RESURRECTION: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

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RESURRECTION: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN
CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

A Dissertation Presented

by

RACHEL JESSICA DANIEL

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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RESURRECTION: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE

A Dissertation Presented

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving, supportive and encouraging family.
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ABSTRACT
RESURRECTION: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BLACK CHURCH IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CULTURE
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From 2000 to 2013, there have been multiple representations of black church culture in black Christian popular fiction, film, stage performances, and rap music. This dissertation argues that this overwhelming amount of material is the beginning of a movement that calls to mind earlier representations of African American spirituality. Like early forms of African American theater and literature, 21st century black church culture texts depict communities that are deeply engaged in both sacred and secular practices. This tension between the sacred and secular demonstrates how African Americans
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CHAPTER 1
THE BLACK CHURCH’S QUIET DEATH AND TRIUMPHANT RESURRECTION

In 2010, Dr. Eddie Glaude declared, “[t]he Black Church, as we've known it or imagined it, is dead.” While preachers and theologians had a heated debate about the existence of the black church, they failed to recognize that Tyler Perry's I Can Do Bad All By Myself, released in fall 2009, made $51 million in domestic box office sales. Perry's film, like most of his work, featured several church scenes, including a particularly moving sermon by gospel singer and pastor Marvin Winans. As Glaude nailed the coffin shut on the black church, many black Americans were still enjoying a very lively representation of it in Perry's film. Then, in 2010, Reverend Eddie Long was accused of sexual assault of underage males in his congregation, which perhaps made some wish the black church was dead. In 2012, Long was, embarrassingly enough, crowned King by his church in an elaborate ceremony. On February 18th, 2012, the world watched Whitney Houston’s funeral, which was held at her childhood church home, New Hope Baptist Church. Of the funeral, religious scholar Stephen Prothero wrote that it brought the “world inside the black church.” Piers Morgan, a British anchor for CNN, struggled to define what a “black church funeral” was. And in a strange twist where fiction meets reality, Tyler Perry and Bishop T.D. Jakes, two important figures who represent black church culture in film, both spoke at length about Whitney Houston and the Christian faith.

The black church is one of the primary institutions that define American culture and African American spirituality. Despite the scholarly concerns about its death, the black church, both real and performed, continues to thrive. In this dissertation, I examine
representations of the black church in texts created by African American writers, filmmakers, musicians, actors and stand up comedians in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These representations reaffirm heteronormative, patriarchal values which support an evangelical interpretation of Christianity. To provide context for the chapters to follow, this introduction will discuss the history of the black church, and offer an overview of two critical conversations: the death of the black church and the debate about sexuality amongst black liberation and womanist theologians as well as evangelical Christians. The black church in contemporary popular culture is a largely unexplored terrain that holds important insights about the connections between race, sexuality, and spirituality.

What is the Black Church?

The black church is a set of American, Christian churches that has historically been founded, led and attended by black people. This definition comes from Lincoln and Mamiya’s seminal text, The Black Church in the African American Experience. They define the black church as 'independent, historic, and totally black controlled denominations' (1). The singular title is used as a shorthand term to signal a particular type of history, worship service as well as social, economic and political power. There are all-black congregations within larger, white denominations, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church; however, “the black church” is a term that usually signals Christian congregations whose leadership, liturgies, and theologies reflect black history and culture. Lincoln and Mamiya limit their study to seven major churches. They focus on the history of how these churches were founded, rather than the specific doctrines and worship practices which define each church. Yet, there are tensions between the different types of black churches--in particular, the worship styles
of each. This divide is briefly captured in Langston Hughes’ 1926 essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” Hughes writes, “many an upper-class Negro church, even now, would not dream of employing a spiritual in its services. The drab melodies in white folks’ hymnbooks are much to be preferred. ‘We want to worship the Lord correctly and quietly. We don’t believe in ‘shouting.’ Let’s be dull like the Nordics,’” they say, in effect” (1312). Lincoln and Mamiya hint at this divide when they write about the progression of music within black churches. They write, “the educated or progressive class of blacks disdained the spirituals because they were reminiscent of slavery....the spirituals of the “invisible” slave church were antistructrual, while worship in the institutional church was very structured.” This observation, coupled with their analysis of the hymnbooks used by different types of churches, still doesn’t offer a complete picture of the differences between each church and the social practices which existed within them.

The term ‘black church’ obfuscates the many differences between the various churches that fall under its title. The ‘black church’ is uncritically referred to in news cycles, during election seasons, and when seeking the political opinion of the majority of black people. This phrase problematically lumps together black Christians regardless of the numerous doctrinal differences and worship practices that define each denomination as well as each congregation. The phrase ‘the black church’ also assumes a singular black community that holds the same ethics, spiritual and political ideals. While the histories of black churches suggest one popular political position, the truth is that the black church to which scholars refer is fragmented when it comes to each congregation’s political positions and actions.
In this dissertation, I use several different terms. ‘The black church’ is used when I refer to the work of other scholars, who recognize and define it as a singular institution with historical importance and political power. I use the term ‘black churches’ to discuss contemporary African American Christian places of worship, all of which have different doctrines, and political positions. The performed black church is a term I use to define the representations of black churches in popular culture. There are multiple theological positions which fall along a spectrum of liberal and conservative political and spiritual perspectives. In the United States, many politically conservative Christians define themselves as evangelicals; however, liberal evangelical Christians, who are typically considered politically moderate, also exist. Evangelicals are Christians who believe in several different principles. First, a person must have a transformative experience in which they are “born-again.” Robinson writes, Being born again refers to the marking point in a Christian’s life when he or she accepts Jesus Christ as a personal Savior. For some, the term implies an emotional experience, one initiated by the Holy Spirit. For others, the born-again experience is a gradual conversion to the teachings of Christ. Regardless, most evangelicals use the term to describe their spiritual condition (595).

Second, Christians should be invested in sharing their faith with others. Third, the bible is believed as the ultimate authority, and is read as an infallible text. Fourth, Jesus Christ’s crucifixion makes possible the redemption of humanity. Evangelicals span multiple denominations and cultures.

One of the reasons why African American Christian churches are, regardless of denomination, referred to as ‘the black church’ is because of its beginning as an

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1 This definition was developed by historian David W. Bebbington, and was accepted by the National Association of Evangelicals. It was reprinted on their website, [https://www.nae.net/church-and-faith-partners/what-is-an-evangelical](https://www.nae.net/church-and-faith-partners/what-is-an-evangelical)
“invisible institution,” a phrase coined by sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. During slavery, denominations had differing opinions about slavery, and whether it was the responsibility of Christian churches to proselytize to those enslaved. White churchgoers were conflicted about whether slaves should become Christians: they were afraid that, if they became Christians, they would be equal and therefore, could not be enslaved (Frazier). It is perhaps this fear that led to sermons restricted to a message about slaves obeying their masters. These damaging messages intentionally distorted Biblical passages to justify American slavery and slaveowners’ control and torture of slaves. In order to counteract this, black people, both free and those still enslaved, would gather to have church services that were oftentimes hidden from white slaveowners. These meetings were the foundation of black churches and communities. As an invisible institution, black churches during and after slavery were not only a place to worship, but also home spaces for African Americans. Historian Bettye Collier-Thomas writes:

“DuBois argued that neither before nor after the Civil War was there ‘to any extent any real home life for the Negro.’ He demonstrated how the church literally usurped the place of the home and became the social center of black life and the place where most of the community’s interests were concentrated. According to DuBois, the church was ‘all but supreme and absolute in the development of the race. It became the great agency in the progress of our people because it was the only institution over which we had control.’” (58)

Even when these churches were not officially recognized by the larger denominations that they represented, the congregations were important to those attending them. Black churches became a site for spiritual encouragement and political strategizing. During
the Civil War, General Sherman had a meeting with the twenty black religious leaders about the ending of slavery, and the best ways to support black people during what would be called the Reconstruction Era. Of this, Sherman wrote, “I...invited the most intelligent of the negroes, mostly Baptist and Methodist preachers, to come to my rooms to meet the Secretary of War” (Billingsley 54). There, African American male preachers, who offered their ideas to Sherman, were recognized as powerful representatives of the black community. Most black churches were therefore not only a place for black Christians; they were also a place for other black community members. Black churches, perhaps by necessity, discussed both spiritual and political matters. Because of this, they became some of the most important organizations during the Reconstruction Era. Scholars point out that businesses and organizations, including schools, banks, insurance companies and others, emerged from black churches (Lincoln and Mamiya 8). This history ensures that “the black church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the black community” (8).

Black churches function as powerful counter-publics within the larger nation they inhabit. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when blacks lost many of their civil rights, black churches became counter-publics that fulfilled the needs of the black community. Higginbotham's understanding is shaped by Habermas' theory of the public sphere: wherein citizens can debate ideas, and thus mediate between private citizens and the state, in order to come to decisions about the common good (Higginbotham 10). Counter-publics exist along racial, ethnic, class and gender interests, and conflict with the ideas espoused by the public sphere. (11). Black churches, therefore, were counter-public spheres because
they were “distinct from and in conflict with the dominant white society and its racist institutional structures” (11). African Americans who were a part of black churches had the opportunity to discuss issues which were most important to them, such as racial equality.

While Higginbotham's assessment of black churches as counter-publics in the late 19th and early 20th century is correct, the role of black churches has changed significantly in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Black churches are no longer the primary counter-public for African Americans in a Post-Civil Rights Movement Era. Black churches were counter-publics because black people were excluded from fully participating as American citizens. As Butler writes, “[w]hen and where African Americans were excluded from the many spheres of society (i.e., economic, educational, political, and mass media), black congregations became...“counterpublics” over and against apartheid systems. To be sure, self-segregation was never the ultimate goal; rather full-scale participation in the larger society” (Butler). Although inequality still exists in America, African Americans are now included in some of the spheres of society to which Butler refers. Black churches are still represented as counter-publics that articulate the standpoint of African Americans, although the racial and power dynamics in America have shifted considerably in the last century. Black churches have always held varying ideas about social movements; however, in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, with the rise of social media, it is easier to see the different values of African American churchgoers and their congregations. According to Professor Alton B. Pollard, the issues within the post civil rights movement era include the HIV/AIDS epidemic, mass incarceration, human trafficking, gender equality, gay equality, gun
control... and many others. These issues have raised critical debates about the political role black churches ought to play. Some African American Christians organize for the right for women to choose abortion; others organize against it. Some African American Christians organize for same sex marriage to be legalized in all of the United States, and some organize against it. Unlike the Civil Rights Movement, where the majority of African Americans wanted to be treated and recognized in law and practice as equal citizens with white Americans, this new era leads to murky debates about Biblical doctrine. Because of these varied and conflicting actions, black churches should no longer be depicted as monoliths that communicate the political standpoint of most African Americans.

While it was necessary for black churches during eras of slavery, Reconstruction, and segregation to become counter-publics to achieve political goals, in the late 20th and early 21st century, it becomes less necessary to either have a counter-public that is organized around race, or to locate the counter-public within the black, Christian church. However, because black churches once played this role, they still appear as counter-publics in popular culture. I argue that even popular representations need to complicate the position of black churches—to move away from the idea that it, as an institution, has to represent the political and spiritual positions of all or even most black people. By holding on to the idea that black churches are the primary counter-publics for black people, we restrict and limit the religious landscape of African American faith, and don't allow for freedom in religious thought out of fear of dominant conservative positions.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alton-b-pollard-iii-phd/fifty-years-later_b_3999278.html
The Death of the Black Church

Now that black churches are known more for a multiplicity of performances than for its history as a spiritual and political force, some theologians fear that the “real black church” has disappeared. In February 2010, Glaude, co-editor of African American Religious Thought, declared “the black church, as we know or have imagined it, is dead.” He states that the black church which was once “central to black life and...a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation” no longer exists. Glaude argues that we believe two major myths about black churches: that they are progressive institutions, and that they are still central institutions to black life. He writes, “the idea of a black church standing at the center of all that takes place in a community has long since passed away...black religious institutions and beliefs stand alongside a number of other vibrant non-religious institutions and beliefs.” The frustration expressed by religious historians is that the “real” black church once had a positive impact on black communities. Now black churches no longer do that on a large scale, or at all, and its representation in popular culture has been boiled down to the performative aspects associated with black churches. Rather than representing black churches as a site for political organizing, black churches and their members are now being represented by limiting stereotypes. Long services, the old black church woman, a forgetful, old black male deacon, songs that have too many false endings, and the stylistic differences between black and white preaching and forms of worship usually become the focus of performances that comedically reference black churches in popular culture. Additionally, there is the myth that all black people who are spiritual are Christians, or all black Christians worship at black churches. These myths simplify the religious
landscape of black Americans and contribute to the staying power of these cultural stereotypes.

In a response to Glaude's article, religious historian Anthea Butler writes, “the Black Church may be dead in its incarnation as an agent of change, but as the imagined home of all things black and Christian, it is alive and well.” Butler also writes that most people can no longer distinguish the real black church from the performed black church in media:

[the Black Church has] become a caricature. When there are movies, comedians, and rappers depicting their ideas of the Black Church, it is not difficult to imagine you don’t know what a Black Church is, because you think you have seen it. And you hear it every time an African American who is a good orator (including President Obama) gets that intonation just right, sounding like a prophetic black preacher. So when all you see are the caricatures of “Black Church” it feels as though you have seen it all already. Perhaps this is why Professor Glaude feels that the Black Church is dead. It has turned into a cliché (Butler).

Butler's assessment suggests that the performed black church in popular culture has replaced the actual black church for most Americans. The popular images of black churches allow all Americans, regardless of race or creed, a supposed familiarity with its culture. For many religious scholars and black Christians alike, actual black churches are still open on Sunday mornings to mainly black congregations, and serve many different purposes to worshippers. The black church that is represented in popular culture is a singular institution with cultural markers that are either performed or
appropriated by comedians, actors and musicians. Butler reads the rise of the performed black church as the definite death of the real black church's ability to operate as an agent for social change.

There is a dynamic relationship between the real black churches and black churches that we see represented in popular culture. More often than not, the performed black church becomes an extension of real black churches. After all, most of these representations emerge from black churches. These texts are usually constructed by the leaders or members, advertised within churches, and faithfully attended by members of different congregations. Churchgoers are the ones who critique black church culture in popular texts. If black churches are cliches, as Butler states, black church members have defined it as such. The representations of the black church in popular culture are not a threat to real black churches. This relationship between real black churches, the performed black church, and the audiences that attend both, ensures the importance of black churches and their centrality to African American communities.

Perhaps Butler is referring to the cyclical performance of black church culture. African Americans who are familiar with black church culture use it as material for texts. The audience members who watch it may take what they have seen in the performance and use it in their daily interactions, or within their own churches. Therefore, actual black churches inform the performances of black church culture, which then influence and change actual black churches. This entanglement of the performed black church, actual black churches, and the audiences which move between them reveals the influence that spectators have in transforming black church culture. It is also
another reason why the performed black church should not be considered ‘fixed’ or ‘stable’ trope.

Glaude’s essay opened up a critical debate for scholars to consider what black churches were, are, and ought to be; however, this conversation doesn’t fully consider the political or spiritual potential of the performed black church in popular culture. Glaude says, “Rare are those occasions when black churches mobilize in public and together to call attention to the pressing issues of our day”; but he ultimately misses that the black Christian popular fiction, church plays and films attempt to call attention to several of the issues he raises: “African American unemployment, inadequate healthcare, home foreclosures, and a general sense of helplessness.” As Glaude attempted to redirect the leaders of black churches, creators of texts about the black church in popular culture were already embroiled in a battle to respond to crises many African Americans currently face. These texts about the black church in popular culture have sparked an active conversation between creators and consumers about the role of the real black churches, and the authenticity of its representation. Furthermore, as these texts entertain, they also do a larger cultural work of creating a dialogue about race, class, gender roles, and sexuality.

Black Churches, Sexuality and Politics of Respectability

One of the reasons Glaude announces the death of the black church is because it is impossible to pretend that all black churches agree on the latest movement for same sex marriage and other civil rights for members of the LGBTQ community. Many black churches, which are usually recognized as politically liberal spaces, hold conservative theological positions about gender roles and sexuality. There is a divide between black
liberation and womanist theologians, and conservative, evangelical black churches. Conservative evangelicals believe that sex should be restricted to heterosexual marriages, and sex outside of marriage is sinful. They work to “deny the flesh” and submit to the Spirit. The Apostle Paul makes clear the divide between things of the flesh and things of the Spirit:

“For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:5-8).”

For those who believe in this, giving into sexual desire outside of heterosexual marriages demonstrates weakness and a “sinful nature.”

Black liberation and womanist theologians decry the ways in which traditional black churches uncritically accept the Apostle Paul’s preaching about sex and the body. Anthony B. Pinn writes, “there is still a tendency in Black churches...to privilege the 'spiritual' over the physical in ways that actually do damage to subjectivity by encouraging suspicion toward the needs, wants, and desires expressed by the physical body (3). ‘Denying the flesh,’ as so many Christians are taught to do, also means giving up the possibility of sexual pleasure. Pinn writes, “the ‘What would Jesus do?’ mantra pervaded Black churches as ministers argued...that we were free to do what we will, recognizing that Jesus is in the room with us. That is to say, a proper relationship with Jesus meant stifled and strained relationship with other humans (and ourselves)” (5).

Here, Pinn draws a telling portrait of how some preachers attempt to ‘scare’ congregants
so that they will not engage in what evangelicals would believe is illicit sexuality. Pinn and others, such as Katie G. Cannon argue that the struggle between the 'flesh' and 'the Spirit' have meant a 'restricted sexual agency' for black Christians (Cannon). In their reading of black sexuality and evangelical churches, liberation and womanist theologians assert that African American Christians cannot operate freely within in their sexual relationships for fear of displeasing God. As Cannon writes, “[t]he vast majority of black churchwomen live in the midst of two competing sexual realities. Either sex is a positive blessing for procreative purposes only, or sex is a negative curse that lays claim to bodily pleasure, contaminating the mind.” (11) Cannon, Pinn, and Kelly Brown Douglas call for a reinterpretation of Biblical passages about sexuality so that black Christians will not be afraid of sexual exploration and desire3. Pinn, Douglas and Cannon, three of the most prominent black theologians who discuss sexuality, draw a limited picture of how nuanced the preaching of sex and sexuality is within black churches: their assessment does not include ministries that attempt to heal victims of molestation and sexual abuse or the open secret of sexual affairs within churches. They also do not discuss how black church cultural representations privilege sexual encounters.

It is difficult to imagine evangelicals reinterpreting Apostle Paul’s writings about sexuality. According to some theologians, many black conservative churches are either silent about sex and sexuality, or preach in such a way that they denounce homosexuality. They note that the unwillingness to discuss sexuality is an issue related to both the Apostle Paul’s writings and the desire to be seen as ‘respectable.’ As

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3 Douglas, Sexuality and the Black Church; Pinn, Introduction to Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic; Cannon, “Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority”
Douglas and Cannon argue, the overlapping histories of exploration, scientific racism, and slavery mean that black bodies have and continue to be read as hypersexual. Therefore, black churches and communities are “reluctant to engage in frank and comprehensive sexual discourse because of the way Blacks’ sexuality has been exploited” (Douglas 8). Cannon cites Higginbotham, who has written at length about the ways in which women within the black Baptist church had to perform “politics of respectability.” Challenged by the negative stereotypes which asserted that black women were sexually licentious, African American Christian women during the Progressive Era did what they could to destroy these images by participating in a culture of racial uplift. Those who promoted respectability hoped that other African Americans would follow suit, and that white people would be shown that African Americans could be respected. Higginbotham writes, the “politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform...” By promoting “temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity,” black women redefined themselves. Cannon argues that black Christian women should no longer have to live in between the “the razor-blade tensions of heteronormativity and hypersexuality” (12), and that they can and should no longer worry about being respectable, but redefine what healthy sexual relationships are, rather than limiting the conversation to heterosexual marital relationships.

Although respectability politics emerged from black churches during the Progressive Era, it impacted the larger black community, including those who were not Christians. Higginbotham writes, “[t]he church played the single most important role in influencing normative values and distinguishing respectable from non-respectable
behavior among working class blacks” (204). Furthermore, although the concerns about race representation have altered since the Progressive Era, the desire to maintain respectability is more active than ever in the 21st century, especially amongst black Christians. Mark Anthony Neal points out⁴, “the current discourse of Black respectability is driven by desires within the Black middle class to protect their hard-earned social gains; no longer a movement about uplift, current efforts find their energies in notions of maintenance and expansion.” Neal’s keynote address begins with Steve Harvey’s transformation from profane comedian to public Christian. Neal’s speech also discusses gospel singer and preacher Donnie McClurkin’s renunciation of homosexual desire. Neal argues that black men are under an extreme pressure to “fulfill desires within Black communities for performances of black masculinity that are no longer viable or sustainable--if they ever were.” Both McClurkin and Harvey are a part of black churches, and their push for respectability comes from those spaces, as well as the black community as a whole. Other faith systems, such as the Nation of Islam, also adhere to respectability politics; however, the history of black respectability suggests it will always be somewhat tethered to Christian principles and black churches.

It is therefore no surprise that black churchmembers who are not heterosexual or who reject performances of heteronormativity are often excluded from the community, or worse, are rejected from it (Douglas). In “The Black Church and the Curious Body of the Black Homosexual,” Victor Anderson argues that black churches are not silent about matters of sex and sexuality, but instead, their preoccupation with it takes the form of rhetorical violence against black homosexual bodies. He examines the ways black churches are automatically read as ‘progressive’ because of their willingness to fight for

racial justice. He writes: “Given their attempts to be faithful both to their religious beliefs and social interests, as they participate in the private and public realms, typically progressive Black Christian clergy may be conservative on the morality of homosexuality, and they may be progressive on civil rights without falling into moral contradiction, that is, unless homosexual sexual practices are regarded by them as a matter of civil and human rights” (299). Here, Anderson defines the public realm as 'civil rights', and the private realm as issues related to 'marriage, family and sex.' The division between these two realms means that black clergymen can participate in select civil rights issues that relate to the LGBTQ community and also maintain their theological stance that homosexual sexual practices and marriage is sinful. While others, such as cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson, express surprise and indignation at this divide, Anderson expresses a more realistic perspective about the paradoxical nature of black clergymen and black churches.

Anderson’s essay provides much needed depth to the conversation about theology and black sexuality: he recognizes the limitations of the cultural critics, sociologists, and theologians who have attempted to define “the black church” as a political site which can be easily read as liberal or conservative. Anderson also understands (and disagrees with) conservative black churches that continue to read homosexuality as sinful. Anderson’s essay eloquently demonstrates the ongoing debate amongst black Christians about sexuality. Black liberation and womanist theologians and conservative, evangelical black clergymen and church members will most likely never agree on a singular interpretation about sexuality. This is only one issue that demonstrates the
complexity of black churches. Ultimately, he argues that black churches are complicated, human communities which represent multiple perspectives. He writes,

“I am not puzzled by the paradoxical conservatism of the Black Church on homosexuality. We all seek faithfully to negotiate our commitments toward promoting in the public realm the civil and human rights of all without regard for race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. We all (including Black gays and lesbians) also seek to be faithful sustainers of norms and values that enrich the private realm of marriage, family, and sex, even if we have disagreement on what those norms and values should be. However, unlike any other mediating institution of civil society and the Black community, the Church is one place where our public and private commitments meet (310).

To extend Anderson’s argument, I suggest that the performed black church becomes the site where the public and private realms converge. Black churches challenge congregants to consider issues related to both realms; the performed black church in popular culture represents situations where civil rights and marriage, family, and sex intersect. In the performed black church, audience members are encouraged to consider the ethics of being involved in civil rights issues and developing better relationships. This is most apparent in Tyler Perry’s work, as the courthouse and prison exist alongside Madea’s home and the neighborhood black church or black church culture. In *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, when children are caught stealing, Madea chooses not to report it, instead allowing them work as a punishment. In Perry’s films, black communities are presented as largely autonomous, self-governing spaces. Audience members watching
Perry’s films or plays can consider the intersection between civil rights and marriage, family, and sex.

**Black Theology and Black Popular Culture**

Black and womanist theologians have often used African American cultural texts to examine how secular texts contain the spiritual sensibilities that arise from the wide range of experiences that black people have. Because black liberation theology was developed in response to the black power movement, the earliest proponents used “bottom up” theories to see how Christianity related to the experiences of African Americans, making such an analysis necessary. James Cone's Spirituals and the Blues examines both sacred and secular forms of music to find the theological impulses within African American communities. His work inspired other studies, which connect African American literature and theology, or now, black churches and hip hop culture.

