CHANGING THE LETTER: THEORIZING RACE AND GENDER IN POP CULTURAL 'MEDIA' THROUGH A LESS PORNOTROPIC LENS

By

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To my best friend and beloved husband, Michael, a love supreme indeed

and

To the "sweetest things I've ever known," Michael and Martin, the reasons why I sing

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CHAPTER I

WHAT IS THIS EXPERIENCE IN "BLACK WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE"?

This dissertation emerges from several critical discourses in History and Critical Theories of Religion, namely post-modern analyses of "religion" by those such as Daniel Dubuisson, Timothy Fitzgerald, and J.Z. Smith, and post-structuralist criticisms of language and gender by those such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and several others. However, this dissertation also builds upon the scholarship of those working specifically in the area of History and Critical Theories of African America/Black Religion, for instance, Charles H. Long, Victor Anderson, and William D. Hart, whose analyses on race and "black religion" not only present iconoclastic rigor, but also aim to disorient sedimented and controlling ideas about both race and religion in African American discourse and scholarship. This dissertation takes the analyses of these scholars and deploys them in a new context: "African American popular religion," with the aim of disorienting the prescriptive totalities of religious and cultural media that reproduce, maintain, circulate, and exchange historical myths on black womanhood so that black women and girls may be seen less pornotropically.

In 2010, in an interview with *Playboy Magazine*, pop musician, John Mayer, well known for his collaborations with B. B. King and Jay Z, was asked if black women threw themselves at him.[1] Mayer replied, "I don't think I open myself to it. My dick is sort of like a white supremacist. I've got a Benetton heart and a fuckin' David Duke cock. I'm

[1] He was asked this question after seemingly randomly asserting, "Black people love me."

going to start dating separately from my dick."[2] This exchange immediately went viral in cyberspace. That is, it spread like a virus all over the cyber body and was reposted on a variety of internet sites. However, the rapid unfurling of this story placed primary emphasis on the answer and not the question.

Many in the cyber world (and beyond) were infuriated by Mayer's blatant alignment of his "dick" (read: his person) with white supremacy. His collaborations with King and Jay Z had given him special entrée to black American culture and social worlds. However, Mayer's unveiling of his bio-politics, specifically his asymmetrical heart, which he articulated as being split between the pseudo-harmony of the Benetton brand and the bigotry of David Duke, betrayed African American trust. This is not because of Mayer's collaboration in the myth of black womanhood, but because of his admitted participation in white supremacy, specifically white racism. Thus, many who had previously uncritically accepted him, particularly those in the Hip Hop community, wanted to know one thing: Is Mayer racist? However, as I watched from the cyber sidelines, I wanted to know much more: What kind of knowledge *aroused* such a question in the first place? What interpretive guide enabled such a haphazard and seemingly ordinary response (or lack thereof)?

Both the question and response, including the gendered silence within Hip Hop's rage against racism,[3] draw attention to the subject of this dissertation, namely, the

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[2] Rob Tannenbaum, "Playboy Interview: John Mayer," *Playboy Magazine*, March 2010, [magazine online article], available fromhttp://www.playboy.com/articles/john-mayer-playboy-interview/index.html?page=2; Internet; accessed January 2011

[3] Hip Hop's silence on gender (within its verbosity on race) reflects a longstanding internal conflict regarding the place, role and value of black women and girls in American society. Ideas about patriarchal right, heteronormativity, hyper-masculinity/femininity, and masculine sexual rites, often drawn from the larger social order, significantly shape male/female relations within and outside of Hip Hop communities, lyrical and visual content, etc. to the detriment of black women and girls. For more information on Hip Hop and gender see Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip Hop*

discourse of "black womanhood" and its circumscription to the yokes and jolts of "America's Grammar Book"[4] on race and gender. Each highlights the continual entanglement of North American black women and girls[5] with dominant meta-narratives on unscrupulousness and perversion. The question mundanely positions both black femaleness and black female sexuality within a context of innate unbridled freakery, and the response (both the verbosity and the silence) constructs both womanhood and sexuality as concomitantly hyper, non-existent, savage, inconsequential, abominable and grotesquely fascinating. Both the question and the response evoke "stocks of knowledge"[6] that rob black women and girls of complex subjectivity, captures them in a script, overdetermines[7] their multiplicity by a hodgepodge of mass-produced mythical narratives, turns them into undistinguishable public enterprises, and subjects them to representational and material terror, discursive and non-discursive.[8]

Culture, and the Public Sphere (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004) and *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip-hop Feminism Anthology* (Mira Loma, CA: Parker Publishing, 2007), T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold On Young Black Women* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2007), and Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

[4] I will further explore this concept when I take up Hortense Spillers' essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in Chapter II.

[5] Deploying the language, "black women and girls," screens in the "daughter" from Alice Walker's seminal text, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose*, typically screened out of womanist theo-ethical discourses on "black women's experience." The "daughter" and her experiences have been silenced, masked underneath a false sense of universalism. This dissertation re-articulates her existence. An engagement with the popular that is concerned with race, gender and experiences, requires this. It demands that we listen to her account of cultural production, how it constructs meanings for her, and how she, in turn, appropriates them. This dissertation takes preliminary steps toward this aim.

[6] I will take this up later in this chapter. However, for now I will offer an abbreviated definition. "Stocks of knowledge" refer to what Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann describe as the meanings, which we arrive at upon making sense out of the conditions that we encounter in our every day lives that motivate our attitudes and action.

[7] Overdetermination refers to the pre-existence of identities and meanings regarding "blackness," resulting from colonial contact where "blackness" became pre-determined (to mean a variety of things) by others who were not "black." For more information see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

[8] Roland Barthes theorizes the production, functionality and circulation of myths in society and culture in his text *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).

The above judgment has a primary implication that is the concern of this dissertation, namely, the pornotropic gaze and its deployment of modern representational epistemes that arrest contemporary black female subjectivities within a context of innate difference.[9] A term coined by black feminist theorist and literary figure, Hortense Spillers, pornotroping refers to the "othering" of black women and girls' bodies that occurs through the production, reproduction, circulation and maintenance of myths, superimposed on these bodies through signs, symbols, significations and representations. At times these myths have become so inextricably entwined that the myth stands in for "reality." Moreover, this entanglement cultivates and transports a variety of messages through sequential linguistic and representational codes that produce structures of meaning that can lead to a sense of powerlessness over black women and girls' agency to explode the signifying force of having been signified by exotic/erotic, wanton, immoral, pathological and criminal markers.[10] These determinations on black women and girls' bodies have significant effects. They influence how black female subjects see themselves and others and how they are treated in society.[11]

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[9] Sander L. Gilman discusses the ideology of "difference" as it relates to ethnicity, occupation, class, and gender in his text *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1985). Also see Rosemarie Garland Thompson, *Freakery: cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), and Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course In General Linguistics* (London: Duckworth, 1983).

[10] The idea of an "entanglement" between black women and girls and cultural messages, and the resulting sense of power/powerlessness combines the theoretical analyses of Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), and Stewart Hall, ed. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), and "Encoding/decoding" in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies 1972-1979*, edited by Stuart Hall (New York: Routledge, 1980), 128-138.

[11] Stuart Hall takes this up in his theory of representation in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices.* See also, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

However, it is important to note that while black women and girls are impacted by superimposed pornotropic ways of being seen, a distinction is to be drawn between identities as produced by others and identities as appropriated and performed by black women and girls themselves. Therefore, although identities are superimposed onto black women and girls' bodies, they are always contested and appropriated. Despite contestation and appropriation, culturally produced and maintained ideas about identities are also so hegemonicly determined that they appear normative and are thus internalized. Although the pornotropic gaze may be internalized, simultaneously operating may also be their contestations, notwithstanding how difficult resistance to pornotropic gazing may be, particularly as they are intermeshed with reality and as such, difficult to resist altogether.

Exploring the pornotropic gaze and its determinacy within contemporary black religion[12] and cultural media[13] is the major aim of this dissertation. Womanist theologians and ethicists created a cross-pollinated theo-ethical trajectory that de-marginalized and re-presented North American black women as thinking and feeling moral agents with experiences worthy of academic inquiry. Pivotal to their discourse is demythologizing black womanhood and its variety of cultural representations. However,

[12] As a scholar of History and Critical Theories of Religion, I interpret "religion" as an arbitrary sign that has been stabilized through the consistency of language, practices and representation over time. As such, it has become an ideologically loaded, socially constructed interpretive concept deployed for the purposes of decoding, analyzing and theorizing legitimate modes of expression within the human experience. What is articulated as "religion" is an integrated and reflexive signifying system that is negotiated through a variety of interrelated practices in human culture. Thus, "religion" is both signified and a signifier. Both positions, signified/signifier, mark a multiplicity of human behaviors. Therefore, what may be deemed "religious," depends on the hermeneutics of the signifier. In view of this, "religion" has multiple profiles, to include but not limited "black religion." "Black religion" refers to the expressions and cultural forms of black peoples. It highlights the way one comes to terms with her or his ultimate reality in the world. For more information see Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), and William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985).

[13] Cultural media refers to representational systems that convey meanings through signs, symbols, significations and representations.

a major proposition circulating throughout this dissertation is that, while womanist theo-ethical discourse opens space for examining North American black women's experiences and representations, what is needed to move that discourse forward in African American Religion[14] from its dependencies on restricted analyses of black women's experiences, methodological limitations and normative conceptual restrictions, is an examination of the manner in which the force of representational epistemes operate in black religion and culture to over-determine contemporary black women and girls' experiences within a pornotropic gaze.

This dissertation argues that religious and cultural media are socially organized technologies of power that reproduce, maintain, circulate, and exchange historical myths on black womanhood, which black women and girls both resist and appropriate.[15] Notwithstanding how they may be resisted or appropriated, operative historical myths need to be deconstructed and, in many cases, disoriented. This dissertation achieves this by "changing the letter." "Changing the letter," which refers to the essay, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," written by Spillers, frames both my theory and strategy for reading (deconstruction) and writing (re-theorizing). It holds that words ("letters") can be manipulated ("changed") in a variety of ways to tell a story that may be either liberative or oppressive ("yoke"). Therefore,

[14] Also known as "black religion."

[15] Darlene Clark Hine discusses this in her essay, "Rape and the Inner lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" *in Hine Sight: Black Women And The Reconstruction of American History* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 37-48. She argues that black women created a culture of dissemblance to conceal aspects of their inner lives from the overdetermining public, thus creating protected psychic space and alternative self-images. This dissertation argues that pornotropia is so pervasive that black women and girls both resist and appropriate its meanings in a variety of ways, to include but not limited to forms of dissemblance.

meanings are not fixed,[16] but are constantly influx, although sometimes appearing stabilized.

This dissertation takes issue with the latter perception: the ways that cultural meanings are stabilized over time and presented as "truth."[17] Pornotropia[18] thrives off of controlling ideas that are stabilized and taken for granted. The phrase, "taken for granted," highlights what Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann refer to as un-reflected inclinations toward certain actions developed in the 'natural attitude', which presume inter-subjective realities of the life-world to be similarly experienced or imagined, for example, the idea that there was a world prior to our existence, made up of subjects, objects and nature, the former of which (human subjects) are endowed with consciousnesses that interpret meanings amongst themselves in horizontal and cognitive ways. However, "reality," the conditions that we encounter, is mediated through interpretation, which gives rise to certain kinds of conduct (over others), given our stock of previous experiences, either our own or inherited. Previous experiences frame our "stocks of knowledge" and motivate our attitudes and actions toward certain ends, given the anticipation of what is believed to be both conventional and probable.[19]

The "taken for granted" within the 'natural attitude' neglects critical queries that might take up how relationships between the subject and representation might be situated,

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[16] See also Stuart Hall's text *Representation*.

[17] This dissertation argues that "truth" is achieved, not given, in light of context, positionality, readings of experiences, etc. Thus, there are a variety of "truths," none of which are fixed. However, all of which are "positioned." This dissertation highlights a "struggle for truth" that is personal, yet has communal interests. For more information about the construction of "truth" see Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

[18] The term "pornotropia" was coined by religious philosopher, Victor Anderson, in order to highlight the complex multiplicity of the pornotropic gaze and its collective grasp of fantasy, fixation, repulsion, desire, etc.

[19] For more information see Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 72-77; Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World, Volume II* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989).

or, as interpreters, how we may be positioned towards either (or both), given attitudes. This kind of thinking leads to reductive practices such as reading one's identity in light of the appearance of a (projected) profile such as the taken for granted "black-female-as-whore" stereotype, as opposed to her complex subjectivity. The latter enables a variety of readings, thus "lessening" pornotropia, which depends on the rigidity of a closed script.

This dissertation highlights a struggle for truth that is inextricably linked to lived experiences, that is, social-cultural-historical-political conditions. One aim of this dissertation is to confuse previous readings of "black womanhood" by blasting the habits of language, linguistic and representational, its internal signals, inferred ideologies, encodings, and operation. These strategies enable the mass-reproduction and continued circulation and closure of the script of black womanhood. Circulating myths of black womanhood need to be taken up. However, they also need to be taken up differently than they have been previously in African American religion, culture, and womanist theo-ethical scholarship. This dissertation explores their deployment in religion and culture and the critiques thereof. Both deployment and criticisms produce layers of meanings that are reproduced and circulated. I will examine the strategies by which myths of black womanhood travel, getting realigned and re-appropriated from generation to generation.

These moves "loosen the yoke" and decrease the jolts of "America's Grammar Book" on race and gender. The following chapters emphasize loosening the yoke, while the overall aim of this dissertation is significantly inspired by the reality of the jolt. "The jolt" refers to the ongoing threat of symbolic and material violence caused by day-to-day representational terror, which is mass-produced in and transmitted through media that

"projects"[20] and inform certain opinions and attitudes regarding 'normativity' and 'difference'.

The technological surge of the 1990s in media produced a voyeuristic visual culture that constantly blurred boundaries between reality and fantasy, fantasy and fixation, and the gaze and repulsion. Consequently, women in general and black women in particular have been significantly impacted by this pornotropic gaze on race and gender constructions, which were influenced by historical myths on black womanhood. Black women and girls have been particularly affected by injurious representations in religious and pop cultural spaces. Concomitant with these cultural effects are increased levels of violence committed against black women and girls that contributes to an unnerving casualness with which these stories of violence are presented and circulated.[21]

Over the years, I have kept a journal of stories about black women and girls and violence, which reveal that representation significantly influences how they are treated before, during, and after violence occurs. My strategy ("changing the letter") and aim ("loosening the yoke") in this dissertation are inspired by these women and girls that include: Cheri Washington,[22] Dorothy Dixon,[23] the un-named Dunbar Village woman,[24]

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[20] This highlights the ways that meanings, developed in the fantasy world of the imagination, get signified onto objects and subjects in reality through media, thus influencing attitudes.

[21] Saidiya Hartman explores this idea with regard to North American enslaved black women in her text *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). The idea of the "jolt" builds upon Hartman's work by exploring the casualness with which stories of violence get transmitted (or not) in our contemporary context.

[22] A seventeen year-old high school student that was brutally beaten to death with a baseball bat by the father of her baby, Carlos Williams, and his cousin, Steven Covington, in order to terminate her and her four month old fetus in Dale City, VA in January 2005. Washington received blows to the head, body and abdominal area. Williams was arrested and charged with "aggravated malicious wounding." Police detective Dennis Mangan suggested that Washington provoked the attack, although he did not propose it was deserved. Virginia law allows prosecutors to seek the death penalty for the "willful, deliberate and premeditated killing of a pregnant woman" with "the intent to cause the involuntary termination of the woman's pregnancy." At the time of the murder, Prince William Commonwealth's Attorney, Paul B. Ebert, had not decided whether he would file a capital murder charge in the case. There was no public outrage

Duanna Johnson,[25] and Sara Kruzan.[26] Each are real victims of brutal violence that were rendered sensational spectacles of spectacular crimes as opposed to human beings due basic rights such as dignity, respect and justice. In each case justice was either inadequate or denied while media attention and public outcry were typically silenced.

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and no protesting from the NAACP as witnessed with Jena Six. For more information see: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A47824-2005Jan29.html.

[23] A twenty-nine year old six-months pregnant mentally disabled woman tortured for months by six people living in her home, including a twelve year-old, in Alton, IL. Dixon was forced to live in the basement with nothing more than a thin rug and mattress. Whenever she came up to eat, she was made to walk around naked, shot with BB guns, burned with glue, scorched with hot liquid and beaten with a bat. She died after weeks of torture. Two adults, three teenagers and one twelve-year-old boy were charged with her murder. However, her main torturer was Michelle Riley, a thirty-five year old white woman who pocketed Dixon's Social Security checks. Her X-rays revealed approximately thirty BBs lodged underneath her flesh, deep-tissue burns that covered approximately one-third of her body and severe dehydration. This story received almost no media attention. Two black teens were also implicated. Thus, it was "seen" as "black on black" crime. Therefore, not even predominantly black news forums or organizations picked up the story. Again, there was no public outrage or organizing by the NAACP or others such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson as evidenced with Jena Six. For more information see: http://www.jacksonfreepress.com/index.php/site/comments/article_disabled_pregnant_woman_used_as_target_practice/.

[24] A Haitian woman living in Dunbar Village in West Palm Beach, FL, brutally assaulted by ten masked teens in June 2007. The teens, ranging between the ages of fourteen and eighteen, simultaneously beat her twelve-year-old son. The female victim was raped, sodomized and forced to have sex with her son. Afterwards, both were doused with cleaning solutions in an attempt to destroy DNA evidence. The perpetrators eventually fled. No one in the community responded to their cries for help. No one even called the police. Eventually, both victims walked a mile to the hospital. There was no public outrage. For more information see: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19698132/.

[25] A transgendered woman arrested for prostitution in Memphis, TN. While under arrest she verbally and physically assaulted by two Memphis police officers, both of which were caught on video. Johnson was assaulted after refusing to respond to names such as "faggot" and "he-she." After being released, Johnson sued the department for violating her civil rights. Both officers were indicted and, as a result, fired from the police department. Johnson was later found shot to death on a street in Memphis by an unknown assailant. Again, there was no public outrage. No marching and no massive organizing on her behalf. For more information see: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/18/memphis-police-officer-ca_n_107797.html

[26] A black teen convicted of first-degree murder for killing her pimp at the age of sixteen. Kruzan, a former honor roll student, athlete, and author, was introduced to her pimp by her mother, a drug addict who abused her, at age eleven. Her pimp, a thirty-one year old male named GiGi, began "grooming" her for prostitution immediately. GiGi became a "father figure" to Kruzan, thus caring for her needs in ways her mother did not. For instance, he clothed her, lavished gifts on her, spent time with her, talked to her and even enabled recreational outlets such as roller skating with friends. However, by the age of thirteen, GiGi raped Kruzan in order to "break her in" and thus prepare her for her future life of prostitution on the streets. At sixteen years old Kruzan murdered GiGi. The judge sentenced her to life without the possibility of parole plus four years. Unless this case is overturned, Kruzan will die in prison for killing the man who raped, abused and prostituted her. When standing before the judge, Kruzan was not seen as a motherless and fatherless child victim who killed her perpetrator. Instead, she was interpreted as a calculated aggressor who "lacked moral scruples;" one incapable of remorse or change. This implies innate degeneracy and thus ignores Kruzan's context in which rape and other abuses were the primary modes of sexual and other expressions towards a child. It also negates the conditions in which Kruzan was born, ultimately without the possibility of human flourishing. For more information go to: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qR7mno6p9iQ

The few times that these women's stories were told, the women were criminalized. It was suggested that they somehow deserved to be violated. Positing a way to re-read black women and girls' "complex—inter-subjective—multi-positionality" through a "less" pornotropic lens is the second major aim of this dissertation. However, it is important to note that subjectivity is irreducible to representation and representation is irreducible to pornotropia. However, representation is seminal to a discourse on black female subjectivity just as pornotropia is critical for discussing representations of black womanhood. Moreover, pornotropia cannot be totalized by violence. Still, violence is a significant aspect of pornotropia. Re-reading black female subjects "less" pornotropically requires such nuances and layers. It demands reading representations of black women and girls and their experiences in terms of their variety.

Black women and girls' experiences are expansive and shaped by specific historical moments or situations. This dissertation gives greater specificity to the cultural-historical moments that contextualize the contemporary representational force of the pornotropic gaze on black women and girl's bodies by asking, "What sort of moment is this?"[27] Stuart Hall, who summarizes Cornel West's genealogy in "The New Cultural Politics of Difference,"[28] described this moment as a "post-modern moment" that is marked by the centralization of popular culture, which inevitably includes black American popular culture vernacular traditions, the United States as a world power and center of global cultural production, and the decolonization of the Third World. Each of

[27] Stuart Hall, "What is this "black" in black popular culture? (Rethinking Race)," *Social Justice* 20, no. 1-2 (March 1993): 104-115.
[28] See Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference" in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic *Civitas* Books, 1999), 119-139.

these markers caused a shift away from pervasive Arnoldsian ideas of "culture" (i.e. "high culture") toward "everyday" mass mediated pop cultural forms.[29]

However, post-modernity does not eradicate modern forces. It does not provide an entirely new "moment." Instead, moments are conjunctural, a mixture of the past and the present. Therefore, high modernity, its influences, peripheries, and determinants are always continuously reappearing and interfacing with post-modern forces.[30] Thus, we can only opt for a project that seeks to *lessen* the omnipresent, totalizing, and oft times harmful, representational force of pornotropia on black women and girls' bodies, which indiscriminately regulates social action and normalizes historical ideas of difference, through critical analyses that seek to unsettle and re-appropriate current culturally embedded epistemes by interrogating them and accenting others.[31]

This dissertation argues that while situational moments are conjunctural, they are historically specific. They exhibit similarities and continuities with other historical cultural moments. It is the combination of what is similar and what is different that defines the specificity of the moment. Hall's "moment" reflects a struggle over cultural hegemony. He deploys West's genealogy of black cultural politics to posit a different way of interpreting "blackness" in black popular culture. Hall provides an interpretation of "blackness" that is more hybrid and thus less dependent on ethnic hierarchies as

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[29] Raymond Williams introduces this idea in his text, *The Sociology of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). See also Stephen Greenblatt's essay, "Culture," in *Critical Terms For Literary Study*, 2nd, Edition, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 225-232.

[30] See Stuart Hall, "What is this "black" in black popular culture? (Rethinking Race)," 104-115.

[31] This includes an engagement on the contradictions of pornotropia. The idea of a less pornotropic gaze acknowledges the force of modern epistemes on post-modernity. This enables a shift away from unrealistic deconstructive aims, totalizing categorical claims and reductive bifurcations, while highlighting individual and representational complexity, complicity, multiplicity, etc., and movement toward analyses that are more ambiguous.

established in the United States. This de-centering opens up more spaces for contestation over meanings of "blackness," thus making room for numerous appropriations.

This dissertation posits an alternative framework for interpreting black femaleness in contemporary black religion and popular culture. The post-modern moment requires a different kind of reading that leaves room for complexity and variety. To be sure, this moment is similar to previous moments marked by the continuous co-existence of history, fascinations with difference (i.e. cultural, sexual, racial, ethnic, etc.), emphases on experiences, pleasures, memories and traditions of ordinary people, preoccupations with the vulgar, and interpretations of the United States as a significant location for mass-mediated cultural production.[32] However, this moment is also marked by a particular mixture of violence, callousness and voyeurism that circulates throughout culture as a result of technological surges of the last quarter of the twentieth century and the cross-pollination of mythological historical ideas on race and gender across various technologies of power since the beginnings of the European exploration.[33]

I am specifically concerned with the post-modern centralization of popular culture, namely the global production and popularization of modern black female epistemes within contemporary media. I have selected three sites for critical analysis that, in my opinion, require immediate attention: theological discourse, televangelism,

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[32] See Stuart Hall, 104-115.

[33] There has been a considerable amount of work done on black women and media by black feminist scholars. This dissertation builds upon the scholarship of Valerie Smith, Michele Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Williams, bell hooks, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and numerous others. Essays like "Intersectionality and Experiments in Black Documentary" in *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* (89-119), and "Telling Family Secrets: Narrative and Ideology in *Suzanne Suzanne*" in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (205-215) by Valerie Smith, and texts like *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black*, and *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, and several others, frame my cultural readings in chapters IV and V.

and black popular culture.[34] I explore womanist theo-ethical analyses on black female cultural representations, T.D. Jakes' *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* phenomenon, and Tyler Perry's cinematic production, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*.

I argue that these three sites reproduce, circulate and maintain myths of black womanhood that need to be explored and, in some cases, "changed." Womanist theo-ethicists, Perry and Jakes offer interpretations of "black womanhood" that deny critical interests of black women and girls like complex subjectivity and difference. However, their deployment of black female myths also resonate with certain needs, for example, stereotypes about black women's genius to consistently triumph over tragedy may provide hope for those in dire situations. A critical examination of this complexity requires a post-structuralist black feminist religio-cultural critical lens. Such a lens, which proffers a critique of the pornotropic gaze on black women and girls' bodies through a critical analysis of the linguistic and representational epistemic regimes of power, discursive and non-discursive, that determine it, entails a turn towards black cultural studies and black cultural criticism. This move highlights a significant break with the production of knowledge operating in womanist theo-ethical discourse.

Black cultural criticism is a complex methodology and critical interpretive lens within Black Cultural Studies/Black Studies. It includes black feminist thought. This trajectory provides resourceful tools and frameworks for critically examining historical myths on black womanhood that over time produced a harmful meta-narrative on the 'nature' of black femaleness that continues to cross-penetrate almost every possible

[34] Although this dissertation builds upon the scholarship of black feminist theorists, such as, Valerie Smith, Michele Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Williams, bell hooks, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and numerous others, it recognizes that the cultural sites that I have selected for examination are typically negated by black feminists due to the "religious" content and the particular kind of gaze that critiques of religious cultures and discourses require.

avenue of culture and society.[35] This lens bridges the scholarship of Raymond Williams and others at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS)[36] and U.S. Black Cultural Studies. Of particular importance is the scholarship of black feminist literary and cultural critic, Hortense Spillers. She provides insightful analytic resources for disrupting and reconfiguring the ground upon which mythologies on race and gender are reproduced and circulated in society and culture.

Spillers' theorizations, which make visible what is behind these readings and exposes how meanings travel through a critique of signs, symbols, significations and representations, are pivotal to black feminist religio-cultural criticism. In addition to positing an alternative grammar for deconstructing cultural ideas, her theories offer useful interpretive categories for reading experiences and representational strategies, for example, "pornotroping," "displacement" and "captivity." These categories provide layers of analyses for exploring and realigning strategies and 'positions' that make objectification viable. They examine representational moves, such as how language and images are used to construct certain kinds of meanings, expose specific habits and complexities, and re-align meanings by "changing the letter" to tell a different 'story.'[37]

Turning to Spillers involves three initial moves. First, it requires a shift towards "religio-cultural" criticism, which is a combined analytic gaze that includes the intellectual activities of cultural and religious criticisms. Cultural criticism, akin to black

[35] For instance, language, images, education, magazines, film, media, news outlets, fashion, advertising, religion, etc.
[36] Led by Stuart Hall, a Jamaican member of the British community who is responsible for connecting the work of CCCS to Black British Cultural Studies.
[37] It is imperative to note that while Spillers' scholarship drives my strategy for reading cultural texts in this dissertation, black feminist religio-cultural criticism is informed by a wealth of black feminist scholars, to include but not limited those already cited, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Barbara Smith, Joy James, Mary Helen Washington, Wahneema H. Lubiano, Angela Davis, Kimberly Crenshaw, Toni Morrison, Paula Giddings, and several others.

cultural criticism, offers a variety of theoretical frameworks and tools for interrogating interpretative moves in representational strategies and practices that attempt to subvert human fulfillment. It aims to expose and redirect the subversion of these goals, wherever present, while simultaneously highlighting possibilities for transcendence.

Religious criticism, as articulated by religious philosophers, William D. Hart and Victor Anderson, is a reflective analytical tool with liberative aims that radically critiques social phenomena "that block the road of inquiry, enforce conformity, and subjugate whole populations through the violent passions that they produce," such as "dogmatism, illiberalism, scapegoating, arbitrary power, antidemocratic authority, and the propensity to dissemble and lie."[38] Religious criticism has an emancipatory agenda, which proceeds iconoclastically. Strategically, it rejects any totalizations that deny what is particular. It achieves this by emphasizing frameworks that transcend particularity over essentialist claims. However, religious criticism, while embedded in cultural criticism, is distinct. As a function of cultural criticism, religious criticism names a particular outlook, disposition or interest.

It is important to note that religious criticism is not theology. Neither is theology religious criticism, except in the sense that theological critical inquiry may lead to criticisms that may be determined as religious.[39] The theologians' primary task is to provide and interpret "the statement of the truth of the Christian message."[40] This task distinguishes between the aims of the religious critic and the theologian. The religious

[38] William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture (Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought)* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 15, 164.
[39] Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 29; see also Victor Anderson, "Theorizing African American Religion" in *African American Studies*, Jeanette R. Davidson, ed., (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 260-278.
[40] Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, 29.

critic, although possibly affiliated with a religious tradition or expression, is not legitimated by affiliations or beliefs. Instead, she is justified by her critique of practices that disable human fulfillment, whether "religious" or "secular," or radically oppositional to or mutually expressive of one's own culture, tradition or context.[41]

Strategies that limit advancement toward the satisfaction of categorical ends and goods that human beings minimally require for maintaining a biological life (for example, safety, work, play, knowledge, friendship, piece of mind, integrity of conscience, spiritual meaning, the ability to move about freely without fear or harm, the ability to marry without undue constrictions, the ability to buy a house where one can afford, etc.[42]) are her ultimate object of criticism, regardless of affiliation. Although, it is important to note that criticisms, including those of the religious critic, are themselves 'positioned'. I use the designation "religio-cultural" criticism, specifically "black feminist religio-cultural criticism," because it denotes a particular disposition and interest internal to this dissertation.

Religion and culture represent a matrix of reflexive, integrated signifying systems that are purposefully negotiated through practices of resistance, accommodation, appropriation and consent. The hyphen explicitly signifies religion as an aspect and function of culture and consequentially, religious criticism as an aspect and function of cultural criticism. The latter provides the context for the former. This lens enables more nuanced readings of cultural forms by highlighting the inter-relationality of human and non-human (for example, nature and animals) activity as opposed to incommensurability.

[41] Victor Anderson, "Theorizing African American Religion," 260-278.
[42] Victor Anderson.

My field of study, History and Critical Theories of Religion, the study *of* religion (which necessarily includes black religious expressions and cultural forms), and the production of religious ideology, a source of both regulation and meanings, allows for these kinds of critical moves. The study of religion denotes "religion" as a reflexive socially constructed human phenomena, and interpretive concept deployed for the purposes of examining legitimate modes of expressions in human culture. It is distinct from theological discourses on the existence and activity of God, which may presume religious essences and origins.[43] Drawing upon the scholarship of Charles Long in *Significations*, "religion" is the way one comes to terms with her or his ultimate reality in the world. It is a movement, motivation, or expression that precedes, yet, influences thought, to include but not limited to theology or theory.[44]

In view of this, "religion" manifests through a variety of profiles and sites. History and Critical Theories of Religion provides a framework for exploring and theorizing these manifestations. Moreover, it opens "religion" up to its varieties, to include but not limited to African American and diasporic religions. This dissertation turns to African American popular religion as a site of critical inquiry, thus moving beyond traditional sites of examination such as African American Christian churches, traditions, institutions, etc., to include the production of African American religious

[43] For more information on the framing of "religion" as a human phenomenon in the study of religion see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and 'the mystic East'* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge and Ideology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), and J.Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Each of these texts shapes the interpretation of "religion" in this dissertation, which necessarily includes African American popular religions.

