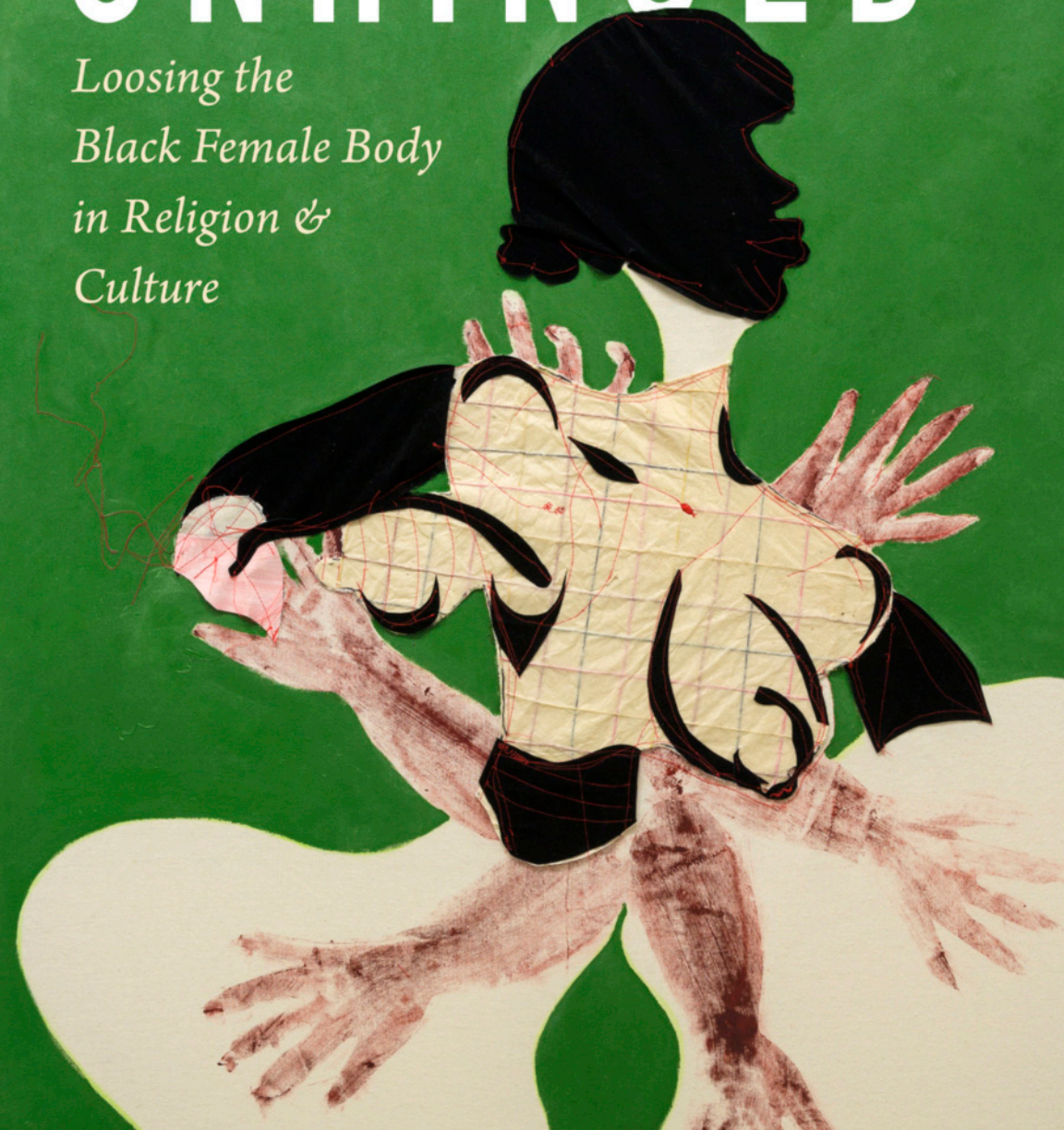
TAMURA LOMAX

JEZEBEL UNHINGED

Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion & Culture



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Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture

Tamura Lomax

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FOR

Michael Raymond,
Michael Leroy, and
Martin Joseph

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PROLEGOMENON

"HOEISM OR WHATEVER"

Black Girls and the Sable Letter "B"

He picked a ho by the name of Rahab . . . so he'll pick you too!

—Rev. Dr. Jasmin Sculark, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* conference, 2014

The Black Church at its best is a wellspring of black religiosity, cultural formation, and liberatory acts. It is complex communal space where many black Americans feel human, valued, loved, and hopeful; where black participation, voice, expression, leadership, artistry, and survival may be affirmed; where chosen familial ties, psychic space for alternative realities, and new beginnings can be made; where black protest and politics might be explored; and where black folk beaten down by false racial narratives might construct new and redemptive bylines. But while the Black Church provides hope and guidance for many of today's maladies, in some cases it dispenses the illness, diagnosis, and prescription. That is, the Black Church sometimes mirrors the antiblack, sexist, classist, homophobic, transantagonistic violence experienced in the rest of the world. And for black women and girls, it can be a battleground for simultaneous erasure and stereotypic seeing, or, more explicitly, marginalization and sex discrimination on some days, and sexualization, clandestine catcalling, unblinking stares, name calling, sexual harassment, and sexual violence—emotional, physical, epistemological, and otherwise—on others.

