Black Women-in-White Dresses: A Critical Study in the
Scholarly Aesthetics of Womanist Religious Thought

By

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

Religion

February 14, 2023
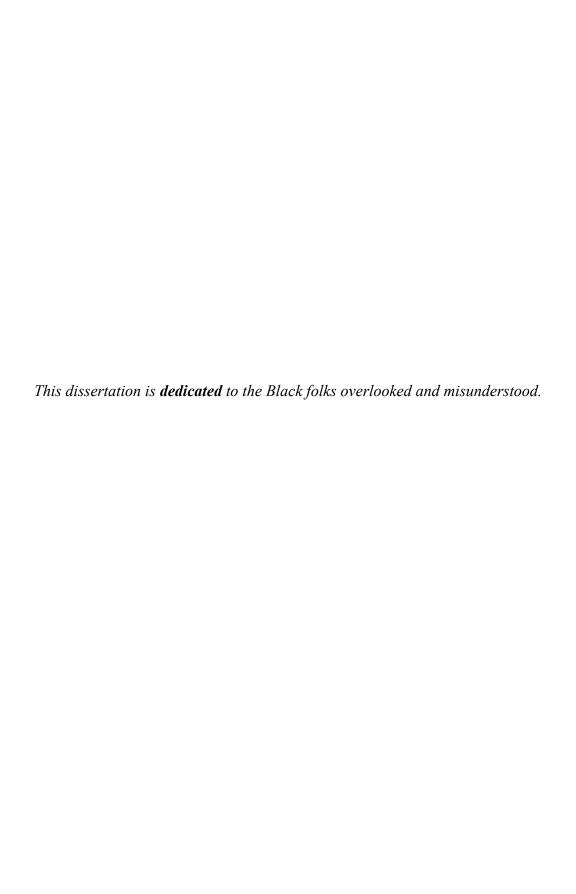Nashville, Tennessee

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*This dissertation is **dedicated** to the Black folks overlooked and misunderstood.*

up beside by desk. Thank you for the gentle nudges when you wanted me to take a break and play with you.

To the Black women-in-white dresses at that little church with a big heart in Roebuck: You were my Sunday school teachers, children's church leaders, and youth advisors. As I got older, you encouraged me and provided financial and other resources as I continued my academic journey. While there were times when things happened that I did not agree with, you all were always willing to wade through the uncomfortable. Even when you were told the pulpit was not for you, you ministered to me. Special shout outs to the best Sunday school teacher, Sis. Betty Jean Davis, the always loving Deaconesses Bessie Davis, Estella Hunniecutt, and Theresa Rogers, the best cook and church Mother, Wessie Mae Stephens. And to those that have gone on the late Deaconesses Mary Ann Woodruff and Sylvia Massey, and Mother Eloise Miller.

Finally, to the queer Black girls and women constantly breaking gender norms and rewriting what it means to be you. Continue to shine in a world that may dim your light or try to extinguish you. Take up the space you need. We need you and your stories.

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Lexicon

This lexicon provides definitions for the phrases used throughout this dissertation that are fundamental to the argument of the paper.

Culture refers to set of experiences relevant to communal and group understandings. Culture is the defined by the description and understanding of experiences. Culture is defined by those experiencing culture. As such, the phrasing, popular culture takes its roots from the communities who create and consume.

Experience is a matter of living. It is the process through which we understand our relationship to the world.

Representation names the way we explain culture and experience.

Introduction

Scholarly Aesthetics and the Work of Phenomenology

"Who are we when we are not someone's mother, or daughter, or sister, or aunt, or church elder, or first Black woman to be this or that?"
—Paula Giddings

Published in 1993 in The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner Studies in North American Black Religion series at Orbis Books, *Troubling in My Soul* is a collection of essays written by early womanist religious scholars. The anthology is the first collection of decidedly womanist and religious essays published. Each essay focuses on the perspective of sin and evil related to the search for hope and justice by black women scholars of religion. In her introduction to the collection, editor Emilie M. Townes offers this overview of the text,

> The four parts of the book are based on the definitions of womanist found in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. African American women in the church and in theological education have begun to explore Walker's definitions in light of the gospel message of salvation and hope. Perhaps the most common understanding of Womanist is that she is a woman committed to an integrated analysis of race, gender, and class. This arises from a deep concern to address the shortcomings of traditional feminist and Black theological modes of discourse. The former has a long legacy of ignoring race and class issues. The latter has disregarded gender and class. Both modes of discourse have begun to address these internal flaws. Yet womanist reflection maintains its critical perspective of feminist and African American traditional ways of analytical reflection.[1]

Walker's four-point definition names a Womanist as

1. From *womanish*. (Opp. Of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown up doings. Acting grown up.

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[1] Emilie Townes, "On Creating Ruminations from the Soul," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993), 1-2.

Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally a universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?" Ans. "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time."
3. Loves music. Loves our dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.
4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.[2]

Using Walker's womanist definition as a guidepost, the scholars featured in *Troubling in My Soul*, wrestle with the complexities of theology and Black women's experiences in the collection of essays. From considerations on the Black Women's Club Movement by Marcia Y. Riggs to M. Shawn Copeland's Theology of Suffering, each writer centers on the lives of Black women as the explanation for the particularity of Black women's experiences.

Part III of *A Troubling in My Soul*, which focuses on loving the spirit, features an essay entitled "A Womanist Perspective on Sin" written by Womanist biblical scholar and theologian Delores S. Williams. In the essay, Williams writes, "to devalue any…understanding of a Womanist is to devalue black women's womanhood, to devalue their humanity, to be guilty of sin—the sin that denies that Black women's humanity is in the image of God as is all humanity."[3] Williams articulates a delicate relationship between Womanist and the entirety of Black women's womanhood. Any rejection, misinterpretation, or inattention to Womanism, and

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[2] Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 1983), xi.
[3] Delores Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering,* ed. Emilie M. Townes (Mayknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993), 146.

therefore Womanists, is a refusal to acknowledge Black women's humanity. Even more, the denial of Black women's humanity is to deny the image of God. Williams places an ontological priority for all Black women to be Womanist. This relationship between humanity and God as constitutive of Black women's identity affirms Womanism as the retrieval of Black women's womanhood in the face of sin or more broadly, systems of oppression along the lines of race, gender, and class.

Situating the claim of Black women's humanity within the framework of Womanism presents several issues. First, the Christo-centric language of God and sin as a part of black women's existence leaves no room for those outside Christianity. Instead, Williams emphasizes a womanist theological ontology for *all* Black women. Furthermore, Womanism and black women are framed as interchangeable within this scheme. The lack of distinguishing language for agency between black women and the womanist moniker further confines black women to a Christian womanist experience. Given these two limiting conditions, Williams strikes down any critique as sinful and tethers Black women to Christian understandings of evil.

This dissertation grows out of an uncomfortableness with critique of womanism as sin. In doing, this dissertation addresses how womanist religious scholars situate the role of representation within statements like Williams' concern with the humanity of Black women. If a critique is sinful, what questions can be asked of womanist religious thought? What questions are permitted considering Walker's definition as an ontological priority for Black women? And more importantly, is there space for a conversation about the totalizing language used to reference Black women in womanist religious scholarship?

This dissertation turns to a concern of representation to explore the category of Black woman referenced in womanist religious thought. Toward that end, a particular focus centers on

the Black women left behind by womanist definitions and means of defining Black women's experiences. A metaphor best realizes the pathway to exploring these concerns. Robert Sokolowski's metaphor of a cube provides a way forward. His approach to understanding the contours of a cube is phenomenological. Phenomenology provides methodological grounding to my investigation.

Cubical Beings

In his book, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Sokolowski begins with the role of intentionality in phenomenology. For Sokolowski, intentionality deals with the "Consciousness… 'of' something in the sense that it intends the identity of objects, not just the flow of appearances that are presented to it."[4] Perception produces the identification of the objects presented. Perception is how we first encounter an object through our senses. Sokolowski best realizes perception by using the cube as a metaphor. When presented, we identify a cube because of prior experiences. We may only see two sides of the cube, but we still perceive the object like a cube. We have still experienced a cube even when we cannot see the totality of the cube. From any way of perceiving it, the cube provides a profile or "temporally individuated presentation of an object."[5] We know that this is a cube because we sense its structure and understand that it is a cube from any given aspect or profile. We are only introduced to a particular presentation depending on how we hold or view the cube. Our understanding of the cube is thus predicated on our knowledge of what a cube is. We perceive the cube from the

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[4] Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 21.
[5] Sokolowski, 19.

profiles it presents to us. This is perception. Whether a known or unknown component of

something, we perceive it by the totality of what we perceive it to be.

From any way of perceiving it, the cube provides a profile or "temporally individuated

presentation of an object."[6] Similarly, the profiles we create in our daily lives—whether on social

media platforms or in-person—represent the presentation of parts or the whole. We can be given

a profile of the cube or a side of the cube. Profiles also contain aspects of the cube and its sides.

The aspect is determined by the way we view the cube. The cube appears as a square when

placed directly in front of us. This is an aspect of the cube. However, if we were to take the cube

and tilt it so that no square is present, but rather a plane in the shape of a trapezoid, the aspect of

the cube has changed.

Even with these delineations of whether a cube is given to us via profiles and aspects, we

never experience the cube as a piece. We experience the cube always as a whole. The cube is the

identity of all that it presents to us. It is never one of those things, but simultaneously all of them.

We can acknowledge the cube as a cube. We sense its structure and understand that we know

that it is a cube from any given aspect or profile. We are only introduced to a particular

presentation depending on how we hold or view the cube. Our understanding of the cube is thus

predicated on our knowledge of what a cube is. We perceive the cube from the profiles it

presents to us. This is perception. Whether a known or unknown component of something, we

perceive it by the totality of what we perceive it to be.

Perception provides a spectrum of possibilities for "layers of synthesis, layers of

manifolds of presentation, both actual and potential."[7] Perception indicates the presence of a

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[6] Sokolowski, 19.
[7] Sokolowski, 20.

whole belonging to one cube. Yet, the presentation of profiles and aspects indicate that "layers of difference that I experience are played off against an identity that is given continuously in and through them."[8] The identity of the cube is what I know and is augmented by how I experience the cube. In these ways, the perceptual landscape is in constant negotiation with my experiences of the cube. The cube provides a profile, and I know it is a cube. An aspect of the cube is presented and recognized as a presentation of a cube. Sides of the cube appear, and the cube is known. These different encounters with the cube define perception and provide a concern for identity. While people are not literal cubes, Sokolowski's metaphor provides an analytic tool for talking about experience. If we position experience as multidimensional, there is a portal to thinking about the diversity of experience. Sokolowski's metaphor disrupts thinking about identity as a universal, totalizing idea. Sokolowski focuses on the presentation of the cube to the one who experiences the cube. This is not an account of *how* the cube presents itself. The focus is given to the experience of the cube, not the cube itself.

The multiple possibilities of perceiving a cube represent what Sokolowski calls a "blend of presence and absence."[9] Thus, I have construed Sokolowski's metaphor as a spectrum to tell the story of Black women. The spectrum I speak of is not linear to represent varying degrees of and between Womanist and non-womanist. This spectrum is also not circular to indicate a process by which one is evolving or moving in some womanist process. Sokolowski's metaphor of the cube, read alongside the work of womanist religious scholarship, troubles Williams and other early womanist religious scholarship processes to tell the story of Black women. Within the complexities of experience, Black women are captured within a totalizing definition of *Womanist*

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[8] Sokolowski, 20.
[9] Sokolowski, 18.

that does not expand the categories of experiences. Instead, an opposite effect is the result. Black women's experiences are flattened to fit a cultural identity—Womanist. By placing Womanist as a concern for Black women in religion, Black women's experiences are trapped in a womanist religious culture focused on inclusion. Inclusion of an overdetermined narrative of Black women's culture seeks to legitimize Black women's lives in the study of religion. Claiming the experiences of Black women as critical is not refuted. However, the need for inclusion to be evaluated alongside Walker's definition is the locale of the problem.

Acknowledging the presence and absence of parts of the whole assists our thinking. We avoid the limitations of categories and tenets. These rubrical forms of analysis provide a sterile understanding of the varieties of self. They flatten experience and dismiss the deeper rationalizing that happens. Our experiences are experienced. Experience is the record of what we sense, feel, know, process, and, most importantly, rationalize. We must consider the totality of experiences in thinking about womanist religious scholarship. Even more, appealing to a cultural modality of doing womanist religious scholarship upholds a cyclical scholarly aesthetic.

The Makings of a Scholarly Aesthetic

In "Black Scholarly Aesthetics and the Religious Critic: Black Experience as Manifolds of Manifestations and Powers of Presentations," Victor Anderson paints a genealogy of Black studies and emerging discourse beginning with literary analysis and critique to sort through methodological commitments to consider how blackness is defined and framed as a product of Black genius.[10] This genius becomes the focal point of how we might understand the production

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[10] Victor Anderson, "Black Scholarly Aesthetics and the Religious Critic: Black Experience as Manifolds of Manifestations and Powers of Presentations," American Journal of Theology & Philosophy 33, no. 2 (2012): 117–34. https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjtheophil.33.2.0117.

of art and culture by Black people. This turn into Black genius as the production of blackness is rejected by Anderson. He argues that Black genius lessens blackness to a product of Black culture. Anderson delineates the relationship between culture and experience to situate the role of blackness in liberation theology. For Anderson, the experience becomes a cultural checkmark that signifies access to Black exceptionalism. This exceptionalism dismisses experience as an act of experience but rather characterizes an experience as one of a communal idea to prove blackness as worthy or placed in relation to whiteness. In this scheme, experience collapses into culture.

Anderson's suggestion that experience presents as a necessary condition for slavery reveals the propensity to engage culture as experienced under a particular set of conditions. The criteria limit how we might engage and therefore understand the vacuous term, experience. Anderson returns to a concern he engages in *Beyond Ontological Blackness,* which questions the push toward survivalist narratives of Black exceptionalism in liberation theologies.[11] He writes, "The effect is black exceptionalism, which is a euphemism for black essentialism. Rather than black experience as manifolds of manifestations and powers of presentations determining the significance of our cultural forms or stylizations of blackness, black culture overdetermines black experience."[12] Anderson provides a critical distinction for me as the reliance on Black culture as a codified and consumer-driven culture of experience renders experience as a necessary condition for blackness and Black culture.

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[11] Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995).
[12] Anderson, 122.

What is at risk when we rely on representative experience(s) in service of a culture of Womanism? Ultimately, the conflation of experience and culture lessens the particularities of age, class, sexuality, race, and gender issues or downright ignore them. The emerging conceptions and realities of contemporary Black women's lives are ignored in service of relying on stereotypes to guide our understanding of the categories of Black womanhood. Even when re-imagined as markers of identity for Black women's experiences, these stereotypes trap Black women into the particularity of these depictions.

I explore re-writing subjectivity concerning how we see ourselves in relation to representing ourselves. In doing so, I center the *desire* for visibility not only a quest for inclusion but also as a space in which Black women receive a particular spotlight. In sentiments regarding representation as inclusion, visibility flattens Black women's experience into a cultural phenomenon shaped by the reception of Black women. Black women's participation in an uninterrogated matrix of representation, and a corresponding theo-ethical significance, captures the roots of womanist theological ethics and its commitments to narrating, distinguishing, and commenting on Black women's experience as a culture of Black women suffering. In doing so, womanist theo-ethics' call for representation through inclusion serves as a call for visibility rather than a liberating claim of inclusion. Thus, the ethical dilemma continuously narrates as a dilemma of representation based on the southern culture of Black women as defined by Walker. Unfortunately, the reliance on this stagnant, poetic definition only serves as a quest to represent a particular Black womanhood, focusing on liberation on the surface as a one-dimensional experience.

Further exploration into womanist religious scholarship's understanding of representation, culture, and experience, reveals the exclusion of many Black women in service of

an ontological Black womanhood. Writings about Black women are flattened such that Black women stands for cis Black women and avoid engagements of transwomen, femmes, and nonbinary persons. Likewise, class analysis may not be explicit but the implicit suggests Black womanhood as related to middle class values—such as education, civic commitments, and organizations. And without further distinction from a one-dimensional reading of Walker, heteronormativity persists and excludes the experiences of queer Black women and Black lesbians.

The preoccupation with a singular experience of black women ultimately dooms womanist religious scholarship to the pits of congratulatory hell. Many times, this celebration ignores present and contemporary understandings of being and presence. Experience—I use the singular form as a pseudo personification in recognition of experience as a noun thing—as a resource for the work of womanist religious scholarship, cannot serve as a shapeshifting practice left to the whims of sufficient ordering. Instead, I am thinking about how to do the work of expanding the understanding of experience. How might the work of womanist religious scholarship do the work of understanding what it means to have an expansive categorical understanding of Black women's experience(s)? This is the question that haunts this dissertation.

This haunting derives from a lack of philosophical understanding of experience in womanist religious scholarship. My concern with Sokolowski and phenomenology reflect a desire to move beyond retelling experience for the purpose of inclusion, but rather to explore the use of experience as a related to larger conversations regarding the categories of identity. For womanist religious scholarship, this would be a deeper engagement aligned with larger conversations in Black studies about blackness and in Black feminist studies, womanhood. Even more, phenomenology soothes this haunting. Phenomenology offers tools to explore the nature

of experience and to read Walker's identification of womanist as that of a singular figure. In doing so, a phenomenological reading of the womanist definition understands any experiences mirroring those of Walker's are simply a product of a set of experiences rather than a product of culture. When experience is rendered under the category for universal experience makes the subject a totalizing metaphor. This metaphor traps any understanding of the subject as representative of the culture.

In her work, *Raising the Dead*, Sharon Patricia Holland examines literature and writings about death after slavery. Holland questions the potentiality of socialization to reflect the relationship to enslaved persons. She writes,

> I propose that we give blackness its due—not as a universalizing narrative for all marginalized people but as something much more tangible, provocative, and meaningful. I would like to view blackness as a measure of how all peoples in the United States construct an intimate idea of self in relationship to the nation—by having, in that little corner of their imagination a black seed against which all action—and therefore, in the existential sense, all being—is differentiated.[13]

Holland arrives at this conclusion by reading Toni Morrison's public lectures and *Beloved*. Morrison represents an "imaginative environment" where Holland argues for the existence of a transgressive boundary or "'space of death'."[14] The ability to transgress boundaries is an indicator of self and self-making. Within self-making, dichotomies are established in thinking and writing, which Holland identifies as racial, gendered, and social in nature. Thus, the author's role is to decide how these dichotomies factor into their work. Holland centers this work within what she calls a "politics of experience."[15]

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[13] Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead*, ed. Donald E. Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 16. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822380382.
[14] Holland, 5.
[15] Holland, 16.

Holland's politics of experience draws on Joan W. Scott's *The Evidence of Experience*. Scott explores the role of knowing and experiencing as a historian. Scott evaluates future methods for the work of the historian and writes, "The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, and how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world."[16] Recognizing difference as a category for detailing history is critical for Scott. That is, history's evidence begins at the point of experience. However, experiences captured by the historian must account for their relationality to history. Demarcating sexuality as a point of difference, Scott introduces the work of writer Samuel Delaney as he details an awakening, an exploration of a new world of homosexuality. Delaney vividly details his first time in a bathhouse and his feelings as both insider and outsider. Although he notes this space is new to him, he "emphasizes not the discovery of an identity but a sense of participation."[17] Scott attributes this feeling to writing one into visibility. The question of difference recognizes our ability to make the other visible. In these ways, following Delaney's autobiographical work is a survey of how visibility and difference identify experience. This identification operates as such that

> …. the project making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, Black/White as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origin, and cause.[18]

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[16] Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–97. https://doi.org/10.1086/448612, 777.
[17] Scott, 776**.** Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957-1965* (New York: Arbor House/W. Morrow, 1988), 173.
[18] Scott, 778.

Scott brings us back to the dichotomies of Holland's work. Scott and Holland center the casting off experience within these dichotomies as both evidence of self and self-making. In this situating of self and self-making, rests the potentiality for understanding Black women's experiences as parts of womanism. However, the self and self-making are not totally womanist. As such, Black women's experiences are beyond the category of womanist religious scholarship.

Chapters Outline

Chapter one locates the tethering of Black women's experience to representation within womanist religious thought. I begin by narrating a story of the Black church, gender, and experience, centering on the experience of Black women and Communion within the Black Baptist tradition. This story presents a dilemma endemic to womanist religious scholarship's appeal to representation. The dilemma focuses on using Walker's definition as a rationale for placing Black women's experiences in categories and tenets while simultaneously denying agency to the women in the story. Interpretations of the Womanist definition attempt to explain Black women's experience and culture, and they ultimately appear to be depictions of moral and virtuous living. In so doing, Black women's experiences are captured within a womanist definition based on Walker's narration of her experience and the interpretations of the four-part definition by womanist ethicists Katie G. Cannon and Stacey Floyd-Thomas.

Furthermore, womanist religious thought's foundation of literary analysis and use of Black female historic figures betrays its attempt to represent Black women within the womanist definition. Womanist religious scholarship's commitment to ethical analysis as a form of representation fails to adequately center on the totality of Black women's experience. This study makes this claim knowing that all experiences cannot be represented. However, womanist ethics'

reliance on identifiable markers of experience related to Walker, differentiating Black women's experiences from (white) feminist theology and ethics, and decrying isolation in Black (liberation) theology, leads womanists to the same conclusions—isolation of experiences. This isolation lends itself to the crafting of authenticity related to Blackness and Black womanhood. Isolation and authenticity operate within a system of cultural hegemony that ultimately equalizes experience to cultural identity.

Given this dilemma in womanist religious thought, **Chapter 2** addresses representation and its role in engaging the experiences of Black women. I turn to a critical engagement with cultural theorist Stuart Hall's work on representations and art critic Nicole Fleetwood to offer theories regarding Blackness and gender as concerns of cultural experiences. If womanist religious thought operates within a crafted representation of Black women, why is representation important? This chapter uses a clip from a reality television show, *Flavor of Love* to think through the ways dialogue amongst Black women polices certain experiences. Recalling the work of historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent*, the politics of respectability are negotiated alongside questions of representation in the public sphere. This chapter tackles matters of representation and whether visual representations of blackness and Black womanhood matter.