Womanists, also, have used literary texts to inform the construction of their theology. They use Alice Walker's definition of womanism to inform their understanding of womanist theology. According to Pinn, womanists turn to African American cultural production because black women, who have been excluded from the mainstream, share their ideas about faith in fiction, films, music and other forms of artistic expression. At the end of her book Sexuality and the Black Church, Kelly Brown Douglas reminds her audience that black popular culture is a space where spirituality and sexuality mingle:

“We cannot avoid noting that the popular culture of Black youth reveals a side of Black sexuality. Typically, popular culture also offers a portrait of Black spirituality as movies

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5 James Cone *For My People*
6 The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide; Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual sensibilities of Rap Music are two of many titles which investigate this relationship
7 Creating Ourselves: African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression
or song lyrics variously speak of God (136).” There is no better space to examine the intersections of black sexuality and spirituality than black popular culture. Where theologians look to secular texts to see what is sacred, I examine a range of texts to see how both the sacred and secular unite in black church culture. The Apostle Paul may have divided the flesh and the Spirit, but both are present in texts that represent black church culture.

Current theologians argue that there is a need for more critical scholarship on both popular culture and black sexuality. I seek to fill this gap by closely reading constructions of race, gender, and sexuality in contemporary representations of the black church in popular culture. Black popular culture is “an arena of daily life...that actualizes, engenders, operationalizes, or signifies pleasure, enjoyment, and amusement according to the beliefs, values, experiences, and social institutions of people of African descent...” (Nelson) As Stuart Hall notes, black popular culture is a site of contestation which combines European ideologies and African heritage. This combination makes black popular culture “subversive.” If Hall is correct, then the black church in popular culture is doubly subversive; it is informed by European and African ideologies as well as sacred and secular elements. This hybridity of cultures means that texts about black church culture often contain moments of tension, such as sex scenes in a text that promotes purity, or a black male character who dresses up as a woman but espouses an evangelical interpretation of Christianity. Popular representations of black church culture are therefore ideologically messy spaces.

8 Creating Ourselves: African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression
9 Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic
11 What is this “Black” in Black Popular Culture?
Performances of black church culture are both representational and instructive; they show audiences ‘what the black church is’ without fully defining it. In black popular culture, performers often reference an indefinable, yet recognizable black essence. Of this exchange, historian Kennell Jackson writes, “performances [of black cultural material] seem to work best at projecting their representation when they are broadly suggestive about blacks and black culture, when they allow the audience to insert its own ideas into the performance.” He goes on to discuss how African American comedians refer to a black essence: “Oh you know us,” says Steve Harvey. D. L. Hughley is blunter: ‘we do shit different,’ and ‘we are different.’ Cedric the Entertainer says, ‘White people live by a different creed, and black people live by a whole different creed.’ Never is the quality they allude to exactly defined. By making this essence broad, the Kings allow the audience to see themselves in this black folk-geist. Each time they cite this black essence, the crowd gets excited. It is like talking about a very public secret” (5). Representations of the black church in popular culture are no different: those who are familiar with black church culture attest to the authenticity of the performance through laughter. Most comedic performances rely upon caricature or exaggeration. These performances may not be realistic representations of African American culture; instead, audiences recognize the spirit of truth within the exaggeration. The actual performance is not authentic, but it invokes a sense of authenticity and nostalgia within the performer and the audience members. Stuart Hall writes, “Good black popular culture can pass the test of authenticity.” Black church representations, therefore, are difficult to define, but easily recognized by those who are a part of its culture. Black church culture is signified through styles of worship, such as
‘shouting,’ praying, and speaking in tongues, as well as spirituals, gospel songs, and rap music (which either references the Bible extensively or samples widely recognizable songs used in black churches). Black church culture is signified through church scenes wherein most of the congregation and the leadership is black, and there is call and response during the sermon (or throughout the service). References to leaders, groups, and celebratory moments within black churches are also common in black church culture representations. There are comments about the deacon board, the ushers, choirs, bishop, the First Lady (the pastor’s wife), various funds, the ‘mortgage burning ceremony, church anniversaries and conferences. Finally, these representations can extend beyond the boundaries of the black church setting. In representations of black church culture, characters can and do use these elements outside of black church buildings, such as “shouting” in a store when there is a sale.

The Black Church in Popular Culture

The black church has a long history of representation in American literature, stage plays and films. In the 18th and 19th centuries slave narratives, speeches, essays and poetry depicted the experiences of enslaved African American Christians. The majority of the texts used the Bible to argue against the institution of slavery, and often exposed the hypocrisy of white Christian slaveowners. Other texts, such as Frances E.W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892), marry racial uplift with the Christian faith. Throughout the 20th century, African American authors used the Bible and the Christian faith in nuanced ways. In some folklore, a Bible story is used as a source for the narrative. In other novels, such as *Quicksand*, and much later, James Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain*
(1953) a Langston Hughes’ *Tambourines to Glory*, Countee Cullen’s *One Way to Heaven*, and others represent the complex experiences that African Americans have with Christianity and salvation (or the act of becoming a Christian). In contemporary African American literature, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, and Gloria Naylor use Biblical imagery and explore African American spirituality in their work.

Religion was also often central to race films of the 1930s and 1940s. These films such as *Hallelujah* (1929) *The Blood of Jesus* (1941) and *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) depicted all-black casts, black church scenes and conversations about salvation. These films meant to engage a black Christian audience. Judith Weisenfeld writes, “white director DeMille saw great potential in the cinema as a vehicle for religious instruction and delivered many religious spectacles and biblical epics in the 1920s and 1930s and again in the 1950s (2). These portrayals were restricted by Hollywood’s interpretation of religion and race; African American theatre, however was a space where black playwrights had more autonomy in exploring black religious themes (). Throughout the 20th century, black popular plays depicted the relationship black communities have with God.

In the late 20th century, popular African American sitcoms such as *The Cosby Show, Martin,* and *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* all included at least one church scene. The show *Amen*, which ran from 1986 to 1991, focused on a deacon, his family, and the relationships of those in his congregation. Black romantic comedies of the 1990s also represented the black church. In many of these more recent representations, the black church remains firmly in the background. With the exception of a few films and television shows such as *The Preacher’s Wife* (1996) and *Amen*, black churches are not
central to these narratives. Black church scenes in otherwise secular films and sitcoms were a way to signal to the audience that black churches are a part of black culture. For many of the scenes, black churches were backdrops for a more interesting narrative. In *Two Can Play that Game* (2001) and *Deliver Us from Eva* (2003), for example, the church scenes are sites for gossip and plot twists. An earlier romantic comedy, *The Best Man* (1998), examines the complicated position of being a black Christian through the lens of two characters who are getting married; however, even this film, which includes several church scenes and at least one heartfelt prayer, does not engage black church culture. Black churches are a part of these texts, but Christianity is not a theme or focus of the texts. The characters may go to a black church, but they are not impacted by nor do they represent black church culture.

In the early 21st century, there was a revival in representations about the black church across genre. Revival is a term often used by Christians to mark a large, spiritual event that encourages people to have or renew their faith in God. These texts attempt to do this work; however, it is also a ‘revival’ in the sense that Christianity in African American literature and popular culture has always been present, but has lately been more fully integrated in mainstream Hollywood and the publishing industry. In these representations of black church culture, Tyler Perry, T.D. Jakes, Steve Harvey, and the authors of black popular Christian fiction are not necessarily doing something new; they add to a longstanding discourse about the ways in which black people negotiate their lives as Christians. Their texts hold more similarities to the didactic films and plays of the early 20th century than the texts from the 1980s and 1990s, when the black church in mainstream popular culture was merely a symbol of spirituality. In the 1980s and 1990s,
the representations were about black culture; these representations were, instead, about black church culture, and often incorporate an evangelical interpretation of Christianity. Tyler Perry’s first major play, *I Know I Been Changed*, toured from 1998-1999. The play started in a church-turned-theatre, and was about surviving sexual abuse with the help of God. Perry’s work is a part of a longer tradition of popular plays within African American communities. In “Chitlin Circuit,” Henry Louis Gates describes the genre of plays as “basically a melodrama, with abundant comic relief and a handful of gospel songs interspersed (141). These plays, which have and continue to gross millions of dollars, draw a mainly black audience that actively interacts with the performance.

*I Know I Been Changed* received strong reviews from Washington Post. It was described as the most “well-produced Gospel show they had ever seen.” Bishop T.D. Jakes, one of the most prominent Christian leaders in America, watched the show, and asked Perry to produce his play, *Woman Thou Art Loosed*. After Perry rewrote, produced and directed Jakes’ play, it opened in 1999 and toured to sold out, standing room only venues. Perry and Jakes continued to work together on other projects, and now have expanded their empires from church plays to mainstream films. The film, *Woman Thou Art Loosed* was released in 2004, and Perry’s *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* was released in 2005. The success of these films indicated that Hollywood could financially profit from narratives about black women and the black church.

While black, churchgoing audience members attended church plays and films, many of them were also enjoying books from Walk Worthy Press, a publishing imprint for black Christian fiction and nonfiction. In 2000, literary agent Denise Stinson

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15 *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*
partnered with Warner Books to create Walk Worthy Press. Of this venture, journalist Martin Arnold writes, “given how dynamic a force the church and religion are in African-American tradition and culture, it is somewhat surprising that no mainstream publishing house has devoted an imprint to black Christian fiction and nonfiction until now.”\(^{16}\) Christian popular fiction has always existed in some form; however, most of the books were about white Christians. The creation of Walk Worthy Press led to hundreds of black Christian popular novels that more accurately reflects black life and worship than white Christian popular fiction. Hachette Livre acquired Time Warner in 2006, and Walk Worthy Press seemed to go by the wayside. However, the authors from Walk Worthy Press, such as Victoria Christopher Murray, Jacquelin Thomas, Michele Andrea Bowen and others, continue to publish. The genre of “Urban Christian” or “Black Christian Fiction” has since expanded considerably.

These stage performances, films, and novels are forms of entertainment; yet, many of them also aim to do a larger, spiritual work for the audience members. As mega churches gain a great deal of financial capital, most actively work to spread their beliefs via mainstream media, with the hopes that people will either become Christians or be encouraged by the messages they offer. Some of these churches have moved from televised evangelism and performances that were for church members and friends to creating entertainment intended for a larger, popular audience. These forms of entertainment also provide a possible respite for Christians who don’t want to be “tainted” by explicit media.

Although white and black evangelical Christians share the same or similar theological interpretations of the Bible, there is still a racial divide in how texts

representing Christian cultures are written, promoted, consumed, and reviewed. For example, *Fireproof* (2008), was a surprising hit. Described as a “Christian themed film,” *Fireproof* was about a white, married couple on the brink of divorce. Alex and Stephen Kendrick, screenwriters for this and two other Christian films, have become known as the “Christian Coen Brothers.” An article revealed the connection between filmmaking and spirituality: “For the Kendricks, ‘Fireproof’ is more than a film, it’s a mission...” Some people are out there to win an Oscar, and we’re looking to win people’s hearts, said McBride...the executive producer of ‘Fireproof.’ We’re in this for the ministry aspect of it.” The article on ABC, titled “Fireproof Shows Christian Movies Sell” ignored the fact that Tyler Perry, at this point a prominent filmmaker, made Christian themed films for the past 7 years, with increasing financial success. At the time of this article, Perry released several films; at least two of them, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) and *Madea’s Family Reunion* (2006), were films in which the main characters returned to the Christian faith. The financial success of these films were also surprising; *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* was number 1 on the opening weekend with $21 million in sales. Two years later, *Fireproof* was number 4 with $6.8 million in ticket sales. Yet, in this article about Christian movies selling well, there was no mention of Tyler Perry’s success. The refusal to acknowledge or connect the success of African American Christian filmmakers with white Christian filmmakers demonstrates the divide between black and white Christian entertainment.

Black and white creators of Christian popular culture are invested in using these texts as a ministry. Denise Stinson, the former head of Walk Worthy Press stated,

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“Hebrews 12:21 directs Christians to be involved in ‘noble activities’...[h]ow noble are trashy movies? How noble is sexually explicit music? How noble is reading books that don’t glorify God?” Stinson’s stance succinctly articulates what others felt—that black Christians need forms of entertainment that represent both their lives and their faith. Black Christians were usually not represented in white Christian popular culture, and had limited representation in black popular culture. Furthermore, some black Christians did not want to consume mainstream popular culture because of their faith. Therefore, black Christians had to represent themselves.

The combination of the rise of black mega-churches, and the financial success gained through them, the popularity of Tyler Perry’s stage plays, and the creation of a new genre of black popular Christian fiction led to a movement of the black church in popular culture. Since 1998, there have been more plays, films, films about church plays, and books that feature the black church and black Christians. Even secular rap artists, such as Game, Nicki Minaj, and Kanye West have recognized that referencing the black church in their music could be profitable. In 2013, short YouTube videos that make fun of black church culture are regularly released by The Playmakers, a black, Christian, all-male comedy team, and Lexi, a black, Christian female comedian. Issa Rae, the creator of Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl, recently started a YouTube show about black church culture called The Choir. Additionally, reality television has come knocking on the doors of several prominent preachers, most of them black. Oxygen’s Preachers of LA, which aired Fall 2013, is a highly rated reality show about five black preachers, and one white preacher, and their wives or girlfriends (some of whom are also preachers). Almost daily, there are new films, videos, songs, and plays

that are about black church culture. In this current moment, representations of the black
curch can neither be escaped nor ignored.

Sacred Sexuality

Many of the texts I examine represent a conservative, evangelical interpretation
of Christianity. Theologians believe that black churches don’t talk about sex; however,
black churches in popular culture constantly represent sexual situations between
heterosexual couples. These texts, which support an evangelical interpretation of the
Bible, establish what I refer to as sacred sexuality. Sacred sexuality is when black,
Christian, heterosexual couples who are either courting with the intention of marriage, or
who are married, discuss sex, display their attraction for one another in thoughts, speech,
or engage in sexual acts. These texts represent heterosexual relationships as a way to
reinforce evangelical interpretations of sexuality. There are three consistent principles
invoked: no sex before marriage; have sex consistently and in creative ways once a
heterosexual couple is married; and divorce, while allowed, should be carefully
considered. These texts occupy an interesting space in the current conversation about
sexuality. They don’t represent the position of black liberation and womanist
theologians; however, they also do not yield to the restrictive representations of sex in
many white evangelical Christian popular texts--an issue I explore further in the first
chapter.

In the following chapters, I critically read texts created by African Americans
who are closely connected to black churches. The texts have all been published or

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19 The term ‘sacred sex’ has been used in multiple contexts; Sexuality and the Sacred (2010) was the title
of an anthology that explores multiple religions and their views on ethics and sexual relationships. I use
the term to connote the ways black creators of popular Christian texts mix sacred and secular elements of
sexual relationships.
produced from 1997 to 2012. In each chapter, I examine how the texts invoke ‘sacred sexuality.’ In the first chapter, “No More Sheets?: Sacred Sex in Black Christian Popular Fiction” I examine the creation of the black popular Christian fiction genre. Walk Worthy Press is the first publishing imprint dedicated to black Christian fiction and non-fiction. The head of Walk Worthy Press, Denise Stinson, was a well connected literary agent who worked for Bishop T.D. Jakes and other high profile black authors. I argue that the first three books of this press depart from the white Christian publishing industry by incorporating extensive sex scenes; however, they engaged in the larger conversation amongst evangelical Christians about purity. In these texts, black women characters are representatives of purity, but also enjoy sexual relationships. In the second chapter, “Dragging the Black Church” I discuss the stage performances of comedians Rickey Smiley, Steve Harvey, and Tyler Perry. I argue that they use drag in order to humorously advance a heteronormative, Christian perspective. Drag also allows these performers to use older, powerful black women’s bodies to represent the black church as they discuss everything from orderly behavior in church to surviving domestic abuse.

In the third chapter, “Bad” Black Mothers and Rape in Black Church Films” I closely read Woman thou art Loosed, which is based off of the self-help book by T.D. Jakes, and Tyler Perry’s I Can Do Bad all By Myself. Jakes and Perry reveal a history of intraracial, intergenerational sexual abuse in African American communities. They depict black girls and women who either are or were victims of abuse. In my concluding chapter, “Hallelujah and Amen!”: The Secularization of Black Church Music,” I consider how popular rappers Meek Mills and Game appropriate the black church sound to promote ideas that are antithetical to the Christian faith. When read
collectively, these texts demonstrate the importance of black church culture. The representations of race, gender and especially sexuality allow for a call and response between audience members and performers about what the black church is, and what it ought to be in the 21st century.

The black church is dead. At least, the black church that historians, politicians, and theologians refer to no longer exists. Instead, there are a series of black churches that make up a far more interesting range of political and theological positions. The black church in popular culture, however, is alive. The popularity of the texts within the Black Church Revival demonstrates that an essential black church culture can only exist in fictional spaces. I closely read each text to see how the Christian faith, race, gender, and sexuality are interpreted and reconstructed. I believe that the black church in popular culture is “a theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time.” (Hall 113)
CHAPTER 2
No More Sheets?: Sacred Sex in Black Christian Popular Fiction

In the 1990s, there was a resurgence in evangelical Christian campaigns for purity. Much of the media coverage featured white teenagers who made the decision to abstain from sex until marriage. Current scholarship on these purity campaigns focus on how evangelicals use rhetoric to “make chastity sexy.” This critical conversation also notes how black and other women of color are problematically excluded from this dialogue and instead, are positioned as impure and already sexual. In this chapter, I analyze black Christian women’s sexual discourse during the evangelical campaign for purity. In particular, I read the rise of black Christian popular fiction as a discursive space within which black evangelical women are models of purity.

In *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns*, sociologist Christine J. Gardner examines several organizations and their role in abstinence only sex education programs. Gardner argues, “chastity has received a makeover.” She writes, “Evangelicals are using sex to ‘sell’ abstinence, shifting from a negative focus on ‘just say no to sex before marriage to a positive focus on “just say yes” to great sex within marriage” (13). She and others identify two moments that led to a renewed vigor in this evangelical campaign for purity and abstinence only education: the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, and the creation of True Love Waits. One of the goals of the Welfare Reform Act in 1996 was to help reduce teen pregnancies. Since it passed, “more than $1.5 billion in federal funding has supported abstinence-only education in the United States” (2). Feminist scholar Breanne Fahs argues that the Welfare Reform Act “introduced abstinence-only sexual education primarily as a social mechanism of
control over lower-income women of color” (116). Before the Welfare Reform Act, evangelicals were successful in creating a culture outside of public school to advocate ‘sexual purity.’ True Love Waits is a ministry that encourages teenagers to wait until marriage to have sex, and is “widely credited with launching the contemporary evangelical sexual abstinence movement.” It began in 1993 and has since grown exponentially amongst youth groups with the help of wide media attention (7).

Although African American evangelicals hold similar positions on premarital sex, adultery, and abortion\(^\text{20}\), they have not been well-represented in the purity campaigns of the 1990s. Primarily white American evangelicals have been the forefront of abstinence only, courtship, and/or purity campaigns. In an interview, Jessica Valenti, author of *The Purity Myth* states:

“...there is certainly an abstinence movement in communities of color and purity advocates who are people of color – but they're not really shown in the mainstream abstinence movement....What you're also much more likely to see is the white leadership of purity organizations holding up young white women as examples of perfect virgins....When you do see abstinence being targeted at young women of color, there's not the same kind of talk of purity – it's more about targeting a group of women that the movement has already focused on as "troubled," and already-sexual.”

Black women, long considered hypersexual, are locked out of the popular image of a “perfect virgin.” Patricia Hill Collins writes, “women of African descent have been associated with an animalistic, "wild" sexuality.” (27) Black women’s bodies are often stereotyped as already-problematic, overly sexualized, and thus representative of

\(^{20}\) In “From Every Tribe and Nation? Blacks and the Christian Right”
promiscuous behavior which leads to unwanted pregnancies, abortion, or government support. The popular narratives about chastity during the late 1990s and early 2000s suggested that white teenagers represent purity and black women represent promiscuity. If, in the late 1990s, being a black woman meant being read as hypersexual, and being a Christian woman meant abstaining from sex or, in extreme cases, not dating anyone at all, black evangelical women were caught in a cultural and spiritual conundrum.

Therefore, black evangelical women who believed in abstaining from sex before marriage developed their own platform for purity.

Gardner states that evangelicals within purity movements use rhetoric to “make chastity sexy.” They use the promise of ‘good sex’ to encourage single people to wait until marriage to have sex. Gardner offers the following example:

Josh...was pacing the stage. “I’m here to talk about how great sex can be,” he said....Then Josh led the teens in an unusual abstinence cheer: “Sex is great!” The audience repeated the cheer three times, each time gaining in intensity....On the last cheer Josh followed with a clincher: “Sex is great...and it is great, in the context of marriage.” Josh, who had been married for four and a half years, held out his left hand as a camera captured a close-up of his wedding ring, which was projected on the screen with the words “License to Practice” (1-2).

With rallies, t-shirts, purity rings, educational materials for sale, chastity is being ‘sold’ to teenagers as ‘cool.’ Older African American Christians also “make chastity sexy”; however, their campaign necessarily takes a different shape. While mainly white, teenage adolescents are encouraged to look to the future for sexual fulfillment, older black preachers (both male and female) encourage their congregations to renounce their
sexual past and present, and then look to the future. The latter group assumes, perhaps rightfully so, that the majority of their audience members are already engaged in sexual relationships. Furthermore, they also encourage heterosexual, married couples to have ‘good sex’ as a way to stay together.

In *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality and Popular Culture*, sociologist Shayne Lee writes about how black clergywomen engage in sexual discourse. He analyzes the texts of well-known black women evangelists: Ty Adams’ *Single, Saved, and Having Sex*, Juanita Bynum’s sermon, “No More Sheets” (1998). Both Adams and Bynum argue that sex outside of marriage is wrong: however, they also offer extensive details about their past sexual encounters. Lee writes, “[f]or an evangelical tome, the pages of [Adams]’s book flood with conspicuous sexual content....to underscore her points about sin, the evangelist offers countless statements with suggestive expressions like bumping and grinding, putting your mouth on sexual organs, knowing where your spot is...” (86). “No more sheets” is a “metaphor for premarital sexual relationships” (Frederick 161). In this sermon, Bynum speaks frankly about her past, “a not-so-distant period of her life when she sleeps with many men and depends on them for sex, clothes, and money” (89). She argues that women needed to be healed from sexual relationships, including molestation, and that God can do that healing. At the end of the sermon, Bynum walks into the audience and runs with sheets in hand, chanting “No More Sheets.” As Lee notes, videos of Bynum’s sermon sold over a million copies, and sparked “No More Sheets” parties nationwide in which black women assemble in alternating homes to watch the video. Lee continues, “It still remains the preeminent sermon addressing the struggle of many black Christian women
to remain celibate and holy before God while negotiating the passions and sexual longings requisite in their humanity” (88). After Bynum married, she used her fame as a platform to encourage women to have better sex with their husbands. She tells women to “Put that Bible down and put a negligee on and work it!” (qtd in Lee 89).

Lee demonstrates that black evangelical women engaged in their own sexual discourse. As aforementioned, black evangelical women are read as impure because of the negative stereotypes attached to black sexuality. Black liberation, womanist theologians, and feminists disagree with the evangelical interpretations that encourage only heterosexual, married couples to have sex. Although there are many black evangelical women, the intersection of their race, gender, and faith means that there are few people who will consider them models of purity, or see their commitment to celibacy as spiritually sound. Instead, they are dismissed by the larger evangelical movement as being impure, and by theologians and feminists, who believe they are misguided and have a limited sexual agency.

It was therefore imperative that black evangelical women produce and consume texts that upheld their belief to wait until marriage to have sex, but engaged in a sexual discourse that was realistic and spoke to the struggles with temptation that many may have faced. As the titles imply, both Single, Saved, and Having Sex and “No More Sheets” spoke more frankly about sexual struggles than “True Love Waits.” According to Lee, both Ty Adams and Juanita Bynum engage in these ministries to help women make the decision to wait until marriage to have sex. To an evangelical audience, their past sexual experiences would make them seem “impure.” However, their willingness to speak about their past is a way to help audience members make the same decision for
purity. Unlike many white evangelicals, whose focus is on not having sex until marriage, or on sex after marriage, black evangelicals offer a history about their sexual past and how they have and continue to “overcome” sexual desires until they get married. Ty Adams and Juanita Bynum shift the narrative from their promiscuity to their newfound purity, and in doing so, suggest that the sexual sins of their audience members can also be forgiven by God.

These ministries use popular Christian musicians to help advance their message for purity. According to Gardner, True Love Waits and other organizations like it were supported by popular Christian music artists such as Rebecca St James and BarlowGirl. Rebecca St James, an Australian singer, is best known for her song “Wait for Me.” The song asks her future husband to wait until marriage to have sex; in it, she also states that she is waiting and praying for him. Black evangelical women had their own series of popular texts to support sermons and instructional books. The same year that Juanita Bynum preached “No More Sheets,” Trinitee 5:7, a black popular Christian female R&B group, released the song “My Body.” One of the lines of the song states, “Tryin' to save myself don't pressure me/My spirit leads me to celibacy/I have to just be real and I know it's fair/I want to please my God and I don't care/You can just leave now but if you stay/There's gonna be no other way.” Unlike the song by Rebecca St James, which focuses on a future marriage, “My Body” is about sexual desire and temptation. The music video displays moments of tension between black men and women in different dating situations. Trinitee 5:7 takes the Apostle Paul’s stance and position the spirit against the flesh: either the speaker pleases God or a man. The “pressure” doesn’t come from the speaker’s own sexual desire, but from the man who wants to have sex with her.
In both Rebecca St James and Trinitee 5:7’s songs, the men to whom they are speaking are silent; however, the former focuses on a future relationship, while the latter focuses on a present struggle. Furthermore, Rebecca St James, who sings repeatedly “I’m waiting for/praying for you darling/wait for me too” barely hints at sex, while Trinitee 5:7 more directly confronts the temptation for premarital sex. When they sing, “Tell you what I’m gonna do/I’ll pray for you,” they use the promise of prayer as a dismissal, and suggest they are praying for their men to get help, rather than pray for a future marriage. Finally, Trinitee 5:7 repeatedly sings they are “God’s property.” Given the long history of black women who were enslaved and considered the property of others, it is interesting that they use this term as a way to free them from a potential sexual encounter.

