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## INTRODUCTION

### WHEN AND WHERE WE ENTER: BLACK WOMEN'S SEXUALITY AND THE INADEQUACY OF PRIOR MODELS OF SEXUAL ETHICS FOR THEIR SEXUAL DECISION-MAKING

*“Only the Black Woman can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.’”*

*Anna Julia Cooper, A Voice from the South<sup>1</sup>*

*“Sexual stories about black women are all around us, but they almost always rely on key myths, while few stories told by black women about their own sexual lives are available.”*

*Tricia Rose, Longing to Tell<sup>2</sup>*

These quotes stand as reminders of the importance of women's voices in the public and private spheres. They astutely note that black women must enter into the conversation if we are to build a better world. Yet, interestingly enough Anna Julia Cooper's rhetoric promotes the performance of womanhood as the means of entry. This irony reflects the time in which she lived, a time when the “cult of true womanhood” still rang as true as the hope for the “American Dream.” However, for black women the pedestal was often out of reach and the dignity of womanhood was a hard fought ideal.

Black women's struggles for womanhood also reflect their struggles with sexuality, as black women's sexuality is rendered invisible and highly visible

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk about Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 395.

simultaneously.<sup>3</sup> As Tricia Rose reminds us, there is no absence of mythologies of black women's bodies and sexualities, yet, there must be space for black women to tell their own truths, revealing both the good and the bad. This chapter introduces black women's narratives and argues that the contemporary messages that abound reflect a legacy of their silence and resistance. I begin with a historical overview of black women's sexuality before moving to the contemporary implications of this heritage. As I explore the prevailing images of black women's bodies and hence, their sexualities, I will examine feminist theorists' responses to these realities. Finally, the chapter will put into conversation these responses with the explosion of faith-based sexuality ministries that focus on black women's sexuality without a particular feminist agenda. I will conclude by insisting that a more nuanced perspective is required to adequately address the social, ethical, and religious consequences of black women's sexual realities.

## **Historical Overview**

Since we are all deeply influenced by our histories, it is necessary to discuss the impact that racist stereotypes have had on black women's sexuality. The negativity associated with black bodies began long before the demeaning images we currently see in popular culture. In fact, the racist assumptions of Kant and Hume in the 1700s provide the backdrop for "aesthetic judgments" deeming blacks to be naturally inferior to whites.<sup>4</sup> European philosophers and scientists used such biases to support physiognomy, a theory

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware of problem of constructing a universal category for all black women without properly acknowledging the diversity of sexual experiences for black women.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness : An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 54.

used to evaluate character based on physical features.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, the physical differences of whites and blacks led many to assert the inferiority and lax moral character of blacks. These notions were exemplified through the display of Sarah Bartmann, widely known as the “Hottentot Venus,” a spectacle of depravity and licentiousness.

Bartmann was a Khoisan woman born in Southern Africa and was a slave sold in 1810 to a surgeon because of her unusual genitalia.<sup>6</sup> Khoisan women were largely regarded as the most primitive because of their enlarged genitalia indicative of their heightened sexual drives. Their large buttocks and enlarged labia “proved” their uncontrolled sexuality; thus, Bartmann was paraded around Europe caged as an animal making her owners quite wealthy. Her body was always scripted as she wore the dual “stigmata of sexual difference and deviance.”<sup>7</sup> After five years of being on display, she was manumitted and died an alcoholic prostitute. Yet, her public humiliation did not end there. After her autopsy her genitalia was meticulously preserved and remained on display at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 1976.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to recover the history of Sarah Bartmann because her prominence in Europe coincided with the debate for the end of the British and American slave trades. As she was commercialized and viewed across Europe, notions of the innate primitive nature of blacks, and black women especially, pervaded. Bartmann’s treatment reified

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<sup>5</sup> For further discussion, see Hegel’s beliefs about Negroes in his *Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Her name is also referenced as Saartjie Bartmann. See Edward Phillip Antonio, “Desiring Booty and Killing the Body: Towards ‘Negative’ Erotics,” in *Loving the Body*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 275.

<sup>7</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality,” in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 172.

<sup>8</sup> Bartmann’s body was only returned to South Africa in 2002 after much debate. For further discussion, see Antonio, “Desiring Booty,” 277.

notions that Africans were bestial and biologically destined to be slaves of whites. I also highlight her story because her objectification pathologized black women's sexuality.

Using the biological sciences of the time, comparisons were made between her anatomy and animals, purposely inferring that African women were so sexually degenerate they would have sex with apes. Cultural theorist Sander Gilman asserts in his widely cited essay "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature" that black females were not only symbols of sexualization but of corruption and disease.<sup>9</sup> Not content to view blackness as simply primitive those who would come to profit from blacks captivity, actively promoted the view that black women were carriers of disease because of their uncontrollable sexual appetites. These views were a part of the fabric of American ideology of blacks in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and sadly are reiterated in contemporary discussions of welfare reform, HIV/AIDS, and sexual abuse.

Historian of science Evelyn Hammonds sagaciously notes "racial difference was linked to sexual difference in order to maintain white male supremacy."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this ideology was most pervasive in the enslavement of black women. When discussing slavery, I must be careful to acknowledge that slavery was not a monolithic experience since, for slaves as well as slaveholders, gendered experiences of oppression were quite significant. For enslaved women, their gendered experience took on additional horror in the American context because sexual exploitation at the hands of their masters was prevalent and not viewed negatively by society. Children produced from the interracial union would also be slaves (since the child of an enslaved woman must be a slave),

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<sup>9</sup> Sander Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 231.

<sup>10</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy," 173.

which further punished the enslaved woman within a system that did not punish the master for her exploitation, rape, or coercion. In popular perception, slaves represented the sexual wantonness supposedly absent from white culture. For the black woman especially, the image of being sexually seductive was reinforced by the image of pure, chaste white women whose behavior was necessarily opposite the sexually aggressive black slave. After all, if women and blacks were deemed sexually loose, then black women were doubly condemned by their gender and their race.<sup>11</sup>

### **Historical images of Black Women**

The institution of slavery relied on what feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins terms “controlling images” used to subordinate black women.<sup>12</sup> One of the most prominent images of a black woman was the Jezebel image. Biblically based, the Jezebel image symbolizes the “evil, scheming, seductive woman” defined by her “excessive, exotic, and unbridled sexuality.”<sup>13</sup> The dominant imagery of black women coincided with the idea that they were the sexually perverse descendants of the biblical Jezebel. Even their clothing and work served to reify their denotation as Jezebels since things that were deemed as indecent were performed by the slave, i.e. respectable white women were clothed in robes of morality and chastity while enslaved women were sparsely clothed and were required to do work that exposed more of their bodies, e.g. working in the fields or washing floors.<sup>14</sup> Combined with the fact that enslaved black women were forcibly

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<sup>11</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 35.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston, Unwin Hyman, 1990), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 36; Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell*, 391.

<sup>14</sup> Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 37.



stripped bare on the auction blocks and inspected to determine their suitability for breeding, black female bodies were constantly on display as further evidence of their loose morals. As a result of rampant sexual exploitation black women were forced to have sex with black and white men to produce children for plantations. Thus, black women were associated with licentiousness.

Trapped in the mythos of Jezebel, black women were thus susceptible to sexual exploitation because they were not deemed “women” who required protection as did white ladies. In the rare chances when black women were allowed to complain about this abuse, white male rapists justified their actions by reminding their audiences that Jezebels were seducers.<sup>15</sup> The image of the Jezebel was essential to maintaining the slavocracy, so much so that laws were passed to prevent black women from claiming the possibility of rape. So ingrained was the notion that black women were always desirous of sex that it was inconceivable to many white social and legal societies that a black woman would ever refuse sex. Acknowledging this sad myth, law professor Dorothy Roberts boldly declares that for a great period of American history the “crime of rape of a black woman did not exist.”<sup>16</sup>

This reality had to be coupled with another controlling image of black women during slavery—that of Mammy. Slavocracy could not have functioned if all black women were viewed as sexually licentious since the plantation system relied on having black women in constant close proximity to whites. Thus, the Mammy stereotype was created to explain how blacks’ moral degeneracy did not influence white women and

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<sup>15</sup> Historian Deborah Gray White observes that the image of Jezebel “excused miscegenation, the sexual exploitation of black women, and the mulatto population.” Deborah Gray White quoted in Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 40.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 31.

children. According to the stereotype, Mammy was generally considered “asexual ... [whose] maternal qualities are expressed through her expert care for white women’s children.”<sup>17</sup> The Mammy caricature could be trusted in the white home. Mammy had learned to quell her uncontrollable sexual desires so that she could attend to the needs of her surrogate white family in which she happily played a subordinate position. Yet, historical data reveals that the idea of Mammy is a part of the white imagination during slavery, a romanticization propelled into future discussions of black women’s sexuality. In fact, historian Catherine Clinton acknowledges that the Mammy image was more fiction than fact “created by white Southerners to redeem the relationship between black women and white men within slave society...and to embellish it with nostalgia in the post-bellum period.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, the Mammy stereotype is crucial to understanding the pervasive silence around sexuality that characterizes black communities because the desire to live up to this stereotype of being asexual or not punitively sexual was accomplished through sexual silencing.

I concur with Patricia Hill Collins who argues the “mammy image is central to intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class” because blacks who assented to this ideal black woman demanded her participation in patriarchal oppression due to her race and gender.<sup>19</sup> While Mammy represented the ideal woman and slave, subservient, asexual, pious, etc. she also represented the Victorian ideal of that time. Thus, Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that the Mammy image “buttresses the ideology of

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<sup>17</sup> Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell*, 391.

<sup>18</sup> Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 202. See Emilie Townes’ contemporary study of Mammy in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 73.

the cult of true womanhood, one in which sexuality and fertility are severed.”<sup>20</sup> The ideal woman was known as the “true woman.” As Barbara Welter argues in her influential essay, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” the attributes of true womanhood hinged on the virtues of innocence, modesty, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.<sup>21</sup> These Victorian virtues had to be publicly visible and constantly displayed to prevent the assumption of impropriety. Yet, any discussion of the cult of true womanhood has to acknowledge the original audience intended was white women. This was especially understandable since during the rise of the “true woman” slavery existed and slave women were not even considered whole human beings, much less “ideal women.”

### **Morality, Religion, and Black Women’s Sexuality**

Blacks participated in hush harbors creating their own blended form of Christianity. Thus, it was conceivable that blacks could be virtuous or as religious as the slave environment allowed. Yet, there was a great deal of disbelief that post-Emancipation black women could be pure. Purity was essential to being viewed as an ideal woman, and although damaging as a norm for white women because it denied that they had “natural sex drives” it nonetheless prevailed as a normative value used to exclude lower class white and black women.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the necessity of the Mammy image is something that allowed post-emancipation black women to claim their participation in ideal womanhood.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 (1966):152; Linda M. Perkins, “The Impact of the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ on the Education of Black Women,” *Journal of Social Issues* 39 (1983): 18.

<sup>22</sup> Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 26.

Yet, it is important to note that these black women did not want to be like white women, but rather to be considered as “deserving of moral consideration as white women.”<sup>23</sup> They wanted to be seen as “Black Victorias,” women morally unassailable and literary theorist Hazel Carby rightly observes that this designation also coded black women as desiring to be “completely sexually pure and purely heterosexual.”<sup>24</sup> This was especially true given the devaluation of black womanhood in the late nineteenth century so black women fought incessantly to be categorized as anything but depraved and immoral.

It is helpful to quote at length an article written for *The Independent* in 1904 by an “unidentified southern white woman,” which reveals one of the prevailing white notions of emancipated black women:

And so degeneracy is apt to show most in the weaker individuals of any race; so negro women evidence more nearly the popular idea of total depravity than the men do; They are the greatest menace possible to the moral life of any community where they live. And they are evidently the chief instruments of the degradation of the men of their own race. When a man’s mother, wife, and daughters are all immoral women, there is no room in his fallen nature for the aspiration of honor and virtue...I sometimes read of virtuous negro women, hear of them, but the idea is absolutely inconceivable to me...I cannot imagine such a creature as a virtuous black woman.<sup>25</sup>

This idea that there is no virtue in black women was reiterated in images, literature, sciences, and even the law, and thus began the era of black women reformers who sought strategies to counter such negative stereotypes. Yet, historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that given the severity of the images prevalent, a “discourse of

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<sup>23</sup> Cathryn Bailey, “Anna Julia Cooper: ‘Dedicated in the Name of My Slave Mother to the Education of Colored Working People,’” *Hypatia—A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 19.2 (2004): 65.

<sup>24</sup> Shirley Carlson, “Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era,” *The Journal of Negro History* 77 (1992):62; Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Toward Black Women, 1880–1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1990.), 46.

respectability” was modeled through black women’s displays of true womanhood, as they “perceived respectability to be the first step in their communication with white America.”<sup>26</sup> They also felt that this discourse would enable them to speak frankly with their own people reiterating that through an acceptance of the dominant culture’s beliefs, they could transcend these negative images.

Historian Darlene Clark Hine’s landmark essay “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance” describes how black women created a “culture of dissemblance” or a politics of silence around sexual matters.<sup>27</sup> To counter negative imagery, black women were widely encouraged to downplay their sexuality. This effort also was heterosexist in nature in that it wanted to control all avenues of sexuality that would be deemed punitive by dominant society. Yet, these silencing mechanisms were not just individualistic. For the politics of silence to be successful, individuals and institutions had to collaborate to ensure the control of black women’s sexual expressions.

In this light, it has been argued “the black women’s movement conducted a particularly militant campaign for respectability, often making black feminists spokespeople for prudery in their communities.”<sup>28</sup> Black women’s organizations were especially concerned with creating positive images for blacks and this was seen as only possible through elevating the status of women. For example, social activist Virginia

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<sup>26</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 196.

<sup>27</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” *Signs* 14.4 (1989): 915.

<sup>28</sup> Hazel Carby, ““On the Threshold of Woman’s Era’: Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory,” in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 303.

Broughton stated, “the social status of a race is fixed by the character of its women.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, black women’s organizations spent a great deal of time policing black women’s bodies and sexualities. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s influential work, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* is a study of codes of respectability in black Baptist women’s movements. Through this work she discovered that although black women policed other women’s sexual expressions, this was still not enough to erase the negative stereotypes about black women. This led to the increasing institutionalization of codes of respectability that were enacted in black churches, schools, clubs, and leisure activities.

This was especially the case for black churches, as moral reform through respectable behavior became the dominant agenda.<sup>30</sup> Thus, when black churches began discussing sexuality they became experts of “disciplining the body” through sermons preaching that respectable behavior came through following Biblical codes that prohibited premarital sex and homosexuality.<sup>31</sup> The impact of religious messages in restricting black women’s sexuality will also be explored in further detail later chapters. However, it is important to note the myriad of targeted ways that a silence around sexuality was created and sustained.

While critics may validly argue that their “tactic of bourgeois respectability was not effective in changing white people’s racial attitudes” given the on-going perpetuation

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<sup>29</sup> Virginia Broughton quoted in Virginia Wolcott, “Bible, Bath, and Broom: Nannie Helen Burrough’s National Training School and African-American Racial Uplift.” *Journal of Women’s History* 9 (1997): 93.

<sup>30</sup> For the purpose of my brief discussion, the Black church will be defined as a predominately Black Christian body of believers. While this is a more vague definition, I want to adopt Kelly Brown Douglas’ assertion that while this discussion of the Black church will focus more on the church’s sexual silence and flaws, it “implicitly acknowledges that there are various black churches with more equitable views and practices.” Kelly Brown Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do With It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls*, (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2005), 189.

<sup>31</sup> Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 201.

of racist stereotypes, I do not seek to dismiss these acts of resistance.<sup>32</sup> However, rather than focus solely on black women's victimization, this dissertation seeks to highlight black women's agential pursuits. As Alison Piepmeier characterizes Sojourner Truth as "neither fully victim nor fully agent" so too are the black women of the late Victorian era.<sup>33</sup> They were acquiescent to a model that has several flaws; yet, they used this model to the best of their abilities.

### **Contemporary Responses**

While Evelyn Hammonds makes allowances for contemporary silencing efforts of black feminist academics by arguing that this silencing is "no more a 'choice' than was the silence practiced by early twentieth-century black women," I still argue that there have been ways in which black women have spoke against their sexual subordination.<sup>34</sup> One important resistance method that I want to highlight is the importance of "speaking truth to power" seen through the years as black women have contradicted the negative associations of their race and gender. For example, the idea of black women as Mammy in recent years has morphed into the myth of the black matriarch. No longer a docile, subservient figure, the Mammy/Matriarch of this century reflects contemporary society's assumptions regarding black women. Rather than assume Daniel Moynihan was correct in stating that working black women were "aggressive, unfeminine women... who allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands" while failing to educate their children,

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<sup>32</sup> Paisley Harris, "Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism," *Journal of Women's History* 15 (2003): 215.

<sup>33</sup> Alison Piepmeier, *Out in Public: Configurations of Women's Bodies in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 95.

<sup>34</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6 (1994): 132.

black women rejected these notions, instead questioning social policy that left black families in poverty and despair.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, the black matriarch myth rears its ugly head in contemporary discussions on black women's singleness. In a recent NBC broadcast on the status of African-American women, two segments focused on black women's sexual relationships. One concentrated on inter-racial relationships prompted by the lack of available black men to date "strong, black women." The other focused on the trend of black women trading in their briefcases for diaper bags in order to be better mothers.<sup>36</sup> The backdrop for both of these areas of concern is the prevailing notion of the black matriarch, a woman who is unable to keep a man or be a good mother to her children.

Equally pernicious is the Jezebel imagery dominant at the turn of the nineteenth century that is now ever present in conversations on welfare queens and video vixens. Where once the Jezebel represented the breeding slave woman, as of the 1980s, a welfare queen represented this same reproducing black woman. While this image is again class-specific (and simultaneously is seen to represent a bad mother) it reifies notions of blacks as lazy and immoral. Scapegoating welfare mothers also serves to control black women's sexuality as the federal government, social workers, etc decide who should have children and why. Most recently, welfare mothers have been pushed into the constraints of marriage as governmental officials posit that a "woman's true worth and financial security should occur through heterosexual marriage."<sup>37</sup> Thus, the mechanism for taming

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<sup>35</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 75.

<sup>36</sup>"African-American Women: Where They Stand," msnbc.com, November 28, 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21982216/>.

<sup>37</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 79. Waheema Lubiano also notes the implications of being deemed a welfare mother that is still relatable to American motherhood versus the image of welfare queen, which is seen as a materialistic, domineering, black woman.



the Jezebel is through state-sanctioned marriage. Yet, just like in the nineteenth century, access to marriage was not to solution the erasing such stereotypes from public imaginations.

Instead, black feminists have posited that the Jezebel image must be directly confronted and refuted. This was exemplified in the treatment of Anita Hill when she brought charges against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. Anita Hill dared to speak in opposition to the idea that she was merely a sex object. In the widely publicized 1992 Supreme Court Justice confirmation hearing, Hill was portrayed as a sexual tease that became vindictive when rejected. Despite her allegations of sexual harassment, Hill was vilified in the popular press and bashed by the black community for “airing dirty laundry.” Hill represented for many whites and blacks simply an educated Jezebel who “asks for whatever sexual treatment she receives, from harassment to rape.”<sup>38</sup>

By speaking out against her injustice Hill represented the resistant spirit of black women when their bodies and sexualities are impugned. While she was championed by the white feminist movement as making a grand breakthrough in terms of getting sexual harassment taken seriously in the workforce, many in the black community expected her to remain silent. In fact, Cornel West describes this as “black closing-ranks mentality” that is dangerous because it is “usually done at the expense of black women.”<sup>39</sup> However, Hill’s testimony went against the grain because she broke silences on many different levels. First, her case spoke to issues of racial solidarity and when one must separate if the race does not have one’s best interests at heart. Her experiences reiterate how “closing-ranks mentality” tends to ignore the divisions of class, gender, and sexual

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<sup>38</sup> Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 27.

orientation in black America because those concerned with cultural conservatism do not possess the moral reasoning required to truly uplift the race.<sup>40</sup> Hill's testimony also spoke to the need to free black women's sexual stories from secrecy. Breaking free from the "culture of dissemblance" described by Hine, through her declaration Hill seconded the black women in the blues tradition that demanded that black men "change their ways."<sup>41</sup> Despite the fact that since taking the bench Justice Thomas has not rendered favorable verdicts in any of the areas that are deemed to help blacks, Hill's image is still castigated for daring to speak for her own best interests.

Another case in which a black woman is rebuked by the black community and popular culture for speaking out against her sexual abuse is the case of Desiree Washington and Mike Tyson. In fact, in this case, religious leaders in the black community were vehement opponents to her right to speak against her own oppression. For example, T.J. Jemison, past president of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Inc., publicly supported accused rapist Mike Tyson. Jemison was accused of attempting to bribe Desiree Washington's family in exchange for her dropping her charges against Tyson.<sup>42</sup> Yet, who speaks for Desiree? Who had the ethical task of explaining to her family that the leader of the National Baptist Convention supports her alleged rapist merely because he is a black man that has succeeded financially?

Sadly, the black community is still learning that it can support both its black women and its black men without having to rank who is more worthy of support. While the cases of Anita Hill and Desiree Washington are now more than fifteen years old, there are still contemporary cases in which it is suggested that black women must chose

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>41</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 155.

<sup>42</sup> Earl Hutchinson, "The Thirteenth Round for Iron Mike," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1995, A7.

between their race and gender. This was overwhelmingly seen in the recent Democratic primaries in South Carolina when black women voters were heavily courted by Senators Obama and Clinton. It is also seen by those seeking justice for Megan Williams, the woman brutally tortured in West Virginia amidst the swell of support to “save the Jena 6” boys. Despite the constant reiteration that black women must take sides, many black women have responded by merely speaking their own truths.

These occasions necessitate black women be able to tell their own stories and resist in their own ways the multi-layered oppressions they face. Yet, as Toni Morrison notes, black women’s sexuality is often regarded as one of the “unspeakable things unspoken.”<sup>43</sup> This is why it is so essential for black women’s sexual histories to be accurately accounted for. For too long, there has been a culture wherein “those who could speak did not want to and those who did want to speak were prevented from doing so.”<sup>44</sup> This legacy of silence has led to black women’s sexuality remaining taboo, providing each generation with less information to cope in a more sexualized culture. Thus, black feminist theorists have begun deliberate campaigns to reclaim sexuality “through the creation of a counter narrative that can reconstitute a present black female subjectivity.”<sup>45</sup>

Pioneering black feminist Patricia Hill Collins argues that black theorizing on sexuality has to take these legacies into account. Her influential book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* provides the theoretical articulation of Audre Lorde’s embodied feminism. In this 1990 text, Hill-Collins tackles the silence of black sexuality positing that “everyone has spoken for

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<sup>43</sup> Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” in *The Black Feminist Reader*, ed. Joy James and Tracey Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Malden, Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 24.

<sup>44</sup> Hammonds, “Black (W)holes,” 134.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

Black women, making it difficult for us to speak for ourselves.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, black women’s self definition of sexuality is essential to her theorizing. Theorizing makes space for communication by black women for black women, and it should not be downplayed as less crucial to the resistance of pejorative sexual ethics. Similarly, black feminist Michele Wallace notes that the “major battle for the ‘other’ of the ‘other’ [black women] will be to find voice, transforming the construction of dominant discourse.”<sup>47</sup> This rigorous analysis of black women’s sexualities allows black women the chance to name their realities and be agents in changing them.

However, this analysis is not without its challenges. For example, black feminists’ theorizing has not paid equal attention to the specificities of black religious women’s sexual lives.<sup>48</sup> Black feminist theory tends to undervalue/ under research black women’s spiritual relationships, and since spirituality, and hence Christianity is so central to black women’s culture, to discuss black women’s sexual agency and empowerment, one must take seriously their spiritual concerns. One field that takes seriously the connection of religion and sexuality is the area of white feminist theological ethics. In this discipline, theorists have crafted a relational ethics model that celebrates the connection of faith and sexuality.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 124.

<sup>47</sup> Michelle Wallace quoted in Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes,” 140.

<sup>48</sup> In the discipline of black feminist theory, I am referring in this work to Audre Lorde, Patricia-Hill Collins, Evelyn Hammonds, Michelle Wallace, and Tricia Rose. Some notable black feminist theorists’ exceptions to paying attention to religious experiences are bell hooks and Hortense Spillers.

<sup>49</sup> As examples of this model, I am referencing the works of Beverly Harrison, Carter Heyward, Marvin Ellison, and Karen Lebacqz. I have chosen these as exemplars because they represent the common themes of relational sexual ethics, e.g. privileging women’s bodies, seeking interrelatedness/ mutuality in sexual relationships, promoting intimacy and sexual expression, etc.

## Religious responses to Women's Sexuality

A key theorist in the relational ethics model is white feminist Christian ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison whose work still remains influential. A particular strength of her work is that she advocates for a holistic approach to sexuality that takes into account that social structures impact one's sexuality. She notes that no sexual ethic is adequate unless it "incorporates a full appreciation of the interstructuring of social oppression."<sup>50</sup> Particularly different from Audre Lorde's understanding of the erotic is Harrison's attention to Christianity's view of the erotic. Harrison writes a clearly Christian sexual ethics. Ethicist Elizabeth Bounds asserts that Harrison is unabashedly Christian because she holds herself accountable to a church that she believes offers a vision of community in right-relation as advanced by Jesus.<sup>51</sup> She sees the revaluing of the body and erotic as suggested by Lorde as most possible in a re-interpretation of Christian sexual ethics. For example, while feminism offers the view that sexuality is to be intimate and mutually pleasuring, Christianity offers moral principles that demand respect, dignity, mutuality, and an ethic of care. While she is quick to admit that Christianity does not always advance these moral norms, she does believe that the norm of love makes it possible for a truly just sexual ethics to be promoted.

Likewise, white Christian feminist theologian Carter Heyward echoes this understanding. She is one of the primary feminist theologians to advocate for the recovery of the erotic, as her understanding of erotic love is linked to the importance of mutual relationships. For example, her body of work is authoritative in the sexual ethics field as her 1989 book, *Touching our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*,

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<sup>50</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol Robb (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 90.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Bounds, "Introduction to the Issue," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 9 (1993): 8.

remains one of the most thorough discourses on the erotic and Christianity. Heyward defines the erotic as “power in right relation” and “our most fully embodied experience of the love of God.”<sup>52</sup> The erotic pushes towards relations with others as a means of experiencing God’s love. She defines sex as an “expression of a commitment to right relation.”<sup>53</sup> Heyward like Harrison is committed to the redemption of Christian sexual ethics because of her pursuit of sexual justice. She advocates a sexual ethic that stems from relationality and is grounded in personal experiences, including experiences of oppression. Her model can be useful for black women’s sexual decision-making. However, Heyward’s main impetus for seeking sexual justice is to redeem liberal Christianity from its morally bankrupt relation to women and homosexuals.<sup>54</sup> This redemption does not always adequately speak to the injustices faced by everyday black women who are trying to be sexual, moral agents.

Nor does it speak to the separate realities of single black women. Most white feminist sexual ethics that promote the norm of relationality pay attention to sexual pleasure, but this is usually discussed in relationships. Forgotten in this model is the experience of singles, and this represents a significant challenge to the inclusivity of the relational model. White feminist ethicist Karen Lebacqz’s work speaks to/for this forgotten community. Her 1986 classic article entitled, “Appropriate Vulnerability: A Sexual Ethic for Singles” suggests that the moral norm in relationships be that each person experiences appropriate vulnerability. A redefining of moral normatives is also necessary in regards to singles having sex since the traditional view of “premarital sex”

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<sup>52</sup> Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1989), 3; 99.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

has been punitive. Lebacqz notes that the Christian view reiterates “celibacy in singleness, fidelity in marriage,” which is an inadequate sexual ethics for today’s times.<sup>55</sup> Instead, singles engaging in sex are shamed and made to feel as if God created sex as good but not for them because they are outside the “legal” boundaries.

To these ostracized persons, Lebacqz reminds them that sexuality is a form of vulnerability that rejects hurting another. Sexuality demands openness to another, which makes space for one to feel vulnerable or capable of being wounded.<sup>56</sup> Appropriate vulnerability is especially needed for singles whose very status lacks the set structures provided in marriage. Hence, the balance of appropriate vulnerability is not easily achieved. For Lebacqz, it is a moral norm that leads one to an adequate sexual ethics. Her article does not provide a description on how to achieve this balance as she posits “single people will have to explore their own vulnerability to find its appropriate expression in sexuality.”<sup>57</sup> She merely states that acknowledging the need for such a moral norm is a precondition to a healthy Christian feminist sexual ethics.

While the majority of my dissertation focuses on those engaging in sexual activity, I did want to give appropriate deference to the dilemma that sexually celibate people bring to Christian feminist sexual ethics. By choosing to remain celibate/abstinent, they are in essence denying themselves access to a portion of their erotic power. Within white feminist sexual ethics, this poses a significant challenge since the relational model has not done a good job providing an ethics that functions for celibacy or singles sexuality. Another flaw in this model is that it is thoroughly grounded

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<sup>55</sup> Karen Lebacqz, “Appropriate Vulnerability: A Sexual Ethics for Singles,” in *Sexuality*, ed. Karen Lebacqz and David Sinacore-Guinn (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 129.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

in white experiences, and this emphasis can be potentially unhelpful for black women, whether single, celibate, heterosexual, or homosexual. When black feminist theorists address this singles sexuality, pleasure, or relationality they have tended to focus on the interlocking oppressions and history of sexual shame/pain. Pleasure is seen as an afterthought or never discussed. Evelyn Hammonds states it best that the “restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone under-analyzed.”<sup>58</sup> The exception to this rule comes in discussion of Audre Lorde and her defiant dialogue on erotic desire.

Hammonds articulates how Lorde and other black lesbian writers foreground female desire and agency to fill a gap in the scholarship.<sup>59</sup> Yet, current research is particularly sparse when dealing with black heterosexual pleasure from a female perspective. Tricia Rose’s landmark text on black women’s sexuality concurs. She notes that while American culture is bombarded with stories on sex and romantic desire, “we almost never hear what black women have to say.”<sup>60</sup> In regards to desire, a topic that does not fit into expectations of black women, she asserts that these stories are impossible to find. Perhaps it is the threat of the myth of promiscuity or illegitimate children that keep black heterosexuals from exploring and discussing their sexual pleasures. Hill-Collins addresses this concern as the awareness that “seeking pleasure can simply be self-centered, self-serving, and selfish, the classic booty call.”<sup>61</sup> For her, caution must be exercised when advocating sexual pleasure. Despite the rationale, the

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<sup>58</sup> Hammonds, “Black (W)holes,” 134.

<sup>59</sup> Hammonds, “Toward a Genealogy,” 181.

<sup>60</sup> Rose, *Longing to Tell*, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 287.



material effects of the decision to deny sexual pleasure are that desire is undervalued in heterosexual relationships and overemphasized in homosexual ones.

The same result is true when delving into the fields of black liberation theology, another potential resource for black religious women. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research on sexual pleasure or the power of the erotic in black liberation theology. As Anthony Pinn notes in his essay in *Loving the Body*, the erotic receives little attention in most theological discussions and when it does these conversations are limited because they are awkward and superficial.”<sup>62</sup> He posits that the erotic dimension to sexuality in black liberation theology has become fetishized in such a way that it only becomes relevant if it is being discussed in some political matter. Given the lack of traction with black theological resources, some black women go back to the resources of feminist theology but often find that “white feminist scholars pay hardly more than lip service to race as they continue to analyze their own experience in ever more sophisticated forms.”<sup>63</sup> Additionally, “white feminists must refigure (white) female sexuality so that they are not theoretically dependent upon an absent yet-ever-present pathologized black female sexuality.”<sup>64</sup>

## **New Models for New Times**

While this chapter has provided a historical overview of black women’s sexual legacy of silence and resistance, it has also laid the foundation for understanding black

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<sup>62</sup> Anthony Pinn, “Embracing Nimrod’s Legacy: The Erotic, the Irreverence of Fantasy, and the Redemption of Black Theology,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 161.

<sup>63</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17 (1992): 251-252.

<sup>64</sup> Hammonds, “Black (W)holes,” 131.

women's sexual decisions from religious and cultural perspectives. I have argued that white Christian feminist sexual ethics does not have the tools to handle the complexities of black female sexuality, especially single black female sexual expression. This model, which is attentive to the spiritual and sexual needs of women, does not speak adequately to black women. Neither can black liberation theology fill in the gaps as it seemingly stumbles to ease its "erotic discomfort."<sup>65</sup> While black feminists offer the most to such discussions, they still fall shy of critically analyzing the needs of black women of faith. Therefore, another model is necessary that responsibly answers the questions that black churchwomen face when they act as sexual agents. Thus, it is necessary to forge forward with a new methodology that is more in tune with black women's sexual histories.

This is especially the case given the fact that answers are popping up in many "unfeminist" spaces such as faith-based sexuality ministries. These ministries include Christian televangelists, Christian women's and singles conferences, and Christian media, e.g. videos/audio and live streaming via the Internet.<sup>66</sup> It is rare to see analysis of these mediums in any discipline, but analysis is desperately required as these ministries have turned into a "multi-million dollar industry—with books, classes, Internet and gospel radio dating services...and conferences," all to help Black women come to terms with their sexuality and spiritual walk with God.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Pinn, "Embracing Nimrod's Legacy," 161.

<sup>66</sup> Notable ministries catering to single black Christian women are: Prophetess Juanita Bynum, Evangelist Ty Adams, Michele McKinney-Hammond, or the True Love Waits abstinence program.

<sup>67</sup> Kimberly Davis, "Sex and the Spirit: SOS for Single Christian Sisters," *Ebony*, January 2005, 108.

## **Overview of Dissertation**

The next chapters will provide some much needed critical attention to the authority of these Christian ministries paying particular interest to popular televangelist Prophetess Juanita Bynum whose discussion of singles sexuality created a niche within faith-based sexuality ministries. The dissertation will utilize a womanist cultural analysis to investigate the authority of Bynum's messages and her implications for black women's sexual decision-making. Although cultural studies and womanist thought will provide only a limited explanation of a cultural phenomenon such as Prophetess Juanita Bynum, it is the intent of the next chapters to point towards the possibility of decoding black women's sexual messages by pushing the boundaries of both disciplines to provide a constructive sexual ethics that advocates black women's sexual agency.