Not all black Americans[1] are Christian or even religious. And to be clear, Christianity is irreducible to the Black Church.[2] Yet if one happens to identify as black in America, the Black Church's cultural force is difficult to escape. First, America is not only largely religious but also Christian.[3] And second,

black Americans remain primarily affiliated with the Black Church. A Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014 reported that of the black adults surveyed, 79 percent identified as Christian, with over 50 percent terming themselves as "Historically Black Protestant."[4] Though almost half of those surveyed attend services periodically, seldom, or never, the Christian tradition, and particularly the Black Church, remains a vital source of information and meaning making for black life in America. More than half of those surveyed in a Gallup poll in 2012 believe religion provides answers to most of today's problems and guidance on right and wrong.[5] Or does it?

Full disclosure: I am the daughter of a black Baptist preacher (a.k.a. PK, a.k.a. preacher's kid), reared in the Black Church and a moderately conservative Christian household. Love, respect, and respectability were the laws of the land. My parents loved me deeply and modeled the good parts of the Black Church. Unfortunately, they were not my only teachers. Christian education in the Black Church can be dicey. I grew up regularly attending Sunday school, Tuesday church school, Wednesday night Bible study, Saturday choir practice, vacation Bible school, and youth and teen programming. I built lifelong communities and learned many valuable lessons about love, kindness, faithfulness, and forgiveness. At the same time, however, through individual and collective engagement, chance encounters, and as an adult, through preaching, music, film, and books, I learned about the synchronous seeing and labeling of black women and girls between the Black Church and black popular culture. I learned that some of the same stereotypical images and ideas thrust upon black women and girls by society were pervasive in the Black Church. I learned that the Black Church and black popular culture significantly influence each other, especially in their omnipresent circulating discourse on black womanhood. And I learned that the promulgating of this discourse as "truth" can be just as death dealing, anxiety inducing, and dehumanizing as white supremacist discourses on race.

Both discourses on race and black womanhood intend to misread people, communities, and histories, and each marks black folk with illusory innate difference (sexual and otherwise), demands infinite reaction from those so marked, and disciplines responses deemed out of line. My earliest memory of marking is vivid. I was eleven years old when a prominent male elder of my childhood church told my father that he could not focus during altar call because he was sexually overwhelmed by my prepubescent derriere. As opposed to chin checking the man for sexual harassment toward a child, I

was lightly chastised for looking "too grown" and prohibited from ever again wearing the black-and-red fishtail cotton dress that donned my eleven-year-old body that Sunday. I am certain my parents meant only to protect me from the church elders' lusty eyes. They did what they knew to do and what many parents of girl children do. They attempted to shift the male gaze by giving *me* a list of pertinent rules: don't wear clothes that show your body, don't wear clothes that are too tight or too revealing, watch where you go and who you're with at night, and always, I mean always, make sure your breasts and behind are covered.

I still appropriate some of these rules. Nonetheless, the implicit and unintentional message was that black girls' bodies are a distraction and the distractions and/or problems they cause are in some way their fault. I prayed tirelessly, asking God to rid me of my "defect." I did not want to be a problem and I certainly did not want my body to take up space in a way that was distracting or caused trouble. I even learned to move about in a way that tucked my butt in so that it would not protrude. Notwithstanding, I now know some prayers get left unanswered. Moreover, the church member's comment was not about my dress or anything I had done. It was about him and how *he* had sexualized my eleven-year-old body. It was about a church culture that subconsciously and consciously reads black women and girls in terms of sexual deviance, excess, accessibility, and pursuance—the activity of literal and ongoing pursuit, approach, availability, access, and entry. It was about the everydayness of these sorts of projections and how black girls are given rules for covering and closeting while black boys are taught to explore and conquer. It was about the ubiquity of a grammar on race and gender, and how black girls are sexualized long before puberty, and how being imagined as some version of temptress, promiscuous, whore or ho, or just overall unscrupulous, comes with the territory of being both black and female in the United States, even in the Black Church.

In *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History* (1994), black feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine asserts that under slavery black women and girls placed priority on protecting their sexual being due to rape. In freedom, primacy was placed on safeguarding not only their bodies but also their sexual *image*. Anyone half paying attention to culture and society knows that defining black women's and girls' sexual image is one of America's favorite pastimes. Black girls such as Sasha and Malia Obama, Mo'ne Davis, and Quvenzhané Wallis learned to resist and dodge the yokes of racist and sexist mythology before they hit double digits. Unlike Hester

Prynne, the protagonist in Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), who was problematically condemned by her Puritan neighbors for adultery and forced to wear a visible scarlet letter "A" for the rest of her life, black women and girls are marked by hypersexuality and pursuance as an essential component of coming of age—regardless of sexual experience or consent.

