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**FILLING THE BIBLICAL GAP: IDENTIFYING SACRED RHETORIC FOR
BLUES WOMEN THROUGH WOMANIST VERNACULAR DISCOURSE**

by

Ayo Mariama Morton

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family and many friends. A special feeling of gratitude to my mother, Joyclyn Marie Morton, who is the personification of God's heart for me. Thanks to my late mentor, Katie Geneva Cannon, PhD, who understood my unique mix of talents and skills and how they fit into the academy. Thanks to the best dissertation committee ever, Andre E. Johnson, PhD, Antonio de Velasco, PhD, Christina Moss, PhD, and Shelby Crosby, PhD. Finally, I'm grateful for the additional support of my aunts, Greta and Lisa.

Abstract

Ayo Mariama Morton: Filling the Biblical Gap: Identifying Sacred Rhetoric for Blues Women through Womanist Vernacular Discourse
(Under the direction of Andre E. Johnson, Ph.D.)

The Blues woman, who is excommunicated from the Black church, is still deserving of affirmation, guidance, and inspiration. Her refusal to deny her authenticity invokes a marginalization that is rarely talked about within the Black community. This marginalization is an erasure/exclusion of this woman for the sake of maintaining this narrative. Rather than forcing herself on the followers of the narrative, she remains on the outskirts of the community. Attendance at church is not a requirement to have access to the biblical canon of the church. However, she is unlikely to embrace the sacred text of the institution that has cast her off. And on the slight chance that she does decide to open the canon, there is little found on the pages to serve her.

With this in mind, the question becomes, *what can be used to fill the gap left by the biblical canon for the Blues woman?* My answer is Womanist Vernacular Discourse. I begin this work by unpacking the biblical gap, the Blues woman, and Womanist Vernacular Discourse. After identifying and exploring the vacancy, I began to find literature from what has been deemed secular in the Black community that has the potential to effectively fill the gap.

Understanding the nature of the Blues woman and her hesitation to enter religious edifices, it immediately became apparent that this inspiration would have to come from sources not affiliated with the church and the tendency to lean on the bible would not be available. I

looked to the places Blues women gather and how Womanist Vernacular Discourse was being exercised in those spaces. Those spaces included open mic nights, movie theaters, and book clubs. As I analyzed the popular literature utilized in these spaces, it was clear that the discourse in all of these texts expose Black women's encounters with each other and the divine.

Then, I wondered if any other ministers were aiming to inspire these women and if their sermons contained a version of Womanist Vernacular Discourse that moved beyond traditional homiletics and extended grace to this woman. Because of this, I looked to how Womanist Vernacular Discourse is used in the poetic, dramatic, autobiographical, and sermonic to fill the gap left by the biblical canon.

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INTRODUCTION

It is women's day at this Black church. The white attire gleams brightly against the brown skin of the women. There are feminine niceties throughout the church on this particular Sunday. The assignment was understood. The women have worked to ensure the service has been planned to be a girl's good time in the Lord. The best preacher from the land has been invited. The choir has been recruited to have the best sound possible. The women in the church have even prepared a meal to be sure every sensory need has been met. After all, it is women's day at the Black church! Everything seems to be in place. Even the carpet appears to be extra soft and feminine this morning. Everything is just right... until *she* walks in.

She is dressed in purple because *she* was not informed it was women's day. *She* is seated so far back in the sanctuary *she* is almost in the parking lot. *She* has a history, and the entire community knows it. *She* is not invited. But they have to let *her* in because the mission statement clearly states that this church... built by the enslaved... erected in 1865... was for anyone who felt led to enter the doors. Their premise was to recreate the hush harbor for the Black community to be able to worship God. Is that not what *she* came to do?

Now, several women in the church were happy to see *her* in the sanctuary. Not because they wanted *her* soul to be cared for... Not because *she* belonged there... But because they knew that *she* was not with their husbands while they were in church. They had heard the rumors. And the rumors were always true about women like *her*.

The attitudes about *her* created an invisible wall around *her*. This wall did not serve *her*. This wall still let in the comments thrown like daggers around *her*, hoping they would land. The wall still let the stares come in. The wall still gave *her* some indication that the church, erected by *her* ancestors, did not approve of *her*.

No one knew what had brought *her* to the church on this particular Sunday. No one knew what *her* life was actually like. No one knew who *she* actually was. No one even bothered to try to understand what *her* life might be like in this isolated space. All they knew was that *she* did not belong in this fine church. *Her* mere existence soiled the narrative the church was aiming to promote. *She* was not the genteel lady the church promoted Black women to be. *She* was not outwardly submissive to *her* husband. After all, all the husbands *she*'d had belonged to someone else. *She* did not fit the mold of a Black woman that belonged to this church.

Her purple dress seemed to be a watered-down version of those blues *she* was famous for promoting. Those blue stories about women like *her*, needing the love of a man... needing the acceptance from the community... needing the fellowship among believers... Those blue stories were packaged in tight dresses and encouraged explicit thoughts that were gateways to all types of sin. Surely, *she* had come in to stir up trouble in the house of the Lord on women's day. The only person who greeted *her* was the usher at the door, who reluctantly led *her* to a seat in the back of the sanctuary in hopes of not disrupting the pictures or the picturesque service for the annual women's day. *She* was not welcomed into the house built for her. The community would be able to progress if women like *her* did not exist. But *her* constant presence in the grocery store, the beauty shops, the nail salons, the school, the community made it more and more difficult for the narrative to be taken seriously. Why couldn't *she* see this?

The narrative would serve *her* needs if *she* would just get on board. If *she* would just denounce the things that were too ethnic to be accepted by the majority in society... If *she* would relax her hair... If *she* would not speak so loudly... If *she* would not participate in that blues music... If *she* didn't wail so loudly during praise and worship... If *she* would quit being *her*, *she* would gain the world. Didn't *she* understand this?

Then, sharply at 11 am, the choir begins to sing. This singing is drastically different from the blue music *she* was used to. This music was choral and stiff. There were no riffs to reflect the culture seemingly present in the Black church on women's day. The music was a dry mirror of the dry white church just up the road. There was no Negro spiritual or gospel music being sung. This choir only sang what is classified as Christian music. The deep feeling of a Negro spiritual might cause these women to break character. There was no place in this Black church for that sort of thing.

As the song closes, a woman steps behind the side microphone because she is not allowed in the pulpit. She welcomes everyone to the service and expressly thanks everyone for being draped in their finest white clothing. She gives the order of service and takes her seat. The offering comes and goes. The responsive reading from the black and burgundy hymnal with the gold lettering comes and goes. Several other pomp and circumstance rituals take place. Then, the main event happens. The preacher takes his place in the pulpit.

He, on women's day, takes a text from the book of Esther. He promotes the idea that the women of today could take a note from this story because Esther understood the assignment, and Vashti was stubborn and did not understand her place. Esther was glorified because of her willingness to bend. She was willing to take on the expectations of the majority. She was willing to denounce who she was to become someone she was not to please the king. She was very much the ideal woman of both her time and the present. Vashti was demonized because of her willingness to stand up for herself. Vashti was demonized because she did not need Xerxes to make her royal; she was a descendant of the Persian King Nebuchadnezzar. She was royal in her own right. She was demonized for not denouncing who she was to make the king feel like a man. She was his wife, not his servant and she was demonized for understanding this.

When the service finally ended, *she* was left in that back left corner without greeting or well wishes for the week. *She* walked into the fellowship hall to have dinner with the women and was informed she had to sign up a week ago for dinner, and if there was anything left, *she* could get something to eat from the leftover. Next time, *she* needed to sign up.

As *she* left the church, without being served/welcome, *she* fell and hurt her physical being. That only seemed right to *her*. After all, *she* had suffered the pain both mentally and emotionally; why shouldn't her outsides match her insides? *She* was indeed a Blues woman headed into another week being reminded that her community would rather *she* not exist.

This woman's story is not totally a fabrication. It accurately depicts what many women encounter when trying to return to the Black church. The isolated space in which this woman resides exists on the outskirts of Black communities. There is no diagnosis for being the Blues woman. She is born naturally. She is oriented through her community's willingness to show her who she is in her grace period. She is encouraged and supported in certain spaces, and those spaces speak the loudest in her head. She can be herself in those spaces without feeling like a burden or eyesore. She is called beautiful there. There are stories there that she can relate to. She is home in the blues-filled spaces.

My concern is that we, rhetorical scholars of race and religion, tend to erase the possibility of inspiration for Blues women by solely exploring divine encounters included in the closed sixty-six book biblical canon to cater to a faulty narrative. What I mean by erasing the propensity of the inclusion of Blues women is exclusively utilizing a text that had no chance to effectively capture these women's experiences. This woman is an outcast from the Black church, which was crafted during the enslavement of African bodies. This enslavement systemically crafted a new being, the Black person. This Black person has had a vastly different experience

than her/his African ancestors who never experienced enslavement in the Antebellum south. As a result, the sacred text of the church of this Black person does not have the capability of speaking to an existence emerging after its close. Moreover, this text is written/composed by masculine councils. Therefore, this woman's experience cannot be accurately represented in this canon.

To clarify, the enslavement of African bodies made significant changes in the orientation and socialization of Black people. This enslavement crafted a need that cannot be met by a sacred text that closed before this occurrence. This woman is left without a relatable guide for her life.

While the biblical text has two books boasting the names of women, Esther and Ruth, it does not explore women's issues in a manner in which women have been understood to relate. She is not the dominant society's male this text was intended to serve, and she is not catered to identically. Understanding this, how do we fill the gap in the sacred text to include the experiences of Blues women?

Since we see that the Blues woman cannot fully identify herself with the biblical text, we end up leaving this woman without an inspirational guide. When we leave this woman without an inspirational guide, we break the propensity of serving her. And when we break the propensity of serving her, she is left like a train without its tracks. The power that resides within cannot be developed or appreciated but instead damages the community through aimless activity.

For example, the eleven-year-old girl experiencing menstruation for the first time needs guidance that only a woman can provide for her. She needs first to understand what is happening to her body. Several changes occur internally that cannot be fully explained unless felt. The change in sweat patterns, the sensory changes, the pain or lack thereof, etc., are all examples of what this girl needs to be explained to her. When looking at the biblical text, this girl is left with

words like unclean, impure, and punishment. The idea of beauty is not introduced. The girl has to understand the changes her body is undergoing to know how to conduct herself. These things are shielded away from in the sacred text that is understood to be a guide for *all* people. She is left to experience this new happening on her own. She is left to her own understanding of how to interact with her world while undergoing a metamorphosis that changes her entire existence. As a result, Black girls experience high teen pregnancy rates, are rumored to be angry, and are misunderstood in their adolescent years. While this may seem like a minute issue, this train is set off its tracks right here and has no direction. In the end, the train, which could have been a positive force with the right guidance, can potentially destroy the entire community. Let us consider *Filling the Biblical Gap: Identifying Sacred Rhetoric for Blues Women through Womanist Vernacular Discourse*.

Literature Review

How does Womanist Vernacular Discourse fill the gap for Blues women in the Holy Bible? Several layers need to be unpacked to understand the task at hand thoroughly. We must first identify the Blues woman. Next, we must elaborate on the gap left by the biblical text. Also, Womanist Vernacular Discourse needs an in-depth definition and exemplification. From there, we will identify a method for determining which texts utilize Womanist Vernacular Discourse. This process will allow us to identify texts fitting this classification and illustrate how they can be incorporated to fill the gap left by the biblical text for Blues women.

The Blues Woman

Post enslavement, the Black church crafted a narrative to better the lives of Black people. This narrative was put in place to prove that Black people were civilized and should be considered people just like everyone else in society. Ethicist Kelly Brown Douglas identified this

narrative as the *narrative of civility* (Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* xii). While genuine in its motives, this narrative had adverse effects on the community. In proving Black people are the same as everyone else, this narrative also, at the same time, offered harsh critiques of Blackness and any remnants of African culture. “This problem has led [the Black church] to *cast-off* certain bodies, which [Douglas] designates as blues bodies” (Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* xiii).

During the post enslavement period, the Black church was the hub of the Black community. If you were an outcast of the church, you were a social outcast. Because of this, the Black church’s narrative was bought into by most of the community (Brown 2000, 29). In this space, blues bodies are outside the church. Many equated those outside the church with the blues because it was popular secular music at the time. This makes space for the eras going forward: rock and roll, rhythm and blues, hip hop, etc. Ergo, the followers of the narrative of civility were demonizing the people associated with the blues. This effort was to instill a fear of being converted to the blues as opposed to continuing to remain solely faithful to the church.

With this in mind, the woman classified as a blues body is strategically demonized. With the myth about women being seductresses at play, the alluring effects of the Blues woman is a perceived danger to the church. She is understood to be able to trick men into going against what they understand to be correct. Eve (American Bible Society Gen. 3) and Delilah (American Bible Society Judges 16) are both misunderstood in this manner. Their motives are written for them.

It is for this reason that I am choosing to focus on *her*. She has been excommunicated from the church either because she *could* not fit into the narrative or because she *would* not fit into the narrative. Her social location in relation to the Black community is an area deserving of analysis. The erasure/exclusion of her existence is grounds for immediate study.

The Biblical Gap for Blues Women

The Holy Bible (American Bible Society) is the sacred text of the Christian faith. By sacred text, I mean a written work dedicated to a religious purpose by venerating the laws or doctrines of a faith to canonize experiences with God to provide guidance/inspiration. In its most common form, this sacred text is the sixty-six books that make up the Protestant Bible. Other books have emerged from the era, but the sixty-six books make up the biblical canon respected by the Christian faith. This written work was sealed in approximately AD 400 after examinations by several all-male councils.

History records 1619 as the year the first ships carrying enslaved Africans arrived on the shores of what would later become the United States of America (Hampton History Museum 9). The capturing, holding, and becoming cargo changed the existence of these Africans. The experiences up to this point were possibly that of the Africans present during the canonization process of the biblical text. This process changed these specific Africans totally; they became new beings.

While there were many routes enslavers traveled, my focus here is on the enslavement of Africans in the Antebellum South in America (Raboteau). My focus is the strategic crafting of a being to become the perfect “slave” in America. This experience brought about yet another being between 1619 and 1865 (Raboteau). This existence was the early rooting of the Black community.

This closed canon has no way of capturing the experiences of these people. These Black bodies’ experiences could not be captured before their existence. While the biblical text does refer to slavery (American Bible Society), it cannot grasp this particular slavery. This slavery

was referred to by many as the most inhumane treatment of people in history. There is no way the biblical text could canonize this experience. This creates a chasm.

During enslavement, many Africans embraced the Christian faith. (Thomas 1-2). As demonstrated from the narratives of formerly enslaved people, these narratives speak of the enslaver approved services in which the enslavers chose the preachers. They also expressed the observations of the enslavers' worship services. In both situations, preachers used the biblical text to support the institution of slavery (Raboteau 212-213). The guidance/inspiration provided was presented through a pro-slavery lens. The chasm widens.