The aim of the first chapter is to begin interpreting Bynum's impact on black churchwomen's sexual decision-making via the lens of cultural studies. This chapter relies on poststructuralist cultural analysis to interrogate Bynum's messages and her viewers. Several cultural studies concepts are useful in this task, namely the terms interpellation, negotiated readings, and encoding/decoding model, which describe why and how black churchwomen are drawn to Bynum's faith-based sexuality ministries. This analysis allows for an interrogation of Bynum's cultural productions, but it does not take into account the complex social and sexual realities of black churchwomen who are her viewers. Thus, the textual analysis methodology deployed in this chapter is further bolstered by the methodology of womanist sociological analysis in the next.

The main aim for chapter two is an intentional focus on black women's spiritual and sexual concerns. This chapter focuses on womanist sociological analysis as a

companion methodology for the dissertation. It posits that cultural analysis alone is insufficient to garner the meaning behind Bynum and her reception. Thus, this chapter emphasizes the benefits of womanist sociological analysis by highlighting Bynum as a womanist sociological case study. This chapter also provides a historical overview of womanist sexual ethics revealing that there is a dearth in research exploring faith-based sexuality ministries. It offers a means of closing this gap by critiquing the messages black churchwomen receive without advocating that they abandon their faith experiences. Thus, I argue that the articulated methodology of womanist cultural analysis is necessary to adequately decode the religious messages given to black women. This methodology serves as the means of analyzing Bynum throughout the dissertation, and it critically interprets Bynum as a text while simultaneously validating the experiences of the women whom Bynum's message hails.

After providing the methodology for the dissertation, the subsequent chapters set out to deploy this methodology to a specific case, Prophetess Juanita Bynum. Chapter three begins my interrogation of Bynum by analyzing her two main influences, neo-Pentecostalism and televangelism. After an overview of both of these influences, I focus on two female neo-Pentecostal televangelists that provide an archetype for Bynum's ministries, namely Mother Rosa Horne and Kathryn Kuhlman. My goals in this chapter are to trace what messages have been popular, how they function, and to provide critiques using womanist cultural analysis while setting the scene for a more detailed interpretation of Bynum's sexual messages. The chapter concludes by examining the niche Bynum creates in faith-based sexuality ministries, e.g. singles sexuality.

Chapter four begins by discussing Bynum's influence in faith-based sexuality ministries paying particular attention to her highly successful "No More Sheets" video. Her video and subsequent ministries discussed the taboo topic of singles sexuality as Bynum confessed to missing sexual pleasure and being unhappy without a sexual partner. Bynum's message resonated with hundreds of thousands of black women who were equally frustrated as they tried to live their single lives before God all the while experiencing sexual desire. Thus, this chapter provides a thorough analysis of Bynum's sermon and subsequent marketing to black women, her cultural readers. It posits that these readers get a message from Bynum that does not help them make the healthiest sexual decisions.

Thus, these women are in need for a more holistic model of sexual ethics that addresses their particular concerns as single black Christian women. The purpose of my final chapter is to provide a potential model for this community. I proffer a womanist constructive sexual ethics as a contribution to the disciplines of cultural studies and womanist ethics. This model advocates for healthy sexual relationships that are built on the principles of mutuality, agency, and pleasure. It pushes for discussions of sexuality to occur beyond the rubric of heterosexual marriage and demands concrete steps for black churchwomen who are sexually agential positing that these steps are necessary for them to make the best sexual decisions. Chapter five completes the circuit of analysis of Bynum by interpreting her messages and offering counternarratives. Thus, the next four chapters continue with womanist cultural analysis, and my concluding chapter ends with an ethical response.

Having provided the arch of my dissertation, it is necessary to address at the onset the project's limitations. First, my concerns are with sexual decision-making of African-American Protestant Christian women. I chose Bynum because of her import to this particular population, and the constructive womanist sexual ethics that I offer in the final chapter is also a decidedly Christian womanist sexual ethics. Similarly, I specifically chose to emphasize sexual relationships among heterosexual women. Bynum's trope is heteronormative, and she hails women who are receptive to these signals. Although I am submitting a model that is intentionally attentive to heterosexism, I did want to note the emphasis on heterosexual experiences throughout the dissertation. Finally, I conclude by employing the model in the arena of the black church. For many critics, the black church has done such a disservice to single black women that it has sent them fleeing into the arms of televangelists like Bynum. Thus, one could question how and why I find redemption possible in this environment. I find this space worth redeeming because it is where black women are overwhelmingly located. As a womanist cultural critic, I am concerned with the lived realities of black women, and I desire to promote a womanist sexual ethics that deconstructs the sources of religious messages restricting their sexuality by offering beneficial practices for the black church. Therefore, the dissertation continues with an interest in constructing a sexual ethics that addresses the intricacies of single black churchwomen sexual lives.

## CHAPTER I

### TOWARDS THE POSSIBILITY OF READING BLACK WOMEN'S SEXUALITY FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF CULTURAL ANALYSIS

*"I find it very difficult to listen to anybody preach to me about being single when they've got a pair of thighs in their bed every night...I want to hear Hold On from another Single Woman!"<sup>68</sup>*

This sensational quote is from popular televangelist Juanita Bynum. Bynum gained notoriety with her stirring sermon turned into video "No More Sheets." The sermon was delivered during televangelist T.D. Jakes' 1997 Singles Conference in Dallas, TX. Bynum presents herself as a holy, sex deprived woman and publicly states that she is covered because the world has seen enough flesh. She has on a long skirt, and a loose top covering her hips, buttocks, and thighs. She has on no make-up, and her short hair cut is simple and non-attention grabbing. In addition, she has a scarf tied around her neck, not in a fashionable sense, but to make sure that her entire body is covered. Yet, she had on high heels, a staple in her preaching ministry. In her asexual presentation, there is something being stated with her desire to always be in sexy heels, regardless of the rest of her outfit. Perhaps it's a reflection of her innate femininity flaunting itself despite her intentions. Or perhaps it's an attempt to draw the attention of her mentor T.D. Jakes, who sits on-stage with her nodding approvingly as she repetitively glances over at him. Whatever it is, the heels are part of the persona that Bynum presents as she begins to tell her story weaved into sermonic moment.

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<sup>68</sup> *No More Sheets*, DVD, produced by Juanita Bynum (Waycross, GA: Juanita Bynum Ministries, 1998).

Juanita Bynum marches across the stage as she talks to the audience of more than 10,000 predominately black listeners about a painful subject—her sexual past. She tells this mostly black female audience that she feels vulnerable, and they hang attentively to her words. She begins the sermon not with a scripture or a title but by simply giving a bit of her biography. In this packaged story, she retells her narrative as a good girl, raised in the Pentecostal church, obedient to her parents and the Lord. But then, she startles the crowd by discussing a taboo topic, her singleness. She is not happy being single, she is tired of those preaching to her about singleness who are married. She is struggling with singleness and so are many in the crowd! Instead of disagreement from the saved single saints across the room, the camera records hundreds of women nodding in agreement with her assessment that she misses sex and wants to be sexually active again. Yet, she can't express herself in that way because God told her that every time she had sex with a man he became her husband and none of these men were her lawful, e.g. God sanctioned spouse.

In order to be found by this God-selected man, she must purify herself so that God can provide her with a mate. She is to be found though, e.g. not actively pursue a man herself. God's plan seems to involve her reclaiming a traditional understanding of femininity. In fact, she preaches to the audience that "men are projectors and women are receptors;" thus, a man deposits his spirit into the woman.<sup>69</sup> Women are to prepare themselves for their spouse by learning to cook and clean while ridding themselves from the spirits of past men deposited in them. She instructs the audience that God won't provide a man to marry until a woman is prepared to be his helpmeet. Thus, she needs to be able to help her man by appropriately performing her womanly duties.

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<sup>69</sup> *No More Sheets DVD.*



One of the most noteworthy moments in the video involves her tying several bed sheets around her body to symbolize the baggage from past men that women carry with them. Before she can begin to remove the sheets, and metaphorically the men, they represent from her life, she must remove the ties these men have on her. She encourages the crowd to “get real” and talk about the pleasures of sex and the temptations to fall “back into the sheets again.” Yet, the image of Bynum is stunning with her trying to walk while being tied down by so many sheets. Yes, she acknowledges sex is pleasurable, but look at its consequences.

Watching Bynum pace back and forth across the stage bound in bulky white sheets one encounters the Prophetess! Bynum is also known as Prophetess Juanita Bynum, and she reveals that God is encouraging women into a life of accountability and prayer. As Prophetess, she can release them from their bondage. She has the answers to alleviate their pain in singleness. She speaks revelation into their lives telling them that God is casting out demon spirits of perversion, (i.e. homosexuality, adultery, promiscuity) and bringing them back into communion with him. All they must do is make a vow that from that conference on they will have NO MORE SHEETS!

As they chant NO MORE SHEETS, she removes sheets in a tantalizing imagined strip tease. She dramatically drops them offstage, stirring the crowd into frenzy as she tells them they are going to be free. Yet, the more sheets she removes, she reminds the audience of how hard it was to walk in the sheets reiterating the oppressiveness of sexual sin and how bound women feel to their sexual desires. She tells them they too can be free, but they must let God free them. They can’t seek marriage just to get sex. They

must seek God, who will provide them a mate that will provide for them entirely not just their base desires.

The crowd continues to chant and she begins to run with the sheets in a dramatic visual spectacle. She waves a sheet over women's heads, she touches them with the sheet, and she twirls it as a flag. Her actions spur the crowd, they respond with shouts, tears, and open weeping. Bynum responds in kind. She weeps at the camera, wipes sweat, tears, and glorifies God for the breakthrough she has presented. The camera zooms in on her tears, the microphone catches the fluctuations in her tone, and her testimony is authenticated by the crowd's acceptance of its truth.

How does one analyze such a scene or case study? How does one make sense of the complexity of this moment for both the viewing audience and the persons involved? How do black women, who make up the majority of this audience interpret these messages and choose to act? These questions and others like them will be analyzed in the following chapters with the hopes of filling in some gaps left between scholarship in black religion and popular culture. Just as Jonathan Walton's dissertation explored the significance of cultural studies to the burgeoning field of black religion, my analysis of black women's sexual decision making seeks to merge the disciplines of womanist ethics with cultural studies to examine the particular sexual messages provided by Prophetess Juanita Bynum. I seek to evaluate faith-based messages on sexuality that have created a rampant discourse restricting and *reviving* black women's sexuality. Bynum is a participant in a larger phenomenon that is long overdue critical analysis, and the tools of the cultural studies discipline are useful in engaging this phenomenon.

Using cultural critic Stuart Hall's theoretical practice of articulation, e.g. "linking two or more theoretical frameworks in order to move beyond the limits of either framework," I am connecting the theoretical methods of poststructuralist cultural analysis and womanist ethics to propose an alternative theoretical lens for examining Bynum's messages, e.g. "womanist cultural analysis."<sup>70</sup> Thus, there are two interrelated aims in interpreting Bynum's impact on black women's sexual decision-making. First, I will demonstrate the importance of the field of cultural studies to my topic by showing how the methodology of the poststructuralist cultural thought will benefit my analysis of Bynum's messages namely through the deployment of its terms interpellation and negotiated readings, which is the focus of this chapter. In my next chapter, I profess that with all the benefits provided in cultural analysis, there is still inadequate attention given to black women's sexuality and spirituality. Thus, I see womanist ethics as a complementary framework for investigating black women's reception of Bynum as both womanist and cultural thought provides a way of explaining the production of meaning present in Bynum and other faith-based sexuality ministries. I posit that by putting together cultural studies and womanist sociological ethics I will get something useful for my work such that I can properly engage and decode the meanings inscribed in Bynum's messages.

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<sup>70</sup> James Proctor, *Stuart Hall* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 54. I am using the term womanist cultural analysis to explain my merging of both the fields of womanist thought and cultural studies.

## **What is Cultural Studies?**<sup>71</sup>

Broadly understood, cultural studies is any approach to studying culture that takes seriously the impact of culture on society. It provides a framework for understanding popular culture, and hence, religion's participation/creation in popular culture.

According to Lawrence Grossberg, cultural studies is "concerned with describing and intervening in the way 'texts' and 'discourses' (i.e. cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations."<sup>72</sup> Within this definition, cultural studies is demarcated as a discipline that is intentionally open and has several functions, most notably being concerned about popular culture, social structures, meaning systems, and critiques of culture.

## **Why Cultural Studies?**

Cultural studies is an useful discipline for my study because it provides a means for understanding popular religion and representations of black female sexuality. Because I am interested in the ways black women respond to particular sexual messages in faith based sexuality ministries including televangelism, conferences, etc. the discipline of cultural studies is helpful to analyze these types of cultural texts. There are many strands of cultural studies that inform poststructuralist analysis, and each has many divergent axes and methodologies. A popular cultural critic asks the prominent question "What is Cultural Studies?" and responds with a variety of possible interpretations because of the plural nature of the field. Thus, the defining task is a particularly

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<sup>71</sup> Despite the plurality in the discipline, in my dissertation, I will refer to cultural studies in the singular tense and as an unified academic field of study.

<sup>72</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, "The Circulation of Cultural Studies," in *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Arnold, 1997), 178.

constraining one because it forces into academic categories a school of thought that is particularly fluid with boundaries. I reference the British school of cultural studies in my trajectory of cultural studies because of the Birmingham school's emphasis on the benefits of poststructuralism, the guiding methodology for the chapter.

## **Structuralism**

The British school of cultural studies underwent two major paradigm shifts with the influence of culturalism and structuralism. For my analysis, attention to French structuralists theorists is key, especially the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Ferdinand de Saussure. These theorists formed the backdrop for the development of structuralism as a theory that “concerns itself with those social structures which bind and determine the major forms of a society and culture.”<sup>73</sup> According to this description, to understand a particular cultural phenomenon requires one to understand the underlying structure and relations that make the phenomenon possible. Structuralism gained influence within British cultural studies as E. P. Thompson, Richard Johnson, and Stuart Hall began advocating the value of structuralism for cultural analysis. Hall was interested in language as a cultural phenomenon, and he relied on the works of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss to build a theory that analyzed texts as complex entities.

There were at least two basic strands of structuralism that Hall utilized in his adoption of French theory. Lévi-Strauss represented the social anthropological side of structuralism and Saussure represented the linguistics component. Saussure contended that language consists of a system of signs which are made from a combination of signifier and signified where signifier represents a specific word and the signified refers

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<sup>73</sup>Jeff Lewis, *Cultural Studies: The Basics* (London, Sage Publications, 2002), 132.

to the specific concept/mental image of that word. To determine meaning one is to look at the relationship within the entire system not just between the signified and signifier. For Saussure, signs do not have a fixed or essential meaning. His classic example of this is the distinction made in traffic lights where green is said to “mean” go, but this color only has this meaning in reference to the particular language spoken of, namely traffic lights. If green is considered in another language system it could symbolize money or even recycling. Thus, the word or color (mental image) does not house the meaning. Instead, meaning is constructed through its relations to language and culture. In this case, words shift or slide across meanings based on cultural contexts, e.g. language systems. Thus, *meaning is not fixed*, which requires it to be interpreted or read.

Although Stuart Hall relied heavily on this structuralist semiology in his analysis of popular culture, Hall also critiques Saussure’s legacy in cultural studies as being focused too narrowly on the formal aspects of language, e.g. how language actually works, which diverts attention away from the interactive and dialogic features of language.<sup>74</sup> Since language systems do not occur in a vacuum, meaning continues to be produced and good cultural analysis must change as the structure, e.g. context changes.

Hall finds strength in structuralism in that it allows one to think relationally about structures and not just people so that it references the unity of structures.<sup>75</sup> This strength is picked up in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, a French anthropologist who adapted Saussure’s semiology and applied it to cultural practices. Lévi-Strauss analyzed meanings in culture by looking at the underlying rules and codes through which ultimate meaning was produced. He was particularly interested in structures as he believed that

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<sup>74</sup>Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London, Sage Publications, 2000), 35.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

all cultures shared a body of mythologies that provided meaning for members of society. Lévi-Strauss' work gains resonance in cultural studies in the area of film analysis, and it provides further insight in the field as evidenced in the work of French theorist Roland Barthes.

Barthes used the best of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss' theories as he used semiology to interpret everyday popular culture. His work debunked the idea of the text as its own carrier of meaning instead positing that all texts are constructed by signs, e.g. a language structure that communicates meaning.<sup>76</sup> Following Saussure's combination of signifier and signified to create a sign, Barthes recognized that when these signs are read, there is a process of signification taking place that ultimately produces meaning. Within this system, Barthes cautions that words operate in a specific cultural and political context and when readers link these particular contexts with the denoted message being provided, they come to a more ideologically framed meaning. These meanings derived from the decoding of specific concepts within particular contexts results in what Barthes termed cultural myths. Myths in this definition represent the taken-for-granted practices and ideas that are thought to be true as they support the status quo. This notion of myth becomes important in cultural theory because it points to the polysemic nature of signs, e.g. their ability to carry numerous meanings. This theory is also significant for audience studies and in film analysis because it focuses not just on the text itself but the text's capacity to have varying meanings in varying contexts, some of which are determined and predicated upon a certain ideological struggle. In this case, black can represent both a negative and positive sign depending on the context and the ideologue using the term.

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<sup>76</sup> Chris Barker, "Roland Barthes," in *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 12.

This gives the structuralist analyst the task of interpreting meanings with awareness of the dominant ideologies at play.

### **Challenges to Method**

Yet, even with an awareness of the dominant ideologies at work, there were critiques of structuralism arguing that its explanation of cultures via major structures or ideologies was theoretically too universalistic. Structuralists focused on signifying systems as if these systems were stable. However, later theorists rejected some of the tenets of structuralism positing instead that meaning is not guaranteed by decoding the structure alone. These theorists were generally considered poststructuralists and poststructuralism emphasized that meaning is a process in a process. While agreeing with Saussure's terms, e.g. signifier, signified, and sign, they disagree with the relationship he determines among these concepts. For poststructuralists, signifiers (words) do not produce signifieds (mental concepts). Instead, they produce more signifiers.<sup>77</sup> For instance, when one is demarcating a word by looking it up in the dictionary the definitions it provides only gives one more words to look up. To garner meaning one must decipher these varying definitions realizing that meaning is possible but it will take time to get there. Basically, one realizes that meaning will be deferred until the last word is defined. Deferred meaning is the heart of poststructuralist thought because words are said to carry meanings that include the traces of other meanings in other contexts.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> John Storey, "Introduction to Part Three: Structuralism and Poststructuralism," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Prentice Hall, 1998), 96.

<sup>78</sup> Chris Barker, "Poststructuralism," in *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), 160.



## Poststructuralist Thought

Poststructuralism emerged in France in the late 1960s and was adopted in cultural theory in the early 1970s. In this approach to reading texts in popular culture, poststructuralists (much like structuralists before them) accept that language does not reflect reality, it creates reality for us.<sup>79</sup> Thus, our understanding of femininity or holiness can have different meanings at different times and in different social contexts. Unlike structuralists though, poststructuralists place greater emphasis on the historically specific contexts. For them, Saussure's fixed language system can not adequately account for the plurality of meaning possible over time. Thus, poststructuralist methodology problematizes the basis of a final meaning. Instead, this methodology posits that "what we call meaning is a momentary halt in a continuing process of interpretations of interpretations."<sup>80</sup> This theory is especially espoused by philosopher Jacques Derrida.

While Derrida was building on the later works of structuralist Roland Barthes, Derrida's unique contribution is undeniable to the methodology of poststructuralism. Derrida moves away from structuralism by arguing that there are no fixed or stable signifieds or signifiers which take on meaning because of their difference to each other. Instead, he contends that although it seems meaning is apparently fixed, it is but a "temporary retrospective fixing."<sup>81</sup> His replacement of the rigidity in Saussure's language system is also evidenced in his concept of *différance*. This concept illustrates that meaning is both the result of difference and occurs only through a process of

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<sup>79</sup> Chris Weedon, "Feminism and the Principles of Poststructuralism" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Prentice Hall, 1998), 174.

<sup>80</sup> Storey, "Introduction to Part Three," 95.

<sup>81</sup> Weedon, "Feminism and the Principles," 176.

deferral. Poststructuralists took from his concept that meaning is continually sought because meaning is ultimately tied to a particular context, e.g. historical period, social setting, specific text, etc. For cultural theorists this is an extremely important detail, and it is especially significant for my project since it suggests that “social meanings are produced within social institutions and practices in which individuals, who are shaped by these institutions, are agents of change.”<sup>82</sup> Meaning will vary according to context and this made cultural studies more attentive to not just the larger language system, but the specifics of the historical-cultural period.

### **Poststructuralist Method**

Poststructuralist thought is more useful for my analysis of black women’s sexuality because I join cultural theorist Chris Weedon in being concerned with using a theory that is “able to address the questions of how social power is exercised and how social relations of gender, class, and race might be transformed.”<sup>83</sup> Poststructuralism is centered on the notion that context matters, and if I am to address the specific context of black female sexuality I must do so within a specific discourse and context. This analysis also necessitates an understanding of discourse as widely understood by the infamous poststructuralist Michel Foucault. In true poststructuralist form, Foucault saw the need to shift attention from the study of language and its structures instead positing that discourse was the key to garnering meaning. His understanding of discourse entailed the joining of language and practice, and was insistent that language and practices have meaning under

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 172.

very specific historical conditions so much so that a meaning may change completely over time.

Foucault's historical understanding of discourse also argued that just as a historical period helps determine meaning it also plays a role in what meanings are excluded. For instance, his understanding of discourse limits other ways of talking or constructing knowledge about a topic. While he posits that the same discourse can appear across a range of texts and sites within society, the meaning is still framed by the regulations given through specific material and historical conditions that determine who can speak, about what, and where.<sup>84</sup> If something is defined only within a specific historical period it is possible that in different periods they can mean different things or as in the case of black female sexuality there can be remnants from previous periods carried into different historical eras to contribute to meaning.

This becomes important for cultural studies because Foucault argues that discourse produces knowledge and that subjects like sexuality only exist meaningfully within the discourses about them.<sup>85</sup> Through his understanding meaning could not exist outside of the specific cultural and historical analysis, and it also could not exist outside of the understanding of the regulation of social practices because discourse was concerned with both language and practice. The body (although in Foucauldian discourse, notably not a black body) is a key site for the regulation of practices because it is through our corporeal realities that our discourses are contested. In fact, Foucault argues that when discourses are regulated such as they were with discourse around sexuality, this very sense of control was centered on the body. Yet, these efforts to

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 45.

control sexuality just enhanced the discourse around sexuality as “sexual talk” and practices became more commonplace in everyday language and life.

This marked another shift in cultural analysis because in this example discourse not subjects produce knowledge. Foucault and other poststructuralists rejected the humanist notion of a centered and stable subject that is the originator of stable, fixed meanings.<sup>86</sup> In this traditional view of subjectivity, an individual is a conscious, autonomous being that creates meaning through speech. This traditional view gives the author of a text autonomy and assumes that only the author “knows” what something really means. Foucault is highly critical of this idea because he argues that even if a subject gives a meaning, this meaning only holds true within a larger discourse that sanctions this meaning. Again, this takes seriously the idea that discourse regulates what is acceptable and unacceptable meanings, and it reminds that when subjects submit themselves to these regulations they are no longer outside of discourse but a construction of it. Therefore, poststructuralists suggest that subjectivity is constructed, e.g. socially produced. In poststructuralist theory, subjectivity is produced in a wide range of “discursive practices—economic, social, and political” in which subjectivity is never unified or fixed.<sup>87</sup>

Contrary to structuralists and earlier theorists, those following Foucault’s lead posit that because discourse produces subjects, they are subject to change as the discourse changes. If the socio-historical period changes so can the types of subjects present. Yet, this view of subjectivity also “produces a place for the subject from which its particular

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<sup>86</sup> Barker, “Poststructuralism,” 160.

<sup>87</sup> Weedon, “Feminism,” 173.

knowledge and meaning most makes sense.”<sup>88</sup> This place is otherwise known as a subject position and an individual may occupy more than one or even contradictory positions in the perspective of cultural studies. Hall contestably proffers that until an individual identifies with those positions that the discourse constructs, he or she will be unable to take meaning because the discourse sets the meaning.<sup>89</sup> If this is the case then the African-American subject must be produced through the crucible of race relations in the United States during a certain socio-historical period. In a later work on race, Hall posits that when one looks at the case of blacks who have been typically seen as objects and begins to discuss black subjectivity, one must remain cognizant of the entire discourse that produces the black subject, which includes theories predicated on negative views of blacks. Thus, when I discuss black female subjectivity, I must do so within a discourse that acknowledges white racism and its effect on black subjectivity. Most importantly for my work, Hall suggests that discourses on black subjectivity have centered on the experiences of black masculinity to the exclusion of black women and black gay men; thus, my work must begin with an exploration of this specific historical reality.<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, Louis Althusser is another key poststructuralist whose influential views are important for discussions of black subjectivity. Althusser argues that we are made subjects by ideology and are simultaneously subject to ideology.<sup>91</sup> This argument is evident when looking at the economic crisis of our time, where poor persons take on

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<sup>88</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 56.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston Baker, Jr., Manthia Diawara, and Ruth Lindeborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 168.

<sup>91</sup> John Fiske, “British Cultural Studies and Television,” in *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Arnold, 1997), 118.

middle class subjectivities despite their actual economic status. Just as Hall posited that an African American must be viewed through the ideology that produced “blackness” so must a female subject be viewed through the lens of the ideologies that produce masculinity and femininity. Whereas, Hall uses the terminology that the discourse produces meaning, Althusser refers to this process as ideology, a process that is constantly reproduced. Althusser’s subject is produced and reproduced by culture and is merely a social construction. Yet, Hall and Foucault would necessitate a larger emphasis on the socio-historical period that the subject is produced within.<sup>92</sup>

Another key distinction among these poststructuralist theories is that Althusser is one of the first to emphasize the role that media and language play in the construction of the subject, e.g. how ideology is reproduced within individuals. Ideology is not just ideas but actively involves practices that keep certain structures in place. He theorizes that ideological state apparatuses are many tools used to serve one goal—the perpetuation of certain ideologies. He argues that ideology is the ideology of some dominant class; thus, a person behaves in a certain way, adopts a particular attitude, and participates in regular practices. These practices and attitudes become socially acceptable because they defend the ideology of the dominant class. Thus, a person may behave in a way that is not in her best interest but in the interest of what he terms the ideological state apparatus.<sup>93</sup> His example of ideological state apparatuses include religion, education, family, legal system, political system, unions, media, and culture. The apparatuses he describes are responsible for supporting a dominant ideology, and the practices that sustain this

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid. This is also because Althusser relies on Freud’s theory of the subject and not just social and historical constructions.

<sup>93</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Prentice Hall, 1998), 159.

ideology are constituted to make natural or normative actions that maintain the status quo. These ideological state apparatuses include much of Bynum's base (religion, education, family, media, etc.) so it is important to include an analysis of the role of these apparatuses as I deconstruct Bynum's messages.

## **Interpellation**

I particularly like Althusser's paraphrase of St. Paul in positing that in ideology we "live, move, and have our being" such that we are "always-already subjects" because we constantly reproduce the ideology that constructs our lives in particular ways.<sup>94</sup> Even though we are already subjects there is a process of recognizing this fact that he terms interpellating or hailing the subject. Interpellation involves the moment the subject realizes that the message is for her. This recognition comes from signs carried in our own language that represent who we think we are. When we respond to a particular hail, we recognize and accept a certain social position and ideology that is already present within the hail. Thus, in the case of black women's sexuality as I determine what messages are being presented about black women as sexual subjects, I must also be attune to the ideology that is already present within these messages. Typical of this type of dominant ideology are the concepts of: patriarchy, heteronormativity, sexual purity, black sexuality as oversexed and insatiable, etc. These are all categories that are embedded within messages because they support the dominant structures in power that place men in authority and control most women's and blacks' sexuality.

Being hailed by such dominant structures relates to the work of the media, and this is a reason why this concept is important for my analysis of Bynum's messages. His

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 161.

description of interpellation provides a means of explaining some of the ways that media exerts power over the public. For example, he posits that one is to think of interpellation as greeting a person and having them recognize that it is he that is being addressed. In the case of Bynum's messages, black women are hailed because they recognize themselves in the messages that she is telling about herself. They become subjects as they receive their social position as single black women and they identify with Bynum as such. Just as with advertising, these women see themselves as her target group or in fact believe that she is speaking prophetically to just them. While they recognize themselves as part of a singles ministry or single women, it is possible that when Bynum's messages are received, these women instead render the message as an individual missive to just them as they deem their experiences similar to ones that Bynum details. Intriguing to this understanding is that it does not matter if what these women perceive is actually reality. This is part of the genius of interpellation in that it makes the subject think that the message they receive is real. In fact, Althusser responds that one's particular response to a hail can be an act of "ideological misrecognition," where many persons can believe that it is to just them that the message is given or even that they are the special person that is being hailed.<sup>95</sup>

Interpellation is most successful when a subject totally accepts the ideology hidden (or at times explicit) in the message. Thus, a person circumscribing to Bynum's abstinent message or her many capitalistic opportunities may do so thinking they are helping themselves "unaware" (according to Althusser) that they are ultimately reinscribing patriarchy and dominant modes that degrade singleness. This is the case when I interpret how black women receive the messages presented by Bynum. Often

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<sup>95</sup> Storey, "Introduction to Part Three," 97.



they are unaware or purposely ignorant of the mass media effect of her video and conferences. Believing it is to just them that Bynum is talking gives them a sense of personal connection to her that negates the dominant ideology present in her message.

This personal connection is significant because Althusser posits that interpellation is really a “larger process wherein language constructs social relations for both groups in an act of communication and thus locates them in the broader map of general social relations.”<sup>96</sup> He proffers that interpellation is a means for reproduction of social relationships because we interpret the messages of the media as not abstract but made “by us for us.” In the example of Bynum’s message, one sees a cooperative relationship where black women accept her message (or much of her message and certainly her ideology) because they find a connection to other single black women and to Bynum herself. Her story is not just a story pitched by advertisers. It is believable to them because often it replicates parts of their own narratives.

Once a person has received a hail he must still interpret exactly what he is being told by that message. For instance, the person that determines that someone has in fact spoken to her must then determine why her attention was desired. There is usually a meaning intended with the hail and that meaning usually serves the hegemonic forces in power. Again, cultural theorist Stuart Hall is immensely influential in theorizing how one determines meaning. He posits that there is a “preferred” meaning that supports the dominant ideologies, but that these meanings can be only preferred not imposed. Hall comes to this conclusion by method of critique as he criticizes the previous mass communications models as being too linear by insisting that the person hailed receives an exact message from the sender. Instead, he argues that a more helpful model is an

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<sup>96</sup> Fiske, “British Cultural Studies,” 118.

“articulation of linked but distinctive moments—production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction.”<sup>97</sup> Within this new circuit, the person being hailed has several modes of receiving a message. However, Hall reiterates that messages are not open to any and all interpretations. There are limits based on each stage of the circuit, although this circuit is ultimately created to reproduce the dominant codes of the sender. These codes make not only the hail distinctive, but the message from the sender. For Hall, codes are our cultural maps for interpreting information/structures, and in true poststructuralist fashion, he reminds that although codes seek to stabilize meaning, this is only temporary and within a specific context.<sup>98</sup> Instead, codes offer the interpreter a means of seeing just how socially constructed our meanings can be.

### **Encoding/Decoding Model**

Hall’s interest in coding and decoding is paramount to the development of cultural studies because his interest in the TV message made space for the analysis for a variety of mediums in popular culture. His model is especially helpful for my project given my interest in televangelism, but also given my interest in determining exactly how women receive the messages sent by Prophetess Bynum because Hall notes that before a message can have a desired effect it must first be “meaningfully decoded.”<sup>99</sup> Decoded meanings have the ability to entertain, instruct, or persuade us, which often leads to complex ideological and behavioral consequences to these messages.

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<sup>97</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, ed. Stuart Hall, et.al (New York: Routledge, 1980), 128.

<sup>98</sup> Hall, *Representation*, 21.

<sup>99</sup> Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 130.

Properly decoding messages in the televisual medium requires one to pay attention to both the visual and oral messages presented because they may be sending opposite messages. For example, in the television realm, reality is mediated through language, so we can see a dog bark on TV, but it can not bite. What we hear is deceptive in comparison to what we are seeing. Thus, we are witnesses to what Hall terms “maps of meaning” where not all codes are equal.<sup>100</sup> In light of this polysemic nature of codes, Hall suggests that there are numerous ways to gather meaning or read a text.

The possibility of reading a text is widely discussed in cultural theory because it acknowledges that even as I interpret a text in one particular fashion there are numerous other ways to approach it and find meaning. Hall accepts a view of reading where reading refers to “capacity to identify and decode a certain number of signs,” and in this view these signs are placed in relation to the larger cultural environment to make sense of a message.<sup>101</sup> This understanding is popular in cultural studies because it allows for an interpretation of texts making space for both “professional” analysts as well as the “everyday” reader that determines the meaning of a message. Despite the seeming plurality of readings possible, it is not to be understood that any meaning is possible. On the contrary, the encoder can construct some limits and parameters within which decodings are possible. Thus, when a person hails someone else there is a preferred meaning he wants to convey but this meaning is limited by the fact that the receiver can reject or ignore his message. Hence, Hall posits that there are at least three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a TV discourse can occur: readings operating within

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.,134.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.,135.

the dominant/hegemonic code, readings operating within a negotiated code, and a reading that operates with an oppositional code.<sup>102</sup>

These three readings were developed by political social theorist Frank Parkin, but Hall used them within a poststructuralist framework. Thus, a dominant meaning is seen as effective by the sender if the receiver accepts the message in its entirety. This is not guaranteed because messages are sometimes rejected, but the dominant meaning is usually when a viewer decodes the message according to the same dominant codes of the sender. This reading is hegemonic because it does not question the authority of the sender or the validity of its message. It involves the reader choosing to accept a view as opposed to having a particular view imposed on him.

