending Tish and Fonny vocally is the verbal communication she exercises as an active bystander ally to assist the two in the reclamation of their identities.

Spivak’s comments on allyship revolve as follows, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak 78). She draws on the heavy questions. Within this context, the question translates into Can African American identity speak? The answer given through both texts from Baldwin and Jenkins say yes. Spivak is saying that the allies that show up in this story are also subaltern. They are known as “subaltern elite”, which is the deviation from an ideal (Spivak 80). Within the texts of *If Beale Street Could Talk* the ideal is known as racist before towards people of color. The “ideal” racism or identity is white. Here two out of the three allies identify as subaltern,

while all fall underneath three categories of elite subaltern due to their allyship and active bystander behavior towards people of color.

The society these three allies maneuver in is the wheel of pressure trying to get them to conform to a racist way of life. But here we see through actions stated above the three continue to rise and show up for their friends of color. Spivak continues by adding, “the people or subaltern...is itself defined as a difference from elite” (Spivak 80). This is an additional layer to reveal that moreover, the idea of elite is also associated with this idea of racial perfection or white, which is not how they identify. This form of perfection, in connection with the term elite also implies racism and hatred. Yet, another moral way of life that these three allies choose to fight against on behalf of their friends of color to help them regain their rights, culture, and vocal identity.

Spivak additionally connects the use of vocal unrest to clarify the importance of African American identity. Tish and Fonny hold a version of subalternity within themselves. This face of suppression speaks visually through the cinematic adaptation. With several examples of verbal and non, through the world of Baldwin’s reveals the subaltern can speak. She just speaks through many different ways. Not only can she speak but, she is updating her societal status from subaltern to free. Now this is by no means a commentary of gender, as much as it a commentary about race, racial injustice and social class. We see these communicational elements and their abusers appear which the context of their stories. The amplification of the importance of telling these stories is also expressed through the subaltern speaking. Using her voice to amplified those that have been historical silence, stifled and threatened by the systems set in place to muffle them. People of color within postcolonial American are dealing with the heightened racial cues set

forth by systemic racism. These stories make attributing to the understanding of their voices being passed down through generations and surviving through centuries.

In social alliance with the film adaptation, Barry Jenkins uses communication to highlight the connection of subtleties as they are amplified through life situations and marginalized groups. People of color are mainly present in these moments to full showcase a fuller meaning of what it means to use one's voice within the context and its underlying subtext. This is a cinematic take and subtext that further express and visually explains voice of a marginalized group through the use of non-verbal communication. These communications are camera movement and eye contact or directional gaze, as mentioned above. As the scenes guide the eyes through the communication the viewer is granted personal passes into the intimate moments of this identity of communication. Jenkins, helps the eye of humanity to further linger and interaction intimately with the use of this type of communication be taking on the role as a witness instead of an observer. Falling intimately into the role of ally, we see the connection, one more of this non-verbal identity and why its importance must continue to exist in the collection of its peers and verbal counterparts.

Baldwin conversates with the idea of subalternity as well, but in a different way. Here within the text, it is made clear that the use of thoughts and manuscript is the non-verbal communication in which African Americans connect and communicate. In efforts to express them themselves the use of the written word is a mode of storytelling. The written work has been under scrutiny due to the use of its own mother tongue according to Ngũgĩ (Thiong'o 6,7). Baldwin pushes forward in the continual writing of *If Beale Street Could Talk* as he highlights the written word used to introduce both the use of African American stories and colloquium. The

use of “Standard English” is not the goal here (Ebonic 4). The connection of African Americans to their homes, culture and identity are the nature of the literature quest. Baldwin and Ngūgī are on the same page, revealing that African Americans do reject their mother tongue to a certain degree. In doing so they lose their heritage, and lose who they are internally. The colonization must be uprooted in order for them to communicate and reconnect with themselves. This again, is possibly through the external use of allies, which results in a deeper understanding of who they are at their core.

The cinematic forefront of this conversation is the directional gaze of allies to assist their friends in racial need. The novel directly comments to reveal the connectivity of the two in their coexistence. The original text being written word and not spoken. Further confirming the idea of non-verbal communication being just as crucial to the argument. Amplified the importance of the use of non-verbal expression through bodily movement.