The narratives also inform us of the invisible church. This invisible church was forbidden by the enslavers and thus carried out in secret meetings. These secret meetings were sometimes held in slave cabins but were more popularly convened in what is referred to as hush harbors (Nunley 34). In these secret meetings, the enslaved were protected by other enslaved people to worship God authentically. The conjuring of the spirit in their own ways was an introduction to the worship of the divine that could not be canonized in the biblical text (Raboteau 212-217). This context brought about a new experience. The chasm widens.

Post-emancipation, this invisible institution can emerge. It ultimately becomes the early Black church. This church appears from the hush harbor to provide the same service while still purposely invisible (Thomas 21). It was to be a place where the Black body could authentically worship God. Interestingly, the Black Church embraced the biblical text. The doctrines were of utmost importance when establishing the Black churches of the south. Those enslavers approved services and observations of white services were reference points for crafting this new institution (Thomas 22).

The Black church adopts the mission of proving the civilization of Black people (Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* xii-xiii). The Black church crafts what Ethicist Kelly Brown Douglas refers to as the *narrative of civility*. The genuine effort was to improve the perceived gaze of dominant society in hopes of acceptance and approval of Black people. This narrative implemented expectations for the Black community that denounced any practices that one could view as authentically Black/African. Plainly stated, the Black church promoted a faulty narrative of the Black community. This narrative is faulty because it went against the foundations of the Black church, accepting and supporting all Black people. This requirement of the Black church pushed various bodies further into the margins. Douglas refers to them as *blues bodies* (Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* xiii). The institution that cast off these people crafts yet another experience. The chasm widens.

While both men and women were cast out, my research focuses on the outcasted women. The women who are marginalized first for being Black and then for being women and then for being blues bodies are beings so far from the original Africans present during the canonization of the biblical text it cannot possibly serve as an adequate guidance/inspiration for her. The chasm is too vast not to be considered a gaping hole for the Blues woman.

Womanist Vernacular Discourse

“Vernacular discourse is speech that resonates within local communities. This discourse is neither accessible in its entirety, nor is it discoverable, except through texts.” (K. A. Sloop) Kent Ono and John Sloop open the door for further interpretation. Their critique of vernacular discourse walks into the African American community perfectly with the suggestion that the discourse of the oppressed is where the critics should turn to gain a thorough understanding.

Geneva Smitherman draws this ideology closer with, “Through song, story, folk sayings, and rich verbal interplay among everyday people, lessons and precepts about life and survival are handed down from generation to generation. Until contemporary times, Black America relied on word-of-mouth for its rituals of cultural preservation.” (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* 73) Smitherman crosses the study into the culturally specific discourse modes of Black people in America. This crossing aligns with the belief that you must first understand the culture to understand the discourse. Kimberly P. Johnson explains traditional communalism that ventures into what this understanding must entail. “I understand traditional communalism as life-giving relationships that empower, protect, and nourish us in ways that help us to stay on the course toward authenticity, freedom, justice, and equality.” (Johnson 37) Ono and Sloop graze the surface with their explanation of cultural syncretism, “[affirming] various cultural expressions while at the same time [protesting] against the dominant cultural ideology” (K. A. Sloop 21) and its function as pastiche, “[implying] that vernacular discourse may borrow from, without mimicking popular culture... constructing a unique discursive form out of cultural fragments.” (K. A. Sloop 23) Smitherman takes a more profound plunge in her essay *How I Got Ovu*. “But word-of-mouth is more than sufficient because the structural underpinnings of the oral tradition remain intact even as each new generation makes verbal adaptations within the tradition.” (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* 73)

Smitherman’s offerings speak to the culturally specific nature of Black vernacular discourse. Again, Johnson’s offerings converse with Smitherman’s to explore this notion through a womanist lens. “Traditional communalism is an inherited and shared legacy that is passed down through generations and it has the ability to rescue women from various forms of

internalized oppression and self-deception and reestablishes a sense of self-awareness, communal pride, and collective memory.” (Johnson 38)

The Black woman’s vernacular nature goes deeper. Smitherman hints about the *mother wit* as wisdom, and Katie Geneva Cannon picks up where Smitherman and Johnson leave us.

[Black women writers] delineate in varying artistic terms the folk treasury of the Black community in terms of how Black people deal with poverty and the ramifications of power, sex as an act of love and terror, the depersonalization that accompanies violence, the acquisition of property, the drudgery of a workday, the inconsistencies of chameleon-like racism, teenage mothers, charlatan sorcerers, swinging churches, stoic endurance and stifled creativity. Out of this storehouse of Black experiences comes a vitally rich, ancient continuum of Black wisdom. (K. G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* 85)

Cannon packages this orality in a way that makes it feelable. The addition of the feeling invites the Black woman to the conversation.

As such, Audre Lorde deepens the understanding with, “The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free.” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 38) Lorde helps us to further craft the definition of womanist vernacular discourse. She validates the necessity of feeling in our discourse. For Lorde, it is not merely an accoutrement, “it is a vital necessity of our existence.” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 37)

I can effectively craft a definition of womanist vernacular discourse by pulling all of this together. I argue that womanist vernacular discourse is a verbal interplay of lessons and precepts manifesting as language resonating among African American women handed down from generation to generation through contextually specific fragments structurally underpinned and

delivered as music, storytelling, poetry, sermons, and folktales to produce a repository of Black wisdom crafted from an exploration of various experiences through the feminine power of emotion, sentiment, and intuition (Morton).

Womanist Vernacular Discourse Texts

With an understanding of Womanist Vernacular Discourse and the ever-widening gap in the biblical text for Blues women, the question becomes, *What texts would serve as the filling?* And *What framework is being used to make this determination?* Several texts have already been deemed womanist. A shallow dive into womanism will give you Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (Morrison, *Beloved*) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (Walker, *The Color Purple*) for fiction.

Beloved and *The Color Purple* will not be ventured away from; I will look to the ways they have been utilized in the past to build upon this foundation. I will identify the womanist underpinnings and use the findings as a guide in examining other works. The other works I will be examining are sermons, autobiographies, poetry, and drama. The sermonic has proven to be an excellent way to begin to fill this gap. It is a way that is steeped deeply in vernacular (Thomas 7). It is through the vernacular that preachers have related to congregations for generations. The significations in the sermonic are as perfect an example of cultural connection as one can get. The shared experience connects the preacher and the congregation; it gives the message being conveyed a more substantial impact. I am arguing Womanist Vernacular Discourse has this same ability in the sermonic.

To demonstrate this, I draw from two sermons. The first is *Imagine a Different Ending*, delivered on October 10, 2021, at Christ Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, by the senior pastor, Gina M. Stewart. Tamar's story from 2 Sam. 13:1-22 is used as a cautionary

tale to address domestic violence. The second sermon will be *He Loosed Me...But He Didn't Let Me Go* delivered at First Shiloh Baptist Church in Hanover, Virginia, by an associate minister, Lisa Johnson. Johnson draws on the story of the woman who was bent over for 18 years (Luke 13:10-17). The context is vastly different from that of Stewart's. Here, Johnson is preaching in a rural church to a very traditional congregation where she is not the pastor. Her buy-in with the audience is vastly different from that of Stewart's. I will explore this through the same two lenses to do a comparative study based on the rhetorical situation of both preachers.

I will also analyze two autobiographies through the same two lenses. The first is Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*). This first-person narrative is the first memoir of the renowned poet. While history has recorded many of the happenings in this book, the vantage from Angelou's view adds a womanist texture to the explanation. The various occurrences in this book walk into the poet/dancer/singer's life lived as a Blues woman. The relationship to Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem *Sympathy* (Dunbar) makes a perfect parallel to Johnson's sermon as well. Because the text captures her formative years, it makes for an ideal guiding tool for young Blues women.

The second autobiography is Sister Souljah's *No Disrespect* (Souljah, *No Disrespect*). Chosen for its contrasting context to that of Angelou's, Souljah's depiction of growing into a Blues woman ranges from the concrete jungle of New York City's housing projects to the intellectually encouraging space of Rutgers University. She is constantly in contact with rituals and practices of Black women but is inquisitive and contrary enough to land her on the Blues woman list.

It will be interesting to do a comparative reading of these two works. Stamps, Arkansas, and the Bronx, New York, could not serve as two more distant contextual locations. But both

women emerge as lyricists who understand the importance of dancing in the Blues woman's experience. Looking to their influences and various other underpinnings, how do these women come forth with the same genre of art that attract vastly different audiences? Sure, some fans of *Phenomenal Woman* (Angelou, Maya Angelou: Poems) may also love *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, *The Coldest Winter Ever*). Are the vernacular significations the same? Are there more likenesses between these two women that lie just beneath the surface, waiting for the womanist vernacular and the Blues woman's lens to delve into?

The subsequent comparison is between two works of drama. The ideology here is to deal with the imagination while remaining true to the reality of the Blues woman's context (Parks). For this reason, I am choosing to examine Lynn Nottage's *Ruined* (Nottage). I will liken the brothel setting to that of women who have been cast off. I will focus on the nurturing relationship between Mama Nadi, who is the madam of the brothel, and Sophie, one of the new girls brought in, to introduce a model for caring for Blues women. The rituals and understanding among the women make for a twisted but beautiful tale of sisterhood amid the turmoil they endure without ever having to leave their communal abode.

Power Book III: Raising Kanan (Penn) is the other fiction work I critique. The two storylines I will center are Raquel Thomas and Laverne "Jukebox" Thomas, a mother and her teen lesbian niece, and how their unspoken connection serves as guidance to other women and the men in their lives as well. These Blues women will be analyzed to show how their unique rhetorical situations utilize womanist vernacular in strategic but natural ways.

Finally, I will examine the spoken word of Sunni Patterson and Brion "Lady Brion" Gill. Both women are widely respected spoken word artists who approach the microphone from different backgrounds but can move the world with their words. Delving into the Blues woman's

approach both women take, I will be identifying the womanist vernacular at work in both pieces. I have chosen *Wild Women* (Patterson) from Patterson, and *I Talk Black* (Gill) from Lady Brion.

Methodology

I will use close reading as my method. *Techniques of Close Reading* (Brummett) by Barry Brummett is the instrumental guide in this effort. However, I will be using various other references to remain consistent with my focus. There will be specific guided readings that I will use in addition to Brummett to keep womanist vernacular/Blues women at the center.

I will begin with loosely using Kenneth Burke's Pentad Method (Brummett 38-40) as a guide for framing. Here, I will show Womanist Vernacular Discourse at work in the texts by pointing out the *act*. I will then identify the participants using Womanist Vernacular Discourse in the text and how they are doing it by examining *agents and agency*. Describing the *scene* will be monumental because this is where the context is explored. This is where the Blues woman is set apart from the majority of the Black community. Her context has to be understood to gain a thorough understanding of this work. Lastly, I will look to the *purpose*. This is where the rituals/traditions within the margins will be examined to understand her lens. This will make room for the philosophies and reasons behind her actions.

While pointing out the *act*, I will cross-reference Zora Neale Hurston's *Characteristics of Negro Expression* (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression*) and Kent Ono and John Sloop's *The Critique of Vernacular Discourse* (K. A. Sloop). I will identify the adornment Hurston reports as unique to the Black experience (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression* 32-34). I will look to Ono and Sloop's cultural syncretism and pastiche to explore how this action is used. In addition, I will be looking to Robert C. Rowland and John M. Jones' *Recasting the American Dream and American Politics: Barack Obama's Keynote Address to the 2004*

Democratic National Convention. The coverage of *Romance and the American Dream* (R. C. Jones 428-432) details political/cultural romance in a way that will be helpful when close reading for dramatic analysis.

Moving into the *agent(s)*, I will pay close attention to the present and mentioned people in each text, but I will also be sure to mention those who played a part in making this act occur. Understanding that this marginalization is structural, the background agents are crucial to understanding Womanist Vernacular Discourse and the Blues woman's context. I will look to Katie Cannon's *Black Womanist Ethics* (K. G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*) to identify key characters and what role those characters play in the acts being explored.

Moving into *agency*, I will pay close attention to the freedom (or lack thereof) of both the writer/orator and the audience. This freedom plays a significant part in agency. I will be using Toni Morrison's *What Moves at the Margin* (Morrison, *What Moves at the Margin*) and Angela Sims' *Lynched* (Sims) to explore the effects of strategic silencing and how to read the silence to understand the agency at work. In addition, I will look to Jacqueline Jones Royster's *When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own* (Royster) and Elaine Richardson's *To Protect and Serve: African American Female Literacies* (Richardson) to capture the rhetorical analysis already at work in literacy and agency.

As we move into the *scene*, I will look to several outside sources. To gain a thorough understanding of the Blues woman's context, there must be an exploration of the places she is denied entry. This explains the hunger from the outside. It also explores the power dynamics at work in this context. For this reason, I am first looking to Olga Idriss Davis' *In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy through Safe Spaces of Resistance* (O. I. Davis) to explore what is not able to be seen or heard in the scene but is definitely a part of the atmosphere. I will also

reference LeRoi Jones's *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (L. Jones) and Angela Y. Davis's *Blues Legacy and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. Both books give models for dissecting the Blues woman's context. They provide rhetorical tools for reading the context of this woman's spatial/social location.

Finally, for the *purpose* analysis, I will reference the beliefs and values of Blues women to determine the reason for their common actions. I will be leaning heavily on three outside texts for this part of the study. Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*) offers the philosophy behind womanism. This text gives a perspective on Black women's lives as the first option instead of how it is compared to that of dominant society. Geneva Smitherman's *Word from the Mother* (Smitherman, *Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans*) offers framing strategies, and Hurston's *Characteristics of Negro Expression* (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression*) provides a view into how the movements of Black people help shape Black language.

In addition to Burke's Pentad, I will look to Brummett's explanations of form. For example, the information about the various components of narrative structure (Brummett 52-61) will raise something from the chosen texts to complement the pentad. In addition, the *subject position* analysis will allow the study to pinpoint the *ideational*, *interpersonal*, and *textual* functions occurring within the vernacular (R. H. Jones 12). This will make it possible to assess the relationships through the discourse. Another tool I will utilize for reading the text is James Arnt Aune and Edwin Black's *suggestion of three personae* (Brummett 66-67). For a womanist approach to persona(e), I will also incorporate Sherley Anne Williams' *Some Implications of Womanist Theory* (S. A. Williams 218-220).

In closing, I argue that a deep analysis of the texts I have chosen will make a case for Womanist Vernacular Discourse having the propensity to fill the gap left by the biblical text for Blues women.