In addition to songs, popular Christian fiction also supported messages about purity. However, like the marked differences between ‘True Love Waits’ and ‘No More Sheets’, as well as “Wait for Me” and “My Body,” black popular Christian fiction is considered more risque than white popular Christian fiction. Lee is the only scholar who includes popular black Christian novels in his assessment of sexual discourse amongst evangelicals. Lee writes, “black female novelists explore how Christians navigate around the landmines of sexual temptation and desire in the black church” (83). Indeed, black Christian popular fiction is a fruitful space to examine how sexuality is configured in black churches. Although Douglass and other theologians write that black churches do not discuss sex or sexuality, black churches in Christian popular fiction constantly depict sexual relationships, and, at times, sermons about sex. I contend that black Christian popular fiction is one of the most important spaces within which black
women’s sexual discourse develops. Unlike sermons, black popular fiction is intentionally a form of entertainment. While authors are limited to the restrictions of publishers (and, to a certain extent, their fans), they are not necessarily beholden to a congregation in the same ways that a pastor is. Black Christian popular fiction is a space in which authors can more fully explore sex. As scholar Tony Bennett writes, “popular fictions...help to define our sense of ourselves...an understanding of such fictions...is thus central to an understanding of ourselves, of how those selves have been shaped and of how they might be changed” (1). An examination of black Christian popular fiction allows us to better understand the beliefs, ethics, and relationships that shape the lives and ‘selves’ within the black Christian counterpublic.

Although there are a few critical studies on popular fiction, it is still a field that has not been fully explored. Popular fiction is understudied because scholars either focus on literary texts, or other forms of popular culture. Popular fiction “is often subsumed under the umbrella of popular culture. This is a mistake: just as film and television have developed their own approaches that reflect the unique social, cultural, political and industrial dimensions of each medium, so popular fiction should occupy its own space” (Schneider-Mayerson 21). Black popular fiction is a subset of an already understudied field. While there are numerous studies on visual and aural forms of black popular culture, black popular fiction remains almost untouched by both literary and popular culture scholars. The few studies on black popular fiction focus on street literature and its connection to the hip hop industry and culture.

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21 Popular Fiction: the Logics and Practices of a Literary Field; Reading By Numbers: Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction; Language in Popular fiction; Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender, and Popular Fiction; Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature.
22 “I’m Goin Pimp Whores!”: The Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip Hop Neo-Slave Narrative;
There are also few studies on Christian popular fiction, and unsurprisingly, almost none on black Christian popular fiction. In the Library Journal article, “Christian Fiction: A Born-Again Genre,” Duncan offers a definition of Christian fiction and its audience: “With its focus on biblical values and traditionally low emphasis on profanity, sex, and violence, Christian fiction...has long been popular with a certain readership, mostly white, female, and coming from an evangelical Protestant Background.” In the introduction to *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, the editors acknowledge the rise of Christian chick lit, or ‘church lit,’ which has its own genres of “faith-based versions of adolescent chick lit, mommy lit, southern lit, and African American lit” (6). However, this characterization of Christian popular fiction belies the importance and the longevity of this field. Grace Livingston Hill, a white author, is considered a pioneer of Christian romance novels; her work was first published in 1877. Hill wrote 117 novels. Frances E.W. Harper was a 19th century African American author who also wrote short fiction and novels meant for Sunday School instruction. Mort, however, either does not know or does not consider work by Harper and others ‘Christian romance novels.’ 19th and early 20th century African American writers were published in <> According to him, Janette Oke’s popular series *Love Comes Softly* (1979) is widely recognized as the foundation of contemporary evangelical fiction (Mort 122). Mort writes, “in the years before Janette Oke made her mark, Christian romance readers lamented that there was nothing to read but Grace Livingston Hill, and they were nearly right...only Hill combined love stories with an overtly Christian message” (Mort 30). Mort’s guide is a helpful overview of the different genres within Christian fiction; however, while he dedicates an entire chapter

to Western Romance, African American Christian fiction is, once again, limited to a list of a few short titles. He writes, “Only a few years ago, readers couldn’t have found an African American who wrote Christian fiction. That’s no longer true” (209). Given the extensive history and complicated relationship that African Americans have had with Christianity and the black church, it is preposterous to believe that there were no African Americans who wrote Christian fiction. Mort’s statement problematically assumes that African Americans were not writing Christian fiction instead of considering a publishing industry that may not have welcomed those texts. As a 2001 New York Times article points out, “until fairly recently there were only two major book companies committed to publishing lines of fiction (not romances) and nonfiction by black writers on black subjects. Now there are five….it was as if publishing had suddenly awakened to the idea that African-Americans will buy great numbers of books if the stories or material are relevant to them.”

It is not that African Americans were not writing popular texts, or Christian popular texts, but that they were not welcome within the publishing industry until recently. Because Mort’s study is limited to popular fiction, he did not consider the African American authors who write extensively about spirituality or Christianity, such as James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Gloria Naylor and others. Lee briefly mentions that black women novelists continue Baldwin’s examination of the sexual dynamic of the black church; however, I would argue that Baldwin’s depiction of sexuality and spirituality is far more complex than the black popular fiction titles Lee mentions.

Literary agent Denise Stinson echoes and reframes Mort’s statement in the New York Times article, “Making Books; Heeding a Call of the Faithful” (2001). Of the

dearth of African American Christian fiction, she states: “I couldn’t find much that I really wanted to read.” To fill this void, Stinson partnered with Warner Books to create Walk Worthy Press in 2000. This was the first mainstream publishing imprint for black Christian fiction and nonfiction. Warner Books realized that there was a viable market for black Christian fiction: according to Jamie Raab, a publisher at Warner Books, “75 percent of African American book buyers are also Christian-book readers” (Arnold).

Stinson was successful in building a network that created and consumed black Christian popular fiction. Before this moment, there wasn’t an identifiable genre; however, now there exist several genres within black Christian popular fiction. Michele Andrea Bowen, the third author to be published by Walk Worthy Press, writes on her website, “I am categorized as writing in the genre of Black Christian Fiction, which is relatively new, making it’s mark in November 2000 when Victoria Christopher Murray’s book, Temptation, was released...Since that time, there has been a wonderful increase in novels about African American Christian Life and Culture. I am blessed to have been a part of this incredible endeavor early on.” Bowen’s categorization of her novels, and the New York Times articles by Martin Arnold are useful in that they clearly identify the origin of black Christian popular fiction with Denise Stinson’s creation of Walk Worthy Press and subsequent publication of Murray’s Temptation. When Hachette Livre acquired Time Warner in 2006, Walk Worthy Press went by the wayside, and the authors either were published by Hachette Livre or others, like Murray switched to Simon and Schuster. Despite the dissolution of Walk Worthy Press, Stinson was successful in using it to start a new genre.
From the beginning of Walk Worthy Press, Denise Stinson only accepted books that would communicate a certain type of Christian perspective. The publisher’s note states:

“[a]lthough our books are primarily fiction, our goal is to help our readers grow spiritually strong by publishing creative, contemporary and entertaining material with a Christian theme or message consistent with the Bible.”

The first novels published under Walk Worthy Press not only marked the beginning of contemporary African American Christian Fiction, but also provided a model of how to talk about sex while also respecting the limitations and boundaries of their understanding of the Christian faith. Victoria Christopher Murray’s Temptation is about a married couple who struggles with infidelity. Jacqueline Thomas’ SingSation is about a Christian black woman who goes to Hollywood to be a backup singer for an R&B star, and finds herself amongst people whose values are different from her own. Finally, Michele Andrea Bowen’s *Church Folk* is a novel about black churches during the Civil Rights Movement, and the lives of the characters therein. *Temptation, SingSation, and Church Folk* depict conversations between characters about sex and how to deal with temptation in romantic relationships. These novels, much like the other types of texts within popular black church culture, all promoted sacred sexuality. Sacred sexuality occurs when black, Christian, heterosexual couples who are either courting with the intention of marriage, or who are married, discuss sex, display their attraction for one another in thoughts, speech, or engage in sexual acts. Although Christians from all racial and cultural backgrounds can engage in this behavior, African American cultural texts demonstrate sexual desire in more explicit ways than mainstream evangelical texts.
Demonstration of sexual situations, even in Christian texts, is not always embraced by Christians. Black Christian popular fiction was in a unique position: up until its existence, the majority of Christian fiction featured white characters. Profane language, sex, or violence were almost nonexistent within the novels. On the other hand, black popular fiction had all three.

Authors of black Christian popular fiction found a way to write narratives that included some profane language, sex and violence, while also offering a perspective wherein characters were ultimately encouraged to have a relationship with Christ. Because these authors walked a line between the sacred and profane, the early novels by Walk Worthy Press were not immediately well received by the Christian publishing industry. The review of Singsation by Publisher’s Weekly states, “The novel pushes the parameters of traditional Christian fiction with characters who have long discussions about underwear and thongs, engage in some French kissing and exclaim,"Oh my God!" The sexual situations aren't graphic, but they are more titillating than most CBA readers are used to, although noticeably toned down from Walk Worthy's first book.” Although the novels were risque, they filled a need in the market. They did well amongst audience members. Temptation was on the Essence bestseller’s list for nine consecutive months, and was nominated for an NAACP Image Award in Literature. Church Folk was also an Essence bestseller.

In Temptation, Kyla and Jefferson Blake have had a happy marriage for 16 years. One night, Jefferson has sex with Kyla’s best friend, Jasmine, which threatens their marriage. Jasmine believes that Jefferson is the man she ought to be with, and plans to destroy their marriage so that they can get married. By the end of the novel, however,
Kyla and Jefferson have extensive counseling and renew their vows. Jasmine becomes a Christian. Kyla’s other friend, Alexis, struggles to remain celibate while dating Brian. Alexis and Brian get engaged by the end of the novel after a short courtship. Singsation follows Deborah Anne Peterson, a singer who is discovered by rapper Triage Blue on one of his trips to his home church. While in Hollywood and on tour with a popular R&B singer, Deborah meets people who are alcoholics, use recreational drugs and have sex with multiple partners. Through her lived example, she encourages them to live their lives differently or to become Christians. Deborah helps Triage to take his relationship with Christ seriously; after they start dating, they abstain from having sex until they get married. Both books end with marriage ceremonies and a sex scene.

There are several similarities amongst Temptation and Singsation. First, both of them are set in the early 2000s, the time period in which the books were published. Both texts also depict an all-black world with African Americans who are college educated and have a great deal of financial success. In Temptation, two of the male characters are doctors who own an African American practice; Kyla is a stay at home wife and mother who was once a CPA accountant; Alexis is a former model who owns her own business; and Jasmine is up for a promotion at her job. In Singsation, the main character, Deborah Anne Peterson and all of the characters in the music industry are financially successful. There are no white characters in either text; even scenes in Hollywood have all black characters. This mirrors other black popular texts created during this time period: late 1990s and early 2000s popular fiction by Omar Tyree, Eric Jerome Dickey, Terry McMillan, carefully depicted all or mostly black worlds where there were a preponderance of financially successful characters.
Temptation and Singsation both advocate abstinence until marriage and fidelity after marriage. Both novels also show that Christians should not judge others, but instead lead lives so that others will be inspired to believe in Christ. The novels do rebel however: unlike other Christian texts, these books suggest that it is okay for women to date men who do not believe in Christ, or those who do not know much about the faith. I cannot overstate how radical this point is. During this moment in most evangelical circles, it was unacceptable for women to accept the attention of men who were not Christians. 2 Corinthians 6:14 is one of the most popular verses that many use to discourage Christians from dating outside the faith. It states: “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?” The dominant idea is that, if one dates outside of his or her faith, the non-Christian will ‘corrupt’ the Christian, who will walk away from his/her faith. There are other Christian novels that depict this situation: Mort’s guide calls this “unequally yoked Christian romance.” However, in most of the Christian novels he lists, the heroines end romantic relationships when the man is not a Christian. Mort writes, “[m]any Christian romances portray love between a believer and an unbeliever; the unbeliever must be saved for romance to succeed. Sometimes it doesn’t happen...but in either case the lesson of the verse in Corinthians is brought home” (144). Temptation and Singsation initially move away from this trend. In Temptation, Kyla and Jefferson date, although Jefferson isn’t a Christian. In Singsation, Triage Blue is a Christian who is removed from his faith. However, by the end of both novels, both men become strong Christians. Kyla and Deborah lead their respective men to church, and then to Christ, instead of walking away from their faith.
After their first kiss, Kyla tells Jefferson that she is a virgin. Undeterred, Jefferson asks Kyla out again, with the intention of discovering whether or not she would eventually be willing to have sex with him.

“Well...uh, I know some Christian girls who aren’t virgins.”

She hunched her shoulders. “I can’t talk for anyone else, I can only talk about me. I made a vow when I was thirteen years old through a program at my church. I vowed then that I would remain celibate until marriage. I don’t think I really knew what that meant back then, but as I’ve gotten older, it has become really important to me.” (120-1)

Kyla’s vow of celibacy establishes her as a woman who grew up within a church that prioritized public declarations about purity. Many teenagers had ceremonies wherein they pledged their intention to wait until marriage to have sex. These ceremonies were made popular by the True Love Waits organization. Murray’s decision to incorporate this flashback within the novel demonstrates the existence of black girls who choose to be abstinent and black women who are fully capable of maintaining that vow in moments of temptation.

A similar scene takes place in Singsation, when Triage proposes that he and Deborah have sex.

““My virginity is going to be a gift to my husband,” she explained.

“You’re kidding, right?”....”Man I didn’t know there were people who still felt that way.”

“I know, but this is something that I’ve wanted to do since I was a very young girl. And I only have one chance to do it right.”
“But who says this isn’t right? I’m falling in love with you, Deborah, and I know that there’s nothing wrong with two people expressing how they feel about each other.”

“I can quote you scripture after scripture that says this is right, Triage. God says that fornication is not for our body and that we should flee from it. But I don’t want to lecture you, and I’m not trying to judge you. I’m just telling you what’s right for me” (220-1).

Like Murray, Thomas also shows how a woman in the 21st century can communicate a desire to abstain from having sex. Thomas uses the language of the True Love Waits organization. Deborah views her virginity as a gift for her husband. Fah notes, the True Love Waits organization states that “ministers should say to their female Bible students, ‘Sex is an incredible gift within the marriage covenant but it destroys the lives of those outside God’s plan (120). Thomas uses this principle and the scene to offer readers a sample discussion about premarital sex. Deborah becomes an example for the readers, as she politely rejects Triage’s advances, and even alludes to bible verses she memorized, a strategy many Christians use to avoid temptation of any kind. Deborah says that she doesn’t want to lecture Triage, yet, the author does offer her readers a mini-sermon during this scene.

Both authors attempt to craft an evangelical perspective on sex without making their protagonists unlikeable characters who nag their boyfriends. Kyla states, “I can’t talk about anybody else, I can only talk about me,” and Deborah says, “I’m not trying to judge you. I’m just telling you what’s right for me.” Both women assert that virginity is a personal choice that is right for each of them; yet the novels are, in a sense, preaching to a much larger audience and insisting that abstinence is the best choice. Deborah
doesn’t judge her boyfriend, but she does judge the women in her life, most of whom are sexually active. She tells her friend and fellow band member, Vianca, “Everyone knows that condoms are not one hundred percent safe. Abstinence is the only safe method” (167). Here, Thomas echoes the advocates for abstinence-only education. Deborah’s reminds her friend that sex means she is susceptible to disease and unwanted pregnancy, in an attempt to scare her into making the ‘best’ choice. When Vianca responds “you need to grow up...people do drugs, people have sex and lots of it. There’s nothing wrong with it as long as it’s between consulting adults,” Deborah silently thinks, “It was like the world had evolved backward, heading toward Sodom and Gomorrah and no one seemed to care” (167). By evoking Sodom and Gomorrah, Thomas evokes the language of evangelicals who believe that sexual relationships between people of the same sex, and in particular, between men, is wrong and punishable by the destruction of a city. Deborah is shocked that her best friend, Willetta, who is also a Christian, abandoned the virginity pact they made when they were both 14 years old. “It’s amazing how cavalier people are about sex. I mean, what about what we learned in church?” Willetta shrugged. “I don’t know. I pray about it all the time. I know I’ll have to answer to God. I just hope He understands.” I don’t want to get in front of the Lord and just “hope.” Rather than invoking the language of a God who forgives all sins, which is common in evangelical narratives, Deborah insinuates that God won’t forgive Willetta for having premarital sex. She thinks to herself, “She thought the world had gone crazy, but the

24 In Between Sundays: Black Women’s Everyday Struggles of Faith, Marla Faye Frederick’s interviews reveal how black evangelical women use ‘Sodom and Gomorrah’ to talk about homosexuality. According to her, the language they use to describe homosexual relationships is “punitive” (206).
The biggest surprise was that all of this craziness was going on right in Villa Rica, and right in her own family.” Although Thomas allows for multiple perspectives on premarital sex from Christians and non-Christians, Deborah’s thoughts ‘win’ each argument. Even when Deborah refuses to verbally respond to her female friends, the author includes Deborah’s thoughts at the end of either a chapter or a section. Readers are always thus reminded that premarital sex is wrong.

*Temptation* is slightly less didactic than *Singsation*. Murray demonstrates more sexual situations, even those between dating couples. During their courtship, Kyla and Jefferson struggle with lust. He tells her, “[a]ll of this fondling and caressing and stroking isn’t enough. It’s killing me. I’m frustrated. I was pretty active before I met you, if you know what I mean...

“Jefferson, as much as I love you, I love God more. I don’t want to lose you, but I just can’t compromise. I can’t break the promises I made to the Lord. Trust me, you wouldn’t want me to do that either.”

This exchange is an important one for several reasons: first, Murray reveals that Kyla and Jefferson are somewhat physically involved. During the height of the courtship movement[^25], which began a few years after True Love Waits was founded, many couples refused to do anything more than hold hands. Showing any physical intimacy beyond holding hands was strongly discouraged. Representations of unmarried couples fondling, caressing and stroking in Christian fiction during this time were rare, if not nonexistent. Kyla does keep her vow to remain a virgin until marriage; however, she would also be considered somewhat of a transgressive figure within evangelical...

[^25]: “The Christian author Joshua Harris is widely credited with starting the contemporary courtship movement among young evangelicals” (Gardner 213).
communities during the early 2000s. She is dating and somewhat physically involved with a non-Christian man. Murray never criticizes Kyla for these decisions. Instead, immediately after this conversation, Jefferson falls in love with her and “felt he had to find out more about the spiritual center of the woman he loved.” Kyla invited him to church, “never pushing, until he had finally agreed to go.” Jefferson becomes a Christian, and after three years of a celibate dating relationship, they married.

While *SingSation* painstakingly uses the language from *True Love Waits*, *Temptation* unabashedly uses sex scenes between the married couple to demonstrate how good sex can be when a Christian, heterosexual couple waits until marriage, and then remain faithful to each other. On the first page of the novel, the readers can see that Kyla still sexually desires her husband, even after years of marriage. “[Jefferson] grabbed Kyla around her waist and hugged her close. Kyla’s skin tingled at his touch. After many years, he still turned her on (10). Many popular romance novels emphasize that sex with a stranger is more exciting than sex with one’s spouse; Murray and many other black Christian novelists romanticize marital relationships to demonstrate just the opposite. Murray writes, “As their lips touched and their tongues met, Kyla allowed herself to drift into the sacred land with the only lover she’d ever had and the only man she would ever love. (38)” Here, Murray implies that Kyla can fully enjoy sex because her husband is her only lover. The description of sex as a “sacred land” demonstrates that it is through marriage that sex becomes good, and guilt-free for Christians. Murray underscores this point when Jefferson talks about sex in church. When the couple was late to church, and Jefferson explains to his mother: “It was Kyla, Mom. She wore me out last night,” Jefferson whispered....”I was exhausted...she made me use muscles I’d
forgotten I had” (40). This discussion about sex between a man and his mother shows the lengths to which the author goes to demonstrate that sex between a married couple should be enjoyed. Rather than draw a veil over the sexual side of the relationship, as happened in SingSation and earlier Christian romance novels, Murray shows us that sex is something to be enjoyed and discussed—even if it is with one’s mother at church.

Murray is careful to include other types of relationships within the novel. Alexis and Brian are dating and attempt to stay celibate. After their first kiss, Alexis tells Kyla that she doesn’t want to have sex with Brian, but is trying to figure out how to tell him. Although Brian is a Christian, Alexis doesn’t think that he will be happy with her celibacy. Alexis states, “I don’t know what side of the fence he will be on. The man is a red-blooded African man. I can tell you that for a fact.” (68) Alexis implies that, because Brian is a black man, he will find it difficult to remain celibate. She doesn’t assume that he wants to have sex because he is a ‘red-blooded man,’ but because he is of African descent. This quick comment demonstrates how even black Christian men are hypersexualized. One of the most famous figures within the purity and then courtship movement was Joshua Harris, a young white man; however, in all of these novels, black men in their 20s and 30s are expected to be sexually active and experienced, while the women are celibate. However, black men in these novels are not constructed as a threat to the women; their desire to have sex and past relationships simply demonstrate that the men are heterosexuals. Black male virgins are looked upon with suspicion within some Christian communities, simply because it is difficult to codify their sexuality. Thomas alludes to this in SingSation: Triage, the rapper, has to be set up on dates because there were rumors that he was gay. People assumed this because “Triage has never been one
to sleep around or grab the first piece who throws herself at him” (202). Thomas is sure to show us how eager Triage is to have sex with women throughout Singsation; she intimates that being celibate is very difficult for him. In most, if not all of the black popular Christian fiction I have read, there are no black male virgins. Therefore, Murray and Thomas imply that all of the men have had sexual relationships in the past, but love the Christian women so much that they will respect their physical boundaries.

In Temptation, Jefferson and Jasmine have sex when Kyla is away. From the beginning of the novel, the audience can see that Jasmine has an elaborate plan to seduce Jefferson, and destroy his marriage so that she can marry him. In the scenes that leads up to sex, Jasmine invites Jefferson over to fix her garage door, then appears in lingerie. When Jefferson refuses her advances, she drives over to his house to apologize and asks if she can first watch movies with him, then sleep in the spare bedroom to avoid her non-existent stalker. Jasmine then appears in front of Jefferson’s bedroom door “dressed in the red slip, waiting for him, like a vision in a dream. Without a word, she took his hand and leaned into him. She kissed him gently, letting him feel her, then followed him as the gentle kiss built with his desire. She moaned. He led her back to his bed, laying her down like a delicate flower and kissed her with surprising zeal.” (129) In this scene and the ones previous, Jasmine is the one who pursues, while Jefferson is somewhat passive and easily controlled by her actions. Although Jefferson takes full responsibility for his actions, the reader assumes that the adultery is almost entirely Jasmine’s fault. The women in this narrative are villified for either being ignorant, or a temptress. Kyla ignores warnings from her friends that Jasmine enjoys having sex with married men, and Jasmine’s desire for Jefferson and other men make her seem like a one-dimensional,
delusional character, especially since she assumes that one sexual encounter with Jefferson will help him leave Kyla. Jasmine also stalks both Kyla and Jefferson. Thus, readers root for Jefferson as he works to win Kyla’s trust and to save their marriage. Jasmine only seems sane when she becomes a Christian and pens a heartfelt apology to both Kyla and Jefferson.

While Murray includes part of the sex scene between Jefferson and Jasmine, she does so in order to demonstrate to her audience how easy it is for Christians to give in to temptation. Jefferson oftentimes ignores his conscience (which many Christians would read as the Holy Spirit) by allowing Jasmine to sleep over, and then picking up a novel to read instead of his Bible. These mistakes, Murray suggests, lead Jefferson to have sex with Jasmine. Murray then shows that repentance and forgiveness from God may be quick, but restoring a marriage takes hard work and dedication. Jefferson prays, “Heavenly Father, I don’t know what to say. I feel such shame and guilt. But I know that You have forgiven me and I thank You for Your grace and mercy. With Your grace, I have peace and I thank you for that, Lord. Jesus, I thank you for the blood. Your blood that covers me now and that covered me before I was born....” (129). It is telling that Jefferson’s time of prayer is longer than his transgression. Also, the inclusion of the prayer, and the bible verses that follow, are meant to teach the readers that God will forgive all sins. Readers who find themselves in this situation can see a model for a prayer for forgiveness, and then know which verses discuss them. By showing a prayer and then verses, readers can see that Jefferson has an encounter with God, and that prayer is a conversation. Jefferson ultimately finds comfort: “He closed his eyes, knowing that the torment that still grieved him would gradually be lifted. God’s
forgiveness was instant, but now he had to forgive himself....before he fell into complete unconsciousness, God had one more message for him....weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning”(130, emphasis is the author’s).