In the negotiated reading, the reader accepts only part of the sender's message, as she can choose question or accept only part of the dominant ideology behind the message. According to Hall, this lends to a more contradictory reading since "negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics...[which] are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logic of power."<sup>103</sup> This view is seen as contradictory because the consumer has the opportunity to adopt a code or part of a code, e.g. the interpreter has ultimate choice in determining what meaning to take from the message based on his or her social position.

A final potential interpretation for a message is an oppositional reading. In an oppositional reading the consumer understands that the system that produces the text is fundamentally contrary to his worldview and so the entire message is rejected. Hall describes this interpretation as an "alternative framework of reference" that is potentially

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

revolutionizing.<sup>104</sup> This signals the freedom of the reader and the fluidity of meaning within poststructuralist discourse. The oppositional position gives credence to cultural studies' shift away from mass communications studies, which tried to influence audiences, by showing through the encoding/decoding model that audiences are more diverse and savvy than previously described. Instead of being cultural dupes, an oppositional reading showed the complexity of audience analysis.

However, before I move too quickly into how a particular meaning is interpreted via a message, I must first acknowledge that the encoding and decoding model is culturally specific. Black feminist cultural critic Jacqueline Bobo points out that when a person comes to view and interpret a text, “she/he does not leave his/her histories, whether social, cultural, economic, racial, or sexual, at the door.”<sup>105</sup> In fact, this is part of the promise of poststructuralist cultural theory because it is clear that one's identity matters, e.g. how one sees oneself as existing in the world is a cultural construction that flavors how one views a text. Yet, one's history does not completely dictate how one reads a text because cultural studies is clear that one's history is always comprised of one's socio-economic experiences. These experiences are produced and constructed as a result of how one chooses to identify or is identified by society. Thus, identity politics are an important factor in how one decodes messages because it speaks to what lens a person is coming to the message. Cultural critic Simon During posits that “cultural studies has often been regarded (especially in the USA) as the academicisation of identity politics,” and this is particularly true when discussing black cultural studies.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>105</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, “The Color Purple: Black Women as Cultural Readers,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Prentice Hall, 1998), 312.

<sup>106</sup> Simon During, *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 149.

## **Black British Cultural Studies**

In the pioneering text *Black British Cultural Studies* it is offered that during the 1960s and 1970s identity politics operated within the realm of the everyday culture of black Americans and informed how the field of cultural studies approached different cultures. As the civil rights movement transitioned into the black power movement, there was a coalescing around blackness that spurred other groups like white feminists and gay activists to organize likewise. These groups viewed not only culture through particular lenses, but they also engaged in political activism based on these subjectivities. Yet, these subjectivities were often too narrowly conceived. For instance, in the academy and in forms of political activism, it was common for white women's concerns to be deemed representative of all female concerns and for black men's concerns to be seen as representative for all blacks. To paraphrase the lament of the important black feminist title, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, there was a push in black feminist cultural criticism to recognize the contributions and specificity of black female subjects.

Within the discipline of black cultural studies, this recognition was a slow process that mirrored the access to the discourse of all "others." When the Birmingham school first began to notice difference, it first opened its ears to the plight of white women who felt ignored in the discussion of how messages are encoded and decoded. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, white feminist cultural theorists Angela McRobbie and Laura Mulvey expanded the conversations and publications to include attention to feminist and specifically gender issues. Then, black cultural theorist Paul Gilroy began bringing the categories of race and British nationalism to the forefront at the Centre. While his work

primarily challenges essentialist understandings of race, there is an underlying interest in black masculinity. From Barthes focus on the black male soldier to contemporary cultural studies discussions on Mapplethorpe's work, the black male subject is seen on some level as representative of blackness.

The politics of representation that informed cultural studies of blackness did not signal attention to black female subjectivity.<sup>107</sup> Thus, the move to recognize black women as cultural readers, consumers, and even producers was a significant one. When various disciplines began noticing the absence of the black female voice and identity in their varying discourses, it marshaled in a change in focus that has led to pivotal research done for and by black women. As black feminist cultural critic bell hooks astutely notes black women have had to deal with being constructed as an "absence...that denies the 'body' of the black female so as to perpetuate white supremacy and with it a phallogentric spectatorship where the woman to be looked at and desired is 'white.'"<sup>108</sup> At its heart this represents the problem of being reflected in the world as always an object and not a subject.

Moving through the canons of work from Kobena Mercer in British Cultural Studies to Anthony Appiah in American Cultural Studies there is a noticeable absence of attention to the specificity of the black female. Three cultural theorists are notable for their attention to black women and their experiences, namely Hortense Spillers, Hazel Carby and bell hooks. Spillers' important work begins simply by acknowledging an oft unstated reality that black women have remained invisible to public discourse for some

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<sup>107</sup> The politics of representation that informed feminist cultural studies also did not signal great attention to black female subjectivity.

<sup>108</sup> bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 201.

time. She astutely notes that black women's sexuality is rarely framed by them and when black women are subjects they usually "speak" through fiction novels or music such as the blues.<sup>109</sup> Her article "Interstices" challenges audiences to search for feminist nonfictional texts where black women express their own sexual truths as she posits that we have not done a good job representing our own selves. She describes this absence as the interstice, the missing word that allows us to speak in a way common to all about black female sexuality.<sup>110</sup> Despite the fact this article was originally written in 1984, I would argue that not much has changed today.

### **Black Feminist Cultural Studies**

Likewise Hazel Carby's work looks at sexual politics of black women, especially in relation to the cultural workers of the blues industry. Carby was trained at the Centre for Cultural Studies as a contemporary of Paul Gilroy and a student of Stuart Hall. Her analysis of cultural materials seeks to expand black feminist discourse as well as cultural studies to include an interrogation of black female performance, which included the *act* of performing sexuality. Her attention to black women as sexual subjects begins in the realm of fiction novels but she moves to an astute analysis of black women blues performers in the 1920s. Carby focuses on deconstructing black women who portrayed themselves as sexual subjects in song and in doing so inhabited an "empowered" sexual presence.<sup>111</sup> By giving credence to what black women sang about she validates the importance of their voice and agency. Particularly important is her distinction that

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<sup>109</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 153.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>111</sup> Hazel Carby, "The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (New York: Verso, 1999), 7.



cultural critics recognize the conflict of the female blues singer who was caught between the racist constructions of black female sexuality and a desire to express their own innate sensuality and sexual agency.<sup>112</sup>

Yet, the road to black female sexual subjectivity is hard fought. Despite the fact that there are allies in the feminist camp working on female subjectivity and sexuality, the race of the black female often offers opposition to her inclusion in this theorizing. For instance, black feminist theorist Evelyn Hammonds posits that black female theorists must create a counter narrative that includes an “analysis of power relations between white and black women and among different groups of black women.”<sup>113</sup> This counter narrative is what is at stake with black churchwomen’s sexuality because there has not been a way to adequately address not only the parallel relations to feminist theological discourses but the complex relationships they have to conservative messages. Thus, the ability to seek sexual validation in a way that affirms their diverseness has led to some “canned” explorations of black female sexuality that explore only a segmented dimension, e.g. heterosexual relations or prudish morality as opposed to the variety of ways in which black women express themselves sexually.

Evelyn Hammonds posits that there are three themes in perceptions of black female sexuality—1) black female as embodiment of sex yet absent of sexual agency 2) black women resisting negative sexual stereotypes 3) a “politics of silence” that governs black women’s sexual expression.<sup>114</sup> According to these themes the ways black women’s sexuality has been historically addressed in the field of cultural studies follows this

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>113</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.2/3 (1994): 131.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 132.

model. Even the three black female theorists (Spillers, Carby, and hooks) adopt this model and write from this narrative in their discussions of black female sexuality. However, my attention to black churchwomen's sexuality complicates this historical narrative and necessitates an emergence of a mediating theme—religious responses to black females as cultural and sexual agents.

This is necessary because Evelyn Hammonds' astutely notes that "black women have created whole worlds of sexual signs and signifiers" which must be decoded in the contexts of the worlds they participate in.<sup>115</sup> For black churchwomen, the major theme and response is the code of silence and virtue required of Christian women. This is more than a theme in the black community. It represents a significant "culture" in black religious lives. Black female historian Darlene Clark Hine was one of the first theorists to discuss black female sexual silence in the terms of culture. She refers to their participation in a "culture of dissemblance" that was created to protect black women by seemingly disclosing only what they wanted of their sexual selves accruing a space to utilize their own resources of resistance against tropes that castigated their sexuality.<sup>116</sup> This culture that was seemingly silent was as Foucault noted not actually silent about sexuality. In fact there was a great deal of discussion of sexuality going on as women refigured their images and created empowered definitions of themselves.

Many critics of this culture of dissemblance posit that it merely reaffirms the Victorian notions of morality present in the dominant culture that was Christian centered and heteronormative. While I agree with this assessment, I believe more was going on than just colluding to a dominant historical pattern. Black churchwomen were refiguring

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>116</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14.4 (1989): 915.

the pattern to fit their unique circumstances. Thus, when some view hypocrisy in black churchwomen's responses of open castigation for premarital sex while jubilant celebration if a child is born from this contemptuous union, I view this as the complexity of relationships within black women's groups. Within this dominating demand for sexual silence simultaneously arose resistant strategies that dealt justice in the times of inequality.

Another major critique of the "culture of dissemblance" is the fact that in choosing to participate in this culture women "lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality."<sup>117</sup> Instead, the culture represents their sexual expressions and says what is acceptable. I find this an intriguing critique because it is true that silence around sexuality was often only broached if the dominant culture made it acceptable. However, I am also left with the numerous challenges to this dominant view that get discussed. For instance, when looking at how black churchwomen express themselves sexually, they participate in a dominant "church/Christian" culture that advocates heterosexuality and marital intercourse. Yet, they also participate in a larger dominant culture that reminds them of the extended time for black women to get married and of the diverse means of being sexual agents in society. Presented with numerous messages from "dominant" communities, the "typical" sexual silence of the Victorian and antebellum period is not duplicated. A new culture of dissemblance occurs when women attend singles conferences, ministries, etc. and openly discuss their sexual desires and demands for pleasure. Within these spaces, they are articulating their own conceptions of sexuality even if it seems to only reiterate the dominant messages.

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<sup>117</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes," 133.

What I find useful from cultural theory for this analysis is the understanding that all of these messages become a part of this “culture.” While it is about individual women making sexual decisions and being sexual agents, this analysis also reiterates that it is about the institutional or cultural maintenance of these decisions that matters as well. This culture must be understood through multiple lenses realizing that it is not just the church or dominant white society that is a factor in these decisions. Its women’s nuanced understandings or negotiated understandings as Hall describes them that make these decisions intelligible culturally. With this understanding in mind, it makes sense that black feminist cultural critic Michelle Wallace posited that cultural criticism is as crucial to black women as law, health, economics or the family.<sup>118</sup> Because of the tools of cultural criticism, black churchwomen’s diverse attempts to be recognized as sexual subjects can be understood.

This chapter has focused on the benefits of poststructuralist cultural criticism in reading black women’s sexuality. By emphasizing the concepts of interpellation and negotiated readings, poststructuralist cultural thought is a helpful tool for analyzing black women’s gendered experiences and the impact of particular religious messages on their sexual decision-making. However, these resources in cultural studies only provide a partial explanation of a cultural phenomenon such as Prophetess Juanita Bynum. Poststructuralist cultural studies has focused too closely on male experiences, and feminist cultural studies (even black feminist) has not given adequate attention to the complexities of black women’s sexuality and spirituality. Thus, in the next chapter I will continue the process of investigating black women’s sexuality by looking through the lens of womanist sociological analysis. Womanist sociological ethics offers a framework

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<sup>118</sup> Michelle Wallace quoted in Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes,” 140.

for interrogating black women's faith decisions and sexual practices by taking seriously their faith claims and the import of their Christian beliefs on their decision-making. Yet, the next chapter does not provide a better model for investigation, but rather a complementary model. In fact, it will demonstrate my belief that it takes both poststructuralist cultural theory and womanist sociological analysis to adequately decode the religious messages given to black women. Womanist cultural analysis adds constructively to both its disciplines and allows for a validation of faith experience while critiquing the values in this faith that lead to unhealthy sexual decision-making.

## Chapter II

### TOWARDS THE POSSIBILITY OF EXPOSING THE COMPLEXITIES OF BLACK CHURCHWOMEN'S SEXUAL DECISION MAKING

*"It is definitely sinful to be involved sexually at this stage of the game [prior to marriage], ... [but] everybody needs to be loved, to be cared for."*

*Ms. Sylvia, in *Between Sundays*<sup>119</sup>*

*"Liberating black churchwomen who live in the midst of two competing sexual realities is a moral imperative."*

*Katie Canon, "Sexing Black Women"<sup>120</sup>*

*"She would fuck practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment."*

*Hannah, in Toni Morrison's *Sula*<sup>121</sup>*

*"Sexual schizophrenia is present in the lives of women who live with a division between their sexual and spiritual identities."*

*Rev. Dr. Susan Newman, *Oh God!*<sup>122</sup>*

In the previous chapter, I began investigating black women's sexuality through the lens of poststructuralist cultural theory. I concurred with Evelyn Hammonds that my goal must be more than merely making visible "black women's self-defined sexualities;"

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<sup>119</sup>Ms. Sylvia quoted in Marla Frederick's *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 196.

<sup>120</sup> Katie Cannon, "Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 25.

<sup>121</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Plume, 1973), 43-44.

<sup>122</sup> Reverend Doctor Susan Newman, *Oh God! A Black Women's Guide to Sex and Spirituality* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 93.

instead I must push for what she deems a “politics of articulation” where black women both speak and act.<sup>123</sup> Hammonds’ use of articulation signals for me the use of articulation for Stuart Hall. For him, articulation refers to the “connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions.”<sup>124</sup> Hall sees the possibility for linkage where there is seemingly no commonality. Thus, in deciphering black female sexuality, a culture of articulation would refer to the possibility of black churchwomen having both speech and agency not just representing the “beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb.”<sup>125</sup>

Another theoretical use for articulation appears in how black feminist cultural critic Jacqueline Bobo refers to black women viewers of text. She sees in Hall’s definition a social alliance that is cohesive only for a specific time and for a specific purpose. She is interested in black women interpreters of the film *The Color Purple* and sees black women viewers, the film, and responders to the film as an articulated discourse that is a disruptive accomplishment. In fact, for her, when an articulation arises, she sees a cultural transformation occurring, a testament that is not something totally new nor something totally duplicated of responses of the past.<sup>126</sup> I concur with this assessment in viewing black churchwomen’s responses to the phenomenon of Juanita Bynum. I see their contemporary “culture of dissemblance” as something reflective of Victorian morality of the past but equally representative of the emerging televangelistic world of

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<sup>123</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.2/3 (1994): 141.

<sup>124</sup> Stuart Hall, “Reflections upon the Encoding/Decoding Model: An Interview with Stuart Hall,” in *Viewing, Reading, Listening: Audiences and Cultural Reception*, ed. John Cruz and Justin Lewis (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 141.

<sup>125</sup> Hortense Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 74.

<sup>126</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, “*The Color Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers,” in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, ed. E. Deidre Pribram (New York: Verso, 1988), 105.

today. This unifying ideology made space for black women to speak collectively and individually about their sexuality.

This articulated space of cultural transformation demands new analysis. The investigation in the prior chapter is incomplete without an examination that takes seriously the complex sexual lives navigated by black churchwomen. Thus, this chapter refers to articulation as the merging of the methods of cultural studies and womanist sociological analysis to evaluate this new transformed space or realm of womanist cultural analysis. Although cultural studies can interrogate race, gender, and sexuality, I find womanist sociological ethics an appropriate contextual framework for investigating black women's participation in the contemporary religious "culture of dissemblance." Womanist sociological ethics offers me the ability to engage black women as living data, and its use of case study is ideal for examining the quintessential case study in faith-based sexuality ministries, Juanita Bynum. Thus, my articulated method acknowledges the benefits of explicitly documenting the import of black women's faith while simultaneously critiquing the values in their faith practices that lead to unhealthy sexual decision-making.

The chapter begins with a historical overview of womanist thought as a discipline that hinges upon the experiences of black women. It is culturally specific and is uniquely positioned to examine the concerns of black female subjectivity and sexuality. I then move to the development of womanist sexual ethics suggesting that contemporary sexual frameworks also require the lens of womanist sociological ethics, namely case study methodology. Finally, I conclude with a more detailed discussion of the benefits of womanist cultural analysis.



## Womanism

Womanist ethics is a complementary framework to examine cultural messages of black women's sexuality because by its definition "appreciates and prefers women's culture."<sup>127</sup> Alice Walker's 1983 influential text *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* offered a four part definition of womanist that contained aspects of "tradition; community; self, nature, and the Spirit; and criticism of white feminism."<sup>128</sup> The term womanist spoke to all the areas of black liberation theology and spoke in a language filled with female metaphors and imagery. For instance, whereas, black liberation theology desired to be a theology grounded in black experiences of oppression, it was shockingly silent on the experience of gender oppression faced by black women. Walker's definition of womanist suggests "no genuine community building is possible when men are excluded...neither can it occur when black women's self-love, culture, and love for each other are not affirmed."<sup>129</sup>

Black female religious scholars found in the term womanist a way to highlight their feminist concerns without the negative feedback that feminists were anti-men. As black feminist scholars of religion, they were also interested in the empowerment and black men, they just wanted to be able to speak from the authenticity of black women's lives. The first Black religious scholar to use the womanist moniker was ethicist Katie Cannon who in her 1985 article "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness" describes black womanist consciousness as providing the "incentive to chip away at oppressive structures, bit by bit" by "debunk[ing], unmask[ing], and disentangl[ing] the

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<sup>127</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, 1983), xi.

<sup>128</sup> Dwight Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 130.

<sup>129</sup> Delores Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 2: 1980-1992* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 269.

historically conditioned value judgments and power relations that undergird the particularities of race, sex, and class oppression.”<sup>130</sup> Cannon’s rebellious call introduced womanism to black women’s religious scholarship positing that the “chief function of womanism is not merely to replace one set of elitist, hegemonic texts...with another set of Afrocentric texts...Rather our objective is to use Walker’s four part definition as a critical, methodological framework.”<sup>131</sup> This rebellious rhetorical act of renaming and collectively building a canon connected to everyday black women’s experiences and religious lives ensures healthy conversation with feminists, black male theologians, churches, and all those seeking justice. It says that true liberation must entail the liberation of black women.

Walker’s definition of womanism is particularly applicable to my dissertation because it places the culture and sexuality of black women at the center of the methodological framework. Walker’s definition of a womanist as a “woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually... appreciates and prefers women’s culture...[and] loves the spirit” is key to the analysis of a cultural phenomenon like Bynum.<sup>132</sup> Even though Bynum herself may not accept the appellation nor the women who are the cultural readers of a Bynum text, I think the term womanist and womanist methodology can be immensely helpful to ferreting out what is relevant in their lives. The definition begins with an attachment to women’s sexual, cultural, and spiritual needs, meaningful components in black women’s experiences. Its use in the discipline of religion and theological studies has been primarily focused on the lived experiences of

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<sup>130</sup> Katie Cannon, *Katie’s Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 56;122.

<sup>131</sup> Katie Cannon quoted in Stephanie Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 56.

<sup>132</sup> Walker, *In Search*, xi-xii.

black women as it relates to their negotiations with faith, in particular Christianity. In fact, I concur with Muslim womanist scholar Debra Mubashshir Majeed that the womanist scholarly and religious agenda is primarily concerned with making normative the “Christian experience of African American women.”<sup>133</sup> While I do acknowledge the many limitations of such an agenda, since my project is primarily focused on the experiences of single Christian women, this agenda actually is of service to my project. Furthermore, the womanist agenda’s attention to the lived realities of everyday women fits superbly with the varied population of women who are hailed by messages such as Bynum.

Womanist anthropologist and theologian Linda Thomas asserts that womanists bring forward the legacy and language of all black women providing a sense of meaning that is understood by black women everywhere.<sup>134</sup> While the nomenclature may not be known by the masses there is something intuitive in works for black women by black women. Thus, the rhetorical defining of womanist has been called a prophecy and a prototype for the formation of the disciplines of womanist ethics and theology.

As previously noted, ethicist Katie Cannon was the first progenitor in the field of religion, which makes sense because ethics plainly put is an analysis of life experiences and choices. An ethical stance takes seriously the multiplicity of oppressions facing black women, and it is the basis for a reflective theology. Thus, Cannon’s work as a developer of womanist ethics was essential to the natural development of the larger field known as womanist theology since Stephanie Mitchem, author of *Introducing Womanist*

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<sup>133</sup> Debra Mubashshir Majeed, “Womanism Encounters Islam: A Muslim Scholar Considers the Efficacy of a Method Rooted in the Academy and the Church,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. by Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 42.

<sup>134</sup> Linda Thomas, “Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Paradigm,” in *Living Stones in the Household of God*, ed. Linda Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 39.

*Theology*, argues “womanist theology begins in ethical analysis.”<sup>135</sup> When Delores Williams coined womanist theology in her 1987 article “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices” she became a pioneer with her use of black women’s fiction and black women’s lives as a lens for theological reflection. Designed to teach from a pluralistic perspective, womanist theology is unabashedly black female oriented and faith grounded. It remains open to growth, critique, and further exploration as it brings “black women’s history, culture, and religious experience into the interpretive circle of Christian theology and into the liturgical life the church.”<sup>136</sup>

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, black women religious scholars began producing book length texts on womanist ethics, theology, Christology, biblical interpretations, theodicy, and social justice. These books presented strong challenges to both black male and feminist theologians, but their first task was to elevate black women’s experiences as fodder for respected theological analysis. The import of their contributions are too numerous to name, but their chief significance was to make black liberation theology truly a theology of liberation and inclusion. Delores Williams articulates the goal of womanist theology as “opposing all oppression based on race, sex, class, sexual preference, physical disability, and caste.”<sup>137</sup> Thus, the womanist theologian or ethicist advocates for the survival and liberation of all people.

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<sup>135</sup> Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 57.

<sup>136</sup> Delores Williams, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices,” in *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 185.

<sup>137</sup> Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), xiv.

## Womanist Sexual Ethics

This desire for liberation affirms that womanist ethicists are “never content to merely react to the situation [they seek] to change the situation.”<sup>138</sup> The change womanists bring in regards to black women’s sexuality is holistic understanding of black women’s sexual selves. Like white feminist relational theo-ethicists, womanists concur that sexuality is more than genital expression. They acknowledge that sex is meant to be good and pleasurable and support the notion that “sexuality reflects God’s presence in our life.”<sup>139</sup> Womanist sexual ethics explore the tensions in black women’s sexual expression and offer a liberatory sexual ethics tailored for black women’s lives. Arguably, the mother of womanist discourse on sexuality is theologian Kelly Brown-Douglas.<sup>140</sup> Her 1999 groundbreaking text *Sexuality and the Black Church* remains one of the most comprehensive elaborations on womanist sexuality to date. In this work she addresses the silence surrounding sexuality in black Protestant churches by analyzing why the subject has been so taboo. Beginning with an analysis of Michel Foucault’s discourse on power, she describes how white culture has erroneously defined black sexuality to bolster white supremacy. When black men and women internalize the hegemonic discourse that disregards black bodies and black sexuality, they also internalize disdain for themselves and their sexuality. A womanist sexual discourse of resistance encourages the end to sexual silence and shame in black religious communities. Her womanist discourse reiterates that black churches must reestablish the

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<sup>138</sup> Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, 89.

<sup>139</sup> Traci West, “A Space for Faith, Sexual Desire, and Ethical Black Ministerial Practices,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 38.

<sup>140</sup> Sadly, the field of womanist sexual ethics is still quite new, and there are not many competing discussions of black female sexuality going in womanist scholarship. This is why Kelly Brown-Douglas’ work remains so influential. She has the most in depth study, but there is also promising work by womanists Marcia Riggs, Katie Cannon, Karen Baker-Fletcher, et.al.

unity of the sacred and secular realms, combining African heritage with an appreciation of contemporary dance and music and other venues of sexual expression. Black churches are called to encourage self-love and to affirm sexuality, especially for black women who make up the majority of black churches. She closes her monumental work with the hope that the taboo of sexuality be discarded so that black women and men can be “free to experience what it means to wholly love” and be loved by God.<sup>141</sup>

In her 2005 follow-up *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls*, Brown-Douglas argues quite thoroughly that black sexuality is representative of what she terms platonized Christianity, which reflects the dualistic demonization of body/soul present in western society. She concludes that black sexuality must disregard this legacy and create a new sexual politics. She feels that womanists are particularly adept for this challenge because they can restore the necessity for loving, intimate relationships within sexuality. Brown-Douglas asserts that womanist sexual ethics can “affirm the necessity for sexual expression to be relationally right—that is, an intimate expression of loving/harmonious relationality.”<sup>142</sup> Her view is parallel to that of white feminist relational theo-ethicists, but she acknowledges that this affirmation must come from a space that understands the complexities of black sexuality.

Her work and others restate that these complexities are understandable through the lens of womanist thought. Yet, the field of womanism is purposely interdisciplinary as it seeks to use a variety of means to understand the intricate relations of black sexuality and especially black faith. This interdisciplinary nature results in numerous

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<sup>141</sup> Kelly Brown-Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 143.

<sup>142</sup> Kelly Brown-Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do With It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 215.

methodologies for a womanist scholar. Because I feel that womanist ethics will provide the best tools for analysis for my project, my emphasis will detail three recognized methods of womanist ethics: literary analysis, historiography, and social analysis. Each offers benefits to my project and each method is relevant to the other methods so I will provide a brief overview of each.

### **Womanist Literary Analysis**

Literary analysis is one of the more popular methods of womanist ethics and perhaps one of its best developed theories. Perhaps because the term womanist comes from a great black female literary author or perhaps because literature at times can speak on subjects that are otherwise too taboo to mention, black women's literature has been a cogent resource for interpreting black culture for womanist scholars. This is especially true for womanist ethicists. In one of the earliest womanist works, *Black Womanist Ethics*, Katie Cannon posited that black women's literary tradition is an ethical source because black women writers embrace the "moral actions, religious values, and rules of conduct" of black culture.<sup>143</sup> Thus, using literature as a source is feasible because even purposely fictive works parallel black women's everyday lived experiences. Womanists have taken much criticism for their embrace of black women's fictional thoughts. Yet, culling literature does not equate to uncritical analysis. In fact, womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas argues that unlike literary criticism that is simply "reflective" of how

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<sup>143</sup> Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series No. 60 (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1988), 90.

black women understand and “re-present” their sociohistorical realities, womanist ethicists use black women’s texts as “constructive paradigms of moral wisdom.”<sup>144</sup>

By analyzing a recounting of their own story in their own words, womanists use black female literature as a means of creating a canon for themselves. Instead of the “great white” philosophers or the normative experiences of black male theologians, womanist ethicists see in black women’s literature the ability to expand the canon of the academy and the canon of the black church to include black female voices. There are many womanists employing literary analysis as a foundation for their work with great attention given to the works of Zora Neal Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. Thus, there are numerous methodological tools in play. The most relevant approach for my research project is embodied in Stacey Floyd-Thomas’ biomythographical analysis.<sup>145</sup> In this technique, black women use both their own history and myths to create a larger story that speaks to a larger community of black women. While Floyd-Thomas sees biomythography as a means of producing radical subjectivity, e.g. personal empowerment, I find biomythography more useful as a variation of what she terms “embodied testimony.”<sup>146</sup> In this vein, the embodied testimony is a truth-telling that liberates the person telling the narrative but also has space to empower others for liberation. Floyd-Thomas sees novels like Lorde’s *Zami* and Morrison’s *Beloved* as embodied testimonies although they are partially fictional. Likewise, womanist theologian Michele Jacques asserts that this “embodied testimony of truth *liberates* the

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<sup>144</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode : Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 19-20.

<sup>145</sup> Here Floyd-Thomas is referencing Audre Lorde’s term biomythography which referred to an “amalgamation of autobiographical fact and mythically resonant fiction.” See Stacey Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 21.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



very soul of the community.”<sup>147</sup> Those novels have had similar effects on black women’s lives, and I posit that some of the actual testimony we see/hear during televangelism serves the same purpose. I argue that some of what Prophetess Bynum and other televangelists present to their audiences is their own truth mixed and amplified to reach the masses. However, reading Bynum’s narrative solely through the lens of literary analysis would be an error as her work also resonates with womanist historiographic methodology as her narrative is a part of a historical genre of faith-based sexuality ministries, which will be explored in my next chapter.

### **Womanist Historiography**

Womanist historiography refers to the corrective attempt to recover the stories and moral consciousness of black women throughout history.<sup>148</sup> Much like the literary tradition, this is a well-documented method of analysis for womanist ethicists. In fact, one of the main goals for womanists is a retrieval of black women’s stories from the annexes of history. While black theology was predicated upon the retrieval of sources, these were typically male. Womanist historiography is resurrectionist as it returns to full awareness our understandings of black culture. Even more so than relying on literature as a depiction of black women’s lives, womanist historiography forces the audience to question why certain stories were left out of canons and returns from the margins black women’s experiences. While most womanist works parallel black theology in returning to slave narratives as the primary site of excavation, more contemporary womanist historiography focuses on autobiographies/ biographies of black women as well as

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<sup>147</sup> Michele Jacques, “Testimony as Embodiment: Telling the Truth and Shaming the Devil,” *Journal of Interdenominational Theological Center* 22.2 (1995): 129.

<sup>148</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 105.

examination of key moments in the lives of black women. Womanists working on slave narratives face the same critiques of source material as black theologians. A key distinction in their works is that the womanist is tasked with challenging what is taken for granted in the histories of black women.<sup>149</sup> This is especially the case when examining black women's autobiographies and biographies for the "truths" that lie beyond their telling of truth. An important component to womanist historiography involves interpreting the written "witnessing and testifying" of black women by honestly recovering their narratives not creating history but revealing it. While this biographical method is useful in the same ways that biomythography is helpful, I find the most promise for my project in the exploration of emancipatory historiography.

According to womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas, emancipatory historiography "merges history with ethics" such that moral agency is highlighted in experiences that are both historical and personal.<sup>150</sup> She uses as an example the experience of Anita Hill during Supreme Court Justice Thomas' confirmation hearings. In this example, to properly analyze this historical person requires one to employ Katie Cannon's four strata method involving: theoretical analysis, systemic analysis, cultural disposition, and collective action."<sup>151</sup> Each step in the method ultimately reveals how Anita Hill should be viewed as a moral agent. In my own project with Prophetess Bynum, I find this method appealing because it accepts her biography but adds to it the critical analysis necessary to interpret her story. While the theoretical and systemic analysis seem routine in dealing with a marginalized community, I resonate with Floyd-Thomas' charge to grapple with the dilemmas in collective consciousness facing black

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 154. This concept is also found in the works of Katie Canon and Beverly Harrison.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

women's stories. For example, in my examination of Bynum, I struggle with the reality that many of Bynum's messages are punitive yet seen as salvific for black women in the audience. To truly interpret the benefits of her persona requires dismantling the messages that have been denigrating to black women and especially single women. Emancipatory historiography offers the space to offer a radical new interpretation of history, keeping what works while jettisoning what is punitive. However, this method similarly does not encapsulate all that Prophetess is for her audience. Investigating Bynum requires one additional womanist methodological move, the use of womanist sociological analysis.

### **Womanist Sociological Analysis**

Womanist sociology involves at least three dimensions of investigation, namely, describing through empirical research the experiences of black women, analyzing the norms crafted by black women as they act in the world, and critically defining what justice looks like in light of the specific experiences of black women.<sup>152</sup> The move towards sociological analysis is necessary when dealing with intricate nature of black culture as quantitative and qualitative methods can provide a significant foundation for the study of black women's social systems. In this regard, I agree with womanist anthropologist and theologian Linda Thomas who posits that "not only should womanist scholars include historical texts and literature...but we should also embrace a research process that engages poor black women who are living human documents."<sup>153</sup> Womanist sociological analysis answers this charge by researching everyday black women and highlighting their voices.

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>153</sup> Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology," 45.

Within womanist sociological analysis, Stacey Floyd-Thomas emphasizes three main techniques to empirically examine the multidimensional nature of black women's lives. She defines these methods as case study analysis, Dance of Redemption, and emancipatory metaethnography.<sup>154</sup> All three methods are pertinent for my study, but I will focus on case study and metaethnography in the dissertation. These theories allow me to analyze the normative judgments made by black women viewing Bynum's messages, and they provide space for both a descriptive and moral analysis of their views.

Numerous womanists utilize case studies which use real-life situations to prompt critical reflection on moral dilemmas.<sup>155</sup> Whether investigating hypothetical situations or actual events, these womanists rely on case study analysis to more deeply engage a problem. Case studies are meant to be descriptive tools in qualitative research that "investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context."<sup>156</sup> They allow a "thick description" that provides a specialized understanding of the event. Because they depend on the researcher for interpretation, they are often critiqued for not being analytical enough, e.g. not generalizable to more than just the single case. To this end, ethicists are trained to note that case studies are generalizable for theorization.<sup>157</sup> This is significant for my project as Prophetess Bynum represents one particular case but through analyzing her messages I can theorize about other faith-based sexuality ministries.

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<sup>154</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 69.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 70. For further discussion, see specifically the works of womanists Katie Cannon and Marcia Riggs.