Spivak reaffirms that this marginalized groups can speak in different ways. The term Subaltern challenges the idea that African Americans can speak out non-verbally. This more amplifies the confirmation that they can speak out in different ways. Non-verbal in nature the use of allies and advocates make heavy stances in this chapter to aid in the subaltern speaking out in an alternate medium to use their voice for social change. Subaltern will be a present idea that will remain in this full text as a call to action or challenge. Deeming the audience accountable to answer the moral question of whether or not one should speak out. The Subaltern is used cinematically in this chapter to reaffirm that African Americans can speak out non-verbally. The platform of voice in the context is expressed through the verbal lens that has several faces to it. Resulting in the pure evolving connection of allyship through non-verbal communication.

**Conclusion:**

The absence of this theoretical conversation would have gone unnoticed without the overlapping similarities all tied tighter with the crown and the identity it cares, as the common thread through this entire review. The connection and relation of why our main text *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Crowns* reside in the similarity of the following ideals of elitism, crowns, allyship, New York City, migration, royalty mindset and communication all pair together to further explain how African Americans reject the colonization mindset in order to reclaim their identities. The imperative nature of this conversation acts as a direct movement to reclaiming moral and cultural identity.

Within *Crowns*, by Regina Taylor, the full journey has been paved to the reclamation of African American identity. Yolonda first placed it in her brother, revealing that African Americans place their identity within relationships. As her identity is tested and challenged, the

rise of women of color and agency begin to emerge. Her mentors revealed that the crown of identity is present with this text spanning across both chapters. Ngũgĩ's application of elitism within "Decolonizing the Mind" appears express to express that colonized African Americans are to be pushed to assimilate to use English. The elitism agenda, birthed out of the mind of the colonizer culture, pushes the rejection of African culture was promoted within the first chapter. The use of the mother tongue was brought up by Ngũgĩ as well, which through the application of his theory challenges African Americans to use it, as seen in the first chapter. This brings forth the ideal that African Americans communicate verbally to reject the colonization mindset. In connection with *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Spivak rebuts and introduced the Subaltern elite in order to communicate that the allies present though viewed as the desired race, white, are all subaltern. This use of subalternity is the breaking away from the racist social culture that plagues their allies of color. Their marriage in connection proves that the subaltern can speak and has many voices.

*Crowns* expresses the value of African Americans within both of these chapters through the metaphorical, theoretical, and physical use of crowns as a symbol of reclamation. By naming her musical *Crowns*, Regina Taylor presses the impartation that African Americans are royalty (Taylor 47). The loss of known identity is in play as the women fight to help the protagonist reclaim her status of royalty and freedom from the colonization mindset; which declares that she is "not" royalty. Further, dismantling the falsehood that African Americans are not royalty in connection to their reclamation of identity. Amplifying the inverse, African Americans are royalty. This conversation also confirms that the weight and possession of crowns comes with a price. "Our crowns have been bought and paid for" (Taylor 7). Baldwin echoes the same notion, "Our crown has already been bought and paid for" ("*Crowns* Introduction"). Both authors link

the idea the crown is expensive, but it has already been paid. These have been purchased through the African American struggle. This struggle is rooted in slavery, mistreatment, abused and racism. The idea of a crown being purchased is derived from the religious ties to Christianity mentioned in this thesis. Within both chapters, our protagonists identify as Christian and through this faith a pillar of hope is illuminated through the knowledge that Jesus Christ died on the cross for all of mankind's sins. His blood, was the permanent purchase to save his people. Within Christianity, God and Jesus are recognized as being a part of one being. His people are referred to as his children and being a child of God makes them royalty. Here the crown once again, is purchased for them to fully claim their identities as children of God. This identity is royalty. Within this establishment the two chapters continue to agree with the notion that all African Americans have to do is "wear" them (Taylor 7). This ties in the importance of recognition of identity and self-worth within the African American Community.