_Temptation_ and _Singsation_ both end with wedding ceremonies and a honeymoon scene. In _Singsation_, Deborah and Triage get married. The reader does not get to see the sex scene. After they have sex, Triage states, “You were so right; you were worth the wait.” And we would have never had the chance for a night like this if you didn’t stand by what you believe...Thank you for this” (337, emphasis mine). Again, the language of being “worth the wait” is directly taken from True Love Waits. Temptation, however, leaves almost nothing to the imagination:

“Her heart pounding through her chest, but then she realized it was his heart she felt. She let her hands roam over the hardness of his back and arms. She wanted to feel every part of him. ...She sighed as his tongue traced her curves, making her body tremble. She lifted her head, her tongue begging to find his again and she took him in” (213).

The sex scene between husband and wife is longer than the previous one with Jasmine and Jefferson. Also, the scene is meant to represent how much Kyla forgives Jefferson after his adulterous relationship.

_Temptation_ and _Singsation_ offer straightforward narratives of women who struggle with the desire to have premarital sex or with the betrayal of a spouse. By the end of each novel, most of the characters either become Christians or make steps to consider that commitment. In Michele Andrea Bowen’s _Church Folk_, however, there exist some members and even leaders of the fictional Gospel United Church who are not
Christians, and who unapologetically engage in illegal activities as well as pre- and extra-marital affairs. Church Folk pushes the boundaries of Christian fiction more directly than the other two novels by making the church a site for both salvation and sin; however, despite these differences between Church Folk and the other two novels, Bowen, too, offers a clear depiction of sacred sexuality. Furthermore, she complicates sacred sexuality by using it as a strategy to discuss racial inequality.

Church Folk is a historical novel set during the Civil Rights Movement. The protagonist is 29 year old Theophilus Simmons, an attractive, black, unmarried pastor of a small church in Memphis, Tennessee. During a church revival, he meets Essie Lane, a 25 year old black Christian woman who works in the kitchen of Pompey’s Rib Joint. They are the central characters of the novel; however, their love story is not the primary focus. During a bicentennial conference of the Gospel United Church, prominent pastors and bishops ran and participated in a brothel that was set in a funeral home. Theophilus and other pastors fight to shut down the brothel and to have the participants punished for their actions.

Church Folk was the most controversial of the three novels published by Walk Worthy Press. A review from Publisher’s Weekly states, “the sexual situations and language e.g., "dick teasers," "hell," "damn," "bitch" and "balls" will send most CBA retailers, and their conservative clientele, running in the opposite direction. Regardless, many African-American readers will embrace this steamy morality tale, with its bold themes and fallible characters, as a satisfying addition to the scanty collection of

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26 The CBA, or the Christian Booksellers Association, has now become the Association for Christian Retail.
http://www.cbaonline.org/nm/aboutcba.htm
African-American fiction with Christian themes. The reviewer’s comment about the novel’s “steamy morality” is an apt description of the way Bowen moves between the sacred and profane nature of all of the romantic relationships in the novel.

At the very beginning of the novel, Bowen demonstrates the fallibility of her protagonist. The first lines of the novel mix sexual desire and God’s creation: “At the age of Twenty-nine, the Reverend Theophilus Henry Simmons had developed one unshakeable conviction about God--that He loved women. If He didn’t love women, how could He have created such a magnificent creature as a fine, deep, dark chocolate woman who looked real good in pinks and oranges, had big, sexy legs, and a stardust twinkle in her smile--the kind of exquisite Negro woman who compelled the Universe to praise every swing of her large, shapely hips?” (4). Theophilus objectifies women throughout the novel, often focusing on different parts of their bodies. His expressed desire for black women is praised within the context of the novel, rather than punished. Bowen demonstrates that black Christian men can (and do) express physical interest in women, and that appreciating a woman could be considered an act of worship. Also, Bowen’s description validates the beauty of black women by praising specific, physical qualities that would have marked black women as unattractive by white standards of beauty.

However, she also shows us that Theophilus’ love of women got him into trouble. Theophilus had a sexual relationship with Glodean Benson, a woman who is described as “a gal with somethin’ in her drawers that snapped” (4-5). The description

27 http://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-446-52799-6
28 In romance novels by white women, there are descriptions where beauty is defined by markers of whiteness, such as a small physical frame, blue eyes, pale skin, and red lips. In black popular fiction, authors usually rewrite this tradition by praising black women, thus redefining what beautiful women look like.
of Glodean’s private parts suggests that she is dangerous. The audience does not see the specifics of their relationship, only the deep regret that Theophilus feels after they breakup. His “curiosity about that “snappin”...caused him to put Glodean’s feelings, his reputation, and his relationship with God in jeopardy. He repented to God, and he knew God had forgiven him” (5). Rather than build up to a sexual encounter (as it is often done in mainstream popular fiction) Bowen introduces the sexual relationship between Glodean and Theophilus immediately, using his attraction for Glodean as a way to codify Theophilus’ heterosexuality, and his guilt to codify his spirituality. Theophilus’ guilt and desire for repentance so early on in the novel is also an interesting choice; Bowen immediately shows that the admission of sexual needs is fine, but acting on those desires outside of a marriage is wrong. Bowen, like the other authors of black Christian fiction, villifies black women who have sex outside of marriage, and deliberately pursue men in an unapologetic manner. Bowen implies that women like Glodean plague every congregation, and that they are dangerous temptations that can destroy the work that God has for men. Theophilus feels terrible about his relationship with Glodean, and begs God for forgiveness; however, he is not positioned as a threat within the narrative, but someone who made a mistake. Like Brian in Temptation, Theophilus is written as a victim of a sexually hungry woman.

Bowen counters this scene about illicit sex with another scene where Theophilus leads a passionate revival where he catches the Holy Spirit. I believe Bowen transfers the passion of a sexual encounter to a moment, a few pages later, when Theophilus catches the Spirit. Bowen writes, “...with each passing day, his sermons became hotter and hotter, until on that last night, he walked up in the church so full of spiritual fire he
felt like he had what his mother said was ‘fire all shut up in his bones.’” (8) In other
words, the excitement usually reserved for a sexual encounter is transferred to the
passion that he and congregants feel during a revival. Bowen draws a divide between
right and wrong: sexual passion outside of marriage is wrong; however, spiritual passion
is always right. This prioritizes Theophilus’ relationship and connection to God, and
shows that sexual relationships outside of marriage can threaten one’s health and
ministry. The lack of glamour in Theophilus’ affair with Glodean is a method that
Bowen uses to show that love in courtship and marriage should be valued more highly
than the thrill of premarital sex. Instead, there is an excitement about the budding
relationship that Theophilus has with Essie Lane.

During the courtship of Theophilus and Essie Lane, the audience has the
opportunity to witness their desire for one another. Bowen writes, “Theophilus looked
at Essie’s shapely hips and thought how perfect her behind was. He closed his eyes for a
moment, imagining wrapping his hands around her hips…” Essie has a similar reaction:
“[s]he felt that kiss like a charge running through her body. Never in a million years
could she have imagined being so ignited by a kiss--especially a kiss from a man who
was a preacher (43). Essie’s mother, Lee Allie quickly figured out that they had been
kissing in her kitchen, and thinks, “she wanted to tell [Essie] it wasn’t a crime to like the
feel of a man, if he were the right man and her husband” (46). The focus on the physical
nature of Theophilus and Essie’s relationship is surprising in a Christian novel, and may
be a part of the “controversy” that one interviewer referenced about Church Folk29.
While the novel prioritizes Theophilus’ perspective, Bowen does not only subject Essie

29 In the interview, the specific controversy was not mentioned; the interviewer merely asked whether or
not her latest novel would draw the same controversy as Church Folk.
http://ezinearticles.com/?Interview-With-Michele-Andrea-Bowen,-Author-of-Church-Folk&id=1796683
to his gaze. Essie tried “not to stare at his long legs and the biceps that kept bulging against the short sleeves of his black cotton clerical shirt every time he moved his arms.” Instead, Essie returns his gaze with one that displays her sexual desire for him. Although this scene is sexually charged, Bowen still follows the script of a Christian courtship: Theophilus and Essie are being chaperoned by Essie’s mother. Lee Allie’s presence and thoughts helps to remind the audience that a young couple’s sexual relationship is fine as long as they are married.

In an interview with Bowen about Church Folk, Jana Siciliano, a senior writer for Bookreporter.com, seems concerned by the sexual content within the novel:

TBR: Essie and the reverend have a very carnal relationship as well as an emotional and romantic attachment. Is this something that you wanted to make clear--that a man of God can also be a man of the earth as well?

Michele Andrea Bowen: An important part of CHURCH FOLK is the love story that occurs between Theophilus and Essie Simmons. They are crazy about each other....And I would not describe their relationship as "carnal". I think of it as passionate, loving, and wonderful. It's not about God being of the earth. It's about us learning to understand, through prayer, learning from our churches, bible study and so forth, the incredible facets of God's love and how it is expressed while here on earth. The Song of Songs in the Old Testament gives us a peak at the expression of romantic love in a Godly way. I hope this makes sense.

Bowen carefully corrects the term “carnal.” One of the definitions of carnal is “not spiritual, in a negative sense; material, temporal, secular”:\(^{31}\): this is a pejorative term for many Christians who prioritize the spiritual realm over the secular one. Bowen rejects the term carnal and instead complicates how Christians understand love. Rather than portraying love as either spiritual or carnal, she speaks of the “facets of God’s love” and its expression. In other words, sex can be spiritual. The interviewer’s question cuts to the heart of what some find to be the problem of black popular Christian fiction: the relationships seem to be driven by physical desire, rather than a spiritual one. Bowen’s correction of the term and depiction of a romantic relationship between a Christian, heterosexual couple asserts that relationships (and people) do not have to be categorized as only spiritual or only physical, but that they can and do have both elements. Bowen further articulates sacred sexuality in *Church Folk*. Theophilus gives a controversial sermon about sex. He states:

“The passion that is stirred up between a husband and a wife— if treated with the respect God intended for us to treat it with— helps us become filled with a love for the Lord, our brothers and sisters, ourselves, and life in general, that makes us better in every way.” “...we are fighting hard in this country for the right to be equal to everybody else in America... before we go out to combat the evils of racism, fight the evils of segregation, refuse to yield to the evils of the Klan... we need to get right at home. (28-9)

This is the first moment in the novel where Bowen begins to define sacred sexuality. Her use of Theophilus, a character who had sex before marriage, and repented, shows the audience that one can be restored. Also, she uses a full length sermon to directly

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\(^{31}\) Oxford English Dictionary, accessed 1.12.14
communicate these ideas; in her later novels, Bowen does not use this technique.

Theophilus assumes that married heterosexual couple should have sex consistently, and that this “passion” between them should influence the way they love others. Theophilus implicitly suggests that a healthy sexual relationship is a cornerstone for building a stronger black community that can fight for civil rights. The message of love that will counteract and overpower hatred echoes Martin Luther King, but Bowen uses this to speak to a 21st century black, Christian audience which still exists in a world with increasingly fragmented black communities and the long lasting impact of racism within them.

Bowen also offers a feminist perspective in Theophilus’ sermon: he directly talks to black men, insisting that they treat women as equals. He states, “Church, I’m sick of the injustices we Negroes heap on one another--especially what we Negro men do to our own women. ...We take away the very rights we are demanding for ourselves from our own Negro women and children” (30). Theophilus advocates for every member in the black family to treat one another with love and respect. By focusing on transforming the black family, Theophilus finds a way for everyone to actively engage in the Civil Rights Movement. Theophilus’ framework of a sacred sexuality as a means by which to advocate racial equality is surprising to his congregation. His perspective is somewhat radical: in this sermon, Theophilus rejects the sexual stereotypes that nipped at the heels of the black community, and he uses sexual relationships as a cornerstone for civil rights. By reminding a Christian audience that sex is sacred, Theophilus empowers and restores dignity to black families who may have shied away from a discussion about sexuality in order to maintain the appearance of holiness.
In *Temptation, SingSation*, and *Church Folk*, black female characters were models of purity. While young, white Christians waved pledge cards, black women were not the focus of the conversation. Yet, Murray, Thompson and Bowen found a way to demonstrate a range of black female sexuality—from women who were virgins, committed to celibacy, or were married and sexually active. The three authors of Walk Worthy Press assert that black women can abstain from sex, that they encourage others to be celibate and become Christians. Murray, Thompson and Bowen also attempt to demonstrate romantic relationships that are complicated by sexual desire. In communicating principles consistent with their faith, the three authors do judge female characters who have premarital sex.

Walk Worthy Press introduced a new genre of fiction for black audience members. Although it has folded, the industry lives on, and other publishing companies now have African American imprints. The Christian Booksellers Association, one of the most important organizations in the Christian publishing industry does not accept risque black, Christian popular fiction. As one blogger writes, “African-American Christian writers historically have had a hard time getting past Christian Booksellers Association (CBA) editorial. Part of this has been the restrictions on content. [African American] authors as a whole don't shy away from "keeping it real" and that may have made CBA folks a bit squeamish.\(^2\)“ Black authors of popular Christian fiction do “keep it real,” incorporating divorce, adultery, premarital sex, violence, and profane language. Some of the recently published titles of black popular Christian fiction include sex scenes that have no apparent spiritual purpose. Bowen was well aware of this trend, and in a 2008 interview stated: “I write Christian Fiction. I don’t write something secular with a

church setting. I write as a ministry and I’m thankful that my stories crosses the lines, so 
that folks who read secular fiction will reach out and pick up a copy of one of my 
books.” What constitutes Christian fiction is increasingly complicated as more books 
by mainstream publishing companies include black church culture. Walk Worthy Press 
was successful in starting a genre and freeing mainstream Christian fiction from its 
restrictive representations of race and romantic relationships.

In the dialogue about purity, black Christian women rewrite the narrative about 
their sexuality. They use multiple platforms to construct their own sexual discourse. 
African American evangelical women’s sermons, songs, and popular novels encourage 
women to confront or testify their sexual pasts, abstain from sex while single, and then 
have good sex after marriage. While white evangelicals have a similar message, African 
American women more frankly discuss or depict sexual situations. Their ability to “keep 
it real” about sex is one of the reasons why the black Christian popular fiction industry is 
currently growing.

Chapter 3

Dragging the Black Church: Comedic Performances of Black Women

There is no question that drag has catapulted some black male comedians from obscurity into popularity. Tyler Perry's performance as Madea, an older black woman who is both an ex-convict and a community healer, moved his stage plays from the chitlin circuit to the big screen. Although Perry writes and directs his plays, films, and television shows, he is best known as Madea. Because of Madea, Perry is currently one of the wealthiest men in the entertainment industry. Perry, who is often critiqued for his performance of Madea, told interviewers, “It's a comedic moment. People need to just chill!” However, it is impossible to ignore the ways Perry uses a black woman's body to communicate a perspective that privileges heteronormativity and patriarchy. Of course, Perry is not the only actor to do this. Comedians Rickey Smiley and Steve Harvey have also created characters Bernice Jenkins and Sister O’Dell. Performances by Perry, Smiley and Harvey have called into being a black counterpublic that is invested in their definitions of race, gender, sexuality and theology. Like the historical role of the black church, black comedic performances create a space for a speaker to present their ideas, and audience members can and do have lively debates about them. While Smiley and Harvey use their drag performances as black women to lovingly make fun of black church culture, Perry uses Madea to make important claims about romantic relationships and gender roles.

Drag is when a person intentionally dresses as the opposite gender. Drag is always performative; however, there exists a spectrum of drag performances. Rather

34 http://archive.feedblitz.com/131536/~3991802
than discuss the rich history of drag and drag performance, as so many scholars have
done, I examine the ways in which these black men intentionally use a black woman’s
body in order to reinscribe heteronormative and patriarchal values. The performances of
Smiley, Harvey and Perry are fraught with complications: first, each of them
appropriates the black church and uses masculine privilege in order to gain legitimacy
with a mainly black audience. Secondly, despite the fact that evangelical interpretations
of the Bible do not approve of men dressing up as women, Smiley, Harvey and Perry
do so for audiences that are overwhelmingly Christian and/or can identify, through
experience, with black church culture. Thirdly, even when these comedians advance
ideas that do not necessarily favor black women, they both have developed a fan base of
black women. These performances are successful because they reference identifiable
parts of black culture, and in doing so, trigger cultural nostalgia.

As famous black men, Smiley, Harvey and Perry direct the narrative about
gender in the black community. Their ideas about gender roles are heavily influenced by
the black church and Christianity. Because they are black Christian men, they sometimes
reify and advance sexist, heteronormative attitudes. There are other comedians who
comment on the black church; however, I closely read Rickey Smiley, Steve Harvey,
and Tyler Perry’s work because their fame is largely dependent upon their ability to
appropriate and perform black church culture.

Rickey Smiley has been a comedian popular with black audiences for over 20
years. He is well known for his ability to play different characters as he makes
observations about daily black life. Smiley hosted BET’s Comic View for two seasons,

35 Deuteronomy 22:5: A woman must not put on men’s clothing, and a man must not wear women’s
clothing. Anyone who does this is detestable in the sight of the Lord your God. (NLT)
he is the host of the Rickey Smiley Morning Show, and has his own sitcom on TVOne, The Rickey Smiley Show. Most recently, Smiley headlined the Laugh and Shout Experience Tour, where he was Minister Joe Willie. Smiley is one of the few (if not the only) popular black comedians to perform male and female church characters, as opposed to only churchwomen. Smiley has made appearances in Steve Harvey and Tyler Perry’s work. Together, the three comedians engage in a conversation about black church life.

Steve Harvey has enjoyed a long career, and, unlike Smiley and Perry, was famous well before his performance as Sister O’Dell. He hosted Spike Lee's Original Kings of Comedy. He has had several taped comedy specials. His comedic performance Don't Trip: He Ain't Through With Me Yet (2006), was taped at MegaFest, a four day evangelical conference for black Christians, which was first launched by Bishop T.D. Jakes in 2004. The latter part of the title, “He ain't through with me yet,” is a popular saying amongst black Christians, and comes from gospel singer Albertina Walker’s “Please Be Patient With Me.” Harvey talks about black culture at large, and pokes fun at the black church, and characters within it. While Steve Harvey began as a stand up comedian, his influence spans over several genres, including radio and scripted and live television shows. He is currently the host of the Steve Harvey Morning Show, the Steve Harvey Talk Show and the popular game show, Family Feud. Harvey co-wrote Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man: What Men Really Think about Love, Relationships, Intimacy and Commitment and Straight Talk, No Chaser: How to Find, Understand and Keep a Man with Denise Millner. The success of his books established Harvey as a relationship expert. Both books were optioned for film; the first, Think Like a Man, grossed $96
million at the box office. Most recently, Harvey recommitted his life to the Lord, and afterwards, retired from stand up comedy. Harvey has always spoken not only about Christians, but to them. The longevity of his career and breadth of his experience means that he is currently one of the most important commentators on black culture.

Tyler Perry is not a comedian by trade: he is a writer, actor and director who started with stage plays and transitioned to films, and then television shows, the list of which is too long to name here. Before mainstream audiences knew who he was, his plays were sold-out to black audiences across the nation. Tyler Perry's plays enjoy an intimate connection with the black church. Some groups would go to church first, and then attend his plays together. Furthermore, because of the plot lines of Perry's plays, the performers oftentimes move from acting to worship, especially while they are singing, which makes the play feel like an extension of a black church service. While Smiley relates black church culture as a stand up comedian, Perry uses his stage plays and films to create an all black world in which the black church is central. And although Harvey briefly discusses Christianity in his stand up, books, and radio show, Perry uses the Bible, preaching and songs to heal the problems of the characters in his plays. Smiley, Harvey and Perry’s perform black church culture because of its importance to them and their audience members.

Drag and the Black Church

A drag queen is defined as “a man who dresses up in women’s clothes, typically for the purposes of entertainment.” However, this definition doesn’t fully engage the range of drag performances. There is clearly a difference between drag queens such as RuPaul, who uses makeup and hair in such a way that he appears to be a glamorous
woman, and comedians who dress up as elderly women, but always include physical reminders of their masculinity. In the spectrum of drag performances, there exists on one end, drag performances that ‘do’ political work by pointing out the performativity of gender. These performances insist that gender is always performed, and is not an innate part of our identity. As Judith Butler argues (and scholar Timothy Lyle helpfully summarizes), “drag acts have the political potential to point to the utterly constructed, fabricated nature of the social scripts regarding a natural, fixed gendered identity that is directly tied to a natural biological specific and a pre-existing ontology of sorts” (945).

While drag can do this political work, popular comedians who dress up as women are usually on the other end of the spectrum. They instead use drag to parody black women. The over-the-top, ridiculous spectacle instead suggests that, if a man performs as a woman, it is unnatural. The humor lies in the comedian and the audience’s acceptance that gender can only be performed in a theatrical way; it is not a reminder that gender is always being performed. I agree with Lyle, who writes, “drag can emerge as an appropriation of the radically liberating practice by the dominant power structure. The practice of drag is thus ‘domesticated’ and utilized as a tool to re-circulate conservative, normative logics and to sustain and even to perpetuate culturally sanctioned ideas about gender and its oppressive consequences for females (And those males who fall outside the gender binary)” (946). Thus, traditional drag shows remind us of the performativity of gender, while comedic drag reminds audiences that the gender one is born with can never be really erased, even during performance.

Both traditional drag and comedic drag reference the black church. Lately, in traditional drag shows, Drag Queens dress up and perform Gospel songs either in
churches, at Gospel Brunches, or in bars. In “Transformance: Reading the Gospel in Drag,” Jeffrey McCune writes about this type of drag show, where the sacred and secular meet. He states: “...I had seen impersonations from Aretha Franklin to Whitney Houston, but never had I encountered performances of gospel. This performance prompted me to question whether I was in a Black club or in a Black church. When I veered to the right and then to the left, it appeared that the Biology Bar had become Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church.” (152) McCune’s description points to the ways that traditional drag, which is usually seen as a secular practice, can appropriate black church traditions in unlikely spaces, ministering to a group of people who are usually marginalized within the black Christian community. White Drag Queens also use songs performed by both white and black gospel singers. This type of drag is different from the work that black comedians engage in. Dragging the black church is when an actor or comedian performs as an elderly male or female, and comments on or makes fun of black church culture.

Black church culture is a set of practices, gestures and actions that are rooted in and reminiscent of the ways that people in different black churches praise and worship God. The popularity of television evangelism, coupled with performances of the black church in popular culture, allow for most to be somewhat familiar with black church culture. Unsurprisingly, comedians do the most work in defining black church culture through their performances. Gary Owen, one of the only white comedians who discusses black church culture, speaks about the black church as an outsider, bemoaning the step team, spoken word, multiple offerings, those who ‘interrupt’ the preacher by shouting,

In all of the comedic performances I have seen, the comedians perform as elderly church people. However, it is possible for one to perform as a church’ person of any age to make fun of church culture.
and the length of the services. Fashion also plays an important role in black church culture, as churchgoers find ways to look fashionable while also being modest. Black church culture also refers to the ‘stock characters’ of a church: the deacon, piano player, soloists, and of course, the elderly church woman.

Through rhetoric, music, dress, and bodily gestures, Smiley, Harvey and Perry veer between the secularity of their performance and space of the theatre, and transform from comedians into preachers, and their audience members into churchgoers. An example of this is the beginning of Harvey's fifth taped comedy special, Still Trippin (2008). Harvey enters the large stage in an all-black suit and tie. One of the first things he states after the applause is “Before I get started, I never start anything without first of all saying that God is everything to me. (loud applause). If it wasn't for God, I never, ever would have made it. Well! Now that we got that out the way, how y'all bougie asses?” Here, Harvey is not dressed up as a woman, yet he ‘drags the black church’ through his dress, entrance, and his statement. He stylistically borrows from the black church tradition of putting God first. Harvey also mixes the sacred and profane by putting God first, and then cursing at the audience. Many of these performances take place in secular spaces, outside of churches. This allows comedians to speak freely about both the black church and other parts of black culture. The performance of these comedians are not only a way for the audience members to identify as Christians; the comedians’ ability to talk about black church culture and Christianity also serve as inspiration for black audience members to perform their identity in similar ways within their public lives. The black comedian as black preacher allows for a particular type of authority: in between punchlines, he can offer his perspective. There are usually some
sanctioned audience responses, but the agency of audience members is limited because of the model of stand up comedy for popular comedians: one elevated stage, one microphone, one speaker.

Black Women and the Black Church

Black women who attend either a show headlined by a black comedian or a traditional black church could run the risk of being a silent audience member. The role of black women in relationship to the black church is a complicated one. The black church, which can be radical in movements against racial oppression, have, at times, reproduced patriarchal and sexist structures. While there have always been black women preachers, some historically black churches have held firm to the belief that men should preach, and women should be silent. The black church was not simply modeling a theology based off of white Christian churches; they did not support black women preachers primarily because of the Apostle Paul's teachings36. However, it is impossible to ignore that this silencing of black women also reproduces the sexism found in American society. Black women in the United States have long been considered historically oppressed due to their race, gender, sexuality, class, and other identities.