<sup>156</sup> Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 18.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

## Case Study Analysis

The opening vignette of chapter one is a case study of Bynum's appeal and promotion of her faith-based sexuality messages. In this case, Bynum provides a sexual testimony that resonates with her audience and draws them into frenzy. Yet, this study is also illustrative of several ethical dilemmas faced by women encountering Bynum. Ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas suggests that the first step in analyzing a case is defining the contestable issues metaethically, e.g. what is the issue, how is it being enacted, why is it upheld for black women.<sup>158</sup> Bynum's case study presents numerous ethical issues, but I will only delve into three issues. I see the first metaethical issue as directly related to black women as sexual agents. Bynum discusses the dilemmas facing black women as they desire sex but are sexually silenced by society or their religious communities. Floyd-Thomas encourages the womanist ethicist to probe deeper recognizing that this silencing and denial of sexual or even moral agency is the result of male dominance within society and church. Another acute metaethical issue in Bynum's case surrounds premarital sexuality or singles sexuality. Premarital sexuality is a concern because of the societal and religious emphasis on marriage, despite the fact that fewer black women are getting married. Bynum reiterates the bias towards heterosexual marriage as well as acknowledges the punishments levied when women are sexually active. Although Bynum does not critique this reward/punishment system that supports male dominance and reinforces heterosexual marriage, her message demonstrates the complexities facing women as they choose how/with whom to be sexual agents. Finally, the last metaethical issue I want to diagnose is the religious and societal double standard facing black female sexual agents. This double standard involves punishing women solely for their sexual

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<sup>158</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 73.

actions (evident when churches bring only women before the church for repentance based on their sexual acts or sermonizing/shunning women who are actively sexual) because this scapegoating avoids blaming men and denies sexual agency. All of these issues are interlocking since the case ultimately advances sexuality as good and pleasurable for those who are married, while preaching abstinence and faithfulness to those who are not. Thus, Bynum's model of black women's sexual ethics is based on the cultural logic of heteronormativity and male privilege.

Womanist sociological analysis teaches that a case is never left at merely its descriptive level. In fact, after defining the contestable ethical issue, the womanist sociological analyst must diagnose this metaethical problem and her responsibility to resolving this problem. A distinct innovation in womanist case studies is that contrary to a typical sociological case where a target group is named, for the womanist researcher there is the acknowledgement that the researcher is "morally committed and socially linked" to the case study.<sup>159</sup> While acknowledging the break from typical claims of objectivity, the womanist's concern for the survival and thriving of the black community necessitates that she be a participant learner in the process. Thus, when an ethical dilemma is probed the diagnosis is for the community as well as the individual prompting the case. Likewise, this reverberates with my own role in investigating Bynum because as much as I am a critical analyzer of her messages, I must acknowledge that I am also part of the population that her messages are hailing. Additionally because this is a womanist/cultural project, I bring to the case study the need to shift from mere analysis of the social context to examine and influence the moral agency of those interpreting the

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 74.

case. As a womanist analyst, I must recognize that “liberating Black churchwomen who live in the midst of two competing sexual realities is a moral imperative.”<sup>160</sup>

Another way that womanist sociological methodology is useful for my project is through its use of metaethnography. In this method the goal is to study black women as subjects not objects of inquiry and seeks to authenticate their religious lives.<sup>161</sup>

Comparable to the methodology of *mujerista* ethics, emancipatory metaethnography involves talking with living people and using their voices as sources for research. A particular gift of this technique is that it privileges the “thick description” of a few black women without seeking to universalize their stories or homogenize their voices.<sup>162</sup> Just like womanists who use biomythographies, autobiographies, or historiographies, the major emphasis is on creating space for the validity of black women’s religious experiences. According to Stacey Floyd-Thomas, emancipatory metaethnography encompasses three main criteria: cultural centrism, critical analysis, and spiritual empowerment.<sup>163</sup> Each of these criteria partners well with an ethical analysis of a case study.

The concept of cultural centrism is formed as a corrective to the previous sociological models that have not deemed black women worthy of full length study. Potentially, even more detrimental than the silencing of black female voices is that the fields of sociology and even Christian ethics have not understood black women as being moral agents. Studies of black women typically treat them as pitied objects than can

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<sup>160</sup> Cannon, “Sexing Black Women,” 25.

<sup>161</sup> Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 91.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

change nothing of their circumstances.<sup>164</sup> It would be invalid to view Bynum's audience as such. In fact, with the aid of the tools in cultural studies and womanist critical analysis it becomes evident that these women are actually savvy sexual agents. This realization is what is at stake in the spiritual empowerment of these women because recognizing them as agents also demands seeking a better sexual ethic for them. Thus, "theory and analysis must be linked to praxis and action."<sup>165</sup> Theorizing and praxis come together by examining Bynum as a case study and her audience as privileged members of emancipatory metaethnography. Just as with any other case study, Bynum is not easy to interpret nor are her effects on her audience. She is the penultimate example of faith-based sexuality ministries as her contemporaries borrow heavily from her modeling. As a case study, Bynum presents interesting ethical dilemmas when the researcher tries to delve into how black women understand their faith and sexuality. Yet, womanist sociological analysis offers the means to analyze the complexities of such a cultural phenomenon.

A major task in proffering a womanist sociological analysis is the work of "employing a grounded theoretical approach for focusing on the hermeneutic of black female religious and cultural traditions (particularly the oral/aural cultures)."<sup>166</sup> Such an approach is interdisciplinary and helps to explicate the major norms for the study. In the case study of Bynum, this approach advocates for a discussion of black female sexuality and problematizes what is deemed "good sex" for both the church and the individual. Womanist sociological analysis is concerned with both Bynum and her participants. A

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 66.



thorough womanist analysis has to explore the moral crises that her situation provokes in light of her contestable sexual ethics.

In order to do this type of analysis, I concur with sociologist Daphne Wiggins who states womanists must begin “engaging via pulpits, media, and popular magazines the topics that undermine the health of the black community and women.”<sup>167</sup> This means coming out of the comfort zones of literature and history to interrogate living human texts. It also requires becoming more accessible to black women within churches but also to those who are increasingly receiving their religious messages through mediums such as Bynum.

### **Womanist Cultural Analysis**

A thorough womanist analysis realizes that one methodology will not be sufficient for such an august task. This investigation acknowledges that it can not do it alone no matter how interdisciplinary it is as a discipline. Thus, third and subsequent wave womanists are forging new ground asserting that for them womanism is “ready to enter dialogue with other schools of thought that can critique, enrich, and expand the scope of its discourse.”<sup>168</sup> For my project, cultural studies is one of these schools that can contribute and enhance the womanist analysis. However, I argue for an articulation or a linking of the two to form a womanist cultural analysis, a discipline that depends on the methods of poststructuralism, black cultural studies, and womanists’ attention to spirituality to investigate the experiences of these black women.

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<sup>167</sup> Daphne Wiggins, *Righteous Content: Black Women’s Perspectives of Church and Faith*, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 181.

<sup>168</sup> Melanie Harris, “Womanist Humanism: A New Hermeneutic,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. by Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 221.

## Advantages to Womanist Cultural Analysis

One advantage to this merging of tools and methodologies is that they offer gifts to each other and answer some of the critiques presented to each discipline. For instance, cultural studies handles more strongly the critiques of racial and gender essentialism wielded against womanism. Womanist thought and its predecessor black theology have long been associated with an understanding of blackness as solely a response to repression, which is especially true in regards to sexuality. Black cultural critic Victor Anderson argues that this typification of “ontological blackness” subjugates black subjectivity.<sup>169</sup> This is problematic because it not only denies other realities as possible it also provides very little room for deviations from whatever is deemed the norm.

Womanists have written against this essentializing because of their definitional interest in the survival of all in the black community. Yet, I concur with black feminist Patricia Hill-Collins that there is a relative mismatch between what privileged black women in the academy identify as important themes and what the larger black community would deem worthy of addressing.<sup>170</sup> This proves true in the dearth of womanist analysis of popular culture and emerging trends like televangelism. However, this critique is ameliorated within a womanist cultural analysis because there is a functional concern with popular culture and how this impacts one’s religious life.

Another womanist critique averted through the merging of methodologies is that the womanist norm for black women’s experiences is in tension with what black

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<sup>169</sup> Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, (New York: Continuum, 1995), 104.

<sup>170</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond.” *The Black Scholar* 26 (1996): 15.

churchwomen are actually experiencing.<sup>171</sup> Daphne Wiggins argues that black churchwomen have problems with the womanist nomenclature because of its criticism of the black church.<sup>172</sup> These women are not beyond criticizing what they find wrong within their tradition, but they exercise their agency in different ways. For those coming from conservative theological viewpoints, womanism offers too many (non-Biblical) sources for theological reflection and criticizes what they view as the infallible word of God. The women in Wiggins' study were more evangelical than the typical womanist writings putting them seemingly at odds with womanist influences.<sup>173</sup> In response, Linda Thomas encourages womanists to be attentive to these concerns by advocating for a new paradigm for womanist thought that employs ethnography as a means of highlighting the direct speech of everyday black women, who may be more conservative than womanists.<sup>174</sup>

Similarly, ethicist Cheryl Saunders believes womanist analysis is not helpful for churchwomen because she believes that Walker's definition is essentially a "secular cultural category whose theological and ecclesial significations are rather tenuous."<sup>175</sup> While she rightly acknowledges that Walker's definition points to a love of the spirit, which is not necessarily Christian, I do not believe this absence negates its use for analyzing black women's religious experiences. Utilizing a womanist cultural analysis

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<sup>171</sup> Part of this disconnect can simply be attributed to the fact that womanism is still largely based in the academy and not always easily accessible for those without theological training. Womanist homiletician Teresa Fry Brown's recounts working with black women in her church and attempting to integrate womanist concepts. She relays their rejection of the concept arguing for the necessity of conversing in "sisterspeak" with "ordinary" black churchwomen which means relinquishing academic elitism and class status.

<sup>172</sup> Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 177.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>174</sup> Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology," 45.

<sup>175</sup> Cheryl Sanders, "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective: Roundtable Discussion." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989):86.

mediates her perspective. It shows that on the contrary, these women's faith experiences are a part of their culture, which is not solely secular. In fact, Dwight Hopkins posits culture is de facto religious because "culture refers to religious culture as a total way of life."<sup>176</sup> If one looks at the proliferation of self-help books that are "tangentially Christian" being consumed by black churchwomen, it is evident that as consumers their main concern is for a medium that offers help and "spiritual guidance" not necessarily a pathway to Jesus.

I am more apt to accept Saunders critique that womanist interpretations are not more plentiful in examining black churchwomen's lives because of its association with homosexuality. Saunders is worth quoting at length as she asserts:

there is a fundamental discrepancy between the womanist criteria that would affirm and/or advocate homosexual practice, and the ethical norms the black church might employ to promote the survival and wholeness of black families...the womanist nomenclature, however, conveys a sexual ethics that is ambivalent at best with respect to the value of heterosexual monogamy within the black community.<sup>177</sup>

While I find no validity in Saunders perspectives, her homophobic view is an often unstated belief for black churchwomen. Despite Walker's definitional urging, many womanists are equally hesitant to publicly affirm lesbians and gays.<sup>178</sup> Perhaps this is the result of their ties to institutional churches and churchwomen. This is certainly an area that womanism can borrow from the advances in cultural studies.

Cultural studies most recent debates have involved gay and lesbian identity politics. They highlight how identity is constituted in relation to society. Whether the

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<sup>176</sup> Dwight Hopkins, "Theological Method and Cultural Studies: Slave Religious Culture as a Heuristic," in *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection and Cultural Analysis*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York: Routledge, 1996), 164.

<sup>177</sup> Sanders, "Christian Ethics and Theology," 90.

<sup>178</sup> I will address the silencing of the lesbian voice in womanist scholarship in more depth in chapter five of the dissertation.

area is black British cultural studies, feminist studies, or gay/lesbian studies, the discipline pays close attention to the politics of representation experienced by those in subcultures. Anchored by the groundbreaking work of Michel Foucault on homosexuality and the current work of cultural critics like Kobena Mercer, cultural studies has made significant strides in theorizing on gays and lesbians in popular culture. While I agree with womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher that it is possible that womanists write more about sexuality than readers recognize, I submit that good intentions are no substitute for fervent advocacy or theorizing.<sup>179</sup> Rather than merely advocating for the need for sexual justice, cultural studies provides womanist ethics a means for highlighting and celebrating gay/lesbian culture.

### **Womanist Cultural Analysis and Methodology**

Thus, there are many areas where cultural studies is of great benefit to the discipline of womanist ethics and vice versa. Over twenty years ago cultural theorist John Fiske hypothesized that cultural studies' development showed two distinct methodological strategies forming, one derived from ethnography and the other from structuralist textual analysis.<sup>180</sup> The ethnography based method encouraged the study of meanings that the audience created by listening to them, reading with them, observing them. For my project, this would involve conversations with black churchwomen about Bynum/singles ministries and sexuality, a clearly womanist process. Yet, Fiske, rightfully acknowledges that alone this method is not enough. He partners ethnography

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<sup>179</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, "The Erotic in Contemporary Black Women's Writings" in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 208.

<sup>180</sup> John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Arnold, 1997), 132.

with close readings of the text itself acknowledging that every text has polysemic readings ranging from the structure of the text and its connection to the audience. In my dissertation, this requires looking at Bynum and subsequent faith-based sexuality ministries realizing that meanings lie not just in the Prophetess but in the ideologies that make her the Prophetess. Structuralist thought demands acceptance that meanings are relative and changeable. The way that the text relates to the dominant ideology and social system is what remains constant.

However, neither discipline has the capacity to properly understand the phenomenon of Bynum alone. Womanist cultural analysis will be most successful when as Fiske notes ethnographic studies are related to poststructuralist analysis.<sup>181</sup> Combining these two methods/disciplines provides the sense of ethnography needed with the semiotic analysis required. Most importantly, a womanist cultural analysis does the work of analyzing without jettisoning these women's spirituality. This "articulated" method allows room for rigorous religious and cultural criticism while simultaneously highlighting these women's faith experiences as sources of moral agency. Womanist cultural analysis answers Linda Thomas' call for an approach that provides an "augmented methodology" for the womanist scholar that invokes black women's perspectives and shows how "diverse cultural practices of everyday life influence" the decision-making of black women.<sup>182</sup>

I believe womanist cultural analysis adds constructively to both disciplines and is necessary to decode the spiritual and sexual realities of Bynum's black female viewers.

The dissertation seeks to use this articulated methodology to perform a thorough analysis

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<sup>181</sup> John Fiske, "British cultural studies and television," in *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Arnold, 1997), 132.

<sup>182</sup> Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology," 46.

of Juanita Bynum and her faith-based sexuality ministry. Thus, this chapter has emphasized the benefits of case study and womanist cultural analysis, which will be employed in further chapters to deconstruct Bynum. However, before I delve into the deconstruction of Bynum's public persona and influence, I will provide a genealogical overview of Bynum's participation in the larger televangelism world. While not meant to be an exhaustive review of televangelists, the next chapter will concentrate on the spectacle of celebrity preachers, with attention to ministers that targeted women viewers. Chapter four will also focus on delineating Bynum's Pentecostal background's impact on her sexual messages. By situating her theologically, it is my goal to make possible the means for interpreting her message and influence.

## CHAPTER III

### PRODUCING THE PROPHETESS

*“I was more concerned for my image, what I would project and what others were going to ‘read it’ to be.*

*Juanita Bynum, *Matters of the Heart*<sup>183</sup>*

*“Never allow people to tell you what they think about you, You tell them what they should think about you.”*

*Juanita Bynum, *Essence* article<sup>184</sup>*

In order to deconstruct Bynum’s participation in the electronic church phenomenon, it is necessary to read her through the proper lens. This requires paying attention to how the Prophetess was produced, and to what ends she owes her success. My goal as a womanist cultural critic is to investigate her technologies of production and to set the scene for properly interpreting her “No More Sheets” message. I take on this task despite black theologian Anthony Pinn’s assessment that womanists operate within a “hermeneutic of familiarity” when drawing on popular culture.<sup>185</sup> I hope by branching out to televangelism and cultural studies to spark further investigation and move outside this realm of familiar literature. The discipline of cultural studies has paid very little attention to religion, and scholars working within religion and cultural theory have paid

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<sup>183</sup> Juanita Bynum, *Matters of the Heart* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Charisma House, 2002), xvii.

<sup>184</sup> Kenya Byrd. “Juanita Bynum: I Will Never Allow Anyone to Misrepresent My Name,” *Essence.com*, January 27, 2009, [http://www.essence.com/news\\_entertainment/entertainment/articles/juanita\\_bynum\\_interview](http://www.essence.com/news_entertainment/entertainment/articles/juanita_bynum_interview).

<sup>185</sup> Anthony Pinn, “Cultural Production and New Terrain: Theology Popular Culture, and the Cartography of Religion,” in *Creating Ourselves : African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 22.



scant attention to black religious media. Thus, to read Bynum's sermon message, one must see it in its role as an "enactment of the sacred," remembering that this enactment was a process.<sup>186</sup> Religious culture is produced, and to properly interpret her message, one must investigate how the Prophetess is also produced. In offering this genealogy of Bynum, I also want to explore how Prophetess Bynum is imprinted by Pentecostalism, race, femininity, and sexual discourses of her time to bring the subject, Prophetess Bynum, into being. She is the result of a certain set of factors and to properly engage her, one must engage these social and historical environments. Thus, this chapter's goal is to see how Bynum fits into larger systems of production, e.g. televangelism and Neo-Pentecostalism. After investigating Neo-Pentecostalism, and specifically the role of women in the Church of God in Christ, I will examine two of Bynum's cultural foremothers, Mother Rosa Horn and Kathryn Kuhlman. I conclude by discussing Bynum's niche in the televangelism field. My goals are to trace what messages have been popular, how they function, and to provide critiques using womanist cultural analysis while setting the scene for a more detailed interpretation of Bynum's sexual messages.

### **Pentecostalism and the Church of God in Christ**

In situating this study on Prophetess Bynum, it is useful to place her within the larger context of American religious history. Thus, a brief overview of Pentecostalism, and particularly, the influence of the Church in God in Christ, (COGIC) the largest

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<sup>186</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Producing the Sacred : An Essay on Public Religion*, Public Expressions of Religion in America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

Pentecostal body in America, will be explored.<sup>187</sup> Pentecostalism refers to the multiracial church bodies that organized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it can be traced to the Azusa Street revivals led by a black evangelist, William Seymour. Pentecostals involved in this first revival became a part of what Zora Neal Hurston termed the “Sanctified church” that encompassed Holiness, Pentecostal, and Apostolic movements. All three bodies share an emphasis on the experience of baptism of the Holy Spirit and ecstatic worship. They also share a deep appreciation for a revival of the New Testament Pentecost experience. According to Christian ethicist, Cheryl Saunders, an important distinction among these churches is the necessity of glossolalia, speaking in tongues, which is supported by Pentecostals and Apostolics but not by Holiness churches.<sup>188</sup> Another key distinction for early Pentecostals was their belief in being separated from the evils of the world by seeking to live a godly life. This understanding of being “in the world but not of it” helped make them a recognizable religious group. During this period of development there was a great deal of overlap in the beliefs and practices of Pentecostals and Holiness members, with perhaps the greatest difference between being “socio-economic status and/or race of their membership bases.”<sup>189</sup>

This is a particularly important distinction in regards to the rise of the Church of God in Christ which began as an interracial denomination but became a predominately black fellowship associated with members of lower socio-economic status. Historian Anthea Butler notes that the Church of God in Christ is also distinctive from other

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<sup>187</sup>I am choosing to focus on COGIC particularly because Bynum was reared in a COGIC church, her parents were COGIC evangelists, and she graduated from a COGIC high school.

<sup>188</sup> Cheryl Jeanne Sanders, *Saints in Exile : The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture*, Religion in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>189</sup> Marie Dallam, *Daddy Grace: A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 43.

Pentecostal churches in its “emphasis on sanctification as both a crisis experience and a constant striving to live a cleansed life” because this emphasis sometimes even trumped their theological doctrine on speaking in tongues.<sup>190</sup>

Another important distinction in Pentecostal churches is belief in the inerrancy of the Bible and placement of the Bible as authoritative. As biblical literalists, Pentecostals “claim the Bible as text for their testimony of being saved, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost.”<sup>191</sup> Yet, this does not mean that they do not pick and choose what parts of the text to highlight or ignore. As savvy exegetes, it is typical to find churches that emphasize the Bible’s mandate of female subordination while jettisoning the Bible’s justification of slavery. From antebellum to present, black churches have become experts on articulating the proper place for the female body. Yet, most of this instruction comes in the form of gendered restrictions based on certain Bible verses. For example, women alone bear the stigma of sexuality shown in the dysfunctional ethic of bringing unwed mothers before the church to be publicly chastised and made to repent in front of their congregations. This punishment is seen as a means of restoring them to right relation with the church and is scripturally referenced by the readings of James 5:16 and Galatians 6:1. Despite this emphasis on scriptural adherence male offenders are not usually summoned before the church. Because of this selective choosing and policing of biblical texts, it is helpful to note that such a stance is the backdrop from which Prophetess Bynum operates. However, I do not find it helpful to belabor the role of scripture in Bynum’s background or in her COGIC sensibilities because I agree with ethicist Marcia

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<sup>190</sup> Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 30.

<sup>191</sup> Sanders, *Saints in Exile : The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture*, 138.

Riggs that our fights in the church about sexuality have deeper roots than our interpretation of biblical texts.<sup>192</sup> I see these women participating in a structure that creates church policies that police black women's bodies using both patriarchal and biblical hegemonic rationales.

### **Women in the Church of God in Christ**

I find this especially true in the case of women evangelists in the COGIC tradition and in interpreting the role of purity for COGIC women. The history of women's leadership in COGIC has a complicated patriarchal background as the denomination supported women's leadership without ordination based on its selective biblical literalism. Based on literal interpretations of Joel 2:29 the Holy Spirit could dwell within women and they could exhort God's goodness. Yet, within the same Bible a literal interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:11-12 said that women were to remain silent and be subjugated.<sup>193</sup> As a result of this dynamic, early women evangelists were called "teachers" and eventually "church mother" not preachers (a distinction that has remained today with women being called evangelists not ministers). In historian Anthea Butler's comprehensive study of COGIC women, she notes how successful women were in church planting, missionary work, and fundraising (roles traditionally performed by men).<sup>194</sup> Thus, even without the titles, women were active evangelists and important figures in COGIC church history. Many of Bynum's COGIC foremothers kept the

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<sup>192</sup> Marcia Riggs, *Plenty Good Room : Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 123.

<sup>193</sup> There is great variety in Pentecostals churches on how these scriptures are interpreted. Some Pentecostal churches sanction women's ordination (and were even founded by women) while COGIC churches specifically prohibit women's ordination.

<sup>194</sup> Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ : Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 38.

distinction of teacher (avoiding the harassment of being referred to as a preacher). They also created a legacy of seemingly acquiescing to social norms while challenging male power and authority.<sup>195</sup>

This was especially the case for their participation in the cult of purity demanded by COGIC social norms. While on the surface, the demand for purity and chaste dress is an example of the social policing of black women's bodies in churches, historian Anthea Butler suggests that one look deeper at this narrative. She posits that COGIC women sought purity through sanctification, and purity represented a means to “transcend the physical body and its limitations, and to harness spiritual power to change the world.”<sup>196</sup> The early COGIC woman revealed the sanctified life through her practiced personal sacrifice and avoidance of the sins of the world. While its true the emphasis on sanctification often resulted in conservative views, dress, and actions, women called into the sanctified life were not just fulfilling patriarchal roles. Instead of following solely a cult of domesticity and purity, they believed they were putting themselves in line with the Holy Spirit.<sup>197</sup> Their desire to “live holy” required them to be “in the world, and not of it.” This doctrine was best achieved through sanctification of the black female body.

### **Importance of Dress for Sanctification**

In the early days of COGIC, (and for most new converts today) women were expected to be fully covered, shun makeup, and be plainly attired. The Holy Spirit was thought to dwell only in pure vessels so those who were inappropriately adorned could not receive the Holy Spirit. In fact, it was believed that “spiritual power was given only

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 66.

to those dressed appropriately, and those who ignored the admonitions were marked as outsiders to the sanctified COGIC community.”<sup>198</sup> It also reflected the markings of a sanctified body, one capable of housing the Holy Spirit and one subordinate to God’s will. This sanctified, complicated female black body was the cause of much discussion because it served as both a representational and signifying practice. Modest clothing was the means of representation, e.g. clothing stood for something much larger than acceptance in white society. Clothing served as a code in a master language of participation in the COGIC community. For example, these standards were strictly enforced by church mothers and churchwomen so that women who had just converted were encouraged to sew up the splits in their skirts or use modesty cloths (lap cloths placed across the lap of woman with a skirt deemed to short). Anthea Butler describes Mother Robinson, a forerunner in COGIC women’s leadership, as being a woman whose modest dress was seen as a model for the entire denomination. She wore a standard starched white blouse, long black skirt, and practical shoes, attire that became customary for COGIC women.<sup>199</sup> This standard attire did not focus on feminine curves, which were believed to entice men. On the contrary, modest dress was meant to keep women from being vain (and hence less focused on God) and to control the sexual urges of the COGIC community.

It was believed that through modification of dress one could signify a sincere desire to be in the will of God and thus an effective COGIC representative. It is also important to note that through this modification of clothing, COGIC women were given more credibility as they went about “teaching” because it was thought that they appeared

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 77.

less sexually appealing. Women in COGIC were encouraged to avoid the clothing of “street women” or the Jezebels of their day, but to remember chastity and their call to live in the will of God. This was thought to communicate that they could not seduce or be seduced. In this sense, clothing acted as a symbol of sanctification as well as a source of protection.<sup>200</sup> In the next chapter, when Prophetess Bynum’s dress is interrogated, similar tropes are revealed.

When investigating the role of clothing for COGIC women in the early twentieth century, it is clear that clothing was meant to be plain, without color, and with no ribbons, bows, or anything to attract attention. Considered unfashionable for their times, COGIC women shunned cosmetics and wore their natural hair unadorned and often covered.<sup>201</sup> Their refusal to straighten their hair, wear heels, or revealing tops was not just about refusing European models of beauty. In fact, their goal was to be respectable but not in the sense of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s “politics of respectability.” Instead, they were encouraged to seek to please God not whites. This viewpoint was preached and sung to COGIC women and became an ingrained part of their social environment. Thus, sanctified clothing reflected an acceptance of the COGIC worldview and an embrace of its community.

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<sup>200</sup>This is an important distinction for black women who during slavery were often in inadequate and embarrassing clothing that offered no such protection. For further discussion, see Pamela Klassen, “The Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity among African American Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century.” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 14 (2004): 39-82.

<sup>201</sup> Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ : Making a Sanctified World*, 85.

## Cultural Shifts in the Church of God in Christ

This sanctified clothing became the “foremost social marker for COGIC women for decades.”<sup>202</sup> However, these early dress codes of plain attire soon yielded way to more trendy adornments as there were cultural shifts in America and in the COGIC body. Starting in the 1950s, women in COGIC were led in a new direction. With the passing of Mother Robinson came a new leadership that had a new understanding of sanctified dress. The new women’s leader, Mother Coffey encouraged women through gradual change to become more modern Saints. Plain dress was seen as backwards, and she was leading them towards their future. In this regard, she encouraged women to show “more of the shapeliness of a woman” as she orchestrated sales of bras, girdles, and slips meant to help women smooth themselves out.<sup>203</sup> The binding effects of these items called public attention to women’s curves, and they were able to be viewed as more fashionable. For instance, after the change in power, Mother Coffey began straightening her hair, with the new sanctified woman being represented by long, pressed hair. This reframing of her self-image also led Coffey to envision reframing the image of COGIC women nationally. As she gradually changed her own look, the women in the convention followed her model. By changing her style, she reframed how COGIC were portrayed, a significant component in their cultural representation. She was effectively engaging in an activity that cultural theorist Stuart Hall calls “relations of representation” where individuals/groups contest their marginality and seek to control and represent their own experiences.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>204</sup> Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 164.



When this transformation was complete, Mother Coffey began actively publicizing the work of COGIC women and became more civically active. A key example is her participation and eventual leadership in the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) where she had more visibility as a female leader. With this attention came the urge to fit in with the NCNW crowd and their form-fitting attire. Mother Coffey's role in NCNW was a strategic one as it allowed for "church clothes" and "street clothes" which were both fashionable. Her visibility in the public realm outside of the denomination was also a marker of the changing times.

With Mother Coffey's approval, women in COGIC were able to "accentuate themselves and appear more attractive without violating denominational standards" which brought in new converts who believed in the COGIC message but had been unable to manage the many COGIC restrictions.<sup>205</sup> This was an important shift in COGIC doctrine which had previously been tied to removing themselves from the vestiges of the world. However, changing times saw COGIC members embrace using the culture of the world to save the world. An example of this change is the COGIC interest in education. Prior generations of COGIC members had believed the adage that "You don't need an education, you just need the Holy Ghost" while reformers founded COGIC schools.<sup>206</sup> The first school established was Saints Industrial School in Lexington, MI, the school that Juanita Bynum graduated from. It is known as a school where students are taught in an environment where sanctified behavior is expected and rewarded.<sup>207</sup> While initially funded by the denomination, they soon were linked with Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority as a long-term service project, which marked an interesting merging of socialites and Saints.

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<sup>205</sup> Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ : Making a Sanctified World*, 144.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

After their interaction with women in the “outside world,” they added more social activities (although they were considered sanctified events) and focused on bringing in more elite students. Although minor, these distinctions reflected some of the first bends of COGIC members in the culture wars.

These culture wars also reflected the cultural shifts occurring within the denomination. For example, the denomination began shifting its focus from otherworldliness to media, modernity, and civic participation.<sup>208</sup> Leaders began to promote the denomination in print and on the radio which brought in converts that were more educated and better paid. Sanctified living had been brought mainstream with the goal being more than just individual change, but change for society as a whole. Their emphasis moved from trying to draw themselves out of the world to instead being agents of sanctification in the world. Anthea Butler notes that instead of standing on street corners evangelizing, the new converts to COGIC will come through their interactions with the world in social and civic arenas.<sup>209</sup>

### **Neo-Pentecostalism and Prophetess Bynum**

This reflected the gradual shift to what is now known as Neo-Pentecostalism. While contestably a rather recent phenomenon, its mainstream appearance coincides with the cultural shifts occurring in the COGIC denomination. As a contemporary form of Pentecostalism, Neo-Pentecostals have merged into society with “saintly” alternatives. They have adopted the value systems of consumer culture, and they “emphasize personal

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 136.

experience over communal concerns or doctrinal authority.”<sup>210</sup> These characteristics map well to the changes that COGIC members were realizing during the 1950s. In addition, within the dominant culture, this change also coincided with the rise of Oral Roberts as a major figure for Neo-Pentecostals since during the 1950s he began televising his popular tent revivals that emphasized the “power of the Holy Spirit to empower Christians to live with health, vitality, prosperity, and productivity.”<sup>211</sup> The draw to Neo-Pentecostal practice offered the best of both worlds, the blessings of the Pentecostal church without removing all of the trappings of secular society.

I believe COGIC members were directly or indirectly drawn to Neo-Pentecostalism because they were beginning to move towards a stance where they were “in the world, but not of it, unless it is in the name of Jesus.”<sup>212</sup> Whether considered predecessors of Neo-Pentecostalism or actual figures in the burgeoning movement, I think their use of cultural tools such as media is as important as it was effective. For instance, African-American society in general was more receptive to the new mediums that COGIC members and other Pentecostals were using to reach them. This was particular true of their media attempts.

Black religious broadcasting dates back to the 1920s and 1930s, but COGIC members did not begin completely embracing until this until the 1940s.<sup>213</sup> Some of the more popular radio evangelists and audiences were leaders of Holiness or Pentecostal

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<sup>210</sup> Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! : The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 79-80.

<sup>211</sup> Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes : America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 35.

<sup>212</sup> Walton, *Watch This! : The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, 79.

<sup>213</sup> I am concerned here with the popularity of black religious broadcasting in specific, but I will be looking at snapshots of the wider field of religious broadcasting as it relates to crafting a proper genealogy of Bynum. I agree with Jonathan Walton that blacks have been marginalized in studies of religious broadcasting, and I hope my work is able to highlight yet another understudied arena, black female televangelism.

churches, which appealed to white and black audiences. I understand the interest and demand for radio personalities as an instance of cultural shifts away from participation in a local church and larger denomination to being a part of a national Christianity. Evangelizing took on a larger mission than just saving one's own soul or even the soul of your community to having a national cry for America to be saved, a direct link to the notion of America as an "elect" country that has God's favor. This national call demanded more effective means and radio broadcasting served an interesting role during these times. I also find the shift to radio important because I feel it also represents a shift from the time in which religion, which had previously been a public act, e.g. physically going to church, returns to the realm of the private. With this technological advance, one could be an active Baptist, but speak in tongues with the radio Pentecostal. Yet, to draw those who considered themselves devout Baptists meant that there had to be something more than a Bible lesson given.

### **Spectacle of Religious Broadcasting**

In most cases, this factor is the spectacle of religious broadcasting. Religious broadcasting refers to "religious activity, produced, and viewed by people who share common symbols, values, and moral culture."<sup>214</sup> While I am concerned with its impact on blacks, religious broadcasting includes televangelism, which is dominated by white culture. Whether on radio or television, evangelists had to be media savvy to best market themselves and their messages. This often resulted in what I refer to as the spectacle of religious broadcasting. This use of spectacle refers to Marx theorist Guy Debord's

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<sup>214</sup> Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion : The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*, Communication and Human Values (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1988), 21.

understanding of spectacle as not just a collection of images, but the social relation among people mediated by images.<sup>215</sup> In this instance, the spectacle of religious broadcasting refers to the entire industry, its mediums, performers, and the audience. Debord is concerned with spectacle solely as a negative factor that pacifies and distracts by getting people caught up in the spectacular show so much that they forget to focus on actual life.

With regards to religious broadcasting and particularly radio broadcasting, it is clear that one of the contributing factors to success is the charisma of the celebrity preacher. Historian Gregor Goethals posits that the “charisma of the preacher is critical to effecting a change of heart, [her] ‘presence’ and words seem as ‘real’—perhaps more real—to the viewer at home than to the person in the pew.”<sup>216</sup> Thus, it is the preacher’s voice that extends the state of spectacle. Through her performance she is able to lead listeners away from their problems to an arena that she is preparing. In this sense, words are literal texts and they possess a dominant reading encoded by the preacher to participate in her larger goal—selling the spectacle of her ministry.

On the radio it became important for the spectacle to sell itself aurally and to be a stellar performance that connects the performer to a larger world. Jonathan Walton agrees as he asserts that within black culture, “nothing has been more central to the circulation of the black church tradition than the recorded and/or mass-transmitted sounds of the worship experience.”<sup>217</sup> Thus, to understand black participation in religious

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<sup>215</sup> Guy Debord, “The Commodity as Spectacle,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 139.