[44] See Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*.

ideology and its influences in popular media.[45] This focus requires black feminist religio-cultural criticism, which opens up space for several additional theories and methods in the study of religion.

The second move highlights my deployment of ideological criticism, a defining component of cultural criticism. As with religious criticism, cultural criticism provides the context for ideological criticism. Ideology refers to opinions, convictions, ideas, feelings, orientations, motivations, principles, etc., that members of a group may hold, exhibit and/or disseminate through varying technologies of power, thus enabling them to satisfy their desires and interests.[46] These positions are powerful. They structure society in line with particular values and aims such as capitalism, racism and sexism.

Although determining and potentially limiting to human fulfillment, ideologies are not completely determinant of human action. Instead, they are constantly negotiated and subject to imminent critique and continuous realignment. Ideological criticism (detailed and reflective analyses of particular values and aims that structure society along certain kinds of axes) is ongoing. This analytical lens, which is often expository, interpretive and evaluative of particular social realities or systems of ideas that are

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[45] Others who have done similar work are Milmon F. Harrison, author of *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (2005), Shayne Lee, author of *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* (2009) and *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (2005), Stephanie Mitchem, author of *Name It and Claim it?: Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (2007), and Jonathan L. Walton, author of *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (2009). However, this dissertation is distinct from these texts in its emphasis on pop cultural "religious" texts (i.e. films), representational strategies that construct gender, black feminism, and its move toward developing a strategy and theory for reading not only African American popular religion and cultural production, but also other forms of black diasporic religiosity, and its intersections with pornotropic gazing.

[46] For more information, see Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School (Modern European Philosophy)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology: The Origins, Grammar, and Future of Ideology* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1982).

foundational to an economy, is particularly resourceful for examining and critiquing the construction, transmission, diffusion and appropriation of black female cultural images.

According to political philosopher, Raymond Geuss, ideological criticism makes three programmatic moves: descriptive, pejorative and positive.[47] The descriptive mode refers to groups into which socio-cultural systems may be divided. It includes interpretive categories such as beliefs, concepts, attitudes, motives, desires, values, predilections, rituals, gestures and psychological dispositions of a group.[48] The pejorative mode calls attention to "false consciousness,"[49] "the illusionary and falsifying ways that cultural activities deny the real interests of persons."[50] The positive mode explores constructive possibilities. It brings to the fore an ideology that the critic thinks will most likely satisfy the real aims and interests of the group.[51] This is not a move towards strategic hegemony. It is reflexive. It creates openings for individuals and communities to satisfy their wants and needs. It makes room for complexities and ambiguities that reflect the continual negotiation and restructuring of social relations and meanings. This dissertation performs each of these moves. Each chapter is structured in light of Geuss' tri-fold program.

The third move re-reads "experience" through representation, the ways in which one represents and imagines herself and the ways in which she may be represented and imagined by others.[52] This move distinguishes between outside projection and internal consciousness. However, it also recognizes the constant negotiation between each.

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[47] Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School (Modern European Philosophy)*.
[48] Raymond Geuss, 5.
[49] Geuss, 12, 87.
[50] Anderson, 27.
[51] Geuss, 22-26.
[52] This move is undergirded by Stuart Hall's seminal work in *Representation.* Also influential is the scholarship of Kobena Mercer in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*.

Representation holds that experiences are understood in terms of "stocks of knowledge" that mediate encounters through language. However, language signifies and has a certain end. Still, the data of our experiences can be interpreted in a variety of ways, particularly given 'positions' and attitudes. Representation makes room for various experiences as well as a variety of interpretations of those experiences.

The aim of this dissertation is to provide a reading of readings that "changes the letter" and "loosens the yoke" of pornotropia. It recognizes that phenomena and encounters have numerous sides and therefore can be read in many ways. However, often cultural readings tend to limit other analyses by providing not "a" reading but "the" reading. This dissertation aims to deconstruct the strategies that reproduce and maintain cultural myths of black womanhood while providing an alternative framework for reading both experiences and images in our contemporary context.

This dissertation builds upon black feminist and womanist theo-ethical contributions towards the demythologization of myths of black womanhood. However, it also attends to the monstrous and the seemingly fixed modern epistemes on race and gender, while pushing for a *less* pornotropic gaze that takes account of the force of modernity on post-modernity. This focus draws attention to the inconclusive, unstable and messiness of life, namely, human complexity and complicity in the maintenance of cultural meanings. Thus, it opts against theo-ethical moves, which require solutions (i.e. God making a way out of no way).

Chapter II, "Changing the Letter: Black Cultural Criticism, Hortense Spillers and the Loosening of the Yoke," turns to black cultural criticism and the scholarship of Hortense Spillers. It argues that her body of essays, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes,

the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," and others, are foundational to contemporary analyses of myths of black womanhood, which effect black women and girls' experiences, namely black feminist religio-cultural critiques. They provide critiques, theories, methods, language and interpretive categories that are useful for both reading and rethinking black women and girls' contemporary experiences and cultural representations. Further, the essays aid in loosening the yoke of "America's Grammar Book" on race and gender, particularly as deployed in chapters III, IV, and V. Moreover, they create openings for future discourses on race, gender, experience, representation, and popular culture in religious studies.

Chapter III, "Demythologizing Race, Gender, and Experience in Womanist Theo-Ethical Discourse," deploys black feminist religio-cultural criticism to explore womanist theo-ethical contributions to the discourse on the myths of black womanhood. This chapter critically examines the intellectual gaze and representational strategies of two prominent womanist scholars, Kelly Brown Douglas and Emilie Townes. I argue that while Douglas, Townes and others, created productive space in black theological discourse for thinking critically about how black women get re-presented in various cultural forms and how those re-presentations in turn affect their experiences, their analyses, although necessary and insightful, are inadequate for our contemporary context. Specifically, they are yoked by womanist theo-ethical internal logic, which is essentialist and reductive, yet, in some ways, simultaneously affirming. I explore this complexity and suggest an alternative. I will turn to Hip Hop sensation, Nicki Minaj, as a possible site of complex subjectivity, re-presentation, and critical inquiry.

Chapter IV, "Whose 'Woman' is This? A Black Feminist Religio-Cultural Commentary on Bishop T.D. Jakes' *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*," utilizes black feminist religio-cultural criticism to examine Jakes' representational practices, both discursive and non-discursive. I argue that Jakes deploys a pornotropic optic that draws upon and repackages the racist and sexist epistemes of high modernity in order to mass-produce and market a "liberative" message for women. While this message is a source of comfort and hope to millions of women, it presents what black feminist theorist, bell hooks, calls "a new style of primitivism." That is, Jakes constructs a message that displays a dependency on his *universal woman*. Not only is his creation reductive, "she" is the gateway towards his ideals and growing empire. She never gets loosed. Instead, she is held captive to Jakes' imagination and kingdom.

Chapter V, "Mad Black Bitches and Lady-like Saints: Representations of African American Women in Tyler Perry Films," uses black feminist religio-cultural criticism to examine Perry's representational strategies for defining and presenting "black womanhood." I argue that Perry's films further instigate critical discourse between religion and the popular. Films such as *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006), *Daddy's Little Girls* (2007), *Why Did I Get Married* (2007), *Meet the Browns* (2008), *The Family that Preys* (2008), *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009), *I Can Do Bad All by Myself* (2009), *Why Did I Get Married Too* (2010), *For Colored Girls* (2010), and the forthcoming *Madea's Happy Family* (2011), require womanist and black feminist attention. Each offer casts and storylines that resonate deeply with black Christian women and their experiences. However, while these films are, in some ways, affirming, they present a range of complex cultural codes that need to be decoded. That

is, while they appeal to Christian sensibilities and complex subjectivities, on one hand, they perform what cultural theorist, Tommy L. Lott, refers to as "cultural malpractice,"[53] on the other. Neither can be dismissed. I explore this complexity and suggest an alternative by turning to the work of Oscar Micheaux and Ntozake Shange.

This dissertation aims to "change the letter" and "loosen the yoke" of operative taken for granted meanings of black womanhood that circulate in scholarship, religion and culture. My intention is not to discredit that which is emancipatory or life giving. It is to deconstruct and disorient what is prescriptive, iconographic, and totalizing, while simultaneously presenting that which is freakish, complex, and fluid. This is not a dissertation on black women and girls' essences, heroism, or genius. Moreover, it is not a discussion on tragedy. Rather, what is offered is a guide for reading culture, religion, and experiences *less* pornotropically that turns the taken for granted inside out, exposes its strategies, and posits a theory that celebrates complex multi-positionality, which appear seemingly contradictory. This dissertation presents a black feminist religio-cultural criticism that stands within and between womanist theo-ethics and black feminist thought.

[53] See Tommy L. Lott's essay, "Black Vernacular Representation and Cultural Malpractice" in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, edited by David Theo Goldberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 230-257.

CHAPTER II

CHANGING THE LETTER: BLACK CULTURAL CRITICISM, HORTENSE SPILLERS AND THE LOOSENING OF THE YOKE

This chapter argues that the scholarship of black feminist literary and cultural critic, Hortense Spillers, is foundational for contemporary analyses of myths of black womanhood, which effect black women and girls' experiences. Her essays provide critiques of signs, symbols, significations and representations that are useful for reading black women and girls' contemporary experiences and cultural representations. They offer necessary concepts, language and strategies for disrupting the ground upon which mythologies of race and gender are reproduced in and circulate throughout society and culture. Namely, these essays provide a critical framework for loosening the yoke of "America's Grammar Book" on race and gender through a deconstruction and reconfiguration of its representational strategies of reading. These moves enable several openings for discussing the intersections of race, gender, experience, representation, and popular culture in religious studies. Moreover, they are critical for formulating a black feminist religio-cultural criticism.

I will examine two essays: "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed" and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." After providing a close reading of selected essays, I explicate where Spillers' scholarship proffers a more adequate lens for reading and demythologizing black female experiences and cultural representations than womanist theo-ethical cultural criticisms. I conclude with a brief turn toward chapters III-V, which deploy black

feminist religio-cultural criticism to explore the representational strategies in three sites: 1) theological discourse, 2) televangelism and 3) popular culture, respectfully.

Changing the Letter and Loosening the Yoke

Of particular importance to the development of black feminist religio-cultural criticism and demythologizing black female experiences and cultural representations is Spillers' essay: "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, The Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," a comparative reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe and *Flight to Canada* (1976) by Ishmael Reed. Inspired by Ralph Ellison's essay, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Spillers argues that if you have the luxury of writing about a phenomenon and are thus situated toward it in a particular manner, words ("letters") can be manipulated ("changed") in a variety of ways to tell a story that may be either liberative or oppressive ("yoke"). Therefore meanings cannot be fixed. They are constantly being realigned and reconfigured, although sometimes appearing stabilized by routinization and mass-production. This is a guiding principle in both Spillers' scholarship and this dissertation.

Spillers' essays ultimately aim to change how African Americans are conceived, whether discursively, orally or visually. They specifically intend to deconstruct the ground upon which yoked repetitions are invented and reinvented, particularly historical race and gender representations, by exposing their production and maintenance, and "changing the letter." Spillers provides a layered framework for deconstructing and reconfiguring the reproduction and circulation of the "Welfare Queen" and the "Jezebel" trope, both signifying the "black-female-as-whore." However, her framework shifts from

signified/signifier arrangements toward axes with multiple interlocking synapses. This move re-reads the taken for granted, "black-female-as-whore," as a pornotropic[54] invention situated in the mythemes of the "nuclear family," and interprets black female inter-subjectivity as "flesh."

As "flesh," black female inter-subjectivity becomes a landscape of prohibitions where the abnormal might be staged and a passageway between the human and non-human world might be experienced. Changing the letter of signifiers like "Welfare Queen" and "Jezebel," which articulate inherent hyper-sexuality and immorality, disorient inherent taken for granted meanings. These signifiers erase history while problematizing black women and girls' inter-subjectivity. However, "changing the letter" explores a web of relations, where meanings are carried through both the human psyche and material culture over time where they are brought to life and realigned again and again through varying arrangements, to include collaborative acts by black female and male subjects.

These moves ("changing the letter") articulate strategy, not solution. They are not aimed toward dismantlement or overthrowing. Spillers recognizes the cultural force of modern epistemes operating in post modernity. Thus, demolition is not her goal. In fact, Spillers steers clear of false certainties altogether. Modern epistemes such as "blackness" are powerful. However, she might add that while powerful, epistemes like "blackness" are also malleably brittle. That is, while complete dismantlement of popular, reductive

[54] "Pornotropic gazing," to be taken up further later in this chapter is a way of "seeing" others, which is "othering." It refers to the act of looking as a strategy for constructing meanings, which draws attention to how cultural meanings and mythologies are produced, circulated, maintained, reconfigured and superimposed, via varying controls, onto the bodies of others, to the point where they appear normative, thus impacting how subjects are read and treated. I hold that pornotroping, when deployed as an interpretive category for reading, provides a clue for making sense of the taken for granted.

and totalistic readings of "blackness" is unlikely, meanings can be altered. Thus, subjects are never completely determined by cultural meanings, regardless of how controlling. Instead, they have the ability, at least on individual levels, to "change the letter" and present a new side of the 'story'.

Spillers advances this strategy through her reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *Flight to Canada* (1976), two very different novels that take up North American slavery. At the forefront of this essay is Spillers' concern about the discourse of ex-slaves and its circumscription to the yokes and jokes of discursive slavery, particularly in the literary imagination. Spillers argues that discursive slavery is necessary for explaining what happened historically as well as for interpreting what appears to be a recurrent manifestation of neo-enslavement, which are often sustained through social-cultural-economic-political practices and ideas. However, writers like Stowe reinvented "slavery" through a manipulation of signs, thus re-encoding the phenomenon in a way that ultimately yielded a radically different reading.

Spillers contends that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) produced a group of objects that were oriental in character and placed them into discourse among other themes and concepts, thus freezing the dynamic qualities of both the institution and its subjects in an ahistorical fictionalized scheme.[55] For example, Stowe's "Tom," a sweet-tempered, bible toting, "uncle," who is estranged from his own sexuality, which is simultaneously rendered both exotic and unspeakable, becomes "the negro" in Stowe's text, robbed of complex subjectivity and captured in a script whose outcome has already been

[55] This represents the "yoke."

determined.[56] For Stowe, he is a living sacrifice, an undistinguished public enterprise, subjected to the terror of both mercantile dealings and textual crucifixion. Spillers argues that he is a necessity for Stowe, who demands that someone else pay the price for *her* "slavery."[57] However, Josiah Henson, the basis for Stowe's "Tom," was much more complex than what she made him out to be. Unfortunately, his story was eclipsed by Stowe's characterization to the point where Henson had to prove his authenticity.[58]

Equally troubling is that this text was prominently placed in the canon of American literature and thus reproduced in mass proportions. This generated a whole sea of cultural items, all of which enabled a voyeuristic view into the life of "Tom," "the negro," which eventually took on a life of its own and produced a shadow that hovers over its primary examples of articulation.[59] Spillers argues that this placed "the negro" within an arrangement of discursive signs, among a group of theories, schemes and backdrops.[60] Henson and many others were demanded to live up to the script. Henson refused.[61]

Reeds' iconoclastic satire, *Flight to Canada* (1976) is inspired by a letter that he found, written by Martin Delaney to Frederick Douglass "complaining that Mrs. Stowe had not only ripped off Josiah Henson, but some other black writers as well [and thus]

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[56] Hortense Spillers, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 180-194.
[57] Hortense Spillers, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, 185.
[58] Henson wrote the following books in an effort to tell his own story: *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* (1849), *Truth Stranger Than Fiction. Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (1858) and *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life: An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson* (1876).
[59] The "primary examples of articulation" highlights the act of placing subjects (i.e. the enslaved) into discourse through language, which Spillers argues "hovers over" them like a "shadow." Hortense Spillers, "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed," xii-iii, 179-180.
[60] Hortense Spillers, 179-180.
[61] By telling his own story.

demanded that she pay Henson, five thousand dollars."[62] Reed parodies Stowe's caricatures, exposing the human-made character of her "slavery"[63] and therefore lessening the yoke.[64] In addition to providing an alternative reading, Reed gives voice to Henson and others. That is, the yokes and crucifixion in Stowe's work became the jokes and liberation in Reeds'.[65] Moreover, the symbolic and material assassination of difference, particularity, complexity, and inter-subjectivity in Stowe's book (crucifixion) became the outrageous (liberation) in Reeds', who highlights the troubling nature of discursive slavery and the perversion in the master class by emphasizing the comedic.

Flight to Canada (1976) is disruptive. It provides a reading of slavery that disorients Stowe's "slavery" while subverting "slavery" as possessed and articulated by many African Americans. Spillers argues that there is the belief that slavery should only be articulated by those who have lived it or those emphasizing the tragic. She finds this troublesome. However, Reed shows that the truth of slavery, which Spillers posits cannot be fully grasped, can be communicated without overdetermining it within a particular experience or forcing readers to relive it. Instead, discursive signs can be rearranged, deploying the same "props" or sequence of "props" to render a different reading.[66]

Reeds' moves are complex. He subverts ontological categories by deploying comedic rage to interrogate and draw attention to the discursive and its properties,[67] for example, "uncle Tom" and his projected meanings. This move explodes habits of

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[62] This is from an email exchange via *Facebook* between Ishmael Reed and myself.
[63] Spillers' strategy to expose "the human-made character" of discursive "slavery" and other articulations draws attention to the ways that humans create stories through language about phenomena with particular ends in mind.
[64] This dissertation argues that the "yoke" of dominant modern race and gender expressions operating within the meta-narrative on difference, established in contact/conquest, are so embedded in our cultural landscape that they can only be lessened through varying acts of resistance to its determinants.
[65] Spillers,182.
[66] Ibid., 195.
[67] Ibid.

language while reconfiguring values and beliefs that arise in them through a re-arrangement of lexical signs that re-encode "slavery" with new readings.[68] Stowe's serious and powerful "slaveholder" becomes perverse and needing a psychiatrist in Reeds' text.

Spillers concludes that a critical discourse that deconstructs the strategies that undergird yoked manipulations such as Stowe's "negro," is necessary for lessening the sting of prevailing social fictions, which get reproduced through varying technologies of power over time. Deconstruction is particularly necessary for slavery, which Spillers maintains is one of the most textualized and discursive fields of practice of all time. Thus, "slavery" is constantly being reinvented, both by writers and readers. This reinvention denotes room for improvisation and rearrangement[69] that have real effects and aims. These moves highlight a struggle for truth that is inextricably linked to lived social-cultural-historical-political conditions. "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, The Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed" is no different from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) or *Flight to Canada* (1976). Each confuses previous readings by offering new ones. This dissertation aims to do the same.

"Changing the Letter" provides a critical theory and strategy for reading and writing. As a theory, it holds that meaning making is strategic, political and truth seeking. However, truths (meanings) are human-made articulations of social-cultural-historical phenomena that are 'positioned' toward certain ends. Thus, there are as many "truths" as there are "positions." Truth extends from stocks of knowledge and experiences that are influenced by representation: the interpretation of one's own

[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 182.

constitution that include the way one represents and imagines herself/himself and the ways that one may be represented and imagined by others. Therefore, experiences are put into language where they *become* true. Thus, some truths, particularly if mass-mediated, are more determining than others. Nevertheless, truths (meanings) can be changed.

As a strategy for reading and writing, "changing the letter" enables certain moves for interrogating, drawing attention to, and reconfiguring the properties of language in order to expose its habits, while emphasizing other values, meanings and readings. Such moves deconstruct and disorient the mythic by re-presenting its parts, for example, Stowe's "Tom," as artifactual, homogeneous and commodified through analyses on the work of representation, including the linguistic, discursive and visual. These moves are particularly useful for interpreting and re-reading womanist theo-ethical constructions of black womanhood, experience and representation, which are determined by a "tri-modal" gaze that suggests that one cannot say anything about black women's experiences unless they have lived "them" or emphasize the horrendous. I will explore this further in Chapter III. In addition, "changing the letter" is helpful for analyzing contemporary cultural significations that reduce black female inter-subjectivity to problems or promiscuity. I will take this up in Chapters IV and V where I examine the representational practices of Bishop T.D. Jakes and filmmaker, Tyler Perry, respectively.

For the remainder of this chapter, I turn my attention to Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." While "Changing the Letter" provides a theory for reading and writing, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" performs these moves. The essay accents other interpretive categories that tell a different story about the female

subject of slavery. These categories are important for analyzing and redirecting black female representations. They "change the letters" of "America's Grammar Book" on race and gender by turning its ideas inside out, thus exposing the history, politics and strategies behind their harmful projections.

Spillers' writing style is richly layered and the essay takes up multiple themes.[70] For the purposes of this dissertation, emphasis is placed on pornotroping. Pornotroping provides the clue to understanding how black female inter-subjectivity might be read and projected, thus impacting both experiences and representation. To substantiate this thesis, I will also take up other themes such as displacement, captivity, degendering, and broken kinship ties. I will first highlight Spillers' theory for reading and then turn to her themes.

"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" offers a critical discourse on the cultural production of meanings that deconstructs representational strategies by showcasing the arbitrariness of signs and symbols, on one hand, and the intentionality of signification and re-presentation, on the other. Critical to this essay is what I interpret as Spillers' theory for reading: the underlying idea that meanings are contrived, on both conscious and unconscious levels, through the consistency of signification on signs and presentations. Specifically, "verbes," which refer to an integration of Levi-Straussian ideas about the interconnections between linguistic and social structures with psychoanalysis, are words that have become "full" with meanings over time, turning signs into sign-vehicles.[71] These vehicles inscribe individuals within the collective with preferred meanings that are received and appropriated.

[70] Also referred to as interpretive categories.
[71] Spillers, 509.

"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," perhaps Spillers' most widely read essay, articulates how these vehicles get produced, reproduced, maintained and circulated. Spillers argues that sign-vehicles, established in light of historical social arrangements, were infused by "shadows" that fall over the word, eventually penetrating the interstices between symbols.[72] The shadow, which is akin to a pathogen whose function is to assign difference, encapsulates the word, thus becoming a master representational microbe. As such, it approaches its subject/object with terrifying certainty, thus defining their function and identity through concrete discourses and representations from generation to generation. While the figure eludes the imaginative grasp and although neither the shadow nor its "verbe" have inherent meaning, the combination is in tandem reified in personality where it gains strength as it signifies. These moves produce not merely a "verbe" but entire grammars.

"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" emphasizes the latter. Spillers' deployment of *grammar* refers to the whole system and structure of language and representations developed around race and gender during colonization, which articulated a story through which identity and outcome are already known. She argues that discourses on race and gender re-conceptualized individual biography in terms of mythology, a conceptual sign system that empties reality of history and fills it with "nature," thus producing its own grammar on essences that ultimately "go without saying." This recoding replaced inter-subjectivity with a general template (filled with multiple "verbes") that not only came to stand in for reality but also abolished the complexity of human activity.

This analysis is imperative for deconstructing the strategies that maintain the myths of black womanhood and lessening the yoke. It tears America's grammar book on

[72] Ibid., xii-iii.

race and gender apart, examines the pieces, and critically explores the parts that mythology leaves out such as the structure and function of signs and symbols that come to life as they become words and are given meanings. However, as articulated in "Changing the Letter," signs and symbols effect life. That is, while signs and symbols, are informed by social arrangements, they also influence them.[73] Thus, meanings are unavoidably entangled with social-cultural politics.

This entwinement between signs, symbols, signification, representation and inter-subjectivity draws attention to how the enslaved and others are "seen." Spillers argues that it is how the enslaved (and others) were "seen" that enabled and justified certain treatment and strategies. She introduces the ideas of "seeing" and "seen" in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" through the theme, pornotroping. "Seeing" or "seen" highlights her psychoanalytic work on hermeneutics, representation and subjectivity, most substantially explored in her essay, "'All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife was your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race." "Seeing" or "seen" laces emphasis on how we see with both the eyes and the psyche.

Pornotroping, when deployed as a critical interpretive category to critique the activity of pornotroping or "seeing," draws attention to the deconstruction, analysis and re-encoding of subjects or phenomena in light of received knowledge. These moves enable black female subjects to be reimagined ("seen") in particular mythical and homogenized ways. Pornotroping accentuates how the signs, symbols and significations of particular essentialist discourse and representations circulate throughout a variety of

[73] This essay, significantly informed by psychoanalysis, creates a basket weave of criticisms directed at 1960s academic feminism, the civil rights and black power movements and black intellectualism, all of which caused further displacement for black women in particular by not taking their historical experiences into account. Spillers is providing a critique of the meta-language on race and gender that enables and supports this sort of negation.

media where they are projected, received, consumed and appropriated to deploy and reproduce a variety of pornotropic gazes. This mass-mediated way of "seeing" black womanhood leads to a sense of powerlessness in terms of perception. However, Spillers maintains that humans are not always to themselves who they are to the world. Individual consciousnesses negotiate with (to include accommodation, resistance or both) pervasive cultural perceptions. Thus, while pornotropia is powerful, it is not wholly determining.

Nevertheless, pornotroping significantly impacts black women and girls' experiences. It relegates their presence to absurdity and sexuality to the unusual. This rereading cuts them off from full "personhood," including that which is (problematically) established through patriarchy.[74] Personhood refers to inter-subjectivity as experienced and recognized. Spillers posits that when subjects are born there is a social dimension in which the state has an interest in your name, weight, mother's name, father's name, doctor, etc. The birth certificate validates this, thereby creating a mini biography. However, this was not afforded to ex-slaves. Ex-slaves were read through a pornotropic lens that rendered them non-persons. Numerous implications followed. Namely, it gave rise to ideas of "black womanhood" that significantly affected historical (and contemporary) social-cultural politics and arrangements. For example, the sign-vehicles, "black" and "womanhood" became so full with meanings that their combined meaning cancelled out notions of "womanhood" altogether. Early twentieth century politics of

[74] This will be taken up later when I discuss degendering and kinship ties. In short, it highlights the idea that women are often recognized as subjects/persons in patriarchal societies through biological or legal ties with men (i.e. fathers and husbands). Pornotroping lessens these rights and rites for black women and girls because it recodes their being as absurd and unusual, whether they are daughters and wives or not. However, its force may be greater for those who are neither.

respectability reclaimed some of these ideas. Nevertheless, contemporary ideas of "black womanhood" continue to carry the baggage of both 'not being' and 'being' a "woman."

Spillers' deployment of pornotroping as a critical interpretive lens for reading this phenomenon "changes the letter." It manipulates the signs in order to highlight a new grammar that tells a different story. The new story exposes the operation and projection of "verbes" and sign-vehicles, which deconstruct and re-encode cultural meanings (i.e. myths of black womanhood) in light of received stocks of knowledge, unsettles several "truths," and draws attention to representational strategies, which I also refer to as themes for reading black women and girls' experiences and representations (i.e. displacement, captivity, degendering and broken kinship ties, all of which are implications of pornotropic gazing). However, while pornotropia influenced and justified the operation of these strategies, each simultaneously deepened the gaze of pornotropia. That is, the politics between social-cultural arrangements and practices, language and representation, and pornotropic gazing, is circular and ongoing. Nevertheless, deploying representational strategies such as displacement, captivity, degendering, and broken kinship ties as interpretive themes aids in exposing and deconstructing these arrangements, practices and politics.

Displacement and Home

"Displacement," a continuous thread in many of Spillers' essays, is foundational to "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." However, she takes it up most explicitly in her essays, "Peter's Pan's: Eating in the Diaspora," the prolegomenon to *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*

(2003), written over fifteen years after "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" and "'All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife was your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race." Displacement accentuates Spillers' commitment to both exposing and re-imagining the place and role of Africans in the diaspora, disoriented by European conquest. Contact/conquest placed Africans of the diaspora on a ceaseless social-cultural-political pendulum, swinging back and forth between home and exile, animalization and super-humanity and grotesquery and intrigue. This movement back and forth strategically destabilized Africans in America for centuries, therefore causing continuous anxiety with regard to identity and belonging.

More specifically, it led to an acute sense of ambivalence toward America, particularly for those desiring to establish "home," a place of rooted-ness, belonging and vulnerability, which is essential to both individual and communal identity formation and flourishing. Displacement/home is multifaceted. In one sense it accents diasporic plight and the ongoing search for a place of flourishing while it also notes (dis)location, as an outsider/within multiple discourses, whether as for Spillers it is feminism, black feminism, the Black Church or Black Studies.[75] However, "home" also marks the interior being of a subject, the core of one's humanity where critical consciousness develops. Finally, the displacement/home dialectic is also something concrete, a place of non-membership/membership, non-affiliation/belonging and exposure/refuge.

However "home" is read, Spillers asserts that it is ungraspable for African Americans historically marked with a cloud of meanings. Thus, it represents a romantic conceptual sign, which often stands in for concrete reality. Nevertheless, it is a space that Spillers wants to encounter. However, "displacement" creates obstacles for getting

[75] This may be in part due to Spillers' leanings towards psychoanalytics.

"home." Spillers advances this idea through her readings of race and the sign, "African-American," both of which are the outcome of politics and thus traverse individuals and collectives.

Spillers articulates "race" as a "poisonous" marker of difference that appeals to the irrational,[76] speaks through multiple discourses, banishes illusory notions of a public/private split and penetrates the "interior self." The latter produces what she refers to as the "perfect affliction."[77] That is, it shapes views while demanding an endless response. That is, "blackness" marks its target and then "specifies for the nervous beholder an overinvestement of anxiety *because* it is so marked," thus making the individual a "stimulus to anxiety" because she or he is always mindful of causing some sort of stir.[78] Thus, "blackness," a sign-vehicle through which we "see" and are "seen," calls attention to ideas of difference established through contact/conquest and civilized/primitive dialectics, which reconfigured "Africanness" as Europe's opposite. As such, Africans were reread as basins of "ultimate difference."[79]

Simultaneously, "Europeaness" (and thus, "whiteness") was reinterpreted as the standard of civilization from which everything else deviates. Both became sites where racial and gendered "knowledge" is "evidenced," thus provoking and permitting certain feelings and treatment. The sign "African American" functions in a similar way. Notwithstanding cultural deployment, Spillers contends that both the signs (African/American) and the symbol (the hyphen), present a hyphenated identity, which

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[76] In the eyes of "proof" (i.e. science/DNA).
[77] Ibid., 378-9.
[78] Ibid., 379.
[79] T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting demonstrates that the black bodies were signified as not only physiognomically different, but also physiologically and temperamentally different, particularly black female bodies. For more information see T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Duke University Press, 1999), 6, 8.

represents difference and dislocation. The hyphen is sometimes represented by a space. Spillers might argue that the meaning of the sign fills the space, regardless if it is visibly present or not. She asserts that "African," which precedes "American," suggests that the subjects operating under its combined banner are "cut off from both the new situation and the old," thus belonging "neither here nor there."[80]

Therefore, the hyphen, although at times invisible, reflects the cultural ground and space between Africa and America. It points to both a "division and deferment of place"[81] as well as a combination and fragmentation of meanings. This combination and division of signs and symbol function to symbolically and materially un-stabilize the identity and life-world of black persons. However, it is imperative to note that the sign also functions as a stabilizing mechanism, although troubling, particularly as it refers to "home" in terms of where African Americans live, function and attempt to thrive. Nevertheless, Spillers seems to suggest that African Americans will never be completely at "home" in either Africa or America. Consequently, the meaning is paradoxical. It indicates affiliation and exilic status concomitantly.[82]

Mythology screens this sort of reading out. It erases the narrative of contact/conquest where colonialists, during the formation of the social and symbolic order called the "New World," made contact through conquest, trade and colonialism with every part of the globe while simultaneously producing, through Enlightenment methods and epistemologies, racial and gendered theories (to include forms of color and color/gender symbolism) that made the economic and military conquest of various

[80] Spillers, "Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon," 253.
[81] Spillers, Ibid.
[82] Spillers, "'All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife was your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race,"385.

cultures and peoples both justifiable and defensible. Mythology obscures the representational strategies that made Africa Europe's exotic 'other', as evidenced in the grammar of both "blackness" and "whiteness, " and thus further destabilized African American identity. Lastly, mythology negates how these grammars cross-pollinate various aspects of society through varying regimes of power, which mass-produce racist and sexist representations to the point where they appear normative.