CHAPTER 1: A REIMAGINATION OF THE SERMON

Preparing a sermon is much like preparing a meal. This is the reason I credit my maternal grandmother with training me for ministry. I spent many years with my grandmother in the kitchen. In the kitchen was where my grandmother was able to be the minister she never claimed to be, in words anyway; she just walked it. In that kitchen, she did hair, fixed meals, held family meetings, etc. Most importantly, this was where she met God for the first time, and it was the location that she continued that relationship for the remainder of her life.

That kitchen was the location of my formation. I could not understand why my cousins were able to hang around the other parts of the house while the meals were being prepared. I could not understand why it was imperative that she show me the difference a little butter would make. I did not understand why she was imparting that it was better to burn the scalp than to burn the hair, the scalp would heal. I could not understand back then why it was so important that she show me the difference it would make to insert certain things in the meal preparation to enhance the pot liquor. I did not understand why it was imperative that *I* learned all of these things.

More than twenty years after her transition, I am able to understand that she was in a shepherd's position in that kitchen. Her shepherding view allowed her to see beyond the surface and, thus, see where God was taking me. She was able to see that God would use me in a way that could possibly empower a people and I had to be ready to do the work.

Those years I spent in that kitchen with my grandmother is what Toni Morrison marked with Baby Suggs, holy, in the Clearing. She indeed “[accepted] no title of honor before her name, but [allowed] a small caress after it...” Those who really knew my Granny did not know

her by her formal name, Olivia Johnson; they knew her as Libby. And those who *really* knew her referred to her as Libby Cake.

She was doing the work of the minister through that kitchen. There were days when I was summoned to that kitchen where I would assist as she pressed hair, prepared a meal, and guided women out of abusive situations. She did not need my help; she called for me to be present so I would be able to see how to serve the people she knew I was called to serve. They would come in search of Aunt Libby. You know in the Black community the women—regardless of relation—were always Aunt. They came searching for the comforts of Aunt Libby... She would open the wound in her own way and treat it with those things God had made her familiar with. She would have them sit at the table waiting for a homecooked meal and impart knowledge as she worked those pots and pans. Or they would come in search of a haircut. When they sat in that chair, she would impart wisdom she could only have gotten from God. Or they would come bruised by life's latest blows just to be in the space where someone showed that they loved them. In true Aunt Libby form, she would feed them and work on their souls the entire time. But she never left them with just the knowledge. She always gave them something sweet in the end. They came for Aunt Libby, but they left with a blessing from Libby Cake.

Much like the kitchen of my Granny, the sermon opens the wound in a poignant way but closes in celebration. There is the introduction of hope, the inspiration to push on, and the reassurance that you will be alright. Then, there is the celebration to close it. It is the *holy* of Baby Suggs and the *Cake* of Libby. That kitchen has been the location of a powerfully delivered sermon more often than that of the pulpit, especially when connecting with a Black and Blue woman.

It is for this reason that I state we, rhetorical scholars of race and religion, tend to approach the task of preparing sermons in a way that is culturally incapable of reaching the Blues woman by utilizing the homiletical devices of the dominant society and cultivating a worship atmosphere that restricts, if not totally excludes, this woman in an effort to maintain a process handed to us from a people that has never been invested in her well-being.

Important to realize, the sermon is the crux of the Black church worship experience. To clarify, the sermon provides the guidance, inspiration, and affirmation for the community. Utilization of homiletical devices of the society invested in her oppression is equivalent to trying to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. (Lorde) Cultivating a worship experience through a faulty narrative's lens contradicts the goal of affirmation. The service promoted here not only strips the sermon of its potential to affirm, it separates the preacher from the congregation and further perpetuates the oppressive nature of the dominant society. If the tools used to craft the guidance/affirmation were wielded by the oppressor, they can only design a plan respective of their creator. This leaves the congregation with an enslaving sermon in Black woman face posing as inspiration for the Black and Blue woman.

Ergo, we are maintaining an oppressive process from the community's sacred space in the name of inspiration and cultivating a worship service based on the gaze through a faulty narrative's lens. This ultimately promotes a service uplifting a sermon crafted by the oppressor's tools.

Let us consider, *A Reimagination of the Sermon* by setting the atmosphere, seasoning the salve, and serving the meal to provide the Blues woman with culturally respective affirmation, guidance, and inspiration.

Setting the Atmosphere

Setting the atmosphere is creating safe space for the Blues woman to be vulnerable by using sensory tactics that are culturally specific to adequately feed the soul. This requires unpacking several elements to ensure the scene is conducive and the least restrictive for the Blues woman to be able to be fed. The preacher must remain steadfast in the centrality of the Blues woman; it is easy to slip into her marginalization from habit. What is most important is to keep the focus on her.

One year for Thanksgiving, my mother and I decided to use real silver utensils that had been stored away for a special occasion for more than twenty years. When we opened the case and looked at the forks, knives, and spoons, my mother immediately shot down the idea of using them. They were so tarnished that the silver was completely black. She knew, as did I and anyone else who has ever polished silver, this task was a great undertaking. But I was willing to do the work to have the best utensils for my family's meal.

We began this process by soaking the utensils in warm, sudsy water. The warmth of the water was important for the silver to release any surface dirt it was holding. The warmth translates to the silver that it is okay to let go of those things that are superficially coating you from the elements of your existence. This warmth, however, can only remove so much and is simply a gateway to the more difficult work.

After removing the silver from the water, we began applying the polish with clean cloths. The silver is worthy of having the best cloth to handle it. The application of the polish is intimate. It cannot be applied to more than one piece of silver at a time. It has to be applied individually to ensure that the effort goes into the most stubborn of areas. Some areas are easily

rubbed and will shine. However, those more intricate crevices tend to need more attention. Needing more attention should not mean that they are ignored or given the blanketed rubbing. We had to give those spaces deeper, more specific care.

As we removed each piece from the water and began polishing it, the work became more informed. We found that certain rags handled the more ornate areas better. We learned the different types of polish had different features and did different work. The solution was stronger in some polishes than others. We had to know which pieces needed the stronger solution to be able to give each piece of silver the best care.

As we spent the time rubbing the silver, the tarnish moved. This tarnish moved from the silver to the cloth. Understanding the propensity of the tarnish to return to its familiar place, we made sure to dispose of the cloth. This step was crucial to how the silver would perform later. The silver had to be reassured that it could get dirty again. This means we had to take care not to leave the evidence of the dirt removed in view of those not privy to the process. We had to keep the confidence of the silver and affirm the quality of the silver's natural essence.

While the freshly polished silver utensils are used for delivering the meal, the process of polishing the silver correlates perfectly how to set the atmosphere for the worship experience and more specifically the sermonic moment for the Blues woman. This polishing process is equivalent to incorporating Womanist Vernacular Discourse into this phase.

Removing the silver from the distant storage and making it the central focus is an archeological excavation in and of itself. It is intentionally shining light and warmth on something that has been purposely placed in the coldness of the darkness. To be placed in the

light when you have grown accustomed to being in the shadows can be harmful. Understanding this, it has to be done in a way that will not be blinding and will not sting.

Cultural knowledge is imperative in this moment. Knowing what the soul needs to be comfortable is not something found on the surface. This requires an understanding of the people that is not easily unlocked, especially when dealing with people who have come through the cruelty of slavery. This is a people familiar with pain. “That's how I learned to love the pain. E'ry time I got hit. I took it as an opportunity for defiance. To not give anyone reaction they expected” (Hemingway). Harriet Tubman's words delivered by Aisha Hinds reiterates the need to know the people beyond just observing them. The average person would not know that there was pain involved for Tubman because that's what she wanted them to believe. Her scars were deeper than just surface. There was a mental and emotional pain that she lived with. It is for this reason that an interactional sociolinguistic analysis is needed. This “is concerned with the sometimes very subtle ways people signal and interpret what they think they are doing and who they think they are being in social interaction” (R. H. Jones 21). Face strategies and framing strategies are a part of this interactional sociolinguistic analysis.

Face strategies have to do primarily with showing who we are and what kind of relationship we have with the people with whom we are talking. Framing strategies have more to do with showing what we are doing in the conversation, whether we are, for example, arguing, teasing, flirting or gossiping. (R. H. Jones 21)

The unearthing of the story that's been hidden is crucial to being able to set the atmosphere. Knowing the chronological history is important, but nowhere near as important as knowing the roadmap of the scars or being able to trace the trail of tears. This knowing has to

push beyond the safety of the panoptical view and dare to experience the life of the Blues woman. The life that easily worshiped God in the hush harbor. The life that was a marker for being one with the universe. The life that was the embodiment of Blackness and the remnants of Africa. The life that was silenced because it was proof that there was a difference in Black people's culture and that of the dominant society.

How do you set the atmosphere for this woman to be vulnerable enough to be fed? What elements have to be present for her to be reassured that the abuse she has already survived will not be forced upon her again? How do you reassure her that she is the reason you are attempting this impartation in the first place? These are the questions that need to be answered by the atmosphere.

The orator must be willing to travel to the places the Blues woman is comfortable and stay to hear, see, smell, taste, and feel the environment when it is in full gear. “[W]hen the ball was getting right, the more respectable Negroes who did attend went home. Then Bolden played a number called *Don't Go Away Nobody* and the dancing got rough. When the orchestra settled down to the slow blues, the music was mean and dirty, as the Tin Type roared full blast” (Jones 128). LeRoi Jones quotes F. Ramsey and C. Smith's *Jazzmen* to illustrate the separation of Blues people and who were deemed “respectable” Negroes of the time. There were certain activities the narrative of civility deemed unacceptable and participation was forbidden in order to be respected. These activities were well attended by Blues people. The question becomes, *what about these “unacceptable” events attracted the Blues woman?*

This is where Kenneth Burke's pentadic method will assist the orator in being able to understand what they are actually experiencing. The naked eye's viewing of a situation can be deceiving; the orator must be able to see behind what they are seeing. This pentadic method

requires the identification of the act, agent(s), agency, scene, and purpose. (Brummett 39) Each of these sharpen the lens through which the orator is seeing the situation.

While Burke offers the perfect method for unpacking the experience, there is a cultural component that must be incorporated as well. For this reason, I am suggesting that each component be filtered through womanist vernacular.

[A]fter a week of standing on lines registering, buying books, getting special permission from the deans to enter into courses that were already overbooked, I was down to go to the pub. I never drank alcohol. I heard that was the main attraction to the pub, but for me it was the music. Music always had a strong effect on me. I could listen to a gospel record and be overwhelmed by a spiritual feeling that made me want to cry. I could listen to jazz music and be submerged in deep thought about why the world was arranged the way that it was. I could listen to one of my grandmother's blues albums and experience the emotions of the singer as if they were my own. Or I could listen to rap music whose beats drove me in so many directions. It could make me feel overtly sexual and controlled by the drum beat. Or it could bring to mind the urgency of the poor condition of black people in this country. Rap spoke to many things—from Almond Joy to Public Enemy to Ice Cube was a trip from a hot sexual sweat to critical thinking to directed rage. So I was going to the pub to feel the music and have it take me away in what I considered the most natural and safe way to “get high.” (Souljah 56)

This is where Burke's pentadic act would lead us to being able to describe what is occurring before our eyes. The naked understanding of the act, agent, agency, and scene here is that Sister

Souljah is entering the pub. The pub is an attraction for the college students because they are able to drink alcohol there. The naked eye would assume from the information gathered here that Souljah is going to unwind and have a drink. When we hear from her perspective what is actually occurring, she informs the audience that she is not interested in the pub for the alcohol; she enjoys the music.

This deepens the understanding of the act, agent, and agency in a unique way. She is able to repurpose the pub for her own needs. This gives the preacher a new understanding of what may attract the Blues woman to this location. Thus, deepening the understanding of what may need to occur in order for her to be comfortable.

When she opens the idea of what the music does for her, the pentadic purpose is fulfilled. She gives us the values/beliefs/customs that are present in this scene that originally would have just appeared to be a college student entering a bar.

Souljah describes the need for the Blues woman to enter the pub, ball, club or other safe space for the Blues body. She explains the need to release and let the music drive your mind and body to unwind. There was something spiritual about this releasing. There was something happening in that space that was a major factor in the hush harbor secret meetings. There was an expected and approved physical reaction to the spirit. This opening to release is very African in its traditions and it is very Black church. The removal of this practice by the church was another oppression being introduced.

There is a reel on Instagram that repeats the phrase, “Got it on your chest, leave it on the concrete” (Videos). The guys in the video are dancing to a Louisiana style live band and the foot work is similar to that of the people in the southern Black church when they would “shout”. The

encouragement is the safe space that has to be created for the Blues woman to be comfortable. This is a way to culturally lament. These lamentations are a necessary component to understand the vernacular of the Blues woman.

Negro dancing is dynamic suggestion. No matter how violent it may appear to the beholder, every posture gives the impression that the dancer will do much more. For example, the performer flexes one knee sharply, assumes a ferocious face mask, thrusts the upper part of the body forward with clenched fists, elbows taut as in hard running or grasping a thrusting blade. That is all.

(Hurston 35)

Here, Hurston opens the door to the dancehall to explain the suggestive language of Black dancing. This is an imperative understanding of the Black vernacular. While there is a “ferocious face mask” assumed. It has to be read from the inside. The reading has to have what Toni Morrison refers to as *A Knowing So Deep* (Morrison) to be able to create that erotic bed Audre Lorde refers to as “a longed for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered” (Lorde 55).

Seasoning the Salve

An understanding of the wounds must be present. Knowing the trauma of the Blues woman is not an easy task because she is well versed in how to mask it. But this knowledge keeps the sermon from being what I refer to as a *shout fest*—where the congregation has the opportunity to shout because of the cadence and the appearance of soul food being presented and it turns out to be simply soulfully coated nothingness. The sermon has to be a salve for the Blues woman. By salve, I mean, an ointment used to promote healing. The salve has to be able to heal and it has to be culturally equipped to reach the soul through the sensory subconscious. In other

words, the preacher has to be able to season the salve. Seasoning the salve is incorporating language and care into the impartation by appropriating ideas and objects the Blues woman is familiar with to make the meal possible to consume.

One of the meals I enjoy preparing is a low country boil. This boil is loaded with seafood. Crabs, shrimp, crawfish all have a very distinct taste. They are delicacies, but just boiled in water will not do these shellfish justice. They require special additions to the boil for the best taste. While the shellfish are all quality pieces of meat, they do not render their own drippings. There are other foods that are added to bring the shellfish to their best.

I start by adding butter, lemons, garlic, Old Bay seasoning, salt, pepper, and spicy andouille sausage to the large pot of water and bringing it to a boil. I quarter a few potatoes and add them to the boiling water. Once the potatoes start to soften, I add ears of corn and the crabs and crawfish along with some creole seasoning. Once the pot appears to be just about finished, I add the shrimp. The shrimp only need a few minutes in the pot before they should be taken off of the heat. Once they are slightly pink, the pot is finished.