Chapter 3 explores the politics of representation as evidenced by reactions to Michelle Obama's National Gallery Portrait. I identify two events surrounding the portrait's reception. First, I explore the viral sensation of *Parker Looks Up*, a book written by Parker and Jessica Curry, detailing Parker's awe and fascination with the Obama portrait. I argue that six-year-old Parke's infatuation with Obama's portrait should not be celebrated as the power of representation. Second, I address the public outcry following the reveal of the former First

Lady's portrait. The public outcry considers issues of verisimilitude in Amy Sherald's grayscale rendering of the former First Lady.

Chapter 4 considers social media as a space of disruption of the womanist norms identified. Using the work of sociologists and communication scholars, I frame emerging ways of being and belonging as defined in the age of social media. This framework suggests that the work of liberation and inclusion is not about confirming categories of experience but rather the narration of experience and culture as separate entities related to being and belonging. These conversations situate the importance of recognizing social media as a public sphere.

Finally, the **conclusion** suggests paths forward for studying gender as scholars of religion, concluding with an argument for the emancipation—the loosening of Black women—from womanist religious scholarship's culture. This cultural hold attempts to discuss Black women as cultural *objects* rather than *experience*.

Chapter 1

Black Woman's Social Lives

Growing up in a southern, Black, working, low-income family, I thought of the church my family attended as more than our place of worship. That small, rural church dominated our social lives. Within the four walls of this church, my family had status as one of the most visible, dedicated families. Three generations of my family attended and served; many started as children who regularly attended Sunday school. Church gave us an identity outside of society's labels and categories. Church was a social club that framed the inner workings of Black social status and class. While the realities of poverty were ever present, church was a place of escape. This felt most apparent on Communion Sundays.

On the first Sunday of every month, our church observed the death of Jesus by drinking wine (grape juice) to represent his blood and ate bread (oyster crackers) to represent his body. While the celebration of Christ is the reason for the gathering, I remember these Sundays for their pageantry. My grandmother wore a white suit that she had dry-cleaned earlier in the week. She always wore one of the three wide-brimmed hats she owned—each coordinated with the suit of her choosing and each coordinated to the season of the year. When we arrived at our small, rural church, my grandmother joined other women similarly dressed and seated in the front of the church. Their presence seemed to convey an idealized womanhood.

When the time came to receive sacraments, my grandmother and her fellow women-in-white rose from their seats and followed their husbands to receive Communion before the rest of the congregation. Although their husbands were participants and dressed in their uniform of a black suit, white shirt, and tie, the women always caught my attention. As other parishioners

processed down the church aisles to the table, my grandmother and others were seated regally and offered a quick smile and wave. For a few hours on Sunday morning, my grandmother's status as a Black, under-educated, working poor woman was unnoticeable because of her membership in an exclusive, heterosexual, married women's club. Their experience within the Black church culture was one of service. Their lived experiences outside and inside the church served as a reminder that no matter the visual presentation of holiness on Sunday morning, their lives Monday through Saturday, did not attract similar visual esteem. Their white suits and hats did little to separate them from the impacts of racism, sexism, colorism, and classism inside and outside those church walls. Their status as women in that church did little to protect them from misogynist policies that allowed them to be the church caretakers but nothing more. My grandmother and her fellow women-in-white's attire signified their status as married women and mothers of the church.

Recalling this memory memorializes a common and repetitive experience and overshadows demeaning realities. While I have fond memories of the scene, I cannot forget that my unwed mother and my burgeoning queer self are missing from this story. We were witnesses but existed outside of the boundaries of my grandmother's group. My *fondness* for this memory prioritizes the pageantry of my grandmother's status while lamenting the women left out of the scenario.

After many years of study and thinking about this scenario, there is still a methodological conundrum. To tell this story of my grandmother and her fellow women-in-white is to tell a story of perception. My perception of this scene overshadows a deep consideration for a fuller and more complex narration of experiences. Even more, the perceptual landscape that could come from a story as such proves to be one that can speak to womanist ways of being.

In the (southern) Black Baptist tradition, Communion Sundays are services commemorating Jesus' death and resurrection. While the sacraments are the theological symbolism of the occasion, the moment is a distinct aesthetic representation. These aesthetic representations take the form of dress, décor, and music to create a solemn experience. Communion Sundays play into the complex gender dynamics of the traditional Black Baptist church. The placement and attention given to understanding the coded ways Black women are *read* in the public square necessitate a conversation on how to make sense of visual representation in two ways. First, how we experience Black womanhood through visual representations, that is, how Black womanhood is defined through the visual in our everyday lives across various mediums, and second, who controls or articulates these representations and their subsequent visibility.

Nostalgic Forms

Viewing my grandmother as fertile ground for investigation, an object, seems to rob her of her agency. To emphasize the symbolic nature of the Black women-in-white dresses during Communion is fraught. The same narrative that I tell and the symbolic nature of what I thought it taught about Black womanhood traps this memory within the limitations of representation. That is, to simply recall the memory of my grandmother and others and name the memory as an example of their agency or its impact on my womanhood devalues the power of the aesthetic moment and instead reduces Black women to representational schemas. To retell that narrative and mine it for ethical significance traps Black womanhood within the bounds of another narrative. Instead, she is trapped as a representative figure, likened to an aesthetic mammy.

To avoid this mammification, this dissertation is clear that any reflection on the women in white is not an example of what scholar Yolanda Pierce names "grandmother theology." [1] According to Pierce, "grandmother theology [is] a subset of womanist thought…rooted in generational wisdom."[2] Grandmother theology occurs in "kitchens, hair salons, gardens, and church basements" between Black women and across multiple generations.[3] While these places are symbolic to many Black women, they represent a confusion of experiences that Pierce, and others see as theologically significant. It is simple to view this reflection on my grandmother's white dress as a theological invitation to consider the sacrament of Communion and Black womanhood. However, my memory of my grandmother and contextualizing it within my experience leaves out a crucial component: my grandmother's voice. Instead, the reflection exposes a world of possibilities given to explore the experience of witnessing Black womanhood within the varieties of presentation. My grandmother wearing white is not about being a Black woman. The wearing of white during communion fits into a profile of Black womanhood.

In speaking of evangelist Juanita Bynum—of "No More Sheets" fame—womanist sexual ethicist Monique Moultrie names her attire as her commitment to her faith.[4] Moultrie writes, "her clothes serve as double signs, constructing meaning and carrying particular messages…to perceive her as a representative of holiness, which her modest attire attests."[5] Moultrie's attention to Bynum's dress denotes the body as a visual plane and an outward representation of theological understandings of what it means to be a Black Christian woman. The history of Black

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[1] Yolanda Pierce, *In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Broadleaf Books, 2021*), xvii.
[2] Pierce, xvii.
[3] Pierce, xvii
[4] See Juanita Bynum's https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UNbbm4fHuwg.
[5] Monique Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 35.

women-in-white is not limited to the confines of church life, as civic, fraternal, and sororal organizations and community events may require women to dress in white. These organizations and ceremonies typically revolve around rituals and signify the same ideas of reverence and respect—white clothing functions as the symbol of formality. Within biblical frameworks, the color white symbolizes purity, holiness, and cleanliness.

The distinction between *being* and profile does not negate Black womanhood. Nor does this distinction reject my grandmother and other churchwomen in its significance to culture. This distinction, however, denounces Black churchwomen in white and my retelling of their presentation as symbolic of all Black womanhood. The inclination to assume this story is symbolic of all Black church women is misguided. Using the language of profile simplifies the constraints of universality. Focusing solely on the symbolism of Black women-in-white invokes a nostalgic form that focuses on Black women-in-white dress as an ontological priority. The symbol invokes nostalgia to remember dress and aesthetic form as integral to understanding Black women. I counter that these symbols are mere aspects of a profile. The symbols provide a contoured understanding of the locale of Black women's experiences. The symbol is not everything or a totality. Instead, it is the symbol of a particular context driven by nostalgia.

Within this Black cultural discourse, nostalgia operates as a driving force. Nostalgia here is concerned with memory and remembrance. In my use of nostalgia, I am thinking alongside the work of Badia Ahad-Legardy in *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture*. Ahad-Legardy is concerned with memory and nostalgia and the possibility of Afro-nostalgia. Of nostalgia, they write,

> In the contemporary black imagination, Nostalgia functions as a psychic and emotional vessel onto which historical desires are cast. Nostalgia consistently shows up as a dominant

feature of contemporary African American expressive culture, although it has been considered a privileged emotion that is absent from black narratives.[6]

For Ahad-Legardy, the investigation into the possibilities of Afro-nostalgia begins within African American studies. Nostalgia shows up in African American studies to think through traumatic histories and prioritize Black exceptionalism as it is "a lens through which we can conceptualize the desires of the African-descended to discern and devise romantic recollections of the past in the service of complicating the traumatic as a singular Black historical through line." [7] These feel-good memories negotiate remembrance and what is left behind. Afro-nostalgia provides a framework for contextualizing the history of African descendants up and against known histories. Ahad-Legardy suggests "afro-nostalgia as a framework…to analyze the seemingly dissonant concepts of historical memory, blackness, affect, joy, and thriving."[8] Ahad-Legardy's framework fits within contemporary conversations in Black studies engaging slavery and trauma. For example, Ahad-Legardy references Christiana Sharpe's "wake work" and Saidiya Hartman's "afterlives of slavery" as she argues that "nostalgia [is] an often-overlooked contender to help heal historical pain."[9] Healing historical pain through nostalgia presents a new framework to fill in the gaps of the archive and personal remembering.

Nostalgia as a healing practice is not a new concept. In 1982, Black feminist and lesbian scholar Audre Lorde released *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Lorde classifies *Zami* as a biomythography that blends prose and poetry with autobiography. Weaving together her memories of family and friends alongside reflections on Grenada, her family's country of origin,

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[6] Badia Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 6.
[7] Ahad-Legardy, 3.
[8] Ahad-Legardy, 4.
[9] Ahad-Legardy, 8.

and the burgeoning spaces for feminist and lesbian scholarly exchange, Lorde offers a general

biography of her life while adding a layer of reflection. According to womanist ethicist Stacey

Floyd-Thomas, *Zami* reveals a "moral conflict that begins with a yearning to find lost self...and a

journey that starts with the love and loss of her mother and all the other women who she comes

to love and lose throughout her life."[10] In her monograph, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in

Womanist Ethics*, Floyd-Thomas names literary analysis as one of three methods—Black

women's literature, sociology, and historiography—that compose a systematic womanist ethical

analysis. The process of mining Black women's literature as "sacred texts" serves as "a veritable

storehouse of life stories that illuminate the experience of survival and liberation in the midst of

evil and suffering."[11] Within the method of literary analysis, biomythography is an example of

what Floyd-Thomas defines as radical subjectivity or Black women's ability to defy their

existence "in light of the racist-sexist-classist oppression that they face and the ways in which

they have subverted forced identities and hegemonic truth claims."[12] In *Zami*, Lorde provides an

"embodied testimony" that participates in an "act of recalling...the information revealed within

them" or simply "re-memory of disremembered memories."[13] Recall functions as a form of

nostalgia as far as Ahad-Legardy is concerned. She argues that

> Afro-nostalgia…expresses a desire to lace the gaps of historical memory with pleasure-
> inducing affect—not by rewriting the past but by embracing nostalgia's imaginative
> capacity to rehabilitate the black historical past and refashion the present. Contemporary
> black subjects reckon with the trauma of the historical past vis-à-vis pleasure-seeking and

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[10] Stacey Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics,* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 25.

[11] Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode,* 20.

[12] Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, "Writing our Lives: Womanism as an Epistemological Revolution," in *Deeper Shades of Purple Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas. (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 8.

[13] Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 28.

pleasure-making acts of *anamnesis* (bringing to the present an object or person from the past)[14]

The process of recall and remembrance as pleasure in *Zami* "culminates in a new understanding of her truer, more cumulative self in the mythic personification of Afrekete."[15] Afrekete appears as a feminine spirit and the embodiment of becoming. Through Afrekete, Lorde offers a radical possibility of self, ignited by a journey of self-discovery. Afrekete is the product of infatuation with and nostalgia for a woman Lorde remembers. Kitty is both Afrekete and a pleasure-induced memory. Kitty, short for Afrekete, is the last story of romance offered in *Zami*. Lorde recalls sitting at a house party and meeting a young woman named Kitty. Her beauty and fashion strike Lorde. Of Kitty, Lorde writes, "And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fine hairs along the under edge of my navel."[16] Afrekete awakens within Lorde a new passion and desire. Lorde speaks of her erotic connection to Afrekete as a "thundering space," drawing her to her "electric flesh."[17] Lorde slips in and out of prose to describe Afrekete as a cosmic reality, a new possibility for Black women. Their relationship represents the possibilities of pleasure for and with Black women. Afrekete symbolizes the radical potential of a relationship—sexual or otherwise—for Lorde. When Afrekete disappears after their short relationship, Lorde writes, "I never saw Afrekete again, but her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo."[18] This emotional tattoo functions as a nostalgic form.

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[14] Ahad-Legardy, 8.
[15] Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the* Motherlode,25.
[16] Audre Lorde, *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 1982), 249.
[17] Lorde, 249.
[18] Lorde, 253.

Ahad-Legardy's argument suggests that Lorde relies on nostalgia to soften the realities of failed and traumatic relationships. Lorde situates her identity as related to the romantic and non-romantic relationships with women, whether friend or stranger, familial or non-familial relationships. Nostalgia shows up in the lessons learned in each remembrance. Lorde's *Zami* follows what Ahad-Legardy names "the positive emotions generated by nostalgic memories, real or imagined, encourage a feeling of connection between the past and the present and a general sense of social connectedness and felicity."[19]

Womanist Representation(s)

Lorde's *Zami* and Ahad-Legardy's Afro-nostalgia fit within a genealogy of scholarship that captures and describes Black social life. Within the study of Black religion, Black social life describes the relationship to religious modes of being and belonging. Black social life presents the possibilities and awareness of Black life in and through religion. Furthermore, themes of being and belonging narrate the fight to include Black social lives within religious studies—the introduction of womanist religious scholarship into the academic world of religious studies is an example of these themes.

In her seminal text, *Black Womanist Ethics*, Katie Cannon explores the exclusion of Black life in dominant ethics. Cannon positions the moral identity of Black communities as worthy of exploration for theological and ethical conversations. Cannon seeks to disrupt the world of dominant ethics based on a monolithic experience of virtues. She writes,

> Black people live with severely limited ethical choices. Their action guides assert a human validity that is not derived from the white-male-norm. The values and virtues therein teach Blacks the usefulness of prudence, the relativity of truth, and how to dispel the truth of death to seize life in the present. For Black people, the moral element of

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[19] Ahad-Legardy, 20.

courage is annexed with the will to live and the dread of greater perpetrations of evil acts against them.[20]

Ignoring the moral identity of Black people furthers the role of racism and white supremacy when discussing virtues. Cannon suggests that a corrective occurs when black women's literature is a primary resource. Black women writers such as Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Ann Petry offer a portrait of Black social life that characterizes the moral interiority of Black life. Even more, Cannon, and other early Womanists, use Black women's literature to narrate Black women's experiences. Cannon's labeling of virtue in the Black community names how womanist ethics and theology intervene on Black women's behalf to include their experiences. Alongside literature, Cannon points to the works of Howard Thurmond and Martin Luther King, Jr. To respond to normative ethics' lack of engagement with Black life.

Cannon's womanist ethical method focuses on themes from Zora Neale Hurston's life and work. Of the biographical data shared, Cannon names invisible dignity, unctuousness, quiet grace, and unshouted courage as characteristics of Hurston's life. These characteristics extend beyond Hurston and provide commentary on Black experiences. Evil and suffering are the ways by which these characteristics arise. The actions and characteristics of Black communities captured in Black women's literature show the possibilities of virtues in the face of oppression. Cannon notes that "dominant ethics makes a virtue of qualities that lead to economic success— self-reliance, frugality, and industry. These qualities assume that success is possible for anyone who tries." [21] Thus, virtuous living is the cure for social issues.

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[20] Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics (*Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1988), 145.
[21] Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics,* 2.

Alice Walker coined the term "Womanist." While it is true that *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* provides a full-length definition of the terminology, Walker introduces the term "Womanist" in the story "Coming Apart." Published in 1979, "Coming Apart" tells the story of an unnamed married couple struggling with questions of sexual desire and waning love in their marriage. [22] After finding pornographic magazines filled with images of nude White and Black women in the family bathroom, the unnamed wife confronts her husband about his attraction to other women and their dwindling sex life. Shocked by the accusations, the husband attempts to hide his voyeuristic exploits by turning his attention back to his wife, who reads the works of feminist thinkers. The husband finds the works of Audre Lorde, Ida B. Wells, and Tracey A. Gardener too liberal for his wife, claiming that Lorde's sexuality invalidates her as a resource for a heterosexual wife, while Wells and Gardener encourage the wife to be a feminist.

After establishing the relationship between husband and wife, Walker introduces the term "womanist" as the wife contends where she lands on the spectrum of feminist identity. Walker writes, "The wife never considered herself a feminist—though of course, a 'Womanist.' A 'Womanist' is a feminist, only more common."[23] Walker discusses desire, sexual and otherwise, in the latter half of the short story. For Walker, stating that the wife is sure of her womanist identity while uncertain about her feminist identity lends itself to a dialogue regarding desirability between Black women and Black men. In doing so, Walker names that much of the contention between Black women and Black men regarding desirability *and* sex is at the root of accepting feminist ideology. Even more, feminism's relationship to white women casts an

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[22] Layli Phillips, "Womanism: On Its Own," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (United States: Taylor & Francis, 2006), xix.
[23] Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (United States: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 7.

additional layer over conversations regarding sex, desirability, and pornography. Walker's

labeling of the wife as womanist attempts to disrupt the husband's dismissal of feminism.

However, Walker provides no significant definition of "womanist" in this publication. She does,

however, provide a short etymology of the term and its derivation from "black woman's culture"

in a footnote. According to Walker,

> An advantage of using "womanish" is that because it is from my own culture, I needn't preface it with the word "Black"' (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word "feminist") since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is no need to preface "feminist" with the word "white" since the word "feminist" is accepted as coming of white women's culture.[24]

Walker's second use of the term signifies a separation from feminism to explain the

particularities of one Black woman's experiences. Walker turns to womanism as a response and

critique of Jean McMahon Humez's editorial work on *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca

Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*.[25] Troubled by how Humez characterizes Jackson's

relationship with a fellow Shaker woman, Rebecca Perot, Walker offers "Womanist" as a better

identity to assign to Jackson. Womanist, according to Walker, presents as a better way to capture

what she calls "woman-bonding" between Black women. Woman-bonding as a womanist way of

being is a more nuanced explanation of women's relationships with men and women, sexually or

otherwise. Walker writes:

> Indeed, I can imagine black women who love women (sexually or not) hardly thinking of what Greeks were doing; but, instead, referring to themselves as 'whole' women, from 'wholly' or 'holy.' Or as 'round' women—women who love other women, yes, but women who also have a concern, in a culture that oppresses all black people…for their fathers, brothers, and sons, no matter how they feel about them as males. My term for such women would be 'Womanist.' [26]

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[24] Alice Walker, "Coming Apart, "11.
[25] Alice Walker, "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress," *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (United States: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 12.
[26] Alice Walker, "Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress," 18.

Through "Coming Apart" and "Gifts of Power"—published in 1979 and 1982, respectively—Walker distinguishes Black women outside of feminist thinking by focusing on experiences of being (race) and belonging (relationship building). Feminist, even as a descriptor, does not capture the nuances of Black women's lives for Walker.

Womanist religious scholarship's adoption of the term, womanist, comes from Walker's 1983 collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. The collection begins with a four-part definition of the term womanist. The term's etymology is a derivative from the Black, southern colloquial phrase, "womanish." The word identifies a Black girl acting outside of what is good Black girl behavior. The four-part definition begins with an intergenerational conversation between the womanish girl and a presumed adult womanist. While there is no specific transition from girl to woman in the four stanzas, the definition contextualizes knowledge as passing from woman to girl. Walker describes a Black woman open to the possibility of loving, sexual, or otherwise, men and women. She stresses that a womanist is concerned with the survival of the entire Black community while also privileging women's culture. A womanist loves the arts, relates to the universe, and appreciates the movement and shape of her body. Finally, a womanist is a darker, richer shade of purple compared to lavender, associated with feminism. This color play—we get the color lavender by adding white to purple—alludes to Walker's critique of white feminism favoring white women's experiences over those of Black women.

In her text, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics*, Melanie Harris notes that Walker's turn to the personal as experience operates as a moral biography.[27] Harris views the

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[27] Melanie Harris, *Gifts of Virtue, Alice Walker, and Womanist Ethics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 11.

"task of uncovering black women's stories and highlighting their experience as an important source for their moral framework" as "the womanist ethical task."[28] Virtue, and subsequently virtue ethics, presents itself as a part of black women's—womanists'—lives. To do the work of virtue in womanist ethics, Harris's *Gifts of Virtue* argues for a return to the use of Walker in womanist religious scholarship. According to Harris, Walker presents a wealth of resources if womanist ethicists and theologians are willing to examine her work. Harris believes that more attention to Walker's life offers a reservoir from which Walker's womanism flows.

Walker's womanist definition is deeply personal. The definition is at the beginning of a book of prose titled after an essay in which she reminisces on her relationship with her mother. Walker's "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," is an appreciation of Black women's works. Of the essay, Harris writes, "Walker implies that it behooves any woman of African descent living in the present to honor the women of the past, who may have never been allowed to write because they were sharecroppers or slaves but who had every bit of intelligence and creativity to do so."[29] Walker's description of the artistic life of her mother's gardening functions against how literature makes sense of Black women. Noting the contributions of famous Black women writers and authors, Walker asks, "[h]ow was the creativity of the black woman kept alive, year after year and century after century, when for most of the years black people have been in America, it was a punishable crime for a black person to read or write?"[30] Walker answers this question by naming the aesthetic value of her garden. Walker's mother and other women make art out of materials readily available, a quality of survival that she admires. Walker writes that the essay's title came "while thinking about the far-reaching world of the creative black woman,

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[28] Harris, 11.
[29] Harris, 16.
[30] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 403.

that often the truest answer to a question that really matters can be found very close."[31] *Our Mothers' Gardens* symbolize a space for mothers and their daughters.