My pinning was not a scarlet "A" but a symbolic sable "B" for black, which inherently included promiscuity. It was conferred at age eleven in the Black Church and confirmed at age fourteen in high school during a raucous discussion about sex with friends. I was the new black girl, just in from a predominantly black working-class East Coast neighborhood, readying my best valley girl impression with hopes of fitting into my new predominantly white and affluent environment on the West Coast. As the white boys bragged about their many sexual conquests, the white girls boasted about their depth of sexual knowledge. Public (and private) discourses on sex and sexuality were vulgar in my household, so I remained silent. Unbeknownst to me, it was my very being that had ignited the conversation in the first place. My presence unintentionally created a context for racist and sexist adolescent sex talk. I was the *text*. And they were "reading" me, or at least who they thought I was supposed to be.

Drawing upon rife and insidious mythologies influenced by theological, artistic, scientific, philosophical, literary, and medical racism, and by colonization and neocolonial gazing, my new "friends" marked me with inbred sexual savagery. They sanguinely declared that I was born to crave and provide sex for anyone and anything "just like a monkey." In fact, all black girls were. A father of one of the girls was a medical doctor and he had told her so. Everyone laughed in agreement. Some even pretended to be monkeys having sex, making loud "hoo . . . hoo . . . hoo" noises while wildly thrusting their pelvises, poking out their elbows and scratching their sides with their fingernails. This was their representation of all black girls, and it naturally included uninhibited corybantic animal sex.

While socially construed ideas about blackness, womanhood, and black female sexuality permeated the air I breathed long before I stepped foot onto the campus of my predominantly white and wealthy high school, I could neither adequately frame nor pinpoint them, nor was I certain that they were supposed to apply to me. They were in the air, hovering about, waiting for an opportunity to fasten to my chest and fix me—and others who looked like me. Looking back, however, there was little difference between the significa-

tion encountered that inglorious day in the Black Church and that fateful day in high school, or that which I sensed when participating in conventional teenage pastimes, such as reading Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in middle school or listening to my personal stash of plastic cassette tapes containing my favorite Hip Hop music carefully concealed underneath my bed. The challenge was bringing these discourses together, finding the common thread, and rupturing the latter.

My interest in this project—the circulating discourse on black womanhood in religion and popular culture—came full circle in 2010 after reading an interview with pop musician John Mayer for *Playboy Magazine*. Mayer, well known for his collaborations with B. B. King and Jay Z, was asked if black women threw themselves at him.[6] He replied, "I don't think I open myself to it. My dick is sort of like a white supremacist. I've got a Benetton heart and a fuckin' David Duke cock. I'm going to start dating separately from my dick."[7] Many black people in the digital world (and beyond) were infuriated by Mayer's biopolitics, namely his asymmetrical heart, split between the pseudoharmony of the Benetton brand and the bigotry of David Duke. Many who had previously uncritically accepted him, expressly those in the Hip Hop community, wanted to know one thing: is he racist? While the unfurling of this story placed emphasis on Mayer's answer, I wanted to know more about the question. It was familiar. Inherent in the question were assumptions about black women's and girls' hypersexuality.

But what kind of interpretive guide and/or histories enabled such an ordinary question and lackadaisical response? The question, response, and gendered silence within black America's verbosity on race reflect not only a long-standing internal conflict regarding the place, role, and value of black women and girls in American society but also the Freudian assumption that women and girls always "want the D" and that black female sexuality is homogenous and always already hyper and fiendish. Whether black women threw themselves at Mayer is not the issue. The problem lies in how the query suggests common knowledge. My "aha!" moment came when I realized that the ideas that shaped Mayer's interview were influenced by the same discourse on black womanhood that sculpted so many others—from Georges Léopold Cuvier's report on Saartjie Baartman to J. Marion Sims's interpretation of North American black female slaves to Ronald Reagan's account of his welfare queen to Don Imus's portrait of Rutgers' girls' basketball team to my high school colleagues' interpretation of black female sexuality and, yes, to even the church member's reading of my eleven-year-old body.

The discourse on black womanhood, then, is what must be central. It is the common thread. It weaves the quilt of race and gender signification and representation and rereads black women and girls as indiscriminate jezebelian enthusiasts—across time and contexts. This book provides a framework for mapping, theorizing, and unhinging. Frankly, it is the text I wish my parents or I had when I was growing up. It locates the ruthless dawning of racist, sexist, and classist mythologies about black womanhood and sexuality in European contact/conquest and its offspring, colonial/neocolonial white supremacist culture. Yet it refuses to turn a blind eye to how these ideas get negotiated and propagated in black religion, the Black Church, and black popular culture. Critiques of white racism and popular culture are necessary and ongoing. What remains underexamined is how the Black Church and black popular culture often inform each other, at times reproducing, maintaining, and circulating malevolent racialized gendered meanings.