<sup>216</sup> Gregor Goethals, “The Electronic Golden Calf,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffery Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 141.

<sup>217</sup> Walton, *Watch This! : The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, 20.

broadcasting in the age of Bynum, I contest that one must understand the spectacle of performance in religious broadcasting earlier in the century.

### **Forerunner Mother Rosa Horn**

The ministry of Mother Rosa Horn illuminates this point. I consider Mother Rosa Artimus Horn a forerunner to Bynum in religious broadcasting as her radio broadcast reached the masses with an unconventional style of preaching and powerful prayers. I am also purposely looking at female examples within religious broadcasting because they offer closer comparison to Bynum as persons who were understudied in the history of American religious broadcasting. Cultural critic Tricia Rose notes in her study of female rappers that women are “especially vulnerable to misreadings” because they are “consistently ignored or marginalized,” and I attest that this also happens with televangelists.<sup>218</sup> While current studies in American religious broadcasting are seeking to include the voices of blacks, these voices are usually black men. Thus, by highlighting women such as Mother Horn, Kathryn Kuhlman, and Juanita Bynum, I am adding to the discourse as well as providing a proper means for understanding Bynum’s influences.

For example, through Mother Horn’s biographical sketch, one can see similarities to subsequent evangelists like Bynum. Mother Horn was married twice and had two children, Jessie and William Jr. She also began her ministry in Illinois before receiving national recognition from her church in New York.<sup>219</sup> As founding pastor of Pentecostal Faith Church in Harlem, she was described as having a powerful presence and was an

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<sup>218</sup> Tricia Rose, “Never Trust a Big Butt and a Smile,” in *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 234.

<sup>219</sup> Sherry Sherrod DuPree, *Biographical Dictionary of African-American, Holiness-Pentecostals, 1880-1990*, 1st ed. (Washington, D.C.: Middle Atlantic Regional Press, 1989), 124.

effective speaker attracting thousands of followers.<sup>220</sup> In fact, as her ministry grew she was offered a broadcast radio deal that made her show, “Radio Church of God of the Air” direct competition for famous evangelists like Elder Michaux and Father Divine. As a result of her radio success, her church was the first in Upper Manhattan to be wired for radio broadcasting and to produce two programs a week that aired across the eastern seaboard.<sup>221</sup> Her sermons touched on contentious topics, which she preached with confidence. For instance, she preached on the biblical authority for women’s preaching, as previously stated a divisive topic in the Pentecostal community. Yet, she was emphatic that Yes a woman was called to preach and states that even Paul affirms the ministry of Phoebe calling her to be a servant in Christ not a cook or a maid.<sup>222</sup> Because of the widespread popularity of her broadcast, she gave audiences more than just prayer and worship. Her sermons were emphatic, controversial, and well received by her thousands of listeners and church members.

Given the previous Pentecostal views towards utilizing worldly devices, Mother Horn is arguably one of the first female evangelists to promote the themes of Neo-Pentecostalism. For example, in an early interview with a newspaper reporter, one sees her using the media to her advantage. She tells the reporter that although the radio is an “instrument of the devil” it allowed her the means of converting infidels, healing the sick, mending broken families, and returning lost souls to Christ.<sup>223</sup> She is fine with being “in the world in Jesus name.” This advanced foresight led to an expansive career.

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<sup>220</sup> Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder : Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 173.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>223</sup> Clarence Hardy, “From Exodus to Exile: Black Pentecostals, Migrating Pilgrims, and Imagined Internationalism” *American Quarterly* 59.3 (2007): 749.

In fact, her career spanned thirty years, and she used her influence to confront dance halls, pool rooms, and other places she deemed unholy. Mother Horn, the stout, brown skin woman from humble slave parentage, was labeled the “Pray for me Priestess” and publicly engaged in the spectacle of success of religious broadcasting. In fact, her prayers were widely mimicked across the country. She used her notoriety to amass wealth which drew her more followers. She also used her perceived power to heal and pray as tools to influence those around her. Her sermons drew a wide variety of famous personalities who wanted to be a part of what they heard on the air. One such member was a young James Baldwin who subsequently based his play *The Amen Corner* on her ministry.<sup>224</sup>

I find this an important to highlight because Baldwin saw in Mother Horn a presentation that he could capture for a larger audience. In her fiery sermons, he witnessed the spectacle of performance. His participation as church member, the audience listening at home, the publicity stunts geared to increase her membership and radio spectators, all presented Baldwin with a complicated text that he brought to the masses. I also find telling his patterning the play’s main character, Margaret after Horn. Margaret’s character leaves her husband supposedly at the instruction of the Holy Spirit. She believed the Holy Spirit needed her to be single to fulfill her ministry and be totally focused on God.<sup>225</sup> This maps well onto the rhetoric of Bynum who also began her ministry as one who the Holy Spirit demanded be single.

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<sup>224</sup> Walton, *Watch This! : The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, 43.

<sup>225</sup> James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner; a Play* (New York,: Dial Press, 1968).



## Cultural Shift to Televangelism

Mother Horn provides one example of the spectacle in religious broadcasting. This spectacle is amplified when the medium moves to newer technologies like television and the internet. Yet, its role remains the same—to entertain and include audience members in a particular message and meaning. The move to television and eventually internet offer one additional component to the spectacle, the power of the image. Theologian Kelton Cobb notes that when images become a part of religious broadcasting they begin to rival the importance of the word such that the capacity to hold viewers is increased.<sup>226</sup> Thus, television was not a neutral medium because it had the ability to communicate some messages better than the radio broadcast. It also adds greatly to the sense of spectacle because it has the means through visual literacy to produce sounds and images as original, e.g. a television dog mimics an actual dog.<sup>227</sup> In the realm of television, the image appears true, which is part of the role of spectacle to appear real while distracting from the real.

Television broadcasting was a natural addition for Neo-Pentecostals who had found favor using the technology of the times to promote Jesus. The televisual medium was a new market for advertising everything from cars to dishwashing soap and just as these audiences were perceptive for goods being advertised, they were equally prime for evangelizing. Just as COGIC evangelists had used newspapers and public revivals to witness to the masses, Neo-Pentecostals in general used the cultural shift to television for the same purpose. The significance of these cultural shifts are worth briefly detailing.

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<sup>226</sup> Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, Blackwell Guides to Theology (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 38.

<sup>227</sup> Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture : The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991), 79.

In his book *Televangelism Reconsidered*, Bobby Alexander provides a synopsis of the move from religious radio broadcasting to television broadcasting. He notes that at the onset, the national television networks were required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to air religious broadcasting for free, but the networks got to choose which denominations/programs to air. Alexander asserts that originally religious conservatives were restricted from television so that only liberal mainstream religious views were aired. In 1960, the FCC mandated selling airtime to anyone wishing to put religious programming on the air regardless of their conservative views. Pentecostals quickly bought air time and began producing revivals and healing shows for television enjoying great success and spearheading the careers of evangelists like Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, and Kathryn Kuhlman. These Pentecostal evangelists wanted to promote the fundamentals of biblical belief and morality, and soon they dominated religious television programming.<sup>228</sup> Yet, the picture is more complex than Pentecostals simply raised more money and thus were on television more. As a result of the fervent expressions of Pentecostal services, whether they were praying, speaking in tongues, or healing the sick, there was simply more to watch in their services. Communication studies professor Quentin Schultze posits that the Pentecostal shift to television allowed Pentecostals to get on television and promote their message, and it provided the American audience with “more entertaining television” with a lessened emphasis on tradition replacing this with an emphasis on glitz and glamour. Schultze also asserts that there are at least six characteristics typical of television ministries, e.g. they are audience-supported;

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<sup>228</sup> Bobby Chris Alexander, *Televangelism Reconsidered : Ritual in the Search for Human Community*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1994), 58-59.

personality led; experientially validated; technologically sophisticated; entertainment oriented; and expansionary minded.<sup>229</sup>

### **Forerunner Kathryn Kuhlman**

Pentecostal televangelist Kathryn Kuhlman displayed all of these traits. Again, I am referencing her as a prototype to Bynum because I attest that there are numerous similarities in her and Bynum ministry's participation in the larger spectacle of religious broadcasting. Despite the obvious race difference and allegations that Kuhlman catered specifically to whites, she had a large following and lots of media attention (including a public scandal) just like Bynum. For example, her biographical sketch reveals a woman who also was a teenage minister with a Pentecostal background. She began her ministry in Concordia, Missouri where she emphasized the ministry of the Holy Spirit while not demanding speaking in tongues as its evidence. Instead, she relied in the power of healing from the Holy Spirit to conduct miracles. She had several successful ministries before the scandal of her marrying a divorced (some sources proclaim he was still married) evangelist named Burroughs Waltrip. In her sanctioned biography she understood this shunning as the result of her putting a man before God. She states that she and the Holy Spirit made each other promises, which demanded her to divorce Waltrip and surrender herself fully to the Lord.<sup>230</sup> After this her ministry grew, and she began her television ministry at CBS with a show *I Believe in Miracles*.

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<sup>229</sup> Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture : The Business of Popular Religion*, 28.

<sup>230</sup> God's Generals, "Kathryn Kuhlman," [http://www.godsgenerals.com/person\\_k\\_kuhlman.htm](http://www.godsgenerals.com/person_k_kuhlman.htm) and Deborah Vansau McCauley, "Kathryn Kuhlman," in *Twentieth-Century Shapers of American Popular Religion*, ed. Charles Lippy (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 227.

*Time* magazine did an exposé on her in 1970 as a result of the thousands of followers she had worshipping with her in the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium and via television. The *Time* reporter described her as a “joyfully middleclass, fiftyish, lady who likes fine clothes...[and] hidden underneath the 1945 Shirley Temple hairdo is... a veritable one-woman shrine of Lourdes.”<sup>231</sup> A significant part of Kuhlman’s draw for the masses was her ability to call upon the Holy Spirit to heal those in her audience. As a diminutive brunette woman she spoke dramatically, looking up almost in a trance as she preached extemporaneously. She often preached in a form-fitting flowing white dress that blew from the fan prominently placed on stage. I argue her show *I Believe in Miracles* was a success not because of the dramatic healings referenced by her mentee Benny Hinn, but because of the spectacular nature of those “slain in the Spirit.” Those who she believed had “gone under the power” fell as she prayed for them often without her touching them. Yet, one did not have to speak in tongues or roll around on the floor to be healed. There were often times when her style was theatrical yet quiet. She would simply call out that people were healed and return to a stillness on stage.

This led to wide appeal among denominations, which led to perhaps one of her biggest successes—the ability to grow an international ministry appealing to Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic Christians as all parts of the Body of Christ.<sup>232</sup> This appeal resulted in her preaching to stadium and convention center capacities. She was interviewed on several national shows and newspapers, and even started a foundation in

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<sup>231</sup>*Time*, “Religion: Miracle Woman,” September 14, 1970, <http://www.time.com/magazine/article/0,9171,902774-1,00.html>

<sup>232</sup> Wayne Warner, “At the Grass-Roots: Kathryn Kuhlman’s Pentecostal-Charismatic Influence on Historic Mainstream Churches,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 17 (1995): 65.

her name. In fact, she is still so revered that the Trinity Broadcasting Network regularly airs her half hour shows despite the fact that she has been dead since 1976.

I find her a useful predecessor for Bynum because of her dramatic stage techniques utilizing both props and her body to influence the audience. She soon moved beyond just pastoring a local church to preaching on television, publishing books, and receiving a honorary doctorate for her work in the ministry. Her notoriety extends beyond her ministry, just as I argue Bynum's ministry hopes to do. In watching Kuhlman's stage presence, one sees someone comfortable on television who knows how to use the medium to effectively get her message across. Yet, one also sees a cultural shift from worship in public to participation in private and/or public. Viewers could enjoy her at home or go down to the studio and be seen enjoying her in the audience. This shift also reflected a move to a ministry that is most recognizable because it is on television not because one is a member of the church. This resulted in a marked distinction occurring in Neo-Pentecostal faith. Religious historian David Harrell, Jr. notes that this revealed a more stereotyped, more staged, and professional performance where Pentecostal ministry moved from store-front churches to Hilton hotels and ornate churches or charismatic conferences and seminars.<sup>233</sup> This certainly anticipates the moves that Bynum makes when she enters the scene in the 1990s because she moves quickly from television to conferences to internet all in the name of Jesus.

As technology changed so did the audience's perception to the messages. While many criticize televangelism for being merely "powerful images and emotional words designed to attract and hold viewers," this misses the complexity of this burgeoning

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<sup>233</sup> David Edwin Harrell, *All Things Are Possible : The Healing & Charismatic Revivals in Modern America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 8-9.

movement.<sup>234</sup> Televangelists are more than just market driven as these markets are a part of the social environment of the time. For instance, I attest that each broadcast has its own history and political structure. In other words, despite the fact that each broadcast participates in the spectacle of the larger field of religious broadcasting, there is something unique being presented. For Mother Horn, she used her black asexual, female body to assert that women were given authority to preach and to pray; for Kuhlman she used her sexualized white body to heal. Reviewing each in Hall's circuit of culture reveals that both of these ministries are relevant to Bynum because they reproduce a certain identity (albeit a regulated one) that is consumed by the masses and produced in a particular nuance representation by Bynum.

### **Bynum's Role in Contemporary Religious Broadcasting**

The niche that Bynum is a part of is one that is the contemporary result of a convergence of other influences. Bynum is the culmination of a certain type of spectacle. In fact, while Schultze speaks of televangelism as America's own religion, e.g. a "Protestant hybrid nurtured by mass media," I argue that Bynum is a hybrid of the effects of African-American culture to televangelism.<sup>235</sup> She is the progenitor to a movement that takes shape after her sexual discourse on singles sexuality begins. For example, there was a successful history of evangelical sex manuals dating to the 1970s. Yet, these manuals and other Christian sex advice primarily related to married couples. When Bynum enters the scene in the late 1990s, her take on singles sexuality falls into the line of singles discussions that had been going in churches, but with a twist. She begins with

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<sup>234</sup> Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture : The Business of Popular Religion*, 120.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

an acknowledgment of her sexual desire and daily struggle to remain celibate, truthfulness not present in other material.

Bynum is the contemporary response to the previous evangelical sex ministries, with an emphasis on singles. Much like the pioneer in the field, evangelical Marabel Morgan, Bynum led a movement. I liken Bynum to Morgan because when Morgan first published her Christian sex advice book *The Total Woman* she aimed at a small market, e.g. teaching women to sexually please their husbands.<sup>236</sup> However, her book spurred a religious response to the secular sex manuals that were bestsellers at the time and that did not advocate sex solely within marriage. It also encouraged Total Woman workshops and conferences expanding the resources reach. Eventually, these manuals expanded to a market now known as family counseling, but retained its focus on marriage. During the late 1990s, evangelical manuals began to focus on single adults or “born again virgins” positing that “evangelical Christians had the best sex.”<sup>237</sup> However, this reiteration always referred to sex within marriage and is very focused on pleasing men sexually. To make matters worse, these manuals tend to “segregate sexuality into something that only married people should be thinking about.”<sup>238</sup> The Christian singles market focused on spiritual topics like living in God’s will, but rarely on bodily needs. This made Bynum’s entry to the market a welcome change. While to be clear, she still advocated for sex within marriage, she did not act as if sex was something that should not be thought of until marriage.

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<sup>236</sup> Mark Oppenheimer, “In the Biblical Sense: A Guide to the booming Christian sex-advice industry,” *Slate*, November 30, 1999, <http://www.slate.com/id/56724/>.

<sup>237</sup> Ann DeRogatis, “What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality and Salvation in Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals, 1950s to the Present,” *Church History* 74 (2005): 112.

<sup>238</sup> Lauren Winner, “Solitary Refinement,” *Christianity Today*, June 2001, 34.

Thus, Bynum's niche opened the doors for numerous others to follow in her footsteps. As a Neo-Pentecostal, she fully utilizes the technology of her time to promote her agenda. While her messages are now dispersed through videos, DVDs, conferences, websites, and revivals, these mediums are not neutral in the same ways that radio and print were not neutral mediums for her foremothers. She has a particular message packaged and in the next chapter, I will interrogate the message and how it is read by black women. This chapter's goal was to see how Bynum fits into larger systems of production, e.g. televangelism and Neo-Pentecostalism. The next chapter will expand this view while noting how black women receive her dominant message of achieving the American dream through a suitable marriage.



## CHAPTER IV

### READING BYNUM AS TEXT

*“I have a mandate from heaven to solidify the singles so they may find satisfaction in a Savior. I must divulge some truths to the divorced so they can reach their divine destination. I also must challenge the couples so they can be more than conquerors in Christ.”*

*Juanita Bynum, No More Sheets*<sup>239</sup>

*“Is it wrong for Christians to masturbate? Well, I chose to write about the subject of masturbation because I’ve done it!”*

*Juanita Bynum, No More Sheets*<sup>240</sup>

Prophetess Juanita Bynum is a forerunner in the area of Christian singles’ sexuality ministries, and I argue that this is more than just being at the right place at the right time. Just as her foremothers, Mother Rosa Horn and Kathryn Kuhlman had an unique quality like the power to pray and heal that set them apart and won them great celebrity, so Bynum also stands apart for her frank discussion of singles’ sexuality. Bynum has been very successful at crafting her ministry, and she is overdue critical analysis. Thus, I will begin this chapter with what Clifford Geertz refers to as a “thick description” of the phenomenon known as Prophetess Bynum. I began this process in the previous chapter by identifying Bynum’s major influences, Neo-Pentecostalism and televangelism. This chapter deepens the task by exploring how Bynum participates in what Stuart Hall considers the circuit of culture. For Hall, this circuit is where “meanings

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<sup>239</sup> Juanita Bynum, *No More Sheets : The Truth About Sex* (Lanham, Md.: Pneuma Life Pub., 1998), 33.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices.”<sup>241</sup> Thus, my interrogation of Bynum will trace her meaning through several representational practices as I am concerned with who she becomes, what she produces, and how this production ultimately regulates the sexuality of black women who consume her products.

Before analyzing the rhetorical content of Bynum’s sermon, it will be helpful to interrogate the aesthetics of the “performance.”<sup>242</sup> I read Bynum as a text and to do so requires that I look not only at her sermon, her video performance, but also the book that resulted from the sermon. While the entire project is a form of womanist cultural criticism, this chapter is particularly concerned with unveiling Bynum and interrogating her influence for black women. This analysis is necessary to present rationales for how black women utilize her message, which I ultimately argue is through negotiated readings. As I decipher her sexual messages and scripts, I will show that her message is descriptive and prescriptive, but ultimately un-affirming of black women’s sexual agency and responsible decision-making. Finally, I counter the current womanist silence on this important black female with my own critical assessment.

### **Bynum’s Identity Formation**

Even before her recent marital abuse and scandal, Prophetess Juanita Bynum was one of the most recognized female televangelists in America today. Currently, the Pastor of The Warehouse in Norcross, GA, Bynum has ministered to hundreds of thousands

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<sup>241</sup> Stuart Hall and Open University., *Representation : Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Culture, Media, and Identities (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage in association with the Open University, 1997), 3.

<sup>242</sup> I do not use the term performance in a pejorative sense. I merely want to emphasize the theatrical nature of sermon delivery.

across the globe. Yet, her narrative begins with much more humble beginnings. In her often conflicting self-biography, Bynum describes being born in the “ghetto” and also being reared in a nice suburb neighborhood of Chicago. After her divorce, she is anorexic, and she is an overeater. She is on welfare with nothing to eat and nowhere to turn, and she is surrounded by family and church members who care for and encourage her. She moved east of Detroit with her husband at twenty-two or her marriage was already over and she fled to Michigan to start over. However, this contradictory data should not be dismissed. Televangelists are very careful as to how their public image is crafted so these differing statements offer insight into her narrative. Jonathan Walton suggests that “it is possible to glean a subject’s theological orientation based on the way they convey their autobiographical narrative;” thus, such discrepancies reveal her theological ethos.<sup>243</sup> Yet, when looking through the lens of womanist emancipatory historiography, her complicated narrative also teaches her viewers about her interpretation of history and what she chooses to erase or include.

The facts in Bynum’s biography are tentative at best, but most sources agree that she was born in 1959 in Chicago to Elder Thomas Bynum, Sr. and Katherine Bynum. As a family they attended St. Luke Church of God in Christ in Chicago. She also attended Saints High, a COGIC boarding school in Lexington, MS, where it is reported that she graduated second in her class.<sup>244</sup> Bynum started preaching as a teenager, and after graduation her ministry led her to Port Huron, MI. There pastors William and Veter

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<sup>243</sup> Jonathan Walton, “A Cultural Analysis of the Black Electronic Church” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2006), 148.

<sup>244</sup> Valerie Lowe, “A Fiery New Army of African American Women Storms America’s Pulpits,” *Ministries Today*, July/August 1999. <http://www.spiritlady.com/wim/mt7991.html>.

Nichols served as her spiritual mentors for the next nine years. During this time she is told by Pastor William Nichols that if she submits and allows herself to be broken, God will anoint her to become a common household name. She is encouraged to “walk in the office of prophet” because she was ordained by God to do so, and she begins to minister under the name Prophetess Bynum.<sup>245</sup>

A turning point in her narrative is in 1981 when she gets married “for sex and for what the man looked like,” but this marriage ultimately unravels.<sup>246</sup> As a result of the stress of this failed relationship, Bynum attempts suicide and is committed to a mental hospital. Her downfall escalates after her divorce is finalized, and she leads a life of what she deems sexual sin as she has premarital sex with numerous men. After taking a job as a flight attendant with Pan Am Airlines in New York, Bynum eventually returns to full-time ministry under the instruction of her new pastor John Boyd. Through her new church home, New Greater Bethel Ministries she began speaking to small venues of women, and in 1996 she met televangelist Bishop T. D. Jakes and he invited her to his singles conference.<sup>247</sup> Two years from the fateful meeting, she was chosen by Jakes to preach at the singles conference in Dallas, which is the beginning of her nationwide notoriety as she reproduced the “No More Sheets” sermon via video, books, journals, and conferences. She is awarded an honorary doctorate in theology from Truth for Living Bible College in Jacksonville, FL in 2000 and begins being promoted as Dr. Juanita Bynum.

She continues her “No More Sheets” singles ministry, and her modeling of chastity until marriage, which culminated in her televised million-dollar wedding to

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Michelle Buford, “Carnal Knowledge,” *Essence*, May 2001, 185.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

Bishop Thomas Weeks in 2003, the man God prepared for her because she was obedient. She and Weeks extended her singles ministry by launching a relationship ministry called *Teach Me How to Love You* soon after their public wedding. Three years later she and Weeks co-found Global Destiny Church in Duluth, GA. Her marriage to Weeks publicly unraveled in August 2007 after Weeks assaulted her in an Atlanta hotel parking lot. They divorced the next year. She has been on popular radio morning shows, BET, and even on nationally syndicated Good Morning America in light of her marital strife because her appeal is still strong. Championing herself as a survivor of domestic abuse, she now is marketing a new message to black women, namely that God sent her this suffering so that she could lead a “new” domestic violence ministry. When critically analyzed this new ministry will appropriate some of the same tropes as her previous submission sermons associated with her singles ministry. Thus, even her new ministry continues to reflect her on-going narrative of moving from “victim to victor” by undergoing “necessary” suffering. While this dissertation will not have room to examine the new messages since her “No More Sheets” ministry, the aim of this chapter is to illuminate the cultural impact that Bynum has on black Christian women’s sexuality.

### **Investigating the Womanist Case Study**

Prophetess Bynum’s interest in black Christian women’s sexuality stems from her own personal history. Frank discussions on sex and self-respect were a standard in her sermons, but the sermon preached for Bishop T. D. Jakes’ singles conference in 1997 catapulted her to expert in the field. The conference was held in a packed Dallas

Convention Center, where estimates range from 17, 000 to 36,000 attendees.<sup>248</sup> A scan of the massive crowd gives credence to Jakes' power to draw an audience across generations, races, and income classes. Yet, the performer for the night is a widely unknown evangelist Juanita Bynum. Bynum was initially invited to teach a class for women during the conference, but according to her own narrative, Jakes instructed her after her first class that she was to give the sermon for the night.<sup>249</sup> When she enters the stage, she feigns humility at the unexpected preaching opportunity, but it is clear that she is prepared because although this sermon is preached for the conference it is being prominently videotaped so that the performer and the audience know that they will be on film.

Being on film is not something one usually expects when gathering for a religious event unless one is already familiar with Bishop Jakes' model of worship. Jakes has a televangelist ministry that utilizes all facets of the media, and his conferences are equally equipped with videos, cds, and books sold of the event while the event is going on. Thus, it was not surprising to see that the television production cameras and sound board are situated in the middle of the convention center, or the congregation for this event. There are camera men roaming the aisles capturing the audience's responses. Looking through spectators' lenses, at first glance, the Dallas Convention Center is just a throng of people gathered to watch an event. There are no crosses or other religious iconography visible. The glass podium is unadorned as is the large grey stage that Bynum speaks from. Her backdrop is green foliage and one large earthen pot. Nothing about the stage sets the tone

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid., and Juanita Bynum, *Walking in Your Destiny* (Lake Mary, Fla.: Charisma House, 2006), 66. These numbers vary so widely because the conference was a part of Jakes' larger "Woman, Thou Art Loosed" ministry so estimates sometimes include the attendance number for this ministry and not just the particular singles event.

<sup>249</sup> Bynum, *Walking in Your Destiny*, 66.

that this will be anything more than a motivational talk or lecture. Yet, as the video starts, the organ tunes up and Bynum comes out to lead the audience in praises to God making it clear that this will be church.

After several minutes of giving thanks to God, a visual scan of the space reveals Bishop Jakes seated to the left of the podium along with several rows of “VIP” persons who are asked to grace the stage and to the right of the podium are the musicians and several men working the sound equipment. When the cameras scan the massive crowd, there seems to be a sea of people praising God before Bynum has even given her a sermonic text. The crowd is predominately female and predominately black, but there are whites, Hispanics, and men present. The audience ranges from stylishly to casually dressed, but they share a uniform intent to praise God. When Bynum appears on the stage, she brings a Bible and a binder to the podium, although she rarely opens either. Instead, to garner attention, Bynum directs the audience to be seated and instructs them she has an awesome task and responsibility to make sure that “there is no flesh” presented to them just the words of God.<sup>250</sup>

### **Bynum’s Techniques of Production**

Her attire also reflects this desire to remove from the audience the sight of her flesh. Using Laura Mulvey’s analysis of looking, we, as the spectators look with the camera, which looks at Bynum, who looks at her audience.<sup>251</sup> Thus, there is an innate interest in what Bynum looks like, what she says, and ultimately what she is perceived to be doing. In the instance of analyzing her appearance, one must remember that meaning

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<sup>250</sup> *No More Sheets*, DVD, produced by Juanita Bynum (Waycross, GA: Juanita Bynum Ministries, 1998).

<sup>251</sup> See Christine Glendhill’s use of Laura Mulvey’s theory in Stuart Hall’s *Representations*.

goes beyond just the visual. For example, she is dressed in a long pink suit, with a long skirt, and a loose top covering her hips, buttocks, and thighs. She is completely covered from her head to her ankles, as she even wears a white scarf to cover her neck. She wears simple stud earrings and a simple watch, all understated as she is making great strides to draw as little attention to her body as she can. Yet, she is wearing heels; they are not sexy stilettos, but “respectable” church heels that give her a glimmer of femininity in an otherwise sexless outfit. She could have worn flats or modest wedges, but I contest that in her choice of shoes, she is signaling a desire to be seen as more than just Prophetess. Her heels are not the “practical” shoes as typically advocated in COGIC circles. The high heels signal a sense of fashion despite conforming to modest dress. They also give the added bonus of accentuating her body, as heels tend to give the appearance of longer, more slender legs and a more defined derrière. Given her use of multiple sheets later in the sermon, the heels also served to give her the ability to walk more deliberately while encumbered since they also tend to change one’s posture and gait. Her clothing serves as more than just rhetorical support or tactical function for her sermon though. They also reflect her COGIC background as well as proper pulpit etiquette for women speakers at that time.

For example, when Bynum expounds on her clothing in *No More Sheets: The Truth About Sex*, the book-length version of the sermon, she says that women “dress to attract the attention of a man, so he has to see an appearance of where we’re going” not where you have been.<sup>252</sup> In this sense, clothing is to model your new walk with God. It is to provide the evidence of your sanctification just as was expected with women in COGIC years before. As Bynum states in an interview years after the sermon, during this

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<sup>252</sup> Bynum, *No More Sheets : The Truth About Sex*, 174.



time the “Lord wouldn’t permit me to wear makeup and pants...because my Spirit wasn’t ready to look like that. I wasn’t to be trusted to know that if I were to look like that and I were to be approached by a man and I wasn’t married, would I have the strength not to fail God.”<sup>253</sup> Thus, in an analysis of her clothing, her clothes serve as double signs, constructing meaning and carrying particular messages. She wants the audience to perceive her as a representative of holiness, which her modest attire attests. However, she also allows for meaning to be constructed by wearing her high heels. These assumptions and conveyed messages are carried out through an even larger sign system, her body.

At first examination, Bynum’s desire to “kill the flesh” is also a desire to ignore her body.<sup>254</sup> Her modest appearance has the added benefit of disguising her feminine form. The suit does not draw attention to the curves of her breasts, hips, or behind. Yet, her refusal to accentuate it does not remove her body from sight. In fact, although she makes proclamations about the dangers of the body, she uses her whole body in preaching. From the start of the sermon until its close, she waves her arms, touches herself, walks around, and bends over to emphasize her points. She is constantly moving around the stage. She needs her body to perform the sermon. She is a body in motion despite her desire for an absent body.

Upon further investigation, one sees her complicated relationship to her body. Bynum has a “holy” body that she does not know what to do with. A brown-skinned woman of medium build, she has to have a relationship with her body. It is simply too visible to ignore. In general, as a black female body, she is a descendent of women

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<sup>253</sup> J. C. Christian, “Uncommon Beauty: A Mazza Exclusive,” *Mazza International Hair Book 7* (2005): 30.

<sup>254</sup> *No More Sheets*, DVD.

denigrated for their ebony form. Yet, specifically, her body is the site for pain. Her body bears the scars of sexual and emotional pain. Her testimony ends in retrieving her misused, sexualized body; thus, even as she preaches to redeem it, she remains tied to the wounds inflicted to it. This is to be expected because as womanist scholar Linda Thomas argues what the mind forgets, the body remembers.<sup>255</sup> Thus, her shrouded modest body is still a flagged body making the act of hiding it much more than a mere aesthetical avoidance. I assert that her uneasiness with her black female form is the basis for her sermon's biblical and sexual interpretation.

Deciphering the codes inscribed onto Bynum's body is a task of great import because this conflicted body serves as a model for many black women. Yet, her modeling is full of contradictory gestures. For example, she obscures her shape in her performance, but she makes sure to keep her body in eye contact of Bishop Jakes. Throughout her sermon, she preaches looking directly at him and repetitively walks over closer to him. When she wraps the three bed sheets around her body, they create a form-fitting costume that eroticizes and enlarge the shape of her buttocks. Arguably, she enacts a modern day representation of Hottentot Venus as she parades around Jakes wearing the sheets, which symbolize her baggage. Draped in the sheets, Bynum moves her body in exaggerated motions across the stage. With her eyes on Jakes and his gaze returned on her, they engage in a voyeuristic dance that the audience gets to participate in. Eventually, the gaze is intensified as she begins removing the sheets in a manner befitting a strip-tease. This is further magnified when she closes the sermon by running through the auditorium waving a sheet as a flag. Her sanctified body bounces before the

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<sup>255</sup> Linda Thomas, "What the Mind Forgets the Body Remembers: HIV/AIDS in South Africa--A Theological and Anthropological Issue," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 35.4 (Ag 2008): 276-286.

Lord. Yet, this same body urges restraint, proper attire, and both physical and spiritual covering, which present the audience with multiple meanings.

Polysemous presentations are also visible in Bynum's face because it reflects a wide range of meaning. Although she is without makeup, she is far from a blank canvas, as she has a very emotive face. Her heart-shaped face is wide at the forehead and cheekbones and narrow at her jaw line, and she uses all areas of her face to express her emotions. For example, her almond eyes appear innocent, but when she begins to cry at the end of the sermon, her eyes conflict with her vocal emotion. Instead of weepy tears, she gives a compassionate, tearless stare to the camera. Early in the sermon she comments on the importance of men really studying women's eyes because she says that the eyes reveal that women are needy, so an aesthetic deconstruction of her eyes shows a variety of expression. She stares confidently into the camera and even when emotional either through praise or her testimony, her eyes remain steady, making contact with the camera, Jakes, and those in the audience. There are times when she is joking in the sermon and her eyes also reflect this gaiety even though her mouth does not form a smile.

However, her eyes are not her only communicative tool. She scrunches her face to express disbelief or anger. She shakes her head for dramatic effect. She even flares her broad nostrils (which she later gets cosmetically altered) to show her ire at Satan's tricks. Her ebony skin emotes her views well, all the while reminding the audience the importance of sanctification and her COGIC roots. It is worth quoting at length an early COGIC foremother's opinion because it is so eerily similar to Prophetess Bynum and reflects the well preserved nature of these views. Written for the "Purity Column" in a COGIC newsletter, Pearl McCullom writes:

The purpose of Holy Women is to LURE men into the body of Christ by lifting him up, and not to lure them to their own bodies by lifting IT up....Oh, you want a nice boy friend or a good husband...Now that kind is attracted to you through BEAUTY OF CHARACTER AND CONDUCT...LIPSTICK, ROUGE, AND MAKEUP MAY DO HARM TO YOUR COMPLEXION, BUT THEY MEAN DEATH TO YOUR MORAL RATING AS A SAINT. (Emphasis in Original)<sup>256</sup>

Thus, Bynum's plain face also showcases her submission to codes of holiness.