Experience as moral biography is similar to the concerns raised about nostalgia and biomythography. Womanist thought, beginning with Walker's moral biography as virtue-making, encompasses ethical reflection. Harris argues that an individual's biography provides insight into their moral life. Knowledge of an individual's acts—through any retelling of their biography—is the grounds by which the method is born. Harris's appeal to a moral biography presents a challenge as she fails to define it in the text. Given moral biography's relationship to virtue ethics in Harris' and Cannon's works, moral biography must signal the relationship between the living out of morals gleaned from an individual's life story. Reading the moral from an individual's biography is a practice of reading the moral as defined by another. As such, to read the women-in-white as moral agents *suggests* a moral code in the act of remembering. Yet, the moral code is continuously up and against normative ethics. For example, Cannon's disquiet over the lack of concern for Black women's moral lives identifies a more significant problem with reading Black women's experiences up and against dominant ethics. Cannon turns to Hurston's literature and life as a resource for understanding the Black woman as a moral agent. Cannon and Harris name this project of excavating biography and the literature of Black women—and Lorde's excavation of her life—the beginning point. However, recalling, retelling, and reading an individual's life story does not unsettle nostalgia, as there is still a necessary engagement of history and remembering.

Contending with what it means to engage history and memory, womanist theo-ethicist Emilie Townes notes that we must wrestle with the fact that "the images of [B]lack women and

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[31] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, 406.

girls rest solidly in the imagination of US culture and must be deconstructed and understood for the awful impact they have on how a stereotype shaped into 'truth' in memory and history."[32]The shifting from stereotypes to truth is a product of what Townes names the fantastic hegemonic imagination (FHI). Within the FHI, stereotypes created about Black people become truths of history. The fantastic hegemonic imagination "plays' with history and memory" to shapeshift memory and history in service of dominant narratives.[33] This shapeshifting eventually creates narratives of evil.

Using the work of French historian Pierre Nora, Townes argues for a rearticulation of the "paradigm of history and memory" such that history and memory are subjective.[34] A subjective view of history negates any understanding of history as an objective, scientific discipline. Using history as a scientific enterprise limits the discipline to "a reconstruction of what no longer exists."[35] As a scientific form, history presents an unwavering discipline uninformed by memory. Townes cautions against naming the relationship between history and memory as a polarized binary. Dichotomies of history and memory position memory as less than such that its subjective nature is like personal remembrance or what Nora names "sites of memory."[36] Memory intercedes as a "dynamic" idea informed by "constructed history."[37] Memory's dynamic nature renders it "life always carried by living societies...in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting."[38] Townes aptly argues that memory and history coexist as

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[32] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil,* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 3.
[33] Townes, 7.
[34] Townes, 13.
[35] Townes, 13.
[36] Townes, 13.
[37] Townes, 13.
[38] Townes, 14.

particular and universal concerns. Memory reflects the known through the act of remembrance. History operates as "relative" to understand "the relationships between things."

The narratives of Black women who have been forgotten and silenced recover a new understanding of what happens when we remember. Townes suggests that this method of recovery is the work of countermemory, which "begins with the particular to move into the universal. It looks to the past for microhistories to force a reconsideration of flawed (incomplete or vastly circumscribed) histories" as a means of rejecting dominant culture.[39] Townes sees countermemory as a way to "open up subversive spaces within dominant discourses that expand our sense of who we are."[40] Townes's concern with reimagining dominant discourses in the service of honoring Black experiences mirrors Cannon's concern with dominant ethics. Both scholars suggest that the way to reorient dominant discourses is to examine the particularities of Black life. For Townes, this work begins with memory, history, and imagination. Cannon points to Black women's literature as incubators of Black moral life.

Is it Fantasy?

Nostalgia conjures images of Black women from the past that confine us to the realm of memory. For womanist religious scholarship to move beyond nostalgia, there must be a reckoning with how fantasy casts that memory beyond pleasure but as a representative form of meaning-making. In his essay "Fear, Trembling, and Transcendence in the Everyday of Richard Wright: A Quare Reading," featured in *Philosophical Meditations on Richard Wright*, Victor Anderson considers the work of Soren Kierkegaard, E. Patrick Johnson, and Alfred Shultz as Wright's interlocutors. Johnson's etymology of Quare, fashioned after Alice Walker's four-part

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[39] Townes, 8.
[40] Townes, 23.

definition of womanist, provides an "episteme" of the term "from its black cultural and familiar vernacular roots."[41] Quare, as Anderson argues, represents a definition for context. The context in this article is the distinctive bio-poetic and countermemory that Wright experiences and translates into his work. Anderson notes that "Wright bargains his own sense of individuality to gatekeepers of black acceptance…demanding for the price of acceptance…the negotiation of silence."[42] Wright's bargaining shows up in his writing as his experiences are cast on the page and upon his subject matter. Anderson reads this within a *quare* profile of Wright. Quare should is not a definition of identity. Instead, it is a description, a possibility of who someone can be. Quare as potential exists as "moments of transcendence that for instance the finite province of fantasy and projecting provides."[43] Anderson's quare profile references the works of Alfred Shultz and Thomas Luckman, who suggest that "projection is utopian: in performance of the fantasying consciousness."[44] Fantasying is not simply the act of remembering or recalling. Instead, fantasy is a reimagining. Anderson writes,

> Designating fantasying as a finite province of conscious life points out that as a projection
> of the conscious life, what is projected, enjoyed, played out, in what one loses oneself in

[41]Victor Anderson, "Fear, Trembling, and Transcendence in the Everyday of Richard Wright: A Quare Reading," *Philosophical Meditations on Richard Wright*, ed. James B. Haile III (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 66. E. Patrick John's definition of Quare: Etymology (with apologies to Alice Walker) Quare (kwar), n. 1. Meaning queer; also opp. of straight; odd or slightly off-kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of being; curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes "Black" Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan Behan's famous play The Quare Fellow. -adj. 2. A lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women, sexually and/or nonsexually, and appreciates black culture and community. n. 3. One who thinks and feels and acts (and sometimes, "acts up"); committed to struggle against all forms of oppression- racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc. n. 4. One for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity. 5. Quare is to queer as "reading" is to "throwing shade." (E. Patrick Johnson, 2006, 125).
[42] Anderson, 66.
[43] Anderson, 72.
[44] Anderson, 72.

and invites others into the fantasized world as intersubjective play of ideality, such a finite province of conscious life, as is fantasy and projection, is disrupted by the actuality of everyday time. Everyday time renders such fantasying moments of transcendence momentary.[45]

The momentariness of fantasy renders the temporarily given profile as a projection of possibilities. Fantasy as reality is fleeting. However, fantasy is never continuous but always a finite projection of possibilities. Quareness is not an identity of the profile but rather a momentary *read*ing of the profile.

Anderson's usage of quare as an understanding of Wright's work undergirds this chapter's concern with labeling my grandmother and other church women as womanists. Anderson argues that,

> My quare reading of the everyday of Richard Wright does not signify a fixed, stable identity. It highlights critical, interpretative moves, in the practices of reading and writing, from an empathetic standpoint of a life in motion and nomadic, as it were, questioning and shy, speaking and silenced, understood and forgotten, restless and 'boundaryless.' My quare reading of Wright's…forms of transcendence of the everyday through African American cultural rituals and lived experience.[46]

Quareness is not identity but rather a profile of being. It is a representational phrase meant to describe an act temporarily given. Anderson does not attribute his quare reading of Wright's actions as a conclusion of Wright's quareness. Rather, quare is an operative word to make sense of Wright's actions related to gatekeeping and cultural identity. Between experience and acceptance is a *quaring* of actions. This quaring occurs in three ways. First, countermemory is a form of signification. Anderson's use of countermemory is different from Townes' use of countermemory. Anderson's countermemory is a reflective retelling that "is closed off neither by moments passed nor by the immediacy of moments now being experienced."[47] Moments pass as

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[45] Anderson, 72

[46] Anderson, 78.

[47] Anderson, 77-8.

experienced and part of memories. Memories represent the "non-resolvent ability of the

"passing" of the past into the "presentness" of the present, being re-presented."[48] Signification is

vital to understanding the relationship between experience and memory. Countermemory does

not accomplish this alone. Countermemory works alongside what Anderson names *biopoetics*.

He writes that

> Biopoetics and coun-ter-memory signify an interpretative loop or circuitry. Biopoetics signify an identity in becoming, highlighting the precarious and capricious cultural de-terminacy of life options in the making, the coming into being, of Richard Wright. Countermemory signifies the ambiguous texture of Wright's bio-graphical consciousness, the meaning structure of his conscious attention to the course of his beginnings and life journey."[49]

Wright's journey as a writer and other life events renders his work part and parcel of his

experiences. Remembering and recounting framed against countermemory and biopoetics are

given their momentary status as profiled in writing. Countermemory and biopoetics bracket and

suspend totalizing conclusions. The profile they provide is a practice of quareness. Quareness or

quare as a practice of reading does not subject Wright and his work to "a fixed, stable identity."[50]

The profile is not the total but one move within experiencing the whole.

Anderson's delineation of quare alongside biopoetics and countermemory speaks to the

methodological issue present in the scenario of my grandmother and the other women-in-white.

Choosing not to label this account and those involved as *womanist,* or a womanist practice frees

the temporarily provided profile of first Sunday attire and duty. This move disrupts patterns of

reading Black women alongside and up against the stereotypes identified as products of the FHI.

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[48] Anderson, 69.
[49] Anderson 77
[50] Anderson, 78.

Anderson's quare reading as a temporary understanding of the scene is a less constricting way to understand Black women's experiences.

Chapter 2

Matters of Representation

"Oh my god. Is this who we are? Is this what we represent? Telling somebody to kiss it, lick it, suck it...."

Comedian Mo'Nique uttered the above quote at the reunion show for VH1's *Flavor of Love Girls: Charm School*. The 2007 show followed former contestants of the dating and reality show contest, *Flavor of Love*, the VH1 show that followed rapper Flavor Flav of the rap group Public Enemy as he searched for a new sweetheart. *The flavor of Love* was an instant hit for the VH1 network and appeared for three seasons from 2006-2008. Fourteen contestants from Seasons 1 and 2 of *Flavor of Love* returned to VH1 to compete for $50,000 on the show *Flavor of Love Girls: Charm School*. The competition served as a pseudo-finishing school intended to revamp the image of its contestants. At the show's reunion, Mo'Nique claimed that the show attempted to respond to the backlash from Black women about the actions displayed on *Flavor of Love*. Mo'Nique developed the show around ten commandments that would refine each women's appearance and demeanor. These commandments teach the arts of fine dining etiquette, public speaking, and other mannerisms that connote elegance and refinement. Mo'Nique, the headliner of the *Queens of Comedy* and lead actress in the UPN series *The Parkers*, oversees the women's transformation as the headmistress and life coach of *Charm School*. Each segment featured an inspirational moment meant to invigorate the women to strive for greatness. Mo'Nique clashed with popular contestant Larissa, also known as Bootz, on *Flavor of Love* throughout the season. At the reunion, Larissa calls out Mo'Nique for her "holier than thou" persona.

Larissa: I just think everything you saying is...it don't even matter. You just playing this game cause you getting a check.

Mo'Nique: Tell me what game that you think I'm playing?

Larissa: You're playing this game of making all the girls on Flavor of Love feel like they're a disgrace.

Mo'Nique: F you, your monkey…you deserve better come on baby put your best foot forward.

I begin this chapter with this scene as it portrays the tension between Black women and representation. Larissa pressures Mo'Nique to take accountability for her superior and classist actions toward the women featured on *Charm School*. What does the Black woman want in terms of representation? What stories and narratives about Black women's experiences exist as a part of our stories? Finally, why is representation in popular culture necessary? This chapter thinks through visibility to answer these questions around representation. Here, visibility names the attention, platform, exposure, and representation that underpin womanist religious thought. For the extent of this chapter, I unpack what I see as the relationship between visibility and representation.

Figure 1. Promotional image from Vh1's Flavor of Love Girls: Charm School in a Boston newspaper television review. (Joanna Weiss, "'Charm School' Sells Redemption but it's all Show," April 24, 2007,

Mo'Nique claims that Black women are concerned with the way Black women behaved on *Flavor of Love*. Her astonishment with the women's behavior toward each other includes how the contestants treat each other and the other colloquialisms uttered in moments of frustration. Mo'Nique assumes the role of an elder Black woman guide and mentor. In this role, Mo'Nique encourages the group to work hard to make Harriet Tubman, Dorothy Dandridge, and other notable Black women proud.

Depictions of Black women in art, film, television, and social media provide fertile ground for a conversation on race, gender, and verisimilitude. As such, Black women's presentations and depictions are limited to a set of identifiable markers of known Black women's experiences. If we begin by thinking about the experience and the mode of perception accompanying it, experience presents visibility as realized through representation. The desire to be seen is not merely a visual concept. Instead, visibility is having images stand in for experiences by focusing on control of representations. Mo'Nique's commentary on Larissa is an example of this.

Other Black women like Beyonce Knowles, Maya Angelou, Oprah Winfrey, Toni Morrison, and other celebrities are celebrated such that their visibility becomes a marker for honoring Black women's experiences. Black women shaping the narrative around their identity without explicitly mentioning whiteness operates as an intra-gaze condition. This intra-gaze condition may be the product of the white gaze but goes a step further as it condemns the presentation of Black womanhood outside of Black womanhood. Even more, there is an

intergenerational aspect that places the burden of making notable Black women from history proud.

Mo'Nique acknowledges that the behaviors of these women are like those she has exhibited at times. In her confrontation with Larissa, she acknowledges that she is not perfect. Mo'Nique distinguishes herself by noting that these behaviors have a time and a place. It is helpful to name here that the contestants on *Flavor of Love* and *Charm School* are of varying racial backgrounds. The group includes white women, women of Asian descent, and those who identify as multi-racial. Mo'Nique's comments do not necessitate a rehashing of respectability politics and Black women's behavior. Instead, Mo'Nique's words speak to a different type of policing of Black women. Beyond respectability, there is an additional qualification of acceptability. Figures like Mo'Nique and other deified Black women are role models of Black acceptability of Black women's behaviors portrayed in the public sphere. This "acceptability" acknowledges a multitude of Black women's behaviors. Even more, this acceptability understands the power of representation for Black women. Mo'Nique's *Charm School* illustrates Black women thinking about the power of time and place, code-switching, and representation.

Conversations regarding shows like *Charm School* and *Flavor of Love* reimagine respectability politics. At its core, concerns for Black women's representation exist as advocacy for respectable behavior. However, these concerns with the visual representations—crafted by Black women—of Black women demand *respectable* and *acceptable* behavior. Therefore, Black women's portrayals represent an acceptable Black womanhood crafted by Black women for non-Black audiences' consumption. Black acceptability acknowledges many personalities within Black womanhood but places a hierarchy on the forms of Black womanhood exhibited in mainstream, popular culture.

This demand placed on Black women to "represent" a particular narrative of Black womanhood reflects what art critic Nicole Fleetwood describes as a "weight placed on [B]lack cultural production to produce results."[1] The issue that Mo'Nique raises requires Black women to police their behavior. Black women are responsible for their behavior as part of Black cultural production. By participating in *Flavor of Love* and, subsequently, *Charm School*, the Black women on the show bring the entirety of Blackness and Black womanhood into this framework. Their actions on the show showcase who they are and can be. The weight of representation was unfairly placed on their shoulders as if they possessed the ability "to alter a history and system of racial inequality."[2] The burden of representation is placed on Black women even if they are not the cultural producer. In her *Troubling Vision*, Fleetwood argues that "the desire to have the cultural product solve the very problem that it represents: that seeing [B]lack is always a problem in a visual field that structures the troubling presence of blackness."[3]

Mo'Nique's concern with the contestants' behavior operates on two levels. First, reality television and social media representation showcase Black women in the public sphere. As such, the burden of representing an acceptable Black woman occurs such that Black women serve as a corrective to how they are perceived. *Charm School* attempts to counter the perception of Black women's prior behavior on *Flavor of Love*.

Secondly, Black women police the behaviors of other Black women. That is to say, Black women, mandate what visual representations of Black women are worthy of being displayed. This policing is not a new phenomenon: From the Black women policing the representational

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[1] Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3.
[2] Fleetwood, 3.
[3] Fleetwood, 3.

customs of others during the early formations of Baptist conventions and respectability politics,

C. Delores Tucker's campaign against vulgar rap music, Spelman College's rebuttal to Nelly's

Tip Drill video, to Mo'Nique's declaration on *Charm School*, and countless other calls from

Black women regarding the presentation, and subsequent representation of Black women.

Acceptable Representatives

Mo'Nique's concern with Black women's depictions on reality television names a value

placed on Black women in the spotlight. Appearing on a popular television show provides a

segment of society with an in-depth look at Black women's behaviors. While these behaviors are

of a small group of women, a part of reality television—sometimes scripted—targets a specific

segment of society and places the burden of representing all Black women on the Black woman

participants of *Flavor of Love* and *Charm School.* The burden of *representing all Black women* is

daunting, given the nuanced Blackness and womanhood factors. However, Mo'Nique places this

burden on the Black women she mentors. Why are Black women tasked with upholding the

image of *all* Black women?

The questions of representation emerge from the relationship between race, gender, and

popular culture. In his work, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" cultural theorist

Stuart Hall explores the conditions of a "Black popular culture." Hall begins by examining

American cultural criticism through the works of Cornel West in "The New Cultural Politics of

Difference" and Michelle Wallace's "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual

in Afro-American Culture." According to Hall, these two essays and American cultural criticism,

in general, reflect a contentious relationship between naming and defining American Black

popular culture. Hall begins at the point of difference and acknowledges "the ordering of

different aesthetic morals, social aesthetics, the orderings of culture that open up culture to the play of power" to understand the relationship between power and culture.[4]As such, Hall casts culture into a system that orders not only its reception but how culture comes to be. The move to name facets of culture as *popular* participants within this power play.

What are the implications for Black popular culture if popular culture is a contested site of power? For Hall, "the role of the 'popular' in popular culture is to fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength, allowing us to see them as expressive of a particular subordinate social life."[5] Popular culture is rooted in the communities which create, consume, and experience the same popular forms. Thus, Black popular culture arises from communal experiences as representative of authenticity.

Culture and experience are related to our understanding of Black popular culture, but they are different. This distinction between culture and experience ultimately answers Hall's question, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" The "Black" is the discourse of our experiences captured within popular culture. However, these experiences are not representative of Blackness but rather present a version of Blackness that communicates what is of value and essential to Black communities without giving total access to Blackness. The distinction between culture and experience is critical for naming, reading, and sharing representation. Hall writes, "we tend to privilege experience itself, as if Black life is lived experience outside of representation. We have only, as it were, to express what we already know we are. Instead, it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how

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[4] Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice (San Francisco, Calif.)* 20, no. 1-2 (March 22, 1993), 108.
[5] Hall, 108.

we are constituted and who we are."[6] Black life cannot be the total of what we experience

through representation. Instead, Black life is the experience we know compared to

representation.

However, placing experience as a characteristic of authenticity allows space for what

Hall names a "theater of popular desires, a theater of fantasies."[7] These desires and fantasies

serve as a litmus test and shapeshift experience for an intended outcome. As Hall states, "popular

culture, commodified and stereotyped as it often is, is not at all, as we sometimes think of it, the

arena where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience."[8] Even more, to name or

read experience as the only culture misconstrues the systems by which culture, the popular, and

Blackness exist. Desires and fantasies provide the contours by which experience, authenticity,

and culture are conflated in service of diminishing, misinterpreting, and misnaming Black

popular culture.

To privilege experience, representation, or culture over the other is to misread

representation as a totalizing experience. Even more, to place this burden on Black women, as

Mo'Nique does to Larissa and the other women of *Charm School*, is a failure and further

ostracizes unacceptable lived experiences of Black womanhood. This ostracization brings us

back to questioning what Hall means by representation and how we might delineate it from

experience and culture. In "The Work of Representation," Hall defines representation as "the

production of meaning of the concepts in our minds through language."[9] Representations occur

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[6] Hall, 109.
[7] Hall, 113.
[8] Hall, 113.
[9] Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon. 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2013), 14.

in two processes: system and language.[10] The system refers to mental representations of concepts. These concepts relate to how we organize nouns— persons, places, or things. We assign relationships to these through our understanding of them. A system process is a mental act. Our knowledge of the objects and nouns "depends on the relationship between things in the world…and the conceptual system, which can operate as mental representations of them."[11] The second process of representation is language. The language used to "represent or exchange meanings and concepts, we can only do that when we also have access to a shared language."[12] Language allows us to communicate and share with others the meanings we interpret through images and sounds. These signs, specifically visual signs, convey meaning as "they bear…a certain resemblance to the object, person or event to which they refer."[13] Representation as a process of language necessitates knowledge of what is represented. Furthermore, to make meaning out of these representations requires both the system and language. They work in tandem in the process of understanding representations.

These processes lead to three approaches of representation as meaning. First, Hall focuses on meaning to further situate his concern with representation as after product. When visual representations are presented, like those offered by *Charm School's* cast, the viewer reads these moments as they are received. We operate as the receiver rather than the producer. These approaches reflect how we make meaning out of what we receive.

First is the reflective approach, which situates meaning in the "object, person, idea or event" in language.[14] Hall distinguishes visual images in the reflective approach as the

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[10] Hall, 3-4.
[11] Hall, 4.
[12] Hall, 4.
[13] Hall, "The Work of Representation," 7.
[14] Hall, 10.

dimensions of visual items. Two-dimensional images of an object versus three-dimensional experiences of a subject reflect a conceptual understanding of them. Our ability to differentiate between the real and imagined is thus predicated on our understanding of the object and subject. The second approach places meaning making in the specificity of language. This intentional approach places its actors as the definitive resource for understanding the language used to represent or communicate an image. In this approach, language is used with a specific and intended meaning. "We cannot be the sole or unique source of meanings in language, since that would mean that we could express ourselves in entirely private languages. But the essence of language is communication and…depends on shared linguistic conventions and shared codes."[15] The third and final approach "acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language…we construct meaning using…concepts and signs."[16] This approach, aptly named the constructionist approach, relies on language to construct meaning through "social actors."[17] These actors are the vehicle by which culture and language are gathered and dispersed.