Because the shellfish is not a meat that will render its own juices to create a well-seasoned dish alone, the additional seasonings have to meet this meat where it is. It does not take away from the quality of the shellfish, it just pairs well and plays well with others. Those other additions to the pot make for a delicious serving.

The same way the shellfish needed the butter, seasonings, and sausage, the stories in the biblical text need to be paired to be what the Blues woman needs to be guided, affirmed, and inspired. The question becomes, *what does it need to be paired with?* The answer is intricately simple.

I want to suggest that the preacher must use Womanist Vernacular Discourse in the textual preparation. This is deeper than just using the colloquialisms and jargon that are easily recognizable as Black and woman language. The incorporation of the culturally specific vernacular in the sermonic moment is much more intricate.

Kent Ono and John Sloop offer cultural syncretism as a working component of vernacular discourse. "...a cultural syncretism that affirms various cultural expressions while at the same time protests against the dominant cultural ideology" (Sloop 21). Use of this, when looking to pair the stories about women in the biblical text, calls for the preacher to understand the affirmations needed within the Blues woman's context to be able to put this text to its best use and have the audacity to push against the traditional approach to exegesis in order to properly serve this meal. The preacher must be willing to use the literature that fills those gaps left in the text to bring this meal to fruition.

Filling those gaps respective to womanism would naturally cause the preacher to look to Kimberly P. Johnson's *The Womanist Preacher* for guidance. Johnson offers four rhetorical models of womanist preaching, two of which are *radical subjectivity* and *traditional communalism*. "Radical subjectivity sermons lend themselves toward moving the individual audience members from victim to victor. Its focus is on self rather than the community at large. These sermons document one's journey toward identity formation, self-love, and self-worth" (Johnson 117).

Johnson's *radical subjectivity* calls for the preacher to choose a text wherein the woman is viewed as a victim and moves toward victor. The stories about women in the biblical text are indicative of this. However, the stories tend to introduce us to the woman already present in her condition. The story then gives a way that God meets her condition and heals her, and we never

hear about the woman again. While it covers the healing, it does not give the Blues woman enough detailed information for life application. The backstory is vital in this context. The background reveals how this woman arrived at this condition.

In order to “affirm a woman’s humanity in the midst of her oppression so she will stop looking for validation from others” (Johnson 120) we must be able to unpack how she arrived in this condition in the first place. This informs the preacher what habits/tendencies rest with the woman to assist her in breaking this cycle.

“Traditional communalism sermons lend themselves toward some form of communal healing and communal remembrance to live out the Christian faith” (Johnson 117-118). These sermons stop identifying women individually and recognize the community that has been formed for survival purposes. This calls for a persona analysis to identify the orator and the community being spoken to in order to pinpoint the original gospel message to return to. Because traditional communalism sermons “encourage the individuals to make sure they are living the gospel message, so that the community as a whole can be the people God has called them to be” (Johnson 121), the purpose section from Burke’s pentadic analysis, “the underlying reasons, goals, or philosophies that guide action,” (Brummett 39) comes into play here as well.

Ono and Sloop also offer pastiche that plays a tremendous role here. “[V]ernacular discourse is constantly engaged in the process of pastiche, in constructing a unique discursive form out of cultural fragments. Pastiche fractures culture in the process of appropriating it through imaginative reconstructive surgery” (Sloop 23). Breaking the dominant norms to formulate a new discourse is what has happened in the Blues woman’s vernacular since the beginning of her existence.

Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in [her] vocabulary – not evolved in [her] but transplanted on [her] tongue by contact – must add action to it to make it do. So we have “chop-axe,” “sitting-chair,” “cook-pot,” and the like because the speaker has in [her] mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So we can say the white [person] thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics. (Hurston 31-32)

Understanding this, the seasoning has to do more than tuck itself into the salve; it has to communicate its existence in order to be consumed in the first place. The Blues woman is understandably hesitant to embrace anything traditional of the Black church. After all, it is a place she has been separated from. The seasoning has to work overtime here to inform this woman that it is intended for her and has her best interest at heart. Her system has to be willing to ingest it.

For instance, I had a friend who could not swallow pills. She had tried everything trying to train herself to be able to get the pills into her system, but to no avail. Because of this, she would have to take a large amount of liquid medicine and alter other parts of her life to supplement the pills that were not available in liquid form. While we were having a conversation with an older woman, she said that she needed to get home so she could take her medication. Further conversation informed the woman why she needed to get home to take liquid medicine. The older woman said, “Crush them pills and put ‘em in something you like. Just need to wrap ‘em in something you *can* swallow.”

This is the ideology I am suggesting here. The various ailments in life will cause one to have to swallow some bitter pills. This would be fine if the pill was readily available and the wounds were easily identifiable. It is for this reason that the preacher must season the salve. Just

like the cabbage, collards, broccoli and other green vegetables that hold various nutrients the body needs but does not have a natural taste that is appetizing, this salve has to be seasoned to the pallid. Onions and peppers, salt and pepper, garlic and herbs, and oil and vinegar all need to be incorporated to culturally codify the salve.

Historically, Black preachers have identified a biblical text and exegetically unpacked the moves of God in that text as the salve to troubles. While I am not arguing the biblical canon should be done away with, I am making the claim that there are holes in the text for women. The feminine way in which women identify, makes for difficult application directly from the text.

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence. (Lorde 53)

Lorde explains the existence of the erotic that is deeply feminine. It is a space that is natural to the female existence. This space calls for feeling. The emotional story. The intricate details of the existence of the women being lifted for inspiration. This deeply female and spiritual plane is left without the necessary developments of the story in the biblical narratives. Women, in general,

need this use of the erotic in order to fully relate to the story being presented; there is a deepening when talking about the Blues woman.

While the biblical canon records proof that these events did occur and they did involve these women, the text—at best—gives inadequate erotic expression to be able to inspire Blues women. Keeping in mind these were the women who could not—or would not—fit into expectations the narrative of civility promoted, Blues women were bodily liberated and refused to be oppressed by the domesticity expectations placed on Black women to be accepted as a moral barometer to satisfy the perceived dominant societal gaze. (Douglas 37) For this reason, the biblical narrative leaves gaping holes in the possibility of guidance/inspiration.

This is the reason the seasoning is imperative. The impact of the narrative has to travel beyond the neck for it to truly do the work of moving the Blues woman. It has to be full-bodied. This salve has to move beyond the masculine lens' observance of Hadassah's movements in the book of Esther to the *Rolling Hills* empowerment of the gateway to her womb of Jill Scott's pen. (Scott) This salve has to tap into resources that travel into a deeper dimension than the canonized text used for the traditional sermon.

The refusal to deny the *flesh* caused an awakening of the soul of these women who were described by Jean Toomer as “exquisite butterflies trapped in an evil honey, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them, except as ‘the *mule* of the world’” (Walker 232). Inspiring the Blues woman requires a respect for the place in the soul that Toomer realized was vacated by these women for the sake of survival. This understanding has to be felt as opposed to read about; it has to be personal. This vacancy has to be loved first. It has to be met erotically to be healed. The preacher must love the scars and what rests beneath. It has to be

understood that this vacancy is not empty. It is void of voice and care in hopes of being able to navigate the world forced upon them.

It is Hagar's existence. The life forced upon the slave girl Hagar by her mistress Sarai was done without regards for Hagar. The barrenness of Sarai's womb was reason to send her husband in to rape Hagar to bring forth life. There is a power dynamic that leaves Hagar without agency and she vacates to become the *exquisite butterfly trapped in evil honey*. She vacates, but her soul is reawakened by the angel sent to bring her back.

The sermon has to be seasoned with the understanding of this vacancy and how to give it voice and care. It has to experience this vacancy and be able to speak to it. Speaking to it is the nourishment of the sermon. It is the salve being placed in the wound in order to promote healing. This salve has to be specifically seasoned for the soul to which it is proclaiming.

Serving the Meal

The first time I had a meal at an Ethiopian restaurant, I asked for silverware. I assumed the waitress forgot to bring it. She rolled her eyes, walked away, and returned with a fork. As I began to eat the Ethiopian dish with this fork, I was trying to imagine why people were so adamant that I have this experience. I made it about halfway through my meal before one of the young men who owned the restaurant came over to have a conversation with me about the food.

He simply asked, "Is this your first time?" I nodded in the affirmative and he smiled. He pointed to the spongy bread I had tasted and pushed to the side to be discarded, "May I show you something?" I nodded in the affirmative again.

He pulled a piece of the injera, the spongy bread, and pushed it over the chicken and vegetables. “Here.” He pushed the combination into my mouth and I instantly understood why I had been urged to try Ethiopian food; it was delicious.

My approach to the exotic cuisine was negotiated by my orientation to the food I was familiar with. This dining experience had to be specific in its serving. I needed to understand that the injera was sour fermented flatbread that coupled well with the spice of the chicken and the herbs of the vegetables to create an appetizingly delightful experience. My experience of them separately was not to my liking and I was prepared to store in my memory that I did not care for Ethiopian food and I would have lived the rest of my days without experiencing one of my favorite foods.

Much like the young man helped me to see with the Ethiopian food, the sermon has to be served in a way that is respectful of what is being offered and who it is being offered to. I want to suggest that the preacher must use Womanist Vernacular Discourse in the delivery. In the case of the sermon, serving the meal is delivering the food to the Blues woman’s soul in a language she recognizes by tailoring the message to be compatible with the tools she is well versed in to give her inspiration that she is able to apply to her life naturally and fluidly. She must be able to identify the food, have the necessary tools to ingest it, and have the knowledge of how to partake. In addition, the food has to be pleasing to the eye, soul, stomach, and pallid. It is the job of the preacher to guarantee all of this.

Effectively serving is layered with theory. The first of these is subject position, which is “the kind of reader you have to become in order to make sense of the text. Subject positions are sometimes distinguished as preferred, subversive, or inflected (negotiated)” (Brummett 66). The preferred subject position is the one hoped for, especially in the preaching sense. When the

audience member is preferred, she/he “is the one the text most clearly ‘appellates’ or calls to in the reader” (Brummett 66).

In the Ethiopian restaurant experience, this was the hoped-for subject position from me. The waitress was insulted because I was not the preferred. I had not been properly acquainted with the atmosphere to be able to take this position. Because of this, I appeared to be subversive. The subversive audience member “reads against the text, undermining the kind of reading stance the text calls for” (Brummett 66). In actuality, I was the negotiated/inflected audience member. I was experiencing the text on my own terms without having made a decision about it.

In respect to the Blues woman’s subject position with the sermon, most times this moment is met with an audience that is subversive because of her history with the Black church. After being denied authentic agency, this woman is hesitant to hear guidance/inspiration in the form that is native to the church. The goal of the preacher is to move her from subversive to preferred. This work is mostly done during the seasoning the salve phase but the delivery of it plays a part in this as well. This is where the preacher used the lens of the negotiated/inflected audience to be able to craft the sermon in a way that is conducive to the Blues woman’s context. By the time the preacher is serving the meal, the context should be understood, and her person should not be violated in any way. She should be able to eat this meal the way the preacher is serving it because the preacher has done the work to set the atmosphere and season the salve. This entire moment is catered to her context.

Following all of these steps does not guarantee that Blues women will enter the space and immediately become the preferred. Brummett talks about genre playing a major part here. Genre is “a recurring kind of textual event with three components: *style*, *substance*, and *situation*” (Brummett 62). Because of its recurring nature, the audience tends to arrive with certain

expectations based on past interactions. There is an expectation based on the fact that they are receiving a sermon. Because of this, it is understandable that the Blues woman be apprehensive about the reception of a Black preacher's pulpit oratory.

In relation to the Ethiopian restaurant experience, I entered the space in hopes of getting a meal. My expectation was to eat the food with a fork because that is what has been the recurring tradition with eating a meal. The waitress served the meal without understanding this and immediately became irritated when I reverted to my understanding. There was a breakdown in communication. This is where the young man becomes the effective preacher. He serves the cuisine in the manner in which it should be consumed to get what the chef intended.

The Blues woman, having been outcast by the institution in which the sermon is traditionally delivered, has to be served in a way that introduces the culturally informed style and substance. She has to be oriented to the new situation in a loving manner. The preacher has to embody the paraclete who comes alongside to show her that there has been a shift in her favor. The linguist Michael Halliday introduced the term *transitivity*, "a relationship between participants" (Jones 13), to be able to explain what occurs here.

Halliday pointed out that whenever we use language we are always doing three things at once: we are in some way representing the world, which he called the **ideational** function of language; we are creating, ratifying, or negotiating our relationships with the people with whom we are communicating, which he called the **interpersonal** function of language; and we are joining sentences and ideas together in particular ways to form cohesive and coherent texts, which he called the **textual** function of language. (Jones 12)

Halliday allows the language to do the work through discourse. The ideational function has to be representative of the Blues woman's world. The dominant society has placed her in the margins of its margins; in order to purposely guide/inspire this woman, the preacher must engage in ideational language that represents her world. Both Hurston's *Characteristics of Negro Expression* and Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* deliver this ideology in a manner that is culturally specific. The ideational language function has to incorporate the worldview of the Blues woman.

The interpersonal function is not much different in its requirements of understanding the culture. However, the relationship between the people communicating is identified in this function. The addressing/greeting gives certain cues about the relationship between interlocutors. Traveling deeper, Walker nods to this function with the definition of womanism. There is an out of placeness of sorts with the girl child being womanish, but it leads to the Black woman moving out of the expected "place" to reclaim her agency. She must push the limits given to her by dominant society in order to truly exist as a Blues woman. Understanding the necessity of the defiant stance, the language reflects a stronger tone that may be perceived as brash or disrespectful but is actually the remnants of Sherley Anne Williams' *bolekaja* (Williams 219) she must embody to have agency.

The textual function has to be fully immersed in the language the Blues woman speaks.

My desire has been to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without. While this latter mode of literary analysis can be a revealing and

rewarding exercise, each literary tradition, at least implicitly, contains within it an argument for how it can be read. (Henry Louis Gates 339-340)

The ways in which the author/community of origin decide to communicate the story is indicative of their way of life. In the case of many survivors of trauma, the accounts tend to be sporadic and reflect the experience of having been inside the trauma. Changing the language robs the audience of the linguistic cohesiveness that communicates something between the words that is not able to be translated in language *appropriated from without*.

Analysis

Two of the sermons exhibiting the utilization I have suggested are *Imagine a Different Ending* by Rev. Dr. Gina M. Stewart and *He Loosed Me, But He Didn't Let Me Go* by Rev. Dr. Lisa M. Johnson. These sermons exercise the above methodology perfectly and provide examples of how Womanist Vernacular Discourse can be the catalyst for the necessary tailoring for the Blues woman to receive adequate inspiration/guidance.