Spillers screens these narratives in by shattering the taken for granted into pieces, examining its "ingredients" and positing a different story. "Ingredients" refer to the parts and pieces of what she calls "finished products." "Finished products," as articulated in "Peters Pans: Eating in the Diaspora," denotes meanings and ideas such as "blackness," "African American," "black womanhood" or "Welfare Queen" that are made up of numerous theories and myths ("ingredients") that have been solidified over time. Thus, their meanings go without saying. However, the displacement/home dialectic disrupts previous, taken for granted meanings by reframing the discourse of African Americans in terms of historical conquest. This move is not to freeze African American experiences within a context of oppression. However, it is to agitate notions of innate African primitivism and difference by highlighting European empire, barbarity, capture, signification and strategic representation, which cause *moments* of oppression.

This reading creates an opening for a discourse on displacement strategies (i.e. captivity, degendering and broken kinship ties) that illustrate how displacement socially positioned black women and girls, how this positioning effected how they were "seen" and treated and, how pornotropia furthered displacement by justifying this treatment. These strategies are pivotal for reading Spillers' essay, contemporary experiences and

cultural representations. In addition to providing an investigative grid of themes for getting at how black female subjectivity was read and reconfigured historically, each theme enables strategic, analytic layers necessary for reading and reinterpreting contemporary meanings of black womanhood. They help, for instance, to parse and reconfigure contemporary normative claims such as those taken up in the works of womanist theo-ethicists, T.D. Jakes and Tyler Perry in chapters III, IV and V, respectively.

Captive Flesh

Of particular importance for this dissertation is the mytheme of "captive flesh." Spillers argues that the enslaved were "seen" as "captive flesh," a subversive expression intended to draw attention to the functionality of both psychological and physical "captivity." Psychological captivity emphasizes the transporting of historical ideas after slavery, thus causing what Spillers refers to as a "post-captive" state. "Post-captivity" refers to the calcification and maintenance of old texts and the simultaneous reproduction and projection of the same or similar narratives in light of contemporary contexts, events, and premises, all of which are enabled by pornotropia. The mixture of both the old and the new penetrates our psyches through a variety of gazes and media, thus circulating between individuals, institutions, structures, systems and communities while concomitantly "marking" new targets who resist or appropriate (or both) their meanings. This cycle furthers historical ideas of "difference" and feelings of displacement.

Physical captivity refers to literal captivity as well as captive practices such as regulation, market display, commodification, auction, naming, forced labor, torture,

isolation and breeding. Spillers argues that the Middle Passage literally robbed Africans of all that made up their subjectivity, for example, their body, cultural and familial context and gendered identity, thus turning differentiated African female and male subjects into undifferentiated "flesh," *things—for—others*. As "captive flesh," the enslaved were reduced to (in)human territories of cultural and political maneuver, upon which hatred, fascination and curiosity was spun ad nauseam. Physical captivity, in terms of North American enslavement of Africans, is over. Nevertheless, captive practices such as the display, naming and commodification of "black flesh," continue. This is critical for reading contemporary black female experiences and representation. The status of "flesh" obscures complex subjectivity, thus turning "the one" into a fragmented "it." There are numerous consequences for this.

Degendering and Broken Kinship Ties

Spillers argues that physical captivity erased gender and familial lines. She refers to this as "degendering" and "broken kinship ties." These practices were particularly burdensome to the female enslaved who were expected to labor both physically and sexually at the behest of everyone, both the free and the captured. Spillers asserts that the enslaved were often separated and put together without regard for kinship. This destroyed boundaries and thus confused identities and social roles. Therefore, the relationship between enslaved children and their biological parents were complex. She holds that there were early alliances between children and their mothers, hence "mama's baby," particularly since mothers were often central to the achievement of individual

subjectivity. However, the relationship between children and their biological fathers was troubling at best, thus "father's maybe."

"Captive" fathers, who were either physically absent or mockingly present, were not allowed to name, raise or protect their children and thus, experienced erasure in both name and body. This rupture had several implications. Primarily, it further unleveled the foundation upon which black females attempted to stand and build their identity. Furthermore, it confused sexual practices and concepts between fathers and daughters, leading not only to increased incest patterns both during and after slavery but also a host of other ramifications. Spillers furthers this argument in "'The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight': In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers," an essay that utilizes Father Mapple's sermonic representation of Jonah in *Moby Dick* (1851) to examine what she interprets as "a celebration of incest" in black literature such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou, *Corregidora* (1975) by Gayl Jones, *Just Above By Head* (1979) by James Baldwin, *Invisible Man* (1947) by Ralph Ellison, *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker and *The Bluest Eye* (1970) by Toni Morrison.

In *Moby Dick* (1851), Father Mapple parallels Jonah's soul with his view of a "slanted" room. The narrator suggests that Jonah's soul, not the room, is crooked and thus, should be upright. In the same way, Spillers argues that the black phallus is crooked, yet should be "straight." "Straight" refers to familial boundaries, not heteronormativity. Spillers posits that many black literary writers, preoccupied with the absence of black fathers during slavery, overlooked this phenomenon and thus approached incest patterns uncritically. "'The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight': In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers" provides a close examination of

incest patterns in order to articulate the effects of un-individuation and ruptured family lines.

Spillers argues that incest patterns between fathers and daughters made black female identities even more caliginous. She asserts that daughters, in a typical patriarchal system, maintain status as they "disappear." That is, they are born typically bearing the father's name. However, they "end" by "acquiring" the husband's name. Thus, they maintain "visibility" as they become "wives" and "mothers" to their "husbands" children. Enslaved daughters did not receive the right or privilege of this status. Notwithstanding its problems, patriarchal right established a degree of visibility/personhood and in most cases, protection. However, enslaved female visibility was established only through their invisibility. By this I mean, their status as ungendered, unprotected and unconnected market pieces did not afford them even the partial rights or rites of "daughter" or "wife." Instead, they were "seen" as boundary-less, sexually neutral enclaves, upon which, the abnormal could be staged, unrestricted curiosities would unfold and unbridled access was enabled.

Strategies like captivity, degendering and broken kinship ties refashioned black female subjectivity in terms of primitivism, difference, impurity, immorality and danger. Further, they caused black womanhood to be re-envisioned as a frontier of "flesh" for marketing, purchase, play, consumption and disposal. This reading demarcated all kinds of limits, namely, a sexual limit. That is, black female "flesh" was reinterpreted as being so boundless that black female ex-slaves, whose gender and kinship ties were effaced, became subject to everything and everyone, including their fathers, brothers, and perhaps

even sons.[83] Thus, in addition to confusing the familial lines that make "father" father and "daughter" daughter,[84] slavery, and its pornotropic optic, redefined black female sexuality as marketable, expendable, inexhaustible, unidentifiable and non-existent, all simultaneously.

The shift from subjectivity to "flesh" and the re-encoding of black female sexuality are central to getting at the subject of "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Spillers refers to black female sexuality as "mythic events that never happened," a "sexuality-to-be."[85] In her essay, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,"[86] written in light of her frustrations with the continued slippage in feminist discourses on sexuality, which distinguished black female sexuality as either different or absent, Spillers argues that the sexuality concept in feminist discourse problematically echoed the problems of the broader social-cultural-historical landscape. Neither had faced black women's historicity, which literally located them within a context of sexual prohibition and freewheeling entrée, concomitantly.

Spillers argues that "sexuality," which is often read in one of two ways, either a neutral reference to a set of practices or "as a class bound narrative firmly situated in the mythemes of the 'nuclear family'," [87] really refers to "feminine sexuality." However, "feminine sexuality," a codeword for a "more or less smooth transition between public and private moments of a political economy," is most often circumscribed to the latter,[88]

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[83] This notion is conceived in light of my previous research on slave narratives.
[84] Spillers, "'The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight': In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers," 233.
[85] Ibid.
[86] "Interstices" refers to the empty space in discourses that exclude black women's experiences, which Spillers "fills" with a "small drama of words." This reading censures readings that signify black women as objects awaiting their verbe (description) from generation to generation.
[87] Spillers, "Peters Pans: Eating in the Diaspora,"13.
[88] Ibid., 13.

namely, the 'nuclear family'. The problem here is that black female sexuality has neither been private nor neutral nor is it typically included in the 'nuclear family' mythology. This pronouncement is not to deny the existence of black families. However, it is to question what a "nuclear" family represents and more importantly, to highlight the obscurity of black female sexuality within public/private contexts. That is, black female sexuality, as read and sometimes performed, too often swings between hyper-reality and non-existence. Complex subjectivity is screened out.

Spillers posits that pornotroping, displacement, captivity, degendering and broken kinship ties, re-read black female inter-subjectivity in terms of pathology. As such, it became a problem, however, one of great interest. That is, black female "flesh" represents a terrain of contradictions. It is the principle form of passage between the human and non-human world wherein visual, psychological and ontological difference take up residence, thus igniting radical discontinuity in the "great chain of being"[89] while simultaneously both stifling and exciting the desires of those longing to consume "it." This gives rise to black women and girl's disappearance as legitimate subjects of female sexuality, whether discursive, practical or otherwise, thus enabling a theatrical canvas for dominating mythologies such as "black-female-as-whore," "black-female-as-vagina-less" and everything else in between, to thrive. Concurrently, this canvas marks black female sexuality as unachieved yet, concomitantly so boundless that it entails and thus permits anything and everything. Spillers argues that this paradox of being/non-being is so thoroughgoing that daughters labor even now under the outcome.

This canvas of meanings gets reproduced in a variety of contexts and, in all sorts of ways. Contemporary black female cultural representations not only often lack nuance,

[89] Ibid.

they get entangled in a web of sexual boundlessness that imagines black female sexualities to be innately impassioned and unrestricted and therefore, accessible to everyone at all times. However, themes such as pornotroping, displacement, captivity, degendering and broken kinship ties, disentangle this web by naming, historicizing, destabilizing and rereading these strategies, thus demonstrating the human character of meaning making with regards to black female subjectivity (this includes sexuality) while simultaneously reconfiguring significations.

Spillers' essays provide a range of useful theoretical lenses. Together, they put forth a dense and thorny patchwork of critical analyses that are necessary for examining representational strategies and politics of contemporary myths of black womanhood. It is unlikely that these analyses will dismantle or obliterate the force of modern epistemes operating in post-modernity, which continue to reify race and gendered subject positions in terms of civilized/primitive dialectics (nor do they aim to). Nonetheless, her theories may aid in disrupting the ground upon which mythical ideas are continuously manipulated, reproduced and maintained. At minimum, they provide a lens for reading both black women's experiences and cultural representations more adequately. If mass-produced, these sorts of criticisms may help loosen the yoke of pornotropia. At most, they could "change the letter" of "black womanhood" altogether by both recognizing and enabling variety. Black female subjects take up multiple inter-subjective complex positions. Interpretations of experiences and representation, notwithstanding the site of cultural production, needs to account for this sort of variety.

Toward a Black Feminist Religio-Cultural Lens for Reading Historical Myths of Black Womanhood

In this section, I will explicate where Spillers' scholarship allows for the kind of complex reading required for demythologizing historical myths of black womanhood. I proposed above. Particularly insightful is her multi-layered analytic approach. Spillers' essays take the "finished product" and turn it upside down in order to discard, dissect and analyze the pieces. Each piece (or "ingredient") is then critically explored through a variety of theoretical and methodological lenses, thus producing a more precise reading of controlling myths and mythemes operating in culture. This is evidenced in her work on naming, which she explores through multiple analytic gazes (for example, semiotics, genealogy, literature, psychoanalysis and history) within several essays. This approach offers a level of complexity and density that contemporary cultural phenomena require.

Spillers places emphasis on representational strategies such as pornotroping, grammar and the production of meanings, displacement, naming, broken kinship ties, captivity and degendering, which offer tools (i.e. language, categories, theories, etc.) for reading cultural myths and thus, "changing the letter," as opposed to providing "the" reading. Her analyses give prominence to interrogating what makes certain readings possible, not necessarily what "the" reading is. This approach strategically disrupts the 'story' representations hope to convey (i.e. hyper-sexuality) and the work they attempt to do (i.e. mark black women and girls' sexuality as inhumane) by making visible what is behind them (i.e. history, aims, and representational strategies) and how they travel (i.e. individual psyches, language, mythology, media, etc.). For example, Spillers' theorization of "captivity" articulates a genealogy that draws attention to the function, aims and practices of physical and psychological colonization. This is helpful for

interpreting representations that position race and gender as biologically different (i.e. uncivilized, licentious, inferior and undifferentiated). It keeps the human made character of judgment, which establishes what is "good"/"bad," "right"/"wrong," or "civilized"/"primitive," at the forefront. In addition, it provides a concept and theory for deconstructing the strategies that continue to reproduce and disseminate these ideas, including individual appropriation. Last, it allows other kinds of stories to be told.

Spillers' analysis of representational strategies (i.e. thematic analytic categories such as pornotroping, displacement and captivity) calls attention to particular practices that enable moments of oppression. This allows a different sort of reading than a more conventional term like *objectification* might. However, these categories do not attempt to exhaust meaning. Instead, they provide layers of analyses for reading contemporary myths and images that explore the strategies and *positions* that make objectification viable, thus exposing and articulating specific behaviors as well as complexities. Objectification fails to speak to complexity, specificity or complicity while Spillers' themes make room for these kinds of analyses.

When speaking about pornotroping and captivity, Spillers highlighted Reeds' take on Stowe's "Tom," which articulated both the tragedy and the comedy of Stowe's reading of "Tom's" religiosity. According to Reed, Stowe's "Tom" wore a cross around his neck that was so large that the weight of the cross, alone, nearly killed him. Again, this was not to make light of slavery. It was to provide another reading of Stowe's "Tom," which placed emphasis on Stowe's pornotropia. However, it was also to show human complexity. That is, sometimes subjects participate in their own oppression or, find phenomenon that may be deemed injurious by others, pleasurable. Or, as in Reeds'

case, sometimes our readings of oppression highlight the ridiculous, thus giving rise to mixed emotions, which may include humor.

Spillers' emphasis on representational strategies entails a critical analysis of signs, symbols, significations and representations. This move reveals how meanings get produced, reproduced, circulated, appropriated, realigned, reconfigured and re-appropriated, thus, defying quick solutions or the deployment of false certainties. Instead, it makes analyses continuous, iconoclastic, ambiguous and open, thus enabling a wide variety of interpretations, lenses, approaches and angles. It forges a discourse on both the communal as well as the particular.[90] These moves are significant because, in addition to revealing how meanings get produced and appropriated, they place emphasis on the effects and consequences (the politics) of representation. Specifically, they articulate how words, once penetrated with meanings, become sign-vehicles that produce structures of thought, which convey ideas in light of mythology and other representational schemes, all of which are transported through multiple media.

This analysis of how meanings travel draws attention to how they get appropriated by subjects, including black female subjects themselves (or, in Reeds' text, Stowe's "Tom"), the force of modern representational regimes in post-modernity and the cogency of pornotropia, all of which impact social interaction in a variety of ways. This dissertation deploys Spillers' strategies to further dissect this phenomenon. I argue that grammars on race and gender produced a pornotropic gaze, which enables occasions of violence, voyeurism, callousness and injustice, that concocted "verbes" such as "Nigger," "Wench," "Jezebel" and "Ho." These "verbes" traverse generations via varying

[90] For instance, Spillers' analyses on the sign, "African American" explored meaning as produced, articulated, projected and re-appropriated by both Europeans and African Americans themselves. This may also include individual appropriation.

technologies, transmitting certain opinions and attitudes while re-instituting particular cultural codes regarding black women and girls' *difference*.

These technologies, to include a variety of media, rearticulate and calcify social fictions and presuppose a voyeuristic view into the life of "the black woman." However, much like Stowe's "negro," "the black woman" is an artifact that has been arranged among a group of theories, schemes and backdrops. Black female inter-subjectivity eludes the grasp of human articulations. Nevertheless, ideas of "the black woman" or "black womanhood" get reproduced and disseminated over and over again. However, it is imperative to note that myths of black womanhood are not simply projected "out there" (in culture or by white racists) then consumed "in here" (by black women and girls). They are reproduced, communicated and sustained *between* black women and men, and at other times they are appropriated and maintained by black female subjects themselves, notwithstanding how reductive or totalizing some cultural meanings may be. Spillers' provides a more adequate framework for reading, deconstructing and reconfiguring this complexity. Her themes enable analyses that explore black participation in the maintenance of cultural meanings in which I further examine in Chapters III, IV and V.

I find Spillers' framework foundational to black feminist religio-cultural criticism. It provides the theoretical and methodological layers needed for loosening the yoke of pornotropic gazing in religio-cultural spaces and productions, which maintain myths of black womanhood. The maintenance of black female myths has real effects. Namely it obscures the complexities of inter-subjectivity. Black feminist religio-cultural criticism aims to disorient this practice so that black female experiences and representations may not only be read differently, but also so that black womanhood may be understood and

appreciated in terms of its variety, which is both multifaceted and untamable.

Conclusion

To conclude, in the forthcoming chapters I turn to womanist theo-ethical discourse, televangelism and the Black Church, and pop cultural film, all of which represent significant sites of complex meaning making. I specifically explore the representational strategies of womanist scholars Kelly Brown Douglas and Emilie Townes, Bishop T.D. Jakes, and Tyler Perry, respectively. Each produces yoked ideas of "black womanhood" that need to be exposed, deconstructed and, in some cases, "changed." While their readings are not solely oppressive, they are not altogether liberating. Each offers powerful religio-cultural "female-centric" messages to large, predominantly female audiences. Their messages, particularly those of Jakes and Perry, infiltrate varying cultural controls where they are disseminated widely, thus reconstructing and maintaining pornotropic gazing in unexpected ways.

I will use black feminist religio-cultural criticism, as I have developed in this chapter and Chapter I, as a framework for offering a critical, yet less pornotropic, reading of Douglas, Townes, Jakes and Perry's cultural productions. The following chapters will explore representational practices within the three sites, "change the letter" by attending to and rethinking the critical interests of black women and girls, foreground the signifier, reveal un-emancipatory structures of thought, and provide a more liberative alternative. Chapter III examines two womanist texts, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999) and *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006). Both texts provide analyses on myths of black womanhood that are foundational to

theological discourses on race and gender. Chapter IV examines T.D. Jakes' text and film, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993, 2004). I also give some attention to the sermon series as well as other texts such as: *The Lady, Her Lover and Her Lord* (2000), *God's Leading Lady* (2003) and *Daddy Loves His Girls* (2006). Chapter V critically engages Tyler Perry's film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*.

The aim of these chapters is not to provide "the" reading, but *a reading of readings* that demonstrates the benefits of black feminist religio-cultural criticism while also attending to particular kinds of "religio-cultural" representational strategies that require "changing." This does not suggest disabling other readings. It makes room for other kinds of readings, improvisations, and arrangements. This is the work of Spillers' essays, to "press towards truth," and to get at the inner most core of meaning or subjectivity by way of "honest talk," deconstruction, and reconfiguration. Moreover, this is the work of this dissertation, to "press toward truth" in black cultural production in general and in interpreting black womanhood in particular through *a less pornotropic gaze*

CHAPTER III

DEMYTHOLOGIZING RACE, GENDER AND EXPERIENCE IN WOMANIST THEO-ETHICAL DISCOURSE

This chapter argues that womanist theo-ethicists, Kelly Brown Douglas, Emilie Townes, and others, created space in black theological discourse for thinking critically about how black women get re-presented in various cultural forms and how those re-presentations in turn affect their experiences. However, while these analyses are both necessary and insightful, they are inadequate for our contemporary context. Douglas and Townes provide readings that are yoked by their internal logic, which is strategically essentialist and perhaps, necessarily so. Thus, it is imperative to read their analyses alongside of history and context. Nevertheless, their representational strategies are marred by an ahistorical and transcultural tri-modal gaze, which encloses both black female experiences and representations within a context of oppression. In addition to creating a discursive artifact that has been reproduced again and again, this closure screens out the various ways that experience and representations get interpreted, projected, negotiated, appropriated and performed. However, although their strategy screens out variety, they simultaneously affirm other experiences. Neither their affirming or oppressive qualities can be negated. This chapter explores this complexity.

Womanist theo-ethicists created a productive site in theological discourse for theologizing "black women's experience" and for analyzing cultural myths of black womanhood. These moves necessarily de-marginalized black women's history and experience in discourses that had previously negated them. In addition, they reinterpreted

the mass-reproduction and promulgation of black female cultural images as a theological problem. This challenged theologians and theological ethicists to rethink theologies of hope in light of post-modern epistemic regimes of power, and broaden interpretive categories like sin and evil to include cultural production and representation. Moreover, it positioned womanist theo-ethical discourse and its dominant object of analysis, the Black Church, as sources of both power and agency in the demythologization project. These moves created openings for numerous scholarly projects, including this one, to emerge.

However, while womanist theo-ethical scholarship has made several significant contributions to theological discourse, I find their analyses on black female myths and representations inadequate for our contemporary context. They are asphyxiated by the internal logic of womanist discourse, which is simultaneously compelling and frustrating. On one hand, their attempt to rescue black womanhood from pejorative signifiers deploys representational strategies that resemble the organizing ingenuity and liberative aims of 1960s protests and aesthetic movements, which combated systemic racial alienation through the re-conceptualization of experience and desirability with maxims like "black is beautiful" and James Browns' "Say it Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)." However, on the other hand, the hermeneutic demand to define and concretize experience and desirability, although in some ways agreeable, led to a taken for granted schemata of interpretation, constituted in and by tragic heroism, that is ahistorical, transcultural, and overdetermined by notions of struggle, resistance and survival. This produced a framework for reading (one that keeps getting reinvented over and over, regardless of context) that has emancipatory aims yet, trivializes both black women's complex, multi-

positioned, inter-subjective existence, and the intricacy of black female cultural representations.

Several womanist theo-ethicists and biblical scholars have written on the myths of black womanhood, such as Katie G. Cannon, Delores S. Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas, Emilie Townes, Marcia Riggs, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes and others.[91] This chapter emphasizes two figures that have, to my knowledge, the most sustained work on this theme: Kelly Brown Douglas and Emilie Townes. I will take up their texts, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999) and *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006), respectively. Each offers seminal tools for both interpreting and reconfiguring black female cultural images in womanist discourse.

Although these texts provide deliberate critiques of cultural representations and thus, contribute to the demythologization project, they are also a part of cultural production. That is, their analyses define how cultural images should be interpreted. This positionality produces an additional layer of meanings that, I believe, should be explored. My reading will place emphasis on the representational strategies within each—not to invalidate their scholarship, but instead to *loosen the yoke* produced in their analyses.

I will make the following moves. First, I will offer a brief overview of womanist discourse in order to situate Douglas and Townes' scholarship. Second, I will offer a descriptive account of Douglas' text, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999). Third, I will provide an account of Townes' *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006). Fourth, I will deploy black feminist religio-

[91] For more information on womanist theology see, Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002).

cultural criticism to show the following: How their readings are predicated on certain criteria derived from womanist theo-ethical discourse, and how the deployment of this framework both limits their analyses of black female re-presentations, which shape and maintain myths of black womanhood, and deny critical interests of black women and girls while positively responding to other needs. Fifth, I will "change the letter" by re-imagining Douglas and Townes' tragic hero in light of the power and appeal of contemporary pop cultural sensation Nicki Minaj.

Overview of Womanist Discourse

Womanist scholarship developed in the late 1980s in response to essentialist Christian theological claims of black liberation theologian, James H. Cone, and white feminist theologians such as Letty Russell, Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and others whose theological discourses were significantly shaped by 1960s social movements like the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Women's Liberation movements. Womanist thought proceeded over a decade later, displaying notable influences of both its theological and theoretical heritages, the latter of which include black feminism, critical race theory, literary theory, etc. Of particular importance to the discourse is the ongoing struggle between white supremacist ideas of race and gender and resistance thereof, the latter of which materializes as a result of social activities that function alongside of God's divine power to aid black women in "making a way out of no way."[92]

Womanist scholars produced a cross-pollinated theo-ethical discourse that responded to social phenomena such as North American slavery, Jim Crow, 1960s social

[92] This idea is foundational to womanist thought. It stabilizes black women's experiences within a tri-modal lens of struggle, resistance and survival.

movements, 1970s shifts toward re-emphasis on black aesthetics and novel academic openings emphasizing race, gender and difference. They posited that North American black women experienced these circumstances in particular ways. A significant consequence was the re-presentation of "black womanhood," mythologized under a multiplicity of complex gazes through a variety of media as homogeneous, licentious, degenerate, and in some instances, absent altogether.[93] Womanist theo-ethicists and biblical scholars argued that North American black women had been mythologized to the point of social disenfranchisement. Thus, they constructed a critical discourse on North American black women's experience that explored the effects of race, class, gender, representation and religion on black women's lives.

This amalgamation developed a womanist theo-ethical lens that made the following moves. First, it provided an explicit account of black women's historical narrative, particularly their experiences with both violence and the threat of violence (sexual, physical, psychological, et al.). Second, it drew attention to the ways that violence continues to manifest itself through various sociopolitical avenues (i.e. religion, welfare, media, economic distribution in the work force, etc.). Third, it disrupted normative claims on black female identity inherent within culturally produced black female images, thus disorienting pejorative cultural projections. Fourth, it placed emphasis on the power of hegemonic white racial biases in the production, reproduction, circulation and maintenance of these projections.

[93] That is, black women's experiences were both misrepresented by various forms of media and often excluded from significant sites of subversive cultural production, for example, civil rights and women's movements, feminist discourse, and Black and Women's Studies. Hortense Spillers takes this up in her essay, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words." She argues that white feminist discourses on female sexuality completely ignored the experiences of black women altogether, whose sexuality had been blemished by history.

Fifth, it offered both methods for resisting their force and alternative identity markers for replacing their inscription. For example, black women were reimagined as heroic survivalists as opposed to powerless flesh. Sixth, it imagined God as being on the side of "multiply oppressed" black women, fighting against social paradigms of injustice (i.e. racism, sexism and classism) on their behalf, thus making a way for them to survive in oppressive conditions that determine their lives. These moves granted both God and womanist theo-ethicists centralized positions in the demythologization project. Moreover, they created a discursive platform for hope and possibility.

These contributions are significant. They center specific kinds of experiences while also blasting the reproduction and maintenance of stereotypes, offering strategies for resistance, and providing alternative schemes of interpretation. In this way, womanist theo-ethicists "changed the letter" of pervasive, derogatory myths on black women's bodies that imagined them in a context of inherent sexual savagery and unscrupulousness, developed during and after European contact/conquest. Black feminists such as Hortense Spillers, Patricia Hill-Collins, Angela Davis, bell hooks and others, had previously taken this to task in their scholarship. However, womanist theo-ethicists posited a new grammar—one that re-presented black women as moral agents aided by God who assisted them in their ongoing struggles to survive within a context that presented them as "Mammy's," "Jezebel's," "Sapphire's," "Welfare Queens," etc.

Kelly Brown Douglas

Kelly Brown Douglas, Associate Professor of Religion, ordained Episcopalian priest, womanist theologian and author of *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999), makes a significant contribution to the discourse on the demythologization of black womanhood. Douglas introduced black sexuality as a relevant and necessary topic of academic investigation in black liberation theological discourse in the late 1990s. She argues that white racism and white patriarchy, combined, created a "white culture" that deployed Christian dualisms, which turn the body and soul into diametrical oppositions,[94] to justify exploitive and manipulative behaviors that re-encode black sexuality through the production of negative black cultural images. These images, which emerge from a context of both fear and fascination, are mass-produced, via various media throughout cultures. This led to a white normative gaze that advances a politics of racial, cultural and sexual difference where whiteness offers the standard. Further, it maintains white patriarchal cultural hegemony while attempting to deteriorate black humanity. Both increase white power and black silence, concomitantly.

Douglas calls for an immediate and open discussion on black sexuality between black churches, black communities, and black religious scholars. She argues that negative views of black sexuality gave rise to black silence, which resulted in the rise of HIV/AIDS in black families and thus increased black deaths due to risky sexual practices. In light of this, Douglas introduces a sexual theology that advances a womanist discourse of resistance, which she hopes will disentangle black sexuality from white cultural

[94] Douglas expands this concept in *What's Faith Got To Do With It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005).

hegemony while simultaneously fostering healthier sexual attitudes. She turns to French philosopher, Michel Foucault, who did a substantive amount of work on discourse and power in the mid to late twentieth century, to frame her reading of black cultural images and to formulate her constructive moves toward a life affirming theological sexual ethic.

To undergird her thesis, Douglas deploys *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, which argues that discourse is a technology of power that produces knowledge and thus regulates social activity. She asserts that black female representations are produced and maintained by white supremacist and white patriarchal ideological biases that distort black humanity by way of discourse and representation, and normalize white power and privilege. However, while discourse is a source of power, it is also a threat to power. Foucault argues that discourse renders power fragile as it undermines and exposes it, making it possible to thwart it.[95] Thus, Douglas constructs a "sexual discourse of resistance" in hopes of thwarting current sexual politics operating within both black and white communities.

Pivotal to her discourse of resistance is Douglas' reading of black female stereotypes, which utilizes Foucault's discourse/power/knowledge framework to both expose their origination, evolution and injury and, thwart their operation. Critical to her reading is the influence of ideology in the production of cultural meanings, namely, white ideological biases. She interprets the production, maintenance and circulation of black female cultural representations in light of white ideological bias, which for Douglas, represents a set of beliefs, attitudes, motives, values, dispositions, etc. that are characteristic of "whiteness." More specifically, she holds that these biases reveal the

[95] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 92-102.

underlying concerns and desires of those operating under the sign, "white," while simultaneously structuring society in light of particular interests.

Douglas' argument is as follows: Negative black cultural images are the products of both fear and fascination. They emerge from a white racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, patriarchal, Christian dualist ideology, which functions to normalize white supremacy and corporeal bifurcation while concomitantly satisfying the white imagination. The mass production of these images, through discourse and representation, helps to maintain white power by producing unhealthy knowledge about black sexuality, thus making it taboo, and black humanity in general, suspect. This is the "root" of black silence on black sexual matters.

Douglas holds that the "root" of harmful black cultural representations is white ideological biases, which extend throughout culture assaulting black humanity. This includes historical representations as well as contemporary images that resurface in black American cultural traditions such as music, films, books, religion, etc. However, Douglas argues that these images are reproduced in black cultural traditions only insofar as black culture has been influenced by white cultural hegemony.[96] Thus, while black cultural forms may appropriate black cultural images, the "root" of the problem lies within white supremacist biases.