The concerns raised in this chapter focus on Hall's intentional approach, where actors are the definitive resource for understanding the language used to represent or communicate an image. This approach highlights how social actors rely on several significations to convey a specific message. The constructionist approach is also related here. The material world is misconstrued in the issues with which I am concerned. Language systems are not the priority but rather what the material world presents to us. In this case, the material world presents us with an

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[15] Hall, 11.
[16] Hall, "The Work of Representation," 11.
[17] Hall, 11.

image of Black women. Mo'Nique, as a social actor, is presented with a particular view of Black womanhood that she recognizes but decries for the message it portrays.

The Problem

Why is this burden placed on Black women? I return to Fleetwood to answer this question. While Fleetwood's work focuses on photography and engages theories of art criticism, *Troubling Vision* provides a helpful starting place for engaging other visual representations. Fleetwood argues that Black representation is a solvent for the reception of Blackness. Black photography—and more generally, Black art—is presented as a corrective for how Black people are viewed and received. The Black art subjects are showcased to represent a palpable Blackness and disrupt white understanding of Black people.

I want to further this idea by suggesting that the visual media that showcase Black life—and interiority—are monitored by Black people to police Black people's behaviors. In this manner, "the role of visuality and performance…produce Black subjects in the public sphere."[18] Visuality and performance silos the Black subject to what is presented through television and depicted on social media. Fleetwood's "excess flesh" is a useful concept "to attend to ways in which Black female corporeality is rendered as an excessive overdetermination and as overdetermined excess. It is a strategic enactment of certain Black female artists and entertainers to deploy hypervisibility as constitutive of Black femaleness in dominant visual culture."[19] In *Charm School's* case, Mo'Nique makes hypervisible the very problems that she is attempting to rectify. The behaviors she identifies as problematic are again displayed and, in some cases,

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[18] Fleetwood, 6.
[19] Fleetwood, 9.

intensified. In this way, the excessive need to police the behaviors of women like Larissa backfires. Unacceptable behaviors, as displayed by the cast members, are further explored.

In this space, where representation occurs as a corrective—that is, Mo'Nique showing up as a mentor and guide on *Charm School* for contestants deemed poorly behaved on *Flavor of Love*—to unacceptable behaviors by Black women, representation operates as the all and all of Black womanhood. Mo'Nique and others act to blame Black women for behaviors deemed inappropriate and absolve whiteness from its dehumanizing construction of respectability and acceptability. To lift and validate Black womanhood, Black women are iconic and representative of all Black women. The need to represent is an unfair and undue burden on Black women to fall in line with—or the case of *Charm School,* to work toward—an idealized vision of Black womanhood created for and by other Black women. This validation is a slippery slope as it makes icons of Black women. This icon status perpetuates a singular, acceptable view of Black womanhood. Unlike Higginbotham's politics of respectability, these views consolidate and condense Black popular culture into acceptability. The Black here is no longer a thing of Blackness but constructed for acceptance in the public sphere.

This need for a Black icon presents as "an image (or person) that refers to something beyond its individual components, something (or someone) that acquires symbolic significance."[20] Fleetwood situates the Black icon as a site for the interplay of history and white supremacy. At the site of the icon, particularly the racial icon, we witness power dynamics that seek to shape how we understand the subjects represented. The Black subject as a racial icon negotiates the realities of Black life and the white imagination. Even when a Black cultural reader or actor discusses the Black subject, white supremacy subjects the Black subject. This

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[20] Fleetwood, 33.

subjection is especially apparent when we think of the Black subject as an icon. Tracing its

etymology, Fleetwood explores "icon" as a product of religious imagery. Icons, like the Black

Madonna, represent deification. Even more, "the icon is rooted in desire to represent, and thus

produce, God."[21] This representation and subsequent production venerate the divine. The

representation is *visual* proof of admiration for the subject—the icon. We must contend with

reception when considering the icon as a product of representation. Fleetwood directs us to

consider how "the icon is an image…imbued with significant social and symbolic meaning, so

much so that it needs little explication for the cultural reader to decode it" in visual theory.[22]

Given images' symbolic and social signals, how might we make sense of what Mo'Nique deems

as unacceptable behavior by the Black *Charm School* contestants?

      While the *Charm School* contestants are not icons in the larger public, they are

responsible for memorable moments in the early 2000s when VH1 dominated reality TV. For

this reason, I situate them as early Black reality television icons. Understanding iconicity and

Black women are necessary to understand the severity of dealing with Mo'Nique's commentary

on their behaviors. From her work as a standup comedian, body-positive activist, star of

syndicated television, and *The Parkers*, Mo'Nique's visibility is near iconic. As such, the

Academy Award winner's visibility appears as a foil to the Black contestants of *Charm School*.

However, Mo'Nique and the contestants participate in what Fleetwood calls veneration and

denigration. She writes, "Racial iconicity hinges on a relationship between veneration and

denigration and this twinning shapes the visual production and reception of [B]lack American

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[21] Nicole Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 5.
[22] Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 7-8.

icons."[23] Veneration and denigration occur because of the consumption of icons in the public

sphere.

Charm School is a visual experience produced for entertainment and consumption. The

show's targeted audience is fans from *Flavor of Love*. Mo'Nique's role as headmistress and

reformer broadens access to these women. This broadened access participates in what Fleetwood

calls "broad consumption."[24] Celebrity creates a level of access to icons. This access provides a

public-facing image of whom we think these social actors are. This "access to such images

changes, as does their production, consumption, and reception."[25] The process of veneration and

denigration continues. Yet, the backdrop against which these images are presented to us remains.

The history of race and white supremacy will always color our reception of racial icons. As such,

the same reverence that Black people assign to Black images is always against the White

imagination. Mo'Nique's attempt to rescue Larissa and the other women from degrading

behaviors has noble intentions. However, her work is inevitably flawed and further denigrates

the contestants' public image. As Fleetwood explains,

> The racial Icon is both an exceptional and a familiar figure. She or he is exceptional as a
> symbol of overcoming racial inequality and perceived inferiority; they are ordinary, given
> the American public's familiarity and investment in exhausted notions of race, nation, and
> (under)achievement. Whether a self-conscious and deliberate construction or a product of
> circumstance, the racial icon—as image, political figure, celebrity, or sports hero—
> conveys the weight of history and the power of the present moment, in which her or his
> presence marks the historical moment. To stand apart and to stand for are the jobs of the
> racial icon.[26]

Mo'Nique's noble attempt to help the contestants is flawed as they represent a contested site of

investments in acceptability, culture, representation, and iconicity.

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[23] Fleetwood, 8.
[24] Fleetwood, 2.
[25] Fleetwood, 3.
[26] Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*, 10.

Speaking to Black women's visibility and the weight of responsibility associated with it, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham theorizes a politic of respectability that explores the strategies and tactics used to advance a particular presentation. Focusing on the lives and works of Black church women in the development of Black Baptist denominations, Higginbotham writes, "women of the Black Baptist church adhered to a politics of respectability that equated public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of African Americans as a group."[27] As a means of "opposition to the social structures and symbolic representations of white supremacy," the politics of respectability symbolize a political strategy embodied by Black Baptist women's performance and work.[28] Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent* situates the Black church as a "public sphere." This categorization denotes the church as a cultural space where the Black church is presented as a body, consistently negotiating its identity and utility in its members' lives. Higginbotham arrives at this idea of the Black church as the public sphere by focusing on the high morals and behaviors emphasized in the early formations of mainline Black denominations. What is the value placed on aesthetics and appearance within Black church spaces? There appears to be a link between aesthetic values of whiteness and Black church rhetoric when examining the politics of respectability and the emphasis on Black women's decorum.

Aesthetic values exposed through dress and decorum engage acceptability. Higginbotham writes that "[B]lack women asserted agency in the construction and representation of themselves as new subjectivities—as Americans as well as blacks and women" in their work to form

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[27] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14.
[28] Higginbotham, 186.

women's auxiliaries.[29] However, Higginbotham warns us not to read this appeal to decorum—read here as an idealized version of Victorian aesthetics—as an acceptance of White morals and values. Instead, the women's aesthetic values "did not reduce to an accommodationist stance toward racism, or a compensatory ideology in the face of powerlessness. Nor did it reduce to a mindless mimicry of white behavior or a 'front' without substance or content."[30] The work of racial and gender self-determination is at the crux of respectability politics. In this manner, respectability operates as a form of garnering visibility. Alongside this, visibility exists as a form of acceptability. Emphasis and value are assigned to choosing the time and place to showcase behaviors. Acceptability acknowledges that Black women can exist in multiple ways. However, visibility must showcase respectable behaviors.

Be Iconic, Not Ordinary

Mo'Nique's commentary regarding Black women and how they present themselves on television emphasizes this idea of self-determination as a reform for the former *Flavor of Love* contestants. As she encourages Larissa in their exchange to "put your best foot forward," Mo'Nique claims that behaviors and attitudes dictate reception. If *Charm School* contestants can reform their behaviors and attitudes, their social profiles will become pleasing and acceptable. Even more, the alleged Black women, whom Mo'Nique says she speaks for, bothered by their behaviors, would view them differently. Mo'Nique's desire to reform these women through a finishing school curriculum appeals to a form of acceptability for Black women in the public spotlight.

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[29] Higginbotham, 186.
[30] Higginbotham, 187.

Beyond respectability, Black women's visibility acts as a form of and creates space for representation. For this reason, the emphasis rests on the representation rather than the authenticity of the experience. Take, for instance, the premise of *Charm School*. Each contestant arrives with the expectation that they will fully participate in a competition designed to reform the former presentation of themselves on *Flavor of Love*. These presentations are admittedly crafted by producers but still showcase each person's characteristics. In these ways, the visibility of the contestants operates to garner attention. Alice Holbrook and Amy E. Singer identify this representation as contentious with the ordinary and celebrity. Their article, "When Bad Girls Go Good," contends with the perception of the self in terms of the ordinary and celebrity for contestants on *Charm School*. Holbrook and Singer view the show's premise as one that will "teach…skills that would make [contestants] successful in 'real life'"[31] The use of the term "real life" connotes that the women achieved a level of celebrity by appearing on *Flavor of Love*. Mo'Nique's *Charm School* sought to reacclimate the women back to an "ordinary" life that required refinement.

The premise of refinement is faulty, as contestants on *Flavor of Love* appeared as their ordinary, daily selves on the show. At the beginning of this chapter, Larissa's comments detail her reflections at the reunion special after the show aired. Throughout the season, Larissa rejects Mo'Nique's idea that who she was—self—was different from her portrayal on *Flavor of Love*. This ambiguity between self and Mo'Nique's understanding of who these women are is a challenge for fields of study seeking to understand Black women's experience. In attempting to shape the perception of who Black women are, a singular, yet somehow diversified version is the

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[31] Alice Holbrook and Amy E. Singer, "When Bad Girls Go Good," *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 37, no. 1(2009): 36.

outcome. As such, Black women shapeshift into acceptable characters. In these ways, the remaining acceptable character is iconic, such that she solves or unravels the stereotypes cast upon her. However, in advocating for that version of self that is both acceptable and iconic, Black women's totality can be lost. In this way, one of Larissa's remarks rings true: "I'm not going to change for no- [expletive deleted]-body. I'm Bootz, I'm back, and [Mo'Nique] can kiss my ass."[32] Larissa's rejection of Mo'Nique is in service of accepting what she knows as ordinary. Larissa owns that the assumed celebrity's visibility does not impact her everyday identity, as presented on Flavor *of Love*. Nevertheless, it appears that Larissa's ordinary will not do for Mo'Nique. In this way, visibility represents a space where the ordinary must be refined or reflect the established order set by iconic Black women.

Is there a world where *Flavor of Love* represents a favorable location of visibility for Black women? Programs like *Charm School* and mentors like Mo'Nique place a burden on those who have access to viewership, and subsequently visibility, on a major television program to represent Black women as other iconic Black women have. This burden signals the need for iconic *and* respectable Black women who escape the ordinary to gain visibility. However, it is the ordinariness, the everydayness, and the familiarity of the women on *Charm School* that troubles the notion of acceptability for Black women's visibility. Therefore, Black women policing other Black women is a matter of representation. Representation matters to Black women if the representation names the iconic and respectable presentation of Black women.

Chapter 3 picks up the concerns of representation as realized through the visibility of Michelle Obama. Specifically, the chapter explores the contours of representation through the work of artist Amy Sherald, who captured Michelle Obama for her formal First Lady portrait.

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[32] Holbrook and Singer, 41.

Sherald's work and the subsequent concerns with verisimilitude reflect what is at stake when the

weight of representation is placed on Black women.

Chapter 3

Looking Up at Blackness

Figure 2. Side by side images of Parker Curry and her book cover inspired by her viral success. (Fox 29 Philadelphia, " 'Parker Looks Up': Book captures viral moment with Michelle Obama portrait," https://www.fox29.com/news/parker-looks-up-book-captures-viral-moment-with-michelle-obama-portrait)

The children's book *Parker Looks Up* tells the story of toddler Parker Curry's encounter with Michelle Obama's National Portrait Gallery (NPG) portraiture. *Parker Looks Up* provides details of a viral photo of Curry, spellbound by Obama's portrait. After frolicking through the halls of the NPG, Curry sees Sherald's image of Obama. With the help of her mother, Jessica Curry, Parker recounts recognizing Obama's "rich brown skin" like hers and other women in her family.[1] After asking her mother about the woman's identity, Parker calls her "a queen."[2] An

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[1] Parker Curry and Jessica Curry, *Parker Looks Up: An Extraordinary Moment*.
(New York: Aladdin, 2019).
[2] Curry and Curry.

image of Parker standing in front of the portrait with her mouth agape became a viral sensation

resulting in Jessica and Parker Curry meeting Michelle Obama. Jessica Curry describes the

gravity of this moment for her daughter. She says,

> As a female and as a girl of color, it's really important that I show her people who look like her that are doing amazing things and are making history so that she knows she can do it'…According to Parker, coming face-to-face with the painting made her feel as though she were in the presence of "a queen," or some sort of magical amalgam of her grandmother, her mother, and herself.[3]

Parker Curry's enthrallment with Obama's portrait, the video of Parker meeting Obama, and the

press surrounding Sherald's work are examples of the power of representation. Parker, her

mother, Obama, and Sherald represent four women entangled in the same representation matrix.

Sherald is the creator, Obama is the subject, and Parker and her mother are recipients and

decipherers. Art educator Chris Kienke describes this as

> The images that are made available to us are the choices from which we can form our individual belief systems and how we see our collective identity…images that express ideas about cultural identity and who exactly those images apply to and to whom they do not apply to. What they say or do not say about how that culture sees itself through images.[4]

Parker's fascination with Obama and her image reveals another part of the conversation

regarding representation. Representation is not only about respectability. Representation is also

about conjuring up the familiar—a familiar and respectable subject to provide a curated model.

Barack and Michelle Obama symbolize celebrity and blackness as key interlocutors for

relationality and familiarity. The first Black family to serve as the first family of the United

States is a significant accomplishment. Given this historical significance, immortalizing these

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[3] Dorothy Moss, "'Radical Empathy': Amy Sherald's Portrait of Michelle Obama" In *The Obama Portraits*, 26, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691203294-003.

[4] Chris Kienke, "Cute Babies: How Imagery and Representation Shape our Collective Beliefs," Visual Inquiry: Learning & Teaching Art. Jun 2019, Vol. 8 Issue 2, 140.

figures is a great task. After their eight-year tenure in the White House, Barack and Michelle

Obama continued the tradition of past Presidents and First Ladies by unveiling portraits for the

National Portrait Gallery. On February 12, 2018, the Obamas commissioned portraits by two

Black artists, Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald. Wiley's portrait features a stoic Barack seated

amongst a backdrop of vivid flowers. Sherald's portrait of the former first lady is presented

chiefly in a muted grayscale, complemented by a few splashes of color. She depicts Michelle

Obama sitting in a long, flowing gown with geometric shapes scattered along the skirt. The

Obama portraits represent the epitome of representation and blackness as they are two paintings

produced by two Black artists of two Black people.

Figure 3. Photo of former First Lady Michelle Obama and artist Amy Sherald at the unveiling of the Obama's National Portrait Gallery paintings. (Saul Loeb, *AFP/Getty Images*, February 18, 2018. (https://www.npr.org/2018/02/13/585299081/obama-portraits-unveiled-at-national-portrait-gallery).

Sherald's distinct style of portraiture contends with the day-to-day presentation of Michelle Obama. Of her choice to paint skin in grayscale, Sherald says, "I feel like the black body is a political statement in itself, right? So, on canvas all of a sudden I'm making a political statement just because I'm painting brown skin. But, I paint the way that I paint."[5] Sherald's artistic expression questions what it means to see black. *The New Yorker's* writer, Doreen St. Félix, writes, "The gray skin in Michelle Obama's portrait feels at first like a loss, and then like a real gain."[6] Félix comments that Sherald's portraiture style attempts to exclude reducing race to color as "the photorealistic depiction of race—a quality determined by others' eyes, externally— is a dead end."[7] Sherald's ability to convey blackness without reducing blackness to the appearance of color-matching skin raises a more significant concern around experience and representation concerning Black women. Given the celebration of the first Black President and First Lady, the Obamas' visibility represents a complex intersection of experience and representation. First, Sherald's decision to convey Obama—and her other, primarily Black figures—in grayscale suspends representation as true to reality. Instead, Sherald provides her vision of Michelle Obama on her canvas. Second, does representation have to match all known characteristics of what we know of the subject? Of the celebrity of her subject, Sherald recognizes that,

> Everybody is invested in [the Obamas] in all kinds of ways, on all different levels. And so, for me to even want to paint her makes me crazy. Because I'm setting myself up for criticism, right? I feel like I captured her. When I look at it, I see her; I see the Michelle

[5] "A Portrait of Artist Amy Sherald," February 18, 2018. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/artist-amy-sherald-on-painting-michelle-obama/.

[6] Doreen St. Félix, "The Mystery of Amy Sherald's Portrait of Michelle Obama," *The New Yorker*, February 13, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-appearances/the-mystery-of-amy-sheralds-portrait-of-michelle-obama, 5.

[7] St. Félix, 5.

that was present at the sitting, you know, a contemplative, graceful woman who understands her place in history.[8]

Sherald's acknowledgment of perceived knowledge of Obama complicates a form of cultural representation presented and depicted within a set of recognizable models that reflect who Black women are. This reflection references and confirms previous experience. Representations of Black women must present blackness and gender as verisimilar—in Michelle's case, it appears the condition is artistic likeness and coloring. As such, any presentation and depiction of Black women appear confined to a set of identifiable markers of experience. This chapter begins with concerns about stereotyping in womanist and black feminist thought and deduces the parameters for identifiable characteristics of experience and intra-racial ideals around black representation.

Representing What We Know

Figure 4. First Lady Michelle Obama official portrait. (Photograph by Joyce N. Boghosian, *First Lady Michelle Obama official portrait*, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppbd.00357/)

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[8] "A Portrait of Artist Amy Sherald."

In a 2018 article for *The New York Times*, art critic Holland Cotter declares that the

Obama portraits "blend fact and fiction" in their artistic interpretation. Cotter describes Michelle

Obama's portrait in detail. He writes,

> [Mrs. Obama] sitting against a field of light blue, wearing a spreading gown. The dress design, by Michelle Smith, is eye-teasingly complicated: mostly white interrupted by black Op Art-ish blips and patches of striped color suggestive of African textiles. The shape of the dress, rising pyramidally upward, mountain-like, feels as if it were the real subject of the portrait. Mrs. Obama's face forms the composition's peak, but could be almost anyone's face, like a model's face in a fashion spread. To be honest, I was anticipating — hoping for — a bolder, more incisive image of the strong-voiced person I imagine this former first lady to be.[9]

Cotter's desire for a vivid, eye-catching portrait captures a quandary relevant to Black women

and representation. An image, and a knowing of likeness, are produced before Cotter gets to

Sherald's portrait. However, what we know of Michelle Obama and what we experience of her is

not who she is. Rather, and all at once, we experience a curated profile and the perception of who

she is. Even more, the perception of the curated profile is sometimes standing in as a

representation of the whole. The profile Cotter perceives, and the expectations of likeness

ultimately flatten the whole into a profile. As such, the whole is relegated to our knowledge of

the whole. Therefore, when Cotter and others view Michelle Obama's portrait and expect

verisimilitude, they are looking for the publicly crafted profile—their experience—of Michelle

Obama. When one arrives at the portrait with a perceived notion of who and what they think the

portrait represents, this is apperception.

Cotter's imagination of a "strong-voiced" Obama moves beyond the expectations of art.

His review of Sherald's work also casts a profile of a Black woman who is highly visible in the

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[9] Holland Cotter, "Obama Portraits Blend Paint and Politics, and Fact and Fiction," *New York Times*, February 12, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/arts/design/obama-portrait.html.

public sphere. Michelle Obama's profile also reveals more about expectations of representations of Black women. These expectations and imaginations about Black women are phenomenological ideas and a part of the history and memory relationship that Emilie Townes explores in her work *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. Untangling the layers of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, Townes situates her concern with history, memory, and imagination on the stereotypes of Black women. Mammy, Aunt Jemima, Sapphire, the Tragic Mulatto, the Welfare Queen, and Topsy are the products of evil upheld in a history that demonizes Black people and favors white dominance. The histories of these popular stereotypes reflect public opinion regarding Black women's social histories. Townes writes, "How do we grasp a hold of our identity and truly name ourselves instead of constantly looking into some strategically placed funhouse mirror of distortions and innuendos and mass marketing?"[10] The fantastic hegemonic imagination distorts Black womanhood and shapeshifts caricatures of black women as a commodity. Townes outlines the links between stereotypes and commodification through social histories. From selling mammy paraphernalia to Welfare Queen economics, Townes provides a departure regarding representation and Black women.