What I needed growing up was not only a histo- or cartogram of sorts but a genealogy of cross-disseminated racial and gendered representations and a structure for critically reading them. And not just read them as preeminent parts of white supremacist heterosexist discourses but as pivotal elements of black religious and cultural discourse. This book places emphasis on the latter: the circulation and functionality of the discourse on black womanhood, in particular jezebelian tropes, in black religion and black popular culture. It examines how racial and gendered meanings reproduced in the Black Church and black popular culture may be harmful, how the Black Church remains an important fount of inspiration that shapes identity and experiences, for good and bad, and how racial and gendered meanings reproduced in black religion, the Black Church, and black popular culture get maintained and appropriated by black women and girls who have their own critical consciousnesses.

This book is a critical black feminist source of discontentment. It holds that the incessant violence of multicultural signification that black women and girls face requires language that enables critical recognition and righteous refusal. It is disinterested in straight-lined good/bad binaries but rather comes alive in messy gray space. For example, it explores how the discourse on black womanhood produced by white capitalist racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism birthed a simultaneous jezebelian "ho" discourse in black communities and institutions—to the point where "hoeism or whatever" seems normative, even within the Black Church, which constructs and peddles its own brand of ho theology, which draws on and helps solidify the

jezebelian metanarrative. Additionally, what of the ways in which this metanarrative gets deployed by black women? The title of this prolegomenon, "hoeism or whatever," is an ode to Twitter personality Zola (@_zolarmoon a.k.a. Muva Hoe) and her personal narrative about sex work and sex trafficking.[8] Zola is neither ashamed of nor apologetic about her sexual labor or sexual autonomy. How might we problematize ho discourses operating in culture and ho theologies functioning in black churches without demonizing Zola's right to sexual decision making?

Concurrently, the title calls attention to the sable pinning, disrobing, sexualizing, and trafficking of bodies in ideas, thus serving as a framework for interpreting identity and sexual activity, imagined or real. It challenges the practice of distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable women: jezebels and true women, or, more contemporarily, hos and ladies. Who better exemplifies the messy cataclysmic paroxysmal junction between black religion, the Black Church, black popular culture, and ho/lady binaries than Bishop T. D. Jakes and popular cultural producer Tyler Perry? Neither had much to say in response to Mayer's interview. Perhaps they did not know about it or maybe the jezebelian discourse influential in Mayer's *Playboy* interview is equally powerful in their religious productions, and particularly ho theologies. No, they are not synonymous. And no, I am not suggesting that Jakes and Perry are downright sexist misogynoirists[9] who imagine black women solely for sexual pleasure and/or capitalist gain. What I am noting is the obvious presence of a prevailing and routinized discourse.

Why examine them when there is an entire stadium of others, you ask? Or, as my beautician once asserted when engaging about Perry during a hair appointment, "At the end of the day it's entertainment. There are worse stereotypes and worse people. He has a good message: 'Regardless of what you're going through, you can turn things around.' People need to know that. I think it's great—like a sermon for those who may or may not go to church." She was right. There *are* worse stereotypes and worse people. I explore some of them, too. Still, while neither Jakes nor Perry is functioning as D. W. Griffith in blackface, nor have they remixed a Black Church version of Dr. Dre's classic "Bitches Ain't Shit" (but hos and tricks), we can no longer ignore how mass-mediated black religious and sermonic messages reappropriate race- and gender-specific ho/lady and other doppelgangers to "educate, empower, entertain" mainstream audiences.[10] As mentioned elsewhere, a quick glance at Christian history reveals a disconcerting narrative on what happens to women seen as "bad" or accused of doing "bad" things.

I am reminded of how those charged and found guilty of doing "witchcraft" in medieval Europe were executed by way of burning, stoning, or hanging. Add New World interpretations of race, gender, and sexuality to the mix, and violence against women and girls who disrupt religious and cultural scripts is pushed to new and literally unspeakable levels. Let us recall how NuNu, a spiritual and political leader on a southern plantation in the film *Sankofa* (1993), loses her life at the hands of her mixed-race son for similar reasons. And one need not physically die for violence or social crucifixion to be experienced. Do call to mind how Yellow Mary was signified and ostracized by her Gullah community at Ibo Landing in *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) after being raped, sexually exploited, and prostituted. True enough, cultural products such as film, including those steeped in history, are part hypothetical. Nevertheless, they are also part imitation. Of course, this works both ways. The point is, while there are worse stereotypes and worse people, in real life and popular culture, no one should be (or shall be) let off the hook. To put it bluntly, there are no passes to give. And no bonus points for not being as bad as others. All antiblack misogynoirist cultural projections are due for a *read*.