Douglas' method for reading stereotypes follows the succeeding pattern. It begins with a historical backdrop that is followed by descriptive, social and theo-ethical analyses, which place emphases on particular historical-social meaning, the effects of group projection and liberation from these effects. Each stereotype is read using this

[96] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 72-80.

formula, which I interpret as "womanist criticism." In view of this, I will describe Douglas' analysis of one figure, "Jezebel." This stereotype has significant contemporary implications. Chapter IV, which takes up T.D. Jakes' *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* phenomenon, will show how this trope gets mediated within contemporary religio-cultural spaces. And, later in this chapter, I will explore how some of the characteristics of the type get re-appropriated by hip-hop phenomenon, Nicki Minaj.

Douglas posits that the Jezebel type is "a person governed almost entirely by her libido."[97] That is, she is "vulgar," the opposite of a "respectable lady" in every way. In this way, she is devoid of the 'nature' that enables proper conduct and decency. These ideas are meant to make sharp distinctions between African females and white women. They are significantly influenced by the "Victorian Ideal," which represented an ideal type constituted by stereotypical qualities, such as purity, delicacy, piety, beauty, virtue, gentleness, and the innate desire and ability to nurture others, traditionally associated with white women in the nineteenth century. However, while they presented white women as symbolic "Virgin Mary's," thus causing a shift from previous Aristotelian and Christian ideals that interpreted them as deformed males, evil, sexual temptresses and progenitors of sin, they simultaneously expressed what black females were not.

Douglas argues that the depiction of "Jezebel" as vulgar is drawn from cultural interpretations of the biblical Jezebel,[98] European travelogues depicting early explorations to Africa that misinterpreted African ways of life, and the conditions of slavery, which forced African women to bare their bodies and breed multiple children. She asserts:

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[97] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, 36.
[98] See I Kings 16:29-23.

> Travelers often interpreted African women's sparse dress-dress appropriate to the climate of Africa-as a sign of lewdness and lack of chastity…Indeed, the warm climate came to be associated with "hot constition'd Ladies" possessed of a temper "hot and lascivious."[99]
>
> If the habits, way of life, and living conditions of the African woman gave birth to the notion that Black women were Jezebels, then the conditions and exigencies of slavery brought it to maturity. The life situation of the enslaved woman encouraged the idea that she was a Jezebel, even as the Jezebel image served to justify the life situation she was forced to endure.[100]

Douglas maintains that the necessity of nudity and forced reproduction sanctioned by the institution of slavery stabilized and advanced the Jezebel type in the public imagination to the point where the connection between bondwomen's reproductive abilities, licentiousness and immorality were taken for granted. "Proper ladies" were marked by their dress, which signified both moral status and class. Thus, while white women often wore layers of clothing, enslaved females were given barely enough material to cover their bodies. Douglas posits that both field and house labor often required the enslaved to raise their dresses above their knees. This exposure furthered the sentiment that black females were inherently wanton and thus led to greater sexual exploitation. Douglas maintains that it also helped to maintain both the system of slavery and white power, which produced "white culture." The latter reinforces white power and privilege by maintaining distinctions between "proper" and "non-proper" bodies and activities,[101] and by repackaging historical stereotypes so that they are operative in the present, for example, the "Welfare Queen."[102]

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[99] Kelly Brown Douglas, 36-37.
[100] Brown Douglas, 37.
[101] Douglas further establishes this in *What's Faith Got To Do With It?*
[102] Ibid. 43-46

Emilie Townes

Emilie Townes, Professor of African American Religion and Theology, ordained American Baptist clergywoman, womanist ethicist, and author of *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006), also makes an important contribution to the demythologization project. Her text examines how memory and myth work together to produce representations of black womanhood that make black women miserable and cause them to suffer. Townes holds that the mass-production of stereotypes in popular culture leads to specific forms of injustice and is thus a source of significant evil. She argues that contemporary representations such as the Black Matriarch, Aunt Jemima and the Welfare Queen, all of which have their roots in historical cultural stereotypes such as Mammy, Jezebel, Topsy, Sapphire and the Tragic Mulatta, are the result of an individualistic immoral society that intermingles these myths with reality through a variety of means in order to capitalize on their "value."

Of particular importance is the influence of these representations on the development of public policies such as Welfare Reform. Townes posits that Welfare Reform, grounded in Christian social ethics (for example, the protestant work ethic, which holds that hard work is linked to salvation), was shaped through a range of racist, classist and sexist ideological biases that underpin negative cultural images. She holds that this combination of ideology, representation and public policy constructed an oppressive context that nurtures the reproduction, maintenance and circulation of the myth of black womanhood. In addition to advancing the idea that black women are innately evil, Welfare Reform and the images it has both reproduced and helped concretize, further victimizes large groups of black women by placing the burden of

social responsibility, regarding the attainment of social goods for their families, solely upon their shoulders. This masks injustices within economic and political structures that shape black women's lives while simultaneously restraining their ability to function fairly in a society where they are already oppressed by race, class, gender and sexual significations.

Townes turns to Christian theo-ethicist, H. Richard Niebuhr, author of *Christ and Culture* (1956) and *The Responsible Self* (1978), and calls for social solidarity. She argues that social solidarity, which depends on morally responsible selves who use their agency to respond to God and community through individual and collective acts of countermemory and counterhegemonic subversion, is necessary for dismantling systemic evil (i.e. the production of negative female images).[103] Countermemory functions as a corrective to the stereotypes produced by the biases of the collective memory while counterhegemony operates as the mass-producer of reconfigured values and beliefs established by countermemory.[104] Both advance through a retelling of communal narratives by the black community and thus, reconstitute history from non-nostalgic and diverse, yet inter-subjective, points of view while concomitantly demolishing structural evil.

Townes' reading of black female cultural representations, which undergird and attempt to fossilize historical myths on black womanhood, deploys Antonio Gramsci' work on hegemony, Foucault's theories on discourse, power, knowledge, imagination and the fantastic and, Toni Morrison's work on memory and history. Together, these theories

[103] However, Townes speculates about the challenges of such solidarity when addressing social evils that are culturally produced.
[104] Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil* (Palgrave, Macmillan, 2006), 17, 21, 23 and 47.

construct her framework for reading cultural images: the "fantastic hegemonic imagination," which she hopes will help expose and dismantle the epistemological basis of public policy making that negatively effect black women and girls. This framework functions by holding the following in tension: 1) memory, which is selective, 2) imagination, which constructs images within the interior fantasy world in response to both conscious and unconscious desires, and 3) the past, which highlights historical phenomenon. Townes holds that when parsed and critically examined, these categories reveal both the production and maintenance of myths in general, and the "interior life" of public policy making, which frames black femaleness as inherently bizarre and evil, in particular. She notes this reading and its circulation as "evil."[105]

Townes' analysis of Welfare Reform places special emphasis on the Mammy stereotype. She argues that the Mammy stereotype, along with others such as Jezebel and Sapphire, developed in light of "the fantastic hegemonic imagination." Each conveys specific knowledge. Thus, Townes reads them as "conductors" of evil. She posits that Mammy, a fat, black, a-sexual, super mothering mythical figure that "came to life" through public display and advertising,[106] helped maintain the status quo by enabling white women to be reimagined as virtuous Victorian ideals who maintained perfect homes and raised spiritually noble children, and white men to be reread as natural moral leaders of the household and thus, society. The latter redeemed unsolicited sexual encounters between enslaved women and white men while the former allowed white women to reconstruct their day-to-day reality in a perfect fantasy world.

[105] Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil* , 13.
[106] Emilie Townes, 39.

She asserts that the mass-production of this image on pancake boxes and a variety of other cultural sites replaced the historical narrative of black terror experienced by most black ex-slaves with a new 'story' that reread the Mammy figure as a positive reality. However, Townes holds that meanings shift depending on the aims and fantasy life of those imagining. Thus, when operating among public policy makers formulating Welfare Reform, the Mammy figure (alongside of other stereotypes such as Jezebel and Sapphire) was identified as a negative reality. These shifts sway the collective imagination, which regardless of positive or negative readings, understand black women as "Other." This advances white supremacy and empire, on one hand. However, it draws attention to room for countermemory and counterhegemony, on the other.

A Critical Analysis of Womanist Representational Strategies

Historical myths of black womanhood layer our consciousnesses with distorted meanings that function to make us understand the intersection of race and gender in particular ways. These myths are both forceful and pervasive. They form a system of communication that include but is not limited to oral speeches, modes of writing and representation, such as photography, cinema, reporting, sport, publicity, advertising, etc. Each technology conjures, maintains and appropriates ideas about black women and girls as exotic/erotic, wanton, immoral, pathological and criminal with a force that is totalizing and naturalizing. Thus, the meanings produced can be violent and/or lead to violence, particularly as they appear to evolve from nature.

Black female myths are essentializing and limiting to human possibility, particularity, complexity and ambiguity. These limitations significantly affect black

female experiences, both, how black women and girls are interpreted and how they interpret self and others. Thus, the demythologization project necessarily continues to expand alongside of the historical subject. The scholarship of womanist theologian, Kelly Brown Douglas, and womanist theo-ethicist, Emilie Townes, is a part of this movement. Each provides significant contributions that highlight distinct subject positions that are both necessary and insightful. Namely, they brought the myth of black womanhood, produced by black female cultural representations, to the fore in black theological discourse.

This move, which offered a critique on academics, religion, culture, communities and public policies, "changed the letter" of theological discourses on experience by drawing attention to the work of white racist ideology, which informs multiple gazes, in cultural production and its maintenance of black female stereotypes. This reading constructed a critical lens for reading black women's experiences and historical representations. In addition to placing hetero-normative white supremacist ideology at the center of both cultural production and womanist criticism, their framework gave black women like myself a schema to interpret certain experiences as well as a source to place much of the blame. At the very least, womanist criticism put these experiences into discourse in front of a very wide audience, thus lessening the yoke of historical representations, in these spaces at least, while producing new sites for critical thinking and exchange (i.e. seminaries, divinity schools, etc.).

However, while liberative, on one hand, womanist criticism is oppressive on the other. That is, womanist criticism deploys a scheme of interpretation that displays a dependency on certain kinds of representational strategies, which produce an additional

layer of meaning that functions both positively and negatively. Their strategies, although they demonstrate emancipatory qualities, are hindered by certain criteria inherent to womanist theo-ethical discourse. I will now turn my attention to these limitations.

I will make the following moves. I will deploy black feminist religio-cultural criticism, which moves by way of ideological criticism, to highlight Douglas and Townes' representational strategies for reading, specifically their ideological moves and interpretive categories. This will be followed by a pejorative critique, which will draw attention to how these moves limit their analyses of black female re-presentations, and deny critical interests of black women and girls while simultaneously meeting other needs. After which, I will turn to the conclusion, which provides a constructive possibility.

A critical engagement of representational strategies (i.e. the deployment and configuration of one set of signs, symbols, significations and representations over others) reveals the appropriation, production and circulation of certain meanings as well as the politics of representation. This kind of reading draws attention to how sign-vehicles ("verbes"), once ordered, produce structures of thought that are transported via various media as well as the effects and consequences of such activity. Namely, sign-vehicles transmit opinions and attitudes that create additional layers of meanings that are sometimes taken for granted. Deconstructing and re-theorizing them is important for loosening the yoke of un-emancipatory structures of thought, in this case, womanist criticism. While womanist criticism is made up of several distinct analytic moves, interpretive categories and aims, it also evidences quite a few overlapping similarities, particularly within womanist cultural critiques of black female images. This is

substantiated in Douglas and Townes' scholarship, both of which provide reading strategies and analyses that are foundational to the womanist paradigm for reading cultural representations.

They argue the following. Black female cultural representations, the products of social-cultural-historical mythological narratives, are informed, produced, maintained and disseminated by white supremacist hegemonic biases, which frame black womanhood within an economy of sexual difference that is difficult to escape. This reading of black womanhood is evil because it causes black women to suffer and experience misery. Nevertheless, it may be resisted through alternative hegemonic discourses, which draw on counter memories, narratives and readings that are oriented toward overthrowing structural racism, sexism and classism in general and thwarting dominant cultural meanings in particular.

These ideological moves call attention to certain kinds of experiences. The eminence given to these experiences, which need exposing and further examination, accents a tri-modal lens for reading that functions as a normative framework for talking about black women's experience in womanist discourse. This lens, which encapsulates black women's experience in "struggle, resistance and survival" against oppression, particularly, white ideological biases, provides the rhetorical conditions for black women's "difference." Womanist theologian, Delores S. Williams, captures this idea in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, a seminal womanist text, when she writes about black women's experience being grounded in the "wilderness" where they "make a way out of no way."[107]

[107] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

While Douglas and Townes' analyses necessarily prioritize black women's suffering, evil, and white ideological bias, their critical moves simultaneously screen out other kinds of experiences, interpretations, and moreover, complexities. Their analyses produced an interpretive grid for reading black female cultural images that informs the scholarship of many, notwithstanding the context or appropriation of the representation. This negation limits their analyses while also both meeting and denying certain critical interests. I now turn to explore this complexity.

The representational strategies, both discursive and non-discursive, operating in the scholarship of Douglas and Townes produced a scheme of interpretation that conceptualized both black women's experience and the production of black female cultural representations in a tragic/heroic bipolar symmetry. This move posited a compelling new grammar that emphasized both the violence and threat of violence, via various controls, that many black women and girls face, to include but not limited to physical, sexual, emotional and psychological trauma caused by both material and symbolic forces. Moreover, this reading simultaneously drew attention to forms of resistance and possibilities for survival. This gaze provided individual and collective affirmation as well as a sense of hopefulness.

To be sure, the continued manifestation of violence and the threat of violence against black women and girls through a wide range of avenues, representational and otherwise, makes this kind of discourse, which argues for recognition, equity and genius, necessary. That is, while suffering transcends race and gender and neither experience nor representations can be totalized by suffering, attention to suffering is needed when exploring North American black women and girls' experiences and cultural

representation. Douglas and Townes achieved the latter by isolating points where they believed that black women connected: struggle, resistance and survival. This move enabled them to construct theologies around the myth of black womanhood, which produced a whole new way of thinking about black female subjectivity. This new line of though required a sense of authority—at the time.

As evidenced with African Americans in general, strategic essentializing can sometimes be meaningful for the tyrannized, even if simultaneously oppressive. Notwithstanding forms of isolation, it helps to galvanize people into groups around similar interests and concerns. This promotes a sense of "home," camaraderie and purpose—something Spillers suggests African Americans, due to displacement, captivity and post-captivity, are continuously in search for. Douglas and Townes' attempt to correct ideas of black womanhood should be read against this complex backdrop. Extreme measures are often taken and sometimes needed when one's humanity is literally on the line.

Nevertheless, while the articulation of distinctions *between* women, experiences, and representations may possibly lessen, confuse or limit overall liberative aims, they are necessary for loosening the yoke of cultural representations. Douglas and Townes present us with a scheme of interpretation, yoked by representational strategies characteristic of womanist discourse. These strategies, although they meet certain needs, both limit Douglas and Townes' analyses of cultural representations and deny critical interests of black women and girls, particularly their deployment of certain categorical claims informed by their interpretive categories, and the prominence given to pejorative criticism in their ideological moves.

Douglas and Townes' scheme of interpretation, produced by their tri-modal gaze (struggle, resistance and survival), categorically frames cultural images in terms of evil and misery caused by white ideological bias. Both cultural representations and white ideological bias must be uniformly resisted in order for black women to survive. These claims suggest the following: 1) black female experiences and representations are wholly oppressed by dominant ideological biases, 2) black female survival is dependant upon the dismantlement of these biases, 3) black women and girls can be totalized by signification, and 4) white supremacist ideology is categorically descriptive of oppression.

However, these sorts of claims fail to take seriously the plurality of human experiences as encountered and interpreted through situated knowledges, which includes, yet, is irreducible to moments of oppression. In addition, they negate individual critical consciousness, which remains in constant negotiation with, yet, may exist apart from, ideological bias. Also, they mistake whiteness as the source of all oppressions.[108] Further, they neglect how culturally produced representations get produced, maintained, reconfigured and realigned. That is, they are constructed, circulated and repositioned

[108] The work of feminist theologian, Ellen T. Armour, in *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference* (1999), is insightful here. Underneath womanist categorical claims regarding whiteness and oppression are the historical relations between white women and men and black women and men, and the assumption that all white people are unequivocally racist. Womanist theologian, Jacquelyn Grant sets this up in her groundbreaking text, *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, when she explicitly states that "white women are racist." While "whiteness" can be a source of oppression and white people can be racist, "whiteness" is not categorically evil and white people are not innately racist. Armour's scholarship, which draws attention to black/white relations through a critique of "white feminism" and their tendency to re-inscribe oppressive ideologies and structures while claiming to speak against them, disorients womanist categorical claims regarding white oppression while also affirming the possibility of racism. Armour asserts that white feminist theory and theology is caught up in a "specular world" that nurtures the idea of sameness between women and in turn nurtures the race/gender divide. Her aims are two-fold: to assist white feminists in understanding the complicated dynamics underlying their inattention to race, and to aid them in resisting these dynamics, with hopes of ultimately moving white feminists closer to feminism's goal of promoting the liberation of all women. At minimum, Armour's text both presents another side of the story, and instigates the deconstruction of "whiteness." The white oppressor/black oppressed trope is inadequate. It fails to articulate the complex and various inner workings of actual relations and experiences between and among black and white women.

through a variety of interlocking signifying systems that reproduce and appropriate cultural meanings, which are disseminated through multiple cultural regimes that black people participate in.

Townes hints at black participation in the appropriation of cultural meanings in her discourse on hegemony. However, both she and Douglas ultimately contend that black participation is realized only insofar as it is informed by white ideological biases. This reading conveys "false consciousness," that rational subjects are so completely overdetermined by white supremacist ideology that they are incapable of acting critically and consciously on their own behalf. Moreover, this kind of reading denotes social and cultural domination (both willful and un-willful), what ideology may do *to us* (for example, it turns white people into racist, sexist bigots while forcing black people into a permanent stance of struggle, resistance and survival) as opposed to highlighting how ideology constructs meanings, which are produced, circulated, resisted, negotiated, appropriated, maintained and realigned by various producers, including black female subjects, in a variety of ways.

The latter makes room for the ways that ideologies and meanings may fluctuate, particularly given history and context. It emphasizes that, although subjects are situated within ideological structures and while dominant ideologies may influence ideas and mobilize social relations, rational subjects who experience life both apart from and within a variety of inter-subjective ideologies, negotiate and interpret them in light of experience, which is particular and nuanced, notwithstanding force. This is a more adequate way of critiquing ideology. Deploying ideological criticism as a regulative control of false consciousness to frame experience and representations is both circular

and oppressive. It places black women and girls in constant misery where the only way to escape is by dismantling the object of criticism, white supremacist ideology, which informs various cultural sites. However, this aim may not be possible. In that case, the favor of an extra-human force becomes the only option.

A more adequate deployment of ideological criticism would entail allowing it to circle back to cultural criticism, thus enabling other experiences, readings and interests to be seen. However, Douglas and Townes' commitment to exposing what is false (for example, white supremacist ideology) screens out how many of the characteristics of cultural images are taken up and re-appropriated by black women and girls themselves as sources of self-empowerment, pleasure, meaning, etc., notwithstanding how injurious or troubling to some. Instead, they favor "us" versus "them" readings that highlight the heroic qualities of black women's genius to "womanishly" resist and dismantle tragic oppression. Each stands in as inherent, diametrically opposing, truths. However, the heroic is devised to thwart the tragic, both black female oppression and white supremacist ideology.

This schema is meant to counter the projection of harmful black female stereotypes and thus, reinterpret black female subjectivity as categorically courageous, resistant and rebellious. However, while this schema is constructive, particularly as it "changes the letter" of black womanhood from dreadful to desirable, it produces a grammar that is totalizing. This structure of thought privileges an exceptionalist reading of the group over individual inter-subjectivity, thus encapsulating individual subjectivity under a unity of experience totalized in suffering and rebellion against white supremacist

ideology.[109] Black female experiences thus become marked as "black women's experience," which articulates white ideological bias as a condition and stabilizer of both black femaleness and heroism.

While Townes' reading is more nuanced, the tragic/heroic schema is dominant in both her and Douglas' scholarship. Little attention is given to variety and complexity. Townes might suggest that there is no room for this kind of reading, particularly when black female representations are deployed to inform public policies that limit black women's ability to function fairly in society. I concur. However, both Townes and Douglas utilize the tragic/heroic schema to offer a reading of black female cultural representations in general. I hold that representations should be read in terms of their variety. Placing cultural representations in a context of oppression suggests a totality of experience, which necessitates the powers of heroic genius.

The tragic/heroic schema indicates an interminable struggle between white supremacist ideology and suffering-turned-survivalist heroic geniuses, the former being a condition, which authenticates the latter. In addition to giving prominence to a particular interpretation of racial identity and experience, this reading negates the truth of both race and gender as significations of ontology, which correspond to experience. Simultaneously, this reading (tragic/heroic) suggests that black oppression is ontologically evoked by white supremacist ideology, which is categorically identified with whiteness. For example, both Douglas and Townes make oppression categorically characteristic of "black women's experience" and white supremacist ideology categorically descriptive of "black women's oppression," both of which frame how

[109] Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 85-109.

cultural representations are read. This leaves little room for transcendence, with the exception of the dismantlement of white supremacist ideology.

Notwithstanding nuance, the tragic/heroic schema structures black women and girl's existence and cultural representations in dominance and thus, denies critical interests, such as the right to self-express and find meaning within the interstices on the spectrum *between* tragedy and heroic genius—in light of individual autonomous, multi-positioned, historical inter-subjectivity. Further, it mistakes epistemological interests and standpoints for 'being'. This is not emancipatory. This kind of reading limits aims toward human fulfillment by collapsing particularities such as contexts, ideas and identities into ontology, thus making particular experiences categorically characteristic of the social whole. To be sure, experiences causing black female oppression need to be interrogated and exposed on an ongoing basis. However, both experiences and representations resist reification into reductive totalities, including tragedy and heroism.

I will explore this further in chapters IV and V when I take up T.D. Jakes and Tyler Perry, respectively. Both offer ideas of black womanhood that are undergirded by historical stereotypes, which are embedded with the same tragic/heroic schema that womanist scholars use, to convey their messages. The difference is, neither Jakes nor Perry offers a critique of culturally produced images. Both deploy them as truths. The tragic/heroic schema serves as a framework for articulating unacceptable versus acceptable behavior for black women—who live up to troubling stereotypes. While Jakes and Perry read black womanhood pornotropically, both widely appeal to womanist scholars' targeted audience: black Christian women. There is something about Jakes and Perry's representations that resonate with them.

I say this in order to say that while many black women and girls encounter moments of suffering and although cultural representations may lead to moments of oppression, there is no one way to read either experiences or representations. Both are interpreted in a variety of ways. Acknowledging this in analyses of black female myths will aid in loosening the yoke of cultural production, as opposed to tightening it with additional layers of meaning that closet both complex inter-subjectivity and representational meanings in a tragic/heroic house sans doors or windows. The meanings and appropriations of both experiences and representations elude the grasps of our articulations, schemas, strategies, and gazes.

Changing the Letter: From Tragic Hero to Nicki Minaj

Trinidadian-American Hip Hop sensation, Nicki Minaj, provides a liberative alternative to Douglas and Townes' tragic hero. Her performance of race, gender and sexuality instigates further engagement between womanist cultural criticism and the popular. Minaj disorients the categorical claims and pejorative ideological moves that inform Douglas and Townes' schema by re-appropriating and finding power within the Jezebelian/hyper-sexual/black-female-as-whore type. Douglas and Townes put forth bifurcated signifier/signified arguments that develop clear lines between black and white, cultural production and consumption, and good and evil. However, Minaj challenges each of these assumptions through various embodied practices

Minaj, born Onika Tanya Maraj on December 8, 1984, is a cultural phenomenon, recently hailed as the "Queen of Hip Hop" by the *Rolling Stone*. Thanks to raw talent, an "extra-ordinary" physique, conventional beauty, the power of social media, courageously

outrageous style, and major backing by her record label, Young Money Entertainment, founded by controversial "rock star" rapper, Lil' Wayne, known for both his love for drugs, sex and alcohol and racy lyrics, Minaj, who is relatively new to the Hip Hop scene, has become a significant force in popular culture. With her trademark colorful wigs, ranging from pink to blonde to rainbow to camouflage, long pointed vampire-like nails, body hugging garb, which shows off her tiny waist and protruding hips and buttocks, six inch stilettos, and risqué lyrics, Minaj is ripe for "Jezebelian" comparisons. However, to suggest that she is uncritically reproducing sexist praxis is to read her through an ahistorical transcultural pornotropic lens.

To be sure, the "Jezebel" stereotype is deeply embedded in the American ethos and thus, continues to live through a variety of performances and readings of the same. However, uncritically mapping the Jezebel signification onto Minaj, notwithstanding potential cross-references between each, is a way of dismissing the dynamic power of both Minaj and the Jezebel trope. Each has their own intrinsic logic, which produces specific kinds of cultural codes. As defined by Douglas, the Jezebel type is governed by her sexual desire and is the opposite of a "respectable lady." However, Minaj takes this troubling myth and re-conceptualizes it in terms of ambiguity, inter-subjectivity and sexual liberalism.[110] That is, while she celebrates sex and sexuality, she does so in her own way, which is not always what is expected.

[110] T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting discusses "sexual liberalism" in her text, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold On Young Black Women.* Sexual liberalism highlights black women's autonomy to decide whether or not they will participate in "consumption-oriented sexual trafficking." If so, there are several implications that they will likely face, namely the biases of the broader context, for example, the misrecognition of sexual freedom for hyper-sexuality and easy accessibility. I argue that Minaj finds ways to subvert these kinds of readings, not entirely but partially. She is not powerless to outside gazes.

A more adequate reading of Minaj would be this: she is a sex-positive subject[111] who deploys her creative power and agency in a context that tends to regiment both race and gender toward hetero-normative and patriarchal ends. As evidenced by her commitment to both transcending and playing with Hip Hop's boundaried ideals, Minaj is complex and various. She literally takes up multiple subject positions at once, and therefore provides womanist criticism another side of the story. For example, the name "Minaj," highlights the multiplicities of both Maraj's (Minaj's birth name) sexual and personal identities. Each opens up to a variety of interpretations. However, neither her sexual or personal identities are unequivocally identifiable.

Two of her most prominent identities are "Harajuku Barbie," a sexualized, Asian inspired woman who fights for what she wants, and "Roman Zolanski,"[112] a macho multi-sexed man who plays effortlessly with conventional sex and gender identities, sometimes appearing to both resist and acquiesce them simultaneously. Although Minaj's allegiance to the "Barbie" aesthetic suggests that she is simply reviving age-old sex and beauty standards, which define women's value in terms of male desirability, Minaj subverts this by marking her sexuality with obscurity. In an interview with *OUT* magazine, Minaj posited that she dated neither women nor men. She contends,

> The point is, everyone is not black and white. There are so many shades in the middle, and you've got to let people

[111] Sociologist, Shayne Lee, discusses "sex-positive subjectivity" in his book, *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality and Popular Culture* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth UK: Hamilton Books, 2010), which builds upon Sharpley-Whiting's scholarship. However, Lee diverges from Sharpley-Whiting in his reading of "sexual liberalism." Whereas Sharpley-Whiting historicizes black women's sexual representation in both choice and violence, Lee contextualizes it in choice/liberty. My reading of Minaj leans toward Sharpley-Whitings' analysis. However, we differ with regards to the extent of choice.

[112] "Roman Zolanski" is an interesting play on Monica Lewinsky, former mistress of President Bill Clinton, and Roman Polanski, Polish-French film director, producer, writer and actor, accused of pedophilia in 1977. The deployment of Polanski's name is particularly troubling, given his sexual narrative with a thirteen year-old girl, and Minaj's aims toward sexual subjectivity. It is a contradiction that requires further exploring. However, its complexities span beyond the scope of this project.

> feel comfortable with saying what they want to say when they want to say it. I don't want to feel like I've got the gun pointed at my head and you're about to pull the trigger if I don't say what you want to hear. I just want to be me and do me.[113]

"Being" and "doing" Minaj entails being a sexual subject that both resists and embraces the gaze of others—on her own terms. Further, it includes initiating the gaze, which does not always reflect desire, as a form of power.

Minaj's gazes are often disruptive. They disorient what her body, posture and dress might be communicating through comedic display. This confuses the pornotropic gaze, which misrecognizes Minaj for territory. To be sure, she is a participant in pornotropia. However, Minaj simultaneously demands to be seen as a subject. Her play in ambiguity and penchant for funny faces draws attention to this demand. Her sexual ambiguity and funny faces represent an individual form of resistance against the dominant operating representational control in popular culture: the Jezebelian/hyper-sexual/black-female-as-whore type.

However, Minaj confronts this operative trope then simultaneously both uses and resists its projection. These moves provide an alternative to Douglas and Townes' methods of resistance. Minaj acts alone, although her influence is vast. In an attempt to shift the cultural imagination, Douglas and Townes propose concerted acts of resistance among the collective. However, the push for communal acts of resistance suggests that historical representations are static and that their meanings do not have adaptive powers, even as they have traveled from nineteenth century minstrelsy to twenty-first century popular culture. Further, this push presumes that cultural images are solely circulated

[113] Caryn Ganz, "The Curious Case of Nicki Minaj," *OUT Magazine*, October 2010, [magazine: online article], available from http://out.com/detail.asp?page=2&id=27391; Internet; accessed January 2011

and maintained by "white culture" and white ideological bias. Moreover, the push for communal refusal assumes that cultural images are read, performed and experienced in the same way and thus, can be strategically deconstructed and countered in light of categorical aims. Finally, push supposes that counter discourses of resistance are formulated outside of power. However, Minaj demonstrates that these assumptions are not always true.

This is not to say that white ideological bias is inoperative in popular culture or that black female representations are not a continued aspect of its force. Further, I am not attempting to reduce the power of white racism and sexism, particularly forms that mass-produce myths of black womanhood, which re-present black female subjectivity in ways that are homogeneous and stereotypical. Moreover, I am not proposing that these images should not be resisted—as they are encountered and interpreted. However, I am arguing that Minaj poses a challenge to both Douglas and Townes' tragic/heroic schema, and pop cultural pornotropic gazing by re-imagining her own constitution, notwithstanding the assignment of cultural difference. Minaj's positionality calls attention to Foucault's notion of resistance, which acts out wherever power is and is thus, internal to power, plural and irregular. [114]

Foucault argues that power is generated from a multiplicity of points from which it is distributed, appropriated and confronted. Therefore, as myths of black womanhood emerge from a variety of cultural points where they produce multiple complex meanings and additional points of power, they are also confronted, redistributed, and realigned. Minaj "changes the letter" by performing each of these moves. She takes a dominant

[114] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 95.

narrative, repositions it and then mass-produces her creation, thus co-creating within culture. These moves dismiss the idea that white ideological biases operating in "white culture" are the sole points of creative power that dispense ideas of black womanhood.

To be sure, Minaj aids in maintaining aspects of the historical type, parts of which are recalled by viewers regardless of her perceived strategies of resistance. Nevertheless, the issue is not that she deploys this representation. Rather, it is for what intent is it being used. Intentionality is difficult to know. However, we can look at the effects, which are multiple. Minaj's representation is life giving to many. She takes the pejorative, confuses it, and makes it appealing. If nothing more, this confusion is an emancipatory act for both Minaj and her fan base, many of which are marginalized due to their race, sex, sexuality, gender and class. Her performance of each of these categories (race, sex, sexuality, etc.) tells them that they are "okay," or as Minaj has articulated, that they are beautiful, regardless. Not only does this align with womanist theo-ethical aims to affirm the full humanity of the marginalized, it is a simple, yet important, message for our current context. 2010 witnessed numerous teen suicides. Perhaps, Minaj might inspire some to live, in spite of differences between subjects.