Allyship helps declare the reclamation of African American identity throughout each chapter in this thesis. Chapter One examines how, allyship reveals itself through the use of verbal support and theoretical communication. This communication came from the women of color mentoring Yolonda. The women of color guide Yolonda to help her understand her culture to find her identity, not place it. The hats also acted as allies and advocates to help place value and intention on the meaning of her journey. The historical time stamps evolve through the women's storytelling acting as a guide to assist Yolonda once more into her true identity as a "queen" (Taylor 47). These allies take different forms within the second chapter, *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Here the allies are three-fold, taking on the role of Spivak's subaltern elite. These white counterparts express what it means to be a true ally, standing up for their friends of color in times of scrutiny. The use of verbal and non-verbal communication is exercised by all of these

allies within each chapter to confirm that African Americans cannot fully reclaim their identity without the assistance of true allyship.

New York City, is the hub for connection and communication within both of the chapters. Although each text, *If Beale Street Could Talk* and *Crowns* is set within the space of the city, the African American identity is moved with the notion of diaspora. As we saw in both chapters, the idea of home is expressed by Baldwin in the novel. For the novel and film, the theoretical idea of diaspora is used in relation to a form of migration. South to North, is used to relay the storytelling present in the Baldwin and Jenkins' context. Whereas in *Crowns*, Yolonda is moved from North, an area of her comfort and liberation to the South to be challenged. Her identity is revalued as it leads to salvation, but it does not come without a cost—her comfort. These spaces give additional geographical context that ties identity to location once again.

Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot, inherently, speak. Ngugi argues that the use of mother tongue in relation to language and voice is restricted. I argue that the subaltern can speak and African Americans reclaim their identity through verbal and non-verbal communication. The impact of identity is the driving force to reclaiming it. Through the use of allies, eye contact, bodily movement, and verbal vocal expression the subaltern can speak and reclaim its identity as well. If the African American identity can be read as subaltern in the contemporary United States, then this thesis argues that the subaltern can speak. The African American community rejects the colonization mindset of suppression of voice and language in order to reclaim their identity—royalty.

These elements needed to be in conversation to reveal that the African American identity is valuable. It is worth the reclamation process to salvation. It is worth the journey of allyship and moral standards of what it means to speak out for social justice and social change. This



conversation only confirms that there is a prompting of the spirit of mankind to assist the marginalized and aid in allyship to officially help the voiceless; find their identities and finally put on their crowns.

**Gallery:**

**Gallery Description:**

Here is a collection of photos from the Georgia College & State University production of *Colors* the Musical by Regina Taylor. Within each of these images, an aspect of identity and connection is seen. The women of color depicted in Chapter One are visually present. Each of these women takes on a different physical stance to allow for a more dynamic encounter with their story telling. The cast of this production, was a fierce display of dynamic actors, history makers, and world changers.



*Figure 1. Yolonda standing in her full identity. Mike Crews, 2019.*



*Figure 2. Yolonda grieving the loss of her brother Teddy.*

*Figure 3. Yolonda being supported by Mother Shaw, with her new found salvation. Mike Crews, 2019.*



*Figure 4. Yolonda connecting with the women as they share their stories. Mike Crews, 2019.*



Figure 5. The Church setting on stage.



Figure 6. The women of color praying over Yolonda as she resists, praying with her eyes open.



*Figure 7. All of the Orishas praying for Yolonda.*



*Figure 8. All of the Orishas surrounding Yolonda during her salvation.*



*Figure 9. Yolonda reflecting on the women's stories.*



*Figure 10. Yolonda witnessing Velma's salvation.*



*Figure 11. Yolonda submitting and accepting the prayers of the women around her.*



*Figure 12. Lindsey Kellogg, as Yolonda, setting the hats before the show.*





*Figure 13. Velma, to the left, and Wanda, to the right, in judgement of Yolonda's actions.*



*Figure 14. Yolonda embracing her new identity as she admires Man and Velma.*



*Figure 15. Mother Shaw in her Orisha form, directing the Orishas to celebrate Yolonda's salvation.*



Figure 16. The full cast of 'Crowns' with director Valeka J. Holt at the Georgia College production, 2019.



Figure 17. The full cast 'Crowns,' with Milledgeville Mayor Mary Parham-Copelan, 2019.



Figure 18. Lindsey Kellogg, portrayed Yolonda, next to the Georgia College 'Crowns' production marquee, 2019.