Womanist and some black liberation theologians have actively questioned traditional readings of the Apostle Paul’s teaching, and argued for black women preachers. In the 19th century, when many black churches were being founded, black women challenged the idea that only men could be called to preach. In the 19th century, black women challenged the idea that only men could be called to preach. In the 19th century, black women challenged the idea that only men could be called to preach.

36 “Women should be silent during the church meetings. It is not proper for them to speak. They should be submissive, just as the law says.” 1 Corinthians 14:34, NLT. This is one of many verses the Apostle Paul writes about women publicly speaking during church. Theologians continue to debate what this means; however many black churches have adopted this practice. Some womanist and black liberation theologians suggest that black churches practice this as a politics of respectability—in order to be accepted by white Christian churches and culture. I disagree with this statement because it limits the agency of black church leaders, who have also studied the Apostle Paul’s teachings in depth, and are quite able to make a decision about how to interpret those passages.
helped found churches; others insisted upon holding positions of leadership that were, at the time, reserved for men\textsuperscript{37}. In “Women in the Gospel,” Julia Foote, the first ordained deacon in the A.M.E. church, and the second female ordained elder argues that God calls men and women to preach. Foote writes, “We are sometimes told that if a woman pretends to a Divine call...she will be believed when she shows credentials from heaven...[i]f it be necessary to prove one’s right to preach the Gospel, I ask of my brethren to show me their credentials, or I can not believe in the propriety of their ministry” (53). Foote’s essay uses the role of women in the Bible (particularly the New Testament) to prove that women can also be called to preach. She insists that men and women are equals by using the verse, Galatians 3:28, which states in part, “There is neither male nor female in Christ Jesus” (53). Although Foote made this strong argument in the 19th century, there are still conservative evangelical churches which do not allow women to preach in the 21st. In his article, “Practicing Liberation in the Black Church,” pastor and professor James Henry Harris writes, “[w]omen in black churches outnumber men two to one; yet in positions of authority and responsibility the ratio is reversed....women who are qualified for ministry must be given the same opportunities as men to become pastors and to serve in such leadership positions...theology and the church must eliminate exclusionist language, attitudes or practices, however benign or unintended, to benefit fully from the talents of women.”\textsuperscript{38} As recently as December 37 Women such as Jarena Lee, Rebecca Cox Jackson, and Amanda Berry Smith were 19th century black women who challenged black male leadership of A.M.E. and Methodist Churches. (Lincoln and Mamiya 3662) 
\textsuperscript{38} http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=778
2013, no women were a part of an important conference about church leadership, something which raised the ire of feminists and womanists.\(^{39}\)

A 2010 survey of “11,000 churches of various denominations showed that only 12% of principal Christian church leaders are women. That statistic drops to 3% for African American women.”\(^{40}\) Black women can “fight back” from the pews; but if they attend a church that doesn't allow or recognize black women preachers, it may be difficult for them to fight on equal ground. Some black Christian women privilege messages from men. In his work about T.D. Jakes and his connection to women, Lee includes an interview. Delores Carpenter states, “I thought [T.D. Jakes] appeal was phenomenal, but I did feel a little sad because I knew in my heart all the women who could preach the same thing would not get that kind of response. For some reason, hearing it from a man made it more profound for the women and that made me a little sad” (137). It is possible that some evangelical women who attend comedic performances about the black church prefer to hear a man’s perspective on relationships, rather than a woman. Also, they may enjoy seeing a parody of themselves on stage.

While some scholars point out the disparity of men and women leadership within churches, there have always been black women who actively participate in leading their congregations. Furthermore, black women have and do find other ways to lead and support their churches. As womanist theologian Cheryl Gilkes writes, “Although the black male preacher was the leader recognized by whites and their religious institutions, black women emerged as worship leaders, preachers, catechizers, exhorters, prayer warriors, singers, teachers and storytellers—all authoritative agents of the black

\(^{39}\) [http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2013/12/13/6257/]

\(^{40}\) [http://www.ebony.com/wellness-empowerment/the-spiritual-life-bishop-vashti-mckenzie-405#axzz2MVAqpmIP]
This rich history depicts a more complicated picture of women’s leadership, and may suggest that women are often leaders, even when they are not allowed to preach from the pulpit. The connection between a conservative theological position that does not recognize black women’s preaching and the religious activity of black women is reproduced during drag performances about the black church. By using an elderly black woman’s body to represent the black church, the comedians acknowledge the power black women have in churches. When characters ‘speak out of turn,’ the comedians represent the ways in which black women skillfully negotiate the power dynamics in conservative churches. Suddenly, black women who serve the church behind the scenes become stars of comedic performances. One of the potentially powerful aspects of black comedians performing in drag is that it demonstrates the importance of the role of black women within the black church, while also making fun of and calling out traditional black churches for not allowing black women to preach from the pulpit to mixed gender audiences.

Because of the black church's importance to African American culture, many black male comedians and performers use the black church and its rhetoric in order to legitimize their connection to the black community. One of the problems with this is that black male performers, especially those who appropriate and discuss the black church, uncritically use their male privilege to communicate their ideas about all women in general, and black women in particular. Of course, black church and black comedy both allow for a call and response during certain segments of the sermon or show; however, a sanctioned response is different from developing a narrative from the pulpit or the stage. Furthermore, this response--when one is so caught up in what the

preacher/comedian is saying that they must respond--seems as though they are ‘led by the Spirit,’ which can connote an other-worldly, spontaneous response, rather than a strategic response. Within the context of the black church, emotive responses are respected by the majority of the others in the congregation; however, if this is the role that black women are limited to, it means that they are always controlled “by the Spirit,” instead of having the opportunity to control the narrative. Preachers also state that they will be controlled by the Spirit, but they have the opportunity to prepare a sermon. The character Bernice Jenkins, played by Rickey Smiley, uses church announcements to advance her own agenda. Smiley’s performance reveals the ways in which black women strategically navigate black church politics. In evangelical black churches, and in many stand up comedy shows, black women have limited options for sharing their opinions about what the preacher or comedian is saying. Within the black church, black women do speak back, and they can employ an oppositional gaze; but ultimately, many are limited to responding to what the preacher says, or creatively sharing their own ideas and thoughts, rather than sharing them from the pulpit.

This problem is further exacerbated by the lack of black woman comedians who discuss the black church. From my findings, most of the popular black woman comedians, such as Whoopi Goldberg, Mo’nique, Aisha Tyler, and Wanda Sykes, do not discuss the black church culture; if they do, their acts are not as well-known as their

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42 bell hooks argues that black female viewers of mainstream films use an oppositional gaze in order to critically interrogate the images that they are being shown. This demonstrates agency on the part of the viewer: instead of simply taking in images that do not correctly represent them, they can use an oppositional gaze to reject the idea that what they see or hear represented is true. For the purposes of this essay, I suggest that black female churchgoers and audience members of both the black church or black comedy can employ this gaze to reject the statements of the pastor or performer. Additionally, black women have and can strategically use “testimony” time in traditional black churches order to speak back to the church leadership. In these ways, they can “speak back”, but it is ultimately limiting. The pulpit in the black church, and the stage/microphone in black comedy can eclipse the voice of a black female audience member.
male counterparts. In *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality and Popular Culture*, Shayne Lee includes a chapter which analyzes Black woman comedians and their ability to freely discuss black female sexuality. This chapter includes a brief discussion of Sheryl Underwood, whose stand up special, The Platinum Comedy Series (2005), “boldly mixes sex talk with spirituality, giving Jesus Christ a shout-out every now and then.” Lee continues, “[t]his nexus of raunchy sex talk and spirituality would be offensive in any other form of public discourse, but on the comic stage, it generates pure laughter and amusement.” (107) There are black Christian comediennes who discuss the black church\(^{43}\), but they are a small minority in comparison to the multitude of black male comedians who have discussed the black church and use it as a recurring theme in their work. While so many are profiting off of the black church, many black women comedians seem to give it a wide berth. Is it that the industry does not want to have black women criticizing the black church? It seems as though only men are allowed to use the black church in their stand up routines. In this way, the world of black comedy reproduces the politics of the black church--where women, even outspoken ones, stay silent rather than tackle it. Black male comedians, in other words, can still speak from the pulpit, to a large audience of black women. And none of the popular black women comedians are speaking back.

Smiley, Harvey and the Black Church

Much of Smiley’s work is about the black church; he is best known for his performance as Sister Bernice Jenkins. In his most popular sketch, “Church Announcements with Sister Bernice Jenkins,” he walks onto the stage in a huge hat,

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\(^{43}\) Small Fire is a black female Christian comedian who references black church culture. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qh8ZPj_XFEM&list=PL8hXou3ZimMi5oJGWf_QypSa6L4muUkJz&feature=share](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qh8ZPj_XFEM&list=PL8hXou3ZimMi5oJGWf_QypSa6L4muUkJz&feature=share)
curly gray wig, glasses and a church suit, with satin gloves. Smiley still has his facial hair, which reminds the audience that, despite the costume, he is still a man. She uses a music stand as a prop to hold a sheet of paper. The announcements are punctuated by a pianist. There is nothing necessarily offensive about Sister Bernice; she is like so many older black church women who are concerned with policing respectability in their congregations. Smiley uses Sister Bernice as a way to reflect upon the role and work of older black women in congregations. Far from being a powerless, quiet woman, Sister Bernice immediately takes control of the stage. She first orders the pianist to play something else, and when the audience laughs, she yells at them: “stop all that SNIGGLING. Sniggling like a cheshire cat. Ain’t nothin in the world all that funny. Crack babies.” When Sister Bernice yells, she establishes herself as an authority figure of the congregation. As she reads the announcements she has been given, Sister Bernice takes her time to add her own suggestions or to respond to what’s been written. She turns to the audience, and speaks to an invisible set of people: “To the pastor...pulpit guests...I didn’t get the rest of y’all name because they didn’t put it in the program.” Here, Sister Bernice enters into the tradition of giving honor and respect to the Pastor and guests before starting the announcements; however, she also comments on the irresponsibility of the person who wrote up the program. This person, later revealed to be Sister Mabel, comes under Sister Bernice’s wrath again: “We would like to...congratulate the Jackson family, stand up if you would. She just gave birth to triplets plus one more. Sister Mabel who typed the program didn’t know what you call it when its four babies.” Again, Sister Bernice manages to articulate her opinions and ideas about the work that other people in the church are doing, and comment on church
happenings. In this way, Sister Bernice rewrites the announcements. Smiley’s performance is important because of his ability to accurately reflect the complexity of the role of black women in traditional black churches. They may not be able to write a sermon to share from the pulpit, but they do, at moments, control what is happening within the church. And, like Sister Bernice Jenkins, many of those women use their opportunities wisely. In this brief clip, which has been circulated primarily on YouTube, we only see Sister Bernice Jenkins and the audience, who is treated as her congregation. This is one of the ways that comedians turn a secular space into one that is momentarily sacred: with a gesture, the audience is suddenly transformed into the congregation of a church.

One of Harvey's most famous sketches is his Sister O'Dell performance. In the Original Kings of Comedy (2000), he imitates her during testimony. He explains what testimony is, and then affectionately makes fun of Sister O'Dell, who would watch too much television and then mix up her song with the “Love Boat.” Harvey's imitation of an elderly, forgetful black woman was so successful that Sister O'Dell became a recurring character on his radio show and in other performances. Initially, he only imitated her speech, song, and movements. However, when doing the radio show (which is also taped for television), he dresses up in a wig, holds a cane, and has a shawl and glasses. While Harvey does not at all demean Sister O'Dell, we must question why audiences love his performance of her. After all, there are a few performances of older black church men; however, it is hard to recall one specific character in the same way that so many people can easily name Sister O'Dell and Rickey Smiley's Bernice Jenkins. It isn't as though forgetful black women don't exist, but that they are the only ones who
are being portrayed. The only time that black women can speak in traditional black churches (during testimony and church announcements), they are not noticed for communicating deeply held beliefs, but for their inability to appropriately share information.

When Rickey Smiley and Steve Harvey drag the black church, they do so to represent and teach others about black church culture. Rickey Smiley’s characters, both male and female, allow his audience to better understand black church culture. Steve Harvey’s comedic style creates a preacher/congregation dynamic. His performance as Sister O’Dell encourages the audience to appreciate black church culture which allows for a woman to praise the Lord using the lyrics of the Love Boat. In their performances of church ladies, Steve Harvey and Rickey Smiley never compromise their positions as black male comedians. They simply use antics to demonstrate who these women are, and then go back to their ‘regular’ performances. Those performances do not define their careers. However, Madea is Tyler Perry’s default character, integral to almost every story line, and is the comic relief, savior, and character who brings healing and redemption to broken relationships. Madea is a wonderfully complex character whose unpredictability charms her audience.

Tyler Perry and the Black Church

Tyler Perry is connected to black church culture in many different ways. Unlike Smiley and Harvey, whose work ventures into other aspects of black culture, Perry organizes his empire around black church culture. Even when his plays do not have a black church scene, the characters “have church” by singing, praising the Lord, or preaching. Perry uses Madea to make fun of black church culture, even as she
encourages others to go back to church or to develop a better relationship with God.

Perry’s films differ from his taped stage plays. In Perry’s plays, he displays the performativity of gender when he occasionally reveals that he is both Madea and Perry. In his films, he performs as both Madea and her brother, Joe. In Perry’s plays, the cast routinely breaks into gospel songs, which creates a church service atmosphere. Madea directly engages with the audience, which creates an automatic congregation. However, in Perry’s films, only a few characters sing, and black church culture is not performed or referenced as often as in his plays. Yet his films still use an evangelical perspective. For example, the film Madea’s Family Reunion doesn’t have a black church scene. In this film, Perry moves from portrayals of the black church, to an embodiment of Christianity in the black community. Perry writes Christianity into the script so deftly that we cannot escape it. Perry’s performances turn the theaters into churches, and his audiences into congregations.

For Christians in Perry’s productions, or in the audience, the line between being entertained and worshipping during is very thin.

**Dragging Madea**

Critics have found several problems with Perry's performances. First, Perry's performance in drag is something that male critics believe has castrated black men. In a much-circulated blog entry, “The Bridge: Diary of a Mad Black Man,” Darryl James writes, “[t]he Black man in drag is one of the new coons...no one has to oppress him, because he is self-castrated.” Secondly, Madea is eerily reminiscent of the Mammy stereotype, which has its roots in minstrelsy and has been supported in film.

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44 As an undergraduate student, I led a black women’s bible study. We went to see the film *Madea’s Family Reunion* as a group, where the members (most of whom were Church of God in Christ), yelled “hallelujah!” or “praise the Lord” every time they saw an attractive black man on the screen. In graduate school, I and other black friends who were either Christians or familiar with black church culture watched the film *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*. We all discussed the moving and realistic sermon by pastor and gospel singer Marvin Winans, and how we were impacted by it.
Spike Lee famously stated that Tyler Perry's work was “coonery and buffoonery.” These critiques of Perry's work sometimes acknowledge the history of black male performers in drag, but focus more on Madea either because the degree of success that Perry has enjoyed because of her, or because Madea continues to appear on the screen, even though Tyler Perry's name attracts a faithful audience, regardless of whether or not Madea is a part of the film, play, or television show. Madea is admittedly, a more memorable character than any of her contemporaries—characters played by Jamie Foxx, Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy and others. Perry's performance of Madea and the black church is much closer to Flip Wilson’s famous characters Geraldine Jones and Reverend Leroy. The Flip Wilson Show, which aired in the 1970s, featured Geraldine Jones, a masculine looking woman with a boyfriend named Killer and a key line, “the devil made me do it." Reverend Leroy was a pastor of “The Church of What’s Happening Now.”

Unlike the characters these comedians portray, Tyler Perry's performance as Madea feels both realistic and ridiculous: she is eerily reminiscent of older black women who are well-respected in all-black communities. Furthermore, Madea's somewhat complicated relationship with the black church allows her to be linked with an easily identifiable part of the black community in a way that none of the other characters are. Madea is not a churchwoman like Sister O'Dell and Sister Bernice Jenkins: she is a criminal who smokes and makes fun of church folk. However, she usually communicates truths that are related to Christianity, and points characters to the black church.

46 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmJati2W7uA
Madea is also different from other characters that comedians play because of her consistency across genres. Martin Lawrence, for example, has been known for his television performance as Shanaynay; that character has not been seen on film. Madea, on the other hand, started with stage plays, then graduated to films. Because of Madea's fame, she has been woven into the fabric of American folklore, and, as such, has become an easier target of critique. Much of the criticism of Madea focuses on what Perry's performance means for black men and ignores what it might mean for black women. Perry's formulaic plots promote an idea that is an anathema to black feminists: that a black woman's happiness is predicated on a black man loving her. The critics who focus on Madea’s performance as a castration refuse to see that the only character with real power in Perry’s plays is Madea—who is Tyler Perry in drag. Perhaps the critics are uncomfortable because Perry’s performance suggests that, in an American patriarchal society, black men must become women in order to have power. Like Harvey and Smiley, Perry uses his masculine privilege to tell women how to operate in heterosexual romantic relationships. Madea’s performance isn’t necessarily a castration of black men; Perry’s writing honors patriarchy and heteronormativity. Madea acts as an ‘empowered black woman,’ but it is ultimately in service of heterosexual marriage. Madea is a problematic figure, but not necessarily because she is Perry in drag. Madea is problematic because Perry doesn’t use his performance to question gender norms, but to reproduce them.

Perry uses Madea’s body to make claims about the fixedness of gender. By drawing attention to his costume, Perry constantly reminds the audience that he is not Madea--and that gender is not so easily performed. Furthermore, Madea, as a character,
makes claims about gender and gender roles to insist that there are correct and incorrect ways of behavior based on gender. In the taped stage play *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, a character states, “After my divorce, all I want is a nice, loving sensitive man.” Madea responds, “be careful what you ask for, you just might get it. Get you a nice, loving sensitive man, so sensitive he a tambourine player.” Madea suggests through her tone, motion, and allusion to the history of closeted black gay men who are church musicians, that she might end up with a gay man. In this joke, Perry manages to reveal the open secret about the role of gay men in black churches, and men on the down low in romantic relationships with black women—all while acting in drag. This example, one of many instances in which he reminds the audience about gender roles instead of questioning them, is perhaps why Christian audiences love Madea so much: they have the opportunity to see a performer who supports an evangelical reading of Christianity, and who isn’t politically invested in questioning gender roles. At the same time, however, they have the opportunity to enjoy the spectacle of a drag performance.

Black female spectators have the opportunity to consider the fixed gender roles Perry depicts. Perry establishes credibility in two ways: as Madea, a woman who was a stripper and has been married multiple times, she can offer female characters advice about their relationships, from sex to overcoming relationship difficulties. Because Perry is a man who writes the script, and directs the play, the audience members know this advice is also coming from him. In other words, Perry has an opportunity to show the women in the audience what he and presumably other men want from them. From Madea’s entertaining homilies, women learn that they ought to cook and clean for a man; they should not aspire to be wealthy, or to be with wealthy men; and they should
use their sexual prowess to keep men interested. These messages can be found in many of Perry’s plays. Even when “Madea” is absent from a scene, or not a character within the play, other women who are either older, or married, or both, teach women how to keep their husbands, or how to heal once their husbands have left, and how to find someone new. This places Perry in a powerful position where he can dictate gender roles within the universe he creates.

Of drag, Peter Ackroyd writes, “the idea of a male mind and body underneath a female costume evokes memories and fears to which laughter is perhaps the best reaction” (qtd in Davy 235). Indeed, Madea is meant to evoke both memory, or nostalgia, and fear in the audience. Madea is known for “being from the old-school.” This has several meanings, which Madea defines at different points in the plays and films. The “old-school” mentality in Perry's plays also indicates a time in which every black person spanked their children, much to the benefit of both the children and the adults. Her disciplinary methods are meant to strike fear in the hearts of children. Madea scares the adults by pulling out several guns from her black bag when she is wronged by someone (usually a male), and often talks about having poisoned her husband, or shooting someone. During these scenes, Madea jumps up and down, back and forth, screaming “Call the Po-Po!” Her breasts flap up and down repeatedly. The audience's response, which is a mixture of applause and laughter, suggest that Madea's violence, or threat thereof, is hysterically funny. The performance calls to mind older black women who are seemingly unafraid of everybody. However, the laughter can cover up the fear of what can or will happen if we cross Madea.
Madea is also funny because Tyler Perry employs what Roger Baker refers to as a “false disguise.”

'False disguise happens when there is no attempt by the performer to pretend he is anything other than a man playing at being a woman: he may use an unequivocally male name...; he may give the audience direct clues with self-referential asides... or...deliberately assume a masculine voice and attitude for a moment to remove any lingering doubts (15).

In his taped stage play, Madea's Family Reunion (2005), Madea, who is irritated with her uppity niece, comes to the door of the house half naked. The audience can clearly see Perry's fake breasts flopping as she puts her hand on her hips while she yells. The cast yells at Madea, and most of what is said is missed because the audience is laughing so hard. In another play, Madea Goes to Jail (2006), Madea breaks character as she is giving the audience advice for how to tell if a man is cheating. She says, “I was getting ready to tell you but I can't. I wanted to but who I am is conflicting with this dress I got on....Madea's strong, but she can't fight this playa.” Here, it is clear that Tyler Perry and Madea are fighting for the power to speak to the audience. This “battle” not only makes it clear that Perry is acting as Madea: it also makes it clear that, even in a play with her name in it, Perry is really the one in control. And when Madea is not present, in What's Done in the Dark, Cora, Madea's daughter tells Mr. Brown, “Madea doesn't have a prostate!” Mr Brown then turns to the audience and says, seriously, “believe me, Madea has a prostate!”

When Perry switches from being Madea to playing himself, the audience is enthusiastic in their approval of the switch. Perry uses this to communicate truths to
the audience: when it is something that is best heard from a woman, he uses Madea. However, when he needs to say something that only a man would know, such as how to really tell if a man is cheating, he uses his own voice. This collusion of characters means that his word is always taken seriously, regardless of when he is himself or talking as Madea. This instability always produces laughter.

Although a female character is central to Perry’s plays, the audience is fully aware that it is really a male dressed as a female, who communicates these views. From a feminist perspective, a black man who dresses up and acts as a black woman threatens to erase black women rather than accurately relating their perspective (Davy 234). Kate Davy writes, “while [female impersonation] certainly says something about women, is primarily about men, addressed to men, and for men” (233). Although Davy is correct in asserting that drag is usually about men, Perry's performances are different. Perry's plays are addressed to women, and are about women. However, his plays are not feminist: they do not offer a radical restructure of the society in which we live. Instead, Perry offers a masculinist, patriarchal, and heteronormative perspective through a powerful black woman's body. Unfortunately, the men who critique Perry's work do not understand that he is upholding their position of power: instead, they believe that Tyler Perry's performance as Madea is castrating. But Perry's insistence on simultaneously being himself and Madea means that s/he has become a liminal figure that coexists between genders. This creates a dilemma of sorts: a feminist reading insists that Perry in drag erases black women; male critics insist that Madea destroys black men. Both readings of Madea eclipse the role of the audience members, whose desire to see Madea has kept her alive, in spite of Perry’s desire to kill her off. If Madea erases black men
and black women because she is performed by a man, then who is she for, and why is Tyler Perry's empire so successful?

It might be more productive to consider what these performances suggest about an audience who greedily consumes them. Is it possible that popular audiences want to see a bossy, cross-dressing black man tell them what to do? Or is it that Madea is appealing because her very being is so vacuous that multiple readings can be read onto her body? Madea is not only male and female: she is also sacred and profane, feminist and anti-feminist, pro-church and anti-church. Madea is popular because she meets the various needs of the audience members. For women who want to hear what a man thinks, Madea will switch to Perry’s baritone voice. For women who need to see a powerful and protective black woman, Madea will wave her guns around to save another black woman in crisis. For people who need to go back to the black church, Madea will lead them to a pastor for guidance; for those who think the black church is a mess, Madea is there with her line “I’ll go back to church when they get a smoking section.” For those who want to see Madea as feminist, they can look upon a matriarch who is unquestionably in charge of her household. For those who need to see Madea as an anti-feminist, we see her cooking and cleaning to keep the men in her home happy and well-fed.

Drag is a masquerade, but it also reveals the truth. As we witness black men dress up as black women in a way that is supposed to reflect the power of black women, it is easy to believe that all is well in these performances. Dragging the black church is a performative gesture that masks or cloaks the problem of an unequal gender dynamic in the black community. But these comedic performances instead highlight
them—oftentimes using a 6’4, 392 pound drag figure in tights. A performance of a popular understanding of black feminism really hides the patriarchal agenda these men promote—to keep families ‘normal’ without questioning what that means. Furthermore, the audience members become complicit in the repeated performances of these female characters. Spectators financially support and call for these performances, which implies that they are hungry for drag. They do not only desire to see black men in drag, but patriarchy in drag as well. While we see young black men dress up as old black women, we also see patriarchy dressed up and sold to us as black feminism. Although many critics blame Perry for his stereotypical portrayal of black womanhood, the ticket sales and Perry’s revenue indicate that Madea is, ultimately, a reflection of the audience’s desires.