However, while Minaj provides an alternative framework for analyzing black women and girl's experiences and cultural representations, there are several dangers in uncritically deploying her as a liberative model. For example, power is not equally aligned. It is unclear how much power Minaj has over her current representation. Nevertheless, pre-signing footage of the artist suggests that much of what we see is her own inter-subjective creation, informed by Minaj's scheme of interpretation, which pulls from both context and internal consciousness. However, whatever power Minaj has is

likely unparalleled to that of those in her audience. That is, Minaj the artist has the luxury of protected space. By this I mean, she has a team of people to guard her body from violence, although the threat of violence likely remains. Nevertheless, there are different kinds of consequences for enacting Minaj's liberties offstage, particularly in a patriarchal context that continues to interpret black female sexual liberalists as "ho's," regardless.[115]

An additional danger is Minaj's likely appeal to a growing, third-wave brand of feminism, which superficially celebrates female achievements while invalidating feminism in reality thus, keeping women, particularly the young, in their place. For example, this kind of feminism highlights women's right to embrace their sexual selves as powerful deciding subjects as opposed to mere objects while simultaneously suggesting that power is gained through sex and sexual display—with and for male subjects. This is what sociologist and self-identified third-wave feminist, Shayne Lee, posits as "feminist chic."[116] However, feminist cultural critic, Susan J. Douglas,[117] interprets it as "enlightened sexism" because the underlying idea is that power is achieved by catering to male desire. Black feminist theorist T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting refers this kind of power as "pseudo-power."[118] It depends on a corporate formula for attractiveness, which limits women and girls' value to depreciating assets, on one hand, and assumes their accessibility, on the other.

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[115] T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting takes this up further in *Pimps Up, Ho's Down Pimps Up, Ho's Down*.
[116] For more information see Shayne Lee, *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality and Popular Culture* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth UK: Hamilton Books, 2010).
[117] For more information see Susan J. Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism's Work Is Done* (New York: Times Books, 2010).
[118] For more information see T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold On Young Black Women* (New York, London: New York University Press, 2007).

However, Minaj both caters to and does not cater to male desire. She caters to it to the extent that her desirability increases her market share, which enables the satisfaction of goods. However, Minaj resists catering to them by maintaining sexual ambiguity. This in itself is empowering. Sexual ambiguity loosens the yoke of rigid identity politics by embracing multi-positionality and exploring individual interests. Douglas and Townes' tragic hero does not leave room for this sort of complexity. However, Minaj "changes the letter" because she demands that room be made for her particular subjectivity. I will now turn to T.D. Jakes and the *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* phenomenon.

CHAPTER IV

WHOSE 'WOMAN' IS THIS? A BLACK FEMINIST RELIGIO-CULTURAL COMMENTARY ON BISHOP T.D. JAKES' *WOMAN, THOU ART LOOSED*![119]

This chapter argues that a critical look at the representational practices, both discursive and non-discursive, of prominent black preacher and business savvy media mogul, Thomas Dexter Jakes, more commonly known as Bishop T.D. Jakes, reveals a pornotropic optic that draws upon and repackages the racist and sexist epistemes of high modernity in order to mass-produce and market what is promoted in the retail industry as a liberative message for and about women. Notwithstanding intention and albeit a source of comfort and hope to millions of women across the globe who invest thousands of dollars in Jakes' products, for example, sermons, books, conferences, plays, broadcasting, videos, cinema, advertising, and music, his message reproduces and commodifies a new style of primitivism in the form of fictive ethnography.[120] That is, Jakes constructs a

[119] This chapter is significantly influenced by the scholarship of bell hooks. It is a religio-cultural reading of T.D. Jakes' *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* phenomenon that functions similarly to hooks' reading of Spike Lee's film, *She's Gotta Have It.* In her essay, "'whose pussy is this?' a feminist comment," hooks provides a critical engagement on black cultural production, not to deny its aesthetic, appeal, but to interrogate and unveil the representational strategies, and the political work of sexist ideology therein. Combining Spillers' framework for reading with hooks' scholarship on film, this chapter aims to do the same (hence, the title of this chapter). I will also draw upon the work of others, where appropriate.

[120] This chapter deploys hooks' idea of a "new style of primitivism" and "fictive ethnography" to frame Jakes' reading of women. In the introduction of *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* ("Making Movie Magic"), which extends from her work in "whose pussy is this," hooks argues that the commodification, appropriation and marketing of "blackness" by mainstream media as "truth," appeals to essentialist notions of race, gender, etc., and historically colonizing racial imagery. She posits that movies, in particular, both draw upon and "make" culture. That is, they transform culture right before our eyes. However, movies do not proffer what is "real," they provide what is reimagined—a reinvented version of the real. Additionally, they allow us to "cross the border and engage the other without having to do so experientially." This chapter maintains that Jakes does the same. The images that he produces are not real, but imagined versions of the real that allows him to not only "cross the border" but also "play" the field.

universal 'woman', a necessary social fiction that resembles Stowe's 'negro', which claims to represent women in general and black women and girls in particular.

However, Jakes' 'woman', which presupposes a voyeuristic view into the life of women, is in actuality an artifactual arrangement of signs, symbols, significations, and representations, strategically placed against a schematic backdrop.[121] Specifically, 'woman' is a piece of merchandise, a material and symbolic concept, to be bought and sold, of what Jakes believes women are and who he intends for them not to be. In this way, she is his non-ideal 'woman'. However, she is the gateway toward Jakes' ideals, namely, his ideal 'woman', a key component of his heterosexist familial paragon, his ideal representation of self, the mouthpiece of God who has come to set the captives free, and his ideal religio-cultural empire, which profits significantly off of the non-ideal remaining "captive" to Jakes' imagination.

To be sure, neither the ideal nor the non-ideal is ever really *loosed*. Instead, both are bound by Jakes' kingdom and therefore each necessitates careful deconstruction and re-theorization. This chapter places emphasis on Jakes' non-ideal 'woman'. My hope is that women might be ultimately re-read in terms of their complex inter-subjectivities. Next, I will turn to Jakes. I will begin with a brief biography of Jakes, the self-proclaimed "country preacher," in order to situate his ministerial empire. This will be followed up with the following programmatic moves.

First, I will provide a close, descriptive reading of the text, which both launched and maintains his career, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993). I will place particular emphasis on Jakes' representational practices in the book. However, I will nuance this

[121] Here, I am combing Spillers' work on "the negro" and Toni Morrison's work on "the African" in media. For more information see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

reading with his corresponding cinematic production and sermon, which bear the same name. Second, I will perform a black feminist religio-cultural critique that makes the following moves: calls attention to the troubling and falsifying way that Jakes' message denies the real interests of both the biblical narrative and black women and girls, and presents a constructive possibility that "changes the letter." Third, I will re-read Jakes as a product of the Black Church. Fourth, I will offer final thoughts, to be followed by a turn toward Chapter IV, which highlights the work of popular filmmaker, Tyler Perry.

Thomas Dexter Jakes

Jakes, the youngest son of Ernest and Odith Jakes, both working class individuals doubling as local entrepreneurs, grew up in Vandalia Hill, a small coal mining community in Charleston, West Virginia. By the age of sixteen, he began perfecting three roles that would prepare him for an unimaginable life long journey: salesmanship, compassion and preaching. Before graduating from high school, Jakes had a fierce entrepreneurial spirit, which matched that of his parents, an uncanny sense of empathy for the human condition, resulting from his fathers debilitating kidney disease and subsequent passing in 1972, and a tenacious dedication to the preaching ministry. However, although fearless in these areas, Jakes also had a heavy dosage of low self-esteem, a consequence of several factors, namely, a distressing lisp, discomfiting weight problem, and years of dispiriting poverty. All of these factors play a significant role in Jakes' choice to reproduce and maintain certain representational strategies.

After years of struggle marked by unemployment, car repossession, interrupted utility services, backbreaking labor, government assistance, and seemingly unrewarding

circuit preaching, Jakes located a window of opportunity. In 1992, Jakes, a young impressionable Pentecostal preacher, journeyed to the AZUSA Fellowship conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma[122] led by Carlton Pearson. Pearson, a gifted singer and preacher, is credited with converging black neo-Pentecostalism, media, and white neo-Pentecostalism, which surged in television broadcasting and network ownership from the late 1970s onward with networks like Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), Praise the Lord Network (PTL), and Daystar Television Network (DTN).[123] Sociologist, Shayne Lee, posits that Pearson, "the first African American to regularly host a Christian program on national television,"[124] deployed his connections with these networks to situate himself as the religio-cultural point person between black preachers and powerful media moguls like Oral Roberts and others. Thus, his AZUSA Fellowship conference, which showcased the preaching, teaching, and entertainment gifts of only the most talented or internally connected, served as a launching pad for ministerial careers in media. This connection yielded many rewards, for example, increased speaking engagements and fees (from an additional one hundred thousand dollars, upward, in annual income), and international exposure.

AZUSA was the place to be, particularly for a hopeful preacher like Jakes. Lee writes that in the 1990s thousands attended annually, thus cashing in their vacation days and drawing from whatever savings they had in order to attend seminars, experience

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[122] Pearson's AZUSA Fellowship conference is in commemoration of the historic Azusa Street Revival, a historic Pentecostal revival meeting in Los Angeles, California, dating back to 1906.

[123] Shayne Lee, *America's New Preacher: T.D. Jakes* (New York, London: New York University Press, 2005), 35-36. Pearson was a former student and protégé of Oral Roberts, an innovative celebrity preacher of the 1950s, who is credited with bringing Pentecostalism to mainstream media through weekly broadcasts of his racially mixed tent meetings, and the establishment of Oral Roberts University (ORU), a private charismatic institutional hub for several prominent religious and cultural personalities, for example, Kenneth Copeland, Ted Haggard, and Kathie Lee Gifford.

[124] Shayne Lee, *America's New Preacher: T.D. Jakes*, 42.

powerful preaching, encounter fancy worship, hear exceptional music, explore high tech commercialism, and network. While there were many networking opportunities at the conference, a meeting with Pearson was the most coveted. Lee notes that Jakes and Pearson shared a mutual friend, whom Jakes met the year prior while networking at other more local conferences, Sarah Jordan Powell, a noted gospel singer. Powell made the introduction between Jakes and Pearson and the rest is history.

Jakes' introduction to Pearson reaped immediate rewards, for example, his preaching was showcased on TBN, thus granting him multinational exposure. However, the highest honor was bestowed in 1993 when Jakes, an unknown "country preacher" and pastor of approximately sixty people in West Virginia the year prior, returned to AZUSA as the star of the show. His message, "Woman, Thou Art Loosed," inspired by his successful Sunday school lesson, carved out a permanent place for Jakes in American religious and cultural history. With over twelve thousand in attendance and over twenty thousand dollars in products sold (i.e. tapes, books, videos, etc.) immediately following the service, Jakes' star power soared.

Woman, Thou Art Loosed!

Next, I will provide a close black feminist religio-cultural reading of Jakes' best selling text, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993). My reading screens in his representational strategies, placing particular emphasis on his linguistic and visual depictions of "womanhood."[125] However, it screens out the potential spiritual value of Jakes' text. This is not to question or invalidate possible "felt qualities"[126] experienced by Jakes'

[125] I will deploy the theoretical lenses of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Stuart Hall, Hortense Spillers, Michel Foucault, and others.
[126] William James discusses this in *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a Study in Human Nature.*

audience, which may give rise to emotional, psychological or even physical transcendence, nor is it to dismiss, by way of extraction, Jakes' spiritual intentions. However, my emphasis on his representational strategies regarding black womanhood and not the potential spiritual value of his message aims to demonstrate how myths of black womanhood are sometimes reproduced, circulated, and consumed by African Americans, notwithstanding reduction and totalization, and how these myths often get maintained in mundane or unexpected spaces, for example, the Black Church, a significant site of both complex meaning making and pornotropic gazing. Albeit Jakes' brand transcends the Black Church, both he and *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993) are products of its culture.[127]

Woman, Thou Art Loosed (1993), which began as a female centered Sunday School lesson in the early 1990s, is a religio-cultural phenomenon, inspired by the following: 1) Jakes' early counseling experiences with women who happened to be suffering, including his mother, Odith, who struggled to raise her family alone due to an overworked and later deathly ill husband when Jakes was just a young boy, 2) his interpretation of self, 3) his interpretation of women, and 4) his interpretation of Luke 13:11-12 KJV, which reads:

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[127] There is a significant amount of scholarship on the historical Black Church. My intention is not to "reinvent the wheel" in terms of defining what the Black Church is or is not. It is to situate Jakes within that tradition. In addition, my aim is to broaden the study of Black Religion, African American Christianity and the historical Black Church to include African American popular religion, particularly that which develops in popular literature and film. For more information on the Black Church see E. Franklin Frasier, *The Negro Church in America,* Hans Baer, *African American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*, Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South*, Cheryl Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African*, Milton Sernett, ed., *African American Religious History: Documentary Witness*, and Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*.

> **11** And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. **12** And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity.

Woman, Thou Art Loosed (1993), which constructs Jakes' archetypal woman, both the non-ideal and the ideal, is one of the first of its kind. It is a Christocentric text that focuses on the woman in the biblical narrative as opposed to Jesus. That is, Jakes screens in the woman's "infirmed" status, which he interprets as an ailment resulting from a past event outside of her control, while shifting the healing power of Jesus toward a prescriptive backdrop to which he returns after laying out the problem.

Jakes, who already knew the power of acknowledging women's pain and suffering, particularly as a male religious figure,[128] took the woman's infirmed status and paralleled it to contemporary women's status as constant victims of male violence. This recognition gave him entrée to a sensitive area in his audiences' psyche, which gave way to immediate interest, particularly from black women whose history is plagued by suffering and violence caused by strategies such as displacement, captivity, degendering, broken kinship ties, rape, sale, incest, pornotropia, etc.[129] Like the woman in the biblical text, Jakes' audience likely interpreted this recognition as "good news." His attention to female suffering articulated both empathy and the possibility of liberation, at minimum,

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[128] Lee notes that Jakes' Sunday school class rapidly grew from five to approximately one hundred when he first began teaching *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!*

[129] I am deploying Spillers' scholarship as well as building upon the work of several others, for example, Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), Paula Giddings, *When and where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984), Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1999), Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," and bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: black women and feminism* (Boston: South End Press,1981).

from the constraints of the memory of violation. Specifically, Jakes tells his readers that they have agency to escape the mental prisons of their past experiences caused by child abuse, molestation, incest, and rape and that individual value cannot be taken (by an abuser or anyone else), however it is encountered once one finds purpose.[130] This was and is a powerful message. *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993) sold out in less than one month after its first printing.[131]

Woman, Thou Art Loosed (1993) can be broken down into three categories: the person, the problem, and the prescription. Jakes spends most of his time on the problem. I will follow suit. However, for clarification purposes, "the person" symbolizes both the woman in the biblical narrative and women in general while "the prescription" highlights what Jakes notes as a turn toward Jesus' healing power, which is demonstrated through both one's trust in Jesus' ability to heal, and sanctification, the regimenting of women's behaviors within politics of respectability. "The problem" represents the woman's infirmity, which Jakes projects onto women in general.

On page 14, Jakes notes that the woman is "infirmed" by "something that attacked her 18 years earlier." However, on page 16, he posits that she is "infirmed" by a "spirit that has gripped her life." While this seems like an innocuous reference to Luke 13:11a KJV, Jakes' articulation highlights a significant interpretive move, which first constructs the woman as a victim then reconstructs her as an agent that is "gripped" by a "spirit." When translating "infirmity" in light of our contemporary context, he articulates it as hurting, desperate, manipulative, destructive, abusive, obsessive, clingy, selfish, insecure,

[130] T.D. Jakes, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*! (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: Destiny Image Publishers, 1993), 29, 55.
[131] Shayne Lee, 67.

gullible, weak, and promiscuous.[132] Thus, while the infirmity that "grips" the woman in the biblical narrative may be a "bowed" back, Jakes' contemporary reading is altogether different. He provides a representational shift, which suggests that women, starting with Eve, are problems that need changing (i.e. *loosing*).

In addition, in the opening paragraph Jakes posits, "This woman's dilemma is her own, but perhaps you will find relativity between her case history and your own."[133] This reading indicates that the woman's infirmity is not only possessed by her, but is also in some way her fault. After making this claim, he then shifts toward the notion of "deliverance" from "past trauma."[134] These moves are dangerous. First, they insinuate that women's past traumas may, in some way, be their fault. Second, they both spiritualize and blame the victim for the after effects of trauma, which may be more fairly read as a web of events with multiple controls to include but not limited to both the victim and the victimizer.

Third, they shift the meaning of infirmity, as presented in the biblical narrative, away from a literal weakness/illness toward contemporary "verbes," which pejoratively describe womanhood. Fourth, they put the onus on women who have been traumatized to get "delivered." However, it is important to note that Jakes' reference to "deliverance" is twofold. On one hand, it means being set free from the emotional stresses that accompany past traumas so that one may live life unbound by the psychological restraints of previous pain. This is a positive deployment. However, on the other hand, it refers to

[132] T.D. Jakes, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, 14, 159 and 204. These themes are central to several of Jakes' texts, including his films.
[133] T.D. Jakes, 11.
[134] Jakes, 12.

“deliverance” from essentialist “women’s ways of being,” for example, promiscuity. This is injurious.

However, a close reading of the text highlights healing from either a physical or social ailment. The narrator in Luke 13:11b KJV states that the woman was “bowed together” by a “spirit of infirmity” while in Luke 13:16 KJV, Jesus describes her as being freed from a different kind of bondage. The text reads:

> **16** And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham
> whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from
> this bondage on the sabbath day?

The words “set free” and “bound” reference Luke 4:18 KJV and 7:18-23 KJV, which reads:

> **18** "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has
> anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent
> me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight
> to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..."

> **18** The disciples of John reported all these things to him. So
> John summoned two of his disciples **19** and sent them to
> the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we
> to wait for another?" **20** When the men had come to him,
> they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, "Are
> you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'
> " **21** Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases,
> plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who
> were blind. **22** And he answered them, "Go and tell John
> what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight,
> the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the
> dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.
> **23** And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Luke 4:18 KJV and 7:18-23 KJV are critical to Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry. They frame Jesus as the Christ and his mission as liberation. Thus, Luke 13:11-12 KJV should be read alongside of these texts, both of which suggest that Jesus may have been freeing the woman from some kind of socio-cultural bondage, for example, sexism. The

shifts in language make it difficult to tell whether the woman was healed from a physical or social ailment. Both are plausible, given both the narrator's and Jesus' language. However, "deliverance" from a particular kind of female-centric "way of being" or self-imposed, personal dilemma seems far-fetched. Nevertheless, Jakes utilizes this idea to frame contemporary women's "infirmity."

He writes:

> Jesus said, "Woman, thou art loosed." He did not call her by name. He wasn't speaking to her just as a person. He spoke to her femininity. He spoke to the song in her. He spoke to the lace in her. Like a crumbling rose, Jesus spoke to what she could, and would, have been. I believe the Lord spoke to the twinkle that existed in her eye when she was a child; to the girlish glow that makeup can never seem to recapture. He spoke to her God-given uniqueness. He spoke to her gender.[135]
>
> We are looking at a woman who had a personal war going on inside her. These struggles must have tainted many other areas of her life. The infirmity that attacked her was physical. However, many women also wrestle with infirmities in emotional traumas…an emotional handicap can create dependency on many different levels.[136]

In addition to reproducing several essentialist claims, for example, comparing womanhood to "lace" and a "crumbling rose," suggesting that gender is both natural and "unique" as opposed to socially constructed, and circumscribing adult female life to the romantic era of "girlhood," these moves problematize women's existence, suggest that women possess some kind of special, yet disorienting, innate quality, and set the stage for the transition from the woman in the biblical narrative to Jakes' universal 'woman' in contemporary culture, a 'woman' marked by past trauma, which "taint[s] many other

[135] Jakes, 13.
[136] Ibid., 14.

areas of her life." It is this "handicap" (i.e. the problem/infirmity), not the trauma, which frames the rest of the text.

Jakes highlights four "handicaps" in particular that women need to be "loosed" from: their tendency to make bad choices, have bad attitudes, make excuses, and forsake their God-given femininity. I will give particular attention to the first "handicap": women's tendency to make bad choices. Jakes argues that women are "wounded" (i.e. "infirmed") and that "wounded-ness" is the gateway to "bad" behavior, for example, promiscuity and adulterous affairs ("infirmed" behaviors). He writes:

> Many times…emotional handicaps will spawn a series of unhealthy relationships.
>
> *For thou has had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly*. John 4:18
>
> Healing cannot come to a desperate person rummaging through other peoples lives. One of the first things that a hurting person needs to do is break the habit of using other people as a narcotic to numb the dull aching of an inner void. The more you medicate your symptoms, the less chance you have allowing God to heal you. The other destructive tendency that can exist with any abuse is the person must keep increasing the dosage.[137]

The latter statement implies a state of unscrupulous hyper-sexuality, caused by women's "bad" choices. As a prescription, Jakes suggests that women sanctify their spirits. He asserts:

> However, there is a sanctity of your spirit that comes through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ and sanctifies the innermost part of your being. Certainly, once you get cleaned up in your spirit, it will be reflected in your character and conduct. You won't be like Mary the mother of Jesus and dress like Mary Magdalene did before she met

[137] Ibid., 14-15.

> the master. The Spirit of the Lord will give you boundaries.[138]

However, sanctification does not always work. He notes:

> Yes, we've got hurting people. Sometimes they break the boundaries and they become lascivious and out of control and we have to readmit them into the hospital and allow them to be treated again.[139]

Jakes' emphasis on women's promiscuity is ongoing. He deploys it to mark women's past choices in particular ways, thus shifting the discourse away from women as victims of certain kinds of crimes to women as choice making agents who allow past violations to hinder present decision-making, particularly in terms of sexual activity. In short, women's current status has everything to do with "bad" choices that were within their control, for example, women's tendency to attract men who do not treat them well, have affairs with other women's husbands, and have children out of wedlock.[140] Jakes furthers this idea by interweaving the narrative of the "infirmed" woman with that of Rahab, a woman who is said to be both a harlot and an ancestor of Jesus,[141] and the Samaritan woman at the well who had five husbands and a lover who was not her husband[142] throughout his text, thus interlacing infirmity/sickness with victimization, victimization with bad choices, and bad choices with sexual immorality, the latter of which circles back to infirmity.

This entwinement of women-as-problems with innate infirmities (i.e. uncontrolled sexual desire) and women-as-victims (who lack moral boundaries) is brought to life in Jakes' corresponding film, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*! (2004) Akin to Jakes' discursive

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[138] Ibid., 61.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] See Joshua 2:1-7 and Matthew 1:5 KJV.
[142] See John 4:4-26 KJV.

text, these themes are articulated in the opening scene, which opens up to a large, state of the art, predominantly Black Church service with women in traditional garb, for example, white clothing and hats, and a choir mixed with both women and men wearing traditional robes, singing, "there's room at the cross." While the familiar sounds of the Hammond B3 organ plays against the backdrop, Jakes simultaneously preaches the following:

> I believe that God can make you whole…I believe he can deliver…in spite of everything I've done…Come on down! God wants to turn your life around…He's able to deliver you…there's room at the cross…BACKSLIDER! I'm talking to you…you need this word.[143]

At the very moment that Jakes yells, "BACKSLIDER," enters Michelle, the main protagonist played by Kimberly Elise, a frantic young woman, framed by Jakes' assertion on backsliding who, based upon the timing of her dramatic entrance, needs God's deliverance. However, as the camera zooms in to highlight Michelle's chiseled features, the powerful vibration of Jakes' voice, juxtaposed against the lowered musical tempo in the backdrop signifies Jakes, not God, as both the judge and the healer (i.e. the one who grants "deliverance"). Simultaneously, Michelle is marked as a problem: a mad black woman. However, as her story unfolds, we learn that she is not simply a problem, but a victim of child molestation whose life has spun out of control.

Michelle was raped when she was twelve years old by her mother's boyfriend, Reggie, played by Clifton Powell. During the rape scene, Reggie grabs her and chides her for "teasing [him] with those tight jeans." This is a curious signification because, as a child, Michelle is always dressed in ultra feminine clothing, for example, soft yellow and pink dresses and matching oversized hair bows. Thus, it is difficult to tell if Reggie's

[143] T.D. Jakes, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*!, produced by Reuben Cannon, Stan Foster, Paul Garnes, and Cheryl Miller and directed by Michael Schultz, 94 min., 20th Century Fox, 2005, DVD. Region 1 (U.S. and Canada only): First Run.

projection is an oversight or, an intended reflection of Jakes' imagination. While he does not explicitly make the rape of Michelle her fault, Jakes characterizes her as a girl-child longing to be a "star," the center of attention.

This is troubling, given the work that he does in *Daddy Loves His Girls* (2006) and *God's Leading Lady* (2003), the former opens up to an explicit account of the birth of Jakes' daughter who glides through her mother's legs, which are "gapped like the curtains to a Broadway play," and makes her initial grand performance on earths "stage" for Jakes. The latter, *God's Leading Lady* (2003), makes the stage its central theme. Jakes argues that "the lady in red" becomes a "lady in waiting" once she takes her rightful place center stage, which is strategically both defined and confined by Jakes.[144] Given his reflections here, it is clear that Jakes has an interest in women being on stage. However, he projects this fascination onto women and girls by suggesting that they have an innate desire to be "stars" on center stage, performing for their "daddies." This is distressing at best.

The particular kinds of stages that women take up in Jakes' imagination depend on both sanctity and positive male direction. For example, Jakes' "leading lady" (i.e. his ideal 'woman') embodies pseudo-independence, defined by Jakes, that pushes "her" center stage in various areas of "her" life (i.e. work, play, church, etc.). Specifically, Jakes notes "her" as a lawyer, doctor, preacher, business owner, etc., who debunks certain oppressive social structures while remaining a "lady," Jakes' ideal 'woman'. However, those lacking sanctity and positive male direction like Michelle take up other kinds of stages. Throughout the film we see her beaten, raped and neglected. However,

[144] T.D. Jakes, *God's Leading Lady: Out of the Shadows and Into the Light* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002), 190.

these images are tempered with her shaking her hips for her young male playmate, stripping for adult male suitors, and "acting out" by murdering her rapist as he kneels at the alter, a religious "stage" in which she violates.

Thus, Michelle occupies a different kind of space for Jakes. She epitomizes his "infirmed" 'woman', the non-ideal. Jakes depicts her as a "mad woman " (i.e. crazy) who has made numerous poor choices due to her inability to face and move beyond her past, which includes a host of violations by Reggie, her pimp, drug pusher, mother, etc. Her ultimate sin seems to be her inability or unwillingness to forgive her rapist. According to the storyline, Reggie was never tried in the court of law. In fact, he never admitted to raping twelve-year old Michelle. Thus, it could be said that justice was served through his murder.

Nevertheless, Jakes problematizes this act of agency throughout the film. It is represented as hateful and unscrupulous as opposed to long suffering rage or uncalculated defense. Michelle shoots and kills Reggie as he unexpectedly approaches her at the alter while she was attempting to "loose" herself of things that "crippled" her from her past: a blood stained child's dress from the day that she was raped and a gun given to her by a friend as a source of protection against daily violence. Reggie's positioning at the alter as well as his subjection to what Jakes presents as cold blooded murder, makes Reggie out to be a partial victim. Akin to the insinuated perpetrators in *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993), the book, Reggie escapes accountability while Michelle, who is marred by victimization and poor choices, to include sexual violence that doubles as sexual immorality, is forced to pay for "improper" decision-making via varying "prisons" and "death sentences."

At one point in the film, Jakes suggests that women have agency to make "proper" choices, however, they decide to open their lives to men like Reggie. He preaches, "these people call you…but YOU don't have to answer." Perhaps, in reality Michelle could have made different decisions. However, this is a film with a script already in place. Different choices would necessitate a change in Jakes' story. According to the film, none of her abusers ever called her. Instead, they forced themselves into her presence. These kinds of mixed messages are common throughout Jakes' products. They highlight his complex inter-subjectivity, which I explore later.

In addition to poor decision making, Michelle also embodies the other "handicaps" outlined in Jakes' text: women's tendency to 1) have bad attitudes, 2) make excuses, and 3) forsake their God-given femininity. Jakes holds that women become accustomed to having problems (as a result of "improper" decision making).[145] This leads to bad attitudes that function as security blankets, stress others out, limit deliverance, enable self-destruction and result in excuses.[146] However, because Jesus "loosed" women of their "infirmity," excuses (which he notes are "emotional handicaps" that request "special needs") are tools of "wounded" women who do not desire to be (or believe that they can be) healed by the "Great Physician."[147]

Throughout the film, Jakes depicts Michelle as hardened, full of excuses, which he appears to empathize with, and estranged from her God-given femininity. The latter seems to be the crux of Michelle's problem for Jakes. He argues that the "proper" appropriation of gender identity is critical to "deliverance." Thus, Jakes devotes an entire chapter in *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993) to "femininity." He maintains that girls, who

[145] T.D. Jakes, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, 179.
[146] Jakes, 14, 178-9.
[147] Ibid., 186.

are born to be in relation, evidenced in their love for playing house, with dolls, and dress up, have a God-given "uniqueness" that makes them "open receivers" or "receptacles" that are diametrically opposed to boys who Jakes articulates as "power plugs" or "givers."[148] Thus, females need to be "covered"[149] by males so that they may experience "wholeness," which is encountered when men, who function like "power saws," plug into women's receptacle.[150]

However, while married women are "covered" by their husbands, single women are "covered" by their chastity and morality. Jakes holds that "spiritual warfare," for example, rape, child abuse, sexual discrimination, enmity between women, and male shortage, will ensue if this is not taken seriously.[151] Specifically, women will face sorrow and miss their blessings (i.e. deliverance from the suffering that plagues them) if they do not act like "women," which demands certain kinds of boundaries (or, "openings," if married). We witness this theory first hand with Michelle, who is marked by both her personal and her mothers' "indiscretions." Both lack boundaries and "covers," thus, each faces an immense amount of troubles.

"Michelle," who is neither a daughter (to a present father) nor a wife, both of which highlight social positions that humanize, albeit problematically, women and girls in patriarchal societies, is given a make-over by her surrogate mother figure, Twana, played by Debbie Morgan, a beautician who loves men, lots of make-up, wigs and animal print. She literally transforms from a hardened "street thug," dressed in denim with backward cornrows to a "woman" with soft, cascading curls, a chiffon, flower-printed

[148] Ibid., 27, 97.
[149] Ibid., 48.
[150] Ibid,, 97-98.
[151] Ibid.,101-3.

dress, painted nails, and exquisite face paint—in anticipation of impressing Todd, a good guy whom Michelle needs to "cover" her and make her "whole." However, unlike most fairytales, she does not get to live "happily ever after." The film ends with Michelle in jail on death row. Thus, she never gets "covered" by a father or a husband. Her only option is to become chaste or moral. However, Jakes' depiction of her as a "mad woman" usurps these possibilities. Nevertheless, she has Jakes. Perhaps, he will be her "cover." At the very least, Jakes can introduce her to the Jesus figure articulated in his books. Simultaneously, Michelle can help to grow both his empire and his ego.