This includes those produced by those we love. The ho/lady discourses pervasive in black religion, the Black Church, and black popular culture must be called out, diagnosed, and refused from all angles. It is not coincidental that Rev. Dr. Jasmin Sculark preached, "He picked a ho by the name of Rahab . . . so he'll pick you too," at Jakes's popular "Woman, Thou Art Loosed" conference in Atlanta in 2014, or that Rev. Dr. Juanita Bynum, Jakes's prodigal spiritual daughter, released a videogram in 2016 for "No More Sheets, Part 2" in which she mass mediated a vehement discourse on hoing and holiness, to both of which mostly black women enthusiastically said amen. What does it mean that black preachers use the Bible to champion theologies on hoing and holiness? Or that black women affirmed Sculark and Bynum's messaging? Or that black women and girls are Perry and Jakes's number one supporters? Or that black women make up most Black Church congregations and look to the church for guidance on right and wrong despite its concomitant sexualization and erotophobia? Or that the Black Church may serve as both healer and abuser? Or that the Black Church may be one of few places where black women and girls hear, "Regardless of what you're going through you can turn things around"? Or that Sculark and Bynum's ho theology was likely influenced by Jakes (perhaps unintentionally)? Or that the production of ho theology may have been intended for good, as a response to biblical Jezebel and jezebel the racial trope?

This book is framed in part by my personal experience outside of academia and in part from what I adjudged to be an opening between black theological thought and black religious thought and, more expressly, womanist theoethical thought and black feminist thought. My initial research was sparked by Kelly Brown Douglas's book *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999) and Emilie Townes's book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006). These texts provided a framework and language for interpreting black women's day-to-day encounters with white racist and sexist stereotypes in contemporary culture. Notwithstanding, my experiences required something more. I longed for a grimier account of how the discourse on black womanhood cross-pollinates black American cultural traditions and contexts, to include the religious but also how black women and girls both resist and reappropriate them, at times actively taking pleasure in their meanings.

In thinking about Zola, one might argue that her discourse on "hoeism or whatever" is augmented by her sex work, which often gives rise to, at minimum, questions about socioeconomic class positionality, coercion, and consent. But what of how my girls and I secretively kept the Geto Boys in heavy rotation during my freshman year of college or how the bassline (and base lyrics) of "The Other Level" made us so freely dance? It is easy to reject certain discourses on black womanhood while others, if truth be told, are more difficult. For example, I unequivocally detest and reject D. W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Hating and resisting it as white-on-black antiblack-white-racist-capitalist-patriarchal-hetero-sexist propaganda is uncomplicated. Black cultural products that move us in one way or another, not so much. Yet the jezebelian metanarrative on innate black female immorality and promiscuity can be central to both. When the Geto Boys were played outside of what was ultimately freedom space in the privacy of our dorm, we donned our symbolic "righteous-sistas" hats, offering doubly conscious biting critiques to our college brothers for even thinking about considering black women as bitches or hos. We never stopped dancing in private though.

This nuance in mind, it is one thing to critique and dismiss Mayer and others for antiblack sexist projections. It is another to publicly censure Hip Hop and the Geto Boys, despite knowing every lyric and dancing for dear life in private. However, it is entirely different to turn that critical gaze to the Black Church, Jakes, Perry, and others. What happens when they too produce patriarchal texts that make us dance and/or wave our hands? I do not claim to have all the answers. I am of the mind that Drs. Sculark and Bynum,

Zola, my girls, and I are quite possibly differing sides of the same coin. Each of us appropriated the language that was given. Despite that, none of us was wholly determined by the language. The reading offered in the pages to follow ponders how the discourse on black womanhood serves as the anecdotal glue holding a range of religious, theological, social, cultural, literary, scientific, artistic, and political expressions and ideas together, how this discourse might be negotiated by black cultures, institutions, and people, and how it might be more sufficiently *read*. It hopes to add to the conversation by critically holding all these complex gazes together, and, moreover, by turning stale notions of "hoeism or whatever" upside down and chin checking, once and for all, the sable letter "B," wherever it might operate, including the dear old Black Church.

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Books never come forth in a vacuum. They rise up and are given life in community. And though many academic books breathe fresh air as the writer scribes freely on the hillside, open greens, or cobbled streets of foreign land, thanks to hefty research reserves, this text was written mostly in the carpool line, the athletic arena, the church parking lot, and any other free space I could find and support on my own dime. In short, *Jezebel Unhinged* came alive in the spaces where I lived. Because of that, I thank my husband Michael, our beautiful son's Michael and Martin, and our furry loves, Maxx and Jesse, first and foremost. This book lives thanks to the unyielding and unapologetic love and support we share.