In a time of a black counterpublic that has either disintegrated or shifted its focus, Tyler Perry and black comedy gives us something to either love or hate. If the 20th century black political struggle focused on the right of African American citizens to first be free, then equal, the 21st century black political struggle is organized around the problem of representation. By giving a public audience a complex character that transgresses boundaries of gender and a fictive black world that somehow ‘feels’ authentic, Perry offers popular audiences an escape from politically correct language and ways of being, and critical/scholarly audiences something to debate over. Critics elected to ignore how Perry is useful for transforming the narrative about 21st century performances of blackness and womanhood. Perry consistently creates narratives about the lives of black women. Although the narratives are problematic—a woman’s freedom almost always comes with a marriage proposal—Perry does create Cinderella
tales for black women. This fills a void in popular culture, which has oftentimes either portrayed highly sexualized or desexualized black female characters. Perry writes the love stories of black women into the center of his script, rather than allowing black women to only play supporting roles to either the stories of black men or white women (and in doing so, become a forgettable part of the plot). Perry’s blockbusters are still somewhat financially dependent upon Madea’s presence. In 2009, Perry considered killing off Madea because of the physical difficulties of being in her costume. Ultimately, he decided against it. “Perry said that it’s clear that fans want more of her. ‘As long as they want to see her, she’ll stay around. But, I’m telling you, if they ever stop coming, she’s going to die a quick death”.

Smiley, Harvey and Perry have created a world we can no longer access: a mythical all-black universe with lots of laughs and happy endings. It is a world in which black women, regardless of physical size, are always considered desirable. Black men who have been imprisoned can get their lives back on track, get a job, and get married to beautiful women. Older black men and black women are amusing, but can still offer wisdom that younger people are willing to listen to. And children, although rebellious at first, ultimately obey and respect their elders. Smiley, Harvey and Perry are successful because at the cornerstone of their work exists a misplaced nostalgia for either the way things were, or the way things might have been. This nostalgia is signaled in a variety of ways. Both Perry and Harvey use music to “school” the young ones in the audience and to engage older audience members. In Perry’s plays, the “old-school” can refer to a love for the R&B music of an older generation. In at least two plays, the entire cast has done renditions of crowd favorites,

such as Lenny Williams' “Cause I Love You,” Betty Wright's “Clean-Up Woman”; Luther Vandross' “A House is Not a Home” and others. In The Original Kings of Comedy, Steve Harvey uses music by Earth Wind and Fire, Lenny Williams and others to both educate youngsters and get the older members of the crowd excited. In between songs, Harvey states, “that’s old school. If you ain’t from the old school, you don’t really know what’s happening...” Indeed, Smiley, Harvey and Perry use their positions as powerful black men and their comedic performances to “school” and solidify a seemingly scattered black counterpublic. The nostalgia they evoke through their consistent embodiment of the black church reestablishes patriarchal norms amongst their audience members, which is problematic. However, their performances are useful for combating the erroneous idea that we live in a post-racial society. Although race, gender or religion may no longer be the only identifiers for black men and women, the millions of dollars their products have made suggest that we are collectively longing for an idealized past that history itself cannot grant us. Dragging the black church, then, is a wishful performance--a way to step into an alternate universe and envision a different existence for black (church) folk.
In *Woman thou art Loosed*, Michelle Jordan walks down the aisle of a church and shoots her rapist. April, the protagonist of *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, electrocutes her boyfriend for attempting to rape her niece. In both films, black girls and women are victims of sexual abuse whose mothers do not believe or protect them from future attacks. Bishop T.D. Jakes and Tyler Perry wrote these narratives to reveal the debilitating effect of rape and silence on African American families. Their texts, which are a part of a larger genre of black church films, critique the culture of silence about sexual abuse in African American communities.

The black church has a long history of representation in films about African American culture. Film is one of the most accessible forms of popular culture, and is arguably the primary medium through which people access the performed black church. The “portrayal in film of the ‘black church’...is reflective of a mythical blackness. It is evident that the black church is portrayed as a mainstay of the black community, an institution that uniformly provides succor for black people...Popular films tend to erase the enormous diversity within black Christian churches in favor of presenting an amalgam of the most common stereotypes associated with the black church” (Sneed 70-71). Black church culture is represented in many otherwise secular mainstream films. There are several stock images associated with the black church: a black, male preacher, a choir, and an energetic congregation. They engage with the sermon by using call-and-response, shouting, standing up and offering affirmative responses, such as “Amen” or
Preach It.” Black church scenes usually mark a transformation within the characters (Sneed 72).

While many secular films include black church scenes, lately, there have been more mainstream films that represent the characters’ engagement with Christianity. In the films created by Tyler Perry and Bishop T.D. Jakes at the turn of the 21st century, the communities revolve around a black church. Sermons and gospel songs are offered in a black church and in other public spaces, such as a family dinner, reunion, bars, and once, a crack house. Even those who do not go to church, such as Madea, share their ideas about the Bible. In these films, evangelical interpretations of Christianity set the moral code for the communities. As there is an increase in films about black church culture, there are less black films that incorporate black church scenes.

Black church films are a response to Diawara’s claim that “there are no simple stories about Black people loving and hating each other, or enjoying their private possessions without reference to the White world” (4). Since his assertion, black church films have constructed a mainly or all-black universe. These films prioritize the experiences of black Christian women, and position them as desirable romantic leads. The fictional spaces privilege autonomous black communities where justice is meted out by concerned adults, or a justice system run by African Americans. These films are important: even if the plots are unrealistic, they are a welcome alternative to mainstream Hollywood films, where many of the stories revolve around white characters. Black

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48 ‘Black mainstream films in the late 2000s such as Something New, Think Like a Man, Ride Along, and even a film by T.D. Jakes, Jumping the Broom, do not have traditional ‘black church scenes’. Perry’s first film (which he wrote, but did not direct), Diary of a Mad Black Woman was released in 2005. Perry and Jakes were successful in carving out a distinct genre which allows other mainstream black films the freedom to incorporate narratives about African American life which do not include black church culture.'
church films have allowed for a greater diversity of films about African American culture.

The films of Perry and Jakes are a contemporary version of early 20th century religious films. During the 1920s and 1930s, filmmakers depicted African American religion with the expectation that their films would sell well. They also created an atmosphere in the theatre so that the event of watching a film would offer an opportunity for patrons to worship. Historian Judith Weisenfeld recounts a spiritual experience two black women had in 1928 while watching The King of Kings, a silent film about the life of Jesus. One of the newspapers which recounted this event stated, ‘‘Old time religion’ was felt at a picture show performance here recently...when two women, becoming happy, were injured when they fell shouting down the steps of the Royal theatre during the showing of King of Kings.’’ There was ‘‘some general sense among...patrons that the event was a religious one.’’ Although there have been no accounts of black women hurting themselves while physically responding to early 21st century black church films, the current day representations of faith invite a similar response of embodied praise for black audience members. African Americans who attend plays on the ‘‘chitlin circuit’’ are presumably the same audience members who watch black church films--both in the early 20th century and the early 21st century. The practices of black spectators in both spaces mirror each other. In the ‘‘Chitlin Circuit,’’ Gates writes, ‘‘black audiences have always had a predilection for talking back at performances...[d]uring some of the gospel numbers, there are members of the audience who stand up and do the holy dance by their seats (141). Gates referred to the culture of watching African American plays, however, in some movie theaters, even in the 21st century, there is a slightly modified
response by the audience members watching Jakes and Perry’s work, who may “shout” at the screen by saying “preach!” or “hallelujah!” Black church plays and films are important for their ability to represent black church culture and to offer a space where African Americans can break the ‘traditional’ conventions of a silent engagement with theatre and film. Black church traditions are thus performed on stage, in film, and by the audience members. The films by Jakes and Perry are also meant to encourage a spiritual transformation in the lives of the audience members. Like the earlier church films, the purpose of black church films is to entertain and lead people to worship.

The presumed audience for black church films is African American women who are familiar with black church culture. Both box office sales and critical scholarship about spectatorship demonstrate the power of black female viewers. According to hooks, most black women, because of their race and gender, have an alternative way of looking at mainstream Hollywood films. In these films, white women are objects of desire, while black women are either absent or are in limited, stereotypical roles. bell hooks writes, “[w]ith the possible exception of early race movies, Black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence, that must deny the ‘body’ of the Black female so as to perpetuate White supremacy, and with it a phallocentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is white” (291). In the 1990s, when there were more films about African Americans, scholars argue that black women moved from being absent to occupying the same space as white women: objects of the black male gaze. As a response to their absence in cinema, or to their objectification, black women develop an oppositional gaze, wherein they critically engage with, and dispute the images of womanhood they
see onscreen. Black Christian women spectators resist images based on their race, gender, and faith. For some evangelical women, watching scenes that include sex, drug use, or violence is a direct conflict with their faith. Black evangelical spectators resist racial and gendered stereotypes; however, they also resist images that might compromise their faith. This complicates black Christian women’s spectatorship. hooks’ book was published before Perry’s films were released; if her argument is extended, it would seem as though black women would necessarily construct an oppositional gaze in response to Perry and Jakes’ films. To most feminists, the black women in black church films become objects of the black male gaze. However, black evangelical women spectators may not use an oppositional gaze in response to black church films. Unlike most mainstream or independent films, black church films take the Christian faith seriously. They incorporate positive representations of black, middle and working class communities. The films also represent love stories of black women, who, until recently, were rarely the lead in blockbuster films. Finally, black evangelical women can see representations of Christian courtship in film. When black church films incorporate evangelical interpretations of the Christian faith, black Christian women may not be resisting spectators at all. It is possible that, while watching the films, black evangelical women may resist some images, but accept others.

The rise in black church films stems from the ministry of Bishop T.D. Jakes and the church plays by Tyler Perry. Both Jakes and Perry focused their energy on speaking to and about black women. Jakes is currently one of the most influential preachers in America. His church, The Potter’s House, is the largest church in the United States, and has a multiracial congregation. Jakes is also the CEO of a multimillion-dollar company.
One of Jakes’ most famous ministries is ‘Woman Thou Art Loosed.’ Jakes developed this ministry after years of encouraging first his mother, and then other women he counseled as a pastor. ‘Woman thou art Loosed’ began as “a group therapy session in the form of a Sunday School lesson.” This “became a hit, with over a hundred women attending Sunday School. [Jakes] began to address rape, incest, and other sensitive issues women faced” (Lee 137). Lee suggests that Jakes’ attentiveness to the issues which impact black women’s lives and strategic branding are the reason for his success. Jakes preached a “Woman thou art Loosed” sermon at a conference, wrote a novel, and then released a film, all with the same title. T.D. Jakes was one of the financiers for the film.

Although Tyler Perry is not a minister, his plays and films are also popular with black female churchgoers. Perry often represents a romantic relationship between a black, heterosexual, Christian couple. His films are never simple love stories, however; Perry often includes a family secret about parental neglect, abuse, or molestation of children. Perry may have a personal stake in revisiting these story lines. He was a victim of abuse who endured relentless physical abuse by family members and molestation by a friend’s mother. When Perry revealed the graphic details of his abuse, he stated, “I’m tired of holding this in. I don’t know what to do with it anymore, so I’ve decided to give some away.” Perry has never represented the molestation of males. By focusing on the trials of black women, he has gained a following that makes him one of the most financially successful filmmakers in recent history.

For both Jakes and Perry, the films are extensions of a larger spiritual work. Jakes uses his church and conferences to sell multiple texts, and films to share his faith.
Perry first became famous for his plays, which were often held in churches. In his plays, when acting as Madea, Perry often preaches to the audience, sincerely offering a message that would not be out of place if given from a pulpit. The exchange between the audience and Madea is also reminiscent of a church service. Film, as a medium, does not provide opportunities for a mutual exchange between Madea and the audience. However, Perry’s messages are consistent across church plays and films.

Furthermore, the way the films are marketed demonstrate that they are both for ‘spiritual’ and entertainment purposes. The cover of *Woman thou art Loosed* clearly states, “based on the bestselling novel by Bishop T.D. Jakes.” The description also states that Jakes will play himself. The use of Jakes’ spiritual title as ‘Bishop’ leaves little doubt as to the spiritual references within the film. *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* includes words such as “inspirational romantic comedy” and states “nothing will ever be the same as April finds love, faith, family--and herself.” ‘Inspirational’ and ‘faith’ are not exclusively Christian words, but they do indicate an awareness of speaking to an audience who is engaged with religion. This film includes a sermon preached by Pastor Marvin L. Winans. Winans is a part of a famous family of gospel singers; he is also the pastor of The Perfecting Church. In both films, the description, inclusion of gospel music and preaching by a recognizable pastors signal that the intended audience was African Americans who are familiar with black church culture. While there is a growing body of scholarship on T.D. Jakes as well as his impact on African American Christianity, there has not been much criticism on the film *Woman thou art Loosed*. There is currently no published scholarship that reads texts by Jakes and Perry collectively. Jakes and Perry are important, if divisive figures in African American
culture. In 2013, the video of Tyler Perry laying hands on and praying for Bishop T.D. Jakes went viral. Perry donated $1 million to a youth center planned by Jakes’ church. According to an article in Christian Post, Tyler Perry spoke to the congregation. “See, they don’t understand where I come from,” Perry added, sounding as if he was on the verge of preaching. “They don’t understand it in Hollywood. But I’m gonna tell you something about the blood of Jesus.” At that point, the Potter’s House congregation rose to its feet and cheered” (Menzie). This event, and the response by congregants as well as online commenters (some of whom thought it was staged) show how important Perry and Jakes are to African American Christian communities. Because of their connection to black churches and widespread influence in the entertainment industry, they can seem like credible sources that have a special insight on black men and women. It is therefore commendable that Woman thou art Loosed and I Can Do Bad All By Myself both reveal sexual trauma in African American families. Unfortunately, however, Jakes and Perry’s artistic decisions to implicitly blame black mothers for the trauma their daughters suffer may have negatively impacted black Christian female audience members.

Black feminist scholars have written at length about intraracial sexual violence and silence. Because of slavery and the stereotypes that followed, black women are often portrayed as amoral, sexually deviant and therefore always available for men. These portrayals mean that “violence against Black women tends to be legitimated and therefore condoned” (Collins 146). African American men and women attempted to correct the image of a ‘wild’ deviant sexuality under the threat of lynching and rape. With this potential violence, it was difficult for 19th century black women activists to
have a frank public discourse concerning intraracial gender relations and sexuality (Giddings 422). In the 19th century, revealing intraracial violence would confirm the stereotypes of African Americans, and invite violence from white people. Silence was a strategic form of protection.

In the late 20th and 21st centuries, black women are still silent about instances of intraracial rape. Black women who dare to tell the truth about being raped by black men are thus “twice victimized, first by the actual rape...they are victimized again by family members, community residents, and social institutions such as criminal justice systems which somehow believe that rape victims are responsible for their own victimization” (Collins 147). To prove this, black feminist scholars pointed to the hearings of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas. Although Anita Hill was a victim of sexual assault, many members of the African American community supported Clarence Thomas and vilified Hill (Giddings 424). In a show of support, black women took out an ad. It stated, in part, “As Anita Hill’s experience demonstrates, black women who speak of these matters are not likely to be believed...” (424). It is understandable, therefore, why many black women are caught in what Beth E. Richie calls the “trap of silence.” Richie, a counselor who helped black women who were abused, states, “Fear of being cast out by the community silenced me...” (399). She writes, “[t]oo many blacks still think [domestic violence] is a divisive issue that should not be aired in public” (398). Black churches may also cultivate a culture of fear which prevents victims of sexual abuse from speaking out. Several liberation and womanist theologians believe that black churches are either silent about sex, or speak about it in limiting ways. Churchgoers are reminded that they should only have sex within heterosexual marriages. In these conversations
about sex within churches, rape is not often discussed. Victims of rape may not feel comfortable sharing the details of their attack for fear of judgment. The respectability politics of black communities mean that problems within African American families are kept private. Perry and Jakes’s films attempt to bring the problems of the domestic sphere into the public sphere.

African American women have created texts that reveal this history of abuse. There are slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, and novels that represent black female characters who endure sexual abuse from white and black men. These texts demonstrate that, although black women are victims of sexual abuse, they still have power. This is a balance that *Woman thou art Loosed* and *I Can Do Bad all By Myself* don’t fully achieve. For example, in *The Color Purple*, Celie is slowly transformed from a victim to an emotionally stable, financially independent woman who has a relationship with God. In Perry and Jakes’ narratives, black women are responsible for their own abuse and for the abuse of their children. They are victims incapable of saving themselves or anyone else. Jakes and Perry moved the representation of black women’s rape from African American women’s literature to black popular films. By situating rape within the context of a film about black church culture, Jakes and Perry show that black churches ought to address the issue of sexual violence. However, they do this at the expense of black women, who are characterized as bad mothers.

*Woman thou art Loosed* (2004), was directed by Michael Schultz, and based off of a novel written by Jakes. In the beginning of the film, Michelle is on death row. Bishop T.D. Jakes, who plays himself in the film, comes to visit her, and encourages Michelle to tell him the circumstances that led her to imprisonment. Through flashbacks
and documentary style interviews with the people who knew her, we learn about the events that led to her killing her abuser. During her childhood, Michelle is sexually abused by Reggie, her mother’s boyfriend. Michelle has a strained relationship with her mother, Cassey. As an adult, Michelle works as a stripper, has an abusive boyfriend, and is addicted to cocaine. After three years in prison, Michelle is released early for parole at the request of Bishop T.D. Jakes. She is required to attend the three-day conference as a part of her condition for parole. At the end of the conference, Michelle goes up to the altar to be released from the memory of the sexual abuse. However, while she is there, she sees Reggie and shoots him.

_I Can Do Bad all by Myself_ (2009) was written and directed by Tyler Perry. In it, April is a nightclub singer in a relationship with Randy, a married man. One night, April’s niece Jennifer and nephews Byron and Manny are caught breaking into Madea’s house. April unwillingly takes responsibility for them. The pastor of the local church also asks April to host Sandino, a Colombian handyman who repairs her house for room and board. At the climax of the film, Randy tries to rape Jennifer. April retaliates by dropping a plugged in radio into a bath where Randy is sitting. Sandino rescues Jennifer from Randy, and helps April heal from the abuse she suffered as a child. At the end of the film, Sandino and April get married.

In both films, the women and girls were all victims of rape. Cassey and April were raped by father figures when they were girls, and Michelle and Jennifer are victims of rape or sexual assault in the films. The depiction of the mothers lead the audiences to believe that they are all partially to blame within the context of the film. First, they date and live with these predators, allowing them access to their children. After the abuse
occurs, they don’t believe that the abuse is happening. Finally, they ask their daughters to stay silent about their molestation, and to “get over it.” The films blame mothers for not seeing or responding to the abuse of their children. Cassey, April, April’s sister, and their mothers are collusive mother figures. Research about intrafamilial sexual abuse finds that when a father figure sexually abuses a child, the mother is often blamed for it. The assumption many make is that mothers know about the abuse and do not stop it. This is usually untrue: when mothers discover abuse, they attempt to take action immediately. If they do not, it is usually because they are also victims of domestic abuse (Faller). The films show situations wherein mothers know about abuse and chose not to protect their daughters. Jakes and Perry construct these narratives as a warning for audience members who may not be able to clearly identify patterns of abuse within their families.

The black mothers in both films are all absent, either emotionally or physically. In Woman thou art Loosed, Cassey abandons Michelle several times. In one of the earlier scenes, Cassey rushes to get ready for her first date with Reggie and leaves Michelle alone with him. When Michelle is released from prison, her mother doesn’t pick her up, instead opting to take Reggie to one of his appointments. Michelle and Cassey exchange an uncomfortable greeting at church, but before they can have a conversation, the camera pans to Reggie, who impatiently honks the horn and urges Cassey to leave Michelle. This pattern of abandonment reveals a broken relationship between Cassey and Michelle, and suggests that Reggie is more important to her than her daughter. In Woman thou art Loosed, Jennifer, Byron and Manny are stealing because their grandmother never came home. Their mother is dead, and their aunt, April,
pretends not to know who they are when she sees them. The physical absence of their grandmother and mother, and the emotional distance of their aunt mean they rely upon Madea for encouragement. April repeatedly states that she cannot take them in, and that they will have to go to foster care, citing that she isn’t ready for the responsibility of children. Their abandonment of the children leave them vulnerable to attack.

Because of their unwillingness to be good mother figures, Cassey and April are selfish women. Both Jakes and Perry assert that the abuse they endured during childhood hardened them so they are incapable of thinking of others. In a documentary style interview, Cassey justifies her relationship with Reggie:

Excuse me for trying to keep my family together. Did I put Reggie over my child? No. Did I put my child over Reggie? No. Did I put myself over both of them? Well, you’re damn right. I mean, you ask any woman, and they’ll tell you how hard it is to keep a man, especially when you have a child. I mean--look at me. Who else am I gonna get. Yeah. They say sex is overrated, but being alone sure ain’t. I don’t care how hard you squeeze a pillow, but it’s not gonna squeeze you back.

Throughout the film, Cassey seems to cater to Reggie’s needs; however, in this interview, the audience clearly sees that her need for a sexual relationship comes before everyone else. Although she begins with the phrase “excuse me,” Cassey is unapologetic about keeping Reggie—even after she suspects that he may have abused Michelle. Cassey’s claim that she is trying to “keep her family together” is invalidated because she constantly abandons her daughter. Here, Jakes constructs a black single mother who is so desperate for sex that her desire impairs her ability to make decisions that benefit her children. April is also criticized for her selfishness. She implies on several occasions that
she has a romantic relationship with Randy primarily for the financial help he offers. In a conversation April has with Tanya, one of her friends, Tanya sums up April’s character: “I ain’t never seen a more selfish person in my life. You’re always drunk....You’re sleeping with a married man because you don’t want him around all the time. You have that big house and you don’t even want to be in it.” After April tells Jennifer that she and her brothers cannot stay with her, Jennifer states: “when I grow up, I’m going to be just like you. I won’t give a damn about anybody but myself.”

Cassey and April are self-involved and cannot see the true character of the men they are dating. In the first conversation between Uncle Reggie and Michelle, the audience detects that he is a predator. Cassey’s absence allows Uncle Reggie to have an inappropriate conversation with Michelle. He states, “you’re awfully big for an eight year old. You know, girls these days develop faster than they did when I was growing up...one day, you’re gonna fill out like a grown woman. And in about three years, you’re going to be stacked up just right.” During this scene, ominous music plays, and the camera zooms in and focuses on Michelle’s face. The camera demonstrates the height difference between Michelle and Uncle Reggie. She is scared and backs away from Reggie as he leans over her. He walks toward her, and then says, “there’s nothing to be afraid of.” Twana, Cassey’s friend enters the room, sees Michelle’s reaction to Uncle Reggie, and challenges him. In an interview that immediately follows this scene, Twana states, “You know the first time I saw him I had him pegged. A dog will always avoid eye contact when they busted. But a snake--a snake will never show weakness. Nowadays you got internet predators coming into your house, coming after your babies. But back in the day, though, we had Uncle Reggies. Snakes.” Twana, the positive role
model for Michelle, identifies Reggie immediately. Yet, Cassey remains blind to the
threat Reggie poses to her daughter’s safety and well-being. Cassey’s absence from this
scene, and inability to see Michelle’s fear foreshadows the rape scene. Cassey is a silent
partner in the abuse of her child.

April is so irritated by the presence of her niece and nephews that she does not
notice Randy’s behavior toward them. April poses a physical threat to their safety: she
constantly smokes around the children, even though one of them has asthma. The first
time Randy meets the children, he disciplines them in a show of support for April.
However, when she leaves the room, Randy’s threats carry a sexual innuendo.

Randy: So you think you’re grown huh? I got something for little girls who think they’re
grown.

Jennifer: I got something for grown men who think they got something for me.

Randy: Ooh, I got a fast one on my hands.

For Randy, sex and physical power are weapons by which he establishes and maintains
control. Perry’s films and plays support spankings as a way to discipline children. Those
scenes are usually comical. Here, Randy’s presence, tone, and gaze at Jennifer include a
threat which is sexual in nature. The “something for little girls” foreshadows his attack
of her, and reveals that, for him, rape is about power. Randy’s description of Jennifer as
both ‘grown’ and ‘fast’ are a justification for his future attack. Jennifer’s quick response
indicates that she has suffered threats by other men. Although April is gone from the
room, Sandino is present. Randy assumes that he cannot speak English. Randy attempts
to disempower Sandino because of his immigration status, and poverty. In an attempt to
prove that he is in control of April’s house, Randy is violent with the children and Sandino. April cannot see this power dynamic.