Stewart excavates Tamar's story from 2 Samuel 13: 1-22 (Common English Bible) for Domestic Violence Month. She explains the hesitation of the Black church to examine this text and sets the atmosphere for why it needs to be examined.

...this story is about a topic we really don't like to talk about. And we certainly don't want to hear about it on Sunday morning. Nevertheless, this story must be told because stories like this remind us of the evils in our own world. But the truth is, when we come to worship, even though we know that there is evil in the world, we don't necessarily want to be reminded about all of the evil that's in the world. For many of us, worship is reality denial, not reality adjustment. For some of us, we want worship to be a retreat if you will... from the

challenges... the trials, the vicissitudes and the tribulations of life. We would prefer to skip over stories like this ignore them because of the uncomfortable nature of what we read. Perhaps we do this because we often go to the Bible for encouragement... for a word of peace... a word of hope... and a word of comfort. We don't come to church or even go to the Bible, or come to worship to hear about rape, violence, abuse, secrets and cover ups. (Stewart)

Here, she gives reason for pause from the congregation. It is also a reason that the Blues woman is often hesitant to participate in these services. If the stories that leave women existing in desolation are being ignored, why would the Blues woman want to take part in this? If her existence is marked by Tamar's story, why would she make the effort to be present for a service where this is skipped over to create a comfortable environment for the people who already ignore her existence?

Stewart draws the congregation's attention to this problem and explains how it is problematic. She gives this disclaimer at the beginning of the sermon and proceeds to open the uncomfortable text. She is doing this heavy lifting and breaking traditional practices to promote a past due healing; she is pointing to a broken portion of the communal rituals and creating a pathway for healing. She is setting the atmosphere for the audience to understand the Blues woman from the inside.

Johnson also breaks the traditional practice to incorporate the necessary connecting tools for the Blues woman's experience. She excavates the woman who has been bent for 18 years from Luke 13: 10-14 (The Holy Bible, King James Version) and pairs it with Max Lucado's story about a bird named Chippie. She uses two texts that already existed in an effort to cater to the Blues woman's context. She gives a version of Lucado's story that has been put through the

Hurston workout. She leans into “the speaker has in [her] mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So we can say [Lucado] thinks in a written language and [Johnson] thinks in hieroglyphics” (Hurston 31-32). She brings the congregation into a story about a nameless woman in the midst of the height of her infirmity and fills those gaps left by the biblical telling of the story with the experiences of Chippie.

“The scripture read in our hearing doesn’t tell us the woman’s name... But it does tell us that this woman is bent and can in no wise lift herself up. Had she had a Chippie moment” (L. M. Johnson)? This suggestion creates a non-traditional caveat away from the hole-filled telling of this woman’s story and makes for a bridge to the Blues woman’s context. Johnson makes certain to give the woman a possible backstory. She intentionally does not leave the congregation without the visual needed in Black pulpit oratory to bring the story to life in present context. She sets the atmosphere for the impartation of impactful inspiration to take place.

Both orators pay special attention to seeing the women beyond the surface telling of the stories. While the biblical canon records the patriarchal gaze’s understanding of the stories, both Johnson and Stewart uncover the story behind the story. They incorporate Lorde’s erotic resource here. “The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde 53). They are allowing this erotic resource to emerge in a way that is empowering many: the biblical women, Chippie, and Blues women. In doing so, they are violating the oppressive exegetical rules of sticking strictly to the written text.

Johnson offers us Chippie from her culturally specific lens. “Chippie doesn’t sing much anymore” (L. M. Johnson). This addition gives gravitas for the Woman who has been bent for 18

years that can be held. It is the backstory that illustrates the reason behind both her face and framing strategies.

In the same vein of examining the face and framing strategies, Stewart shows the congregation Tamar in her desperate and then desolate states. This reflects the need for a knowing beyond her face strategy. In respect to the erotic, the framing strategy is needed to understand Tamar's desperation/desolation. That deeply female place of the Blues woman's soul needs to know how she felt in the midst of the begging of her brother not to do this awful thing to her, how she felt in the midst of the awful thing happening to her, and how she felt in the aftermath of the wrong having been done to her. Stewart touches this with looking at the small details of the text. She tears her robe. She leaves crying and puts ashes on her head. She looks to her brother who further violates her by silencing her. But Stewart goes deeper to cause the congregation to see the role the unnamed agents in the story play.

The bystander... It's one script that we really need to consider. You see, we may not be servants of the king. We may not be Amnon. We may not be Jonadab. We may not even be Absalom or members of the royal family, but we all know, myself included, what it's like to be part of a crowd that is just watching and ain't saying nothing. We know what it's like to be witnessing and choosing to look the other way. We know what it's like to declare, "Well, it's none of my business." We know about political expediency and complicity and conspiracies of silence. We know about the tension between altruism, our desire to do good, and altruistic inertia. Where we want to do good, but we can't seem to get off go. We find ourselves sitting on neutral. We know what it feels like to not want to get involved... choosing to remain silent when

violence is done, ignoring the bruises and the blackeyes... 'cause we say it's none of our business. (Stewart)

This is yet another way Stewart sets the atmosphere for the Blues woman's context. She opens the story and pushes forward those moments when the Blues woman has had to stand alone while others saw what was happening to her and acted as if they did not see the wrong being done. This sets the atmosphere for healing to take place for both the Black church and the Blues woman.

The incorporation of Burke's pentadic method with these two sermons allows the audience to pinpoint the womanist vernacular underpinnings present. Understanding the social location of Tamar, Stewart does well with articulating it so that the audience understands the significance of each part of this story. She gives the agents' participation, and their available agency is identified to give the audience a clear view. She takes the time to explicate all of the components of the scene as well. She highlights the location of each part of the story and gives special attention to the action taking place in each of these settings. Specifically, Stewart provides insight on how the space Tamar turns to for refuge, Absalom's house, may not be a place equipped to assist in her healing. She points to Absalom's silencing to leave Tamar a desolate woman for the rest of her days. As she unpacks the stories beneath the story, she gives insight to the purpose of this sermon effort. She shows how Tamar's story aligns with that of many Blues women and how the other agents align with the people aiding in the Blues woman's desolation.

Using Burke's pentad with Johnson's telling of Chippie's story also makes for a deeper understanding of both Chippie and the Woman who is bent. Chippie is chirping within her caged existence. (Further unpacking of this action is in the critique of Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.) (Angelou) Chippie's owner decides to do a quick cleaning of Chippie's cage;

the panoptical gaze validates this violation. Her intent is interrupted and causes Chippie to be left in a vulnerable space. It is in this vulnerable space that Chippie is *sucked into* the vacuum cleaner's bag.

Exploring this part of the action is vital to the necessity of the womanist vernacular. She is violently removed from her familiar caged existence. She lands in a dark place filled with another situation's dirt. The dirt from another situation having nothing to do with Chippie ends up on her. She is having to handle someone else's dirt. The trauma that comes along with being covered in someone else's dirt makes for a deeper understanding of the Woman who was bent's agency as well.

Just as she has landed and gets covered in this foreign dirt, the panoptical focus returns and *rescues* her. She pulls Chippie's body from the dirty place and does a surface cleaning, to remove the visible dirt that makes the panoptical owner feel guilty. The washing is not done in a way that is culturally respectful of Chippie. Chippie is left with yet another trauma from the washing. Realizing Chippie is shivering, the panoptical owner's understanding says hit her full blast with the heat of the hair dryer. This is yet another traumatic event... leaving her in a traumatized, bent, desolate place and removes her ability or desire to chirp. She is no longer singing. She is in a bent place because of the further violation than the one of caging her in the first place. Johnson's telling of the story and connection to the Woman who was bent helps the audience to understand this woman's parallel to the Blues woman's context through a Womanist Vernacular Discourse lens.

I think about us, black women, a lot. How many of us are battered and how many are champions. I note the strides that have replaced the tiptoe; I watch the new configurations we have given to personal relationships, wonder what

shapes are forged and what merely bent. I think about the sisters no longer with us, who, in rage or contentment, left us to finish what should have never begun: a gender/racial war in which everybody would lose, if we lost, and in which everybody would win, if we won. I think about the Black women who never landed who are still swimming open-eyed in the sea. I think about those of us who did land and see how their strategies for survival became our maneuvers for power. (Morrison 31)

Toni Morrison provides the tools to understand the purpose in a manner that is respectful of Lorde's erotic. It is through this knowing that the audience is able to understand Tamar's silence sensorially. It is through this same knowing that we gain insight of Chippie's chirp from her caged existence and the transformation to her refusal to chirp. This is also further explicated through Walker's explanation of the *crazy Saints*. "These crazy Saints stared out at the world, wildly, like lunatics-or quietly, like suicides; and the 'God' that was in their gaze was as mute as a great stone" (Walker 232).

Notice that Walker did not say their gaze was empty of God; she said God was mute. This leans into the vacancy that has to be understood in order to effectively preach for the Blues woman. This vacancy is void of voice and care, but it is not empty. It is a space that has to be cleared and cared for in order to begin to impart wisdom, affirmation, or guidance. That place that had to be vacated in order to survive, that space is where the Blues woman needs to be loved first.

We claim strength by standing with Tamar. We give Tamar her voice back by telling Tamar's story, and we apologize to Tamar for our complicity in her silence, because Tamar is not just in some dusty book that was written some

centuries ago... but Tamar sits in our pews. She sits beside us at our desk. She sits with us in sorority meeting. She sits with us as we do the work of ministry. And we go about the challenges and the daily activity of our lives. And the challenge presented to us today is to ensure that Tamar doesn't keep suffering by herself. The challenge presented to us today is that we claim the strength... as risky as it is... to stand here on a Sunday morning and tell Tamar's story... Yet we claim strength... by planting her feet... And we claim freedom to imagine new endings. (Stewart)

Stewart opens this vacancy in a way that follows the erotic necessity as explored by Lorde. This opening is a loving encounter that does not follow traditional sermonic pathways. She takes care to give an adequate reason for this opening in a way that is respectful of Tamar. Remembering that this is surgery on the soul, Stewart is careful to make the perfect incision that can be seamlessly put back together. She remembers Tamar in the telling of her story and she loves her memory enough to carefully embrace the fragility/vulnerability of this moment. She is providing proof that every other Tamar is safe in this space.

Then, just as smoothly as she made the incision, she begins surgery on the communal soul. She takes the sermon into the *traditional communalism* as rhetorically introduced by K. Johnson. Stewart undoubtedly “moves a woman toward an individual healing, a communal healing, and calls us back to our original values” (K. Johnson 121). She makes us see the current day’s Tamar moving throughout life as a desolate woman. She helps us to understand how to aid in the healing of our Tamars. She also helps us to see our silences and how our being silent aids in the continual perpetuation of an Amnon, Jonadab, Absalom, or David persona.

Johnson also fulfills one of K. Johnson's rhetorical models, *radical subjectivity*. Although the biblical text introduces the Woman who was bent at the height of her infirmity has us understand she meets Jesus and because of her faith she is released from her infirmity, Johnson gives us a womanist spin on this text that aligns perfectly with K. Johnson's model. Because of her addition of Chippie, Johnson allows the audience to see the process to becoming bent and explains how intricate the infirmity travels. Johnson's sermon shows how the "good intentions" of one can scar others. She shows how many women become bent.

Understanding the blues is identified by a twelve-bar bent chord, this is the perfect sermon to speak to the Blues woman's bent places. In order to be identified as a Blues woman, she must be bent in some way. And Johnson does not try to eliminate the fact that she has been bent. She works with the bending to identify the woman in her victim stance. She explores the benefits of the bent condition before she ever identifies the *straightening*. She allows the Woman who was bent to see that she gained some things in those eighteen years that she would not have gained if she was not bent. She moves the woman from victim to victor within what the world identifies as an infirmed condition.

Both Johnson and Stewart treat the infirmities of these women as invitations to advocate for their humanity and ultimately speak to the Blues woman of today. The womanist approach of these vastly different sermons makes a case for adjusting the traditional approach to sermon preparation. There is special attention paid to subject-position in both sermons that makes the delivery effective.

Because the traditional sermon tends to speak directly/solely to the preferred audience, it tends to leave the listeners who do not fit into this category in the margins without inspiration or guidance. This sermon could never begin to move the Blues woman who has been marginalized

within the Black community because of her refusal to conform. The Blues woman enters the sermonic moment either as a subversive or negotiated audience member and should be affirmed in that space.

Stewart opens this space with,

We don't read this story often in worship. We don't study it in Bible study... and after hearing it and reading it... it doesn't take a rocket scientist to tell us why. Because this story is about a topic we really don't like to talk about. And we certainly don't want to hear about it on Sunday morning. Nevertheless, this story must be told. Because stories like this remind us of the evils in our own world. But the truth is, when we come to worship, even though we know that there is evil in the world, we don't necessarily want to be reminded about all of the evil that's in the world. For many of us, worship is reality denial, not reality adjustment. For some of us, we want worship to be a retreat if you will... from the challenges... the trials, the vicissitudes and the tribulations of life. We would prefer to skip over stories like this, ignore them because of the uncomfortable nature of what we read. Perhaps we do this because we often go to the Bible for encouragement. For a word of peace, a word of hope and a word of comfort. We don't come to church or even go to the Bible, or come to worship to hear about rape, violence, abuse, secrets and cover ups. Sounds like almost an episode of the now defunct nighttime drama Scandal. How did and why is such an ugly, tragic tale of dysfunction in the Bible? How did it get in the canon? This story offers insight into the tragic aspect of the human condition, and what this story teaches us, that I need to alert you to, is that this

is not just any family with this dysfunction. This family is the family of Jesus.

Which suggests to us that we don't have to be shamed. Somebody say you don't have to be shamed. (Stewart)

She does not attempt to approach the waiting congregation as if they are the preferred audience. Instead, she addresses the topic and gives the audience a trigger warning. The warning allows the audience to begin as the informed negotiated. They are expected to ingest the subject matter on their own terms, but she is willing to work within this expectation. Because of this unique presentation, she gives agency to the audience and makes room for internal reflection.

Transivity is also present here. Stewart engages the audience in a linguistic voyage into the palace. She takes them on this journey with the understanding that she is making statements about the world. She is implying the standards by which the community operates while making ideational statements. She is the pastor of this congregation who has trusted her to care for their souls. Because of this, she is able to take them on this adventure. The interpersonal relationship is relayed through the immediate shift the audience makes with this unexpected change in expectation. As a result, she is crafting a new text through the delivery of this sermon. She is joining ideas across genres and reimagining the community through a pastiche of ideology intertwining. She gives the biblical text in its truest essence and compares it to the television show *Scandal* (Rhimes). She is connecting the sacred and what has been deemed the secular in this moment. She is allowing the congregation to make this reconnection in an effort to reimagine the way the audience interacts with dysfunction. The way she uses pastiche to make this seamless is the textual function that makes for an entirely new oration.