Next, I will deploy black feminist religio-cultural criticism to analyze and "change the letter" of Jakes' reading. This reading, which utilizes the analytic tools and frameworks of Hortense Spillers and others,[152] strategically stands between Jakes' *texts*, both the discursive and non-discursive, and his readers, with the intent of laying bare particular yoked repetitions draped in totalities, through an iconoclastic analysis of his practices of representation. This move, which provides a reading of readings, involves an interrogation of not only Jakes' interpretive moves, but of Jakes himself. Jakes, who admittedly appears well intentioned when performing in the sermonic moment, constructs, mass-produces, and markets an ideology that subverts human fulfillment. That is, he participates in oppression politics while simultaneously attempting to create a context for transcendence. I aim to expose and redirect the former by accenting his representational strategies, which uncritically draw upon racist and sexist modern epistemes.

My analysis makes the following moves. First, I will call attention to some of the ways that Jakes' message denies the real interests of both the biblical narrative and black

[152] For example, bell hooks, Valerie Smith, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and several others.

women and girls. Second, I will present a constructive possibility that "changes the letter." The aim of these readings is emancipatory. *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993) enforces conformity to Jakes' ideal womanhood through an over zealous censuring of the non-ideal. My hope is to provide an analysis that may aid in *loosing* not only 'woman', but also Jakes, from his franchise.

A Black Feminist Religio-Cultural Commentary on T.D. Jakes

Jakes interprets Luke 13:11-12 KJV in the following way: Jesus commands the woman who had a "bowed" back for eighteen years, from either some kind of outside attack or the "gripping" of a "spirit," to straighten up, thus releasing her from her infirmity. This reading suggests that while she may have been victimized, she eventually began operating under a "spirit" that either maintained or furthered her condition. Jakes posits that the latter was *her* dilemma.[153] Nevertheless, Jesus' healing power releases the "spirit," thus transforming her status from victimhood, whether externally or internally induced or both, to victor.

Jesus' identity as the Christ, which is proven by his healing power, is central to Luke's narrative. Similarly, it is critical to Jakes' ministry, although it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between Jakes and Jesus. However, Jakes' framing of the problem differs from that of Jesus. Jakes re-presents the woman as a victim of an outside attack who is then "gripped" by a "spirit," both of which necessitate straightening up by Jesus. However, neither the narrator nor Jesus re-presents her in this way.

The narrator refers to a "spirit of infirmity" in Luke 13:11a KJV and a physical infirmity in Luke 13:11b KJV (i.e. her back was "bowed together" for eighteen years).

[153] Ibid., 11.

However, in Luke 13:16 KJV, Jesus articulates both a physical and a social infirmity. He asks, "And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When read within the context of Luke 4:18 KJV and 7:18-23 KJV, both of which frame Luke's account of Jesus' ministry, a more adequate depiction of the encounter is unveiled. In Luke 4:18 KJV Jesus says that "The Spirit of the Lord is upon" him "because he has anointed" him "to bring good news to the poor…to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." When asked if he is "the one who is to come" by the disciples of John the Baptist in Luke 7:18-23 KJV, Jesus refers to the performance of his mission as outlined in Luke 4:18 KJV.

Thus, a more reasonable reading of the woman in Luke 13:11-12 KJV might attend more so to either her physical condition or social context and less so to her possible individual decision making, resulting from a "gripping" by a "spirit." While the narrator refers to a "spirit," for example, a "spirit of infirmity," the kind of spirit is unknown. "Spirits," both good, bad and indifferent, are common in Luke, and they are no respecter of persons. They fall on everyone, from Jesus to Paul. However, when "good" or "bad," the source is often identified as such, for example, "The Spirit of *the Lord* is upon me" [italics mine].

Jakes' reference to a "spirit" that "gripped" the woman and his subsequent analysis of women in general (who are also "gripped by spirits") suggests a pejorative reading. However, a close reading of Luke troubles this interpretive move. Jakes' translation of the "spirit" may have come from a literal reading of Luke 13:16 KJV where Jesus rhetorically asks if the woman "whom Satan bound" might be set free from

"bondage" on the Sabbath. However, a representational analysis of verses 12-16 suggests that Jesus' reference to Satan is less so an indication of an individual binding (i.e. a negative "spiritual gripping" that leads to bad attitudes and poor choices), with the exception of personal illness (i.e. her "bowed" back), and more so an indication of his mission, which he articulates as social (i.e. release of the oppressed).

Specifically, in verse 12 the woman is freed from illness, however, in verse 16 she is freed from bondage. The shift in language makes room for both readings (physical and social infirmities). However, the signs "bound" and "set free" in verse 16, which point back to Jesus' mission outlined in Luke 4:18 KJV, problematizes Jakes' interpretation. In fact, Jakes' reading further imprisons the woman, turning both her and women, in general, into a problem. That is, he acknowledges that many women have been hurt by something outside of their control while simultaneously positing that women, at some point in their life, maintain or further their condition on their own. The latter leads to a life of poor choices, which needs Jesus' straightening.

However, a more adequate reading might have picked up where Jesus left off as opposed to redefining the "infirmity" (i.e. poor choices). This would have likely resembled Jesus' mission in Luke 4:18 KJV. Thus, a presumable starting point would have been a critique of contemporary social structures, for example, patriarchy, sexism, racism, heterosexism and capitalism, which limit human fulfillment to a minority. Admittedly, this reading would not have been as profitable for Jakes. Nevertheless, his reading would have aligned more closely with what appears to be Jesus' interests.

The dangers of Jakes' reading are numerous, particularly as it relates to black women and girls within the Black Church, a dominant sector of his audience. When

translating the woman's "infirmity" in the biblical narrative in light of our contemporary context, Jakes circumscribes it within a context of poor decision-making, namely, unscrupulousness and insatiable promiscuity. This reading represents a representational shift that highlights movement away from the woman in the biblical narrative toward Jakes' non-ideal 'woman'. That is, it reflects a turn away from the bible to black women, in particular. However, the underlying command is the same: straighten up!

Throughout *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993), Jakes commands women to turn toward Jesus' healing power and transform their ways. However, Jesus' healing power, according to Jakes, seems obsessed with regimenting women's sexual practices within cultural politics of respectability. Jakes' non-ideal 'woman' is too loose. "She" is a victim of trauma who demonstrates poor sexual ethics, which have caused her life to spiral out of control. Jakes' emphasis on the latter as opposed to the former, trauma, presents a reading that is not in the best interest of black women and girls.

In Chapter II, I deployed the scholarship of Hortense Spillers to theorize black female subjects' historical experiences.[154] These experiences include but are not limited to "captive" practices such as displacement, degendering, broken kinship ties, incest, pornotropia, etc., which enable black women and girls to be "seen" as undifferentiated, unboundaried, boundless, commodified, grotesquely fascinating "flesh." This reading is passed from generation to generation through practices of "reading" and writing via both the human psyche and material culture. Both people and culture stabilize black female

[154] Although I am emphasizing the scholarship of Hortense Spillers, the scholarship on black women's history is vast, to include but not limited to those previously cited, such as, Helen Washington, Paula Giddings, Deborah Gray White, Elsa Barkley Brown, Patricia Hill Collins, Saidiya Hartman, Darlene Clark Hine, bell hooks, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Audre Lorde, and countless others to include biographical accounts, novels, and other forms of work, for example, the work of Linda Brent, Anna Julia Cooper, Zora Neale Hurston and others. Spillers' interpretive categories of analyses, which are foundational to my theory for reading, drive this move.

myths over time through the consistency of signification and representation where these myths are brought to life and realigned again and again between individuals, institutions, structures, systems and communities via varying arrangements. Thus, black female myths are omnipresent and therefore difficult to resist, even for black women and men who sometimes reproduce and appropriate them.

I refer to this as "post-captive pornotropia." It denies human fulfillment by transporting, mass-producing, institutionalizing, and thus, solidifying mythological ways of "seeing" black women and girls. This reading has real social implications, for example, it can invoke a range of emotions (i.e. fear, curiosity, hatred, desire, repulsion and fascination), which underpin and maintain certain ideologies that effect how black women and girls are treated. Jakes captures this in his representation of Michelle, his non-ideal 'woman'. The film suggests that Michelle is born into a context of daily physical, psychological, sexual and emotional trauma, without recourse. Post-captive pornotropia works both within and outside of Jakes' *text*. It enables Michelle to be violated by her mother, Reggie, her pimp, her pusher, her jury, and Jakes.

When Michelle murders Reggie she is sentenced to death. At minimum, her crime should have been interpreted within the broader scope of violence. Instead, Jakes constructs her narrative akin to how society might read her (and any other black female subject): as a victim of trauma who ultimately exemplifies poor decision-making, including unchaste sexual ethics, and is thus, undeserving of either compassion or justice. Like other black women and girls, Michelle is already marked.

Perhaps, if Jesus had written the script things would have turned out differently. Maybe he would have rebuked the social systems that enabled the daily violence against

Michelle or, maybe he would have found a way to at least "set her free," if not from daily violence then perhaps from the representational signals that both mark her as "flesh," and marks her flesh as pathological, wanton, and immoral. However, Jesus is neither "reading" 'woman' nor writing Jakes' *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993). Instead, Jakes is in control. *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993, 2004) is his production. Thus, Jakes' script, both the discursive and non-discursive, reveals *his* interests, not those disclosed in Luke 4:18 KJV and certainly not those of black women and girls.

This is not to invalidate the significance of what Jakes gets right. Notwithstanding intention, Jakes draws attention to our peculiar culture of violence, which impacts women and girls in particular ways. In addition, he encourages women to deploy their agency to release themselves from the stresses of the memory of emotional, physical and psychological trauma that bind their present reality so that they may live life more abundantly. This was and is an undeniable source of comfort and hope to millions of women, many of which attest to being "set free" by Jakes' products. For many, Jakes may have been the first man to ever acknowledge their trauma.

Jakes' corresponding sermon series, "Woman, Thou Art Loosed," is particularly useful here. In the video, Jakes passionately preaches:

> There are some women in this room who have been through so much and you've dealt with so many sick things and so many dead things that a spirit of death and suicide has fallen on you…God said…tonight he will deliver you if you have the courage to come…the devil is trying to kill you before you get your promise…Even while you're coming demonic powers are being broken…spirits of depression are falling off of you because you had the courage to step out…God is doing something awesome in your life![155]

[155] T.D. Jakes, "*Woman, Thou Art Loosed*" Youtube (online video), available from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2CtnVPHqj4&feature=related; Internet; accessed Summer 2010.

As he is preaching, hundreds of female congregants approach the alter where Jakes is standing, wailing and screaming. What he is expressing resonates with them. As the women come in droves, he posits, "These are all the funerals the devil was planning…but that devil is a liar!"[156]

However, similar to Jakes' book and film, this "call to consciousness" is framed with an uncritical deployment of yoked ideas of "black womanhood." That is, while naming abuses such as rape and molestation, and while encouraging women, including those in prison through telecast, to "give [their] heart and…life to Jesus Christ…so that God can get glory out of [their] life," he frames their condition within the context of personal sin. He retorts, "If you are a backslider you can be reclaimed. Today is your day of salvation!"[157] Thus, while Jakes seemingly wants women to transcend their predicament, he places the onus on them to "straighten up." However, similar to the woman in the biblical narrative, women's experiences highlight a web of relations with multiple controls.

I will now present a constructive possibility that "changes" Jakes' reading of 'woman' by foregrounding Jakes, the struggling "country preacher" with low self esteem turned business savvy media mogul. This reading will screen in what might be read as Jakes' "infirmities" while screening out what he presents as women's "infirmity." The aim of such a reading is not to produce a universal man or to reconstruct Jakes' fictive paradigm. However, it is to unveil a more accurate representation of Jakes' complex subjectivity, which is fluid, as a clue to rereading both his texts and 'woman'. I now turn to Jakes.

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[156] T.D. Jakes, "*Woman, Thou Art Loosed*" (Youtube).
[157] T.D. Jakes, "*Woman, Thou Art Loosed.*"

Identity is a necessary social fiction. It aids us in operating in the world by allowing us to locate ourselves in relation to others.[158] Jakes represents himself at the point of sale through design and display. His representational techniques establish a particular kind of spectatorship, thus directing the gaze by signaling meaning, for example, "true" masculinity. Thus, representation is both strategic and political. It aims to reveal a certain kind of truth, at least as Jakes sees (or wants to see) it, about both self and others. However, it also reveals what he hopes to conceal.

For example, Jakes' representation at the point of sale presents him as a powerful producer of knowledge with divine rights and rites over his audience (i.e. consumers of his message) whom he subjects to certain gendered ideals through the diagnosing of "problems" and prescribing of "solutions." In this way, he is the penultimate "daddy/doctor." That is, while he is neither God nor Jesus, whom Jakes defines as "the Great Physician," his representational strategies place him nearby. They unveil who Jakes hopes to be: the ultimate man and regulator of God's will on earth, which includes the projection and performance of "true" masculinity. Thus, if Jakes were asked to give a brief biography he would likely refer to himself as a "country preacher" while simultaneously pointing to his accomplishments. The former provides an acceptable entryway to the latter, which substantiates the "Jakes" who Jakes strives to be: the masculine ideal with divine power and authority on earth.

To be sure, Jakes is a twenty-first century religio-cultural powerhouse. He has written over thirty books, many of which have landed on the *New York Times* best-sellers list, he is a television personality, songwriter, playwright, performer, filmmaker, pastor/CEO of one of the largest churches in the country, The Potters House, which

[158] See Stuart Hall's *Representation*.

boasts of 30,000 members plus, and the organizer of "MegaFest," a high tech, multi dimensional conference that brings "Woman, Thou Art Loosed!" and "Man Power" together, two separate Christian themed conferences led by Jakes, which draws over one hundred thousand female and male participants from all over the globe annually, as well as the founder of a theater and movie production company and record label, Dexterity Sounds. These accomplishments show that Jakes is a cultural force, somewhere in between the struggling "country preacher" that he once was and a powerful "Rupert Murdoch-like" figure[159] it seems he wants to be.

Like Murdoch, Jakes functions much like a puppeteer in the religious world, controlling the strings between media, religion, and religious personalities. He, in conjunction with network owners, decides who and what gets screened in and out of religio-cultural media, for example, who gets to take center stage on TBN and other broadcasting networks and who does not.[160] In addition, akin to Murdoch, Jakes supports big business, a free market economy with minimal government regulation, which enables him to grow his empire through access to social, political and economic capital that allows him to thrive at unconceivable heights. However, dissimilar to Murdoch, Jakes is a gifted African American Christian preacher who happens to be male. This positionality carries a significant amount of weight amongst his constituents.

Nevertheless, Jakes' public representation, which is substantiated by his empire, reveals a powerful persona—the powerful figure that Jakes hopes to be as well as the cultural force that he actually is. However, a close reading of this representation

[159] Murdoch is the 117th wealthiest person in the world, founder, chairman, and chief executive officer of News Corporation, a worldwide company that lists films, television, Cable, Programming, Satellite Television, Magazines, Newspapers, Books, Sporting Events and Websites as its "products."
[160] This was evidenced after his fallout with Prophetess Juanita Bynum II.

simultaneously draws attention to who Jakes is not. Spillers' essay, "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race," is insightful here. In the essay, she presents a theory of subjectivity that proceeds by way of "honest talk," the practice of unsuppressed, ongoing communication aimed at getting underneath the inner most core of meanings. If Jakes were to render his biography under this premise it might read quite differently. That is, it would likely reveal what could be read as Jakes' "infirmities."

This representation would disclose a Jakes whose insecurities of his youth frame his adult desire for strict gender roles, fear of poverty shape his hunger for empire, constant question of value unleashes his need for 'woman', and dis-ease regarding personal desire sculpts his pornotropia, all of which lead to a complex narcissism that deploys 'woman' as an instrument of deflection. "She" corroborates Jakes 'story' and keeps him center stage. However, "she" also reveals his inner conflict. That is, all that Jakes hates about himself is projected onto 'woman'. Thus, dissimilar to 'woman', he never gets "naked." Instead, he is the hero who, like Jesus, attends to the "problem" then provides "healing."

However, according to Jakes' *texts* the woman is never healed. His *texts* begin with her "infirmity." Perhaps this represents Jakes' internal struggle with holiness. As a teen he grappled with feelings of depression and inadequacy due to a desire to "master" the sanctification he witnessed in the adults at his Pentecostal church.[161] Jakes' inability to achieve this kind of holiness eventually led to both individual guilt and disdain for self-righteousness. His early quest for holiness is telling. It draws attention to both what

[161] Lee, 18.

Jakes must have believed about himself, and his present desire to continue to disprove whatever that is.

However, what if Jakes wrote with these markers exposed? What if women read his *texts* with them (his "infirmities") in mind? And, what if his representational strategies were revealed? While Jakes encourages women to face and transcend their painful histories, he might be seen as also reproducing some aspects of them. Thus, his audience, specifically black women and girls, might read *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993, 2004) in the same way that they might read other primitivist media, for example, Edouard Manet's "Olympia," Baudelaire's "Venus Noir," Hogarth's "A Harlot's Progress" or perhaps, R. Kelly's "Ignition," all of which commodify black female subjectivity through iconic imagery, difference (i.e. "uniqueness"), and sexual deviance.[162] However, because *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993, 2004) reads as fictive ethnography it might be read more along the lines of *La donna deliquente*, written by Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo, who argued that African females were innately sexually uninhibited. They posited, "Neither virginity nor adultery has any meaning to the primitives."[163]

However, how might *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993, 2004) read if Jakes wrote it with both his and women's complex subjectivities in mind? What if Jakes functioned more like an "indigenous anthropologist" and less like a preacher-mogul? The latter has more to do with showing Jakes' power, just as the healing of the woman in Luke 13:11-12 KJV had to do with displaying Jesus' power. In "Womanist Theology, Epistemology,

[162] T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting explores this further in *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*.
[163] For more information of difference see, Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1985).

and a New Anthropological Paradigm," womanist anthropologist, Linda Thomas, defines the former as "one who reflects critically upon her own community of origin and brings a sensitivity to the historical, political, economic, and cultural systems which impact poor and working class black women being studied. At the same time, she gives priority to the life story of the subject in a way that underscores the narratives of a long line of subjugated voices from the past to the present."[164] This move requires foregrounding the voices and meanings of the anthropological subjects so that the researcher does not hinder the interpretation of data.

Thomas' paradigm would require Jakes to move beyond the respectability politics of the black lady, [165] his ideal 'woman', toward a reading of women that includes their complex variety. He provides a reading that regiments the performance of both black womanhood and manhood in particular ways, thus suggesting that all performances should be the same.[166] However, there is neither an essential black subject nor gendered guarantees in nature.[167] Instead, black identity, however positioned, is both an individual and social construction that is ambiguous, complex, fluid, and various. To be sure, black inter-subjectivity, which extends beyond the circumscriptions of "womanhood" or "manhood," eludes the grasp of our articulations.

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[164] Linda Thomas, "Womanist Theology, epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm," *Cross Currents Magazine*, Summer 1998, Vol. 48 Issue 4, [magazine: online article], available from http://www.crosscurrents.org/thomas.htm; Internet; accessed 22 October 2010.

[165] See Lisa Thompson, *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009) and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[166] The idea that race and gender are performed, not innate, underpins this dissertation. My notion of performance is significantly inspired by the scholarship of Stuart Hall and Judith Butler. For more information see *Representation* by Hall, and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" in *Feminist Theory Reader*, edited by Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim, and *Undoing Gender*, by Butler, and *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* by E. Patrick Johnson.

[167] See Hall's essay, "What is this "Black" in Black Popular Culture?"

Nevertheless, a text that "looses" women and men to explore and play with their real lived contradictions and complex ambiguities would be liberating, although admittedly not as profitable to Jakes, that is, not unless he found a way to franchise the idea, which would limit liberative aims. Inter-subjectivity cannot be packaged and wholesaled. Ways of being are constantly being realigned and reimagined. Thus, performances and representations, both conscious and unconscious, are always changing. *Texts* that aim to "loose" human subjects from individual and social binds have to take this into account. It may be helpful for Jakes to further explore the arts. Artists like Erykah Badu and Marlon Riggs will prove insightful. Both articulate fluid, complex inter-subjectivities for themselves, notwithstanding audience expectations.

Instead, Jakes chooses to produce *texts* that re-establish the peripheries of high modernity, thus repackaging and distributing colonizing images of "womanhood" that are both reductive and totalizing. This robs both Jakes and women of complex subjectivity, capturing each in a script whose outcome has already been determined. Nevertheless, it enables him to realize his ideals. Thus, Jakes' explicitly marks *his* 'woman' as a co-dependent. According to his 'script', "she" needs him and his *texts* to heal.

Nevertheless, when viewing live footage of Jakes, I was particularly astonished with his passion. It was creatively conveyed through the airwaves. Thus, even as a critic, I encountered Jakes' empathetic ardor. He spoke with both authority and care. Perhaps this is what millions of women have responded to. Jakes provides a message of transcendence and care with an uncanny sense of conviction. He believes in his role and message. Thus, 'woman's' need for him is not solely for monetary gain. It is also a response to what he believes to be God's command on his life.

However, notwithstanding intent, Jakes is the producer of a script with both liberative and oppressive aims. His message, which encourages women to find ways to transcend the sting of injustice while finding internal value and worth in themselves, is helpful, yet misguided. Nevertheless, it is something worth keeping and perhaps, rethinking more thoroughly. However, Jakes should do away with 'woman'. "She" is a social fiction, necessary for Jakes' empire.

Specifically, 'woman' is an instrument, not a subject. "She" coddles and conceals both Jakes' pornotropia and his insecurities, helps to sell his hetero-normative American dream where everyone knows their place, enables Jakes to rearticulate his identity in the public sphere as the masculine ideal, and allows him to reap material rewards for "her" invention. This is not liberating. It is binding. 'Woman' makes Jakes feel "manly." However, he will be better served once he realizes that he no longer needs "her." *His* healing will come as he works through his complex subjectivity, which like everyone, has numerous ambiguities and contradictions.

Sexuality *in* the Black Church

While *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993) is an international success, which transcends color, ethnic, gender, and typical religious boundaries, and although its message is mass mediated through a range of print, visual, and linguistic media such as books, magazines, films, videos, the Internet, television, radio, music, conferences, etc., its force is best understood against the backdrop from which it emerged: the Black Church. In *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993), Jakes makes an argument for a universal

church.[168] In fact, he goes as far as to deny the Black Church's existence. However, both his theology and particular appeal to black women are framed by it.

The Black Church has a long twisted history of mixed liberative and oppressive messages, and a peculiar narrative regarding the black male preacher and female congregants. Womanist scholars such as Kelly Brown Douglas, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Marcia Riggs and others, offer an expansive body of critical literature on the Black Church's duplicity regarding sex and gender, which creatively and tirelessly attempts to raise critical consciousness about social-cultural regimes of power that deny or limit social access due to race while simultaneously reproducing, maintaining and appropriating patriarchy, sexism, and heterosexism. However, what has not been explored, to my knowledge, is the thorny web of relations between black male preachers and black women as it relates to pornotropia. Foundational to Jakes' appeal is a particular kind of reading of the black male preacher and the black sermon.[169] Although many of his *texts* are not sermons that are presented in a church on Sunday morning, they are speech acts, which articulate a certain kind of religious message.

The black male preacher, notwithstanding social movement toward non-Christian religious identities such as Mormonism, Judaism, and Islam, or recent trends away from organized religion altogether toward atheism, humanism, and individual spiritualities, holds a distinguished position amongst many African Americans. He is often seen as a community leader and an authority figure bestowed with the divine power and knowledge to address the human condition. This includes but is not limited to healing the sick,

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[168] Jakes, 175.

[169] My analysis of the black preacher and black sermon is significantly influenced by conversations with Hortense Spillers and her essay, "Moving on Down the Line: Variations on the African-American Sermon" in *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture.*

teaching the unlearned, judging the wayward, fathering the fatherless, loving both the lovable and unlovable, and counseling the troubled. This positionality grants the black male preacher a significant amount of power and influence, particularly as both an extension of the Black Church and the sermonic comptroller, both of which, regardless of religious affiliation (or lack thereof), continue to be significant to black identity and cultural formation.

The Black Church sermon, in spite of its complexities and contradictions, serves as a significant source of affirmation and insight. Historically, it enabled the actualization of critical consciousness and agency necessary for cultivating and realigning cultural meanings and identities, thus stimulating ideas of hope and transcendent possibilities. The preacher, both female and male, created an ethos through the sermonic moment where subjects could entwine their various values and beliefs to create strategies for living while critically articulating their own humanity, truths and identities. Thus, the black church sermon provides a space where different needs may be answered, and power and selfhood may be realigned. Regardless of how it may be mocked or ridiculed in pop culture and news media, the Black Church sermon continues to be a powerful site of complex meaning making and psychological transcendence for many African Americans.

However, the black sermonic moment is complex. It is often tinged with liberatory aims that make use of oppressive strategies.[170] I conducted representational analyses on a range of Black Church sermons, performed by both women and men.[171] My research revealed a common deployment of language and imagery, which reflects

[170] I am deploying hooks' framework for reading black cultural production that is both appealing and appalling. See "Introduction: Making Movie Magic" in *Reel to Real*.
[171] In addition to Jakes, I examined sermons of C.L. Franklin, Eddie Long, Kenneth L. Samuel, Juanita Bynum, Jamal Bryant, and others.

post-captive pornotropia. Specifically, representations of "black womanhood" often swung on a pendulum between "black-female-as-whore" or "black-female-as-vagina-less," both of which lack nuance and particularity.

The constant emphasis on black female sexuality, whether articulated as hyperactive or non-existent, highlights the pornotropia[172] of the Black Church and more specifically, the black male preacher. In addition, it draws attention to the complex relationship between the black male preacher and female congregants, which often teeters along the lines of spiritual leader, father, lover, and sometimes, assailant. This particular narrative has been under analyzed. However, it is critical to both reading and re-reading Jakes, his *texts*, the readings of his *texts*, and the readers of his *texts*. These relationships between the preacher and female congregants are often marred by disfigured boundaries, resulting from the role of spirituality in black life and culture, the authority of the black male preacher, the significance of the black sermon, and the long standing effects of "captive" strategies such as degendering and broken kinship ties, the latter of which disorients sexual practices in general.

In the Black Church, black male preachers may often symbolically stand in as "father." This position signifies hierarchy, right, influence, association, jurisdiction, origin, privilege, power, authority, protection, care, and responsibility, concomitantly. It calls attention to the peculiar history of African Americans and their struggle to create "home" through resituated articulations of community, kinship, and identity. However, it also highlights misplaced sexual tensions and arrangements, for example, historical incest patterns between fathers and daughters. This is something that needs further exploring.

[172] Of course, not all black male preachers deploy pornotropic representational strategies when depicting black womanhood. Some maintain a critical consciousness that enables strategic resistance.

The identification of black male preachers as "father" and female congregants as "daughters"[173] establishes a hierarchal power arrangement, structured in dominance, which aligns, distributes and exercises authority in particular ways, to include but not limited to sex. It presents an 'alibi' for desire, which is both indulged and denied and is both coerced and consented to.[174] However, these relationships between preachers and female congregants do not always go "all the way." Sometimes they stop short just before physical penetration, thus predominantly piercing the psyche and emotional state. Although different, the latter is as dangerous as the former.

Psychological and emotional penetration highlights the ways that pornotropic discourse, for example Jakes' emphasis on women's promiscuity, may function as a fetish, which stands in for the taboo, perhaps desire. However, desire is concealed by the emphasis on women's sexual immorality, which is juxtaposed by the preacher's moral right. Nevertheless, pornotropia presents an avenue for explicit accounts of the erotic in the sermonic moment, which enables the preacher to assume a posture of innocence while concomitantly conveying certain cultural codes or signals that situate black femaleness in harmful ways, for example, "black-female-as-whore" (i.e. Jakes' non-ideal 'woman').

These codes/signals function in relation to other codes/signals, for example, the "mad black woman," thus accumulating meanings across contexts where ideas of black womanhood refer to one another, or their meanings are altered, for example, the victim of child molestation, when read in the context of other meanings (i.e. bad choices, sin,

[173] As recently evidenced with the case against Bishop Eddie Long, male congregants as sometimes seen as "sons." The same sexual dynamics apply.
[174] Stuart Hall discusses this in his work on representation, fetishism and disavowal.

unjustified rage, and promiscuity).[175] This reading infiltrates the psyche and emotional state, thus causing further trauma. Again, psychological and emotional trauma is not the same as sexual trauma. However, it is intrusive, particularly when the producer of knowledge is "seen" as "father."

Jakes marks himself as both "father" and lover, with distinctions between "father" and God often appearing ambiguous. This is evidenced in several areas, for example, book titles such as *Daddy Loves His Girls* (2006) and *The Lady, Her Lover and Her Lord* (2000) or book content, for example, *God's Leading Lady* (2003), which demonstrates a continuous interweaving between Jakes as spiritual guide, Jakes as "father," Jakes as lover, and Jakes as God/puppeteer. We also see this in the opening of *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993) where Jakes boldly criticizes other pastors for not attending to female suffering through preaching, ministries and prayer.[176] However, perhaps the most intriguing display of Jakes/father/lover/God is seen in Jakes' relationship with Prophetess Juanita Bynum II, his "daughter" in the ministry, whose rise to fame came through her sermon series, "No More Sheets," presented at Jakes' annual conference, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*![177]

Akin to *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, "No More Sheets" became a cultural phenomenon, accompanied by videos, books, music, etc. However, dissimilar to Jakes, the "father," who functions as an independent, Bynum II entered the market through Jakes' brand. Her product was the public display of her inward and [private] outer sexual

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[175] This is an articulation of Hall's notion of intertextuality; the idea that meanings accumulate across different texts, where one image refers to another or has its meaning altered by being 'read' in the context of, against, or in connection with other images or meanings.
[176] Ibid., 19.
[177] See Juanita Bynum, *No More Sheets*. Juanita Bynum Ministries. 106 min. Waycross, GA: Juanita Bynum Ministries, 1998. Videodisc.

conflicts. At one point in her sermon, Bynum II thanks Jakes for telling her to publicly reveal the complexities of her sexual past. The encounter reads like a humble daughter thanking her approving father for "showing her the way." However, as she later individuates from him, as a girl grows apart from her biological father, what appeared to be an endearing "father-daughter" relationship between them, becomes spite filled, with Jakes blocking her from preaching events until she renders a public apology for her "bad" behavior—on her knees.[178]

Conclusion

All of these factors are significant in Jakes' rise from a local "country preacher" to a twenty-first century religio-cultural powerhouse. Regardless of what one may feel about his message, his cultural prominence cannot be denied. *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993, 2004) resonates with women and men across varying boundaries. It presents a message that tells women that they can transcend their predicaments and that they have internal value and purpose that cannot be taken away. However, it conveys this message while reproducing imperialist structures. In fact, Jakes does not challenge social structures, for example the ways that violence gets perpetrated under the rubric of patriarchy/paternalism. He does not explore what happens when violence is unimaginable, when subjects are "seen" as flesh, nor does he encourage women and girls to make those who have violated them, accountable. Instead, Jakes participates in the meta-narrative. Regardless of intention, he exploits his position as a black preacher by

[178] It is interesting to note that while outside of Jakes' care ("covering") Bynum II is beaten by her husband. Not only is she unprotected, she is without even the partial rights or rites of "daughter" or "wife." She receives little public empathy and is "seen" in the public sphere as somehow deserving it.

producing a message that is both liberative and pornotropic, the former being necessary so that it may, in some cases, obscure the latter, which is taken for granted.