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INTRODUCTION

"A THOUSAND DETAILS, ANECDOTES, STORIES"

Mining the Discourse on Black Womanhood

> The quintessential differences, blackness and femaleness, provide the stuff of fantastical narratives and allow French male literati, directors and their audiences, and scientists to weave them out of and into "a thousand details, anecdotes, stories." Black females are perpetually ensnared, imprisoned in an essence of themselves created from without: Black Venus.
>
> —T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*

The phrase "discourse on black womanhood" sums up a set of ideas and practices, including ways of gazing—from the unreflected taken for granted to the intentionally critical interventional. It denotes conflict, namely that between black female flesh as overdetermined[1] by colonizing epistemologies and as determined to self-designate within contexts of thriving and/or oppression. It calls attention to the "pernicious editing" that black feminist Kimberly Wallace-Sanders writes about in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (2002). And it notes the reinvention, recoding, and manipulation of subjects, signs, and phenomena that black feminist Hortense Spillers articulates in her essay "Changing the Letter: The Yokes, the Jokes of Discourse, or, Mrs. Stowe, Mr. Reed" (2003). Moreover, it provides the framework for mining and theorizing what black feminist T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting postures as "'a thousand details, anecdotes, stories' . . . created from without."[2]

The discourse on black womanhood recognizes the sociopolitical and cultural work of race-sex-gender-class-specific mythology as an essential American and diasporic project. It foregrounds the cross-penetration of metanarratives on black venus, jezebel, and black-woman-as-whore/ho/thot (that ho over there)[3] as indispensable to white Western and global dominion, and, in some instances, North American black patriarchy. It notes the ways in which discourse intricately connects to power, producing knowledge and constructing narrations on "truth." And it attends to what has been thought, said, and communicated, placing emphasis on who is doing the speaking, against what historical backdrop, in what context, to what audience, utilizing which technologies, producing what knowledge, and deploying what language—epistemic, ideological, discursive, visual, representational, and otherwise. It holds that *what* is communicated is just as significant as *who* is doing the communicating, particularly as the "who" helps frame what becomes knowledge, and thus what can be known, or at least what we think we know to be true. Finally, the discourse on black womanhood understands that once knowledge and/or truth is linked to representation, said knowledge and representation, combined, become regulating.[4]

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 discourse is not fixed. Discourse, a source of both power and knowledge, though at times seemingly calcified, controlling, and irrepressible, is constantly in flux and can be deployed for either oppressive or productive aims, or both. Moreover, its oppressive yoke can be (at least) loosened through collective unapologetic, unwavering, forceful, and mass-mediated strategic intervention. To be clear, the discourse on black womanhood names an inordinate collection of operative racial and gendered tropes carefully, ceaselessly, injudiciously, and vapidly "written" into history, thus affecting black women's and girls' lives. Nevertheless, the collective of ideas and images pivotal to the discourse are not a final destination.

The discourse on black womanhood, and its ubiquitous trope and ideology, jezebel (a.k.a. black venus), circulating within and between black religion and black popular culture, informing our reading of and conduct toward the black female body, is the subject of this book. Many have written

about jezebel and how she shows up in popular culture, typically covered as one-third of the jezebel-mammy-sapphire trinity or as the infamous biblical whore. *Jezebel Unhinged* takes a different course, placing jezebel and her lineage front and center. In 2013, black feminist author of *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (2013), Melissa Harris-Perry wrote about the political and cultural anxieties around Michelle Obama's body as a site of jezebelian fodder. Of particular interest to Harris-Perry was the *Salon* essay by Erin Aubrey Kaplan, a black woman, "First Lady Got Back" (2008).[5] Harris-Perry notes the essay as "one of the most profane." Yes and no. In short, Harris-Perry misses the messy shades of gray between signification, projection, thingification, representation, presentation, interiority, and identification.

I happened to respond to Kaplan's essay back in 2008 in an article titled "Is It Wrong to Talk about Michelle Obama's Body?" published with *Alternet*. While there is a necessary critique about First Lady Obama being "a subject—more than a body, and, more than a butt," and how that kind of projection is dangerous, the connection between Obama and Sir Mix-a-Lot's hit song "Baby Got Back," requires further nuance. I wrote,

> To be sure, the mass production of "Baby Got Back" via radio and television took ongoing essentialist discourses about black female hypersexuality to new dimensions. The constant reproduction of the gyrating images became a source of social studies on black female sexuality. This was obviously deeply problematic. However, as stereotypically reductive as this song and video was, in its own way, it also celebrated black women's bodies . . . many black women, including myself, strangely found a sense of pride in our bodies, specifically our butts. Thus, while Sir Mix-a-Lot (and others) reassigned mythical legacies to our behinds, some black women were re-imagining themselves as subjects with beautiful bodies.[6]

Truth is, Obama made many black women and girls beam with pride every time her beautiful body sashayed center stage. She looked like kinfolk; like "one of us." Fully human and wonderfully made. Still the constant fragmenting and sexualizing of her body was exhausting. This book holds these gazes in balance. Unhinging jezebel means loosing her from black women's and girls' bodies and black-and-white binary interpretations. It means unscrewing the symbolic bolts that clasp her together and letting her fall while also exploring and making sense of what keeps holding her together in the first place. And it means doing this work while still managing to celebrate our

gorgeous bodies—not from a deficit of personhood or historical knowledge but from a profusion of self-recognition and self-actualization.