There is a slight suggestion in both films that Cassey is and April may be a victim of domestic abuse. In one scene, when Cassey and Reggie are older, she points out that he hasn’t worked in a decade. Reggie states: “you know back in the day I would have slapped you silly for saying something like that.” Cassey responds, “Those days are long gone, never to come again. I don’t know what I was thinking about.” This is the only moment in the film that refers to Reggie’s abuse of Cassey. The film does not prioritize domestic violence: instead, the event is a distant memory. Unlike other moments in the film, Schultz does not use a flashback to show the audience the pattern of physical abuse. In recounting it, Reggie is unrepentant, and Cassey seems to blame herself for the abuse she endured. Her statement, “I don’t know what I was thinking about,” hints that it is her fault for enduring the domestic abuse. The film subtly blames Cassey for continuing a relationship with a man who abused her and her daughter, rather than shifting the responsibility to Reggie. The film too easily represents this relationship as one which Cassey can easily extract herself. In *I Can Do Bad All by Myself*, Randy does not physically abuse April; instead, he is a domineering force within her life. In the first scene, Randy complains about the money he pays in child support. April responds, “whose fault is that?” When she challenges him, he glares at her in a threatening manner, and asks her to repeat herself. April immediately softens, as if to ward off a possible attack. By recounting an event in passing, or showing a suggestion of domestic violence, the films do not make important the stories of women who are victims of domestic abuse. Instead, the films demonstrate that the women first chose to stay with
these men, and leaving them should be easy. The audience can judge Cassey and April for maintaining relationships with their abusers: Reggie and Randy’s threatening behavior to the women is never fully explored. Rather than seeing Cassey and April as victims within their long-term relationships, the narrative encourages audience members to blame them for their own abuse, and the abuse of their children.

Both films show scenes where the men attack the girls. Because of the troubling nature of the content, the scenes do not depict the moment of rape. Instead, sound, lighting, and close-ups of the girls’ faces demonstrate their fear. In *Woman thou art Loosed*, Reggie is drunk when he attacks Michelle. They are alone in the house.

Reggie: Go ahead, you better get changed before your mamma comes home. I’m going to come in and help you.

Michelle: Leave me alone! Stop!

Reggie: You’re always teasing me. Running around here teasing me with them little tight jeans on. I’m going to see what you got.

Michelle: Reggie, leave me alone. Let go of me! Mom! Mom!

The door slams, and Michelle starts screaming. The star falls off of her door. Cassey is not present to respond to Michelle’s screams. Reggie blames Michelle for his attraction to her. This scene shadows the earlier scene wherein Reggie meets Michelle: they are in a dark space, and Michelle is terrified. After Michelle is raped, Cassey finds her in the closet, wearing a bloody dress. Cassey doesn’t believe Michelle: she instead assumes first that she had her period, and then that she willingly had sex with a boy from her neighborhood. Instead of listening to or comforting her, Cassey attacks Michelle by speaking over her, stating:
How you gonna lie like that, huh? You let that little boy come in here and do anything he want to you, and then if it don’t be like what you bargained for, you’re gonna say it’s Reggie? No, this is your fault. You hear me? You shouldn’t have let this happen. And if your fast behind keeps this up, I’m gonna send you to live with your grandma with the quickness!...I dont want to hear another word about this. I mean not another word!”

In this moment, Cassey is portrayed as a monstrous mother. Michelle is in the closet in a stained dress, crying. Much like Reggie, Cassey looms over Michelle. Cassey portrays Michelle as an oversexualized liar who is to blame for her attack. When she states that Michelle invited a boy to do “anything he wants to you,” she suggests that Michelle is first an active, then passive recipient of sexual advances. Cassey calls Michelle “fast.”

The stereotype of sexually licentious black women extends to the description of black girls’ sexuality. According to Cassey, Michelle cannot be raped. She is too sexual to be considered a victim. Worse, Cassey silences Michelle, forbidding her to speak about her experience. Michelle is doubly victimized--first by Reggie, and then by her mother.

Reggie and Cassey both blame Michelle for having a body which invites sexual attention. Reggie does this to justify the attack, and later, Cassey claims that Michelle is a ‘fast’ girl who willingly had sex with the neighborhood boy.

Although Cassey blames Michelle for her sexual experience, she sends her away and greets Reggie with a knife. When Cassey repeatedly questions Reggie about the rape, he discredits Michelle.

Reggie: Look, I don’t like the way you’re looking at me. Now, I told you I didn’t touch her. I’m not gonna stand here and have you accuse me of something I know I didn’t do. Now, I don’t know what went down. But you know how fast she’s been getting. You
said so yourself, baby. No tellin how many boyfriends she’s got. Come on, Baby. All the things we’ve been through. Baby how can you do that? How can you believe her over me? How can you do that to me?

Like Cassey, Reggie uses words like “fast” and alludes to numerous boyfriends to suggest that Michelle has an uncontrollable sexuality. Again, Cassey is implicitly blamed for Michelle’s abuse. When confronted, Reggie simply states, “you said so yourself, baby.” Reggie uses Cassey’s words to discredit Michelle’s story. Finally, Reggie asks, “how can you believe her over me?” Because Cassey already considered the possibility that Michelle was lying, Reggie’s rhetorical question allows her to believe him. Cassey helps Reggie unpack his bags to welcome him back into the family. Immediately following this scene is the documentary style interview with Cassey wherein she states that she puts herself above both Reggie and Michelle. Then she says:

But yeah, I love my baby. But things were real different back then. I mean, nowadays, if you discipline a child, they call that child abuse. If you go too far on a date, they call that rape. When I was a kid, you were taught to just move on. If things happened—if it didn’t kill you, then you got through it. It happened to me. And my mother told me, she said, “Baby, it ain’t no sense in you hating your daddy. Cause we all got our crosses to bear. And our little dresses to wear.”

This is one of the most important scenes in the film. Cassey’s description is a critique of people who give a name to physical and sexual abuse. The audience can witness that Cassey has dismissed the severity of her own abuse because of the time period in which she lived. She simply states, “it happened to me,” without fully revealing what “it” is. This hints at the culture of silence around the sexual abuse of black girls who are
discouraged from naming what happened, or revealing their attacker. When Cassey states, “my mother told me...there’s no sense in you hating your daddy,” the audience infers that Cassey is a victim of abuse at the hands of her father. In addition to silencing Cassey, her mother also limits the range of her emotional response. This scene suggests first, that intergenerational, intraracial sexual abuse happens in African American families; that victims are taught abuse is normal; that mothers encourage their daughters to be silent about the abuse; and finally, that the abuse and silence can turn a woman into a neglectful, monstrous mother. Alongside the history of father figures abusing their daughters exists the history of mothers who either don’t believe their daughters, or tell them to “get over it.” This scene also implies that Cassey subconsciously believes her daughter was a victim of sexual abuse. Cassey tells her story of abuse after she confronts Reggie. The film invites the audience to compare Michelle and Cassey’s experience.

However, Cassey dismisses her own abuse and that of her daughter. When Michelle is an adult, Cassey asks Reggie again if he has ever hurt Michelle. Reggie lies. Because Cassey believes Reggie, and continues her pattern of abandoning Michelle, Cassey is never transformed into a loving mother figure. Even as Michelle is on death row, Cassey does not tell the courts about Michelle’s history of abuse to help her get a reduced sentence. Cassey is faithful to Reggie, not her daughter.

In *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, Randy attempts to rape Jennifer. He uses the same rhetoric that Reggie does in the moments leading up to the attack. Jennifer wakes up to get medicine for her brother. As she makes her way to the refrigerator in the dark, Randy lights a cigarette. He states:
“How are you doing beautiful? I’ve seen the way you’ve been looking at me. See this here is my house and I can let you and two little nappy boys stay here.

Jennifer: Right.

Randy: Baby girl, I’ll get you all the medicine you need.

Jennifer: I need to give him his medicine.

Randy: No, see what you need to do is take care of me.

Jennifer: If you don’t stop right now, I’ll tell Aunt April.

Randy: You think she’s going to believe you? You think she’s going to believe you? Take it off.

The room is dark, the music crescendoes, and the camera angle is high, which makes Jennifer, in this scene, look smaller. Randy’s body casts a shadow over her face. The camera angle highlights the difference in height between them. Randy physically restrains Jennifer by pushing her up against a counter; the audience can hear him unbuckle his pants. He muffles her cries by grabbing her face. Jennifer is unable to fight back or call for help.

Randy first justifies his desire by pretending that it is mutual. He uses his status in the household as the financial provider to intimidate Jennifer: he insinuates that if she does not comply, she and her brothers will be homeless. Randy also prevents Jennifer from taking care of her brothers. Jennifer is a mother figure to her brothers, and Randy assumes that she will sacrifice anything, including her body, to take care of them. When she threatens to expose him, he immediately discredits her. In this narrative, April is an inconsiderate and selfish aunt who has always prioritized her relationship with Randy.
over her niece and nephews’ well being. Here, Randy assumes that April will not believe
Jennifer.

Before Randy can rape Jennifer, Sandino starts beating him with a baseball bat,
then uses the belt Randy just unbuckled to choke him with it. When April comes into the
room, Jennifer and Sandino try to tell her that Randy attacked her.

Randy: They’re lying on me. This little slut. You know she’s a slut. She tried to get me
to have sex with her for money...April, who you going to believe, huh? Him or me?

April: You baby. Get upstairs and get in the tub.

In this scene, Randy is bloody, lying on the floor, and Jennifer is crying. When April
claims that she believes Randy, the audience is led to believe that she will continue her
pattern of placing him above the well-being of her niece and nephews. However, April is
transformed from a monstrous to good mother by her act of revenge. While Randy sits in
the tub, soaking his body, he says:

Oh baby thank you. You know I love you, right? I’m just trying to provide the best life
that I can.

April: What happened?

Randy: That little girl tried to get me to have sex with her for money.

April: Tell me what you did....That’s my niece. She’s 16. What did you do.

You are just like Lee. He told my mother he didn’t do nothing either. Just like Lee. He
told my mother that it was my fault, that I did it!”

After this, April drops a plugged in cd player into the bathtub. Randy jumps out, but is
partially electrocuted. Sandino kicks him out of their house. He disappears from the
narrative thereafter.
This is the first reference to April’s past abuse. April punishes Randy for his advances to Jennifer, but also because he reminds her of her abuser. After this scene, April confides in Sandino. She states,

“I should’ve known. The way he looked at her. I should’ve known. Like my mother should’ve known. She was always saying whatever happens in this house stays in this house. Nothing ever gets healed if you keep it covered up. I should’ve known. When a man, a grown man takes interest in a little kid, something ain’t right.

April blames herself for Jennifer’s attack. Because she takes revenge on Randy, and then admits responsibility for not seeing his interest in Jennifer, April becomes a reformed mother figure.

Like Woman thou art Loosed, the scene of confession happens after an attack, and the audience learns that Cassey and April are monstrous mother figures because of their abuse. Both women also allude to their mothers who were complicit in the abuse by encouraging them to stay silent. Perry is more direct than Jakes however: April states, “Nothing ever gets healed if you keep it covered up.” April’s act of revenge, and her admission that she was also a victim of rape, sets her family free from the trap of silence. After April confesses this, she eventually becomes a transformed figure who is unselfish and loving towards Sandino, Jennifer, Byron and Manny.

Both films depict a black church that is a central part of the community, and pastors and other Christians who are involved in the lives of black women who might normally be rejected by traditional black churches. In Woman thou art Loosed, the three day conference is advertised on the car radio when Michelle gets a ride home from prison. The women at the halfway house discuss it. At the beauty shop, Twana plays it
on the television. And in one highly unrealistic scene, a drug dealer turns on the television in a crack house, and the addicts smoke as they watch Jakes preach. Bishop T.D. Jakes plays himself, and is a compassionate pastor who has time to lead a large congregation and meet with Michelle in prison. In *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, April lives across the street from Zion Baptist Church. In one of the earlier scenes, Pastor Brian meets with people in the community who have various needs, and helps them. Pastor Brian and Wilma know April’s family well; they deliver the news of the death of April’s mother. Wilma also goes to a nightclub to speak with April about having a better relationship with her mother, niece and nephews. While there, she sings a song dedicated to April. These scenes suggest that the black church is a highly accessible space for community members; however, the black church should also help others, even if they are in spaces where people do not usually worship God, such as the crack house and nightclub. These scenes also demonstrate an idea familiar to most evangelical Christians: that God can reach anyone anywhere. In both films, the black church enters into secular spaces and becomes a ‘beacon of light’ for those mired in addiction.

The black church scenes aim to be authentic representations of real black churches. In *Woman thou art Loosed*, the black church scenes look as though they were taken from one of T.D. Jakes’ televised sermons. The camera pans the church and focuses in on Jakes’ preaching and then the response of the congregation. In *I Can Do Bad All By Myself*, there is no suggestion that the sermons were scripted and acted out. Bishop T.D. Jakes and Pastor Brian (played by Pastor Marvin Winans) are preaching not as actors, but as real pastors. Both pastors preach sermons to their congregations and to the audience members who watch the films. In many black church scenes, characters are
immediately transformed after by the message and song, and find redemption. These scenes are a source of some change for April and Michelle; however, their transformation is far from complete. The preaching, singing, and praying alone do not protect the women from attacks, and the messages do not prevent the women from committing violent and illegal acts of revenge.

In Woman thou art Loosed, Michelle planned to place the stained dress from her first attack at the altar. By doing this, she hoped she would be released from the pain of her abuse. Reggie decides to become a Christian, and places a crack pipe at the altar, as a sign of his commitment to be healed from addiction. When Reggie sees Michelle, he stretches out his arms to her, and wants to ask for forgiveness. However, Michelle kills him at the altar. This scene demonstrates that the black church alone is incapable of healing deep wounds. The abuse happened in the shadows of the black church. By shooting Reggie at the altar, Michelle makes her abuse, which happened in private, a public affair. Jakes seems to suggest that the black church should do more for victims of rape. Instead of preaching a sermon and hoping that it will be fixed, there should be more action involved. Jakes takes action by appealing to the governor for a reduced sentence for Michelle. He meets with her while in prison, and listens to her story. Michelle’s history of abuse, silence, and public act of revenge is a warning for black mothers and black churches that do not allow rape victims to reveal their abusers.

After the first church scene in I Can Do Bad all By Myself, Randy attacks Jennifer. While still in her church dress, April physically attacks Randy. The black church begins the process of healing, but it alone is not enough to rehabilitate former victims. Jakes and Perry suggest that, after the sermons, black churchgoers go back
home to face nightmarish situations. The church is ever present as a space where healing is encouraged, but it is the relationships that the main characters have with men that heal them. The characters do not confess their sins at the altar within black churches, nor do they go for prayer. Their confessions of their abuse happens for Michelle in a jail cell, and for April in the nightclub where she works. This indicates that all Christians, but especially men of God have to be willing to move outside the boundaries of the black church to help heal others. Using the model of Jesus, who “ate with sinners,” Bishop T.D. Jakes and Sandino are Christlike figures whose presence and touch can heal women who are bound by their abusive pasts.

In the midst of the stories about abuse, Jakes and Perry also follow the principles of sacred sexuality. When Cassey and April have premarital sex with unmarried men, they and their children are in harm’s way. However, the films privilege courtship and then marriage between a heterosexual Christian couple. Michelle is briefly courted by Todd, a black, Christian man who loved her since they were children. April is courted by Sandino, who restores her home and her relationship with her niece and nephews. By sharp contrast, Reggie and Randy are depicted as men who destroy families, peace, and separate the women from God. In addition to raping her daughter, abusing Cassey, and being completely financially dependent upon her, Reggie also doesn’t approve of Cassey’s time at church. Randy tries to prevent April from going to church with Sandino and the children. Jakes and Perry send a clear message: women ought to be married to Christian men who will protect and provide for them. Single mothers cannot, within the context of these films, successfully raise children with the help of non-Christian men, or alone. *Woman thou art Loosed* ends with Michelle in a jail cell on death row. Her hope
of a reduced sentence rests on Bishop T.D. Jakes. At the end of *I Can Do Bad all By Myself*, April asks Sandino to help her “learn how to love.” Michelle and April are depicted as incapable of saving themselves, or living well without the help of Christian men.

The troubling trend in Perry’s films of blaming women for their rape continues. In *Temptation: Confessions of a Marriage Counselor* (2013), Judith is unhappy in her marriage, and cheats on her husband with Harley, a billionaire. The first time Judith and Harley have sex, she says “no”, and “I don’t want to.” It is a rape: however, the film doesn’t recognize it as such. Judith is not portrayed as a victim, but as someone who orchestrates her own destruction. She has an affair, becomes obsessed with Harley, is addicted to cocaine, and then contracts AIDS from him. At the end and beginning of the film, she tells her story as a warning to a woman who is considering cheating on her husband. In black church films, women who have pre-marital or extra-marital affairs are blamed for the abuse they suffer.

Jakes and Perry were undoubtedly well-intentioned: their films attempt to reveal and then correct the history of silence and intraracial rape. In the films, rape is treated as a sin for which there is no forgiveness. Evangelicals believe that God forgives all sins. Although both films privilege an evangelical interpretation of Christianity, they do not include scenes where Randy and Reggie ask God for forgiveness. Reggie dies, and appears as a ghostlike presence who warns the audience, “there was so much I wanted to say...there just wasn’t enough time.” The audience is led to believe that Reggie is in hell because he didn’t ask God for forgiveness before he died. After his electrocution, Randy does not appear in the film. By completely removing Reggie and Randy, Jakes and Perry
show that restoration can only happen when predators ‘disappear.’ The films demonstrate that rape or the sins committed against black women deserve to be punished. Much like films where outlaws punish and kill those who rape white women, *Woman thou art Loosed* and *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* justify violence against men who rape black girls. Jakes and Perry show that black girls are worth avenging. However, they also demonstrate that single black mother figures who have premarital sexual relationships invite ‘the devil’ into their homes. These men prevent them from pursuing a relationship with God, and destroy the relationships they have with their children. At the end of the relationship, when the man is dead or disappears, Cassey and April are left alone to contemplate their abuse and much of the blame for what has happened. Jakes and Perry’s narratives are courageous in that they represent the problems of domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape within African American families; however, until there is a more nuanced and complicated representation of domestic abuse, women will continue to be blamed for their own abuse, and for the abuse of their children.
Chapter 5

Hallelujah and Amen!: Rap and The Secularization of Black Church Music

In June 2012, popular rapper Meek Mill released “Amen.” The song, which used enthusiastic music most associated with the black church, was an anthem to celebrate a party life that was decidedly at odds with Christianity. “She wanna f---k and I say church (Preach),” he raps, while the organ plays. Unsurprisingly, Christian preachers and rappers were frustrated with Meek Mill’s song. Philadelphia Pastor Jomo K. Johnson had an argument with Meek Mill on a radio show shortly after the release; he called for a boycott of the song. Meek Mill finally apologized on BET’s 106 and Park, and Pastor Johnson forgave him. Later that year, in December, another rapper, Game, released his album, Jesus Piece. In an interview to promote the album, Game stated: "I'm calling [my new album] Jesus Piece 'cause last year in August I got baptized and so I've been going to church, but I still been kinda doing me out here...I still love the strip club and I still smoke and drink. I'm faithful to my family, so I wanted to make an album where you could love God and be of God, but still get it poppin' in your life." The cover of the deluxe album features a stained glass, rendering of a black Jesus who appears to belong to the gang, the Bloods; marijuana leaves are in the background. Game’s views about Christianity as well as the image of Jesus as a black gang member, raised the ire of the Christian community, including Christian rapper Lecrae. The arguments between Meek Mill and Pastor Jomo, as well as Game and Lecrae revealed the tension between the hip hop community and black Christians. While there are Christians who are also hip hop fans, it can be difficult for

Christians to enjoy listening to a genre that consistently disrespects the tenets of Christianity. Both Meek Mill, who isn’t a Christian, and Game, who is, appropriate and financially benefit from black church music and Christian themes or language. This trend, which uses sacred music to praise secular themes, is one of the most surprising representations of the black church in 21st century popular culture thus far. Although Jesus has always been a hero in hip hop culture, even to the point that rappers often reference Him or consider themselves Christlike, most rappers don’t rap about hedonistic lives over sacred music. Yet, with “Amen,” and some songs on Jesus Piece, it seems that, in addition to black popular fiction, stage performances, films and television, the rap industry also wants to resurrect the black church. The black church is too much of an important symbol to be ignored, even in the rap industry. This conclusion briefly examines the rap industry’s flirtation with the black church, and then defines how the black church has been resurrected and transformed in 21st century black popular culture.

The black church has always had an impact on black popular music, from soul, blues, and, later, R&B. Lincoln and Mamiya write, “[m]any black musicians and artists received their initial musical training in black churches, developed their talent further in concert halls, nightclubs, and juke joints, and their musical style was combined with the words from hymns or newly created sacred songs in the churches” (4739). Before hip hop, black music seemed to fuse the sacred and secular. Lincoln and Mamiya quote James Cone when writing about black church music: “Black music is unity music. It unites the joy and the sorrow, the love and the hate, the hope and the despair of black people....It shapes and defines black being and creates cultural
structures for black expression. Black music is unifying because it...affirms that black being is possible only in a communal context.” (4529). Black church music was second only to preaching in importance to black church services. It signified an escape from material conditions that were less than ideal and reminded the singers and listening alike of who God is, and who they are in relationship to Him, and to others. Singing Black Church music is a communal experience that worshippers and/or churchgoers enjoy. Furthermore, it played an important role during the Civil Rights Movement, where songs from the black church were transformed into freedom songs (Lincoln and Mamiya).

Christianity has always been a part of hip hop, but black churches have not always embraced hip hop culture. Charles L. Howard examines the connection between the Sylvia Robinson, the ‘mother of hip hop’ and Christianity. Robinson is credited with the first recording of hip hop. In an interview, she states “here was a fellow talking on the Mic with music playing...[a]ll of a sudden I felt a chill all over my body and a voice said to me,”You put that on tape and You’ll be out of all the trouble you’ve ever been in.” And all at once, I felt the chills all over my body, like the Holy Spirit overcoming me.” (qtd in Howard 60). Robinson’s discussion of the Holy Spirit, demonstrates her faith. She recorded the rappers because it was a “Revelation of God.” Howard points out that one cannot critically read the “origins of hip hop from a strictly Christian perspective...yet it is important to point out that at this definitive moment, Christianity was engaging with it.” Other scholars cite that there is a continued presence of Christianity within rap music, from MC Hammer’s “Son of the King” to Kanye West’s “Jesus Walks” (Sorett 147). Many black churches, however, continually
resist this connection. In 1994, Reverend Butts used a steamroller to destroy some rap music. According to Sorett, the “steamrolling of rap CDs...has been etched into America’s consciousness as representative of the general posture of religious communities to [hip hop]” (146). The religious scholars and cultural critics suggest that secular hip hop can incorporate gestures toward Christianity but black churches, concerned with maintaining a politics of respectability, reject hip hop and members of its generation outright.

In the beginning of The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture, Emmet Price writes, “If the Black Church were more vigilant toward the needs, concerns, and desires of its youth and young people during the late 1960s and early 1970s, there probably would be no Hip Hop culture.” Price’s powerful assertion suggests that the black church lost its hold on black youth, and hip hop music and culture became the space where young people could build political movements, question or define spirituality, race, and other identities, and in turn, become what the black church once was: the “stronghold of the black community.” Although Price’s argument is extreme, it does point to how the black community fragmented in response to hip hop culture. Pastors and religious scholars are currently attempting to correct the broken relationship between black churches and hip hop culture. Some construct ministries within larger churches; others have “hip hop churches,” or are attempting to define a “hip hop theology” (Sekou 197). However, they are small in number compared to those who disapprove of hip hop music and culture. Reverend Patricia Lesesne writes, “I am convinced that [rap music] reveals a deep level of disconnectedness and depravity, occasioned by their location at the vortex of social decline, urban decay, gender bias,
institutionalized and internalized racial hostility, and economic ambush on working- and middle-class people, and a war on the family (205).” To the majority of Christians, rap music represents depraved morality and a world in which immediate gratification is more important than obedience to God. For members of the hip hop generation, the inclusion of Christianity within rap lyrics or a discussion of rap lyrics within sermons is a useful and potentially educational tool (Sekou 197). However, scholarship has not yet discussed the latest trend in the rap industry, wherein popular rappers appropriate black church music to praise a hedonistic lifestyle. Unlike other styles of ‘black music,’ such as blues, soul, or R&B, there was a clear distinction between the sound of black church music and hip hop. A few secular rappers seek to close this gap. They sample sacred music and use black church expressions in songs with messages that are antithetical to most interpretations of Christianity. Rap which uses sacred music is divisive and tests the limits of freedom of expression.