This ebony canvas also serves a dual role because those in the massive audience have to believe her and be comfortable with her. She has to establish an intimacy with them that makes them trust her face and hence her. This is established through the numerous close shots of Bynum's face throughout the sermon. Each time the audience is drawn closer in noticing not just her body but the expressions on her face. Thus, I agree with Gregor Goethals that this astonishing intimacy between the electronic preacher and congregation is fueled through the close-up views of the evangelists so that the "details of their eyes, the furrowed brow, the head uplifted in prayer" all serve to make the charismatic preacher seem more real.<sup>257</sup>

Bynum succeeds in this task by having an expressive face and a believable voice. Her language and tone match the crowd's needs effectively as she is able to produce effects in them even if they come in an unconventional package. For example, Bynum does not preach in a stereotypically feminine voice. She is not dainty. Even when she whispers praises to God, they bellow out. Mirroring more of Mother Rosa Horn than the quietness of Kathryn Kuhlman, Bynum knows how to use her voice effectively for her audience of predominately black women. According to womanist homiletician Teresa Fry Brown, sometimes women are encouraged to imitate masculine "voice production,

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<sup>256</sup> Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ : Making a Sanctified World*, 84.

<sup>257</sup> Gregor Goethals, "The Electronic Golden Calf: Transforming Ritual and Icon," in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 141.

pacing, and mannerisms” whereas, other women emphasize more feminine traits, e.g. they are less likely to “use hard vocal contacts and loudness during the preaching moment.”<sup>258</sup> I believe Bynum’s style is somewhere in the midst of these two extremes. She is definitely more likely to be a loud preacher than a “stereotypically” feminine one; yet, she also stays within the realm of the feminine in tone and bodily movements as to be acceptable to many who question if women have the authority to preach. This merger is an acquired skill because she can change her voice and mannerisms to match the audience that she is preaching in front of.

This is to be expected because Bynum is an accomplished gospel singer, and has used her gift for years as minister and singer. When she preaches to the crowd that night she has her cadence perfected. Her timing is in sync with the organist as they urge the crowd to a frenzy. Armed with her wireless microphone, Bynum knows the range of her voice. She begins in a low octave in an almost sorrowful, humble tone. As she introduces her subject matter, she waits until the crowd is clearly with her before beginning to crescendo her voice. With a raised tone or a hushed Hallelujah, she uses both her voice and her words to speed up and slow down her audience until they are perfectly in tune with each other. This emphatic use of pitch emphasizes both her confidence and her charisma with the crowd.

This is particularly the case when she becomes animated or gets excited delivering a point. She yells for emphasis, she whimpers for sympathy, her voice reflects her personality. For example, her refrain of “Can We Talk?” stirs the audience who respond with a resounding Yes as they feed from her excitement about broaching the

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<sup>258</sup> Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Delivering the Sermon : Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation*, Elements of Preaching (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 20.

taboo subject of sexuality. Even though she begins by feigning embarrassment over bringing such a scandalous topic before the audience, her voice reveals her intentions—to teach others despite her personal cost. Her intentions are well-performed as she changes her voice to mock “worldly women” or “sainted Christians.” These voice changes serve to break the tension in the audience from her controversial subject. In addition, to voice changes, Bynum also has a wonderful grasp of timing and intonation. While she does not mimic the alliterative style of other famous ministers, she prolongs her words and pauses at the appropriate moments so that the crowd is never lost.

This ability to keep the crowd engaged is done through her intensity in preaching. Even when she is speaking in tongues, her volume adjusts to alert the audience that something new is coming up. At times she uses technical assistance to match the projection level she requires as she demurely asks the sound technicians to give her microphone more volume. At other times, she uses her dialect or humor to keep the audience interested. For example, the crowd visibly laughs when she tells them that masturbation is not something she was going to come to the altar for. She would rather “just have some sex!”<sup>259</sup> Nodding their heads in agreement, it is clear that they are not ashamed to respond.

These are all example of how she keeps the call and response active throughout the sermon. Teresa Fry Brown refers to this as instructing “listeners in bodily engagement or vocalized assent,” which she describes as telling the audience to repeat after the preacher or to touch your neighbor.<sup>260</sup> This is effectively evidenced by Bynum’s instructions to the audience or the repetition of the chant *No More Sheets* at the close of

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<sup>259</sup> *No More Sheets*, DVD.

<sup>260</sup> Brown, *Delivering the Sermon : Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation*.

the sermon. Bynum's repetition of language at the close of the sermon is also an example of what cultural critic Hortense Spillers describes as creating a fellowship of belief.<sup>261</sup> In this sense, the audience accepts the message because they are led towards the same compelling narrative.

### **Bynum's Representational Practices**

This is also the result of compelling language, which is an equal component in creating a desired effect among the audience. In Bynum's case, she utilizes a trope of honesty throughout the sermon to direct her message. She believes God has called her to be vulnerable and naked before the audience so that they may be set free. She also uses a straightforward, plain speech that speaks directly to her audience who are starved for this type of communication.<sup>262</sup> Her message has a "sister friend" feel as she weeps at the camera suggesting that she is merely telling you something for your own good as opposed to giving you a mandate of celibacy. Bynum preaches that if you've been a virgin, she's been there, if you've been divorced, she's been there, if you have fallen into sheets unlawfully, she's done that too.<sup>263</sup> She reiterates to the crowd that she has been where they all are. This is one of the key characteristics of televangelism because the visual image of the evangelist has to seem real. As cultural critic Quentin Schultze notes the televangelist must appear to tell the truth, all the while hiding the real truth, which is

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<sup>261</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 264.

<sup>262</sup> Patricia Sanders, "Juanita Bynum: No More Sheets as Narrative Emancipation," (final paper, History/ Critical Methodology, Regents University), [http://www.regent.edu/acad/schcom/communication/phd/e\\_colloquium/sanders\\_juanitaBynum.pdf](http://www.regent.edu/acad/schcom/communication/phd/e_colloquium/sanders_juanitaBynum.pdf).

<sup>263</sup> *No More Sheets*, DVD.

they have no relationship with the viewer.<sup>264</sup> Yet, Bynum is able to be so effective because she presents her testimony to the audience packaged in a language that is easy to relate to and similar to many of their own stories.

Bynum's sermon also resonated with many in the audience because of her examples, her language, and her cadence. This was exemplified in her choice of slang dialect, which is an example of her ability to code switch. In fact, she is able to code switch on multiple levels, the first, the move to colloquial vernacular and the other the shift to the use of spiritual language. Teresa Fry Brown describes code-switching as a type of bilingualism where the preacher promotes solidarity with one segment of the congregation by manipulating and conveying nuances of meaning through the repetition of an idea or word.<sup>265</sup> In Bynum's case, she does this through her dialogues with the audience. For instance, she tells the audience: "this ain't 1920. This ain't 1969. Aw, come on. Wake up and smell the coffee...It's time out for putting the covers on it and trying to hide it up...Call a spirit a spirit."<sup>266</sup> In this example, she uses slang jargon and spiritual language to connect with the crowd. In addition, she seems almost deliberate in her speaking in tongues and in her use of Satan as a trope for going astray. Each time she uses these examples, there is a dramatic effect within the audience that seems to connect to these codes.

Bynum's language is also peppered with sexualized verbs, a mechanism that diffuses the tensions around her discussing the pleasures of sex in a religious setting. For instance, she begins the sermon by "mounting" the platform so that God can use her to bless others. She then questions why God would "do" her like that, e.g. expose her sexual

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<sup>264</sup> Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture : The Business of Popular Religion*, 79.

<sup>265</sup> Brown, *Delivering the Sermon : Voice, Body, and Animation in Proclamation*, 21.

<sup>266</sup> *No More Sheets*, DVD.



nakedness before such a vast audience. She concludes that the audience is to treat God as their man, and they must vow not to go home this man dirty. In her attempt to be “real” with the women gathered, her language inculcates them to become sexually aware.

This awareness sets the scene for her discussion about the pleasures of sex and how she longs for sexual intimacy even though she is single. She is speaking at a Christian singles conference however, so good pleasurable sex has to have its consequences. She repetitively tells the audience not to marry for sheets, e.g. they should not marry just to have sex. Although she does reminisce with the audience about the pleasures of sexual touch noting that if church leaders “indulge in back-rubs from their mate, they can’t fathom my longing to be touched,” her framework for understanding sexuality are spiritualized.<sup>267</sup> For her, sex is only ordained through marriage, but she advocates that women (especially) must realize that marriage is not just sex. Marriage is a ministry. In a long section of the sermon, she tells those cheering her on that if they are not prepared to minister to a man of God, then they should leave him alone.<sup>268</sup> Bynum chastises women that they claim they want to be married (ultimately so they can return to having good sex) but they do not want to be a help meet for their mates. In her traditional view, women are not suitable spouses until they can cook, clean, and fulfill a long list of tasks that will minister to their husbands. They are also unsuitable mates if they are in debt or seeking a man to get them off welfare or to buy them things. Instead, Bynum encourages them to “buy your own furniture, flowers, TV, VCR, and car” so they can

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<sup>267</sup> Bynum, *No More Sheets : The Truth About Sex*, 38.

<sup>268</sup> *No More Sheets*, DVD.

decide for themselves if a man is marriage material as opposed to just able to provide for them materially.<sup>269</sup>

### **Encoded Messages**

While delivering these statements Bynum looks seriously at the camera, Jakes, and the audience. Her cadence changes as does her vocal pitch. I believe these changes were so dramaticized because she wanted the audience to buy into the concept of marriage as a necessity. This is the first step to accepting her dominant messages of marrying and achieving the middle-class American dream. Marriage is seen for many, including Bynum, as a means of social uplift. Marriage is supposed to guarantee financial mobility so that those like her, who were on welfare, can marry and ultimately have wealth and prosperity. This notion is intertwined with her capitalistic principles that underline the “No More Sheets” sermon and much of her later ministry.

Quentin Schultze rightly connected the emergence of televangelism in America to fulfill the capitalistic urgings of the American dream. This led televangelists to tailor their messages to the audience as efficiently as advertisers because as an American religion it carries the imprint of the capitalist ideology of the country. This perfect tailoring results in messages like “No More Sheets” which fit a niche and have an easily acceptable model. Even the way that her message is marketed follows the capitalist model as her sermon is produced, distributed, and then reproduced for future audiences. Yet, I think there is more at hand than televangelists preaching purely what they think audiences want to hear.

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<sup>269</sup> Bynum, *No More Sheets : The Truth About Sex*, 173.

The encoded message has to also support the televangelist's goals. Bynum began evangelizing as a teenager with a series entitled "Lessons in Submission," and this message carried over to her sermon during Jakes conference. After she is married, she preaches a sermon based on Proverbs 31 entitled "Giving Sex but Not Romance," in which she encourages women to serve and service their men "making them feel like a wonder, when you know he ain't!"<sup>270</sup> Her lessons on submission were further expanded as it was not enough for Bynum to teach women to be submissive to their husbands, she must also teach them to submit to their spiritual authorities, which gives Bynum the ability to produce more materials. As Schultze posits, this allows the televangelist to be the "mediator of not only the message, but the relationship with God," a highly marketable ability.<sup>271</sup>

These notions are embodied in her sermons just as much as her messages of heteronormativity and sexual purity, but they must be reproduced. She has to constantly reiterate these messages so that she continues to be of interest to consumers. Thus, when one begins to analyze a sermon such as "No More Sheets" one must realize that the sermon is more than words and performance. Hortense Spillers posits that sometimes sermons "think" of themselves as messages, and if this is the case, then the sermon has successfully concealed its efforts to be a text.<sup>272</sup> Yet, sermons are texts and even Bynum is a text because she is offering a message, even if it is a polysemous one.

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<sup>270</sup> *Pride vs. Proverbs 31 Woman*, DVD, produced by Dr. Juanita Bynum Weeks (Duluth, GA: Global Destiny Ministries, 2007).

<sup>271</sup> Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture : The Business of Popular Religion*, 79.

<sup>272</sup> Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color : Essays on American Literature and Culture*, 268.

## Bynum as Text

Reading Bynum as a text demands that as a womanist cultural critic, I study Bynum at what cultural critic John Fiske considers the three levels of texts. He asserts that there is the primary text that is produced by/for the culture fully encoded with dominant ideology; the secondary or sublevel of text that is also produced by/for the culture but represents different parts other than the dominant ideology; and the third level explains the texts that viewers produce themselves.<sup>273</sup> In relation to Bynum as text, my study at the primary level shows that Prophetess Bynum as defined by the capitalistic influences of American televangelism. She can also be read through the lens of Neo-Pentecostalism, and gender, but I feel her dominant message refers back to fulfilling the goals of capitalism, which she promotes through marriage. When she is viewed at the sublevel, one sees the various marketing forces that reinforce the image of Prophetess Bynum. These include Bishop T. D. Jakes' marketing of her sermon, and television producers on the various networks she has been aired on. I also posit that my work and those who critique Bynum's ministry are also a part of her sublevel meaning because she *is* because we *are* interested. Finally, an analysis at the third level of textuality reveals her revamped image as she responded to audience members who were unable to dress as holy or act as holy as she demanded. Much like the cultural shift in COGIC women's dress in the 1950s were a response to the changing cultural climate, Bynum's new image is one that is partly created by her viewers. Bynum has gone from matronly modest to glamour girl. Her short hair is gone, replaced by hair weave, makeup, and glittering jewelry. Bynum stated that when she realized that there were "younger women who were

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<sup>273</sup> John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Arnold, 1997), 143.

being blessed by the ministry” she decided to convey the image that you do not have to dress “religious” to walk in the Spirit.<sup>274</sup> She also conveyed a new level of accessibility that made her marketable to other venues like the Essence Music Festival. Her new branding has been so successful that she no longer goes by Prophetess Bynum, the text first discovered, she is now Dr. Juanita Bynum II, Prophetess, Author, Recording Artist, Actress, and Motivational Speaker.<sup>275</sup>

However, understanding Bynum as a text also requires the womanist task of retrieval. As a womanist critic, I believe Bynum’s testimony must be interrogated. As mentioned in the previous chapters, reading Bynum as both text and case study allows me to examine what erasures are not included in her testimony. Dealing with Bynum as a black female agent demands that I look beyond what she provides in the narrative to what she chooses to omit. Stuart Hall notes that in discussing racial representations, it was the “silences that told us something,” and I suspect that her omissions tell something about her ideology as well.<sup>276</sup> For instance, in Bynum’s sermon, men are largely absent from the audience, and it seems that she is directing the entire message towards women. However, men are prominently positioned in her discourse, e.g. how to get a man; how to keep a man. Although chapter twelve in her *No More Sheets* book is entitled “The Other Side of the Gender” it is clear that her target audience is female and her messages are more receptive for women. Her sermon includes a biological justification for this emphasis on women as she preaches that “men are projectors and women are receptors;” thus, women receive more pain because when a woman has sex with a man, the man

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<sup>274</sup> Christian, “Uncommon Beauty: A Mazza Exclusive: 30.

<sup>275</sup> <http://juanitabynum.com/>. Her website has been remodeled during the public scandal, and she has legally changed her name to Juanita Bynum II.

<sup>276</sup> Stuart Hall, “Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural Studies,” in *What is Cultural Studies? A Reader*, ed. John Storey (New York: Arnold, 1997), 340.

releases his spirit into her.<sup>277</sup> In this skewed logic, women are never single because the spirits of all their past male sexual partners are still attached to them. In her discussion of female masturbation, she contends that masturbation is spiritual perversion because it is a woman saying that she does not need a man.<sup>278</sup> Even in this framing, men are still the objects of discourse in a sermon that is supposedly about setting women free. Although a scan of the crowd reiterates women as centers of attention, perhaps this is only because women are larger consumers of televangelism.

Although men are physically absent in her audience, Bynum does not lack male acceptance or mentorship. She spends a great deal of the “No More Sheets” sermon preaching to Bishop Jakes, and she openly admits in interviews that she is without female spiritual mentors. She has stated that she admires the teaching ministry of Joyce Meyers and the mentoring ministry of Mother Veter Nichols. These women’s ministries reminded her of God’s plan for her life as they initiated her to the success of having a radio broadcast, an early step to her own rise to televangelism. Yet, she bemoans not having had a woman specifically train her.<sup>279</sup> This lack of male training is mentioned because a prominent theme in her message is following spiritual direction. In her book *Walking into Your Destiny* she reiterates that having a strong spiritual leader is key to success in life. Thus, a noticeable absence in her narrative is the presence of female formation. It should not be surprising then that her preaching style and ministries follow more traditionally male models.

In fact, these male models have provided her with the only credentials she still claims. A noticeable absence in Bynum’s narrative is ordination or credentialing. While

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<sup>277</sup> *No More Sheets*, DVD.

<sup>278</sup> Bynum, *No More Sheets : The Truth About Sex*, 157.

<sup>279</sup> Lowe, *Ministries Today*, <http://www.spiritltdwoman.com/wim/mt7991.html>.

it is not atypical for her to be without ordination since she grew up in the Church of God in Christ, which does not ordain women, it is more surprising that she has not been given ordination from some other body. However, her ministry has been successful without this sanctioning because she has been mentored by numerous men. She always acknowledges the guidance of Pastors Terrell Nichols and John Boyd who provided her with her first opportunities for leadership, alongside Bishop T. D. Jakes and Pastor John Hagee for providing her with national exposure. None of these men claim ties to a particular denomination or credentialing body. Even her honorary doctorate in theology comes from an un-credentialed male pastor. As someone who goes by a grandiose title, Prophetess, I found it ironic that she does not have ties to any religious hierarchy or credentialing body.

Another noticeable absence in her narrative is her educational and class background. Although she went to a COGIC high school she has no further training. She did not go to college or seminary (despite the honorary degree). However, this is sadly representative of many in the televangelist world. Quentin Schultze notes that televangelists now possess technology so that they need “no degree, no denominational credentials, no years of waiting, and small amount of training.”<sup>280</sup> Yet, her technological savvy does not compensate for lower-class background and education though. In her sermons, she references dictionaries and encyclopedias instead of books or commentaries. The plain, accessible speech she is praised for is also an indicator of what she lacks.

Paying attention to what is missing in her narrative is helpful because if as Bynum says “one of the most powerful tools that anybody can use is his testimony,” then this

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<sup>280</sup> Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture : The Business of Popular Religion*, 56.

testimony needs to be completely analyzed.<sup>281</sup> Womanists have lauded the import of black women telling their stories, but these stories must be suitable for critique in order to be useful. This is especially the case given how reproduced Bynum's message became. From the sermon, she wrote the book, a journal accessory, and had several conferences under the same name. Her ability to market herself as a spiritual leader for women brought her fame and wealth. In fact, it placed her squarely within the ranks of other televangelists.

As previously noted, American televangelism is driven by persona and drama, areas Bynum certainly excels in. Bynum has charisma that rivals Hollywood celebrities giving her notoriety in a community where personality is seen as more memorable than message or doctrine.<sup>282</sup> Yet, her entrance to the cult of personality is slightly different from other female evangelists. She was not known for her powerful prayers like Mother Horn or for her healing powers like Kathryn Kuhlman. She was not a sequined singer/preacher like Shirley Caesar or even as feminine as Paula White. Yet, she was gifted at preaching on controversial subjects in a way that connected to audiences.

I believe that part of this connection comes from her ability to be open (to a degree) with her audience about her own experiences. Most viewers know very little about personality-led televangelists and what information they have has been "carefully controlled by publicity departments that help manufacture a particular persona for the TV preacher."<sup>283</sup> As I showed in the erasures that are present in Bynum's narrative, she does not tell her audiences her full story, but I think she is more convincing because audiences feel they are getting more of the real story than with other religious leaders. She made a

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<sup>281</sup> Bynum, *No More Sheets : The Truth About Sex*, 27.

<sup>282</sup> Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture : The Business of Popular Religion*, 70.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.



career on publicly admitting sexual secrets, and although I do not think she has showed her “true” side to the public, I believe she comes closer than most to being authentic about her life. As she aptly notes “we have too many preachers in the pulpit who act like they got everything together,” but pastors and prophets have struggles.<sup>284</sup> Thus, she has lived her personal and professional life in the public arena.<sup>285</sup> This is contrary to the public/private schism evidenced by other televangelists. For instance, Bishop Jakes’ son was arrested last year for indecent exposure as he masturbated in front of male officers in a public park, and Jakes’ daughter became pregnant at age fourteen.<sup>286</sup> Jakes nor his church made public comments regarding these incidents. On the other hand, Bynum has been completely in the public eye for her crises. While some consider this an opportunistic trait, for others, it reiterates that she is willing to let the world know that preachers make mistakes and have struggles too.

Thus, as much as I find Bynum a quintessential televangelist, I think she deviates from the mold in some specific ways. Schultze posits that typical televangelists are “more American than Christian, more popular than historic, more personal than collective, and more experiential than biblical” resulting in a prosperity driven, selfish, individualistic faith.<sup>287</sup> On the surface, Bynum fits these criteria. However, her pattern does not fit exactly. For instance, in his argument that the typical televangelist is more American than Christian, I agree, as Bynum has certainly adopted the capitalistic tendencies of American televangelism. Yet, I think that there is something uniquely

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<sup>284</sup> Bynum, *No More Sheets : The Truth About Sex*, 40.

<sup>285</sup> Even when she remarried to Bishop Weeks, she did so publicly with a TBN televised wedding. Her divorce was equally as public.

<sup>286</sup> “Jakes’ Son Charged with Indecent Exposure,” <http://cbs11tv.com/local/jakes.indecnt.exposure.2.933125.html>, February 12, 2009 and Lee, *T.D. Jakes : America's New Preacher*, 78.

<sup>287</sup> Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture : The Business of Popular Religion*, 132.

different about her American version of televangelism and the version that Schultze was considering.

### **“Our” Bynum: For A Woman By A Woman**

In Jonathan Walton’s work on black male televangelists he reads them as part of the dominant televangelism culture while retaining remnants of black religiosity. He portrays these black male televangelists as “both uniquely ‘ours’ and ‘theirs.’”<sup>288</sup> I concur and read Bynum through the same lens. She has emulated the best of capitalist televangelism (perfected by white televangelists), and she portrays the sensibilities of black religiosity. However, I assert that she must also be read through the lens of her gender making her part dominant ideology, part black religion, and an equal part black female. This is an important distinction because although she is usually read as emulating Bishop Jakes or imitating the stage presence of Kathryn Kuhlman, I believe that there is something uniquely “ours” referring to her black femaleness in Bynum’s rhetoric and movements.

Bynum’s black female body disrupts how the audience receives her message because as a female, she has to fight to proclaim biblical authority. As a minority, she has to fight to make her message reach beyond the black community to other ethnicities. By her own report she has attempted to “do things that only men in the gospel did” like booking large auditoriums for events, and she recounts encountering great resistance.<sup>289</sup> Yet, when she does get doors open, she has an outsider/insider relationship that gives her

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<sup>288</sup> Jonathan Walton, “Response to Joseph de León,” in *Creating Ourselves : African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Benjamin Valentín (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 272.

<sup>289</sup> “Heart to Heart with Juanita Bynum,” *Fresh Outlook Magazine*, [http://www.anewthingministries.com/fresh\\_outlook/articles/06-SeptOct-article1.html](http://www.anewthingministries.com/fresh_outlook/articles/06-SeptOct-article1.html).

the ability to say and do things that other televangelists are hindered from doing. For example, when Bynum addresses issues related to women she can critique women in a way that would seem uncomfortable if the message came from a man. She can tell them to get themselves together and be convincing not condescending because she is deemed one of them. Womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems supports this understanding in her description of how female preachers differ from Bishop Jakes. She states that

even the most Pentecostal of women, they are not preaching the same thing that Jakes preaches. The women preachers go a little bit further and tell women, “Go back home and turn that house out.” “Put the rascal out.” Jakes never questions patriarchy and he never tells you to go put a Negro out...but the sisters will say, “You tell that nigger if he put his hand on you again, whatever you’ve got to do just do it!” That’s the difference.<sup>290</sup>

In this light, being a black female televangelist connects her to audiences and holds her accountable to these audiences in ways that others are not required to be.

This sense of connection has led Bynum to attest that her story is representative of all black women’s stories. Yet, this representation must be interrogated because even though she looks like black women, this does not allow her to speak for them without being unchallenged. Her type of representation comes at a price because her representation comes intertwined in the spectacle of televangelism. Her participation in televangelism initiates her in spectacle because she is usually seen before she is heard. Thus, her black female body must be dealt with. She is of interest potentially because of these factors, but those who participate in such spectacle run the risk of being only publicity dupes, who are used by the same media that makes them of interest. In Bynum’s case, I see similarities to Gwendolyn Pough’s view of black rappers whose spectacle became a double-edged sword, as they are only represented by spectacle

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<sup>290</sup> Renita Weems quoted in Lee, *T.D. Jakes : America's New Preacher*, 138.

without the political projects found in other forms of black public culture.<sup>291</sup> In these cases, the representative story loses its ability to advocate for the masses of black culture because they are just figure-heads for the media. For Bynum, this means she loses her ability to offer redemption for black women because she is tied to the capitalist market interests that push her to preach messages that connect to the masses' purses not just her passions.

### **Reproducing the Spectacle**

Thus, the very thing that makes her uniquely "ours" is also the trait that makes her more marketable and hence corruptible. In Bynum's first chapter of her book *No More Sheets* she states that after she preached the sermon, she had pastors, friends, and colleagues insist that she write the book version because she would really get paid.<sup>292</sup> She denounces this saying that she is not about the market rather she is following a God-given mandate. It is interesting to read her public view given the fact that shortly after the book sold hundreds of thousands of copies, she followed the market's interest in her topic and presentation. For instance, an interviewer noted that when Bynum preached "No More Sheets" she tapped into two of the hottest topics for black women, God and sex, and in return women bought over a million copies of her video.<sup>293</sup> Her mandate/market was quite profitable, and she began spinning her notoriety into future monies. At first, she used her fame to publish other books unrelated to the topic, which were not as successful as her prior call to fame. Thus, she retreated to the message that

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<sup>291</sup> Gwendolyn D. Pough, *Check It While I Wreck It : Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 30.

<sup>292</sup> Bynum, *No More Sheets : The Truth About Sex*, 20.

<sup>293</sup> Buford, "Carnal Knowledge," 186.

brought her crowds and began preaching women's conferences and singles conferences across the country advocating that women leave premarital and post marital sexual relationships. She ended up in a legal quarrel with Bishop Jakes over royalties, and Jakes responded by blacklisting her from preaching venues.<sup>294</sup> Preventing from preaching in large venues and conferences, Bynum eventually apologized to Jakes so that she could be restored to her prior glory. Yet, this apology was strategic and it was spiritual since she publicly apologized on her knees to Jakes saying that God blocked her opportunities to preach to rid her of her pride and that she was returning like a prodigal child to receive spiritual rebuke for not following Jakes spiritual authority.<sup>295</sup>

Before this public restoration, Jakes' blacklisting had forced Bynum to reinvent herself again and take her expanded message to other markets, namely white churches. Instead of simply being a black female televangelist she relied on advice that she should "never allow *people* to tell you what they think about you, *you* tell them what they should think about you."<sup>296</sup> This was the beginning of the mogulization of Bynum. Exposed to the wide world of televangelism, she stripped her sermons of the remnants of black religiosity, evidenced in her black vernacular and call and response tradition, relying instead on her femininity and "spiritual" preaching to draw crowds. This was a highly successful move as her message of sexual purity was marketable to all races. She was able to reach as many audiences as possible while at the same time giving a diverse, yet

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<sup>294</sup> Lee, *T.D. Jakes : America's New Preacher*, 150.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>296</sup> Kenya Byrd, "Juanita Bynum: I Will Never Allow Anyone to Misrepresent My Name," *Essence.com*, January 27, 2009, [http://www.essence.com/news\\_entertainment/entertainment/articles/juanita\\_bynum\\_interview](http://www.essence.com/news_entertainment/entertainment/articles/juanita_bynum_interview).

dominant message. This allowed her to become “more than an expositor of the gospel,” she became an industry.<sup>297</sup>

Her popularity led to other marketing and production opportunities as with other celebrity ministers. For instance, there is Flow Records, her music label that produces her music, her own book publishing house that produces her books, and a live webstream called JBTv. These industries bring in lots of revenue as Bynum’s sophomore CD, *A Piece of My Passion* went gold in 59 days, and her books *The Threshing Floor* and *Matters of the Heart* were New York Times best-sellers, with the latter selling over 600,000 copies.<sup>298</sup> With her growing popularity, rather than keynoting other televangelists’ large conferences, she convenes her own mega conferences now. In fact, Bynum likes being called the “Christian world’s Oprah Winfrey” because she wants to be seen as an “intelligent black woman who is making a statement and doing it in style” for Christians.<sup>299</sup> Her current endeavors focus on prayer, empowerment, and living your best life, distant topics from the controversial sermons on singles sexuality. While these recent ventures have left the genre from which she first became notorious, she always acknowledges where she got her start, uncovering sheets for millions of women. In this sense, Bynum continues to fill her role as celebrity preacher because she knows that celebrity preachers are merely religious leaders “who became famous as much for who [they] are...as for what [they] actually did.”<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Pat Burson, “Evangelist with a big stick,” *Newsday*, October 23, 2004, <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/9080/evangelist-with-a-big-stick>

<sup>298</sup> Nadiyah Jett, “Moving in the Spirit,” *Upscale: For the Affluent Lifestyle* August 2006, 70.

<sup>299</sup> Burson, “Evangelist with a big stick,” *Newsday*, <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/9080/evangelist-with-a-big-stick>

<sup>300</sup> Marie W. Dallam, *Daddy Grace : A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 186.

## **Bynum's Consumers**

Yet, to understand this almost blind attachment to celebrity preachers, one must examine how they draw their audiences' allegiances. In the case of Bynum, this means analyzing the environment that made her message so receptive for her consumers.

Analyzing Bynum as text requires one to first recognize her context. Bynum's "No More Sheets" sermon was delivered in the late 1990s. The cultural milieu for black women at this time was one of perpetual singleness. This lament inspired Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, Pearl Cleage's *What Seems Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, and dozens of articles in *Ebony* and *Essence* that reiterated the dire statistic that in the late 1990s, nearly a fifth of all black women had never been married.<sup>301</sup> Bynum's context rehearsed the mantra "all the good men are taken" and that black women were too independent for marriage. Thus, when Bynum preached about her struggles with singleness in a room full of black women, she was sure to have a large number that would resonate with her message. The women who attended Jakes' singles conference were of varying ages, socio-economic statuses, and body types. There was no prototype attendee, but all came to find solutions for their singleness. Thus, when she states she is telling "our" story, they trust that she has found a solution. Bynum reiterates that black women are "needy" and not ready for marriage yet, which is why their relationships are purely sexual.<sup>302</sup> However, she does not leave them hopeless. The first step in the process is to commit to having "No More Sheets."

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<sup>301</sup> Rosalind Bentley, "For 'Prophetess' of True Romance, Marriage a Mess," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 26, 2007, <http://www.religionnewsblog.com/19144/juanita-bynum-8>. According to the US 2000 Census, just 31% of black women were married, the lowest proportion of all races. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/censr-25.pdf>.

<sup>302</sup> *No More Sheets*, DVD.

These women buy into her solution because they share her problem. As stated in chapter two, black women are hailed by such messages because they seem to be suited just for them. In these women's experiences, they share a history of being considered sexually loose, but Bynum offers them a way to be loosed! Viewed as a group, they are simultaneously ashamed and holy, with their status dependent on their context in the conference. Those who choose to accept Bynum's solution are offered redemption and those who reject the message are doomed to remain in sexual sin. By the number of women seen running through the aisles, shouting, and crying, it seems by the end of the sermon, Bynum has many converts.

These converts are instrumental at gaining Bynum other converts as they take the message back to their communities. Bynum is able to sell over a million copies of the video because these women believed that they had received something worth spending their money on. In this sense, Bynum is successful on two levels because she is able to connect with her immediate audience in such a way that they become her advertisers for a larger audience. Bobby Alexander considers this group empowerment one of the benefits of televangelism because viewers are able to "transform their identities and standing in the world."<sup>303</sup> In his research, viewers considered themselves linked together by a specific televangelist or ministry. This also explains some of Bynum's success because women who were witnesses to the original event became spokespersons for her ministry. As a result of their perceived solidarity with Bynum, they are able to share in her solution as they take this message to others. They can go from being ashamed and ignored singles to being empowered and committed singles. Although all Bynum offers them are steps to

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<sup>303</sup> Bobby Chris Alexander, *Televangelism Reconsidered: Ritual in the Search for Human Community*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994), 11.



celibacy, as a group they go from being horny and holy to being saved, single, and satisfied.

### **Regulated Cultural Readers**

This solidarity does not signal passive acceptance to everything that Bynum has preached. On the contrary, viewers rarely accept everything that a televangelist says. Instead, they pick and choose just as they typically pick and choose what to follow from the Bible. In the case of televangelism, viewers “bring their own perceptions and understandings of conservative Christianity to their viewing,” as they make their “own independent judgments about what is presented, evaluating the message in light of their own faith or opinions.”<sup>304</sup> This selective reading is known in cultural studies as performing a negotiated reading.

As I have asserted earlier, I believe that Bynum’s supporters are negotiated readers. As negotiated readers they accept the dominant ideology but must “inflect it locally to take account of his or her social position.”<sup>305</sup> This inflection may include resistance to certain tropes from the dominant group, but it does not question its ultimate dominance. Bynum’s viewers may reject some of her message, e.g. not adhere to everything that she says, but they do not question her pursuit of marriage as ultimate end. In her discussions of sexuality, they accept the dominance of heterosexuality, gender norms within traditional marriage, and marriage as a means to the American dream. However, despite this collusion, they do not passively accept all her views. Instead, they

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>305</sup> Fiske, “British Cultural Studies,” 121.

make their own meanings by rejecting her ascetic appearance and her exorbitant pleas for money.

Black feminist cultural critic Jacqueline Bobo might disagree with my assessment since she argues that Black women begin looking at texts within an oppositional stance because they realize the media has never been good to them.<sup>306</sup> She argues that as a whole, Black women have learned to sift through messages, accepting what is beneficial and blocking out the rest. In general, I agree with her assessment and think this could occur with Bynum followers; however, because religion is more tolerated and seen as being “good” for black women, I argue that fewer women begin with oppositional stance in reference to their clergy person.