Townes turns to commodification "the damaging effect of such epistemological musings is that they take bits of black reality and transform them into moral depravity as the norm for black existence."[11] The commodification of moral corruption introduces another element to Townes' complex narrative of history, memory, and myth. By excavating the social history, Townes introduces myth as a characteristic of images we conjure up to identify mammy. Townes writes, "historical reality may not exist in the mammy image, but myth does…memory

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[10] Townes, 45.
[11] Townes, 116.

functioning as myth and historical process."[12] The myth of mammy does not deny the contributions of Black women working in domestic capacities. Rather, Townes argues that the Black woman behind the mammy figure "departed company from [mammy] when it came to loyalty to their families and resentfulness at their enforced economic status."[13] mammy as myth is thus the project of amalgamation of remembering Black women in relationship to whiteness. Mammy's qualities flatten into a white imagination that holds Black women hostage to a profile perceived by whiteness as a given.

Townes's concern with mammy and myth is instructive in our conversation about representation. To fully understand the complexities of the mammy stereotype, Townes explores the commodification of the mammy stereotype. Of mammy, Townes turns to the "resurgence of interest in Black memorabilia" as one of the indicators of the commodification of stereotypes.[14] Townes' concern with commodification, as related to the stereotypes she examines, situates Black culture as appropriable *and* expendable. Townes criticizes the hybridity of White artists by pointing to white artists such as "Eminem, Christian Aguilera, Elvis Presley, Joss Stone, Vanilla Ice, and others" as performers of cultural appropriation.[15] In Townes' scheme of commodification, Black culture is something that White artists can take and use freely. Those who appropriate have no desire to know, only to use the new culture to fit into a profit margin that is most often commercial and sociocultural."[16] While Townes argues that cultural appropriation is a capitalist enterprise, she also names a dichotomy between Black culture and Black people. Black culture's appropriation, within the FHI, is how whiteness separates black

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[12] Townes, 33.
[13] Townes, 35.
[14] Townes, 42.
[15] Townes, 42.
[16] Townes, 42.

people from their history and culture. The music artists who appropriate black culture act as another confiscation of black property, specifically culture and likeness.

A critical question remains in this theft of culture: *What about the White culture left behind?* The white culture ditched by artists in favor of appropriated Black culture exists within legal scholar Cheryl Harris' whiteness as property model. In "Whiteness as Property," Harris "investigates the relationships between concepts of race and property, and it reflects on how rights in property are contingent on, intertwined with, and conflated with race."[17] In her scheme, property is not only about a physical property. Instead, property is both tangible and intangible. Even more, whiteness defined by property also signifies the importance of ownership. Harris's considerations of property are helpful to understand when thinking through Townes' argument for Black culture as expendable between different forms of identity troubles the phenomenological inquiry laid out in this chapter. Stereotypes outline perception as both presentation and representation. Consider for a moment the mammy caricature. Townes identifies the link between slavery and an amalgamation of Black women used as the face of the Pearl Milling Company, responsible for the mammy caricature. [18] Mammy is a commodified image as Aunt Jemima, who "demonstrated the benefits of maintaining the color line and how Black women behaved under proper White control."[19] Situating the power of whiteness to both name and rename Black women's experiences, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins identifies stereotypes, like mammy, as controlling images or "racist and sexist ideologies that…become

[17] Cheryl Harris "Whiteness as Property," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York, New York: The New Press, 1995), 276.
[18] Townes, 36.
[19] Townes, 39.

hegemonic, namely seen as natural, normal, and inevitable."[20] In her book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins argues that controlling images take root in descriptions of Black womanhood from slavery. Controlling images are part and parcel of the continuing impact of slavery. While Townes locates the contemporary impact of stereotypes within the moral scope of the FHI, Collins argues that "the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemima on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression."[21]

In her essay "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond," Collins names that the movements to increase Black women's visibility and representation have given Black women the ability to choose a "collective standpoint" regarding their ideologies. At the core of Womanism and Black feminism is a commitment to engaging the experiences of Black women. From these experiences, womanists and Black feminists identify the intersecting forms of oppression levied on Black women's lives. The work of Black feminism, according to Collins, describes the experience of Black women as *the Other*. She writes, "maintaining images of U.S. Black women as the Other provides ideological justification for race, gender, and class oppression."[22] Collins' work to outline the contours of Black women's experiences as related to the theory of Black feminists is instructive to the phenomenological inquiry mentioned earlier.

In her delineation of the differing controlling images—Mammy, matriarch, welfare mother, and jezebel—Collins argues that controlling images are not static but rather dynamic projections shapeshifting into the roles created by objectification. She writes,

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[20] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 5.
[21] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 5.
[22] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 70.

Analyzing the particular controlling images applied to African-American women reveals the specific contours of Black women's objectification as well as how oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect. Moreover, since the images themselves are dynamic and changing, each provides a starting point for examining new forms of control that emerge in a transnational context, one where selling images has increased in importance in the global marketplace.[23]

Reading objectification as commodification leads back to Harris' argument for property. However, reading objectification as a phenomenon of culture situates a more significant concern with the forms of representation of Black women. Of the final controlling image, the jezebel, Collins views the intersection of sexuality, image, and white concerns of sexuality. Collins argues that "the jezebel, whore, or 'hoochie'—is central in the nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood."[24] Black women's sexuality, as related to controlling images, is a product of sex, reproduction, and motherhood's role in defining stereotyping.

The jezebel controlling image and stereotype impact Black women in multiple arenas. One scholar seeking to address how the jezebel trope lives on in a particular space is Black feminist cultural and religious critic Tamura Lomax. Lomax argues that the Black church and Black religious thought and life have a hold on the jezebelian trope and understand that jezebel, as Collins does, has a "function…to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive woman."[25] In her work, *Jezebel Unhinged*, Lomax argues for a Black Feminist Study of Religion. This argument centers on theories and methods suggesting that the study of religion is critical to Black feminism. Additionally, a Black feminist approach to the study of religion breaks free from what Lomax calls "a dependency on controlling analyses of Black women's experiences as well as methodological and conceptual limitations."[26] This approach materializes

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[23] Collins, 72.
[24] Collins, 81.
[25] Collins, 81.
[26] Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture*

through engaging and theorizing alongside popular culture and its production of rhetoric related to Black women and Black religion. Lomax turns to polarizing figures of Black popular culture and Black churches, such as T.D. Jakes and Jamal Bryant or R&B artist Chris Brown. Lomax focuses on the rhetoric each uses to embrace a stereotypical idea of Black women bred in church communities. The *jezebel* trope casts Black women and girls in a dynamic that seeks to hitch them to a matrix defined by Black womanhood as a sexualized ideal. Lomax's work attempts to *unhinge* Black women from a pattern of destructive stereotypes that the study of religion has adopted from more significant societal ideas about Black women.

Central to theorizing a Black Feminist Study of Religion is understanding the role of representation, experience, and culture. For Lomax, these categories are not simply interlocutors but methodological approaches to understanding the relationship of Black religion to studies focused on Black women and girls. Using the work of scholar Stuart Hall, Lomax notes that "the discourse on black womanhood understands that once knowledge and/or truth is linked to representation, said knowledge and representation, combined, become regulating."[27] The jezebelian trope and other representations of Black women and girls operate with the complex matrix of signification, representation, and culture. Therefore, studying Black women and girls requires fine attention to issues intermeshed in Black culture and Black religion. This intermeshed reality influences every area of Black women's and girls' lives:

> The discourse on black womanhood propagated across every possible avenue of culture and society—language, images, poetry, photography, print, philosophy, art, science, education, politics, theology, literature, magazines, film, media, news reporting, fashion, advertising, religious teaching, and preaching—sets the terms for how identities get re/presented, exhibited, and treated, shaping not only lives and interpersonal relations but institutions and sociopolitical praxis. Yet the discourse is not fixed. Discourse, a source of both power and knowledge, though at times seemingly calcified, controlling, and

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(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.
[27] Lomax, 2.

irrepressible, is constantly in flux and can be deployed for either oppressive or productive aims, or both.[28]

Ultimately, discourse centered on Black women and girls cannot avoid theories of culture and representation. Lomax's turn to theories of culture and representation fit into contemporary modes to situate practices of understanding the history of presentation and methods of reading the lives of Black women.

Recognizing Blackness

One of the theorists helping to situate concerns regarding presentation and Black histories is Saidiya Hartman. In her work *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route,* Hartman thinks through the afterlives of slavery. Exploring the complications of African descendants journeying back to West Africa and other locations known historically as slave ports, Hartman expresses the feelings of space and place related to the extensions of chattel slavery. Hartman writes, "slavery…established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and political arithmetic."[29] In the engagement of blackness, Hartman's afterlives of slavery explain the ongoing legacies of racist and systemic structures that are constantly reproduced. Given the dehumanizing impacts of enslavement, reading gender in these moments comes into question. In

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[28] Lomax, 2.
[29] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 6.

her seminal work, "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe," literary critic and scholar Hortense Spillers takes up this concern with gender. She writes,

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. "Peaches" and "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire" and "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," God's "Holy Fool," a "Miss Ebony First," or "Black Woman at the Podium": I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.[30]

Spillers' confounded nature of gendered language further situates what is at stake in a concern with being and Hartman's concept of afterlives. The failure to acknowledge these fundamental ideas about blackness and gender is detrimental to womanist religious thought and millennial womanism. Instead, experience stands in as a misread for Black women's culture.

Like Anderson and Sharpe's concerns with questions of experience, culture, and blackness—as discussed in the introduction—Hartman, Spillers, and Lomax engage tropes about Black people that must be taken in the context of our definitions of blackness and, more specifically, what it means to be a Black woman. These considerations reference what scholar William Hart names "the blackness of black" or the assemblages of "Black people, blackness, and antiblackness."[31] In his text, *The Blackness of Black: Key Concepts in Critical Discourse*, Hart explores the landscape of contemporary Black studies with emphasis on the work of scholars questioning the political ontology of blackness. Hart views these scholars as working in a constellation of terminology that addresses situating Black people up and against humanness. Within Hart's constellation of the blackness of black, scholars such as Hortense Spillers, Saidiya

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[30] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" in *White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). Page number?
[31] William Hart, *The Blackness of Black: Key Concepts in Critical Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020), 4.

Hartman, Frank B. Wilderson, and others explicate the issues of blackness defining black.[32] Even more, these scholars undergird contemporary conversations of Afro-Pessimism. To undertake this study, Hart begins with a question regarding the deployment of language and nomenclature to get at the pathos of studying what is and is not blackness. Hart claims that "the concept of culture has been devalued and banalized from overuse."[33] The concept of culture stands in for the ontological concerns in the lineage of Black scholars he has identified. Hart's concern with language and the concept of culture can be used to understand the dilemma of womanist religious scholarship. Black women and womanist become synonymous such that the assumed interchangeability is the devaluing of the concept. Even more, to understand Blackness as that which is recognizable from a mode of being reduces race and gender to that which is capturable.

Media, Black Women, and Black Girls

Reporting on the phenomenon surrounding Parker Curry's viral sensation, *Washington Post* reporter Michael Rosenwald writes,

> At her portrait's unveiling [Michelle] Obama said she was thinking of little girls — and girls of color, "who in the years ahead will come to this place and see an image of someone who looks like them hanging on the wall of a great American institution…And I know the kind of impact that will have on their lives because I was one of those girls.[34]

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[32] The complete compilation of scholars and their definitive contributions to Black studies include Franz Fanon's *Negro phobeogensis,* Orlando Patterson's *social death,* Cedric Robinson's *racial capitalism,* and *the black radical tradition,* Hortense Spillers' *flesh*, Saidiya Hartman's *afterlife of slavery*, Frank B. Wilderson III's *Afro-pessimism*, Fred Moten's *generative blackness*, and Calvin Warren's *black nihilism*. For more information, see Hart's "Introductory Remarks" in *The Blackness of Black*.

[33] Hart, 4.

[34] Michael Rosenwald, "'A moment of awe': Photo of little girl captivated by Michelle Obama portrait goes viral." *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-moment-of-awe-photo-of-little-girl-staring-at-michelle-obama-portrait-goes-viral/2018/03/04/4e5a4548-1ff2-11e8-94da-ebf9d112159c_story.html.

Rosenwald focuses on Obama's recognition of the gravity of her portrait in the halls of the National Portrait Gallery alongside the previous First Ladies. The popularity of Curry's infatuation with Obama points out the complex intra-racial and gender dynamics of representation. Experiencing images of other Black women, mainly those highly visible and well-known within popular culture, is both a matter of inclusion and rejection. Rejection occurs as a project of not allowing these images to stand in for all Black women, even when celebrated by Black women. This complex and fine line of distinction is both phenomenological and ethical. When Parker Curry looks up at Obama, and the photo becomes a viral sensation on social media, is Parker's enthrallment the result of the totality of blackness or an individual profile meant to reflect the possibilities of Black women? When asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, Parker told Rosenwald, "'I'm gonna be president, and everybody's gonna put my photo up.'" [35] Parker's desire to be president is a desired response to the profile. Others see Obama and Parker's visibility as an inspiration for other girls. Rosenwald reports other reactions to the Parker viral moment as an example of "what America is all about…. This young girl can now dream about being someone like Michelle Obama."[36] The desire to *be* Obama reflects a willingness to prioritize specific profiles.

In "Education, Representation, and Resistance: Black Girls in Popular Instagram Memes," scholar Tiera Chanté Tanksley explores how Black women and girls reframe and use memes to speak to (mis)representations. Tanksley suggests that "young Black women are responding to, and resisting, mass media images of Black women/girlhood" through their

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[35] Michael Rosenwald, Washington's latest tell-all memoir: The secrets of a preschool girl gone viral." *The Washington Post*, October 15, 2019.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/washingtons-latest-tell-all-memoir-the-secrets-of-a-preschool-girl-gone-viral/2019/10/14/057811fa-eeb0-11e9-8693-f487e46784aa_story.html.
[36] Michael Rosenwald, "'A Moment of Awe'."

engagement with memes posted mainly on Instagram.[37] Black women and girls responding to misrepresentations put forth in memes offer a glimpse into their moral agency, according to Tanksley. As moral actors in the digital space, Tanksley argues that Black women and girls are acutely aware of "the way social identities are indivisibly tethered to one's way of reading and engaging the world."[38] As such, their responses are evidence of a Black feminist media literacy. Undergirding her argument with Black feminist and critical race theory, Tanksley suggests that understanding Black women and girls' media literacy as a Black feminist media literacy can circumvent (mis)representations by using memes of Black women and girls. In this way, Black women and girls' "sociocultural literacy practices" take ownership of images related to experiences of Black womanhood and girlhood.

Black feminist media literacy offers one way to read social media through the lens of Black women. However, the problem of access and representation are ever present in what images and practices of sharing images occur. In his work, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, Richard Iton identifies the relationship between Black popular culture and the political. For Iton, "the implications of reading culture as politics in the context of the post-civil rights era" are diverse, given the relationship between Black people and culture.[39] One of the significant changes to Black popular culture in the post-civil rights era is the "increased…access to the arenas of formal political decision making."[40] Michelle Obama's Smithsonian portrait represents

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[37] Chanté Tanksley, "Education, Representation, and Resistance: Black Girls in Popular Instagram Memes," in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class and Culture Online*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2016), 248.

[38] Tanksley, 255.

[39] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

[40] Iton, 4.

both sides of Iton's argument. Obama represents new political access ushered in by her

husband's historic presidency; she has a prominent place in Black culture and politics. Even

more, Michelle and Barack Obama represent a shift in political aesthetics. Cultural commitments

to an aesthetic and politicized form of blackness—and in the case of the Obamas, exceptional

blackness— lend themselves toward an assessment of representation as both cultural and

political. Viewing the Obamas as Black political progression lends itself to "external and internal

dimensions of the politics/popular culture nexus in the shaping and expression of African

American politics."[41] However, the political dimensions of Black lives are evidence of political

and black history representation.

In her article "The Mystery of Amy Sherald's Portrait of Michelle Obama," Félix

concludes by considering the long-term effects of Obama's portrait. She writes,

> To some, the lack of verisimilitude may be intolerable. And yet this is how the subject would like it, posterity—young black girls especially, she said in a speech—to see her through Sherald's vision: as a herald of success...wondrously troubles assumptions about blackness and representation in portraiture.[42]

This acknowledgment of the long-term effects of representation brings us back to Parker Curry.

As the pinnacle of Black womanhood, Michelle Obama is a product of representation.

Considering the long-term impacts of promoting specific profiles of Black womanhood as the

right presentation of Black womanhood as an aspiration, Parker's words that began this chapter

are ever more important. Of Parker's sensational celebrity, her literary agent Karen Nagel tells

Rosenwald, "'I just don't think we listen to children enough for their perception, their wisdom,

and their truth.' This experience speaks to Parker's truth and literally to the first time she saw

herself. There is just a profound awareness that transcends the everyday. You take the personal

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[41] Iton, 21.
[42] St. Felix, 5.

and make it universal. And I hope that's what [*Parker Looks Up*] does."[43] The linkages between

Parker's enthrallment, Sherald's artistic choices, and Obama's celebrity showcase the

complicated matters of one Black woman representing blackness.

Figure 5. Michelle Obama at the 2022 unveiling of her official White House portrait. (Doug Mills, *The New York Times*, September 8, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/08/style/michelle-obama-white-house-portrait.html).

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[43] Michael Rosenwald, "Washington's latest tell-all memoir".

Chapter 4

Generational Updates

In a 2006 roundtable discussion for the Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,

theologian Monica Coleman asks, "Must I be a Womanist?". Coleman's simple question unfolds

into a complex set of questions seeking to understand the future of womanist religious thought

blazed by Black women scholars in religion and religious studies. Cautious about identifying as a

womanist, Coleman writes,

> When I read Walker's definition, I feel at home, but the trajectory of womanist religious
> scholarship has left me in a house without enough furniture. There are not enough chairs,
> couches, or beds for me or many of the black women I know and love. It isn't a place
> where we can be who we are in some of the most important ways we live-sexually,
> spiritually, or politically.[1]

Coleman's concern with womanist religious thought unfolds the history and trajectory of the

school of thought. Finding that womanism has yet to supply sufficient furniture, Coleman

identifies the wood, nails, and upholstery that could provide womanist furnishing. Clarifying the

audience, qualifications, and particularities of womanism renders the label viable for

identification and as a sociopolitical, scholarly method.

Following Coleman's introduction, the roundtable includes responses from Katie G.

Cannon, Arisika Razak, Irene Monroe, Debra Mubashshir Majeed, Lee Miena Skye, Stephanie

Y. Mitchem, and Traci C. West. Each respondent varies in degrees of agreement and

disagreement with Coleman's concerns. Cannon and West's responses offer a critical reflection

of Coleman's problems. Responding to Coleman's concern that *all* black women studying

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[1] Monica Coleman, "Must I be a Womanist?", in Coleman, Monica A., Katie G. Cannon, Arisika Razak, Irene Monroe, Debra Mubashshir Majeed, Lee Miena Skye, Stephanie Y. Mitchem, and Traci C. West. "Roundtable Discussion: Must I Be Womanist? [With Response]." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 85–134. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20487856, 86.

religion or religious studies must identify as a womanist, progenitor of womanist religious ethics, Cannon answers,

> No, it is not necessary or essential that every African American female be self-identified as a womanist. The what, how, and why of the womanist definition bear broad application, indicating that a womanist is a self-naming sensibility that is not coerced. Black feminists and other feminists of color embrace the label 'womanist'—and the epistemological mandate that it implies—by our own conscious volition and free will.[2]

Cannon's reminder that the womanist definition is confessional, and an acknowledgment of living life aligned with womanist principles. However, Cannon fails to unsettle the realities of what womanist identification means for non-womanist who study religion and the experiences of Black women. Coleman notes that "the commodification and commercialization of the term womanist within the academic study of religion" such that womanism is synonymous with the work of Black women in the academy.[3] Coleman attributes this to the fight that Cannon and other early womanists endured "to prove that Black women were a legitimate subject/object of study in the field of religion."[4] Furthermore, womanist religious thought's standing within the academy is an important engagement with the proliferation in thought and how Black women are aligned with the naming and/or ideology.

In response to Coleman's roundtable introduction, Christian Social Ethicist Traci C. West challenges power structures when discussing the particularities of experience in religious studies. West considers the morality of such categories. West writes,

> In [B]lack women's studies in religion, the matters of moral import that most compellingly beg for attention reside not in discernment of who fits under which label—' feminist,' 'womanist,' 'black feminist,' or 'third-wave womanist-feminist'—but in

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[2] Katie G. Cannon, "Response," in Coleman, Monica A., Katie G. Cannon, Arisika Razak, Irene Monroe, Debra Mubashshir Majeed, Lee Miena Skye, Stephanie Y. Mitchem, and Traci C. West. "Roundtable Discussion: Must I Be Womanist? [With Response]." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 85–134. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20487856, 96.
[3] Coleman, "Must I be a Womanist?", 93.
[4] Coleman, 93.

questions about the subject matter, such as why and how scholarship about black communities and religious life attends to issues of sexuality and sexual orientation.[5]

By focusing on a label or category, Black women's experiences are demoted in service for political capital. Much of Coleman's concern with womanism focuses on womanist identity and its reception. Coleman suggests that womanism provides political clout within religious studies as it is the space by which Black women's stories are accepted. Coleman seeks to answer these questions as their answers represent a tension between Black feminist and womanist thought in the study of religion.

Coleman's concerns with names and ideology are not new. In her essay, "What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond," Black feminist theorist and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins delineates the differences in Black women's political naming and positioning. For Collins, Black women's history is the root of any position with which contemporary Black women identify. As such, naming and self-identifying are critical to honoring these histories and blazing new pathways forward. However, Collins is suspicious of ongoing iterations of womanist identification. Walker's appeal to "heterogeneity within Black social and political thought [is] the same heterogeneity that exists among Black women."[6] This heterogeneity that Walker aligns with is instructive for all Black social and political thought. As such, aligning with Walker's definition means accepting the full scope of the Black social and political spaces for which she writes alongside. Accepting all parts is one thing that Collins identifies as an issue within womanist thought in the 1990s. Collins argues that womanist

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[5] Traci West, "Response" in Coleman, Monica A., Katie G. Cannon, Arisika Razak, Irene Monroe, Debra Mubashshir Majeed, Lee Miena Skye, Stephanie Y. Mitchem, and Traci C. West. "Roundtable Discussion: Must I Be Womanist? [With Response]." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 85–134. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20487856, 132.
[6] Coleman, 91.

scholars cannot self-select the parts of Walker's definition they find helpful. Womanists must accept the totality of Walker's arrival at womanist thought alongside heterogeneous commitments made within Black political and social thought. However, Collins notes that the womanist term is often used outside of self-defined political and social commitments.[7] Instead, womanism denotes the honorific life choices of Black women throughout time. This labeling is also used to identify the moral deeds of these women as models to follow. Collins's concerns reflect Coleman's concerns with "the commodification and commercialization of the term womanist within the academy of religion."[8] Coleman sees a more precise trajectory in Black feminist thought. The political, cultural, and social choices of Black feminist thought are more defined and engaging for Coleman. Given these issues, Coleman suggests a trajectory for third-wave womanist thought. Of the third wave, she writes, "This wave may tackle some of the issues that the second wave missed: bisexuality, colorism and standards of beauty, eating disorders and obesity, class realities…mental health, progressive Christianity, paganism, indigenous spirituality, and participation in other world religions."[9] Ultimately, Coleman's concern centers around clarifying the definition of womanism and self-identifying as a womanist, trajectory in thought, and the work of Black women scholars of religion. Coleman's roundtable introduction suggests a shift in discussing the particularities of Black women's experiences.