## Works Cited

- “African American Spirituals.” Library of Congress, n.d., <https://www.scribbr.com/mla/works-cited/>.
- “African Pantheons and the Orishas: Crash course World Mythology #11.” YouTube, uploaded by CrashCourse, 12 May 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2se\\_zimj40&t=180s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2se_zimj40&t=180s).
- Archer, Louise, et al. “Can the Subaltern ‘Speak’ Science? An Intersectional Analysis of Performances of ‘Talking Science through Muscular Intellect’ by ‘Subaltern’ Students in UK Urban Secondary Science Classrooms.” *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, vol. 14, no. 3, Sept. 2019, pp. 723–751. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1007/s11422-018-9870-4.
- Armand, David. “The King on Beale Street.” *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, Apr. 2019, pp. 60–61. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=a9h&AN=136016261&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1>
- Baldwin, James. *If Beale Street Could Talk*. Large print edition., G.K. Hall & Co., 1996. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=cat06554a&AN=geo.991264563802944&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1>
- BELAMGHARI, Mohamed. “Can the Subaltern Communicate?” *Arab World English Journal*, vol. 6, no. 4, Dec. 2015, pp. 408–418.
- “CALL-AND-RESPONSE IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUAL.” *Cultural Equity*, n.d., <https://www.culturalequity.org/resources/lesson-plans/call-and-response-african-american-spiritual>.

Cantwell, Robert. *If Beale Street Could Talk : Music, Community, Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central,

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gcsu/detail.action?docID=3413858>.

“Crowns Behind the Crown | Episode 3: "HATitude." YouTube, uploaded by Lindsey Kellogg, 24 June 2019, <https://youtu.be/cA4chJmi-nE>.

“CrownsLK.” YouTube, uploaded by Lindsey Kellogg, 30 November 2021, <https://youtu.be/46jK-NNt7ho>.

“CrownsLK2.” YouTube, uploaded by Lindsey Kellogg, 30 November 2021, [https://youtu.be/7\\_Yk4C0xd-Q](https://youtu.be/7_Yk4C0xd-Q).

Daily News Travel Writer, Jayne Clark. "BEALE STREET, BIRTHPLACE OF BLUES, MAKING A COMEBACK." *Daily News of Los Angeles (CA), Valley ed., sec. Travel*, 4 Nov. 1990, p. T1. NewsBank: America's News – Historical and Current, [infoweb-newsbank-com.us1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/0EF610B0E2629638](http://infoweb-newsbank-com.us1.proxy.openathens.net/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/0EF610B0E2629638). Accessed 19 Feb. 2022.

DEMOISEY, FOX. “Talk of Beale Street.” *Illuminations*, vol. 34, Summer 2019, p. 34. EBSCOhost,

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=ccm&AN=140197739&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1>

Devi, V.Anushya. “Narrative Technique in Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s *Weep Not, Child*.” *Language in India*, vol. 19, no. 9, Sept. 2019, pp. 18–24.

*Ebonics : The Urban Educational Debate*, edited by David J. Ramirez, et al., Multilingual Matters, 2005. ProQuest Ebook Central,

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gcsu/detail.action?docID=235041>.

“Gayatri Spivak: The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work.” YouTube, uploaded by University of California Television (UCTV), 8 February 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZHH4ALRFHw>.

Gibbs, Adrienne Samuels. “Superwoman: From Beale Street to Watchmen, Regina King Is Uplifting Blackness.” *Crisis* (15591573), vol. 127, no. 1, Winter 2020, pp. 8–9. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=a9h&AN=144365355&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1>

Hamlet, Janice D. “Word! The African American Oral Tradition and Its Rhetorical Impact on American Popular Culture.” *Black History Bulletin*, vol. 74, no. 1, Winter/Spring 2011 2011, pp. 27–31. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=eue&AN=60848730&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1>

Harris, Trudier. “The Eye as Weapon in If Beale Street Could Talk.” *MELUS*, vol. 5, no. 3, [Oxford University Press, Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)], 1978, pp. 54–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/467340>.

Henry, Wiley. “Old Beale Street Rediscovered in New Book.” *Tennessee Tribune*, vol. 32, no. 38, 23 Sept. 2021, p. B1. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=n5h&AN=152589542&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1>

“If Beale Street Could Talk.” Directed by Barry Jenkins, Annapurna Pictures Plan B Entertainment Pastel Productions, 2018.