In a slightly different manner, Johnson reads the text from Luke 13 and immediately shifts to Lucado's story about Chippie. Johnson's approach does not make the assumption that the audience is the preferred; she makes space for the preferred and the subversive.

Can any of you identify with Chippie? I know I can, because life isn't fair. Life does not have a set of failure proof rules. The bottom can drop out of your world without a moment's notice. It takes only one call from the police station about your child, one doctor's report, one officer delivering divorce papers, one business to downsize, one meeting in your boss's office or one knock on your door with bad news to have a Chippie moment. It's impossible to believe that one mammogram, one prostate test, or one culture report can throw your whole world into chaos and leave you feeling like Chippie – sucked in, washed up and blown over. Chippie moments steal your song and shake your faith. (L. M. Johnson)

Her approach makes room for all of the subject-positions. She makes the ownership of this story accessible through the various scenarios provided. Understanding that she is speaking to a diverse Black church audience, she opens the door as wide as possible with the scenarios above. This opens the second persona to include everyone who is present without imposing an outside expectation. Johnson opens this invitation and uses womanist vernacular to deliver the inspirational message.

The transivity present here is where the two sermons are totally opposite. Johnson ideationally relays a message that speaks to the representation of the face world present in the room, but also speaks to the frame world in the room. She speaks to the public person before moving into the intimate thoughts of the people. She takes care to do this in a way that will not

cause flight. Unlike Stewart, Johnson is not the pastor of this congregation and the people have not agreed to let her care for their souls. She is contractually caring, and it is apparent in the interpersonal angle she takes with her impartation. She is familiar with the people, but she understands that she must tread lightly because they are conditionally on board; they are believing through the trust in their pastor. So, her negotiation crafts a slightly different version of a womanist text.

Like Stewart, she is involved in pastiche as well. Her pastiche is more aligned with relating to the people and gaining their trust through cultural syncretism. The coherence and sequence of her sermon swings on the pulse of the room and creates a cadence that crafts a nonverbal agreement between the pulpit and the pew. She is then able to impart the message that every Blues woman can relate to. The idea of being freed and still belonging makes for the perfect womanist vernacular sermon.

You must assess the preaching situation in the present, so that you can know what the future preaching situation calls forth from you. Ain't no sense in trying to carve out a preaching future unless you know what the preaching score is now on the contemporary scene, because your preaching future is based on the preaching situation existing now in the contemporary context.

(Cannon 53-54)

Katie Cannon offers the preacher great advice. The preaching situation has to be constantly examined for space for improvement. If the present scenario is feeding the target audience, then you have a perfect foundation to build upon. If the present scenario is lacking in its effectiveness, then there is work to be done. In the case of looking to prepare the sermon for the Blues woman, there is still tons of heavy lifting to do. The good news is the literature is present within the

community, the preacher just has to be willing to break the norms to craft the sermon for the Blues woman to be inspired and Womanist Vernacular Discourse makes space for this opportunity.

CHAPTER 2: A REPURPOSING OF BLACK WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Introduction

She graced the microphone and talked from her soul. I know it was from her soul because it connected with mine. She sounded like the women in my community. She was what I needed as I was finishing the first semester of a tumultuous start to college. I needed someone to speak to me in this manner. Her words danced into crevices I didn't even know existed. I was hooked from the very first word.

I had arrived to hear Sister Souljah speak at Old Dominion University with three other girls. I was torn as to whether or not I wanted to attend when I got in the car. Sure, I was a Black girl going to hear the words of a powerful Black girl and that should've been enough. Right? I was going to get inspired... Right? I was traveling with some people who looked like me and Sister Souljah... Right?

But my short experience at Hampton University had taught me to question the people who looked like me. Not all of them had my best intentions at heart. Not all of them were willing participants in making me a better me. But there I sat... Hoping that the woman behind the microphone would be like the women I remembered from home. She sounded like a homegirl... That unlocked the barb-wired gate that I had recently constructed around my heart. She could now enter the closer space.

I allowed my soul to determine where to put this message being delivered. I began to feel uncomfortable as I realized that she was moving into my soul in ways that no one ever had. She was able to speak to spaces that were left wounded because there was nothing I was able to hear

in church that would help. I had resolved that those spaces would be wounded forever. This woman, who did not know me, was speaking to me in ways only hip hop had.

I was vulnerable and it made me uncomfortable for a short while. When I looked to see what was happening with my carmates, their faces reflected the same amount of vulnerability. I felt slightly better as I experienced how this woman was able to open parts of me that I had purposely sealed off out of fear of being further violated. She did not open these wounds and leave them bleeding like many sermons had done in my past. She poured in something that made the wounds easier to bear... she poured from her own space of vulnerability. She gave us pieces of herself that were not readily recognizable from the outside.

There was her speech to the entire room happening on a surface level... but the real conversation was happening in the vernacular beneath the surface. There was a conversation happening beneath the surface that you had to be a part of the community to understand. She was doing surgery on the Black girls' souls. She was jerking our tears and validating our wounds. She was giving us a message that would inspire us for the next leg of this journey.

I had not read her memoir at that point, but I knew that it was a must that I ingest it. What she was able to do in a matter of about forty minutes was so impactful that I knew her words on paper had the potential to save my life. I was right. *No Disrespect* was the beginning of my climb toward wholeness. It was inspiration I could grasp because this inspiration knew me... and I knew it.

It is for this reason that I state we, rhetorical scholars of race and religion, tend to ignore the culturally specific inspiration for Blues women that currently exists in our community by

failing to utilize the autobiographies of Black women in order to craft messages that follow traditions not invested in the affirmation or progression of these women.

Important to realize, autobiographies of Black women capture the sacred and the secular while canonizing their experiences. Ignoring these texts when aiming to inspire is like using your hand to screw in a Philips head screw while there is a screwdriver in your toolbox. Sure, it is possible to make this happen with your hand, but the tool designed specifically for this purpose is going to outperform the generalized option every time. In this instance, the screw is left loose and cannot adequately perform the task for which it was crafted. This robs the screw and the overall structure to which this screw has been assigned. Utilizing the screwdriver allows for a more intricate filling of the groove. As a result, the screw's ability is elevated, and it has the ultimate performance capacity.

The autobiographies of Black women are the screwdrivers in the toolbox of inspiration. We are constantly solely utilizing the biblical text to speak to this community and that is the equivalent of using our hands to apply the screw. The screw is the message being delivered. While this application is working, it is a loose-fitting application that has the propensity to better perform if only we would use the culturally specific tools already in our toolbox. The autobiographies are not just screwdrivers, they are Philips head screwdrivers that have been tailor-made to fit the screws waiting to serve.

Therefore, we are operationally supporting the utilization of a mediocre text and devaluing the stories from within our community to maintain a tradition that is, at best, loosely functioning. This ultimately discourages Black women from canonizing their stories and leaves the next generation without the unique guidance they hold.

There have been critics from several disciplines who appreciate the role examining Black women's autobiographies plays. For instance, Tamara Butler calls for Black women's autobiographies to be utilized in the language arts classroom to effectively teach the lives of Black women (Butler 161-162). Yolanda Pierce, dean of Howard University's School of Divinity, explores the firsthand experience of Black women's lives and the difference it makes to see those lives from the inside. She ventures into how her grandmother's hands were "a love story of survival in hard places, during hard times" (Pierce 34). And Assata Shakur explains that "Love is contraband in Hell/ cause love is an acid/ that eats away bars" (Shakur 130). This view is only captured from the lived experience. Thus, proving the worth of Black women's autobiographies in education.

This is not to say there have been no rhetorical critics who have written about Black women's autobiographies and the vital role they play. Johnnie M. Stover's *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiographies* (Stover) explores their role in the field of rhetoric. She tackles the emergence of an African American mother tongue and allusion as hidden discourse. Also, *Black Women Writers and the Trouble with Ethos: Harriet Jacobs, Billie Holiday, and Sister Souljah* by Coretta Pittman makes the argument that "The assumption that black women lack a positive and respectable ethos is a historical and contemporary problem" (Pittman 43). To make this argument, Pittman uses Black women's biographies.

My suggestion is that we add this vast catalog to the canon of sacred rhetoric. Let us, therefore consider, *A Repurposing of Black Women's Autobiographies* through voice, validation, and vitality to provide the Blues woman with culturally respective affirmation, guidance, and inspiration.

Voice

“I lost myself, now I can’t see/ who it is I’m supposed to be” (Knowles). Here, Beyonce’s character in the movie *Dreamgirls*, Deena, makes a claim for Black women everywhere. The fact that Black women are made to assimilate every aspect of who they are in order to have space in the place they call home is disheartening. These words speak to having moved so far away from who you naturally are that you no longer know who you are or who you are supposed to be. She travels deeper when she states from the perspective of her friend,

Listen, there is a voice deep inside you

This is the voice that will guide you

To where you need to be

It will set you free

Take it from me (Knowles).

It is imperative that we understand she is hearing the voice of her friend who came from the same space she is native to. This friend has a familiar vantage point as to who Deena actually is. She is reaching out to hear from her friend because it is a voice she can trust. This voice speaks a language she is familiar with; it connects to her soul. And the sister she is reaching for, Effie, has had to travel the road to finding herself again as well. She is reaching to this specific friend because she knows the spatial and rhetorical situation; she has been there.

The voice in Black women’s autobiographies has the propensity to speak to the Blues woman’s soul in a way no other text can. The voice from outside of the vernacular can only understand so far. The limitations are bountiful, and it is for this reason that the autobiographies are written in the first place. It is interesting that the insight is ignored for a panoptical view

when dealing with the Blues woman. Douglas' narrative of civility plays a major factor here. If this woman is the embodiment of the antithesis of what the narrative is proclaiming, erasing her voice is strategic. It is a mission oriented in confusion and forced assimilation. Her voice must be demolished and demonized in order to further disrupt her ability to survive.

The voice given for her was that of the narrative followers who believed that freedom existed in dominant society's approval. Therefore, the voice given for her emerged from a fabrication of what the desperate gaze of the Black bourgeoisie deemed necessary to gain equality. Her voice was suppressed, and she was forced to sit under false representation speaking for her.

"I have come to recognize, however, that when the subject matter is me and the voice is not mine, my sense of order and rightness is disrupted" (Royster 31). It is for this reason that the Blues woman is further marginalized from the Black community. Her passion does not allow her to be quiet as her ontology is misrepresented; she speaks. Her passion is seen as defiance and her emotion is misunderstood for uncouth.

The vernacular of the Blues woman is a great example of why it is imperative that autobiographies be used as sacred text. This ensures that the Blues woman's voice is given from her own vantage point. She is not represented by anyone else. She is her own representation because her experience is needed for her moan to be adequate. The moan that undergirds her telling of her story is like a roux. The herbs and spices needed for the flavor have to be grown in a specific marginalized space to have what is needed to harbor that punch that the roux is desperately in need of. And it cannot be acquired through a short trip into the culture. The most that can be acquired here is to hear the story that needs to be told from one of the natives.

From the early times to now, Black women's writings have paralleled Black history. As creators of literature these women are not formally historians, sociologists, nor theologians, but the patterns and themes in their writings are reflective of historical facts, sociological realities and religious convictions that lie behind the ethos and ethics of the Black community. As recorders of the Black consciousness of values which enable them to find meaning, in spite of social degradation, economic exploitation and political oppression. They record what is valued or regarded as good in the Black community. Seldom, if ever, is their work art-for-art's-sake. (K. G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* 78)

The autobiographies of Black women give voice to an experience that told by anyone else would feel like a fabrication, because it would have to be an imagined and acted out version. The voice of the original agents has to be present in order to accurately account for the act. This edge is missing in the biblical text because the story is not told from the vantage of the women who had the experience. Imagine how powerful the book of Esther would be from the perspective of Hadassah. Many will ask, 'Who is Hadassah?' This would only further prove my point. What did it feel like to have your language... customs... culture... traditions all stripped from you? What did it feel like to be among a harem when you were the apple of your cousin's eye? What was the transformation like? These are all questions that cannot be answered by the biblical text because even if Hadassah was consulted about the occurrences, she was being questioned as Esther. She was being questioned as a follower of the narrative of civility. Her answers were no longer dedicated to authenticity; she was loyal to the role. Apparently, the writer of the story was married to the role as well... the book is titled Esther, not Hadassah.

Her voice was compromised, and she could no longer speak on behalf of the community for the sake of inspiration, guidance, or affirmation. She was able to speak to the king on behalf of her people, but she had to be convinced.

When Haman tricked the king into signing that death warrant for all the Jews, Mordecai sent word to the queen, who was no longer Hadassah but Queen Esther. Look at how she answered him (4:11, NRSV): “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law – all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may the person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.” In other words, “Mordecai, I can’t help you. I can’t help you people.” (Wright Jr. 70-71)

Understanding this, most Jews would not have elected to have Hadassah speak for them either. Her voice could no longer be trusted. But the narrative, in an interest of skewing reality, would have Esther’s voice as the voice of the Jewish community. Told as Esther, her story would serve the narrative well. She is quite possibly the best biblical voice for assimilation.

Hadassah is proof of the need for the autobiographical to be utilized as sacred text. The story behind all of what made Esther needs to be told to truly understand why she made the moves she did. We needed to understand the lack of self-worth and self-understanding because of the loss of her parents at a young age. She was raised by her cousin Mordecai and her allegiance to the Jewish community was never activated. The agent analysis leads to an understanding of the text that is not readily available from what the biblical text shares. The agent analysis allows the audience the opportunity to see who Esther truly is.

The agent analysis will lead to an understanding of her agency. As Esther, she has more access to opportunities to help the Jewish community, but Esther is not committed to the well-being of the Jews. She is a proud Babylonian convert and her agency is twisted because of her view of the world. While she was born into the outside/outsider community, she and her cousin make the decision to turn her into something else. Therefore, she is separated from the understanding of the community to which her blood claims she belongs. The significations of her community would be totally lost on her.

The voice is a vehicle that is vital to true inspiration. When speaking of the Blues woman, the voice is even more imperative than that of the Black women who ascribe to the narrative of civility. Having been *cast off* and misrepresented, Blues women do checks to hear the voice. "...the inflection, rhythm, and stress of that speech" (L. Jones 46) determines whether this voice is native or fabricated. The tonal semantics are critiqued heavily. The native sound to the Blues body of people is as unique as their DNA; they are able to feel whether this voice can be trusted through the tonality and significations delivered.

Validation

The Blues woman has been exploited for her gifts and talents, her cultural knowledge, and her exotic linguistics so often that there is a need for the validation of every representation of her. She must know that the person who represents her is truly who they claim to be. There is a checks and balance that occurs to be sure that this person is genuinely for the people they claim. They must have the voice, but more importantly, they must be validated by the community. The autobiographies of Black women allow the Blues woman the opportunity to put them under the microscope to validate the experience as one from their vernacular. It allows them to hear the voice and determine if it has their moan.