A contemporary response to Coleman's concern with womanist religious thought comes from a group seeking to reorganize scholarly work by introducing new subgenres of concern. On June 5, 2017, a group of self-identified millennial Black women released a manifesto ushering in

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[7] Coleman, "Must I be a Womanist?", 91.
[8] Coleman, 92.
[9] Coleman, 96.

a new wave within womanist religious thought. Millennial womanism, as co-creators Liz

Alexander and Melanie Jones dub it,

> Offers a contemporary framework that makes space intentionally for doing womanist work in the age of social media, Black lives matter and say her name movements, trap music, mass incarceration, religious pluralism, a kaleidoscope of gender and sexual identities, and multi-dimensional realities of oppression…to name a few.[10]

In response to their reading of data related to the growing number of millennial-identified folks

leaving church spaces, Alexander and Jones want to disrupt the notion that Black millennials

lack religious identities. Alexander and Jones write, in "Tilling the Soil: An Introduction to

Millennial Womanism" that they "seek to offer a counter narrative that tells the under told story

of Black millennials who are deeply concerned about faith and justice…reimagine sacred spaces

and refuse to support and sustain ecclesial and faith-based institutions that share concerns of

justice in word, but not in deed".[11] In their 2017 announcement, Alexander and Jones convened a

group of Black millennial women academics and faith practitioners to construct the path forward

for womanist thought, as millennial womanists are the new generations of womanist thought

leaders. Millennial womanism endeavors to provide new perspectives on Black women's

experiences by focusing solely on Black millennial women's experiences. Alexander and Jones

explore the emerging understanding of Black millennial women's lives through narrative inquiry.

This inquiry "focuses on stories" and regards "lived experience as a source of important

knowledge and understanding."[12] While lived experience is the crux of their new path forward,

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[10] Liz S. Alexander and Melanie Jones, "Tilling the Soil: An Introduction to Millennial Womanism," Accessed March 19, 2022. https://btpbase.org/tilling-soil-introduction-millennial-womanism/

[11] Alexander and Jones, "Tilling the Soil: An Introduction to Millennial Womanism."

[12] Michael Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods, 4th Edition* (London: Sage Publications, 2015), 128.

they place a high priority on telling the story and no straightforward method for interpreting it. Specifically, there is no method for analyzing and distinguishing the millennial experience.

Those convened to think about the emergence of a millennial center approach raised several concerns—intergenerational conversations, flourishing, women in ministry, holistic healing, and digital space. For instance, self-identified "life and leadership coach, creator, and consultant…Meaning Maker" Rozella Haydee White writes,

> For far too long, suffering has superseded the life and witness of Black women, while joy and freedom have been a privilege reserved for some and not all. #millennialwomanism calls this reality into question. It does not ignore the very real intersectional oppression that Black women experience, but it does not give it the power [to] erase God's intent for women and for all to experience communal and individual joy that is life giving and deconstructs and obliterates all that is death-dealing.[13]

And if the theme of thriving over suffering and use of God-language does not clarify what millennial womanists do, co-creator Melanie Jones sums up the work,

> Millennial womanism is descriptive in its efforts to recognize Black millennial women who understand womanism (#ifnot4womanism) as an audacious endeavor that refines our work, convicts our witness, and compels our wisdom. The gift of the womanist paradigm is the ability to name ourselves and look to ourselves for liberation. The millennial modifier is a critical move to interrogate the empirical realities facing Black millennial women from a womanist lens that oppresses, restricts, and confines our freedom and flourishing.[14]

The nods to *womanist paradigms* or *epistemologies* seem fraught as the call to innovative approaches only adds digital spaces as a new forum for investigating Black women's experiences. The difference between millennial womanism's work and first, second, and third-wave womanists is not entirely clear. First-generation womanist religious scholars turned to

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[13] Rozella Haydée White, "#Millennial Womanism and Meaning-Making," Accessed March 18, 2022, https://btpbase.org/millennialwomanism-meaning-making/.
[14] Liz Alexander and Melanie Jones, "Millennial Womanism: Liz and Melanie," interview by Neichelle Guidry, *She Preaches,* December 11, 2017, https://www.shepreaches.com/features-1/2017/12/11/millenial-womanism.

literature to do this work. As discussed in chapter one, Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics*

provides an example of how to use literature as an indicator of moral virtue. Scholars such as

Delores Williams turned to biblical hermeneutics, and Jacqueline Grant turned to Christology to

develop a way to include Black women in the expanding world of Black liberation theology

formed around James Cone's work.

Given early womanist religious scholars' work as responding to Cone's male-centered

Black liberation theology or Beverly Wildung Harrison's pioneering work in feminist social

ethics, who are millennial womanists' respondents? Or rather, are they in conversation with an

early womanist generation? Coleman's call for a third generation that would provide a

methodologically furnished home continues into a collected anthology, *Ain't I a Womanist Too?:*

Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought. Coleman introduces the collection by doubling down

on the need for a more expansive engagement of womanist religious thought. Three "marks"

distinguish Coleman's third-wave womanist religious thought.[15] First, third-wave womanist

religious thought "engages the religious lives of women of African descent."[16] Coleman

emphasizes that this engagement is multireligious and rejects dogmatism. This effort to account

for the variety of religious experiences for women of African descent favors the second mark of

the third wave of womanist religious thought, maintaining "a goal of justice, survival, freedom,

liberation, and/or quality of life."[17] Moving away from earlier waves of womanist religious

thought tendency of "defining itself in terms of…oppression."[18] The third mark of third-wave

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[15] Monica Coleman, "Introduction: Ain't I a Womanist Too?," in *Ain't I a Womanist, Too?: Third-Wave Womanist Religious Thought*, *Monica A. Coleman, Editor.* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 17.
[16] Coleman, 19.
[17] Coleman,19.
[18] Coleman, 20-21.

womanist religious thought "understands itself to both draw upon and also depart from a tradition of womanist religious scholarship."[19] That is Coleman's decision to identify new movements in womanist religious thought as waves signify any understanding of the third wave as a moving forward and a departure from previous waves' strict definitions of womanist religious thought. Specifically, Coleman challenges second-wave womanist religious scholarship's insistence on defining the thought as the work of *only* those who are "Black, women, and religious."[20] Given the last mark's concern with expanding the categories of *who* is writing third-wave womanist religious thought, the fourth and final mark "engages work and thinkers both inside and outside of black religious scholarship."[21] Coleman emphasizes a "crosspollination that dialogues with and between areas of scholarship that do not normally interact."[22]

For Alexander and Jones, possible cross-pollination occurs in the new categories for which to label millennial womanist ideology. They write,

> With the intent to grow the garden of our BELOVED womanist foremothers, the core concerns of millennial womanism include:
> - Seeks the freedom and flourishing of Black women and girls as a non-negotiable
> - Advocates for radical expansiveness (not simply inclusivity) that values community
> - Moves beyond respectability politics with an intentional call for recognition and reciprocity
> - Unapologetically strives for healing and wholeness of mind, body, spirit, and soul
> - Embraces all things divine within and outside of traditional ecclesial communities and religious traditions
> - Demands transformative justice (dismantling multi-dimensional systems of oppression + calling for restorative justice)
> - Invests in cross-sector collaboration that gathers diverse voices, skills, talents, and abilities in social justice advocacy and prophetic ministry

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[19] Coleman, "Introduction: Ain't I a Womanist Too?," 19.
[20] Coleman, 21.
[21] Coleman, 19.
[22] Coleman, 23.

- Fosters intergenerational bonds to transfer and translate sacred wisdom with elders and younger generations
- Recognizes social media as a methodological resource for womanist work and witness
- Creates sacred platforms to do ministry and advocacy without waiting for traditional institutions to receive us[23]

Taking this list as a new guide for womanist religious thought requires an engagement with lived experiences as realized through the digital. What distinguishes digital spaces, social media, and technological advancements as a new medium? Is a moment necessary to clarify the mediums and roles in this ambiguity? Social media can be a helpful tool and strategy for engaging Black women's experiences. However, the same application of narrative inquiry as a flattened retelling about Black women traps us in a cycle of limiting profiles and essentialism.

One of the defining characteristics of social media is its exposure. Black women showing up on social media get to craft, tell, name, and showcase the experiences they want to expose. In these ways, social media gives Black women authorial integrity to tell their stories in their voices. Similarly, Black women sharing and engaging on social media is an isolated profile. The following section engages social media as a site for Black experience(s) engagement. The digital space, construed broadly in the analysis of millennial womanism, appears to operate similarly yet in a different medium. Jade T. Perry, a contributor to the digital anthology introducing Millennial Womanism, writes,

> I believe millennial womanism envisions our work by moving through walls, when necessary, and at times, disregards the niceties that keep walls intact. My observation is that much of this energy is spent instead to fund each other's projects, promote each other's works, utilize social media as an access point, assert the integrity of reciprocity in

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[23] Liz S. Alexander and Melanie Jones, "Tilling the Soil: An Introduction to Millennial Womanism," Accessed March 19, 2022, https://btpbase.org/tilling-soil-introduction-millennial-womanism/.

the form of receiving due citation, compensation in check form at keynotes, and in offerings via payment e-applications.[24]

Perry situates social media as a place to transgress the walls of academia. The church is a product of the internet's ability to connect those not in the exact physical location. These connections stick out in previous conversations regarding representation, culture, and experience.

Black Women in Social Publics

In her text, *New Media in Black Women Autobiography: Intrepid Embodiment and Narrative Innovation*, Tracy Curtis examines the foundations of Black feminist and womanist theory by approaching the new ways Black women narrate their experiences. Curtis, "traces responses to these problems by examining a range of texts—printed and digital—those present images of Black women's embodied experience."[25] Like art historian and critic Nicole Fleetwood, Curtis is interested in the presentation of Black women. Although Fleetwood stops at portraiture and visual media, both scholars are concerned with understanding Black women's experience in artistic expression. Curtis' interests specifically turn to defining and reimaging autobiography. However, Curtis' medium that she is most interested in is literature and the impact of technology.[26] Understanding the stereotypes and appeals to representation, Curtis writes,

> As the presence of autobiographical expression expands across media, Black women continue to find themselves used as immobile figures against whom other people define themselves. To address the expectations they burden, these women insert themselves into situations and media outlets where they were never expected or invited. The ways they assert their presence, experiences, and positions as subjects act as instructions for

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[24] Jade T. Perry, "Putting Ourselves on the Program: Re-envisioning Sacred Platforms," Accessed March 18, 2022,
[25] Tracy Curtis, *New Media in Black Women's Autobiography: Intrepid Embodiment and Narrative Innovation,* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 8.
[26] Curtis, 8.

maintaining a sense of self in the face of dehumanizing characterizations and for using new media. This information is vital for an understanding of Black American women's status as citizens.[27]

Black women's autobiographical literature is artistic expression and a commentary on their experiences. Even more, Curtis situates these experiences as stories up and against systems of oppression. Like Katie Cannon's guide to reading Black women's literature as evidence of their moral aptitude, Curtis sees Black women's autobiographies as a part of understanding the Black public sphere.

In "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," Catherine Squires defines the Black Public Sphere as,

> [A] Black public is an emergent collective composed of people who (a) engage in common discourses and negotiations of what it means to be Black, and (b) pursue particularly defined Black interests. This definition, although still wedded to the idea that there is a Black social group, does allow for heterogeneous Black publics to emerge, and also for people who do not identify as Black, but are concerned with similar issues, to be involved in a coalition with Black people.[28]

Squires situates the concern of the Black public sphere as a multitudinous space, thus avoiding limiting Blackness to a particular sphere of cultural existence. Even more, the spectrum of political choices and differences within Blackness requires multiple spaces. Squires argues that "one should speak of multiple Black public spheres constituted by groups that share a common racial makeup but perhaps do not share the same class, gender, ethnic, or ideological standpoints."[29] Black publics take the forms and functions of Blackness for many groups seriously. Reimagining the Black public sphere as multiple spheres is not simply making public

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[27] Curtis, 8.

[28] Catherine R. Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (2002): 446–68. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00278.x.", 454.

[29] Squires, 452.

for expansion. Instead, the multiple spheres provide space for various politics of difference and survival.

To further understand multiple Black spheres, Squires proposes that a "model consists of three types of responses a marginalized public sphere might produce given existing political, economic, social, and cultural conditions."[30] The three types within this model include enclave, counterpublic, and satellite. An enclave model resists hegemonic structures by "hiding counterhegemonic ideas and strategies in order to survive."[31] This survival is not passive but a calculated and deliberate act to prioritize strategies away from the public. A Black public sphere can also function as a counterpublic to "engage in debate with wider publics to test…and perhaps utilize…social movement tactics."[32] Counterpublics within these models engage with other publics to name differences and explore other possibilities. The third and final model, the satellite, is most relevant to my concern with the Black public sphere. A satellite public "seeks separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but is involved in wider public discourses from time-to-time acts as a satellite public sphere."[33] The satellite response defines a Black public that forms despite other publics. Specifically, the satellite response creates a public that does not exist despite other publics. Instead, satellite-formed Black publics are insular for those involved.

Satellite public spheres function as what Catherine Knight Steele likens to the beauty shop. The beauty shop is where Black women escape "the dominant gaze."[34] In *Black Digital*

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[30] Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere," 448.
[31] Squires, 448.
[32] Squires, 448.
[33] Squires, 448.
[34] Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 43.

Feminism, Knight Steele crafts the beauty shop as a metaphor to capture the intricacies of the

spaces Black women carve out for themselves and other Black women. First, Knight Steele

argues that Black women's internet usage "sever the cord" from academic studies, limiting Black

women's impact on digital technology's past, present, and future. Second, the beauty shop

frames Black women's digital footprint as an entrepreneurial endeavor. Knight Steele traces the

beauty shop as a metaphor through the early late 2000s into the 2010s, using the internet as a

meeting ground for women seeking to wear their natural hair. Knight Steele explores blogs and

chat rooms as sites for women to learn about products and techniques from other women. The

beauty shop places class and entrepreneurship at the center of new Black feminist movements in

digital spaces. Like Brock, Knight Steele explores the space that Black women create. Starting

with hashtags like #blackgirlsaremagic, Knight Steele is interested in "the discourse of Black

feminism as it is understood and discussed online."[35] In these ways, Knight Steele situates digital

technology as the location for a new Black feminist revolution that allows Black women to take

control of digital spaces.

From this Black feminist revolution, Knight Steele identifies the collective nature of the

Black women's crafted spaces as an "ethos of digital praxis."[36] The crafting of space for Black

women by Black women is a Black feminist reclamation. Knight Steele writes, "Black women's

historical and persistent relationship with technology provides the most generative means of

studying the possibilities and constraints of our ever-changing digital world."[37] Knight Steele

situates Black women as digital creators and progenitors of promoting Black women in science,

technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and as creative communication hubs. In these

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[35] Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, 7.
[36] Knight Steele, 3.
[37] Knight Steele,1.

ways, Black women carve out space to center Black women's experiences. Knight Steele names Black women as "purveyors of digital skill and expertise, not deficient or in need of new skills to survive a changing digital landscape."[38] Knight Steele reads the digital skill and expertise as a Black feminist modality. Black women's ability to navigate emerging digital landscapes "document a shift in Black feminist principles and praxes and ensure…digital Black feminist thinkers' online writing as central to the ongoing work of liberation".[39] Knight Steele's concern with Black women's digital practices aptly situates the meaning and possibilities of digital spaces as institutions for which Black women can create within and against other uses and techniques. However, Knight Steele's argument that Black women's social media usage provides a new frontier for Black feminist inquiry does little to advance how social media differentiates the politics of Black womanhood from other modalities of sharing experiences or writing about culture.

Social Lives and Social Experiences

Most recently, social science scholars have turned their attention to thinking about social media as a community forming for Black people. For example, scholar Andre Brock identifies a "Black Cyberculture" as the space where "Black folk have made the internet a 'Black space' whose contours have become visible through sociality and distributed digital practice."[40] This "Black cyberculture can be understood as the protean nature of Black identity as mediated by various digital artifacts, services, and practices."[41] Within this space, cyberculture takes

[38] Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism* 2.
[39] Knight Steele, 3.
[40] Brock, André L. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 6.
[41] Brock, 5.

Blackness seriously as "expressions and practices of joy and catharsis about being Black." In addition, it provides a space for "semiotic and material relationships between content and hardware and code performances and cultural phenomena."[42] The cyberculture becomes the location for Black expression and Black communication. Expression and communication reveal how Black cyberculture circumvents the digital mediation of Blackness. As such, "Black cyberculture offers a transformative cultural philosophy of representation, technoculture, politics, and everyday life."[43] Thus, the technology operates as a vehicle by which the disbursement and examination of representation occur—the achievement of collective memory or what Elizabeth Alexander names a *Black interior*. [44] Black cyberculture becomes its interior that "interrogates an ontological perspective of what Blackness means for technology."[45] The ontological perspective is nostalgia, which propels questions of authenticity and likeness. Black cyberculture is a Black interior code and a mode of authenticity and likeness for the known to keep out the unknown. Womanist religious scholarship attempts to decipher the code by adhering to themes in Alice Walker's definition of womanism.

Brock's Black cyberculture includes interactions represented by what he identifies as Black Twitter or the space for the signification of "Black cultural discourse."[46] Black Twitter utilizes the platform to communicate and negotiate curated space to share individual and collective understandings of Blackness. Brock argues "that Black discourse can be employed

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[42] Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, 7.
[43] Brock, 6.
[44] Poet and scholar Elizabeth Alexander defines the Black Interior in her collection of essays of the same title. The Black Interior is the space of existence for thinking through, feeling, and understanding Blackness.
[45] Brock, 7.
[46] Andre Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (2012): 532

effectively over a medium designed for a small, technologically proficient, mostly White user base" as to how relationality occurs mirrors ways of being for Black communities. Even more, Black cyberculture takes on what sociologists have identified as "American technoculture." Brock underscores that these "six qualities" are "progress, religion, modernity, whiteness, masculinity and the future," which he quotes as qualities of "belief encoded within information" transmitted across platforms.[47] In this manner, beliefs expressed by Black Twitter and Black cyberculture represent a ritual drama. This ritual drama, which Brock pulls from an engagement of Ronald Walcott's "Some Notes on the Blues, Style, & Space," is a mode by which Black cultural discourse exists. Social media has become the locale of many investments in Black life and culture as ritual and practice. As a result, there becomes an intra and intercultural conversation regarding what is and is not authentic to Blackness.

Brock's concern with the internet as a construction of Black space mirrors other concerns with understanding the communication of Blackness among Black creators, audiences, and art forms. Reviewing the work of filmmaker Charles Burnett alongside his contemporaries, Film Critic Lisa Kennedy describes Burnett's work as "the [B]lack familiar."[48] Kennedy's 1990 *Village Voice* article examines Burnett's aesthetic choices to create familiarity for Black audiences. Using the rich and subtle details framed within scenes of Burnett's *To Sleep with Anger* and *Killer of Sheep*, Kennedy names how Blackness presents as a given in the film. Burnett's films are loosely influenced by his life and the communities for which he comes of age. Kennedy attributes Burnett's ability to show familiar elements of Blackness as "the subtle tools of a generous chronicler." [49] Conceptually, "the [B]lack familiar" helps us think about the

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[47] Brock, "From the Blackhand Side, 532.
[48] Lisa Tate, "Charles Burnett Interviews," 39.
[49] Tate, "Charles Burnett Interviews," 39.

connection between experience and art. Familiarity evokes a link to a shared experience. And by

recognizing these common experiences, nostalgia reappears, as discussed in an earlier chapter.

The late music and art critic Greg Tate takes Kennedy's concept and considers how artists

deploy familiarity as a collective experience. Focusing on the late artist Jean Michel Basquiat's

relationship to Blackness in his artwork, Tate writes, "this business of speaking for Black culture

and your own Black ass from outside the culture's communal surrounds and the comforting

consensus."[50] Tate beautifully explores the genius and terror of art. Kennedy provides Tate with

the language to sit within that dichotomy. For instance, in the opening to his article, "In Praise of

Shadow Boxers: The Crises of Originality and Authority in African American Visual Art vs.

Wu-Tang Clan," Tate turns to Kennedy's writing,

> There are two ideas of Black culture we should stop and consider here: the Black culture
> of the Black collective (writer Lisa Kennedy's Black familiar), responsible for Cornel
> West's declaration that there are things one cannot not know as a Black person, and the
> cult of the Black individual. The Black modernity I love has always worked the space
> between the collective and the individual.[51]

The pursuit of Black culture in a communal or individualistic manner is instructive in my

concern with the approach of Millennial Womanism. I began this dissertation with a concern

about making Black Baptist church women honorific examples of Black womanhood and the

totality of Black women's culture. Instead, their lives are but one of the many manifolds of Black

women's experiences. Kennedy's "Black familiar" and Tate's use of the term sum up what I see

as the project of Millennial Womanism: present a millennial Black Christian cis heterosexual

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[50] Greg Tate, "Jean-Michel Basquiat, Flyboy in the Buttermilk"
https://www.villagevoice.com/2019/07/29/jean-michel-basquiat-lonesome-flyboy-in-the-80s-art-boom-buttermilk/.
[51] Greg Tate, "In Praise of Shadow Boxers: The Crises of Originality and Authority in African American Visual Art vs. Wu-Tang Clan," *Souls (Boulder, Colo.)* 5, no. 1 (2003): 128–36. https://doi.org/10.1080/10999940309233.

woman familiar. Said differently, womanist religious thought does not grow. Instead, it

shapeshifts to fit new paradigms of being Black, Christian, and a woman.