In conclusion, Jakes is informed by the cultural ethos, which he, along with the Black Church, informs. Religion and culture participate in a continual exchange of ideas, for example, mythemes on "black womanhood," which mask as nature. However, black women and girls have critical consciousnesses that disorient, realign, appropriate, and resist these meanings, thus constructing their own preferred meanings.[179] Nevertheless, myths of black womanhood are pervasive. They make appearances through a variety of mediums, which require deconstruction and realignment. Next, I will turn to popular culture. I will specifically explore the work of filmmaker, Tyler Perry, whose big break came when he turned Jakes' book, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993), into a stage production. Akin to Jakes, Perry is a cultural phenomenon—that provides a particular kind of reading of and message for black women.

[179] Stuart Hall discusses the idea of "preferred meanings" in *Representation*. The construction of "preferred meanings" refer to the representational practice of attempting to "fix" meanings by privileging one meaning over others, or attempting to "anchor" meaning with words. However, Hall argues that meanings do not lie exclusively in the image, but are derived through a range of encoding/decoding practices.

CHAPTER V

MAD BLACK BITCHES AND LADY-LIKE SAINTS: REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN TYLER PERRY FILMS

This chapter turns toward popular culture, specifically the work of prominent African American filmmaker, Tyler Perry, as a critical site of African American religious expression, reflection and critical inquiry. I argue that Perry's films such as *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), *Madea's Family Reunion* (2006), *Daddy's Little Girls* (2007), *Why Did I Get Married* (2007), *Meet the Browns* (2008), *The Family that Preys* (2008), *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009), *I Can Do Bad All by Myself* (2009), *Why Did I Get Married Too* (2010), *For Colored Girls* (2010), and the forthcoming *Madea's Happy Family* (2011), which typically gross over twenty-five million dollars on opening weekends and have netted over four hundred million over the course of five years, notwithstanding Perry's predominantly black casts and storylines, present a complex montage of cultural codes that need to be unwound, explored, and in some cases, reconfigured.

While displaying a preoccupation with Christian piety and heterosexual love and marriage, they simultaneously exhibit a dependency on representational strategies that present black womanhood in both ennobling and jarring ways. These representations, which wax and wane between portraiture and caricature and thus, are both truthful and beautiful and sensational and grotesque, coupled with Perry's emphasis on certain Christocentric themes and American ideals, offer a sense of complex ambiguity that resonates with the repertoires, experiences and expectations of many African American

Christian women.[180] However, while appealing to Christian sensibilities and complex subjectivities, on one hand, they proffer a form of cultural malpractice,[181] which serves up a conglomerate of new and old sign systems, on the other. Neither Perry's appeal nor lack thereof can be dismissed. This chapter explores aspects of this complexity with the hopes of not disregarding Perry's massive appeal, or the varying critical consciousnesses of his audience, but rather providing a close reading of his work that plays in spaces of ambiguity, rearticulates some of the areas that may cause injury, and attempts to honor the interests of his audience.

I will make the following moves. First, I will provide a brief biography of Tyler Perry in order to contextualize his films. Second, I will provide a descriptive account of Perry's first film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), placing particular emphasis on his main protagonist, Helen, also known as the "mad black woman," played by Kimberly Elise. Third, I will offer a black feminist religio-cultural critique that calls attention to the ways in which Perry's films deny critical interests of black women and girls while simultaneously catering to other needs. Fourth, I will conclude by "changing the letter." I will re-read Perry's bitch/saint dichotomy through the representational strategies of Oscar Micheaux and Ntozake Shange's "lady in red."

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[180] This chapter is significantly influenced by the work that Kobena Mercer does in his essay, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation" in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, the work that hook's does in Reel to Real, and Valerie Smith's work in "Intersectionality and Experiments in Black Documentary" in *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings*, and "Telling Family Secrets: Narrative and Ideology in *Suzanne Suzanne*" in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*.

[181] Tommy L. Lott discusses "cultural malpractice" in his essay "Black Vernacular Representation and Cultural Malpractice" in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, edited by David Theo Goldberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 230-257. "Cultural malpractice" is the deployment of stereotypical modes of expression, which appear to misrepresent the variety of black peoples. I deploy it to draw attention to Perry's overuse of limiting cultural tropes, which may or may not reflect certain identities in his experiences, to define the African American collective.

Tyler Perry

Emmitt Perry, Jr. (also known as Tyler) was born on September 13, 1969 in New Orleans, LA, to Willie Maxine Perry and Emmitt Perry, Sr. Young Perry's arrival was met by humble working class beginnings, which included an assemblage of violence, fantasies of survival and thriving, specks of love here and there, and weekly dosages of hope and inspiration from his local church. While there are no known biographical sources on Perry's life, he has recently become very vocal about his childhood, particularly the abuses he experienced as a young boy. In a televised appearance on *Oprah*, Perry revealed that both he and his mother were often the target of Emmitt Sr.'s physical assaults. The constant beatings led Perry to attempt suicide once and later, legally change his name from Emmitt to Tyler as a way of symbolically individuating from his father.

Unfortunately, Emmitt Sr. was not young Perry's sole abuser. By the age of ten, he had been molested at least three times by trusted family friends, both male and female. Perry later learned that Emmitt Sr. was simultaneously molesting one of his friends. These transgressions led to a considerable amount of stress and anxiety for young Perry. Nevertheless, he found solace in the Black Church and a place of refuge in his aunt, Jerry Banks, the inspiration for his popular character, Madea. The former provided Christocentric lessons on love, hope, joy, and forgiveness while the latter offered the same but included physical protection. However, neither proffered Perry the "happy place" that he longed for.

Perry, who says he felt out of place most of his life, found "home" through mental escape and discursive practices. Often, while being abused he would mentally transcend

the violence of the moment by imaging that he was in his "happy place." Perry notes that place as a local park. However, one day he failed to make the mental journey. This caused a significant rupture in Perry's life, one it appears he continues to struggle with—both the effects of physical and sexual violence and the inability to mentally escape.

Perry's "happy place" has likely changed over time. However, his longing to encounter it likely remains the same. While watching *Oprah* before becoming a celebrity, Perry learned that the act of writing could serve as an additional outlet for him. Thus, he began to write letters to himself. Through writing, Perry dreamt again, constructing new "happy places" while simultaneously calling his rocky childhood into remembrance. For the first time, Perry was in control and was able to speak his own truth, at least as he saw it.

After earning a GED and creatively turning a hodgepodge of personal anecdotes into the critically acclaimed stage play, *I Know I've Been Changed* (1998), financed entirely by Perry, aspects of his dreams began to materialize. According to an interview in *True Love* magazine, entitled "Talented Tyler" by Bonga Percy Vilakazi in April 2009, *I Know I've Been Changed* (1998), a musical about adult survivors of child abuse, enabled Perry to forgive his father, an act that he believes changed the course of his life. Perry posits that forgiveness allowed him to release the "bitterness" that enveloped him and thus positioned him to be "blessed." This idea is critical to understanding Perry's work.

By "blessed" he means financially successful. However, the context in which Perry frames his success (forgiveness) highlights a capitalistic relationship between him and God, where acts of piety function as mediums of exchange for social goods. Today,

Perry is an American phenomenon. According to *Forbes* magazine, he is the sixth highest-paid man in Hollywood. His credits include: actor, author, screenwriter, film director, theatre producer, theatre director, television director, playwright, film producer, and television producer. Perry links this success to his faithfulness, namely, his commitment to making certain kinds of movies with specific kinds of messages.

In "Talented Tyler" he states, "Before I start on any project, I surrender to God because I don't want to get in the way of what I'm supposed to write about." The "surrendering" of Perry's films to God protects him from criticism. They suggest divine inspiration and thus a certain authority to tell whatever is deemed "true." However, Perry's fear of "getting in the way" draws attention to his desire to keep his "blessings" unblocked, which necessitates faithfulness to his "call," highlighted by setting himself apart through his messages, audience, and locale. This commitment is evidenced in Perry's decision to live, work and set up studios in Atlanta, Georgia as opposed to Hollywood, California as well as in his catering to those on the margins—those who would not normally get a chance in Hollywood, for example, "people in beauty salons, barber shops, blue collar workers and lower income people."[182]

When asked how he maintains the "essence" of his stories when being criticized so widely, Perry responds by saying that he does not listen to "Hollywood" because he does not want them to "taint [his] work." This response suggests not only religious authority and divine appointment but also racial authenticity, possibly a deflector for his deployment of certain racial representations. When asked about his financial success, which often raises questions of Perry's moralist stance, particularly given his usage of

[182] Bonga Percy Vilakazi, "Talented Tyler," *True Love Magazine*, April 2009, [magazine: online article], available from http://tylerperry.com/articles/TrueLove_April2009-02.html; Internet; accessed October 2010

historical racial stereotypes, Perry replies that, although money comes with the territory, he does not do the work that he does for money. Instead, he does it for the maintenance and betterment of his spirit as well as that of others. For many, this suggests a heightened level of sincerity, however, for others, it articulates marketing savvy.

To be sure, Perry is undeniably a marketing genius. He took a thriving, yet socially marginal (by middle class aspirants), black urban theater concept (slapstick comedic readings of black religion and cultural life) and mass-produced it through the medium of film, thus marrying overt Christian themes like forgiveness, salvation, love, and self worth, and other issues such as violence, prostitution, child abuse, and adultery, on the silver screen. While the urban theater circuit, formally identified as the "Chitlin' Circuit" due to Jim Crow segregation laws, has been censured for its overdetermination of African American religion, culture, and identity in historical racial stereotypes, it serves as a clue to Perry's genius and record-breaking success. Not only is it where he got his start, unbeknownst to many, urban theater has been selling out arenas, thus making millions of dollars, for years. Unlike Broadway shows like *Fences* (2010), *Fela* (2009), *A Raisin in the Sun* (2004), and *The Colored Purple* (2006), which demand travel (for most) and pricey theater tickets, urban theater is often local, affordable, and more conceptually familiar to Perry's audience.

Thus, Perry began his filmmaking career with a ready-made audience, some of which crossed-over from his seminal work on Jakes' *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1993). Perry is responsible for turning Jakes' book into a celebrated theatre production in the urban market. This collaboration enabled the collision of an assortment of interests, thus making room for a range of cinematic opportunities between Perry and Jakes. Thus, it

should come as no surprise that a close reading of their respective films reveal a host of similarities between them. This draws attention to another clue to Perry's appeal, particularly among black Christian women. Both Perry and Jakes strategically inquire about God's activity in and expectations for contemporary black life through the lenses of everyday struggles, relationship woes, and questions regarding identity and self worth. In addition, both Perry and Jakes believe that they are divinely appointed to provide black women and girls with answers. I will now turn to *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*.

Diary of a Mad Black Woman

Diary of a Mad Black Woman, Perry's first film, was released in 2005, just five years after directing *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*, the stage production, and one year after its motion picture debut. Interestingly, both films star actress Kimberly Elise as the main protagonist: a crazed black woman. When examining each film, I could not help but to imagine Elise packing up her things, discarding all things Michelle, her character in *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (2004), exiting stage left, and cutting across the street to the production set of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) where she and a team of stage hands clothed her in the fancy garb of Helen, all the while maintaining the "crazy" that so deeply marked Michelle. Both narratives tell the story of a young black woman who has "gone crazy" due to particular acts of male violation. However, while *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (2004) accents child molestation, injustice and abandonment, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) draws attention to adultery, justice, love and the comedic.

Thus, whereas *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* ends with Michelle in jail on death row, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* ends with Helen, the victor, being carried off into the

sunset by Orlando, her "knight in shining armor." Therefore, while one provides a story of despair and symbolic transcendence, the other offers a romantic fairytale ending where love and justice seemingly prevail. Both films offer contexts for transcendence, even if imaginative and only momentary. Each suggests that liberation from oppressed states and experiences can be found in the following formula: forgiveness, moving on, better decision making, and relationships with both God[183] and a male love interest (i.e. a potential husband).[184] However, Perry provides an added fairytale twist that plays in the interstices between the dramatic and the comedic, the religious and the seemingly sacrilegious, portraiture and caricature, and despair and triumph. It is this dance between moralism and play, and Perry's complex blend of meanings, expressions, and representations that sets him apart from Jakes and thus, distinguishes a film like *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) from that of *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (2004).

Nevertheless, in keeping with the formula presented in Jakes' bestseller, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (the book/1993), *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) highlights a story about a woman, Helen, who is betrayed by her husband of eighteen years, Charles, played by Steve Harris, who chooses another lover due to boredom (read: Helen's spousal inadequacies). As a result, on the night of their wedding anniversary, Charles ends the marriage with his new love interest in tow. This betrayal sends Helen on a downward spiral, which entails her becoming "mad" (i.e. "crazy" or "bitchy") and, as a result, exhibiting poor decision-making, both of which evoke multiple moralizing rebukes, including one offered by Charles, demanding that she turn her life around. Thus, it is not until Helen forgives both her husband and herself (for her poor choices)

[183] For Jakes this would include himself.
[184] Although "Michelle" never marries in the film, marriage is an ultimate end for women for Jakes.

that she is able to move on and truly experience her "blessings," namely, the love of another male suitor, also her savior figure. However, it is significant to note that the possibility of human flourishing, signified by her disappearance into the sunlight at the end of the film while in the arms of her new lover and future husband, Orlando, is not intimated until Helen completely surrenders—to God and Orlando.

Diary of a Mad Black Woman (2005), set in Atlanta, Georgia opens up to an arena of opulence and prestige, signified by a formal banquet, black tuxedos, lavish evening gowns, valet, red carpet, and the performance of class through behavior, language, jewelry, hair, make-up, and accessories. In the opening scene, we are immediately met by Helen, a perfectly packaged, respectable wife, and Charles, her ambitious husband, who is honored at the banquet as the "lawyer of the year." As the evening ends, Charles, who only moments ago publicly expressed his love for and commitment to his adoring wife, Helen, drops her off in front of their luxurious mansion and tells her to "get the hell out of [his] car." Given this brief interaction, it is clear that their marriage is for appearances only and that Charles has interests elsewhere.

However, in an effort to further this point, and perhaps to provide a more sound cause for Helen's forthcoming "madness," Perry offers what is likely one of his most violent and dramatic scenes, with the exception of those presented in F*or Colored Girls*. As the scene opens up, we see Helen awaiting Charles' arrival from work. Wearing an elegant, scarlet colored gown and matching shawl, her coffee-brown golden locks placed in a neat coif, with the exception of a few soft, cascading curls, which surround her face, Helen, dissimilar to Michelle, presents a site of feminine perfection. Charles, unmoved by Helen's aesthetic refinement, which is exacerbated by the rich, rose colored, floor

length draperies and crystal chandeliers in the backdrop, enters the house with his new love interest behind him and tells Helen that their marriage is over. Simultaneously, she excitedly runs toward him, with a small, wrapped gift cupped in her hands, and counters his pronouncement with the words, "happy anniversary!" Notwithstanding the U-Haul truck sitting outside, which holds all of Helen's things, she appears shocked and thus responds with the question, "What are you trying to say?"

Annoyed, Charles quips, "there is no easy way to say this, but our marriage has run its course…it's over." Helen shrieks, "What am I supposed to do without you?" He retorts, "you're a bright girl, you'll figure it out." Charles then makes reference to his children with his new love interest (who is standing by impatiently) and says, "They need me!" Devastated and desperate, Helen yells, "Charles, please…how can you do this to me?" He replies, "be a lady and leave quietly." Helen responds by saying, "no."

It is in her "no" that we see the shift in her representation from respectable to "mad," signified by her move from passive questions like, "Charles, how can you do this to me?" and her confusion/longing filled facial expressions, to her resounding "no," coupled with piercing chocolate eyes and unperfected hair. These shifts set the stage for what happens next. In response, Charles violently drags his wife to the large mahogany front door, throws her outside, slams the door behind her, and locks the gold plated handle. Helen bangs on the door, now from the outside. With no place to go, she gets into her awaiting U-Haul with the driver, Orlando, her future love interest.

As if we missed Helen's transition to "madness," Orlando chides her for not having a destination for drop off. Helen, who is now visibly and audibly distraught, responds by screaming that she has no place to go because Charles had alienated her from

her entire family. In response, Orlando replies, "Now I see why you're going through what you're going through." In other words, I understand why your husband put you out: because you are crazy. As either a sign of agency, or further signification of "madness," Helen puts Orlando out of his truck and drives to the only place that she knows to go: Madea's, her grandmother, a pistol carrying, cigarette smoking, quick-witted, fearless senior who believes in justice at all costs, unconditional love, equity between sexes, feeding both the soul and the body, dancing, and family.

It is through her time with Madea that Helen begins to search for self worth and learns to stand up for herself, starting with a visit to her former home shared with Charles where both Madea and Helen wreak havoc by destroying various contents in the home. At one point, while shredding designer clothing belonging to Charles' mistress, Madea puts her head back and passionately proclaims, "This is for every black woman who ever had a problem with a black man!" After further destruction and interfacing with both Charles and his mistress, Madea and Helen eventually get arrested. Both are charged with criminal trespassing, reckless endangerment, criminal possession of a handgun, assault with a deadly weapon, a suspended license, expired registration, reckless driving, and a broken taillight.

This scene, which literally places Helen on the wrong side of the law and thus on equal moral footing with Charles, is followed by a series of moralizing moments where Helen is a) referred to as "bitter" or "crazy," b) admits that she is "mad as hell" or "losing [her] mind," and c) encouraged to "pick up the pieces of [her] life" by "standing on her own two feet," turning to God, and using "the strength that God gave [her] to survive." Eventually, Helen takes up waitressing and finds love in Orlando. In what seems to be a

turn of the dramatic tide, she begins to laugh and smile again, thus "finding her way" to both inner peace and self-sufficiency. To be sure, Helen is still admittedly angry with Charles. Nevertheless, her new and unexpected predicament, including a "good man" who loves her, assuages her pain and anger.

Orlando serves as a foil to Charles. Whereas Charles is ruthlessly ambitious, selfish, insensitive, and dishonest, Orlando is a humble, sensitive, honest, and loving working class "Christian man" who knows what he wants and is not afraid to be either vulnerable or forthright in getting it. In one scene, when spending time with Helen, he looks deep within her eyes and tells her that he loves her. Helen, who is not yet divorced, asks Orlando how he knows this. He responds by saying that he cannot stop thinking about her, carries her in his spirit, prays for her, buys her feminine products, and is made to feel like everything is alright whenever he sees her smile. After which, they spend a sexless, yet incredibly intimate, evening together, something Helen admits to never experiencing before.

Later, Orlando expresses that he wants to be her "knight in shining armor" who loves her "past her pain," with no expectations from Helen except "waking up in the morning" and becoming his wife. Unfortunately, this high-speed romance is short lived. Soon after Charles is shot by a disgruntled client and former friend. The shooting leaves him wheelchair bound. Unable to care for himself or others, his new love interest leaves him and takes all of his money, thus leaving Helen, who has articulated that she is still "bitter," to care for Charles. Instead, she abuses him, therefore marking her character as not only "bitter," "angry," "mad" and "crazy," but also as an oppressor. In the next

several scenes we see Helen smack, abandon, berate, starve, and nearly drown Charles, now clearly the victim.

However, in a separate scene Helen, who has deserted Orlando to care for and get back at Charles, is admonished by Orlando to forgive Charles and to forgive herself. When she arrives home, Charles awaits her with a timely apology for everything that he had done. However, while doing so, he simultaneously scolds her. Charles says:

> You're a good person. Don't be like me. You used to always tell me God has the power to show you who's God. I get it. For everything, for everything that I've done wrong to you, I'm sorry.[185]

After proper reproach from Orlando, Charles and God, Helen's downward spiral begins to make a turn—a marker for the shift toward the "good" in the overarching narrative in all Perry films.

The culminating point, which highlights this shift for Perry's multiple, converging narratives, occurs in church. The scene begins with a young African American male preacher preaching, "somebody's gonna be made whole up in here today…is there anything too hard for God?" As the camera pans the small congregation, we see Helen, her mother, Myrtle Jean-Simmons, played by Cecily Tyson, Orlando, and Brian, Madea's son, played by Perry. As the sermon draws to a close, the preacher promises God's "deliverance" to anyone willing to submit and passionately asks, "What will you believe God for?" He "opens the doors of the church" and the choir begins to sing, "Father Can You Hear Me?" written by Tamela Mann.

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[185] Tyler Perry, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, produced by Reuben Cannon, John Dellaverson, Joseph P. Genier, Michael Paseornek, Tyler Perry, and Mike Upton, and directed by Darren Grant, 116 min., Lions Gate Entertainment, 2005, DVD. U.S.A.: First Run.

True to Black Church form, the song is sung as a "call and response." That is, while Brian's daughter, Tiffany, played by real life singer, Tiffany Evans, initially takes the lead, her solo is followed up by the preacher, a choir member, the choir, and Tiffany's mother, Debrah, a former singer and current crack addict, played by Tamara Taylor, who enters the church singing (ala "Shug Avery" in *The Color Purple*), with the hopes of turning her life around. This rendition of the "call and response" both authenticates and maximizes the moment by drawing viewers in through familiar Black Church practices and scenes (*The Color Purple*). Each character takes part in singing the following lyrics:

Father can you hear me
We need your love today
I know that you are listening
You hear men everyday
Father please hear us
and we will be ok
Father we need you to heal families today

Father can you hear me
I'm calling on your name
Not Buddha nor Muhammad
but it's Jesus we cry out loud
Father just forgive us
Hear us when we say
We'll give ya, give ya, give you everything our lives and souls today

Father you know we need it
I've never seen so much pain
We have the faith for now
Your victory we will gain
Father you know we mean it
There's no more heart of stone
We're ready for your power
Now the sin is gone

Lead: Father
Choir: Can you hear me now?
(REPEAT 4X's)

Choir: He will say

Lead: He will say yes
Choir: Yes, yes, yes, yes

Lead: Say yes lord
Choir: Yes, yes

Lead: Yes to your will Jesus, yes to your will
Choir: Yes, yes

Lead: Come on say yes
Choir: Yes, yes, yes, yes

Lead: Say yes
Choir: Yes, yes

Lead: come on raise your hand and say yes
Choir: Yes, yes

Ooh Lord can you heal even me Lord?
See I'm coming to you Lord just as I am
I'm in need of the blood of the lamb
Oh my oh my soul says yes

While "Father Can You Hear Me?" is being sung, quite a bit is happening—both on and off screen. Charles, who had been confined to a wheelchair, walks to the alter in a symbolic quest to surrender his life to God. Debrah is reunited with her family as she passionately adlibs, "I know I can't do this by myself…I'll say yes!" Helen, who has begun to turn her life around by caring for her husband, stands by his side in support. Off screen, I am completely drawn in and moved to tears.

Perry's re-enactment of the Black Church presents a sacred space where multiple stories intersect, with none superseding "the" grand narrative: the story of Jesus Christ, which, depending on how it is read, signifies love, redemption, justice, and hope for everyone. In this context, transcendence, even if only momentary, avails itself through humility, vulnerability and participation. Thus, anyone can partake in the moment,

including the viewer. To my surprise, I found myself saying "yes" (for my own reasons) in "response" to the "call." While I am not a fan of Perry films, this admittedly felt good, even if only for a moment.

The scene ends with a soul food dinner at Madea's where everyone gathers, including Charles and Debrah. After "Brian" blesses the meal through prayer, Helen turns to Charles and asks him to forgive her. He responds by saying that he already has. By this time the viewer is likely empathetic to Charles. Not only was his love and livelihood taken away, he was just "delivered." In addition, he had already expressed remorse to Helen for everything that he had done. Nevertheless, she serves him with divorce papers at the dinner table. She is "in love" with Orlando.

The film ends with a nod toward the famous climatic scene in the 1975 film, *Mahogany*, where Tracy, played by Diana Ross, pushes her way through a crowd of people in order to get to Brian, her love interest, played by Billy Dee Williams. Once Helen finally finds Orlando, she tells him, "I gave it all up, I just want you." To reflect role reversal, he asks, "How do you know?" She responds by reciting what he once said to her:

> I carry you in my spirit. I pray for you more than I pray for myself. And, if you're away for more than an hour, I can't stop thinking about you. When you smile, my world is alright.[186]

Helen then tells Orlando that she loves him and asks him to ask her to marry him again. He does. She says "yes." Orlando carries Helen off into the sunset, while "I want to be free" plays in the background.

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[186] Tyler Perry, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, produced by Reuben Cannon, John Dellaverson, Joseph P. Genier, Michael Paseornek, Tyler Perry, and Mike Upton, and directed by Darren Grant, 116 min., Lions Gate Entertainment, 2005, DVD. U.S.A.: First Run.

A Black Feminist Religio-Cultural Commentary on Perry's *Texts*

Diary of a Mad Black Woman not only provides an insightful non-discursive bridge—from religion (i.e. *Woman, Thou Art Loosed*) to popular culture—for examining representational strategies that effect black women and girls' experiences, it supplies the blueprint for Perry's body of work. Thus, grasping its dominant themes and representational formula is useful for understanding both Perry's approach and his rapidly increasing box office power. I am not suggesting sameness or lack of distinction between his films. Rather, I am highlighting similar threads of meanings and images (the former of which seems to arrest and maintain the attention of his growing audience—despite overdetermination of the latter) in order to adequately critique Perry's representations.

Diary of a Mad Black Woman (2005) presents a complex canvas of cinematic cultural codes that display a dependency on American and religious ideals, which necessitate certain representational strategies. These strategies present a lacework of meanings that cross-pollinate Perry's body of work, thus constructing sign systems that resonate with his market, on one hand, and demonstrating pornotropia through the repackaging and mass-production of particular historical identity types, on the other. This blueprint includes a mixture of the following threads: familiar Christian themes (i.e. forgiveness, faith, and redemption), American ideals (i.e. heterosexual marriage and fairytale endings, and their silent partnership with patriarchy), basic human needs and wants (i.e. love, family, laughter, protection, companionship, success, and romance), lived experiences (i.e. abandonment, adultery, violence, and betrayal), and an overuse of specific black male and female representations (i.e. the "black woman-as-saint" and the

"black woman-as-bitch"). These threads, combined, create everyday tales of despair and triumph, where Perry's ideas of justice eventually prevail, thus aligning with the Christian message, which promises ultimate justice over day-to-day injustices for the faithful.

This message is critical to Perry's films. However, it is his method that lures his growing audience. The threading of Christian themes and American ideals with human needs and lived experiences is not anything new, particularly for these kinds of films (i.e. Christian or "inspirational"). However, Perry's blue print articulates these threads while simultaneously recognizing human complexities, specifically, frailty, desire, and agency. Thus, while he utilizes Christian expressions, formations, morals, piety and dogma as controls for non-Christian inclinations such as revenge, lust, anger, etc., he does so in a way that allows his complex Christian moviegoers to feel human, not chastised, while concomitantly remaining unapologetically Christian. This is not an easy task. Nevertheless, it is this sort of complexity that resonates with his audience.

This complexity is embodied in his character, Madea. She lives by her own moral code, often creating mayhem when, where and however she deems fit or necessary, while also managing to represent somewhat of a Christ-like figure. This kind of ambiguity appeals to the complex inter-subjectivities of moviegoers. Thus, while one may feel a sense of triumph or transcendence in Perry's Christocentric themes of justice, for example, being carried off into the sunlight by a "knight in shining armor" who saves the day (both literally and figuratively), she or he may experience the same in either Madea's unconventional love or personal chaos, for example, her fearlessness of the law, handling a gun, or confrontation.

Madea enables moviegoers to tap into that which is both tragic and comedic. However, Perry's cinematic theology, which places particular emphasis on sin, forgiveness, and resultant "blessings," allows his audience to encounter the spiritual or at least that, which is familiarly religious. His theology undergirds his blueprint. It raises questions about God's existence (through designated moral arbiters) in contexts of turmoil (i.e. adultery, betrayal and abandonment) and demonstrates God's presence through what Perry reveals as God's activity, often demonstrated through a shift from bad to good in his storylines, for example, when Helen begins nurturing Charles as opposed to abusing him, and when she is granted a second chance at marriage.

Perry's theology is best understood against the backdrop of his childhood trauma and later success, namely, his fathers abuse and Perry's subsequent journey to forgive him. Perry believes that his ability to forgive his father is the reason for his success. Thus, forgiveness is central to Perry films. According to Madea, forgiveness is displayed by being nice when one can be mean. This is imperative because being nice enables ones "blessings," which come in various forms, to flow. In Perry's blueprint, "blessings" are circumscribed by heterosexual love and marriage, perhaps the key factor in drawing black Christian women to his films. Heterosexual love and marriage represent American ideals. However, for Perry, they highlight ultimate ends,[187] vehicles by which one may move from turmoil to triumph. This reading is both hetero-normative and reductive. Nevertheless, it resonates deeply with many in Perry's audience.

Americans, particularly women, are socialized to view heterosexual marriage as a signal of success and readiness for entry into the club of "adulthood" and sometimes the middle-class. Further, black Christian women and girls in the Black Church, which often

[187] With the exception of his film, *The Family that Preys*.

upholds and maintains historical ideas about black female hyper-sexuality, are oft times indoctrinated into a cult of respectability where marriage may function as a form of resistance. That is, marriage can provide a safe space where sexual passions may "rightly" unfold, without public scrutiny or stereotyping. Thus, marriage can lessen social stigmas attached to singleness and black female sexuality while signaling certain religious and cultural obligations and values. In the Black Church context, marriage highlights a moral distinction, one that reinforces particular demands of patriarchy and heteronormativity, yet, provides several benefits such as potential physical protection[188] or socio-economic advancement.[189]

However one may interpret heterosexual marriage, Perry's deployment of it enables "happy endings." At minimum, this allows his viewers to imagine other possibilities for themselves, notwithstanding gender or sexuality, even if only momentarily. Further, it allows Perry to construct alternative "happy places" for himself. That is, while his films are heterosexist, Perry's overuse of the "knight in shining armor" trope that saves downtrodden women and carries them off into the sunlight, could hint at his own desire to be saved and carried off by a strong, beautiful man. This may or may not be sexual.

Perry says that his writing articulates his truth as he sees it. Thus, his deployment of this trope could represent a variety of relationships, for example, the kind of father that he wishes that he had, a lover that he longs for, etc. Or, it could highlight the powerful

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[188] This draws attention to the social-cultural benefits of being a daughter or wife (for African American women and girls) in a patriarchal society as outlined in Spillers' work in Chapter II. Those who are not face a greater chance of being treated as "flesh" in a post-captive society. The operative word here is "treated." Post-captive status highlights pornotropic ways of "seeing," which I argue is inevitable for raced and gendered subjects.

[189] In our cultural context, marriage provides social and economic benefits for heterosexual married persons, for example, life insurance benefits and tax breaks.

nature of marriage as a necessary and inevitable American ideal, particularly for heterosexual African American Christians. Marriage serves as one way to perform identity, either masculine or feminine. African American women and men, who are unmarried or uninvolved with the opposite sex, after a certain age, are often deemed suspect in black churches and social communities. Thus, Perry's emphasis on marriage could also serve to counteract those suspicions. Regardless of his underlying intentions, Perry's emphasis on heterosexual love and marriage works for his audience.