John Louis Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit argues that rhetors who successfully rearrange and revivify the culturally established public vocabulary to produce social change are masters of culturetypal rhetoric” and “rhetors who introduce new – and thus culturally unauthorized – characterizations and narratives are masters of counter-cultural rhetoric.” For them, they “produce changes in the public vocabulary, thus altering both a community’s discursive and material practices” (Condit 483).

The culturetypal/counter-cultural dichotomy is necessary to lift when speaking of the validation of voice. The validation of the dominant society/the Black community at large may find that the culturetypal voice is that which is safe and follows the narrative of civility. The decades old contrast of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X describe this perfectly. While both held the same goal, equality, their modes were drastically different, and the acceptance of their voices was as different.

In the case of the Blues woman, this validation may follow very different rules than that of the Lucaites and Condit essay and the Black community who ascribes to this narrative of civility. The validation of the voice for the culturetypal has to speak their language and speak it in their dialect. This voice has to connect to their soul in a way that is not readily accessible outside of the vernacular discourse. It has to equivocate the moan of their marginalization.

At twelve years old, I had learned Maya Angelou’s *Lord of My Heart* and was preparing to recite it in class. I practiced it at home and my grandmother said, “You have the words memorized. Now, you just gotta find your soul!” It was yet another lesson my grandmother taught me that would pay off down the road. The passion behind the words was equally as important, if not more important, as the words themselves. This soul is what validates the

autobiographies for guidance and inspiration for the Blues woman. It is the lack of the soul that leaves the holes in the biblical text for the Blues woman. But what is the potency check for soul?

Analyzing the scene is often underrated. This analysis is done through vernacular and is an internal examination. Where and when the action happens is merely scratching the surface. The location and the time can give some indication that this is a story that is authentic enough to be used for inspiration but must be analyzed through a women's blues lens to be certain.

Angela Y. Davis makes the argument that "Women's blues, specifically, celebrated and valorized black working-class life while simultaneously contesting patriarchal assumptions about women's place both in the dominant culture and within African American communities" (A. Y. Davis 120) She pushes, "Women's blues contested black bourgeois notions of "high" culture that belittled working class popular music." Davis's comments here explain the need for the Blues woman to have a voice. She loads this thought with, "In order for the blues to be extricated from a hierarchy that established Christianity as the community's overarching moral authority, they had to affirm, in a self-conscious manner, their own cultural integrity" (A. Y. Davis 121).

The movement of this music was what needed to be present in the vernacular of the autobiographies for them to land with this audience. This music was goal oriented and that goal was devoted to the Blues woman. If the autobiography was to speak to the Blues woman in manner that would move her, it would have to speak this blues language.

There is a call-response that Smitherman speaks of that finds its roots in blues. "Call-response seeks to synthesize speakers and listeners in a unified movement. It permeates Black English communication and reaffirms the modality of the cosmic macrocosm". This cosmic macrocosm is a push and pull between the speaker and listener. It is an invisibly roped tug-of-

war happening where if the agents are in sync, the rhythm sways like that of a blues song. It ebbs and flows with the discourse in way that validates the speaker and affirms their cultural awareness and membership.

Subject position plays a major role in call-response. The Blues woman is almost always initially either subversive or negotiated/inflected when inspiration is being offered. Her history with the institution purposed for inspiration has not been positive. It is for this reason that she is understandably skeptical at onset. It is the job of the speaker to move her to preferred. The Blues woman holds the power here; she determines if she will allow herself to be open to move.

In turn, the speaker/author of the autobiography has the ability to relate to the Blues woman through persona. First persona allows the voice to do the work. If the text is in their native vernacular, there is little room for miscommunication. The point of the autobiographical approach is to bring the author's experience to the canon. Therefore, the first persona, while being extremely vulnerable, allows the author's voice to tell the story in their native language without the need for translation. This raw approach is most likely to land positively with the Blues woman. Without buffing out the rough edges, it presents the author's voice in its purest form. That straightforward approach has proven to be the most accepted in this community. The lack of filter or censoring mirrors the reality of the Blues woman and her community.

While it is important not to fetishize or romanticize blues as if it is a pure reflection of black life and culture, it does capture a profound side of black existence that other forms of black expressive culture do not. In so doing, blues provides an informal, yet incisive, perspective on the relationship between the black church and blues bodies and, correspondingly, the depth of the wrong in

the black church. It also suggests a crossroads-inspired blue(s)print for correcting that wrong.

Douglas explains the effect of the *casting off* of blues bodies and the likelihood of their embracing of sacred text. The blues then becomes an avenue for the inspiration of these bodies. For Blues women specifically, this phenomenon is crucial to her existence.

Vitality

If the Blues woman has been cast off by the Black church, what is the likelihood of her embracing the formal canonized biblical text? Not very. Her allegiance to her authenticity seeks the voice of those who are dedicated to the same purpose. However, her turn away from the church does not include a turn away from the divine or inspiration. What does this mean for the guidance, inspiration, and affirmation of the Blues woman? “Both Wilson and Hurston capture the essence of Blues Speech and are chroniclers of Black religiosity and the healing power of God-talk, articulated by people who preach and sing in minor keys” (Otis Moss 5). Both Wilson and Hurston produced stories from the perspective of the Black community. They used a pen to tell the stories of the Black community that would not be readily included in the canon published by dominant society.

There is a consistent question surrounding Wilson’s declaration that the director of his plays is Black.

It’s not color; it’s culture... I know... you know... we all know what it is when a hot comb hits your hair on a Sunday morning. What it smells like. That’s a cultural difference, not just a color difference. So, it’s the culture... See how everybody laughed? That’s a cultural difference. That’s not a race difference...

Just that motion (tssst with the lick of the finger and flinch) ... That's all I gotta say right? (D. Washington, *Urban View*)

The director takes the script and brings it to life. The director holds the proverbial pen speaking to the audience. The director is trusted with bringing the story from the page to the stage/screen without violating the author's intent. Wilson's insistence on the director being Black, as articulated by Denzel Washington above, is not about his race solely; it is about his innate understanding of the culture. The first persona has to know the life behind the play. There is little room for error when the director has experienced the hot comb on hair scenario presented here.

As Moss presents Hurston and Wilson as "chroniclers of Black religiosity and the healing power of God-talk, articulated by people who preach and sing in minor keys" (Otis Moss 5), this opens a space for doing soul work with Blues women. This gives credence to being able to move people with the familiarity of the blues.

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (Ellison 103)

Ellison explicates perfectly how vital it is to utilize the blues simmered autobiographies of Black women as sacred text. There is a healing quality in sharing the painful details of a story. While there are situations in the biblical text that explain that there was a pain occurring with the women, there are very little details that examine how the events affected them. The blues sensory is missing. These encounters lack the ability to reach the soul of the Blues woman; she is well-

versed in the roux of the richness of the blues simmered story. Her soul connects with what comes from the soul. It cannot be a watered-down version of the story presented to her.

The poets of biblical times were discussing beauty in terms of light and dark – the essential characteristics of a white and black aesthetic – and establishing the dichotomy of superior *vs.* inferior which would assume body and form in the 18th century. (Addison Gayle 92-93)

The language of the biblical canon lacks the capability of executing a soul connection because of its lack of experience with the aesthetic itself. It can only produce from what is within the creator. Ergo, the blues simmered autobiographical capturing of an experience is a necessity for inspiring the Blues woman.

When looking back to the biblical text for explanation, Esther provides the perfect example. There is no book of Vashti or Hadassah in the canon, but the book of Esther is canonized. This capturing of the story does not incorporate that blues simmer. Esther is often referred to with the goal of Esther 4:16, “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish” (NRSV Esther 4:16). This move in favor of the Jews, who she is only in relation with through blood at this point, comes after having to remind her of who she truly is.

There is no record of what this process did to her psyche. There is no record of what any of this experience did to her ontological or corporeal being. It is a record of what happened that could be chronicled by an observer. This transformation, in both cases, would have been much more powerful if told by Hadassah. But the book of Hadassah is not canonized. There can be no

blues simmer that would reach from soul to soul because the writers of this story have no knowledge of the soul experience of Hadassah.

In the Black church we fill these holes with stories from the community's cultural canon and qualify it with statements like, *If you will allow me to speak from my prophetic imagination*. When the stories have been created that will do this work. Let the Black woman speak her truth and leave your prophetic imagination for your own story. These stories hold the propensity for direct inspiration from a familiar source. The Black women writing in first person about their life's experience calls for the reconnection of the sacred and the secular from the traditional African worldview.

Understanding that the sacred and the secular were never separated in the traditional African worldview, the autobiographical text does not need validation. However, there is a need for a reclamation because of the assimilation process that was forced upon the Enslaved people, the narrative of civility that was enforced by the Black church, and the side effects of having been demonized. The non-fiction stories about Black women's lives are often incorporated; the autobiographical takes this ability to a new dimension because it is told from the perspective of the person who experienced it. There are details that can be incorporated that would not be readily available.

As I wrote *Finding Me*, my eyes were open to the truth of how our stories are often not given close examination. We are forced to reinvent them to fit into a crazy, competitive, judgmental world. So I wrote this for anyone running through life untethered, desperate and clawing their way through murky memories, trying to get to some form of self-love. For anyone who needs

reminding that a life worth living can only be born from radical honesty and the courage to shed facades and be ... you. (V. Davis, *Finding Me*)

For the people who take an honest and intentional swing at telling Black women's stories in their absence, your effort is appreciated. The question is about the absence. Why is she absent? Her story is important enough to be included, but her ontology/corporeal is not? What gets lost here? What reinvention is being presented? Above, Viola Davis gives credence to the notion that Black women have to tell their own stories, from their own perspectives, without censorship.

This ideology speaks to the second tenet of womanism, traditional communalism, and makes it vital to the guidance, inspiration, and affirmation of the Blues woman. "I understand traditional communalism as life-giving relationships that empower, protect, and nourish us in ways that help us to stay on the course toward authenticity, freedom, justice, and equality" (Johnson 37). This places a responsibility on the author of the autobiographies. The relationship they have with the community is crucial to the role the story will play. It is imperative that the author has a *life-giving relationship* with the Blues woman.

With a feeling of great temerity I asked [my grandmother] one day why it was that she would not let me read any of the Pauline letters. What she told me I shall never forget. "During the days of slavery," she said, "the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters ..., as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my

Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.” (Thurman 30-31)

She never said that Paul’s letters were abusive; she said the white preachers presented the Pauline letters that way. The relationship between the white minister and the enslaved people was not life-giving. For this reason, the content shared was refused.

The relationship has to be life-giving in order to be utilized as sacred text. Because the author of the autobiography is the person who had the experience, it is imperative that her relationship aligns with the traditional communal goal. The text must empower the Blues woman’s authenticity individually, which will ultimately make the best of the community.

Analysis

My race groaned. It was our people falling. It was another lynching, yet another Black man hanging on a tree. One more woman ambushed and raped. A Black boy whipped and maimed. It was hounds on the trail of a man running through slimy swamps. It was a white woman slapping her maid for being forgetful.

(Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 135)

Maya Angelou exemplifies perfectly how the voice is an intricate detail that is necessary for speaking to the Blues woman in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In the above passage, all of these events could be seen by the outside observing eye; they could even be understood on the surface. The first sentence, “My race groaned” (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 135), sends the message that this voice has to come from the inside for a thorough understanding. That groan could only be felt, and it could only be felt by the agents who had the opportunity to be a part of the race. I say opportunity because this membership is indeed a privilege. This

groan/moan has a way of reaching the soul without a word spoken. It is a language that speaks through the connection.

This scene was in the midst of the Louis-Carnera boxing match. The words were never spoken, but the entire Black community understood the significance of Joe Louis' moves during this fight. Angelou uses the above description to explain how everyone felt when it appeared as if Primo Carnera might beat Joe Louis. This was felt in the stiff, nervous silence of her grandmother's Store as the entire community gathered around the radio. The silence was so intentional that she and her brother were forbidden from using the cash register during the rounds. All of these movements were important details that translated cultural specifics about the act and scene.

The otherwise noisy Store was intentionally quiet. This translates exactly how serious this event was to the agents. The lively people were silent to hear the details of what was happening with their hero, Joe "Brown Bomber" Louis. The selection of Louis as hero was indicative of what the community valued. Louis was able to slaughter a man, in this case a white man, with his hands. There was no superpower activated. He used the strength he had built through labor to defeat his opponents. He was their hero because he was simply using his Black body and intuition to beat who represented the oppressor. It is for this reason that everything simultaneously stopped when the outcome was unsure. "We didn't breathe. We didn't hope. We waited" (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 135).

This scene is culturally rich in voice without any words being spoken. It is an example of the community sharing the moan of their people that reaches back to before the *maafa*, the Kiswahili word for calamity or disaster. (Wright 117) This moan is innate and is allowed to surface in communal spaces.

Maya Angelou had spent a lot of her childhood in Stamps, Arkansas, which is about twenty-five miles from Hope, where I was born. My grandfather had a little grocery store in a predominantly African American neighborhood. When I read *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, I knew exactly who she was talking about and what she was talking about in that book. (Clinton, *American Masters*)

President Clinton is lifted here for two reasons. First, he is inclined to believe that he understood her life because both he and she were from almost the same geographical location. The staunch difference here is she was from Black Stamps and he was from white Hope. His grandfather owned a store in a Black neighborhood just as her grandmother had. Important to realize, Clinton's vantage is vastly different from Angelou's because of agency; his freedom and privilege and the lack thereof for her played a significant role that is ignored in this interview. But his 1992 selection of Angelou as the first poet to speak at a presidential inauguration since Robert Frost in 1961 and first Black woman poet to present at this occasion was a major indicator in her public career. It shined a light on her work for dominant society. Much like the narrative of civility aimed to do, he was deeming her culturetypal for the Black community.

The second reason for lifting Clinton is the "Sister Souljah Moment." Rhetorical critics Andre E. Johnson and Damariye L. Smith explore the moment where then Governor Bill Clinton spoke before the Rainbow Coalition and criticized Souljah's comments in a *Washington Post* article. "While many in the mainstream political world saw this as simply a political strategy, she and the hip hop community view Clinton's remarks as a *dis* – which, of course, in hip hop slang is short for disrespect" (Smith 46).

This mentioning of Souljah was a political move that defamed her character on a global scale, but more emphatically presented her as counter cultural. Her words were taken to a

microphone outside of her vernacular discourse community. In the same regard that Clinton believed he thoroughly understood Angelou and praised her work, he believed he thoroughly understood Souljah and demonized hers. He used his privilege in both situations to give and take credence with both women and present himself as someone who was a part of this discursive community; when in fact, he could not be. His validation/invalidation of the two women was not invited by the Black community, nor was it aligned with the Blues community to whom their work is directed.