In these ways, the turn to evaluating social media provides source material and theoretical

grounding. Using social media to engage the narrative and reflective character of Black women's

experiences prioritizes Black women's culture over engagements of representation and

categories of experience. Twitter's ability to connect users aligns with the gathering and

grouping of Black women that grounds womanist religious reflection. From breaking news,

films, television shows, and award ceremonies, Black women create their publics within the

larger public sphere of Twitter. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the conversations

regarding verisimilitude and Amy Herald's portrait of Michelle Obama are a social media

discourse. Obama's assumed celebrity as the first Black woman First Lady provides the visibility

necessary to dominate social media. Even more, discussions about Obama exist within and

outside of Black cyberculture. While the conversations about verisimilitude happen in multiple

spheres, the conversation amongst Black cyberculture's interiors examines questions of

representation for and by Black women. The expectation of representations of Black women as a

product for and by Black women to mirror a universal experience of Black womanhood appears

as a critical component of womanist religious thought's contemporary understandings.

These Black cybercultures reflect a contention with what it means to have subcultures or

subaltern spaces within the larger culture. In the introduction, I considered the ramifications of a

scholarly aesthetic as realized through the work of Victor Anderson. While explaining the

continued problem within Black studies, Anderson considers the role of the public sphere.

Anderson writes,

> Black culture operates in such instances as articulations of Black experience without
> manifolds. Within this scholarly aesthetics, to be Black is to take ownership of a Black

cultural genius, determining the internal logic of a Black cultural politics of difference and respectability in the Black public sphere. Black scholarly aesthetics, thus, moves toward canon formation.[52]

Anderson aptly identifies the harmonious and complicated relationship between a Black public sphere, experience, culture, and a politics of difference. When situated as a space by which Black culture and experience concerns are named, the Black public sphere is where prioritizing manifolds of representation is critical. Not recognizing the manifolds of representation function as a "burden…referred to as 'strategic essentialism,' which is represented by cultural expressive forms in the arts, entertainment, intellectual culture, and the Black public sphere, including religion and theology."[53] Anderson's concern with respectability and politics of difference point to trappings for womanist religious reflection. Is the push to understand social media as a new methodological resource a genuine endeavor to tell new stories? Or is it a recapitulation of similar representation, difference, and respectability issues?

New Ways to Consider

In her work "Re-Thinking Intersectionality" and *Black Feminism Reimagined*, Jennifer C. Nash seeks to rethink how we understand intersectionality. In "Re-Thinking Intersectionality" questions the "theoretical, political, and methodological murkiness" of intersectionality as a means of naming a possible rearticulating of theories of "identity and oppression."[54]. For Nash, beginning with theories of "identity and oppression' is ultimately a failure. Nash echoes these

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[52] Victor Anderson, "Black Scholarly Aesthetics and the Religious Critic: Black Experience as Manifolds of Manifestations and Power of Presentation," American Journal of Theology & Philosophy 33, no. 2 (2012): 117–34. https://doi.org/10.5406/amerjtheophil.33.2.0117, 125.
[53] Anderson, "Black Scholarly Aesthetics and the Religious Critic," 128.
[54] Jennifer C. Nash, "Re-Thinking Intersectionality." *Feminist Review* 89, no. 1 (2008): 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2008.4, 1.

concerns in *Black Feminism, Reimagined,* as she "imagine[s] Black feminism as an affective project" that is marked by a defensive posture to protect intersectionality[55]. Black feminism's contemporary affect is less about engaging a Black feminist future but more about conserving a Black feminist tradition rooted in understanding intersectionality or a "holding on" to intersectionality as a "Black feminist property."[56]. In defending intersectionality, theory and practice are trapped within a historical and genealogical schema. Projects begin and end with re-narrating the intellectual histories that deify scholars and lessening the critique of scholarship. While Nash focuses on contemporary Black feminist scholars like Brittney Cooper, Nash also names Black women figures from history, like Anna Julia Cooper. They attempt to get at the peculiar predicament of Black women's experiences. When we begin by reading black women's histories, Nash suggests that experience is locked into intellectual histories that serve as "the work" rather than the reckoning with experience. These methods, plus the development of women's studies programs within institutional spaces, operate as mere placeholders instead of providing space for expansive Black feminist theory.

Returning to Coleman's "Must I be a Womanist?" Question, it is important to name the other critical questions she asks. Finding no solid answers or pieces of furniture to methodologically furnish her home of Black women's and religion and religious studies experiences, Coleman contends,

> Is the academic contribution any more significant than telling white folk what we already know about our spirituality? Is a book a piece of womanist religious scholarship if the author identifies herself as a womanist but does not reference the experiences of Black women? Or is it a work womanist because it draws on the work of womanist religious scholars? Does drawing from the experiences of Black women make something womanist? Can womanists make religious assertions for all people? Or have womanists

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[55] Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3.
[56] Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 3.

shied so far away from the universalism of white men's experiences that they are reluctant to expand the insights from Black women's experiences to a universal audience?[57]

I return to the opening critique levied against Millennial Womanism. The defining characteristic of a Millennial Womanist in "Tilling the Soil" appears to be an acknowledgment that the work of their womanist foremothers no longer best serves the ideologies of Black women who identify as millennials. Even more, their appeal to the internet and social media as critical interlocutors and resources establishes the need for a new public to distinguish themselves. These are the response models, and the diversification Millennial Womanists proposes to rely on group thinking and collective engagement. Specifically, the Millennial Womanist appeal features other millennial-identified peers reflecting on the womanist legacy and proposing womanist futures. The context for reflection and the future, fall within building a new institution of womanist religious thought. Even more, the institution is grounded in millennial sensibilities informed by the ever-changing advancement of technology. Sensibilities that create commonality amongst share experiences and respond to societal ills. Situating social media as an institution, one of the response models identified by Squires, places a value on building the institution. If we situate social media as an institution and put it within the dynamic of the Black public sphere or counterpublic, the Black spaces curated are not methodological resources. Instead, they fall victim to what Traci West identifies as heteronormative, patriarchal retellings. West ends her response to Coleman's "Must I be a Womanist" question with these words.

> How does one resist the imposition of all types of narrow and constraining categories for blacks? How does one even resist the conversations about sorting out categories and labels? Racist manipulations and patronizing reductions of black life are implicated in the impulse to do this kind of sorting. I want to resist a conversation about the term womanist if the purpose is merely to have an all-about-me-and-my-self-interests-as-a-black-woman session that endlessly celebrates black womanhood by choosing certain aspects of black

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[57] Coleman, "Must I be a Womanist," 91.

women's history, practices, and struggles that can be construed as virtuous and neglecting others that cannot be.

Millennial Womanism reads as an attempt to focus on a new naming structure and a space to carve out ownership for a new group of Black women scholars and practitioners. Setting new and clear parameters of who is allowed admission into the group and the group narrative further subjugates Black women whose experiences exist outside of the narrow lines of demarcation. West reminds us that the work is to create space to name the atrocities faced by all Black women. As West aptly identifies, the power in sharing and commenting on the stories of Black women's multifaceted experiences is not to limit them to categories that uphold and support white heteronormative patriarchy.

Alexander, Jones, and the other women gathered within the Millennial Womanist announcement represent a curated gathering of voices seeking to delve deeper into the meaning of terms and terminology used to align identity and possibly ideology. The work follows with the legacies that Coleman introduces in her "Must I be a Womanist" and *Ain't I a Womanist Too?* Introductions. While Coleman is critiquing a lack of methodological and political foundations, the nexus of her critique begins with the procedural effects of naming. Much of the critique levied against millennial womanism is about the reliance on experience, narrative inquiry, and the politics of naming. Whereas Coleman sets out to define third-wave womanist religious thought as a new path forward, Millennial Womanism seems to lack any reference to Coleman's work or the politics of naming. As identified in this chapter, adding millennial to womanism or womanist signifies a change in age and access to resources rather than any new commitment to ideology.

The politics of naming is critical to the genealogy of Black feminist and womanist thought. Coleman notes, "central to these conversations is that 'womanism' signifies a kind of

self-naming."[58] The ability to self-name, as evidenced by Walker's defining of the name womanist, reflects a critical engagement with the power that Black women seek in identifying themselves and their ideological commitments. And the ability to name is a project of reclamation for some as it allows Black women to obtain power in naming. She writes, "naming is an important step in reducing a subject to an object, and self-naming is a critical step in the move back to one's own subjectivity."[59] Yet, Coleman reminds us that "those who adopt and adapt the nomenclature of 'womanist' and 'womanism' are making a particular statement about how they want to be referenced and with whom and what they want to be associated. And as a corollary, those with whom they do not wish to be associated."[60] The association or rather disassociation missing from millennial womanism is alarming. If names matter, how might we understand the new boundaries millennial womanism creates or fails to create? Instead, the same limitations and exclusions created by earlier waves of thought are reinstated such that "the words designed to promote personal freedom become bars to cage in and restrain, we need to have a conversation about the viability and usage of those words."[61]

The final section of this dissertation considers the central fault line in the role of representation, culture, and experience in womanist religious reflection: gender. The conclusion argues that the desire to control narratives of representation, experience, and culture limits women and girls to definitions that uphold cis, white, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. Moreover, the lack of forward-thinking in millennial womanist ideas furthers these ideas. Even more, the concern with sexuality identified in Walker's definitions traps possibilities of

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[58] Coleman, *Ain't I a Womanist Too?*, 6.
[59] Coleman, 7.
[60] Coleman, 6.
[61] Coleman, 7.

interrogating the experiences of Black femmes, Black transwomen, Black transgirls, and non-binary persons.

Chapter 5

Beyond Identities and Labels

The title of this dissertation: *Black Women in White Dresses: A Critical Study in the Scholarly Aesthetics of Womanist Religious Thought* takes its name for two influences on my work. The title, *Black Women in White Dresses*, references the first Sunday tradition of my Baptist upbringing. Raised in a small, rural church affiliated with the National Baptist Convention, USA, first Sundays stood out as my grandmother and other women married to deacons and trustees dressed in white dresses and wore white hats. The women prepared the lord's supper and cleaned the communion trays after service. These women sat, regally in the front of the church. They were deified by the pageantry of their dress and their marching around the communion table. This memory represents a conundrum of experiences. The play on Black women in white dresses may unintentionally name a proximity to whiteness and Victorian ideas of womanhood that made the project feel inauthentic to me. Or to think about the pageantry as theological. And using this story as an example of Black women's exceptionalism or genius felt in contrast to the voices and work, I wanted to amplify. Instead, I was interested in how that cultural moment mirrored the complications of Black women's aesthetic lives. The culture they built amongst themselves and alongside other Black women in that space who were not allowed in their first Sunday reserved seating.

This dissertation begins here as this story is one prototypical of what I see as the scholarly aesthetic of womanist religious scholarship. Within this scholarly aesthetic, I identify the categories of experience, culture, and representation as the three interchangeable and exchangeable categories in womanist religious scholarship. This leads me to the subtitle of this

dissertation: *A Critical Study in The Scholarly Aesthetics of Womanist Religious Scholarship*. The language of "scholarly aesthetics" references Victor Anderson's essay, "Black Scholarly Aesthetics and the Religious Critic: Black Experience as Manifolds of Manifestations and Powers of Presentations". Anderson addresses the state of Black studies and Black religion through the questions raised by students about "what makes one Black" or is Black cultural product simply the product of those who identify as Black. These questions center around the desire to rest within a Black essentialism. Even more, Black essentialism relies on a repetitive set of questions that ultimately dictate a Black genius that limits Blackness to a set of determined ideas—which led to an equivocation of experience and culture.

Outlining the ways in which representation functions as an essentializing perspective in womanist religious scholarship, the concern with essentialism here, is for the ways in which it limits womanist religious scholarship's ability to engage beyond, namely in the areas of gender and sexuality. I contend that this presents an ethical paradigm for engaging the role of moral agents when discussing culture, experience, and representation.

To make sense of this ethical paradigm, this dissertation begins with outlining phenomenology as a critical resource for doing the work of reading and distinguishing culture, experience, and representation. Using Robert Sokolowski's phenomenology of a cube, I argue that we are always presented a profile of a whole. As such meaning making based on the telling of a sole experience is not the total story. I am interested in the understanding the complexity of profiles—or temporarily given moments of the cube according to Sokolowski. Second, I situate the story of the women in white and the implications that that story provides for womanist religious scholarship. Calling on theories of memory and nostalgia, I name a preoccupation with emotional significance in womanist religious scholarship. Third, I think through representation

with the work of cultural critic Stuart Hall, art historian Nicole Fleetwood, and historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham. In this chapter I think through a black acceptability, or that which is acceptable to discuss about Blackness in art and culture. This chapter solidifies my concern with what happens when we police the forms of Black culture that can be discussed and portrayed.

This concern with iconicity is continued as a read another scene of representation that attempts to cast Black women within the bounds of verisimilitude or authentic likeness. I *read* the reactions and controversies surrounding Michelle Obama's official first lady portrait by Amy Sherald. From using the story of viral sensation Parker Curry's fascination with Obama's portrait—for those in the audience, Parker Curry is a six-year-old who was cast into the national spotlight after a photo of her looking up at Obama's portrait goes viral—and the concern with likeness in representation of art, I argue in the chapter that representation is confirmation as a part of the whole and a consideration of the commodification of Blackness. I use emilie townes' concern with commodification of Blackness in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* alongside Cheryl Harris' whiteness as property to trouble the responses for a desire to see Obama's representation to be acceptable and authentic.

Next, I returned to womanist religious thought to think about how these concerns show up or not in the work. I reread Monica Coleman's Must I be a Womanist alongside the Millennial Womanist Project. Ultimately, I am concerned that Coleman's question, "Must I be a Womanist" is still relevant. However, it is relevant to ask as, "Must they be Womanist", turning this question internally to how we talk about Black women in the work of contemporary conversations about womanist thought. Beyond Coleman's question, I read Millennial Womanism and conclude that the project is nothing more than a recapitulation of earlier generations of work with the bonus of having the developments of technology. Instead, I argue for ways reading social media and new

forms of technology as helpful resources in expanding womanist religious thought by giving authoritative voice to Black women telling their stories and as a possible way to expand the category of woman.

This final chapter of the dissertation concludes with a meditation on what's next. Using the work of Olúfémi Táíwò's *Elite Capture* and Marquis Bey's *Black Trans Feminism*, I suggest that identarian discourse failed us. My intention in my work is to suggest that perhaps we are beyond the conversation about project of inclusion for the stories of Black women in the field of religion and religious studies. Beyond inclusion is a space to have a sufficient conversation on gender that is not transphobic or prescriptive. I wrote this dissertation to lay bare the problem of what happens when the intermingling of culture, experience, and representation leads to typecast, a monolithic, and overdetermined profile of what it means to be a Black woman. This dissertation follows in a trajectory of work that hopes to continue to read popular forms of culture with the intersections of ethics, religion, and popular culture.

Captured by Identity Politics

On June 12, 2020, a group of protesters assembled outside of the home of LaToya Cantrell, New Orleans, Louisiana's first woman mayor. The protesters gathered as the country dealt with the ever-changing realities of the COVID-19 pandemic as cities passed ordinances following CDC guidelines to confront the spreading of the deadly disease and industries requiring workers to be in person shuttered. New Orleans Hospitality Workers Alliance members called on Cantrell to provide funding for hospitality workers. In addition, these protesters demanded that Cantrell move funding from the police budget to support hospitality workers.[1]

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[1] Grunfield, David, "Photos: Protesters demonstrate in front of Mayor LaToya Cantrell's house demanding better work conditions," *Nola.com* June 12, 2020.

According to a local newspaper, "The protest…merged two national crises—the COVID-19 pandemic and enduring police brutality against black people—into a call for sick pay and health safeguards for those called back to work and forced off unemployment during the pandemic, from hotel clerks to exotic dancers."[2] Protesters sought support from Cantrell, who governs a city built on tourism. Reporters for *The American South* reported that in 2019, that 19 million visitors came to the city of New Orleans, spending 10.05 billion dollars.[3] Tourism dollars directly impact the city infrastructure as they are revenue dollars for industries and citizens. The loss of these industries directly impacts Cantrell's constituents as increased unemployment rates amongst hospitality workers left New Orleans with "the highest per capita unemployment rates in the state."[4]

Protesters sought support from Cantrell as this issue exasperated a pre-existing issue, the racial pay gap. According to the U.S. Census Data, 59.2% of New Orleans residents identify as African American. *The American South* reports that "the racial pay gap is part of a larger issue of racial poverty in New Orleans, where 31% of Black residents live in poverty compared to 10% of white residents."[5] Cantrell, a Black woman, responded to protesters by criticizing their method of getting her attention. In an open letter to the protesters, Cantrell writes that their actions

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https://www.nola.com/multimedia/photos/collection_c384f230-acfb-11ea-a8bb-a79cf2764d30.html.

[2] Grunfield.

[3] Maria Clark, Todd A. Price, and Andrew Yawn. "In New Orleans, A Restaurant Town asks if Hospitality Workers Deserve More." *The Tennessean*, July 15, 2021. https://www.tennessean.com/in-depth/news/american-south/2021/07/15/how-new-orleans-tourism-industry-perpetuates-glaring-racial-wealth-gap/7779563002/.

[4] Todd A. Price, "In New Orleans, A Restaurant Town Asks if Hospitality Workers Deserve More," *The Tennessean*, August 12, 2020. https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/american-south/2020/08/12/new-orleans-restaurant-workers-ask-more/5493148002/.

[5] Price.

"cannot be about misdirected anger. It cannot be about empty gestures. And it cannot be about storming angrily into a residential neighborhood leaving my daughter feeling terrorized"[6] Her daughter, according to Cantrell, is living in a neighborhood that her mother has worked hard to afford. Their presence in that neighborhood signifies that Cantrell overcame the harsh realities of growing up with family members addicted to drugs, incarcerated, or killed due to gun violence.

In a September 2022 article for *The New Yorker*, scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor uses Cantrell's letter to reflect on the relationship between Black women mayors, financial commitments, and identity politics. Taylor notes, "Cantrell invoked her identity to rebuke the protesters" and shared the story of her building a life and career after surviving the drug epidemic of the 1980s.[7] Taylor argues that Cantrell's appeal for care regarding her daughter is an example of "what political scientist Michael Dawson has described as 'linked fate' or the idea that the social, economic, and political fortunes of African Americans are tied together because of shared identity and history."[8] Cantrell deflects to a narrative of survival as a similarity to show that her position as mayor does not obscure her from what she identifies as detriments to Black life. Noting the progression of Black life in the United States, Taylor writes,

> The most profound changes in Black life in the past several decades have been along the lines of class and status, creating political and social chasms between élites and ordinary Black people. After the struggles of the nineteen-sixties and seventies, it was no longer politically tenable in the U.S. to make decisions about minorities without their participation. This was especially true in cities that had experienced riots and rebellions. But exclusion gave way to shallow representation of African Americans in politics and the private sector as evidence of color blindness and progress. The rooms where decisions

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[6] Jessica Williams, "Latoya Cantrell to protesters outside her home: 'We have to be better than that'." *Nola.com*, July 16, 2020. https://www.nola.com/news/politics/article_6658485a-b048-11ea-89b4-b7595ed6360e.html.

[7] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "The Defeat of Identity Politics," *The New Yorker*, September 21, 2022. https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/the-defeat-of-identity-politics, 8.

[8] Taylor, 8.

were being made were no longer entirely white and male; they were now punctuated with token representations of race and gender.[9]

The division between elites and ordinary Black people that Taylor references functions as a means by which movements impacting "ordinary Black people" are captured and represented by the experiences of and narration by elite Black people distinguished by their class status and access to power. Beyond concerns of linked fate, Taylor's article examines philosopher Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò's *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)*. Taylor explores the complexities of activism and politics when race and gender are complicated by class issues. Taylor applies Táíwò's concept of elite capture to explain the experiences of Cantrell and another Black woman, mayor Muriel Bowser of Washington, DC. Bowser and Cantrell deal with the pressures and pushback against policies controversial to Black communities in their cities. Taylor shows the paradoxes of Bowser renaming part of Washington, DC's Sixteenth Street to Black Lives Matter Plaza with an accompanying street mural. The mural, which features Black Lives Matter painted in a bold yellow letter in the plaza, is a response to former President Donald Trump's unlawful treatment of protesters near the White House following the brutal killing of George Floyd. According to Taylor, Bowser positions the mural as a continuous remainder of the voices of those fighting for their humanity and protection from white supremacist forces.[10] Bowser's rebuke of Trump and the denial of mattering for the lives of Black folks are otherwise diminished when Bowser receives pushback months later as she decides to use a government surplus as an investment in the city's police department and prison system. As Taylor points out, Bowser's actions are in stark contrast to the words and movements of supporting causes that recognize the humanity of Black people. The stark contrast

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[9] Taylor, 4.
[10] Taylor, 3.

between words and actions not only impacts vulnerable communities seeking protection behind the rallying cry of Black Lives Matter but brings into question identity politics as all-encompassing.

This capturing is the product of Black access and social mobility fueled by "critiquing the variety of ways that the concept of 'identity politics' has been transformed from a radical invention of the Black feminist left of the sixties and seventies into a placid appeal to racial and gender representation."[11] It is taking identity politics out of the context forged by the work of radical Black feminists. In the introduction to *Elite Capture*, Táiwò details the origin of identity politics as a means to organize. He writes, "the term "identity politics" was first popularized by the 1977 manifesto of the Combahee River Collective, an organization of queer, Black feminist socialists, and it was supposed to be about fostering solidarity and collaboration."[12] The experiences of Black queer women, as realized in the manifesto, name priorities for inclusion. Táiwò's recounting of feminist organizing in the 1960s and 1970s focuses on the political priorities at the core of the movement. Finding few spaces committed to honoring the experiences of all women, the Combahee River Collective sought to identify the realities of those mentioned by the Collective. According to Taylor,

> the Combahee's vision of identity politics…was a powerful rejection of the status quo in the social sciences, which for many years had relied upon powerful outsiders, typically white men, to extoll their own wisdom about the lives of the marginalized, excluded, and oppressed. The powerful social movements of the era swept aside the common sense of white-male authority, transforming the marginalized from examined objects into subjects capable of controlling their own destiny.[13]

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[11] Taylor, 5.