### **Womanist Cultural Analysis**

Learning to interpret cultural readers is a task that benefits from both womanist and cultural studies. Womanist sociological ethics posits that black women must be taken seriously as cultural readers. Their attempts to navigate their own meanings are to be commended and upheld. In the case of black women reading Bynum, they are wrestling with the polysemous messages provided as they accept her emphasis on marriage because it resonates with their desires while simultaneously they resist certain expectations. Bynum’s model has little space for such loopholes, which is un-affirming of their sexual agency. Thus, a womanist analysis shows women who recognize that

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<sup>306</sup> Jacqueline Bobo, “*The Color Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers,” in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (New York: Verso, 1988), 96.

Bynum and their churches call for complete celibacy before marriage, but they exercise a type of restraint that allows for “exceptions under the right circumstances.”<sup>307</sup>

Feminist cultural studies accepts this circumvention of sexual regulation as an example of how women find that “meaning is not imposed nor passively imbibed, but arises out of struggle or negotiation between competing frames of references, motivation, and experiences.”<sup>308</sup> This is important to note because it reminds that meaning is not just in Bynum but in the context and the viewers since the audience does not take Bynum’s message without reflection. These women have a personal wrestling with her advice, a struggle between their competing religious frames of reference, e.g. their churches which advocate only abstinence but do not talk about what to do with their sexual urges, and Bynum who advocates abstinence but offers repentance if one falls into sexual sin. Thus, it is not as simple as Bynum tells them what to do and then they act. Instead, they struggle and negotiate with her as text.

Unfortunately, this struggle is one that women face alone because they leave Bynum’s conferences or turn off her video and must choose to act in their own best interests. Stewart Hoover posited in his early work on televangelism that the “significance of the electronic church is not in its power to change minds and lives;” yet, I believe a womanist cultural analysis rejects this notion.<sup>309</sup> These televangelists do have significant power to aid women in making better sexual decisions. Bynum’s open discussion breaks the silence, but she still only offers celibacy as a long-term solution for handling their sexual frustrations. While celibacy is a valid option for black women, it is

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<sup>307</sup> Marla Faye Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), 195.

<sup>308</sup> Christine Glendhill, “Pleasurable Negotiations,” in *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television* (New York: Verso, 1988), 68.

<sup>309</sup> Hoover, *Mass Media Religion : The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*, 231.

not the only option. Rather than just dealing with the pain of unfilled sexual urges, Bynum and other televangelist must also deal with the emotional shame of those who succumb to their urges. While Bynum admits her own “slide into the sheets” after choosing celibacy, she offers the mantra of “No More Sheets” as a means of recalibrating one’s life. For those for whom the shame leads to them making unhealthy sexual decisions, there must be more than a mantra. It is sad that many televangelists use their power to make more money not a healthier congregation. However, not only televangelists but Christian ethicists are implicated in this failure for both groups are engaged in public religion, which indicates a necessary responsibility and accountability. As sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow asserts to speak of public religion is to “suggest that individuals need to take responsibility for the good of their society.”<sup>310</sup> This means it is not enough to just reject what does not work when messages are going out that restrict one’s sexual health. Thus, I agree with sociologist Shayne Lee that more feminists and womanists must scrutinize the message and ministries of these televangelists.<sup>311</sup>

While the previous chapters have shown the necessity of beginning to perform these critiques, much more must be done. My investigation of Bynum in this chapter sets the scene for demanding a new sexual ethics so that these black women cultural readers find a healthier sexual message. Bynum’s popularity shows that her audiences are as likely (if not more likely) to follow her advice for their sexual frustrations, but the work of ferreting out what is beneficial from Bynum should not be left for them to do alone when womanists and cultural critics can be of assistance. Thus, my final chapter will

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<sup>310</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *Producing the Sacred: An Essay on Public Religion*, Public Expressions of Religion in America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>311</sup> Lee, *T.D. Jakes : America's New Preacher*, 125.

conclude with a constructive womanist cultural analysis that provides an ethics of responsibility and accountability to black women followers of faith-based sexuality ministries.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDING SOLUTIONS FOR THE HORNY AND HOLY: A CONSTRUCTIVE WOMANIST SEXUAL ETHICS

*“What can the church do to reduce the religious hypocrisy that exploits female sexuality even as it disciplines and condemns it?”*

*Rev. Marcia L. Dyson, Essence*<sup>312</sup>

*“Why can’t a woman be both passionate and pious?”*

*Rev. Dr. Renita Weems, What Matters Most*<sup>313</sup>

*“The black church needs a theology of eroticism... [which] certainly promotes safe sex.”*

*Rev. Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, “Race Rules”*<sup>314</sup>

*“Even if the condom prevented a disease or pregnancy, it still did not protect you from sin and its consequences. The only safe sex is celibacy.”*

*Evangelist Ty Adams, Single, Saved*<sup>315</sup>

The previous chapter carefully investigated Prophetess Bynum, her niche in televangelism, and her viewers. It also sets the scene for a discussion of faith-based sexuality ministries that have flourished after Bynum’s entrance to the field. This chapter seeks to nuance the questions posed above as it offers a critique of these ministries positing that they offer conservative theologies that do not adequately meet the needs of the women that they are serving. For instance, there is a schism that black churchwomen

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<sup>312</sup> “Can You Love God and Sex?” *Essence* February 1, 1999, 100-104+. [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com).

<sup>313</sup> Renita J. Weems, *What Matters Most: Ten Lessons in Living Passionately from the Song of Solomon* (New York: Walk Worthy Press, 2004), 37.

<sup>314</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1996), 93.

<sup>315</sup> Ty Adams, *Single, Saved, and Having Sex* (New York: Walk Worthy Press, 2006), 116.

find between what is actually occurring in their sexual lives and what they think ought to be. The interrogation of Bynum and other faith-based sexuality ministries seeks to question the difference between what women believe and what they actually practice, with an emphasis on creating a model that advocates participating in healthy sexual relationships. This model is a constructive womanist sexual ethics that is based on the principals of mutuality, agency, and pleasure. It is my intent to proffer a new womanist sexual ethics that addresses not only the messages that black women receive from televangelists, but also the ones that they internalize from their own mainline churches. I conclude with practical steps that churches can take to apply this model to their congregations.

This model utilizes more than just womanist sources, but its focus remains entirely on black women qualifying it as a womanist work.<sup>316</sup> By introducing this model, I hope to sexually educate black women so that they will have more information in this age of HIV/AIDS. In this sense, I hope to provide a means of productive religiosity, which Anthony Pinn describes as a “religiosity whose principles have felt consequences for daily life.”<sup>317</sup> It is the goal of my ethical project to make a difference in the sexual decision-making of black women and to assist churches and faith communities in decreasing the prevalence of new HIV infections.

A new model for sexual ethics is needed for black women because of the import of Bynum, and the popularity of the ministries that have flourished since her “No More Sheets” sermon. Women are not just subscribing to unhelpful messages in their faith

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<sup>316</sup> I will especially use the testimonies found in Marla Frederick’s study *Between Sundays*.

<sup>317</sup> Anthony Pinn, “Rap Music and Its Message: On Interpreting the Contact between Religion and Popular Culture,” in *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 262.

communities, but they are actively pursuing these messages by listening to what they may deem as alternatives, televangelists. As a womanist cultural critic, I am interested in their active participation in the spectacle of religious broadcasting as I similarly wonder as ethicist Tex Sample posits what it would mean for “spectacles to be in the service of the community.”<sup>318</sup> If Bynum or those influenced by her fame could instead envision a sexual message that encouraged all forms of sexual pleasure and expression, I doubt black women would struggle as much with the sexual decisions they face. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and the messages that they receive are strikingly similar to the old patriarchal messages that advocate abstinence and marriage as the only means of sexual expression. Operating under a tried and true message, Bynum and several prominent successors continue to promote ideals that women admire but struggle to adhere to.

### **Successors to Bynum**

I went through great detail describing Bynum’s effectiveness because she becomes the prototype for other faith-based sexuality ministries. Bynum may be the “prophetess of a healing and deliverance ministry that addresses the problems of the flesh and the spirit,” but there are many others hearing the call to serve.<sup>319</sup> A leading voice in this contemporary movement is Michelle McKinney Hammond, a black author, relationship expert, and life empowerment coach. She has sold over a million copies of her books with titles like *Sassy, Single, and Satisfied* and *How to Be Found by the Man You’ve Been Looking For*. Hammond considers it her God-given assignment to help a black woman “live purposefully and to live life as if she will never get married” so that

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<sup>318</sup> Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World : Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 204.

<sup>319</sup> Kimberly Davis, “Sex and the Spirit: SOS for Single Christian Sisters,” *Ebony*, January 2005, 104.



her life is not on hold for a man.<sup>320</sup> However, her messages usually reiterate that women should be subservient, e.g. they are biologically built to receive from men and to be pursued by men. Again for a supposedly women centered focus, she spends a great deal of time on men, and she has little to offer women who are finding their purpose, living piously, but still are full of sexual passions.

Sadly, the same can be said for other ministers in the faith-based sexuality movement. For example, the ministry of Evangelist Ty Adams is quite similar to Bynum's. Adams' book *Single, Saved, and Having Sex* is an *Essence* bestseller, one of Amazon's Top 100 sellers, and on its second printing. It is even being used in Uganda as a teaching tool in the fight against HIV/AIDS. While she does not have quite the celebrity preacher status that Bynum or Hammond claims, her message has been widely popular as she preaches conferences and seminars taking up where Bynum left off when Bynum's message went mainstream.

Evangelist Adams is much more graphic than Prophetess Bynum in her depictions, but she duplicates Bynum's style of self-disclosure as she reveals her life of what she calls sexual sin defined as premarital and lesbian relationships. Like Bynum, she reiterates that God creates sex and that it is meant to be passionate and pleasurable. Her understanding of how to express sexuality however is equally dangerous. For her sexual sin includes homosexuality, pornography, foreplay, masturbation, oral and anal sex, penetration of any kind, and even tongue kissing.<sup>321</sup> Although Bynum dared to discuss masturbation, her successor takes things a step further. Adams offers a discussion of oral and anal sex while acknowledging the shock effect of her message but

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>321</sup> Adams, *Single, Saved, and Having Sex*, 19.

offers that “there are a lot of undercover Christians literally under the covers” and that “we’ve been sugarcoating this for far too long.”<sup>322</sup> Duplicating Bynum’s references, she succeeds in getting stagnant Christians to discuss sexuality. By offering her own sexual past and feelings of shame as an example of how unlawful sex “severs your union with the Lord” having left her with her panties and her self-respect on the floor, she models for her audiences a sexual honesty that she encourages them to inhabit.<sup>323</sup>

Messages like Bynum and Adams’ offer only sexual prescriptions. Yet, I posit their books continue to be bestsellers because they offer an information-starved generation clear-cut “facts.” She packages a clear, declarative statement that directly addresses Black women. In Marla Frederick’s study of black women’s struggles of faith, she discovered that women were drawn to televangelists because of the simplicity of the message.<sup>324</sup> Similarly, I argue that even though black women are negotiated readers of texts such as Bynum and Adams that they are enticed by the promise of solutions for the sexual struggles they are facing. The more contemporary message Adams delivers leaves much to be desired, but she is upfront and frank. Even in her shocking discussion of her former lesbian lifestyle, she denounces her lesbian lover while exalting the pleasures of lesbian sex. The appealing factor for ministries like Bynum and Adams’ is that they do not decry natural sexual urges or the sexual pleasure that women feel. They offer solutions which mirror the abstinent until marriage message that they receive in their churches, but they have the added bonus of hearing someone else who is likewise struggling to remain celibate.

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>324</sup> Marla Faye Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003), 135.

## **Faith-Based Sexuality Ministries**

However, these televangelists messages post-Bynum are more explicit and perhaps even more damaging for black women's psyches and bodies. For example, Ty Adams considers those Christians who are sexually active to lack a relationship with God. She chastises them for being overcome by temptation and suggests that they should use "celibate Jesus" as their example. She purposely seeks to shame women into realizing that sex outside of marriage leads to hellfire because she sees this as a conscious choice away from God. While this psychological damage is worth noting, perhaps an even more pernicious abuse occurs as Adams counsels single black women. She questions why single Christian women carry condoms or birth control as she asserts "you are planning to fail. You cannot plan to overcome and fail at the same time. You can not have a "just in case I fall" plan. If you are taking birth control pills or carrying condoms, the first thing you need to do is throw them away. You cannot grab a hold to a future of celibacy with a grip on your sinful past."<sup>325</sup> She backs up her rationale with scripture making a convincing case for women who are trying to lead celibate lives. However, what happens with women who do "fall" after she has told them to throw away their condoms and birth control pills? The reality for these women is that protecting themselves means admitting they have strong sexual urges, a truth many women are not prepared to face. This population of women needs a new sexual model to follow because their old one is leaving them susceptible to more than just shame.

Yet, getting converts to a new ethic is a hard task given the preponderance of faith-based sexuality ministries abounding. The messages are promulgated in every

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<sup>325</sup> Adams, *Single, Saved, and Having Sex*, 98.

medium, from the pulpit to the internet. Black women can go to conferences, seminars, and even dating services that focus on their plight as single Christian women. For instance, when the site eharmony.com began actively pursuing black participants, an evangelical Christian named Regina Clark admits being enticed by their pitch. She recalls thinking that “maybe God is using this as a vehicle for my husband to find me” and although she did not even own a computer she bought one so that she could join.<sup>326</sup> This same sense of urgency fuels the lucrative singles conference industry where black women pay hundreds of dollars for conferences and materials entitled “Lord, Make me Over” or “Lord, I’m Ready to be a Wife.”<sup>327</sup> Much more than demonstrating charlatan like behavior, televangelists have learned what is appealing to this market of single black Christian women. They have tuned into these women’s pressure to be married and to lawfully engage in sex. They are not restricted by their denominations or by doctrine, as these ministries multiply based on their use of scripture and a charismatic televangelist.

The sheer numbers of conference, seminar, books, and services targeting single black Christian women demand critical reflection because their impact is far-reaching. Unfortunately, most of these ministries share a conservative ideology that is castigating for those who fall short of its goals. In fact, most of the preaching comes from a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible that encourages female submission. These ministries do not advocate for a celebration of sexuality. Instead, they focus on telling women what they can and can not do. Perhaps in some cruel irony despite their dismal

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<sup>326</sup> Ginia Bellafante, “Single Evangelical in Need of Advice? Books have Plenty,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/19/us/single-evangelical-in-need-of-advice-books-have-plenty.html?pagewanted=1>.

<sup>327</sup> Other popular book titles and conferences for black women are *He’s Fine, but is He Saved?*, *The Black Christian Singles Guide to Dating and Sexuality*, *Put on Your Crown: The Black Woman’s Guide to Living Single... (And Christian)*, *Inside of Me: Lessons of Lust, Love, and Redemption*, and *The Best Sex of My Life: A Guide to Purity*.

messages, there are hundreds of thousands of women flocking to these ministries and their leaders.

As a result of this dilemma, I posit that a new sexual ethics is necessary to help black women interrogate these messages so that they can ferret out what is beneficial. As a womanist scholar this work requires a stretching of the discipline of womanist ethics so that it is no longer susceptible to Anthony Pinn's charge of being insular. In Pinn's assessment, womanists tend to "shape popular culture to fit the religio-theological sensibilities of the scholar as opposed to allowing cultural production, or popular culture, to influence in a deep sense the work of the scholar of black religion."<sup>328</sup> Taking this critique seriously demands that as a womanist cultural critic I utilize the tools of the discipline to explore the cultural productions of faith-based sexuality ministries. As explored in earlier chapters, this agenda reveals these ministries' denial of black women's agency and sexual pleasure. Thus, a more helpful womanist sexual ethics involves the demand for sexual justice as an ethical norm.

### **Sexual Justice as Ethical Norm in Womanist Sexual Ethics**

Sexual justice is a phrase most often linked with the reproductive rights movement. It has a universal definition as the "right to information and means to attain the highest standards of sexual and reproductive health."<sup>329</sup> Using this collective definition provides the framework for highlighting the ways that women seek to control their own bodies and reproductive destinies by addressing the needs of their

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<sup>328</sup> Anthony Pinn, "Cultural Production and New Terrain: Theology Popular Culture, and the Cartography of Religion," in *Creating Ourselves : African Americans and Hispanic Americans on Popular Culture and Religious Expression* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 22.

<sup>329</sup> International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) at Cairo, Egypt. *Cairo Programme of Action*. United Nations Department of Public Information, 1994.

communities. Yet, this language is also familiar to those in the area of Christian sexual ethics because it is one of the norms of relationality. For instance, womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas notes in her work on the black church that now is the time for a “new politic of sexual justice.”<sup>330</sup> This notion of sexual justice is foundational in Christian sexual ethics so much so that Marvin Ellison, a white feminist ethicist uses this as the basis for his liberating sexual ethic found in his book *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality*. In this book, Ellison provides one of the most comprehensive and inclusive discussions of sexuality found in relational ethics. The book is written as a pro-feminist, pro-gay/lesbian, antiracist text that encourages its reader to view sexuality within the framework of social justice, with the hope of encouraging justice-love. Thus, he believes Christians must seek sexual justice, which he categorizes as erotic justice. Ellison posits that a genuinely liberating sexual ethic is needed for all, and this ethic should “turn people on to justice in their bedrooms, and beyond.”<sup>331</sup> I find Ellison’s work a helpful source in crafting my womanist sexual ethics because of the attention he pays to race, relationality, and pleasure.

Ellison proposes a shift in Christian sexual ethics from the love-centered liberal ethic, which places sexuality and love as a private matter, i.e. one to be handled in the home, to a justice-centered postliberal ethic that tries to re-claim sexuality from the private realm making sexual injustice a core issue. With the goal of pushing for an alternative framework for viewing sexuality, Ellison insists that an effective sexual ethics must proceed by listening to and addressing sexual injustice, such as self-hate, violence,

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<sup>330</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, “The Black Church and the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 361.

<sup>331</sup> Marvin Mahan Ellison, *Erotic Justice : A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 3.

racism, sexism, and heterosexism.<sup>332</sup> This sexual ethics promotes the well being of self and others, which necessitates a sex-positive view, an overcoming of compulsory heterosexuality, and the eroticization of equality between persons/groups.

Ellison rightly argues that sexuality in the past has been encoded with the perspective of elite, affluent, white males, which results in an ethic that does not adequately address the needs of others. In a welcome departure from the standard white feminist sexual ethics discussed in the introduction, he investigates how disability and race shape sexuality. Ellison's desire for a definitive sexual ethic that is justice centered demands that he focus specifically on those in the margins because he recognizes that "our sexuality embodies the injustice of our society."<sup>333</sup> Until those who face the most injustice (those on the margins) are freed, sexual justice will ring hollow for all.

By utilizing a liberating sexual ethic, one is allowed to enjoy sex, whether one is in a marital relationship or not. In fact, a liberating sexual ethic demands a rethinking of marriage as a moral necessity, instead urging for sexual relationships to be just and mutually respectful. Ellison even goes so far as to offer that sex can occur whether or not one loves the other person, as long as there is respect and consent, a stark contrast from the contemporary Christian view of sex.<sup>334</sup> I do not find it feasible in the age of AIDS to promote sex without love, nor do I think this is in the best interest of black women's psyches or bodies, but I do respect the value his model places on sexual agency.

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<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 24-48.

<sup>333</sup> Sheila Briggs quoted in Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality*, 30.

<sup>334</sup> Ellison, *Erotic Justice : A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality*, 82.

## Sexual Agency in Womanist Sexual Ethics

Thus, my model pays attention to both sexual justice and sexual agency as key principles for a womanist sexual ethics.<sup>335</sup> It questions how black women live before God as sexually liberated individuals. It argues for an investigation into how black women make sexual decisions positing that these decisions must involve an understanding of their sexual rights. The notion of sexual rights are a part of the human rights discourse that encourages women to demand the right to sexual pleasure, self expression, intimacy, and freedom from sexual abuse.<sup>336</sup> I believe advocating for sexual rights must be a part of a womanist sexual ethics because these rights assure that these women's sexual decisions occur in a respectful environment.

In order to be sexually agential, black women must see themselves as capable of making their own sexual decisions. They must also have the capacity to make decisions that are in their own best interests. This requires them to be moral agents, which is defined by womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas as a means of engaging in “acts of resistance to their own oppression.”<sup>337</sup> Yet, these acts of resistance often call for black women to ignore or reject the oppressive structures of their faith communities. In these cases, the religious messages they receive about their sexuality do not properly prepare them for their realities. Thus, they are left to find solutions for themselves. As they seek to embody a sense of radical subjectivity they face numerous obstacles. These obstacles could typically be handled within a womanist framework, but womanists' works usually

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<sup>335</sup> I use womanist sexual ethics and womanist relational sexual model interchangeably.

<sup>336</sup> Jael Miriam Silliman, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2004), 290.

<sup>337</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, “Twenty Years a Womanist: An Affirming Challenge,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 149.



address fictional characters' agency or historical characters' agency. This results in a lack of emphasis on living women's agential moves.

### **Concerns with Womanist Agential Models**

For example, in Stacey Floyd-Thomas' description of radical subjectivity she finds this tenet best described in the methodology of biomythography which she relates to fictional identity formation. Using this methodology, one could relate the characters in *Sula* to contemporary black women's sexual decision-making. This exploration yields bountiful examples as provided in the exchange of Sula and Big Mamma. In this dialogue Sula is told by Big Mamma "don't let your mouth start nothing that your ass can't stand. When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you" to which Sula responds "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" which is considered by Big Mamma to be "Selfish. [Because] ain't no woman got no business floating around without no man."<sup>338</sup> This is an example of Sula's sexual decisions being prescribed for her just like religious messages on sexuality prescribe sexual decisions for contemporary black women. Black women's literature are full of such examples that parallel closely the lived experiences of single black Christian women, and Floyd-Thomas' methodology would illuminate these commonalities. However, I do not think that Floyd-Thomas' method is adequate for the particular case of Bynum because it presumes that black women are archetypal characters. Although I find it immensely helpful to use fictional sources by black women when dealing with the lived sexual realities of black women I find it more helpful to utilize their own narratives. In

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<sup>338</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Plume, 1996), 92.

this regard, I concur with Linda Thomas who suggests that womanists must view books written about black women as “secondary sources and employ anthropological techniques to collect stories and publish ethnographies of women who are still alive.”<sup>339</sup>

An investigation of living black women who are struggling in the age of AIDS to handle their sexuality reveals a complexity not easily duplicated by womanist literature. Womanist ethicist emilie townes rightly describes this complexity as a time when “we are sexually repressed while at the same time being sexually active, [which] is a dangerous combination.”<sup>340</sup> Those women who choose between being sexually active or celibate have many dilemmas to face. Their roles as moral agents begin with their critical consciousness of themselves as sexual beings then moves on to their actual decision. Yet, too often the messages that women receive obfuscate this first step. Perhaps this is one of the enticements of messages such as Bynum and her contemporaries. They all begin with a declaration and affirmation of women as sexually, social beings. Regrettably, these faith-based sexuality ministries only have one step beyond this declaration, the call to celibacy. While celibacy is a choice it ceases to be a free decision when it is seemingly the only one available. Thus, women explore their options on their own, sometimes with deadly results.

### **Participating in a Womanist Relational Sexual Model**

A new womanist relational sexual model will begin with an affirmation of black women’s bodies and sexual and spiritual. Yet, it goes beyond this by providing a

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<sup>339</sup> Linda Thomas, “Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Paradigm” in *Living Stones in the Household of God*, ed. Linda Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 45.

<sup>340</sup> Emilie Maureen Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory : Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 80.

plurality of options for women who choose to explore their sexuality. This is done with the knowledge that sexual agency is serious work. It is a womanist task exemplified in Walker's womanist definition, e.g. serious and responsible. Sexual agency is shown through "owning up to your responsibility to make decisions and to being willing to accept the consequences of our choices."<sup>341</sup> Yet, this responsibility and acceptance is first garnered through a wrestling of this decision away from the religious community, partner, and other influences. I am aware that black women's sexual decision-making is never without struggle. However, womanists must assist women in gaining the knowledge needed to make these decisions. Even with this assistance, I know that as women negotiate the boundaries of intimacy and spirituality there will be not be one perfect model to follow. Instead, I posit that a womanist relational sexual model offers them an on-going process to reflect on their decisions. Marla Frederick asserts that black women are typically negotiating these boundaries between their Bibles and prayer, but I believe that they are also negotiating them with all the religious sexual messages that they have received.<sup>342</sup> Thus, my model is particularly in tune with the reception of all of these messages as it seeks to give black women a means to reflect and act in a healthy manner.

### **Framework for Womanist Sexual Ethics**

A womanist sexual ethics is framed by certain principles that create relational, sexually intimate, pleasurable, healthy encounters. A key tenet for this model is sexual agency which is a requirement for a truly relational sexual experience. In fact, Kelly Brown Douglas suggests that this new ethical model must redeem the body by granting

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<sup>341</sup> Renita J. Weems, *What Matters Most: Ten Lessons in Living Passionately from the Song of Solomon* (New York: Walk Worthy Press, 2004), 86.

<sup>342</sup> Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, 193.

sexuality the space to be relationally right, which means restoring the connection between sexual intimacy and loving relationship.<sup>343</sup> Relationality is paramount because it establishes the bond between persons and the divine. This connection emphasizes humans' interconnectedness and sanctions the physical expression of connection that comes via sexual intimacy. This sense of relationality is sorely absent from the messages promulgated by faith-based sexuality ministries. Instead of supporting loving relationships that include sexual intimacy, these ministries castigate them considering them examples of fornication and hence sin. A womanist relational sexual model counters this notion by asserting that sexual intimacy and loving, mutual relationship are tangible expressions of God's presence in our life and not sinful.

### **Heterosexism in Televangelism and Black Churches**

This model is relevant for the lives of single black Christian women as their expressions are often denigrated because they occur outside the bounds of marriage. Yet, black gays and lesbians are also in need of a revised model that accepts their expressions of intimacy and relationship. For instance, in the majority of the faith-based sexuality ministries that I explored there was an overt acceptance that same sex activity was worse than their "sin" of being sexually active before marriage. Ty Adams preaches that gays and lesbians that participate in church are not to be overlooked because "God will use [their] gift to bless His people, and [they] can still bust hell wide open."<sup>344</sup> Her provocative view mirrors the experience of black gays and lesbians in black churches. These views were reiterated by the women whom Marla Frederick interviewed as they

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<sup>343</sup> Brown Douglas, "Twenty Years a Womanist," 155.

<sup>344</sup> Adams, *Single, Saved, and Having Sex*, 42.

also applied “punitive language of death and damnation, rather than that of disgust or negation, to the context of homosexual relationships.”<sup>345</sup>

This is also the case made against same-sex marriage, which has been particularly dominated by both male and female black clergy and televangelists. For instance, Bishop Eddie Long led a “Stop the Silence” march to push for an amendment to outlaw same-sex marriage, which he later televised on Trinity Broadcasting Network’s *Praise the Lord* broadcast.<sup>346</sup> Black gays and lesbians who seek to have their relationships validated by the church face similar (although admittedly more punitive) struggles as single women who seek validation for their sexual partners. Yet, when discussing this concern with single black women often they repeat sayings like “belief in heterosexual marriage is not about dominating another group, but rather about pleasing their God.”<sup>347</sup> This ignorance of their oppressive stances demands that a womanist sexual relational model take these experiences into account as they advocate for a plurality of relationships.

### **Heterosexism in Womanist Scholarship**

Sadly, there is not a lot of precedence for this task in womanist scholarship.

Womanist theologian Renee Hill argues in her infamous challenge to womanist and black theologians that the “lesbian voice is silenced in Christian womanist theology.

Heterosexism and homophobia are nonissues in the Christian womanist paradigm for

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<sup>345</sup> Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, 205-06.

<sup>346</sup> Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! : The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 125-26. He contends that black women embrace punitive language for gays because they see the loss of a potential mate. However, I think there is more to their opposition since there seems to be an equal disdain for lesbians.

<sup>347</sup> Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, 208.

liberation.”<sup>348</sup> Despite the fact that this ignores one of the key components of the womanist definition, e.g. “loves women sexually,” the hesitancy to discuss lesbian relationships mirrors the same disregard for religion found in the black feminist theorist model. Hill argues from a liberation standpoint that womanists have a duty to confront the oppression of gays and lesbians because to fail to do so negates the diversity of black communities. A noticeable departure from this norm is Kelly Brown-Douglas’ work, which from the start has been attentive to heterosexism and homophobia. In *Sexuality and the Black Church* and subsequent works she acknowledges the prevalence of homophobia in the black church and posits that heterosexism threatens the full humanity of black gays and lesbians.

Yet, it is not enough that one or two womanists publish and discuss combating homophobia in black communities. A new womanist sexual relational model requires that dismantling heterosexism be a central tenet since the model is grounded on the idea of sanctioning right relations. This has been a problem especially in the area of womanist sexual ethics as Katie Cannon purports that “womanist ethicists must make available to the contemporary church community counter-hegemonic strategies that debunk and unmask normalizing structures of compulsive heterosexual acceptability.”<sup>349</sup> Yet, I posit that before womanists can give strategies to the church community, they must have first created strategies from which they can operate. If Barbara Smith is correct and heterosexual privilege is the only privilege that black women have then there is a legacy

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<sup>348</sup> Renee Hill, “Who are We for Each Other?: Sexism, Sexuality and Womanist Theology,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Vol. 2: 1980-1992*, ed. James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 346.

<sup>349</sup> Katie Cannon, “Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 17.

of heterosexism that must be overcome before they assist others. In this regard I concur with black feminist Irene Monroe who asserts that the problem with some womanists is not that they are in the church or the academy but rather that they have not interrogated their own heterosexist beliefs. She goes on to state that “despite their appending heterosexism to their litanies of interrelated oppressions in their writings...they collude with the status quo, because our queer voices become subsumed by a heteronormative universality that renders us not only invisible but also speechless.”<sup>350</sup> While my project does not examine the particular reality of single black lesbian Christian women, I did want to emphasize that any womanist relational sexual model must make space for these sexual experiences to be expressed and valued.

### **Compulsory Heterosexuality and Establishing Healthy Relationships**

In order for these experiences to be valued, this model must “engage in dialogue about the various dimensions of human intimacy.”<sup>351</sup> This requires highlighting healthy relationships and expressions of sexual intimacy in the variety of forms that are possible. This breaks from the heterosexual/homosexual binary to bring about acceptance to healthy relationships on any continuum. However, my understanding of healthy relationships must be qualified. For this project, I employ ethicist Robert Franklin’s definition of healthy relationships as “interpersonal bonds and interactions that are characterized by mutuality, trust, respect, nonviolence, and sharing” because this designation comes closest to portraying the values discussed in sexual rights

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<sup>350</sup> Irene Munroe, “Roundtable Discussion: Must I Be a Womanist?” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22 (April 2006): 112.

<sup>351</sup> Cannon, “Sexing Black Women,” 25.

discourses.<sup>352</sup> I find this definition helpful because it works for any sexual orientation. Yet, I realize that for the majority of single black Christian women the ideal modeling for relationships is a heterosexual union that results in marriage.

This understanding is exemplified in the current Christian singles discourse. For instance, the film *Soul Mate* is a 2006 documentary on single black Christian women. Black female film maker Andrea Wiley sees the film as a message of encouragement for single women who are waiting to become wives. The film focuses on several successful black women who are beautiful, powerful, and without husbands. They all identify as heterosexual, and their discussions of a healthy relationship equates to a relationship that leads them to marriage. In fact, one of the women featured is relationship expert Michelle McKinney Hammond who posits that women realize that men will put them into the “friendship, freak, or forever file” within two dates.<sup>353</sup> She discourages extensive dating because she believes that if women date too long they run the risk of having sex. The dominant message mediated in the film is that marriage is the only acceptable relationship and all others are poor substitutes. This thinking does not model healthy relationships. Nor does it allow these women to think of a meaningful relationship outside of marriage.

### **Criteria for Enacting Healthy Sexual Relations**

Yet, this model is typical. Marla Frederick notes that the women she interviewed spoke “primarily of marital intercourse and their preference for this type of

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<sup>352</sup> Robert Michael Franklin, *Crisis in the Village : Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 53.

<sup>353</sup> *Soul Mate*, DVD, produced by Andrea Wiley (Los Angeles, CA: Clean Heart Productions, 2006).



commitment.”<sup>354</sup> However, when pressed those women in her survey that had previously been married noted that marriage did not equate to greater intimacy or a better relationship. They did not have a means of envisioning another type of relationship. As a result of this mentality, a new womanist sexual ethics must celebrate “black women’s sexuality, in all its orientations” as advocated by womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher.<sup>355</sup> It must also demand that healthy relationships have gauges that do not necessitate marriage as evidence of success. In this light, I suggest using black psychologist and sex therapist Gail Wyatt’s measure for healthy relationships. Wyatt’s principles include: having self-respect so that one can be in relationship with another; learning to compromise with partners while not ceding all control to them; advocating for self-protection; and controlling one’s own sexual decisions.<sup>356</sup> When a woman follows these earmarks she is much more likely to be participating in the type of relational, mutually respectful expression of sexuality that is advocated by a womanist relational sexual model.

### **Pursuing Pleasure as Key Tenet in Womanist Sexual Ethics**

Wyatt’s descriptions of healthy relationships are also the basis for good sex, and this sex can occur without marital unions. Kelly Brown Douglas asserts that in this sense good sex enhances one’s life possibilities while allowing one to be all God has called one

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<sup>354</sup> Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, 189.

<sup>355</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, “The Erotic in Contemporary Black Women’s Writings,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 206.