Harris-Perry, along with other black feminists such as Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Hortense Spillers, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Angela Y. Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, Saidiya Hartman, Hazel V. Carby, Michele Wallace, bell hooks, Jacqueline Bobo, Valerie Smith, Wahneema H. Lubiano, Joy James, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia J. Williams, and others, provide a robust critical discourse on race, gender, sexuality, and representation. However, their works predominantly place emphasis on black women in history, politics, culture, science, law, and literature. Though Harris-Perry and a few others have taken up religion, there is no book-length black feminist study on the powerful functionality of race, gender, and representation within black religion. And there is no study that critically underscores the significant and collaborative work of discourse, which includes a range of speech acts such as talking and modes of writing and representation, circulating between black religion and black popular culture.

Womanist scholars in religion[7] (also "womanists" or "womanism") developed a significant paradigm in religious and theological studies for examining black women's experiences with sexism in black churches and for reimagining them as thinking and feeling moral agents with experiences worthy of academic inquiry. Pivotal to their discourse is demythologizing black womanhood and its variety of cultural representations. Kelly Brown Douglas and Emilie Townes, mentioned earlier, are of particular import. Both open up space in black theo-ethical (theological studies, theological ethics, the study of ethics in theology) studies for problematizing and theologizing harmful racial and gendered stereotypes, thus expanding the critical work of black feminist cultural criticism. However, though Douglas and Townes, in their seminal texts *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1999) and *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006), respectively, construct a necessary template in theo-ethical studies for examining black women's experience, black female cultural representations, and the Black Church, each place primary emphasis on white supremacy and white cultural production.

Jezebel Unhinged reveals a need for theoretical studies on race, sex, gender, sexuality, and representation, and how they collectively produce meanings about black womanhood and girlhood that are circulated within and between religion and culture, and more specifically black religion and black

popular culture. And though I am well aware of how whiteness[8] functions as an oppressive marker of difference in both religion and culture, this book is not about white folk. The initial historicizing of the white/European gaze in chapter 1 is not an intervention on how white always already determines black. While the white gaze is forcefully mass mediated, it is not incontrovertible. There is an ongoing struggle between previous existence—black existence prior to the activity or knowledge of racial and gender signification—interiority, contact/conquest/projection, appropriation, resistance, and negotiation. Consequently, meaning making in black religion and black popular culture is never merely a reflection of the white/European gaze. It is preceding/already, active, inherited, collaborative, and visionary.

Hence this text is most interested in how sex and gender oppression enables a taken-for-granted reappropriation of stereotypic ideas about race, sex, gender, and sexuality in black cultural spaces, to include the black religious and the Black Church. Ergo, what follows the initial historicizing is an exploration of the ways that historical ideas function not only "out there" but "in here." The aim of such a project is emphatically not to give antiblack white supremacist capitalist patriarchal misogynoirist—male and female—phallocentric gazes and praxis a pass. It is to note language and representation as everyday instruments of oppression and power for black women and girls—beyond white ideological bias. And it is to locate these instruments of oppression and power in both black religion and black popular culture.

Black feminists and womanists have done well in articulating sexism and white racism in cultural production. Black feminist scholarship on race, gender, and the politics of representation within and beyond black popular culture is masterly and foundational. Simultaneously, womanist scholarship on black women and the Black Church is groundbreaking and at the very least virtuosic. To these ends, this book is indebted to, brings together, and builds upon black feminist and womanist scholarship. At the same time, it challenges these lines of thought and holds three pertinent theories in tension.

First, womanist cultural criticism, namely the works of Douglas and Townes, provides a cornerstone for reading and critiquing cultural production and representation, black women's experience, and the Black Church. Notwithstanding, there is a dependency on controlling analyses of black women's experiences as well as methodological and conceptual limitations. What is needed to move that discourse forward in black religion is a nuanced examination of the manner in which the force of representational epistemes like jezebel operate *within* black religion and black popular culture

to overdetermine contemporary black women's and girls' identities and experiences within a pornotropic gaze[9] (which they in turn negotiate). The turn toward the study of black women's experiences in black religion marks a shift toward the study of signs, symbols, significations, representations, and meanings, which enables a more complex reading of black women's and girls' lives—a reading unrestrained by tradition, canon, or institution.

Second, though black feminist cultural criticism offers useful tools for critically analyzing black women's and girls' experiences and cultural production, what is needed to move that discourse forward in cultural criticism and in terms of its relevance to a significant percent of black women and girls who are largely religious and Christian, is an informed, critical, sustained, collective, and foregrounded engagement that explores the significance of Christianity, and specifically the Black Church, in black American and diasporic women's and girls' lives. Such foregrounding in black feminist studies requires centralizing theories and methods in the study of religion as a pivotal discourse therein and marking black religion as being as essential to black feminist thought as it is to black women's and girls' lives.