However, while catering to significant needs and desires, Perry's emphasis on heterosexual love and marriage also displays a dependency on the reproduction and maintenance of several black cultural stereotypes, namely, the "black woman-as-bitch" and "her" opposite, the "black woman-as-saint," which I also identify as Perry's disagreeable type and his marital prototype, respectively. Both are drawn from a nexus of dominant black female stereotypes such as Sapphire, Jezebel and Mammy, each of which display considerable adaptive powers and are thus dynamic in and of themselves.[190] Nevertheless, while Perry seems to draw from them, his tropes represent their own cosmic space in the great cycle of cultural meanings. Thus, representations are not confined to historical types. Yet, they display similarities that highlight specific sign systems and cultural codes.

For example, Perry's marital prototype, the "black woman-as-saint," is most often depicted as moralistic, nurturing, quiet, and caring. This representation might be read as

[190] My reading of black female stereotypes build upon the work of several black feminists, for example, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, bell hooks, Patricia Williams, Valerie Smith, Michele Wallace, Patricia Hill Collins, Toni Morrison, Hortense Spillers, and others. This analysis regarding adaptive powers is particularly influenced by Michele Wallace's essay, "Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates*: The Possibilities for Alternative Visions " in *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era*, Pearl Bowser, Jaine Marie Gaines, and Charles Musser, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 53-67.

a modern day Mammy type. However, that reading would negate both the purpose and visible representation of Perry's trope. Perry's marital prototype, the "black woman-as-saint," exists not in service to white families, but to black men. She is both what his female characters aspire to and what they achieve once they are ready to be "blessed" (through marriage).

However, we never actually get to see how this identity is lived. The transition to Perry's marital prototype usually marks the movie ending. Or, it is displayed in the character of an older female matriarch who is neither the main protagonist nor Perry's marital ideal due to age, that is, unless she is already married. Thus, his marital prototype is not born, but *becomes* so through a series of experiences, which enable her to shift her mode of being away from disagreeable to the agreeable. Therefore, Perry's "saint" represents a *changed* woman. Over the course of the film she learns to right her wrongs and submit to her designated male love interest, the hero, who helps her find her way to the conventional prison of "true womanhood," which affords her the opportunity to live happily ever after.

Perry's disagreeable type, the "black woman-as-bitch," often depicted as inhuman or "mad" is usually signified by certain Sapphire-like traits such as loud talking, rudeness, and overuse of control. However, in Perry's blueprint she also displays selfishness, unscrupulousness, laziness, untrustworthiness, hatefulness, bitterness, insecurity, bad mothering, ungratefulness, misery, and sometimes blasphemy. She is recognized not only by these traits, but more importantly, by the ways that she makes those around her miserable. Unlike Perry's "saint," the "black woman-as-bitch" does not get a "happy ending." In fact, the misery she causes others may lead to punishment, for

example, isolation or violence (i.e. being dragged out of the house). Thus, her only option is to change from the emasculating, disrespectful, and intolerable person that she is so that she might be "blessed" through a "good man" who will reprimand and regulate her subjectivity in the proper direction.

The only character that subverts this framework is Madea. However, Madea is played by Perry and is thus granted masculine liberties, most of which eventually get censured through the legal system. In addition, she exceeds Perry's typical marital age. Thus, there is little need to change her. However, the "black woman-as-bitch" *needs* to be changed because she threatens masculine ideals. Perry's excessive use, censuring, and regimenting of this trope, particularly among successful black female characters, draws attention to his inner rage against, perhaps, the woman within, whose liberation is frustrated by his pietistic prisons, and whose very being de-centers his performance of masculinity, thus rupturing, at minimum, Perry's relationship with his father, which he still longs for.

The "black woman-as-bitch" and "black woman-as-saint" is epitomized in Helen. For example, when she refuses to leave her home she transitions from Perry's marital prototype to the disagreeable. This is made explicit when Charles commands her to "be a lady and leave quietly." This demand is grounded in Victorian ideals of "womanhood" such as kindness, gentleness, civility, and calmness, all of which highlight patriarchal authority, rights and privileges. However, Helen's "no," causes a disruption and thus reconstructs her as "mad" (or "crazy"), a representation validated by Helen throughout the film.

Yet, her initial and subsequent interactions with Orlando mark her as a "bitch," thus signaling the fluidity between these terms for Perry. When Helen scolds him for disrespectfully speaking to her in the U-Haul, Orlando replies, "now I see why you going through what you going through," thus suggesting that being dragged out of ones' home is sometimes justified—at minimum, for black "bitches" that attempt to emasculate black men through "un-lady-like" language and behavior. For both Charles and Orlando, being a "lady" means silencing Helen's emotional state, resulting from betrayal, while simultaneously maintaining a pseudo-noble, male-dominated atmosphere through her posture/deference, appearance, behavior and speech/silence. In later scenes Orlando refers to Helen as "bitter" and "mean." Given Perry's catering to Christian audiences as well as Orlando's facial expression, tone and demeanor, I surmise that "bitter" and "mean" function as sublimations for "bitch." Nevertheless, meaning is not lost on either.

Helen is not re-deployed in any of Perry's later films. Nevertheless, her trope, the "mad" black woman, also known as the "black woman-as-bitch," Perry's disagreeable type, is. In fact, it is used over and over again, morphing over time and waxing and waning between representational signals such as "mad," "crazy," "angry," and "bitchy," through strategies like posturing, facial expressions, behaviors, and language. This trope is central to Perry's schemata: sin+forgiveness=blessings=heterosexual love and marriage=happily ever after. However, "blessings" (i.e. heterosexual love and marriage and happily ever after), Perry's ultimate end, demand certain character traits, which his "bitch" trope must aspire to. Yet, it is her journey from "bitch" to "saint" that provides the "meat" of the narrative. Thus, while she is a central figure, she is only a means to an end.

I will now highlight some of Perry's other "bitches." Although Helen offers a blueprint, the types that follow have their own intrinsic logic, including no logic at all. By this I mean that each has her own narrative, which Perry constructs to justify his presentation. However, that narrative is often unknown, thus suggesting that "madness," "craziness" or "bitchiness" is an innate biological quality rather than a cultural reading. Helen's back-story is by far the most elaborate. While she is ultimately marked as "mad," the inclusion of Helen's narrative humanizes her and thus leaves room for empathy, even if very little. Perry's other "bitches" are not afforded such a luxury.

His "mad," "crazy," "angry" "bitchy" conglomerate is perhaps embodied most fully in the character, Angela, played by Tasha Smith, in *Why Did I Get Married* (2007) and *Why Did I Get Married Too* (2010). It is particularly explicit in *Why Did I Get Married Too* (2010). Not only does Angela make her grand entrance drinking, cussing, loud talking and referring to other women as "ho's" in the airport while traveling to what is supposed to be a relaxing couples retreat with her husband and friends, Perry's linguistic and representational strategies make it explicitly clear that she is not the kind of "lady" that women ought to be (read: although married, she is not the marital prototype, thus her marriage is marred by trouble). For example, he devotes an entire scene to bashing Angela. Once the couples arrive at the retreat, the male characters siphon off from their female spouses for male bonding, which is experienced at Angela's expense. Terry, a neglected husband played by Perry, frames the discussion by articulating, "there's women, then there's Angela," thus dehumanizing her altogether.

What is worse, he follows this up by joking that, when traveling together, they had to "convince the airport that she wasn't a terrorist." Both comments are met with

approving laughter. In addition, throughout the film Angela is referred to as "cuckoo," "crazy," and "Cruella," the latter of which is a favorite signification of Perry's. And, as if these representations are not convincing enough, when reconciling with her husband at the end of the film after accusing him of cheating (which he is), Angela somberly says, "I don't know why I act so crazy." This is a common strategy in Perry's films. The "bitch" is often made to read herself as such.

We see this caricature again in *Daddy's Little Girl's* (2007). However, this time it appears in multiple characters. The first is Jennifer, also played by Smith. According to the storyline, Jennifer is a selfish, loud talking, violent, bad mother who makes poor decisions. The second is Julia, a young, successful high-powered lawyer played by Gabrielle Union. We are made aware of Julia's trope when her driver and future love interest, Monty, played by Idris Elba, picks her up from her apartment for the first time. After giving the doorman her name so that he could call for her, the doorman laughs and tells Monty, "good luck."

Next, enters Julia who chides Monty for not opening her door, turning on the radio without permission, and beat-boxing while in the car. All of this, both the verbal and non-verbal, signifies Julia as an intolerable "angry bitch." Thus, although she spends the first part of the film looking for love, Perry makes it clear that she is not ready. That is, she is too "angry" and "bitchy" for a "good man." Ultimately, Julia falls in love with Monty, an upstanding working class "common" man who normalizes her, helps to correct her behavioral challenges,[191] and enables her to have a "happy [movie] ending."

Daddy's Little Girl's (2007) ends with a dramatic display of triumph and celebration. Jennifer goes to jail while Julia, Monty and his three daughters are

[191] Meaning, she is no longer boss, stuck up or controlling. Monty puts her in her place.

celebrated against a carnivalesque backdrop at Monty's new auto shop. The message is clear: justice is served in God's timing for both the just and the "ladies." This is confirmed in a previous scene where Monty attends a church service, led by Bishop Eddie Long of Atlanta, Georgia, who preaches a sermon about God's "due season." He preaches:

> Let us not grow weary in well doing…in due season you shall reap if you faint not…there is about to be a manifestation of God in your life and it's not time to throw in the towel…It's time to lift up your head because something's about to happen in your life.[192]

Longs' reference to "something" is realized in Monty's life through a sudden new business enterprise, the removal of Jennifer, the mother of his children, and her abusive drug dealing boyfriend, both of which are sent off to prison, and Julia's shift toward "lady-hood," thus signaling her readiness to be "blessed" via love and marriage.

More recently, in Perry's cinematic adaptation of *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf*, a choreopoem written by legendary black feminist playwright and poet, Ntozake Shange, in 1974, we see his "angry black bitch" materialize in the character, Jo, played by Janet Jackson. In the choreopoem, "lady in red" represents women's power to speak for themselves, their right to be loved, and their desire to be both desired and pleasured. She may be angry. However, "lady in red" is not Perry's "angry black bitch." She is frustrated about being cheated on, disrespected and unappreciated. Thus, "lady in red" is mad as in angry, which she has every right to be, not "mad" as in "crazy."

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[192] Tyler Perry, *Daddy's Little Girls*, produced by Roger M. Bobb, Reuben Cannon, D. Scott Lumpkin, Michael Paseornek, and Tyler Perry, and directed by Tyler Perry, 95 min., Lions Gate Entertainment, 2007, DVD. U.S.A.: First Run.

Yet, "lady in red" is over all of these feelings as well as the lover that caused them. Therefore, in the poem, "of no assistance," she disposes of him. She does this because she loves hard, not because she is rude, vicious or loveless. Shange shows us a woman whose love makes her the opposite, yet, is willing to tell her lover to pack up his things and get out! In fact, "lady in red" rebukes any suitor that attempts to injure her. However, she does so only as she loves them. To be sure, she loves to love (and being loved). However, she hates when her love is "thrown back in her face."[193]

In addition, while *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf* draws attention to black women's experiences with varying abuses, "lady in red" is a symbol of strength and resilience, not victimhood. None of Shange's "ladies" are victims. They are triumphant (not heroic)—in their own way. Thus, although "lady in red" constantly faces the threat of rape and other abuses, she remains in control of both her body and spirit. Therefore, in the end, when she realizes that she is "missing something," she locates the "rainbow" within herself, not a lover. The "rainbow," signified by each 'colored' girl/lady in the choreopoem (i.e. "lady in red"), with the exception of "lady in brown," represents colors of life (i.e. human flourishing). They highlight innate value, density, self-worth, and beauty. "Lady in red" encounters these values within herself and determines that they are "enuf."

However, Perry re-reads "lady in red" as a "bitch," a reinvention and gross misrepresentation at best. In his version, Jo, a high-powered magazine executive, seemingly lifted directly from the scripts of *The Devil Wear Prada* (2006) and *The Family that Preys* (2008), is an insensitive, emasculating "bitch" who has an

[193] Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Enuf* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1975), 63.

impenetrable outer shell and is too self-absorbed to recognize that her assistant, Crystal, played by Elise, is being physically abused by her childhood sweetheart, or that her husband, Carl, played by Omari Hardwick, has homoerotic needs that Jo cannot fulfill. Thus, Jo is cold, distant and solipsistic, not self-assured and deep loving. Perhaps the most significant amount of violence is done when Perry turns Jo into a victim of her husband's desires (as opposed to her own) and omits where she specifically finds God within and begins to love herself fiercely.

It seems Crystal's utterance of the famous words is for everyone. However, Shange gave them first to "lady in red." The other "ladies" repeated them—for themselves—in a song of joy. This is the power of Shange's choreopoem. Everyone comes to know and speak her own truth. However, Perry's blueprint does not allow for this act of agency. It is too densely layered by his childhood experiences, contemporary theology and complex patriarchal sensibilities, all of which demand certain kinds of villains and heroes in order to concretize his storylines, themes, ideals, needs, and wants.

Thus, Perry reconstructs complex inter-subjectivities who speak for themselves into sites of psychological and ontological difference. This denies complex subjectivity and re-envisions "womanhood," which is performed in a variety of ways, in a one-dimensional "type." This is a form of cultural malpractice. It misrepresents black women and girls through the manufacturing and mass-production of mythology, which uses the "black woman-as-bitch" trope as an avenue toward an ideal, Perry's marriageable "saint" who does not dare to speak her own truth, but instead knows her role and has resolved to play her part (at least in Perry's imagination).

I am not suggesting that Perry's representations are completely false. Perry holds that his narratives and characters emerge from life real experiences. Thus, they are also portraitures. Whether they reflect living subjects or not, Perry's reading of back female subjectivity caricatures black women and girls' complexities and differences, thus turning what might be truthful and beautiful into something that is sensational and grotesque. Yet, the beauty of his films is that they recognize the monstrous and freakish as human qualities as opposed to circumscribing black female subjectivity to unbelievable images of black heroic genius. However, the danger lies in Perry's moral obligation to realign social roles and his framing of those roles (on either side) as either stereotypical or prescriptive. This kind of reading of black women and girls suggests that black female subjects are flawed as opposed to complex and nuanced.

Perry's reading has real effects. It can lead to hate, violence, callousness, and intolerance of female subjects who function outside of Perry's paradigm. Of course, his representations are read in various ways. Thus, some may find his bitch/saint dichotomy empowering while others may take it and appropriate it in their own way. Nevertheless, however they are read, Perry's language and representations are powerful. They actively construct cultural meanings, which are carried through both human psyches and material culture where they are brought to life and realigned again and again through varying arrangements, both good and bad. Analyses that attend to this, both the rules and practices that shape these arrangements, and what gets presented in Perry's films, are necessary.

Re-reading Perry's Bitch/Saint Dichotomy through Oscar Micheaux and "Lady in Red"

Perry's "bitch" versus "saint" dichotomy emerges from a particular ideological orientation that is difficult to fully know or grasp. Material images, while sometimes troubling, do not necessarily reveal underlying ideology. Yet, knowing the motivation for production is imperative for adequately reading culture. Nevertheless, it is often unavailable. Thus, critics are left to read in light of effects, which admittedly lends only a partial reading. My reading of Perry's films takes this route. I hold, regardless of intention, his binary projection is socially harmful and thus should be reconfigured.

Perry purports to re-present the real. However, he anchors meanings of black womanhood in a context of evil. This reproduces injurious historical ideas and realigns them in the present. That is, Perry takes the abstract, reconfigures it, and turns it into something material (and vice versa) for our present context. Both the abstract and material operate descriptively, literally, discursively, and non-discursively. Each extracts from and adds to varying stocks of knowledge, providing scripts for how black women and girls should or should not act, and how they should or should not be treated.

However, a fair reading of Perry's work makes it difficult to tell whether he is simply sensationalizing black identity in order to lure an audience, or writing from the underside with the hopes of conveying the narratives, representations, and longings of the socially marginal. Analyses should consider both ends. It seems Perry is attempting to tell a different kind of story that redefines meanings. However, his characterizations of black life too often acquiesce to harmful Americanisms and racial tropes that deny differences, complexities, and particularities. Nevertheless, Perry's lure is powerful, notwithstanding representations. His childhood experiences, working class background,

affiliation with the urban theater circuit, and partnership with Jakes,[194] significantly influence his productions, deployment of representations, and appeal.

These influences are useful for reading and reconfiguring Perry's films and representations, respectively. They draw attention to a complex web of meanings, politics, and relations, which effectively blur the lines between the signified and the signifier, good and evil, and the oppressed and the oppressor, in cultural production. Moreover, these influences defy womanist analyses, which locate black cultural life on the side of the signified, good, and the oppressed, and "white culture," which is overdetermined by white supremacist ideology, on the side of the signifier, evil, and the oppressor. However, a reading that attends to the web that is cultural production, to include Perry's influences, forges an analysis that is ambiguous, which recognizes that the reproduction and circulation of cultural meaning is a dynamic force that includes a range of readings, appropriations and intentions, and varying levels of participation. Thus, no one stands completely outside of cultural production.

Therefore, bifurcated good/bad criticisms, which dismiss the complexities of cultural production, do not work. However, we can take a closer look at that which causes injury and reconfigure it to tell a different kind of story. Perry is a prominent and powerful cultural producer with access to and control of various forms of media. He could use his resources to tell a range of stories as opposed to reproducing the same tropes and storylines over and over again. Specifically, Perry could take his bitch/saint trope, reconfigure the values and beliefs that arise in it through a re-arrangement of

[194] There are numerous similarities between Jakes and Perry. Both problematize African American womanhood in a bad v. good symmetry that demands male direction, whether divine or human (or both), to save women from themselves.

significations, and re-encode it with a new reading that is more liberative. Or, he can attempt to discard the trope altogether.

However, given that racist and sexist epistemes of high modernity, which inform Perry's tropes, are so pervasive and can only be lessened, I suggest the former: reconfiguration. In this case, Perry might want to visit the archives of Oscar Micheaux, prominent cinematographer of the early twentieth century who, like Perry, ran his own production company, and wrote, directed, filmed and edited his own films. As with Perry, Micheaux attempted to capture a certain African American essence on film. As a result, he faced an immense amount of criticism for his representational strategies. However, dissimilar to Perry, Micheaux's representations, particularly when read against his overarching storylines, themes, and backdrops, functioned to counter pervasive images and social ills (not maintain them).[195]

Micheaux presented films on themes like lynching, which exposed both black and white participation. These films presented "coon" representations to show the problems of "cooning" alongside of images of white domination, aggression and privilege.[196] Both representations served to provide a moral message regarding racial prejudice and misplaced values and self worth. In some cases, Micheaux provided his characters with dueling on-screen consciousnesses, for example, Reverend Isaiah T. Jenkins in *Body and Soul* (1924),[197] played by Paul Robeson. This film presented an aspect of portraiture[198]

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[195] For more information on Micheaux and his work see Pearl Bowser, Jaine Marie Gaines, and Charles Musser, *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African-American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) and Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing Himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

[196] See Oscar Micheaux, *Within Our Gates*, produced and directed by Oscar Micheaux, 79 min, Micheaux Book and Film Company, 1920. Video-recording.

[197] See Oscar Micheaux, *Body and Soul*, produced and directed by Oscar Micheaux, 102 min, Micheaux Book and Film Company, 1925. Video-recording.

while simultaneously revealing complex ambiguity, thus freeing subjectivities from the boundaries of stereotypes by enabling characters to highlight their own tensions and inconsistencies.

These moves would allow Perry to deploy dominant cultural images, which may be read as both appealing and repulsive to his audience base, while also critiquing them, thus showing representational variety on both ends. His bitch/saint dichotomy might be emancipatory if it was expanded to include not simply projection, but appropriation. Black women and girls utilize these terms in a variety of ways, notwithstanding dominant narratives. I suggest Perry consult his inner woman: Madea, the aspect of his inner being, which gives life and richness to the character. Oft times tropes like "bitch" or "saint" are appropriated, realigned, recycled, and/or resisted by black women and girls longing to be seen (not "seen") as subjects, for example, Nicki Minaj refers to herself as a "bad bitch" to highlight power, beauty and independence. Madea might be more in tune with this.

What if Perry channeled Micheaux and allowed Madea to write his next script, not for laughs or the reproduction of Christian moralist tales, but as an exercise in seeking and speaking truth, regardless? Shange's "lady in red" could be very useful in reconfiguring the values, beliefs, and significations that arise from his bitch/saint trope, and re-encoding it with a reading that is more liberative. Madea is likely more receptive to "lady in red" as a powerful, self-assured subject than Perry. Whereas Perry is overly concerned with the politics of gender acquiescence and performance, Madea and "lady in red" have quite a bit in common.

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[198] Micheaux's biography reveals that his character, "Reverend Isaiah T. Jenkins" was inspired by his reading of his former father in law: a crooked country preacher.

Both are fearless, in control, complex, sexual subjects who love to love, are unforgettable, demand respect, dispose of those who fail to assist their aims, and speak their own truth. While both get angry, and for good reason, neither would uncritically accept Perry's bitch/saint dichotomy as a definition or prescription. Each would reject any intimation that "bitchiness" or "saintliness" is an inherent quality, of course while appropriating particular praxis that others might read as either "bitchy" or "saintly." Nevertheless, whatever their appropriation, it will be appropriated and performed in their own way and for their own purposes and pleasures.

In addition, both would refuse the confinement of African American respectability politics, which pervade ideas of Christian "ladyhood." Yet, each would be empathetic to the complex ways that African American women and girls might perform aspects of these tropes for survival or agency. Thus, Madea's script, particularly if inspired by "lady in red," would demand that black women and girls' complex back-story be kept in the foreground, thus explicating why certain identities may be performed over others from one moment to the next. In this way, cultural readings that overdetermine humanity in any trope or type may be exploded, particularly through the exposure of mythology, historical narratives, context, and social structures. This disorientation would problematize taken for granted cultural projections by screening in representational strategies and varying consciousnesses that show complex identities as human expressions based upon context and circumstances.

These moves would enable a completely different kind of narrative to unfold for Helen. First and foremost, her desire to be desired, appreciated, and respected, would have forced her to a) demand more from Charles and b) leave him once she realized that

he was not giving her any "assistance," long before eighteen years. Second, Helen would have left the marriage with more and on her own terms. Third, she would have loved herself enough to experience and seek pleasure both within and outside of herself, without the fear of being typecast as a Jezebel figure (or any of "her" children), but in delight of the beauty of her sex and sexuality. Fourth, Helen would have opened herself up to love while simultaneously closing herself to judgment and heroic rescue.

Fifth, she would have considered the pain of her marriage as an informative lesson learned for assessing future relations and constructing boundaries and new expectations. Sixth, Helen would have left Charles in the hands of his loved ones when trauma struck—not out of spite for him, but out of love for herself. Seventh, she would have found power in her journey of self-discovery once she realized that what is inside, the spirit and elements that give life and disorient self-destruction, also the difference between resilience and victimhood, and the source from which strength emerges, is "enuf." Eighth, Helen would have encountered God inside of her and loved herself fiercely.

Madea's Helen would be triumphant and in control of her body, spirit and destiny. Thus, her diary would read quite differently. I imagine that it would provide a mixture of escapades, both joyous and painful, that not only resonate with the repertoires and expectations of Perry's audience, but also more closely align with their experiences. Depending on how those experiences are read, they could also demonstrate the breadth of God's activity, which extends beyond even our greatest ideals, thus, not reducing but enhancing the Christian story, which is multifaceted, by revealing the complex ways that that this story is lived and encountered. This may limit Perry's deployment of fairytale

endings, particularly those that display a dependency on beautiful working class male savior figures. Nevertheless, it will offer numerous empowering moments of transcendence.

In the mean time, we are left with Perry who performs Madea's character, whose habits of language, both discursive and non-discursive, are overdetermined by his piety and readings of the data of his experiences. Thus, we are faced with storylines that are anchored in mythology. These narratives reconstruct the biographies of the people and communities that Perry claims to re-present. They turn the richness of lived experiences into "knock-off " versions of the real.[199] That is, Perry takes authentic expressions and invests them with his stocks of knowledge, thus ignoring the intricate details that make human identities uniquely what they are. Nevertheless, "knock-offs," however they are read, just as long as they are close, still have currency. Sometimes imitation, even if suspect, may be good enough.

To conclude, Perry's films present his audience with an array of talented black female cultural workers, whose amazing knack for dramatic and comedic display would be less visible, if visible at all, if it were not for Perry. Yet, they creatively present Perry's troubling representations: "knock-offs" from the real. However, his viewer-ship has multiple complex critical consciousnesses, which read and respond to his representations for themselves. For many, his representations are tolerable for the time being—at least until "the real thing" is made accessible. Until then Perry's movie power will continue to sore.

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[199] See bell hooks' *Reel to Real*.

CHAPTER VI

BEYONCE OR JENNIFER LOPEZ? A FEW LAST WORDS ON "CHANGING THE LETTER" AND "LOOSENING THE YOKE" IN BLACK RELIGION AND CULTURE

In this dissertation, I sought to construct a black feminist religio-cultural criticism for reading black womanhood less pornotropically in womanist theo-ethics and black religion and culture. The aim of this project is that black women and girls might be seen in terms of their complex inter-subjective multi-positionality as opposed to circulating taken for granted scripts on "black womanhood" that hold them captive to oppressive normative claims. Deploying religious, cultural, ideological and black feminist criticism, Chapters I and II developed a theory for reading black women and girls' experiences and representations with the intention of presenting the benefits of a less pornotropic gaze in three sites: theological discourse, televangelism, and black popular culture.

In Chapters III, IV, and V, I argued that these ways of reading black female identities construct ways of *seeing* that depend upon and reproduce modern fictive ethnographies that reconstruct history and biography in mythology and "nature." This way of reading (or *seeing*) places black women and girls' identity on a pendulum between tragedy and heroism, hyper-sexuality and vagina-less, and bitchiness and sainthood. They, therefore, marginalize complex expressions that negotiate *with* and develop in *between* these types. Black feminist religio-cultural criticism "changes the letter" to render a more liberative reading of black women's experiences and representations and blasts habits of language that make oppressive readings possible. My analysis explores the internal signals, inferred ideologies, encodings, and operations of

Douglas, Townes, Jakes and Perry's representational strategies and exposes their dependencies on pornotropic myths. My examination reveals how black female myths travel and get realigned and re-appropriated from generation to generation by a variety of controls that include black vernacular cultural traditions and black female and male subjects themselves.

My reading interprets black female and male subjects as cultural producers who explode and appropriate cultural myths, that is, it "loosens the yoke" of Douglas, Townes, Jakes and Perry's readings of "black womanhood" by articulating black female experiences and cultural representations in terms of their radical subjectivity. I argue that black women and girls are complex subjects, with individual consciousnesses and representations, who read and appropriate black cultural images on their own terms that include resistance, acquiescence, and more, including interpretations that range from appalling and appealing to sometimes a complex mixture of both.

Pornotropic readings of "black womanhood" do not allow for this kind of ambiguity and, thereby, deny the real interests of black women and girls. My reading of black women and girls' experiences and representations screen some interests in while screening others out, particularly, "America's Grammar Book" on race and gender. Narratives of Hip Hop sensation, Nicki Minaj, and Ntozake Shange's "lady in red" are screened in so as to not only "change the letter" and "loosen the yoke" of historical myths on black womanhood deployed in womanist theo-ethical scholarship and Perry's cultural productions, respectively; these narratives also highlight constructive possibilities for performing and reading black female identities less pornotropically. These moves take

the circulating script on "black womanhood" and expose typifications that reveal their oppressive strategies, conditions, and operations.

I am aware that much of this dissertation is densely theoretical and analytical. This is intentional. However, the discourse of black womanhood and its circumscription to the yokes and jokes of "America's Grammar Book" on race and gender also has relevance for the concrete experiences of black women and girls who, everyday, fall under pornotropic gazing, including this author. While a seminary student, I was exposed to an impassioned conversation occurring between a respected professor, whom I was meeting in his office to discuss my doctoral interests, and his colleague. They were debating whether Beyonce or Jennifer Lopez had the "bigger" and thus, "better" "booty." Their debate went on in my presence for about five minutes.

To my dismay, I was eventually asked to mediate: "Okay, what do you think?" "I have no idea," I responded. Dissatisfied, the professor whom I was not meeting looked me over completely and said, "You *know* it's Beyonce," and the professor with whom I was meeting baulked repulsively, "gross!" They laughed, gave each other a friendly shoulder pat, and parted ways. I was left quizzical: If Beyonce is "gross" am I also "gross?": if I am also "gross" in his eyes, then how am I being registered by him at this moment? I pondered why were these men discussing Beyonce and Lopez's privates, and why were they discussing them so passionately in this particular public space? Such questionings were happening simultaneously while meeting with my professor.

After the meeting ended, I raced home to read Douglas' *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective,* which I had first read two years before this incident. On my first reading, I was mesmerized. It was my first time reading anything that spoke

to both my religious and cultural experiences. It provided me with a framework and language for interpreting my day-to-day encounters with white racism and sexism. I counted on it, this time, to aid me in articulating this experience, to provide me, at least, with a safe space for calling out my professor and his colleague for their racism. However, while Douglas drew attention to the force of white ideological bias and the operation of historical stereotypes in contemporary culture, her text did not provide an account of how meanings about "black womanhood" cross-pollinate, how they get reproduced, how they circulate, or how they operate within and outside of black American cultural traditions. It did not show how relationships between subjects and representations are individually situated or how they might function within unexpected spaces such as seminary offices or Sunday morning worship.

Discourses on "black women's experience" require that black female scholars of religion and theology explore these kinds of concerns. This dissertation has tried to do this work. This historical moment of black women's scholarship in religion recognizes the force of historical epistemes, technologies, and obsessions with difference and the vulgar that produce representations of black women and girls that are voyeuristic, violent, and callous. My experience in seminary is but one such experience. However, this dissertation also acknowledges black women and girls as subjects with agency to "change the letter" and "loosen the yoke" of cultural production, if not structurally then, at least, in those spheres and cultural spaces where black women have a great degree of control and power such as the Black Church, religious conferences, scholarship, and expressive culture where pornotropic readings of their bodies rob them of complex subjectivity and normalize symbolic and material terror, even while sometimes spiritualizing it.

Many black women and girls find solace in the Christian faith tradition. It provides a sense of "home" for those operating under the guises of pornotropia, displacement, post-captivity, degendering, and broken kinship ties, which cause moments of oppressions in their lives. The Black Church, womanist theo-ethicists, Jakes and Perry offer messages, which are deeply sedimented in their interpretations of the Christian message. Their messages aim to heal the women in their audiences. However, even in their best efforts, they end up reproducing pornotropic readings of black women and girls' experiences as is evidenced most clearly by Jakes and Perry. I suggest that black women and girls continue to "change the letter" and "loosen the yoke" as they always have done by decoding and encoding pervasive messages, including the religious that obstruct their aims toward human fulfillment, creating their own stories, and destabilizing texts that subvert their emancipatory aims, liberative representations, and complex subjectivities. Black women and girls have the power to disorient and appropriate meanings for themselves, regardless. This is "good news."

This dissertation, deploying the critical discourses of History and Critical Theories of Religion and post-structuralism, specifically the analyses of black religionists, cultural theorists, and feminists, aimed to open up additional spaces in African American/Black religious discourse and scholarship for critical analyses on black religiosity as produced in black cultural vernacular traditions (i.e. texts and films), and gender as produced and circulated in "religio-cultural" spaces. This dissertation not only adds to discourses and scholarship in History and Critical Theories of Religion/African American (also known as "Black Religion") Religion, but also a budding discourse within black religious scholarship that places emphasis on African American "popular

religion." In short, it provides a critical discourse on religion, media, and black womanhood that had been absent.

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