<sup>356</sup> Gail Elizabeth Wyatt, *Stolen Women : Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives* (New York: J. Wiley, 1997), 227-28.

to be.<sup>357</sup> It also encourages pleasure, a key component to healthy relationships and sexual agency. Pursuing sexual pleasure is often a taboo topic because it brings focus back to the body. The body is the site for sensual pleasure and to encourage relationships and sexual expressions to be pleasurable means encouraging bodily awareness. Perhaps it is the threat of the myth of promiscuity or illegitimate children that keep black heterosexual women from exploring and discussing their sexual pleasures. Black feminist Patricia Hill-Collins addresses this concern as the awareness that “seeking pleasure can simply be self-centered, self-serving, and selfish, the classic booty call.”<sup>358</sup> For her, caution must be exercised when advocating sexual pleasure because embracing pleasure for pleasure sake runs the risk of reiterating sexual stereotypes. The material effects of the decision to deny sexual pleasure is that desire is undervalued in heterosexual relationships and overemphasized in homosexual ones. However, this effect is undone when pleasure is advocated in healthy sexual relationships. In this light, Michael Eric Dyson proffers an emphasis on “healthy, mature relationships where lust is not mistaken for affection.”<sup>359</sup> Borrowing from his understanding, a womanist relational sexual model reiterates that pleasure is a part of good sex and healthy relationships but they are not predicated upon it.

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<sup>357</sup> “Can You Love God and Sex?” *Essence* February 1, 1999, <https://login.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=38561126&sid=2&Fmt=4&clientId=622&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.

<sup>358</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics : African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 287.

<sup>359</sup> Dyson, *Race Rules*, 95.

## Moving from Womanist Thought to Action

The promise of a womanist relational sexual model is that it has a means for the ideals of the model to match the lived realities of black women it is seeking to liberate. An investigation of black churchwomen reveals a myriad of sexual negotiations that test the merits of the model. In fact, the black church serves as a means to concretize the ideals of the academy since the rhetoric of relationality, pleasure, and rejection of heterosexism do not mean anything if they can not be applied in real life situations.<sup>360</sup> Yet, it must be noted that this testing site is also a site of contention because it is often because of the sexual silence in black churches that black women have accepted the advice of televangelists.

Kelly Brown Douglas and others question if the church is still relevant to speak to the sexual needs of its parishioners, and I validate these concerns, but I also concur with Pastor Marvin McMickle that the church impacts more people on Sunday than any other organization so it has a responsibility to take the lead on these matters.<sup>361</sup> Thus, I am advocating testing this model with black churchwomen because I believe that the church has a responsibility to do better by them as it is often the cause of their shame. Thus, it should take a role in being a solution. Without restating the long narrative of the role of the black church in the lives of the black community, I accept ethicist Victor Anderson's idea that the black church has been a "center of value and human fulfillment."<sup>362</sup> Yet, Anderson's view of the church is not nostalgic as he counters the discourse of Michael

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<sup>360</sup> I want to thank Nichole Phillips for helping me to frame this perspective.

<sup>361</sup> "Can You Love God and Sex?" *Essence* February 1, 1999, 100-104+. [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com) and Marvin Andrew McMickle, *A Time to Speak : How Black Pastors Can Respond to the Hiv/Aids Pandemic* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 56.

<sup>362</sup> Victor Anderson, *Creative Exchange : A Constructive Theology of African American Religious Experience*, Innovations (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 163.

Eric Dyson who finds the black church as the leader of social change. Instead, Anderson questions whether the black church can be a center of sexual healing, the seat of black radicalism, and remain characteristically a black church, e.g. a “powerful, moral force in the community whose family values and sexual teachings are conservative.”<sup>363</sup> Given his doubts, he returns to the church to be an agent in its reform. Likewise, I see the promise of a womanist sexual relational model as a representation of the church as an agent of change.

The womanist relational sexual model seeks to change the entire structure of the black church. For instance, Traci West posits that ministers in the church could use their power to “lift up the complexity of human sexual desire that God has created and the extraordinary, unlimited opportunities to explore the depths of that gift in covenantal relationships with each other.”<sup>364</sup> Thus, a womanist sexual ethics would encourage the church to reiterate that marriage is but one means of securing intimacy. In fact, when Marla Frederick interviewed black churchwomen in rural North Carolina she discovered that these women and their churches were experts in redefining and accepting relationships outside of marriage. They knew that marriage was considered the ideal, but the ideal often did not match the reality of their situations. In these instances, churchwomen like Ms. Sylvia acknowledge that “it is definitely sinful to be involved sexually at this stage of the game [but]...everybody needs to be loved, to be cared for,” and her desire to be loved and cared for allow her to enter what she would consider “less

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<sup>363</sup> Victor Anderson, “The Black Church and Sexual Ethics,” *The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies*: n.pag. [http://www.clgs.org/5/black\\_church\\_sexual\\_ethics.html](http://www.clgs.org/5/black_church_sexual_ethics.html).

<sup>364</sup> Traci West, “A Space for Faith, Sexual Desire, and Ethical Black Ministerial Practices,” in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 39.

biblically ideal, yet nurturing relationships.”<sup>365</sup> Women like Ms. Sylvia are constantly negotiating their desire for intimacy with the messages they receive. They are embodying a womanist sexual relational model that is based on mutuality, pleasure, intimacy, and agency.

### **Negotiating Sexual Boundaries in the Church and Academy**

Yet, these negotiations for sexual intimacy challenge and reframe these women’s faith as they choose to make sexual decisions.<sup>366</sup> While a womanist relational sexual ethics promotes only healthy relations, black churchwomen are caught between church proscriptions that ban their desire for love and sex or living a dual lifestyle where the church is privy to only part of their truths. Because the church is usually most vocal in its support of marital unions, black women who are engaging in sexual acts outside marriage bounds often hide their relationships or reframe them in the church. This is especially the case for seniors whose church standing might be questioned if it were known that they were engaging in sexual activity after being widowed or divorced. Instead, these women bring their “special friends” to church events and family outings without fully being able to express their love and care for each other.

While leading this type of bifurcated life does psychic trauma, women who engage in sex outside of the ideal unions may participate in unhealthy relationships where their attempts to hide their relationships lead them to not protect themselves. For instance, in Gail Wyatt’s study of black women and sexuality, her data revealed that these

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<sup>365</sup> Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, 196.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

women “viewed the consequences of sex as separate from the sexual act itself.”<sup>367</sup> They concentrated on being sexual and potentially the wishes of their partner without worrying about themselves. While arguably most churches do not think that they are pushing women to make unhealthy decisions, the denigration of women who admit responding to their sexual urges has consequences. These consequences are discussed more frequently when it comes to punitive actions towards black gays and lesbians as they are often encouraged not to value themselves because they are going to hell anyway, which leads many to not care about themselves or other people.<sup>368</sup> This connection of low self-esteem and unsafe sexual practices should be a warning sign to black churches because as single heterosexual women are castigated for their sexual choices, they also are placed in a similar bind.

### **Celibacy as One Type of Sexual Decision-Making**

Thus, churches who preach and teach from the womanist sexual relational model should know the consequences of their actions. They recognize that promoting only one option is not sufficiently a choice. This model is not an opponent of celibacy. In fact, it reiterates that celibacy is an active choice and a “powerful expression of sexuality.”<sup>369</sup> However, the model is open beyond this one choice, and it elaborates on how this choice can be enacted. For instance, in Frederick’s interviews, she noted that Ms. Sylvia engaged celibacy on her own terms by conforming “neither to church pressure to remain

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<sup>367</sup> Wyatt, *Stolen Women : Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives*, 175.

<sup>368</sup> Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way : A Womanist Theology*, *Innovations : African American Religious Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 156.

<sup>369</sup> Dyson, *Race Rules*, 93.

celibate, nor to social pressure that validates a life of reckless abandonment.”<sup>370</sup> Celibacy must be a part of sexual agency, but it can not be demanded. In addition, for those who choose to be celibate, the church must validate their choice without making this choice superior to other choices.

A practical means of doing this uses black writer Donna Marie Williams’s understanding of celibacy as its prototype for discussion. Williams asserts that celibacy is “making the decision to abstain from sexual intercourse when there is no healthy, loving, monogamous, committed relationship present in your life.”<sup>371</sup> Yet, celibacy is not to be confused with a sexual “dry spell.” One is not celibate simply because there is not an available partner. Celibacy is making a choice that even if a partner is around, one will still choose to abstain from sexual activity.

Abstinence as an active choice is desired for many reasons. Donna Williams describes her pursuit of celibacy as a result of the realization that premarital sex did not work for her because she became too attached to men after they were sexually active.<sup>372</sup> Celibacy is chosen for the women interviewed in the *Soul Mate* film because it represented a means of accessing their inner power, walking more closely with the Divine, and allowing themselves to heal from past sexual encounters that were not nurturing and fulfilling. Rev. Dr. Cynthia Hall admits struggling to accept her call to celibacy (which she has embraced for eighteen years) but she says that she realized that she uses her sexual energy as she pastors her Ray of Hope congregation in Decatur,

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<sup>370</sup> Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, 196.

<sup>371</sup> Donna Marie Williams, *Sensual Celibacy : The Sexy Woman's Guide to Using Abstinence for Recharging Your Spirit, Discovering Your Passion, Achieving Greater Intimacy in Your Next Relationship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 20.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

GA.<sup>373</sup> She connects her anointing and power to serve her congregants with her untapped sexual desire. She is engaging in a purposeful celibate lifestyle, which is what a womanist sexual ethics encourages.

Yet, part of the beauty of this model is the understanding that when a woman chooses to end her celibate lifestyle she must also be supported and nurtured as opposed to rebuked. Again, Donna Williams' perspective is informative as ending celibacy includes a ritual and contraception. For her, the decision to end celibacy is a "mindset and an act of faith that says you're ready for a healthy, loving, committed, monogamous relationship that includes sex."<sup>374</sup> Likewise, the womanist relational sexual model also advocates for waiting to end celibacy until a healthy, monogamous relationship is available. However, there must be communal support for women who choose this option in the same way that celibate women are supported for their decisions. In this sense, black churches would realize that those who act on their sexual desires in healthy, monogamous relationships are still participating in the sacred act of sexuality.

### **Black Women engaging in Healthy, Monogamous Sexual Relationships**

This contentious action would be a means for the church to match the realities of the women that it serves. It would be a way for churches to challenge the traditional notion of sin by regarding relationships that are built in love, respect, and include expressions of sexual intimacy as honoring the divine. However, I acknowledge that this particular goal may be too idealistic for churches to achieve. Perhaps a better move is to meet the conservative black church where it is. For example, Victor Anderson has a

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<sup>373</sup> *Soul Mate*, DVD.

<sup>374</sup> Williams, *Sensual Celibacy : The Sexy Woman's Guide*, 204.



similar concern with how the black church accepts its gay and lesbian members and notes that he does not expect the church to be an advocate for sexual freedom, only that it not hate gays and lesbians when they advocate for their own sexual liberty.<sup>375</sup>

Giving this concession, when addressing singles sexuality, churches are asked to embrace and/or forgive churchwomen who ignore the ideal to fulfill their sexual needs. One of Marla Frederick's interviewees named Juanita expresses this dichotomy well. Juanita recalls a conversation she had with her pastor about engaging in sex before marriage. Her pastor reiterated the typical response to abstain to which she retorted that this option did not work for her as a person who loves sex because she knows if she is going to be involved with a person that she wants to know in advance if they are sexually compatible.<sup>376</sup> This honest discussion shows that she is willing to tell her pastor that his ideals do not match her reality and she expects to remain in right standing with the church despite her views. It also reflects her ability to set her own ethical standards. Juanita is an example of a woman who has done what Rev. Dr. Susan Newman encourages black women to do, e.g. to find a "sexual ethic with which they can peacefully live—one based upon truth."<sup>377</sup>

As Anderson notes finding this truth and acceptance may lead one away from the church. My dissertation has discovered that often times this truth-seeking leads black women into the throes of televangelists. Yet, a womanist relational sexual model seeks to counter this reality by offering black churches a means to be more accepting of black

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<sup>375</sup> Victor Anderson, "The Black Church and the Curious Body of the Black Homosexual," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 311.

<sup>376</sup> Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, 196-97.

<sup>377</sup> Susan D. Newman, *Oh God! : A Black Woman's Guide to Sex and Spirituality*, 1st ed. (New York: One World/Ballantine Books, 2002), 162.

women's sexual lives. This model agrees with womanist ethicist Stephanie Mitchem's assertion that churches may not take the lead in dealing with sexuality, but they "should not hinder the discussions."<sup>378</sup> Shaming and silencing black women's expressions of sexuality are examples of these types of hindrances. Thus, to counter this reality, black churches must have access to the tools necessary to rethink their conservative traditions.

### **Concrete Steps towards Enacting a Womanist Sexual Ethics in Black Churches**

The first step in a new womanist sexual ethics toolkit is a revamping of biblical interpretation. Marla Frederick notes that the women she interviewed possessed a more liberal interpretation of scripture than what was preached in their churches, and this liberal interpretation allowed these women to be at ease with their sexual decisions.<sup>379</sup> However, these women are crafting these interpretations as they go along, which will hopefully be an unnecessary task as more womanist biblical scholars begin addressing sexuality. For instance, womanist Hebrew scholar Renita Weems highlights that the Song of Solomon was "eight chapters teeming with lust, love, sex, and passion in the middle of the Bible—and not once does the heroine or her beloved talk about marriage."<sup>380</sup> Rather than read this narrative as an allegory about God and Israel, Weems ponders what it might mean for churches to explore the sexuality positively expressed in this book. This alternative interpretation makes space for women to reinterpret biblical meanings for themselves recognizing that regulations meant for the early church may be inappropriate for this contemporary context. As Rev. Dr. Newman purports continuing to

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<sup>378</sup> Stephanie Mitchem, "What's Love Got to Do? (& Other Stories of Black Women's Sexualities,)" *Cross Currents* (Fall 2004): 82.

<sup>379</sup> Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, 194.

<sup>380</sup> Weems, *What Matters Most*, 17-18.

observe traditional biblical interpretations do a “disservice to our daughters, and ourselves, [as we are] trying to fit a 2001 peg into a 400 B.C. hole.”<sup>381</sup> Utilizing a more liberal interpretation acknowledges that the biblical restrictions on premarital sexuality often involve sexuality that is lust-based and not expressed in loving, monogamous relationships. Thus, a more modern possibility is that those participating in healthy, sexual relationships are participating in God’s plan for sexuality to be sacred and intimate.

Again, it is helpful to have a gauge on reality because instead of this possibility, it is more typical for churches to reiterate a conflicted message of sexual abstinence despite knowing that women and men are not living by this view. For example, in Robert Franklin’s recent study at the Hampton University Ministers Conference, Franklin surveyed six hundred black ministers and found that 85.3% preached against premarital sex; yet 86.8% would dedicate a baby born out of wedlock.<sup>382</sup> These ministers’ willingness to dedicate a child created from a premarital sexual encounter means that ministers know that their congregants are not accepting their ideal and black churchwomen receiving these contradictory messages are not provided a functioning sexual ethics from which to act. Thus, a womanist relational sexual model argues that rather than continually providing conflicting messages, black churches should develop strategies for promoting a feasible celibate life or healthy relationships.

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<sup>381</sup> Newman, *Oh God! : A Black Woman's Guide to Sex*, 34-35.

<sup>382</sup> Robert Michael Franklin, *Another Day's Journey : Black Churches Confronting the American Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 79-80.

## Living Sexually Before God

The next step for churches seeking to promote celibacy as a feasible possibility as opposed to a biblical ideal is to “teach their single members how to matriculate through their celibacy.”<sup>383</sup> Often churches applaud this sexual decision and offer no advice for when women get lonely or horny. Beyond a list of “thou shall nots” the church remains eerily silent although it is advocating this choice. This is an unfair expectation because for Catholic celibate women there is the possibility of becoming a nun and devoting oneself to God. For Protestants, there is no real guide on what to do with sexual energy except for prayer. Thus, womanist ethicists must help train churches to have guidelines for women to model if they are choosing celibacy as a lifestyle. I recommend Williams’ Ten Step Celibacy Program which instructs women to: make a concrete decision to be celibate; find out about themselves; set life goals; heal from past experiences; strengthen themselves by finding out their sexual triggers; pay attention to their bodies; socialize with others; create non-sexual friendships with men; model the benefits of celibacy for others; and end celibacy intelligently.<sup>384</sup> Each of these steps encourages women to become empowered, self-aware, passionate persons. It provides concrete steps for those participating in church singles ministries so that these ministries or conferences are more than just opportunities to meet a potential husband. These steps also require constant participation as a celibate person until the time comes when a healthy, monogamous relationship is established.

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<sup>383</sup> Williams, *Sensual Celibacy : The Sexy Woman's Guide*, 23.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55.

## Sexual Relationships in Black Churches

Similarly, for those single black churchwomen who are choosing to be sexually active, the church has a responsibility to help promote healthy relationships that will hopefully lead to meaningful sexual experiences. As mentioned previously, healthy relationships are a cornerstone of a womanist relational sexual model. They are necessary because in this context selecting the wrong partner could have dire consequences making it crucial that churches help women distinguish between unhealthy and healthy relationships. In Robert Franklin's book *Crisis in the Village* he challenges black churches to promote healthy dating as a means of producing healthy marriages. While I find problematic the date=marriage formula and the compulsive heterosexuality enforced in this construct, I do find value in his desire to have churches endorse healthy relationships.

Franklin participated in a consultation that looked at black clergy's attitudes towards healthy dating, and he discovered that many admitted that they were unable to get their congregants to understand the difference between casual dating and casual sex and healthy relationships.<sup>385</sup> While I do not share Franklin's ultimate concern in increasing the number of black marriages, I do share his concern for committed relationships. I posit that a womanist sexual ethics is dependent on Walker's definition of a womanist as one who is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female." This commitment to all demands relationships that are nurturing and loving. It requires advancing relationships that despite their orientation are monogamous,

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<sup>385</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the Village*, 67.

respectful, and caring. Yet, a practical approach to achieving this goal comes through watching other successful couples in black churches.

### **Womanist Sexual Ethics in Praxis**

For instance, Dr. Lindsay Marsh, author of *The Best Sex of My Life: A Guide to Purity* notes that her pastors demonstrated that “successful marriages do exist and that one man can be faithful to one woman.”<sup>386</sup> While this reiterates success via marriage the type of mentoring couple that Marsh values in her pastors is the same type of mentoring couple that churches need to emphasize. This step would require a couple of any sexual orientation accepting the responsibility of mentoring a new couple providing them with guidance.<sup>387</sup> This mentoring couple would be responsible for helping to answer questions about sexuality without shaming the couple who is sexually active. A benefit of having them answer potential questions is that they can help young couples discuss a variety of relationship situations. For instance, a contemporary situation facing couples is whether living together before marriage is a feasible option. One couple wrote into *Essence* magazine as the woman felt that “God is not looking at this too favorably,” but she felt like she was still doing what’s right in their situation.<sup>388</sup> Caught between her love of her partner and the shame associated with “shacking,” she ultimately chose to live with her partner but acknowledged her angst about the decision. Thus, her confliction over living with her sexual partner could be an issue that she addresses with her relationship mentor.

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<sup>386</sup> John Hoskins, Jr. “Saved, Single, and Not Having Sex,” *Gospel Today* (Nov/Dec 2008): 41.

<sup>387</sup> I would like to thank Rev. Asha Hunter for offering this concrete step as something that black churches could do to effectively embrace single black women who are sexually active.

<sup>388</sup> Adrienne Samuels, “To Shack or Not to Shack: Is Living Together Still Taboo?,” *Essence*, May 2007, 180.

Another value in the mentor relationship is the ability to assist new couples with determining when it is appropriate to express themselves sexually, e.g. what criteria must be met.<sup>389</sup> This does not equate to the traditional wait until marriage mantra, but instead involves listening to why the couple feels ready for such a step. The mentors are also needed to help encourage each individual in the relationship to live up to one's self-worth. Finally, the mentoring couple's role could be to encourage the couple to maintain a healthy, monogamous relationship that can include sex. This relationship modeling is not meant to encourage couples into one standard example of success, e.g. marriage. Instead, it is meant to emphasize the values that should be present in any healthy relationship.

These concrete steps are essential for helping black churches utilize a womanist relational sexual model. By focusing on the principles of mutuality, agency, and pleasure as key components to healthy relationships, this model advocates for a practical application of religion, one in which black churchwomen are empowered by their religious communities to make the best sexual decisions. Yet, these decisions do not have to reiterate the heteronormativity present in black churches. Instead, this womanist relational model offers a means to envision a new path that leads to sexual agency, pleasure, and love. However, this new sexual ethic must be an "ongoing work between black churches, the black theological academy, and the whole black community."<sup>390</sup> The damage done by churches, televangelists, and other forms of religious media can not be undone without an integrated analysis that provides space for a new sexual ethics. While

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<sup>389</sup> I would like to thank Laquinta Yokley for her insight on constructive steps black churches could make to embrace single black women who are sexually active.

<sup>390</sup> Victor Anderson, "The Black Church and Sexual Ethics," *The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies*: n.pag. [http://www.clgs.org/5/black\\_church\\_sexual\\_ethics.html](http://www.clgs.org/5/black_church_sexual_ethics.html).

the previous chapters have made the case for this new sexual model, I am offering this constructive womanist sexual ethics as both a prophecy and a promise to help black churchwomen deal with their sexual realities. In the next section, the dissertation's conclusion, I suggest that this womanist sexual relational model can offer a more holistic sexuality for single black churchwomen. I provide a summary of the dissertation paying attention to its significance to the disciplines of cultural studies and womanist ethics. Finally, I conclude by highlighting the efficacy of utilizing a womanist cultural analysis for evaluating religious media and its future implications for black women's sexual decision-making.



## CONCLUSION

### FOR ALL THE SINGLE LADIES

*“Cuz if you liked it then you should have put a ring on it  
If you liked it then you shoulda put a ring on it  
Don’t be mad once you see that he want it  
If you liked it then you shoulda put a ring on it”*  
*Beyoncé, Single Ladies<sup>391</sup>*

As *Rolling Stones* Best Single of 2008 and recipient of three Grammy’s this year, Beyoncé’s *Single Ladies* track has arguably become a female anthem. It speaks to the pursuit of marriage for single women as well as the need to be in relationship with someone. This song fits into a popular and religious culture that promotes marriage as ultimate ideal despite the reality that just like Beyoncé sings many women will go home as single ladies. For black churchwomen who are inundated with such religious and secular messages, this song could also reflect their lives. Yet, when I did a focus group with young black women at my local Baptist congregation, I was shocked at their interpretation of Beyoncé’s song. They saw in the lyrics not a reiteration of marriage but rather the promotion of healthy sexuality, e.g. a man should put a ring on it (a condom) before trying to connect with them sexually. They understand the church’s restrictions on premarital sex, but also were aware that should be responsible if they were sexually active. Stunned by such disparate views, I recognized the necessity for a new type of sexual ethics that dealt with their complex sexual lives.

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<sup>391</sup> Beyoncé, “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It),” *I am... Sasha Fierce* Sony (CD), 2008.

However, I equally recognized for the older single churchwomen that there are no easy solutions for the horny and holy. These women are caught between competing expectations and their sexual decisions are usually prescribed by their religious messages. Thus, my dissertation posited that a womanist cultural analysis is necessary for evaluating religious media and its implications for their sexual decision-making. This constructive womanist sexual ethics uses an articulated methodology of womanist sociological analysis and poststructural cultural analysis to argue for a more holistic model for women who receive religious messages about their sexuality. My dissertation contributes to both the disciplines of womanist ethics and cultural studies because of its interest in televangelist Prophetess Juanita Bynum and her faith-based sexuality ministry. My project argues that her messages must be interpreted to equip women to make healthier sexual decisions. My goal in this dissertation was to investigate how black churchwomen reconcile religious authority with their own personal freedom to make sexual decisions. In each chapter I sought to understand why Bynum's messages were persuasive with this population of women concluding that womanist scholars must tackle the complexities of these women's sexual lives.

In the introduction, I begin my analysis of these complexities by undergoing a historical overview of black women's sexual decision-making. By analyzing the rhetoric of white Christian feminist ethicists, black secular feminists, and black theologians, I assert that none of these theorists provide a model that speaks directly to the needs of single black churchwomen. This is especially the case with the allure of Prophetess Bynum as televangelism's imprint on women's sexuality is an under-evaluated topic for all of these fields. This dearth in scholarship emphasizes the promise of a constructive

womanist sexual ethics because it is directly suited to address the needs of single black Christian women. However, in order for a womanist sexual ethics to interrogate Bynum's messages, it must first be able to interpret these messages, which requires the theoretical moves of cultural studies.

Chapter one initiates an investigation into the promise of cultural studies as a complementary framework for discussing Prophetess Bynum. Televangelism is a form of religious media and cultural studies provides an interpretive lens from which to understand the import of Bynum. Thus, using the methodology of poststructuralist cultural thought, I find great benefit in the concepts of interpellation and negotiated readings as well as in Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model. These terms help explain the attraction that single black Christian women have to Bynum's messages while providing an analysis that explores how these women apply these messages to their everyday sexual realities. However, the discipline of cultural studies has not paid adequate attention to the experiences of black women much less black religious women so the field of womanist ethics is a necessary complementary discipline.

Womanist thought is important because it understands the everyday realities facing black churchwomen and seeks to critique all oppressive structures, which should include restrictive messages about black women's sexuality. In my second chapter, I employ womanist sociological analysis as a means of viewing Bynum as a case study. As a living text, Bynum represents a cultural phenomenon as well as a complicated example of black female sexual subjectivity. Thus, I posit throughout the dissertation that to interpret a complex figure such as Bynum requires an articulation of methods, namely a womanist cultural analysis that benefits from the structure of cultural studies

and the intentional focus on black women from womanist thought. This interpretation highlights the particularity of Bynum and her viewers while emphasizing that her popularity and viewers' acceptance of her messages are not random.

On the contrary, Bynum's messages and viewers fit into larger systems of production. For example, chapter three highlights the import of neo-Pentecostalism and televangelism on both Bynum and her viewing community. These influences form not only Prophetess Bynum but showcase why those in the viewing audience are susceptible to what she has to say. Bynum is a part of a longer lineage of women televangelists (although uninvestigated) whose unique message and popularity brought them fame and created a community of followers. However, her particular faith-based sexuality ministry dealt with the margins of the Christian community, singles, becoming widely popular for its ability to voice their concerns.

Bynum's method of articulating single black churchwomen's sexual concerns leaves much to be desired. Although she speaks from their experiences of sexual frustration she does little more than reiterate the messages that they receive in their religious communities, i.e. they should abstain although they desire sexual pleasure. While her messages are deemed risqué for some in her televangelist community, an interrogation of her views show that she does not advocate for anything other than what is expected of neo-Pentecostals. Yet, in the fourth chapter, my investigation reveals that restricting sex until marriage is an ideal that even Bynum admits is hard to accomplish. While she promotes prayer as a means of overcoming the connections one has to old and new sexual partners, she accepts that if after the book and the video she falls again, she

will have to listen to her own message and try again.<sup>392</sup> This sense of trial and error speaks to the realities of black churchwomen who are trying to adhere to the sexual messages of their religious communities. However, it also reflects that these women are receiving messages that do not match their experiences or their sexual decisions.

For example, chapter five focuses on the dilemmas shared by those single black Christian women who want to achieve the ideal of waiting until marriage for sexual encounters, but find that they do not actually meet this goal. These women's complicated realities lead them to make sexual decisions under poor circumstances as they feel they are castigated for being sexually active or sexually frustrated if they abstain while waiting for an expected marriage. Bynum's messages are alluring but unsatisfactory as these women ferret out what they can use from her discussion despite remaining sexually active. For these conflicted women, a new model of sexual ethics is necessary. This new model is a constructive womanist sexual ethics that offers concrete solutions for those single black churchwomen who desire to be sexually agential.

A womanist constructive sexual ethics is significant because it provides more research on black women's sexuality, thus attending to a critical gap in research. It emphasizes that black women's experiences matter and their sexuality involves more than exploitation. By utilizing an articulated methodology, the dissertation argues that no one model is sufficient for interrogating black churchwomen's sexuality. Thus, my dissertation offers both fields the benefits of the other discipline. For instance, my dissertation pushes womanism beyond the black church tradition to explore the variety of religious messages that are impacting black churchwomen. While my interest is in the sexual lives of women in the church, this investigation shows that these women receive

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<sup>392</sup> Juanita Bynum, *No More Sheets : The Truth About Sex* (Lanham, Md.: Pneuma Life Pub., 1998), 229.

messages beyond the church's walls. Womanist thought has done a tremendous job critiquing the oppressive structures of black churches, yet, when dealing with black women's sexuality, womanists have ignored a huge influence, i.e. televangelism. By pushing womanists out beyond black churches, the dissertation pushes them into the realm of religious media and popular culture, areas primed for interpretation. In addition, my dissertation offers womanists who are concerned with sexuality a means to discuss more than the pain and abuse experienced by black women. As shown in the introduction, black women's sexual legacy is wrought with negative, exploitative experiences. However, there is more to their sexual narrative than this. Yes, black women are sexually conflicted by their religious communities, but they are also experiencing sexual pleasure, desire, and agency that has gone ignored. Hopefully, my dissertation's push towards a more constructive sexual ethics makes space for these topics to be addressed.

Yet, my dissertation also is significant for the discipline of cultural studies because it provides a first attempt to address religion, race, and sexuality. Prior works in cultural studies that have dealt with religion have paid attention primarily to white televangelists and male televangelists with little regard to sexuality. While the works of Shayne Lee, Jonathan Walton, Marie Dallam, and Marla Frederick are promising additions to the discipline, they all focus on the importance of male televangelists, whether black or white. Instead, my dissertation purposely concentrates on black female televangelists. This turn is significant for a discipline that has not interrogated female televangelists nor black female evangelists and audiences.

As much as my dissertation sought to fill in the gaps in research in both disciplines, I am clear that my work just begins the conversation. It offers considerable attention to some areas, but there are still topics to address. For instance, as I constructed my womanist sexual ethics there was a substantial gap in womanist sexual ethics that had to be addressed. Despite Kelly Brown-Douglas' attention and the pioneering articles in the edited volume *Loving the Body*, there has not been critical attention paid to black women's sexual experiences beyond a discussion of a sexual politics of resistance. While I employ this trope in my work, I seek to push beyond this framing to envision a more substantive model for single black churchwomen.

Yet, even this model has its limitations as in my discussion, I am aware that I have offered a class-based analysis of women's sexual decision-making. For example, I heavily utilize the sources in Marla Frederick's book *Between Sundays*, and these women are classified as rural, poor, Southern women. When I look at the population that watches televangelists such as Bynum, there is a tendency for them to also be poor and Southern. Bynum's audiences lend credence to this stereotype as the majority of Bynum's conferences occur within the Bible Belt, and she has started two churches in the greater Atlanta, GA area. The women who flock to Bynum and others are targeted often because they are more susceptible to the claims of prosperity gospel associated with most televangelists. Thus, the implications of my study may be limited to those who are striving to be in the middle-class not persons who are already there.

An additional problem for this project is that the womanist relational sexual model that I advocate is to be tested within black churches, a potentially unfeasible environment for sexual justice. For example, my dissertation has focused on black

churchwomen's sexual messages, with a particular focus on those they receive from televangelism. When this model is tested in churches it must deal with the reality that many pastors and ministers are emulating the men and women they see on television. Black church leaders are copying the styles and messages of televangelists and until more televangelists are called into accountability, there will be stagnated change in churches. Quentin Schultze offers a solution to this accountability issue by suggesting that televangelists should be sponsored by large churches or denominational boards. While I agree with his view that "unless televangelism is under the actual authority of the church, the church will be increasingly preempted by the organizational needs and interests of televangelists," I doubt that governing organizations will provide enough ministerial and ethical guidance to greatly influence the sexual messages promulgated.<sup>393</sup> Thus, I believe the promise of a work in constructive womanist sexual ethics is to lay the foundation for future researchers to continue to critique black churches and televangelists. In fact, these future possibilities are concrete implications of this womanist relational sexual model.

My dissertation has created one entry point for womanists to discuss black women's sexuality in a more nuanced manner. Yet, it points to the vast work ahead. For instance, an initial interest of this project was a comparative investigation of how black single Christian women and black single Muslim women made sexual decisions. This comparative work on black Muslim women is a possibility because of this project. For instance, Debra Mubashshir Majeed is a Muslim womanist scholar who argues that a Muslim Womanist philosophy "moves beyond the race analyzes of black male intellectuals, the gender analyzes of many feminist (predominately white female)

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<sup>393</sup> Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture : The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991).



intellectuals, and the faith analyzes of Christian womanists in its interest in ... African American Muslim family life.”<sup>394</sup> Majeed is currently working on polygyny and black Muslim women as a womanist scholar. Her work also points towards sexually agential black women as plural marriages are a topic that a constructive womanist sexual ethics should be addressing.

Another topic that is ripe for further exploration is the sexual agency of young black women. As I noted in the opening of the chapter, I was flustered at the youth’s interpretation of Beyoncé’s lyrics; however, these young black churchwomen are growing in potentially even more conflicting an environment than their parents. While they equally face the pressure to become sexually active and to remain virgins, they deal with a plurality of mediums daily that their parents are only beginning to use. Televangelists’ use of popular culture is savvy and marketable; however, it pales in comparison to the conflated messages facing today’s young women. Their understanding of healthy sexual relationships is even more contestable than their parents, which makes a womanist sexual relational model necessary for these young women as well.<sup>395</sup>

Finally, I hope this dissertation spurs interest in the benefits of sociological, anthropological, and cultural analysis as compelling methodologies for womanist scholarship. I began this project with an interest in intervening in the rising numbers of black women becoming infected with HIV. However, my research has shown me that the womanist model alone is inadequate to address the plurality of spaces where black women are being educated or miseducated. When AIDS is the leading cause of death for

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<sup>394</sup> Debra Mubashshir Majeed, “Womanism Encounters Islam,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple : Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey Floyd-Thomas (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 46-47.

<sup>395</sup> I would like to thank Kenya Tuttle and Yolanda Wyatt for emphasizing the necessity of universal sexual education for younger and older single black women.

black women aged 25-44, all tools must be used to circumvent this tragic reality.<sup>396</sup> My dissertation proposes the formation of a constructive womanist sexual ethics that hopefully will offer a means for women to come to terms with their sexuality and spiritual walk with God.

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<sup>396</sup> <http://cdc.gov/hiv/topics/women/resources/factsheets/women.htm>.

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