Third, these moves call forth an alternative field for critical inquiry, research, reading, and writing: a black feminist study of religion, which is a theoretical study on religion and culture and the marking of and exchanges between signs, symbols, significations, representations, and meanings and race, sex, gender, and sexuality therein. A black feminist study of religion, a distinctive blend of womanist, black religious, black cultural, and black feminist criticism, opens out into a range of entry points, including black feminist theology, black feminist religious thought, black feminist religio-cultural criticism, and so on. "Black feminist theology," to my knowledge, was first coined by black feminist Brittney Cooper in a Facebook post in 2010 where she and I exchanged ideas in response to her likening Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (1995) to a black feminist bible and Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) to "black feminisms' systematic theology."[10]

It notes a womanist/black feminist theoretical engagement on theological phenomena, categories, and interests. That is, in addition to a study of religio-cultural signs and meanings, black feminist theology deploys womanist and black feminist tools to examine "the statement of the truth of the Christian message"[11] in black women's and girls' lives. It does this work through critical discourses invested in accounts of God's existence and/or activity and concepts such as belief, good news, and faith, with hopes of broadening, deepen-

ing, and complicating black women's and girls' theological parameters and religious identities, interpretations, and experiences. This book places emphasis on black feminist religious thought and black feminist religio-cultural criticism. Black feminist religious thought denotes a (re)structure(ing) of philosophical and theoretical concepts. Black feminist religio-cultural criticism distinguishes itself from black feminist religious thought only in that the former places emphasis on theoretical moves.

I should pause here and say a few words about terminology. My interpretation of the *religious, religion, and religio-* is irreducible to traditional religious assumptions, concepts, or institutions. Religion is an aspect of *culture*. In the broadest sense, culture points to a matrix of ideologically loaded signifying systems[12] through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored.[13] However, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), culture "is never merely a set of practices, technologies or messages, objects whose meaning and identity can be guaranteed by their origin or their intrinsic essences." It is instead a signifying system that is simultaneously reflexive and lived, and that emerges from integrated cultural stimuli, practices, utterances, and interpretations. Pivotal to "lived culture" is cultural production, reproduction, and representation, each explored through language, customs, and practices of resistance, negotiation, accommodation, appropriation, and consent.

Religion, then, is an arbitrary sign that has been stabilized through the consistency of language, practices, and representation over time. It is cultivated within, not without, culture. As such, religion is an ideologically loaded, socially constructed interpretive concept deployed for the purposes of decoding, analyzing, and theorizing legitimate modes of expression within the human experience. Concomitantly, it is a distinctive form of culture and signifying system, negotiated through a variety of acts, objects, meanings, and practices in human culture. It is both signified and a signifier. And both the signified and the signifier mark a multiplicity of human behaviors.[14] What may be deemed religious, however, depends on the hermeneutics of the signifier. On that account, the religious/religion has several profiles, to include but not limited to black religion.

In *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (1986), religious philosopher Charles Long articulates religion as the way one comes to terms with one's ultimate reality in the world. Holding the histories of religion, black religion, and black people in tension, Long notes religion

as a movement, motivation, and/or expression that precedes yet influences thought and manifests in a variety of ways. Black religion, then, is an innately plural signifying system and interpretive concept that refers to a multiplicity of black cultural forms, factions, motions, inspirations, articulations, and encounters deemed "religious" by black diasporic peoples making sense of their lives. Accordingly, there is a continuous dialogue between black religion and black culture, with each being pollinating and reflexive. Simultaneously, while black religion transcends institutional religion, structures, and presumptions, it includes the Black Church. And although this study resists conflating the plurality of black religion with the historical Black Church, it refuses the urge to diminish or erase the Black Church's cultural importance as a significant site of black religion.

This study invites the reader to turn toward culture, to explore black religiosity as it is produced in black popular culture, for example film, texts, athletic stadiums, and television. Because black religiosity as presented and cultivated within black life and black popular culture is significantly Christo- and Black Church–centric, this text accents Black Church–centric communicative acts such as preaching, writing, performance, and speaking, as a lens for decoding and theorizing modes of expression, meaning making, and signifying practice. I should note, this is neither a gratuitous conflation nor a traditional theological investigation. It is religious criticism, more precisely, a black feminist religio-cultural study that interrogates black women as the objects of cultural and religious texts, to include black religion and black popular culture, and as the subjects of womanist and black feminist texts—and the social, cultural, and psychosexual implications of each.

The latter requires sometimes locating gray space between theoretical and theological inquiries and analyses. A black feminist study of religion is sure to blur boundaries—both intentionally and unintentionally, particularly a study that places emphasis on jezebel, a biblical figure and racial trope. With this in mind, though black feminist religious thought and black feminist religio-cultural criticism place primacy on religion and religious criticism, namely how religion operates in the world to produce meanings, each is also concerned with how jezebel shows up as a detailed theological concept. This necessarily forges a discourse with womanist and black feminist theology. Still, though complimentary, theology and religious criticism are distinct.

Black feminist religious thought and black feminist religio-cultural criticism hold that culture informs religion in normative ways and vice versa. The hyphen between "religio" and "culture/al" ("religio-cultural") explicitly