[12] Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (and Everything Else)*, 6.

[13] Taylor, 6.

The work of the Combahee River Collective not only popularizes and introduces the concept of identity politics. The Collective also ushers in a path forward for Black feminist thought. Understanding identity politics symbolizes a way to approach the political life of Black womanhood.

Táiwò's work emphasizes the political nature of the Collective's work to name identity politics as crucial to understanding the plight of black women. Táiwò writes,

> Identity politics has, however, equipped people, organizations, and institutions with a new vocabulary to describe their politics and aesthetics—even if the substance of those political decisions are irrelevant or even counter to the interests of the marginalized people whose identities are being deployed. But that is a feature of how identity politics is being used, rather than what identity politics is at its core. It is this "elite capture"—not identity politics itself—that stands between us and a transformative, nonsectarian, coalitional politics.[14]

These politics return us to the notion of capture as understanding the difference between class status within similar racial and gender belonging. As Taylor points out, Táiwò's work exemplifies how political identity can be understood through political terms emphasizing global and developing concerns. Táiwò defines elite capture as the moments when "common objections leveled against identity politics, including that it requires uncritical support for poetical figures based on their identities without regard for their politics and that it often reflects social preoccupations."[15] Elite capture is both political seizure and political maneuvering that is about power and access. Taylor's use of elite capture to name paradoxes amongst the work of Bowser and Cantrell signals the level to which power does not obscure race and gender but rather make the political choices fueled by race and gender to be products of class and power.

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[14] Táiwò, 9.
[15] Táiwò, 10.

Taylor's introduction of Bowser's actions and subsequent example of Mayor Cantrell reflect a problem that this dissertation has sought to engage—the misappropriation of representation as an indicator of Black women's culture. Specifically, womanist religious scholarship's attempt to define and locate Black women's culture in the representation of heroic figures, literary characters, prolific Black women figures, and other distinguished examples of Black womanhood fall victim to assuming the symbolic showing of the few stands in for the many. As Taylor expertly names, "tensions are strained when Black élites or political operatives claim to speak on behalf of the Black public or Black social movements while also engaging in political actions that either are in opposition to the movement or reinforce the status quo."[16] Keeping in mind the power and project of elite capture—as realized by the work and actions of Black women—acknowledges the issues of representation as the project of womanist religious scholarship. Representation fails when the voices represented are the products of a boundary-making, classist archetype. This representational archetype of womanist religious scholarship skews toward an elite capture of the concept of womanism from Walker and foundational work by Cannon and others in how religious scholarship addresses categories of race, gender, sex, sexuality, and class as related to the story of Black women.

Identarian Discourse

In their work, *Black Trans Feminism*, Marquis Bey explores the relationship between transness, Blackness, and feminism. Bey argues that identity cannot simply be about labels and politics. Instead, identity is a coalition of the material body and experiences. Bey writes,

> What we have come to name our bodies…is not the only way we can or should think ourselves possible in the world. Our subjectivity…indexes the amalgam of the various

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[16] Taylor, 5.

ways that we engage sociality, an engagement that is not determined wholly by or confined to the surface of corporeality. [17]

Suppose we are to begin with how the body is the site and investment of concerns for Blackness, transness, and feminism. In that case, we are setting up a deeply problematic matter that forgoes settling culture and experience. Bey argues, "blackness, transness, and feminism are not entirely extricated from the body—it remains that the processes of materialization known as race and gender shape how we experience our bodies."[18] These materializations are not the totality of being. Bey concludes that our knowledge of being must recognize the "corporeal surface as only one node of blackness, transness, and womanness."[19] Bey's move from understanding the body as the sole interrogation of identity is a helpful tool for how womanist religious scholarship may expand beyond the limitations of its representational modes.

In this experiencing of the body, we return to Sokolowski's framework of perception. If perception is an engagement of how we perceive the given profile of the body, what do we do with our understanding of the categories by which we understand the body? Specifically, how do we understand that Blackness, transness, and feminism are multiplied and varied? By body, I mean the physical space by which being is contained. Body is not simply an object but is the subjective totality of being. Bey argues that body is a compiled collection of structures that influence being. Or rather, the "construction that is 'the body'…becomes largely through hegemonic structures that trek along on axes of epistemology [and] ontology."[20] Body construction can move beyond hegemonic structures such that movements and schools of thought seeking to narrate the stories of those functioning within hegemony fall victim to the

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[17] Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 3.
[18] Bey, 8.
[19] Bey, 7.
[20] Bey, 9.

same ill-nuanced understandings. Leveling the critique against womanist religious scholarship's

lack of concern for transwomen and transgirls rests in this similar vantage point. My naming of

their experiences as missing is a call for womanist religious thought to evaluate the lack of a

transformative edge for justice-seeking and inclusion. By situating body as a material concern of

Black womanhood is in fact a problematic and transphobic idea.

Understanding the body, a material concern is a product of the fraught nature of body and

being in Black religious thought. In his work, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black*

Theological Thought, Anthony Pinn attempts to address this issue. Pinn argues that "behind

black theology's large claims regarding liberation is a troubled relationship to human flesh, to

black bodies. Black theological thought related to issues of liberation and life meaning, when

framed in terms of the body tend toward the body only as abstraction as symbol with little

attention to the lived body."[21] He strategically uses "lived" to describe the body in order define

the body as a living thing that is beyond categorization as a thing. Making the body a "lived"

thing, Pinn argues that "a body-centered approach to theological thought whereby the body's

meaning and lived experience are prioritized and used as a starting point for the doing of

theology…the body is interrogated for what it might offer in terms of form and content of black

theology."[22] Understanding embodiment in Black theology pushes forward new avenues of

liberating, theological thought. According to Pinn, this move forward is necessary as "black

theology and its claims…do not typically emanate from the body. Black theology is often a

theology of no-body, a system of theological expression without an organized (re)presentation of

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[21]Anthony Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought,* (New York:
New York University Press, 2010), 3, https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814768518.
[22] Pinn, 3.

the body as body."[23] Exploring Pinn's concern about the body is helpful before moving back to understanding how identarian discourse is the problematic locale for womanist religious thought.

Pinn situates embodiment a quest to understand the role of body in Black theological Thought. Pinn argues,

> I promote the body as developed and defined by social structures (e.g., discourse) and in this it is not a biological reality. I couple this with an understanding of the body as biochemical reality, as biological "stuff" that is not captured through abstract references to social mechanism and epistemological structures.[12] I work through this "combined" body or "meta" body by drawing from Foucault's work (and Foucault influenced authors) for insights into the constructive nature of discourse and power relations, and by giving attention to sociology of the body's analysis of the materiality of bodies. The underlying conceptual commitment throughout the text is the suggestion that black bodies are material, are real, but what is meant by this and what is known/experienced about this body is not possible outside discourse (knowledge) generated in connection to power relationships. I do not want to dismiss the discursive body that is currently of concern to black theology but instead combine that understanding of the body with solid focus on the physical or material body.[24]

In this way, the body not only does what Pinn accuses black theology of doing, but also turns Blackness without considering the personhood of those who embody Blackness. While Pinn sees the body as a simple fix, I believe the body presents as a more complex issue. Pinn identifies the body as both discursive and material. Experience relegates understanding as a material or discursive subject. However, throughout this dissertation, I argue that experience is not relegated to what our bodies are doing. Experience is a much larger category of knowledge. Pinn writes, "The body is the location for the arrangement and display of power producing a certain 'art of the body.' Through power, subjects are produced, and these subjects come to represent various arrangements of power. The discursive body is 'inscribed' by power relationships and modalities of discipline."[25] Pinn's concern with power and realness distinguishes the discursive. According

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[23] Pinn, 3.
[24] Pinn, 5.
[25] Pinn, 5.

to Pinn, "[B]lack theology and womanist theology seek to detangle black bodies from the power dynamics of oppression."[26] However, this detangling is not enough as it "misunderstands the nature of power and knowledge, and to assume the body has a pre-history reality and to assume that power does not flow through and by means of black bodies as well."[27] This understanding is confusing as it would mean that the body is a product of binary thinking of real and unreal. Not only real but the site of power as embodied reality in theology. Pinn wants to accept the body as a material idea. The body is both discursive and material as "material bodies engage culture and experience life through a range of activities and practices. Our bodies are defined and shaped by…materiality…as by discourse and thought."[28] Appealing to realness as a category of existence seems to fall victim to the very thing Pinn accuses Black and womanist theology of entanglement with oppression. If "the body is 'real,' but this realness involves its presence as a discursive construction, and it is monitored with regard to its development, (re)presentation, and control" the body is no longer relevant.[29] However, Pinn cannot move beyond realness without substituting embodiment as the reality of understanding the body. This reality is "the construction of the body, the 'placement' and 'control' of the body, with (and finally) the management of the human being as subject whereby individuals' act' on their bodies."[30] Pinn leaves no room for a difference between the human being and the body.

Pinn furthers this concern with a human being and body co-dependency through his concern with culture and experience. His concern is also troubled by the relationship between experience and culture. In this instance, the body is a pendulum swinging back and forth between

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[26] Pinn 7
[27] Pinn, 7.
[28] Pinn, 9.
[29] Pinn, 6.
[30] Pinn, 6.

the two. Pinn writes, "human experience…involves an array of factors only some of which are discursive in nature. Bodies serve as a nonmaterial text to be read, but they are also material realities that shape information within the context of the world."[31] While materiality and experience provide context, Pinn still fails to see that experience and culture are meaning making for the person, the individual. As such, materiality can only be a product of and about the world. Pinn's turn to the body still fails as it does not adequately address personhood. Pinn limits the capacity for us to engage a broader scope of personhood as he wants to make an inanimate object the source of subjectivity. Yet, as many other scholars have pointed out, we must also contend with slavery and how slavery warps the perception of the body in service of turning to Blackness or gender. Pinn also does a haphazard interplay between the terms flesh and body. These seem to be interchangeable in his thinking. In contemporary black studies, flesh and body have been presented as a dichotomy. For instance, the work of Hortense Spillers engages flesh and body as terms related but differentiated by the enslavement of black bodies. Pinn fails to mention Spillers. Even more, he presents the body as a given. Pinn turns to scholars to validate the body as a material and discursive object and subject.

Pinn's concern with real and realness is not only relevant to his concern with the body as a material and racialized subject but also gender. Consider the way that Judith Butler explores a "reformulation of the materiality of bodies in *Bodies that Matter*."[32] Focusing on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, Butler engages the documentary *Paris is Burning* and Nella Larsen's *Passing* to discuss how race challenges our notions or the creation of gender. Released in 1991, Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* showcases ball culture amongst queer

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[31] Pinn, 9.
[32] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* (London: Routledge, 2011), xii.

men of color in New York.[33] Focusing on the familial, competitive, and pageantry elements of

balls, Livingston presents the stories of ball participants to situate their stories in the larger

context of American society. Butler picks up with *Paris is Burning* in *Bodies that Matter* as she

explores "questions of [gender] appropriation and subversion" to use drag as a site of gender and

race troubling.[34] Butler's close reading follows the question of parody as a disruption. Butler

states, "*Paris is Burning* more generally, calls into question whether parodying the dominant

norms is enough to displace them,"[35] Butler points to the competitions that take place at balls to

interrogate how one's ability to pass as real or the accurate performance of a category such as

"executive" or "bangie" reflects one's impression of these lifestyles that that their self does not

embody. For instance, the "bangie" category is rooted in "black masculine street culture."[36] This

performance of "bangie" reinscribes notions of Blackness and masculinity while troubling how

one performs black masculinity. In a sense, drag performers appropriate another example of

gender performance of their supposedly assigned gender. These performances "culminate in a

reworking of the normative framework of heterosexuality."[37] Even more, drag troubles racialized

ideas of gender performance.

   Discussing Venus Xtravaganza, whose participation in Balls is featured in the

documentary, Butler concludes, "Becoming like black women, falsely constitutes black women

as a site of privilege."[38] Butler juxtaposes this concern with privilege by exploring the lives of

black women in Nella Larsen's *Passing.* Butler focuses on the complexities of black women's

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[33] Butler, 88.
[34] Butler, 80.
[35] Butler, 85.
[36] Butler, 88.
[37] Butler, 90.
[38] Butler, 90.

sexuality through the relationship of Irene and Clare, two women with similar ancestries yet identifying with two different racial groups. Using the concept of passing, which is a central concern for Irene and Clare's life, Butler attempts to deal with the multiplicities associated with passing. Clare and Irene are symbolic of this as they negotiate their assigned race versus the race they choose to identify with. Passing, as a means of racial and gender identity, are distinct concerns yet reflect a concern for settling and unsettling concerns with identity. Embodiment cannot untangle this concept and idea of passing. The intersections of gender, race, sex, and sexuality are beyond passing such that the body is not no longer material or discursive. Rather the body is beyond what Pinn proposes.

Bey's concern with moving beyond identarian discourse provides a path forward for understanding the future of womanist religious thought. Bey outlines how understanding the political identity of being moves beyond the preoccupation with identity. The obsession with identity rests within the capacity of representation or, instead, the ability to use representation as a matter of the subject. Bey writes, "representation troublesomely relies on a fundamental tokenization that forces…The One stand in for, exist as, the many; representation fails to capacitate itself for internal irruptions and contradictions, disallowing even the singular to hold differences."[39] Tokenization, as argued in chapter 2, relies on acceptability as a response. Acceptability moves beyond Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's politics of respectability. Acceptability adds another layer such that the bounds of the respectable are fleshed out by another set of demands for modeling Black womanhood. Acceptability acknowledges the various experiences of black womanhood but demands that those are rejected in service of black woman heroics. Even more, the same identarian discourse for which Cannon and other early progenitors

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[39] Bey, 94.

write against is recapitulated when the work is done in service of inclusion within a defined boundary.

In chapters 3 and 4, I turned to the work of Anderson, Lomax, and others who get at this more significant concern with identarian discourse as paralyzing Blackness into an ontological and jezebelian issue. The givenness to Blackness and womanhood as subjective orientations of organizing the world play into a body politic that gives into acknowledging Black womanhood as unique yet not outside of the structures given to it. The performative nature of womanist religious thought lends itself to a recapitulation of the systems for which it seeks inclusion. Being silent on matters of transwomen and transgirls plays into a more significant issue of negating transpossibility or, as Bey argues, an "ongoing agency to materiality…of materialization…we come to understand as matter…glimpsed in the transness and transing of matter."[40] Transness functions in service of breaking loose the bounds of representation and inclusion, omitting transgirls and transwomen further lives into an archetypical representative ideology. This ideology limits the ability to name or tell the experiences of all women if the boundary is cisgender womanhood in thought and being.

While Bey's work on Black transfeminism is new, the concern with boundaries is a more significant concern by earlier scholars. Specifically, Cathy Cohen's consideration of the boundaries of Blackness is instructive. Cohen's *The Boundaries of Blackness* focuses on the communal responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980 and 90s in Black communities. Cohen's work takes up the sociological concern of "linked-fate political frameworks" to understand the priority and method of responses to how black folks respond to black issues. Cohen writes, "linked fate arises from a shared history and common lived experiences among African

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[40] Bey, 8.

Americans as well as from their recognition of significant political, social, and especially economic differences between African Americans and other groups, specifically white Americans."[41] Linked-fate politics result in, according to Cohen, ways of prioritizing commitments that benefit a common Black politic. Issues affecting Black life but operating outside of a positive linked-fate framework. This positive framework results from a political agenda, like elite capture, that benefits those with access to power.

Cohen defines these moments as "consensus issues." According to Cohen, "consensus issues" represent "visible segments of the black political agenda, and…receive the bulk of resources and attention from black political leaders and organizations."[42] These consensus issues operate against what Cohen names "cross-cutting issues." Of cross-cutting issues, Cohen writes that they "disproportionately and directly affect only certain segments of a marginal group."[43] Given their relationship to a subsect of a marginal group, cross-cutting issues "mobilize one primary identity, in this case, one's racial identity, but also to engage other primary identities, such as those constructed around gender, sexuality, and class."[44] Cohen's distinguishing between consensus and cross-cutting is helpful considering the limitations of womanist religious thought. Cohen's special attention how

> [T]he political process where once consensus issues dominate the political agendas of most black organizations, these concerns are now being challenged and sometimes replaced by cross-cutting issues and crises rooted in or built on the often-hidden differences, cleavages, or fault lines of marginal communities. Cross-cutting issues are perceived as being contained to identifiable subgroups in black communities, especially those segments of black communities which are the least empowered. Thus, these issues

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[41] Cathy Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 10.
[42] Cohen, 11.
[43] Cohen, 13.
[44] Cohen, 14.

further stigmatize group members already constructed as deficient in those characteristics thought to embody the normative standards of the community.[45]

The stigmatization faced by HIV/AIDS-positive members of the Black community represents the tension Cohen seeks to address. Themes and issues of marginalization along the lines of identities and norms, ideologies, institutions, and social relationships, structure Black political life. Marginalization informed by these categories structure and reorganize Black political life.

Black political life takes consensus and cross-cutting issues to determine boundaries. These boundaries dictate priorities for intra-racial identity's external benefit. Cohen's boundary concerns extend beyond concerns for race and the markers that distinguish Blackness from the narrative necessary for inclusion. Cohen writes, "Represent the distinct, racialized experiences of different segments of black communities, the fragmentation that threatens a perceived unified black group identity and interest, and the corresponding reduction in the probability and effectiveness of political mobilization by blacks as a group."[46] Cohen's concerns with boundaries speak to how womanist religious scholarship uses representations of heroic Black women figures to name and theorize issues. The presentation of these issues cuts across the possibilities of honoring many experiences. Within these boundaries are critical priorities that determine the shape and validity of experience(s).

No More White Dresses

Black Women in White Dresses began as an observation of the uses of black women as symbolic figures. This dissertation began with a personal reflection highlighting the flows of representational politics. The realities of those Black women are slighted in service of the aesthetic that they offer. This reflection centered on my personal experience yet quickly moved

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[45] Cohen, 9.
[46] Cohen, 16.

to more significant concerns for how representation, culture, and experience as read into the matter identified. At the crux of this argument is a deep appreciation for Blackness while recognizing the limitations of representing experiences that reflect the totality of gender and Blackness.

Seeking to honor and privilege this love and accepting its limitations, Sociologist Ann Swindler's book *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters* suggests that "the culture of love" and "middle-class Americans' view of…what love is, how one knows when love is 'real,'… and where love fits into the larger scheme of life's meanings."[47] Swindler's book is not an ethical investigation of the politics of love or explores scientific evaluations of love. Instead, the book uses love as an entryway to think about "how culture actually works when people bring to bear on a central arena of their daily experience and especially how culture is (or is not) linked to action."[48] Swindler provides an instructive analysis of how individual sensibilities fit into or reject cultural understands of individuals with similar life circumstances.

Swindler is a helpful interlocutor for my ongoing concern with the relationship between culture and experience in womanist religious thought. Swindler works to define culture based on the experiences of those in her study while also acknowledging that this definition of culture is not static. Rather it represents the formation and shaping of culture. For example, love is "social and cultural" while simultaneously a "personal, private experience."[49] By examining love within the culture of a group of middle-class Americans, Swindler seeks to find "variations in the way culture is used."[50] Love among middle-class Americans is a cultural space for the study

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[47] Ann Swindler, *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*, (United Kingdom: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1.
[48] Swindler, 1.
[49] Swindler, 2.
[50] Swindler, 5.

participants can access. The personal and private nature of their experiences demonstrates how they may or may not fit into that culture.

Womanist religious scholarship seeks to make the private and personal nature of experience inclusive in religious culture. In doing so, we are left with a scholarly aesthetic that situates these private and personal experiences as a singular monolithic experience seeking to show cultural and religious relevancy. Cannon and other early womanist religious scholars turned to Black women's literature as the source material for the private and personal made public. Coleman and later generations question this approach in search for a fulfilling method to include all Black women. Contemporary generations of Black women scholars and preachers jettison a concern for inclusion of all, but rather the amplification of flourishing in an ever changing social and digital age. These three approaches to understanding representation, culture, experience, Black women and girls, and religion present a complex matrix. This dissertation ultimately ends with a lack of understanding how any label can come to understand the fullness of any experience of being. Black womanhood as queer, cisgender, transgender, or any other objective falls outside of capture. Understanding where and how Black women exist is in the everydayness of existence. The power of Cannon and other early Black women scholars of religion and religious studies cannot be denied. However, Walker's definition and Cannon's interpretation leave much more to be desired.

The silences outside of the narratives promoted as a throughline of Black women's culture miss many experiences. I began with a reflection on my grandmother and her fellow women-in-white. The narration of their story and individual experiences fit into a pre-determined model. This model begins with a reflection on the pageantry of their Sunday morning duties. Followed by naming the history and significance of Black women in Black church spaces. From

this, the model calls for aligning religious symbolism with the social realities of Black womanhood. This model emphasizes a recognition of these women in white as the epitome of Black womanhood in Black Christian spaces. In doing so, this model silences the experiences of the unmarried mother of three whose faithful service to Black Christian spaces is cast aside. Or the story of the young woman forced out of that same space because she defies the dress code upheld by the women-in-white by wearing pants. Or the story of the women and girls in these same spaces who do not automatically respect the authority of the male pastor or all male deacon board. Or the story of the young transwoman or lesbian ostracized by their families. Is there room for them in a womanist religious model that emphasizes a representational model rather than situating experience as a complex phenomenon? That is the very problem with representational black womanhood. It is inadequate in naming all experiences because experience is always the starting point and never the totality of the story.

The depth of experiences will never matter if the foundations of experience and culture are buttressed by a failure to understand the damaging effects of representation. The story cannot be expanded if the reference point is to begin with experience as the mark of inclusivity. This is not to deny the place of experience. However, it is to say that relying on experience reinscribes the same measures sought for exclusion. To consider new ways of understanding the experiences of all Black women, religion and religious studies must be willing to engage and understand the slippery slope of representation, culture, and experience.

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