“Interview with Gayatri Spivak.” YouTube, uploaded by Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra, 30 October 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdU5G-dunPQ>.

Judith A. Hall, and Mark L. Knapp. *Nonverbal Communication*. De Gruyter Mouton, 2013. EBSCOhost, [https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=544027&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_1](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=544027&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_1)

Mark, Joshua J. “Orisha.” *World History Encyclopedia*, 6 Oct. 2021, <https://www.worldhistory.org/Orisha/#:~:text=Obatala%20%E2%80%93%20sky%20god%20of%20creation,fire%2C%20virility%2C%20war%2C%20foundations.>

Martin A. M. Gansinger. *Radical Religious Thought in Black Popular Music. Five Percenters and Bobo Shanti in Rap and Reggae*. Anchor Academic Publishing, 2018. EBSCOhost, [https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=2070385&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_14](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=2070385&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_14)

Michael Argyle, and Janet Dean. "Eye-contact, distance and affiliation." *Sociometry* (1965): 289-304.

Morgan, Danielle Fuentes.. *Laughing to Keep From Dying : African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century*. University of Illinois Press, 2020.

Nielson, Erik. *Rap on Trial : Race, Lyrics, and Guilt in America*. The New Press, 2019. EBSCOhost, [https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=2088717&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_80](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=2088717&site=eds-live&scope=site&custid=geo1&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_80).

“Ngugi wa Thiong’o Speaks: African Languages and the African Renaissance 15 august 2020.”

YouTube, uploaded by Mboka Festival, 2 September 2020,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDqpBYeRYhk>.

“Ngugi Wa Thiongo-Why Africans hate their own languages | Diaspora Connect: Ep. 23.”

YouTube, uploaded by One Vibe TV, 25 April 2019,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tnF6XdOh5HY>.

Oliver, Paul. “Field Holler.” Oxford Music Online, 31 Jan, 2014, Grove Music Online,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2256548>.

“Overview.” Digital History, 2021,

<https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/era.cfm?eraID=6&smtID=6>.

“Politics of Deconstruction: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Oscar Guardiola-Rivera in

conversation.” YouTube, uploaded by Birkbeck, University of London, 6 June 2016,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28zoswK4zF0>.

“Postcolonial Concepts: Subaltern.” YouTube, uploaded by Postcolonialism, 29 November 2019,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puNX\\_FFmVcA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puNX_FFmVcA).

Rajbhandari, Kritish. “Beyond the Ethics of Nationalism and Betrayal: Silence, Secrecy, and the

Subaltern in Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*.” *Research in African Literatures*,

vol. 50, no. 2, Summer 2019, pp. 158–176.

Rosalind Morris. *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. Columbia

University Press, 2010.

Sadlier, Aoife. “Who Speaks and from Where? A Psychosocial Exploration of Ideology and

Women’s Agency in *The Lives of Others* and ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’”

Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society, vol. 25, no. 4, Dec. 2020, pp. 632–651. EBSCOhost,  
doi:10.1057/s41282-020-00169-2.

Senju, Atsushi, and Mark H. Johnson. "The eye contact effect: mechanisms and development."  
Trends in cognitive sciences 13.3 (2009): 127-134.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1983).

Staff, MasterClass. "What Is call and Response in Music?." MasterClass Articles, 26 Aug. 2021,  
<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-call-and-response-in-music#what-does-call-and-response-mean>.

Taylor, Deitrah. "Crowns introduction pptx." 2019.

Taylor, Regina. Crowns. Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2004.

Thiong'o, Ngugi wa. Decolonizing the Mind. Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986.

Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa.. "Profile of a Literary and Social Activist." About, 2018,  
<https://ngugiwathiongo.com/about/>.

Verbal Communication, edited by Andrea Rocci, and Louis de Saussure, De Gruyter, Inc., 2016.  
ProQuest Ebook Central,  
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gcsu/detail.action?docID=4451840>.

"What is Social Justice?" The San Diego Foundation, 24 March 2016,  
<https://www.sdfoundation.org/news-events/sdf-news/what-is-social-justice/>.