Meek Mill begins “Amen” by thanking God for beautiful women and wealth that he enjoys. The entire song is about enjoying these blessings, as he drinks alcohol, buys expensive cars, and has sex with women. Drake, who is also featured on Mill’s song, has a verse about being wealthy enough to take care of his friends by sending them drugs, giving them money, and keeping them out of prison. In the hook, Meek Mill raps, “there’s a lot of bad bitches in the building (Amen)/a couple real niggas in the building (Amen)/I’m finna kill niggas in the building (Amen)/I tell the waiter fifty bottles and she tell me say when/and I say church (Preach)/We make it light up like a church (Preach)/She wanna f--k and I say church (Preach)/Do Liv on Sunday like a church (Preach).” These short lines, which demonstrate Mill’s desire for women, to
kill others, and of excessive drinking go against most interpretations of Christianity. Considering that one of the commandments is, “thou shall not kill,” it seems strange that Meek Mill would state “Amen” immediately afterward. Throughout the song, Meek Mill and Drake work to make the Lord a part of their verses by proclaiming His name, or talking about prayer and then sex. The theme of the song is not unique--most rappers use imagery related to partying in order to demonstrate their wealth and importance. The success of the song depends upon a performance of success in the lyrics (and in the music video). However, Meek Mill’s song stands out from the rest because of its use of the organ that is most associated with shouting music. As the organ plays, he shouts “Amen,” to punctuate each statement. The phrase “Amen,” is used in black churches (and amongst all Christians) as a way to end each prayer; one of its definitions is “an expression of assent; an assertion of belief.” (Oxford English Dictionary) In some black churches, shouting the word “Amen” and “Preach” during a sermon (or even in the middle of the prayer) lets the preacher know that members of the congregation agree with him. The combination of black church music and language while discussing drug use, fornication, and drinking alcohol in excess is offensive to most Christians. One of the few elements that “Amen” and some black churches have in common is the music and a desire for material wealth, and the recognition that the wealth comes from God. Meek Mill’s use of black church music unites the feeling of a spiritual high (when one catches the Holy Spirit), with the high that he and Drake get from spending money, having sex, and selling drugs.

Other rappers have talked about Christianity or black church culture in such a way that recognizes their fallibility, and in doing so, shows that they believe God is
mighty and powerful. T.I.’s 2004 *Urban Legend* featured “Prayin for Help.” T.I. starts with reciting the Lord’s Prayer; the second major verse, he raps: “I know its only one king, one thing, one being...I believe one day, that Imma change my life get right, start living like Christ, til the end of my fight.” T.I.’s lyrics are worshipful; in it he recognizes his need for God, and he expresses a desire to live like Christ. And in his most recent album (released December 2012), *Trouble Man: Heavy is the Head*, his last track, “Hallelujah,” uses biblical imagery to discuss his struggles. During the bridge, a woman sings “Hallelujah” repeatedly in a gospel ballad interpolation of Leonard Cohen’s song. In both songs, T.I. is humble and is looking for help; he states, in faith: “the Lord is with me, I can stand against a thousand men.” Although both songs express a Christian perspective, neither uses music that is directly related to the black church. “Prayin for Help” is set in a prison; “Hallelujah” depends on biblical imagery and soulful singing rather than the exuberant beat of Meek Mill’s “Amen.”

T.I. wasn’t the only rapper to release a song called “Hallelujah” in December 2012; Game did the same. However, few Christians responded to T.I.’s track; they were too invested in Game’s Jesus Piece, which had tracks that they believed disrespected the Christian faith. Like “Amen,” songs on Jesus Piece recklessly mix sacred sounds, expressions and images while praising secular behavior. The problem most Christians have with mixing the sacred and secular is when it isn’t done to worship God. In other words, rappers, filmmakers, and authors can talk about “secular” things, such as sex, and drug and alcohol abuse, as long as the purpose is to demonstrate the characters’ need for repentance. In music, black popular fiction, stage performances, and films, many Christians consider it disrespectful to discuss sex and partying in a celebratory

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way without repenting, or without encouraging others to repent is considered disrespectful by many Christians.

When Game became a Christian, other Christians rejoiced; however, when he released *Jesus Piece*, Christians rebuked him for his lack of understanding about the dedication to the Christian faith. Grammy award winning Christian rapper Lecrae contacted Game after he became a Christian, and then again when he released *Jesus Piece* in order to express his concerns with his portrayal of Christianity. *Jesus Piece* is a meditation on a rapper’s struggle to be a Christian and to hold on to the life he has always had. Game directly references black church culture by discussing the choir, preaching and church dinners. However, Game is not completely transformed by his Christianity: his love of strippers, sex, smoking weed, and the idea of killing others still motivate him just as powerfully as his love for the Lord. Game is never believably shamefaced about his reach back into what most Christians would call a sinful lifestyle.

At the end of “Freedom,” comedian Kevin Hart does a Public Service Announcement, which is one of his many skits on Game’s album. “If you a man of God, be a man of God. If you a nigga from the streets, G-damnit, be a nigga from the f-ckin streets! At the end of the day, you are who you are! God made you who you are for a reason, man.” Kevin Hart’s PSA is antithetical to most interpretations of Christianity; it assumes that becoming a Christian isn’t a transformative experience. Also, Hart assumes that a man can automatically “be a man of God.” Most Christians would say that their relationship with God makes them men and women of God; and once they become that, they leave the sinful life alone, or at least they try to. This PSA reveals

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the underlying theme of Game’s Jesus Piece; despite his Christian faith, he hasn’t really transformed at all. The tension between the sacred and secular featured on Jesus Piece reflects Game’s internal struggle between his old life and new. This was revealed in an interview, which was reposted on Christ Culture News:

Interviewer: Keeping it all the way one hundred with the HipHopDX readership; did you honestly set out to document a religious awakening with this album?

Game: You know what it was, man? It was more about me trying to find my own balance in life, with religion and the streets and family and music. And so, that’s just all it is. But its not like a Pastor Ma$e album or a Christian album or nothing like that...53"

As Game struggles between being a “man of God and a “nigga from the streets,” he oftentimes uses the black church to talk about things that aren’t Christlike at all. Therefore, his mix of sacred and secular themes and music (Game uses different choral traditions throughout his album) is more similar to Meek Mill’s “Amen” than it is to T.I.’s representation of Christianity.

Of course, listeners shouldn’t have been too surprised by Game’s misappropriation of the black church in his music. Even before its release, the name of the album and the cover of the deluxe version caused controversy. A “Jesus piece” is a chain that rappers have worn since the late 1990s; it originated with Biggie, and was popularized by Kanye West, who rapped about his Jesus piece later54. Most famous rappers have a “Jesus piece” that they wear around their neck, even if they don’t publicly identify as Christians. The cover of the album features a black Jesus on a

stained glass with a Jesus piece around his neck. In an article, someone complained, “in his attempt to make Jesus ‘relate-able’ he ended up depicting Jesus as a shallow man searching earthly treasures and presumably a participant in criminal activities...unless he was re-enacting the Resurrection story, I can’t imagine this being a good idea. He’s gone too far...He’s making a mockery of what is sacred to many people.” The Roman Catholic Church contacted Interscope Records about Game’s image of Jesus, with hopes that they would pull it altogether. Game called for a boycott of Fox News after conservative journalist Michelle Malkin confronted him about his album via Twitter. Game called Malkin’s dislike of the album cover racist. In another article about rappers who impersonate Christ, Edward Blum rightly stated, “[w]hen African American performers present themselves as Jesus it can be disturbing to many because of an ingrained sense that Jesus had white skin, brown or blond hair, and blue or brown eyes...for many Americans their imagined Jesus is humble and peaceful, sexually chaste, and against overt greed....When hip hop artists deploy the Christ image or story for their own purposes, they tap into a long history of everyday African Americans trying to maintain belief in the Christian God with the realities of their oppression.” Blum’s statement cuts to the division of black and white Christians, who necessarily imagine Jesus differently according to their own histories and lived experiences. To some white people, Jesus is what Blum states: humble and peaceful. To some black

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people, Jesus is the One who almost violently drove merchants from the temple.\textsuperscript{59} Despite the divide between some black Christians and hip hop artists, a picture of a radical Jesus may be the only unifying force between them.

Game’s \textit{Jesus Piece} is complicated because it not only discusses the difficulties of transforming from saint to sinner; it also confronts how hip hop consistently defines black masculinity through the lens of a heterosexual, sexually active man who makes a lot of money, either legally or illegally. In other words, the question posed by \textit{Jesus Piece} is not only “how do I live my life as a Christian?” but “how can I be a real man and a Christian simultaneously?” In “Church” and “Hallelujah,” Game moves from the strip club, to the church, back to the strip club again. They may be the most controversial tracks on the album. Game starts by emphatically stating, “I’m trying to go to church!”; but before one can be excited about his love for the black church, he immediately states, “get some chicken wings, after that hit the strip club.” Here, his use of the term “church” is more about Church’s Chicken than it is about an actual church service. For the rest of the song, he encourages strippers to dance for him, and then have sex with him. He uses Christian imagery again when he states, “I’ma crucify that p-ssy, I’ma nail it here, I’ma nail it there.” The misogynistic direction of his lyric is worsened when he insists upon comparing a woman’s vagina to Christ, who was nailed to a cross during the crucifixion. The importance of Christ’s crucifixion to Christians cannot be overstated: it is because of the crucifixion, and then resurrection, that Christians believe their sins have been forgiven by God. Many Christians believe that, while Christ’s crucifixion seems like His weakest point, it reflects His power. Instead of simply stating that this woman will enjoy sex with him,

\textsuperscript{59} Matthew 21:12
Game uses the fairly recent, and unfortunately popular trope of “beating the p-sisy up.” Many major rappers, including Fabolous, Lil Wayne, and lesser known Gucci Mane use the term “beat it up” to refer to their ability to engage in rough sex with a woman; the implication is that she will enjoy it. In 2013, Lil Wayne lost an important endorsement from Mountain Dew because he rapped “beat the p-sisy up like Emmett Till.” This controversial lyric ignored the larger implications of the murder of Emmett Till, who was lynched for simply whistling at a white woman. Furthermore, unlike other rappers who compare themselves to Emmett Till, this line aligns Lil Wayne with the white racists who attacked Emmett Till, and places the unseen black woman in Emmett Till’s place. This careless line is symptomatic of a larger issue; as soon as black men have a bit of power, they (either in real life, or symbolically) turn that violent gaze onto black women. Game does something similar here; rather than identifying with Christ on the cross—which, to Christians, signifies the ultimate act of love and sacrifice—he instead turns himself into one who crucifies. And he, like Lil Wayne, turns that violent action onto women during sex. Game continues to objectify strippers throughout the song. The bridge, which is sung by Trey Songz, is an attempt to get a woman to sleep with him.

Before the track ends, Kevin Hart does another skit. In it, he has just gotten out of church, and is talking with another man about the message he just heard. Rather than dwelling on the message, he states: “Ey, real quick, I’m bout to go f--- with this strip club...ey, listen, I came to church with a condom on, nigga! Somebody gonna get this dick. Look, we out of service now, I could say what I want. Inside you got to keep

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60 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/07/business/media/mountain-dew-drops-lil-wayne-over-emmett-till-lyric.html?_r=0
yourself contained. Outside I’mma throw this dick to somebody in this goddamn strip club. Look at how many ones I got. And I aint put none in the offering plate!” The skit separates the strip club and the church. Hart moves directly from the church service to the strip club, without guilt or fear. This suggests that the black church is to be enjoyed just as much as the strip club; yet, in this skit, the church is not worthy of his money, but strippers are. The song and Hart’s skit, yet again, reveal the heart of the album: a ‘real’ black man can go to the black church and to the strip club, only offering a paltry and unconvincing “Lord forgive me” in between sexual encounters.

In “Hallelujah,” a choir sings with a piano, as Game raps the hook: “Hallelujah. All my real niggas I salute ya/All the bad bitches, I’ma run through yah/Hop in my holy ghost, hallelujah/damn, damn, damn.” In this hook, he celebrates real niggas--men who are authentic, and themselves (if Kevin Hart’s skit is to be believed) and bad bitches--pretty women. The holy ghost that Game refers to is a car, rather than a member of the Trinity. The song sounds worshipful, but the refrain, “Hallelujah” is startling. During the song, Game is in church, thinking about women. He says, “Bad bitches in here, forgive me for my sins/I ain’t meant to walk inside the church cursing again/I wanna live righteous and you know I love Jesus/but you can’t catch the holy ghost in the Prius.” Here, again, Game seesaw between wanting to be Christlike, but struggling with his old habits. Throughout the song, he doesn’t talk about God, or the content of the service; Game instead focuses his attention on what is around him. His gaze on the black church gives him insider and outsider perspective, because he is a part of the church, but not exactly emotionally involved in the service. In the second verse, he imagines
what other people might be thinking about him (or someone who looks like him):

“Lookin’ round the church like what that nigga doing here.” He thinks of his friend, AR, who, despite his convincing still won’t go to church: “He rather sit outside and listen to Hova.” This refers to Jay-Z, who has called himself Hova after Jehovah.

When Game talks about the church members, and then his friend, he occupies a category all his own; he is not like the rest of the church members, but he also isn’t like his friend, who would rather listen to Hova than a sermon about Jehovah. Game represents himself as a man who is still between the streets and the world; he can enjoy “all this ass in here”; he can look at and add a significant amount to the ‘bulging’ collection plate and think “damn pastor you the coldest”—admiring the pastor not for his rhetoric, but for his ability to make money on Sunday mornings.

In the third verse, Game turns a critical eye on others. He states, “these fat hoes is too cheap/ain’t paying they tithes, taking up 2 seats/and look at God’s house, pack full of sinners/with the sunrise service, now they back for the dinners/yeah i know the chicken good but your soul ain’t/and your outfit clean but your nose ain’t.” Game’s criticism of women is irritating; women are either bad bitches, or fat hoes, but either way they are subject to his gaze. Game calls the women out for not paying tithes, taking up too much space, and everyone else for coming to the Sunday church service. Despite their attendance in church, and their attempt to perform a pristine Christianity, Game claims to see through their act. This move from a sinner who can’t control his thoughts about women, to supposed saint who is trying to get his friend to go to church, to a judgmental churchgoer is a strange one. Still, one can appreciate Game’s ability to show his audience the mindset of a recent Christian, who is still in between
worlds. Game’s judgmental perspective might be his way of performing as an actual Christian; despite the fact that many Christians know the famous verse, judge not, that ye be not judged, Christians are oftentimes portrayed as judgmental. The use of black church music here creates a setting for the song: Game is in a black church, looking around at the different types of people who attend, and mentions the hallmarks of black churches: the collection plate, Sunday dinners, sunrise services, and the choir, which keeps him awake, and ministers to him.

“Hallelujah” is strange for its unquestionable acceptance of the black church as it is, and its dislike for the people who attend. In this way, Game’s perspective is a stark contrast to Christian rapper Lecrae, whose mixtape Church Clothes criticizes the black church for its inability to speak to the needs of the community. While Game attends church in G-star slacks and Louie loafers, happily adding a fat envelope to the collection plate, Lecrae walks in the church with a snap back and complains, “church tryna rob my paycheck, choir members probably having gay sex/ pastor manipulatin, hurtin women/I wonder what he’s gon’ say next.” The relationship that Lecrae has with the black church is a stark contrast to Game. Game’s struggle is internal, and is ultimately about his life decisions and whether or not they represent Christ. Lecrae’s struggle is with a church that doesn’t represent Christ’s love. The end of the song calls for “real saints who pray hard...” and loves everyone, “straight or gay, drunk or high.” Lecrae’s plea to a black church that is fragmented, hiding sin, and displays an unwillingness to love others as Christ commanded is different from Game’s representation of a black church that is a part of a series of spaces for black folk to gather. Lecrae calls for a change; Game doesn’t. Ultimately, Lecrae suggests that the

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61 Matthew 7:1, King James Version
black church is dead and going through the motions. According to him, the people who run and attend the church are not representing the Christian faith as they ought to. Game, on the other hand, shows us that the black church is alive, and up for a different sort of change, one where he can proclaim, “Halle motherf-ckinlujah, and the choir will back him up by singing,“damn, damn, damn, damn.”

Nicki Minaj, the popular black female rapper, compared herself to Christ in “Freedom,” which was also released in 2012. In the music video, Nicki Minaj wears a crown of thorns, and then a crown to suggest that she is Christ. She raps, “They’ll never thank me for opening doors / But they ain’t even thank Jesus when he died on the cross / Cause your spirit is ungrateful / Bitches is so hateful I remain a staple…”

Unlike the other representations of the black church or Christianity, this song is about her success as a female rapper and businesswoman; she doesn’t use the song to praise sex or parties. Only one Christian site lambasted her for her comparison to Christ by calling the video for Freedom “blasphemous.” In June 2013, Kanye West released an album entitled Yeezus. The name of the album, as well as the track, “I am a God” raised the eyebrows of several people--Christian and non-Christian alike. In the second verse, he portrays a conversation with Christ. “I just talked to Jesus/He said ‘What up Yeezus?’... “I know he the most high/But I am a close high.” West’s album title goes beyond the appropriation of black church culture of other artists; he doesn’t just shout “Amen” or “Hallelujah”. Instead, his title seems to suggest he ought to be worshipped.

62 http://www.christculturenews.com/nicki-minajs blasphemous freedom video portrays rapper as christ crucified and king/
A series of religious critics responded to West’s album; most thought that the album didn’t work, conceptually.63

The secularization of black church music and its (mis)appropriation in rap is both problematic and positive. It is problematic because it shows disrespect to a faith. As Pastor Jomo K. Johnson pointed out, “many popular Hip Hop artists...[use] disturbing analogies in their music in comparison with the Christian Church. None of these rappers choose to demean or castigate the religion of Islam, only because doing so would put their lives in physical danger. Instead they choose to blasphemously insult the church, the Bride of Jesus, by comparing it to a club, sexual brothel, or by thanking the Lord for “good p-ssy.” Pastor Johnson neglected to mention the ways in which Islam has embraced and fostered a connection with hip hop culture. I believe that the rap industry’s ability to appropriate black church music shows the degree to which the black church belongs to all black people, not only black Christians. Meek Mill is from a half Muslim, half Christian family; Drake’s mother is Jewish; Game is a recent Christian. Their various spiritual backgrounds don’t exclude them from the black church, nor do they prevent them from appropriating the black church.

The recent turn in hip hop to appropriate the sound of black churches demonstrates a shift in the way Christianity and black church culture are treated. Black churches are usually spoken of with some degree of reverence, even by people who aren’t Christians. In the “Chitlin Circuit”, Gates points out that “black America remains disproportionately religious. Count on a black rap artist--gangsta or no--to thank Jesus in his liner notes)” (140). Gates’ wry observation indicates why black

63 http://pigeonsandplanes.com/2013/06/kanye-west-yeezus-religious-reviews/s/think-christian/
church culture and Christianity are usually always spoken of respectfully in black communities. With so many African American Christians or those who are familiar with black churches, it is impossible for artists to critique black churches without offending and alienating the majority of African Americans. Many of the critiques of black churches revolved around the materialism or hypocrisy of the pastors, but usually do not disrespect the Christian faith itself. In stand up comedy, where black church culture is made fun of, and in some films, the culture is spoken of with a degree of respect. Yet, there has been a significant shift from Gates’ observation in 1997, and the recent turn in hip hop to appropriate the sound affiliated with the black church in 2012. In the fifteen-year gap, secular hip hop moved from a polite respect of Christianity to a set of songs which disrespect the faith with its misappropriation of sound and messages. Black churches are no longer ‘off-limits’. Rappers no longer feel the need to recognize black churches as hallowed institutions.

Much like Glaude’s assertion that “the black church is dead”, Meek Mills and Game’s songs contributed to a ‘revival’ that demonstrated the life which exists within black churches. Christians had debates online about this music. Meek Mills’ was forced to apologize, partially because an influential pastor in Philadelphia encouraged people to stop listening to radio stations that listened to “Amen.” Pastor Johnson used the historical tradition of social activism to protect the image of black Church culture and Christianity. Much like the depiction of black churches during the Civil Rights Movement, this boycott reminded Mills and others that, for many African Americans, the misappropriation of black church culture would not be tolerated. Meek Mills song, the boycott, and the apology could be read as a reminder to black Christians of the
political power they have in a time when black churches are increasingly fragmented with regards to various political positions.

The black church in popular culture is an extension of real black churches. However, the performed black church does not always communicate the ideas consistent with an evangelical understanding of Christianity. As the Black Church Revival continues, churning out multiple representations across genre, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine which messages will be approved or denied by members of black churches and the audiences of the texts. Unlike the earlier texts, which were controlled by a small number of influential Christians, the authors, filmmakers, comedians, and playwrights are creating texts that are about black church life have and continue to multiply. Once merely relegated to a shot or scene, the black church and Christianity has become a part of almost every mainstream black popular film set in contemporary times. *The Best Man Holiday*, the sequel to *The Best Man*, did well at the box office, however, black bloggers and film critics complained that it was too spiritual and suffered from the “Tyler Perry effect.” In other words, every black filmmaker has to write a script that would also be appealing to fans of Tyler Perry’s films, and therefore, many of the films include forced narratives about Christianity.65

The financial power of black churchgoers created a maelstrom of texts about the black church, and now black popular culture cannot escape it. Some do make fun of it, however. In her popular *Misadventures of an Awkward Black Girl*, Issa Rae includes an annoying, hypocritical Christian black female coworker who is full of black church idioms. Rae’s inclusion of this character allows her to make fun of black church culture. She continues to do so in her new miniseries, *The Choir*. Black Christians can

no longer claim a monopoly on representations of the black church in popular culture; it has become a public institution that is accessed by everyone, regardless of race or faith.

Black churches have long been central to black communities; however, their role as sites for political activism has been questioned. Because of the varied political and spiritual needs of African Americans, ‘the black church’ as a singular institution has been destroyed by theologians frustrated by its perceived immobility. It is more productive to consider real black churches that hold a range of theological positions, from conservative evangelical Protestantism, to black liberation and womanist positions. The performed black church allows audience members to continue to think fondly of the black church and ‘that old time religion’ without restricting real black churches to liberal or conservative political agendas. This, however, does not mean that the texts that represent the black church are ‘value-free’ spaces. The texts in this analysis of black church culture show an engagement in larger spiritual debates about sexuality and gender roles. In Chapter 1, No More Sheets?: Sacred Sex in Black Christian Popular Fiction, I discussed the evangelical campaigns for purity, and how black women created and engaged in their own sexual discourse. This debate leads to other questions about reader response. What impact might black Christian popular fiction currently have on its readers and their negotiation of sexual relationships, both before and after marriage? In Chapter 2, Dragging the Black Church: Comedic Performances of Black Churchwomen, I argue that male comedians use drag to reinscribe heteronormative and patriarchal values. Their performances of older black churchwomen, while somewhat respectful, still reproduce the relationship that black
women have to evangelical black churches which do not encourage women to preach. I would like to further consider how these performances impact the gender roles in heterosexual relationships. In many of Perry’s taped stage plays, he includes brief interviews with audience members who recently watched the show. Extending that practice, it would be interesting to consider the ways in which gender roles are reconstituted after engaging with his work. In Chapter 3, “Bad” Black Mothers and Rape in Black Church Films,” I read the ways in which Bishop T.D. Jakes and Tyler Perry attempt to break the culture of silence which perpetuates sexual violence in African American communities. There is a need for scholarship on black Christian female spectatorship. Christian black women support Jakes’ ministries and Perry’s films. Considering the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality and faith/religion would recognize the important place Christian black women spectators have, and how they respond to narratives that are constructed primarily for them.

These representations of the black church in 21st century popular culture attempt to define gender roles for heterosexual men and women. In rap music, black church music is used to celebrate everything, and black male rappers, and Nicki Minaj can position themselves, even if problematically, as Christlike figures, disturbing the American notion of a white Jesus. The happy endings from Bowen, Tyler Perry, Harvey and Jakes are only a few in a long list of texts wherein there are positive images of black men and women. The rap industry is not known for its positive representations of anyone, but their ability to use black church culture demonstrates the degree to which representations of the black church have moved from the sacred to the popular. The usefulness of these representations of the black church, however, lies in
the creation of a black audience who can interact with black church culture--for better or worse--without being restricted to a sermon. Black churches have shaken off the shackles of the white clapboard steeple, and has permeated every form of media.

The creation of new genres about the black church brilliantly moves the black church from the privacy of the black community to a larger stage about American culture. Although many still may not know exactly what actual black churches are like, the black church is now no longer set apart from American culture, as though it is a historical relic to be dusted off during Black History Month. Black churches are now recognized as a vibrant part of American culture, not only black culture. The representations of black church culture focus on black audience members while inviting a multiracial gaze. The importance of black churches has been signaled by the rise of multiracial audiences who interact with comedy about black churches, as well as Tyler Perry’s films (and television shows), which are increasingly pitched to wider audiences. Texts about black churches put a spotlight on black consumers, who are still often left out of the discussion about sales. The black church in popular culture is mainstream--even while it continues to be defined (mainly) by black people. In a country that is still racially divided, it is important for African Americans to have a cultural icon that symbolizes spirituality, race, freedom, and struggles won. Black churches, which will always belong to black people, regardless of religious background, are such a symbol. Black churches in popular culture provide a space and way for all Americans to have frank conversations about race, gender, and sexuality. As the trope of the black church rises in recognition through different genres, it will continue to transform, and as it transforms, it will always create public forums where
Christians (and non-Christians) can continue to confront, deconstruct, discuss, or ignore conversations about race, gender, class, and sexuality.

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