Angelou states, “It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense” (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 180). Thus, providing proof of what Clinton’s treatment of her memoir would feel like, but makes a stronger claim about his treatment of Souljah’s statement – made in her absence. He made the choice to talk *about* her publicly rather than *to* her publicly or privately.

A week later, as a result of her voice being absent in the attack, Souljah responded with an account of her education and experience. She proceeded to explicate why Clinton was not qualified to assess the matter at hand. Souljah was forced to try and defend her statements to the public because they were taken out of context and aimed at an audience with whom she was not conversing. She was speaking within her discursive community and her dialect reflected as much. She was then criticized by a community that was not privy to her vantage point. This conversation would have been thoroughly understood within her community.

Johnson and Smith make the argument that this move was seen as a *dis* within the hip hop community. Souljah responds immediately in the way of Clinton’s world, by press

conference. Then, she retorts in the language of hip hop. She responds to Clinton's *dis* with her autobiographical work which she pointedly titled *No Disrespect*.

This invasion is what Ono and Sloop is directly referencing when they state, ...vernacular discourse is speech that resonates within local communities. This discourse is neither accessible in its entirety, nor is it discoverable, except through texts... vernacular discourse is unique to specific communities. Hence, we would not look at what *The New York Times* had to say about rapper Ice T's album... Critics of vernacular discourse would look at discourse that resonates within and from historically oppressed communities. (K. O. Sloop 20)

Ono and Sloop imply that there is an understanding that cannot be articulated; it has to be culturally known. While Souljah took her words to the Washington Post, she was speaking to her own community. Any knowledge of her background would have signaled to Clinton and anyone else that these words were not presented for their interpretation; she was using her vernacular to speak to her discursive community. Without a translator, those who are on the outside have no idea of what is being relayed.

Souljah was not unfamiliar with the critique of her community from the outside. In fact, this critiquing is what pushed her to write *No Disrespect* in the first place. The power behind her words when retaliating to Clinton validates her voice for the Blues woman. She has the ability to speak directly to this woman who is often misunderstood/misrepresented because she has had to face the same scrutiny on the public stage.

I sat through my American history course in a daze, half-listening to the professor explain the institution of slavery and how historically it had been

“overdramatized and oversold” by black people and so-called academicians. Too much, he said, had been made over the rape of slave women and the sale of slave babies when in fact, he insisted, most of the slaves, their masters, and their masters’ families had been tightly knit units woven together by love and mutual need... Within these relationships, he claimed, love had developed along with a mutual dependency. As evidence, he cited the fact that black women had actually breast-fed most of their owner’s white children themselves, so naturally there was an intimate, even a maternal bond between the mammies and the little white children they lovingly cared for. (Souljah, *No Disrespect* 99)

In this scene from *No Disrespect*, Sister Souljah is reeling after being informed that her thirteen-year-old sister is pregnant, and she is in a college course where her professor is romanticizing the institution of slavery.

Her rhetorical situation is extremely complex here. Understanding that the rhetorical situation is comprised of “exigence, audience, and constraints” (Jasinski 514), Souljah is experiencing the effects of Royster’s *When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own*. She is listening to the panoptical view of her ancestors’ experience. This *exigence*, an imperfection marked by urgency, is intensified because of her life circumstance. It is possible that no one else in the lecture hall received this information in the same manner in which Souljah did in this moment. Her blues context had flattened and bent the information being presented.

Now, usually I would have spoken out and protested such claptrap, but my thoughts of my little sister became intertwined with the professor’s obscene “lessons” and I felt vomit brewing in the pit of my stomach... How could he not understand that there can be no love in a master-slave relationship? Such a

relationship, it seemed obvious to me, was based solely on power. The power of the white world with its control of food, land, resources, police dogs, prisons, and lynching ropes over the life of the powerless black slave victim. The slave had only two choices either to submit and pretend to be a genteel figment of her master's imagination, serving him with the appearance of happy cooperation, or to fight back and have the flesh torn from her body until both her spirit and body were broken. (Souljah, No Disrespect 99-100)

Where her usual response would have been “visceral, not just intellectual” (Royster 31), it never surfaces because of the prolegomena of her present predicament. Her voice is buried beneath the weight of her sister's life circumstance. From the outside, it appears as if she has no words when she “packed up [her] books and walked out” (Souljah, No Disrespect 101). In reality, she had many words, but her life would not give her agency to voice them. The professor did not have to defend his ideology.

The challenge left the room with her, but her voice did not leave the conversation because she penned this autobiographical text. This delivers the message to her community in a way that they can hold it. It articulates what the brilliant mind formulated in that moment but did not have the liberty to say. She was being *constrained* by her emotions for her sister's situation. The audience of that day in class did not have all of the information to be able to comprehend her response. The audience of her memoir gets the backstory and thus understands the entire scene in context. The Blues woman not only understands the backstory, she has lived it. She has experienced having to carry on with life while taking a blow. She has experienced having to sit through someone misconstruing her history. She has had to swallow the violation of both. So,

Souljah's account of this story is the equivalent of Deena's interaction with the thought of Effie's voice for the Blues woman.

This experience can also serve as an example of validation. Her moan gives credence to her voice and her intention; her lived experience can be trusted. The Blues woman is able to enter this text with the ability to see that she is not trying to exploit them. Everything about this story sends the message that her goal is to create better avenues to understanding the Blues woman and make ways for her to be able to unapologetically be authentic.

I never said I was an angel. Nor am I innocent or holy like the Virgin Mary.
What I am is natural and serious and as sensitive as an open nerve on an ice cube. I'm a young black sister with an unselfish heart who overdosed on love long ago. My closest friends consider me soft-spoken. Others say I have a deadly tongue. And while it's true that I have a spicy attitude like most of the ghetto girls I know, I back it up with a quick, precise, and knowledgeable mind. My memory runs way back and I'm inclined to remind people of the things they'd most like to forget. (Souljah, No Disrespect ix)

In the preface to her memoir, Souljah gives her audience a clear view of who she is and why she is writing this text. She does not pretend to be something she is not. And she makes no apologies for being who she is. She defends the natural essence of Black women and gives credence to the fact that she is emotional and knowledgeable at the same time. All of this opens the ear, eye, and eventually the heart of the Blues woman. It is her life's struggle; *her* being both Souljah and the Blues woman. Through the significations and the sensory components presented, it is easy to validate her experience in the eyes of the Blues woman.

“In the projects, somebody can call your mother a one-legged whore who does nasty tricks for men for five dollars and she will still be the most important and influential person in your childhood” (Souljah, *No Disrespect* 3). There is an affirmation of sorts happening here. The speaker is doing a call-response to see who the preferred audience is from the very first lines of chapter one. She is sending a signal to the Blues community here. If one happens to keep reading with a hunger/understanding head nod, she knows this person is her community of accountability. Her native tongue needs no translation here. It is a validation moment that depends on the culture. The asymmetry of the woman with questionable morals being valued as most influential makes no sense in dominant culture. However, this asymmetry is reflective of the life of the Blues woman. It is evident in her movements, speech, adornment, etc. It permeates every aspect of the Blues woman’s life.

The audacity to not abide by rules dictated by dominant society is stuffed into the Blues woman’s makeup. She goes against the grain on purpose. Her view of life is different, and she lives it on her own terms. She is not consumed with the task of trying to make the narrative of civility work; she understands her self-worth and it is not wrapped in the acceptance of dominant society.

A light shade had been pulled down between the Black community and all things white, but one could see through it enough to develop a fear-admiration-contempt for the white “things”—white folks’ cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women. But above all, their wealth that allowed them to waste was the most enviable. They had so many clothes they were able to give perfectly good dresses, worn just under the arms, to the sewing class at

our school for the larger girls to practice on. (Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings 49)

This remnant of slavery was indeed an active participant in the Black community's admiration for white life. The just-out-of-reach of white life crafted a hunger that drives the narrative of civility. This narrative was crafted in hopes of acquiring the characteristics of that life for Black people. The Blues woman makes a conscious decision to define niceties for herself. She does not allow the societal definition of luxury to dictate what she reaches for; she leaves that to her soul. She lives out of the place that feels life and whispers to her in quiet moments. She is not married to the ideology of the Black church and its reach toward white life. In fact, she is often discouraged by it and its lack of consideration for Black life.

Even though these problems affected most everyone in the congregation, we never discussed any of these things in church. Nor did we talk about the definition of family and how to keep one together, the cause of difficult times in the world, racial problems, or how to develop one's mind intellectually and spiritually to overcome these difficulties. (Souljah, No Disrespect 16)

Souljah makes reference to the lack of care given by the church. She was discouraged by the evident misconstruing of ministry and actual life. The church was diligent in the idea that they wanted the people to come as they were, but then would ignore their life's circumstance once they were present. They would preach the idealistic spirituality of God to the people and dismiss them with no tools to carry them through the challenges they would face during the week.

So instead of banding together and discussing and developing a plan to save the broken lives and spirits of the shattered families in the congregation, we got

together at the big houses of a couple of wealthy uncles who had “succeeded,” and there we celebrated family, life, birthdays, et cetera. (Souljah, No Disrespect 17)

In addition to not preparing them for the life they would face, they would be reminded of the wealth of others that they did not possess. The church would claim to accept people as they were in one breath, but in the next breath glorify who they were not. The meetings of the congregation at the “wealthy uncles’ houses” had to send messages to Souljah and her siblings that something was wrong with the life they were living. It had to send messages to their psyche that they were less than. This has an adverse effect on children who are not conversed with constantly. It is a trick of the narrative to have the children buy into their ideology before they truly understand what they are signing up for.

The Blues woman is not onboard and does not ascribe to the flaunting of wealth before the eyes of the poverty stricken to motivate them. Her approach is different. She is invested in her communal survival and values the authenticity of Black essence. Her self-worth is not determined by materials. She bases this on her quality of life. She bases this on the ability to love, laugh and unapologetically be herself. She understands her power and has no problem with wielding it as she sees fit.

“Yes, Nathan?” I said with a firm sensuality. His big brown eyes filled with both a physical and spiritual glow. Then, he said, “Man, I’m into you. No more frightening. I can’t deny it. Your brain got me going but it’s scary. You’re too powerful. I’ve never seen anything like it before. You got me going. You have my attention. Even when you don’t see me you have my attention. Your spirit is so strong it’s like an invasion.” (Souljah, No Disrespect 88)

The very characteristics the narrative of civility tries to bury, the Blues woman unleashes with pride. She harbors no shame for knowing her power. It is because of what it does to Nathan here that her power is demonized. Her femininity is portrayed as a weakness because it has the ability to render men powerless. Understanding this, the narrative makes every effort to demolish this power.

It is the same power Angelou exemplifies with,
 Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.
 I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size
 But when I start to tell them,
 They think I'm telling lies...
 I walk into a room
 Just as cool as you please.
 And to a man,
 The fellows stand or
 Fall down on their knees.
 They swarm around me,
 A hive of honey bees...
 Men themselves have wondered
 What they see in me.
 They try so much
 But they can't touch
 My inner mystery.
 When I try to show them
 They say they still can't see. (Angelou, Maya Angelou: Poems 121-122)

This exposes an understanding of Audre Lorde's erotic power that is often demonized by the Black church. This power is only captured in a negative light in the biblical text. The infamous

biblical vantage of Delilah is a perfect example. Delilah is demonized for using her power to defeat Samson, the Israelite who had been terrorizing her people. She used the power she possessed for a Philistine victory. The biblical text paints her as a manipulator but glorifies Samson. The story is written from the perspective of the Israelites. Because of this, she is seen as the antagonist when she is simply responding to the attack on her community. (NRSV Judges 16)

Angelou and Souljah both exercise this same power and promote it. It is a power the Blues woman has that is demonized for the same reason as Delilah. Like any other weapon, it must be destroyed to protect the narrative.

The world of blues created a lifestyle that was consonant with blues themselves. For many blues women it could rightly be said that “blues is life...the blues is art...is life,” as their lives began to reflect a blues-like existence. These were lives that did not comply with any scripts of the respectable elite, be they uplift ideologies or narratives of civility. These were lives of sometimes “reckless,” but all the time “wild,” bodies. These were bodies that undermined the narrative of civility’s representation of the black female body as domesticated.

While it lost them points with the followers of the narrative, it spoke volumes about their authenticity for the Blues woman’s validation of their autobiographies. Tapping into that feminine power was frowned upon by the Black church in an effort to silence the African remnant and the feminine power that was feared by dominant society.

As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in

order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibilities of it within themselves. So women are maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked, much the same way ants maintain colonies of aphids to provide life-giving substance for their masters.

But the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough. (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 53-54)

Not only are Angelou and Souljah providing text that can validate their ability to affirm the Blues woman, they are providing that affirmation at the same time. They are displaying the effect that power can have. In the face of the narrative, both authors are presenting text that encourages the exotic power of the Blues woman. This specific power is unique to this woman, who has been marginalized by the marginalized. This validation is crucial to survival.

The need for the affirmation in this space is vital; it is a matter of life and death. Understanding Angelou named her memoir after a line from a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem, *Sympathy*, makes it easy to understand how the text of that caged bird would be vital to the existence of the Blues woman.

beats [her] bars and [she] would be free;

It is not a carol of joy or glee

But a prayer that [she] sends from [her] heart's deep core

But a plea, that upward to Heaven [she] flings..." (Dunbar)

The desire to be understood is explicated perfectly here. It is easy to see how Angelou saw her reflection in the caged bird's song. Her autobiography expresses the Blues woman's *prayer that she sends from her heart's deep core*. It is the song of the caged bird that the narrative of civility would rather she not sing. The narrative requires that she turn away from this song that causes the Black community to differ from that of the dominant society. Since she is ignored when she speaks, she *beats her bars*.

This metaphor travels much deeper when looking at the fact that Angelou, Souljah, and the Blues woman all deal in metered bars. These *bars* are where their frustration lies. These bars are where they are able to talk about beauty from their point of view. These *bars* reflect the truest of their intimate thoughts. These *bars* are what Walker's *crazy Saints* hungered for. This translates to the fact that their ability to put their trials and triumphs into bars is an erotic power.

“If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat” (Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* 4). The simple knowledge of her existence is a cage for the Blues woman. Angelou makes the analogous connection here to explain the situation that Beyonce describes as the white flag situation in *Freedom* (Knowles). Symbolically, the white flag has meant surrender. This surrendering state is the equivalent of accepting the rusted razor on your throat for your forever. This rusted razor is overwhelmingly apparent in Black women's literature. This is usually the catalyst for the caged bird's singing. This *knowing* is a subconscious co-composer in this caged bird's song. If nothing else, the *knowing* being articulated allows the other caged birds to simply connect, understand, and know that they are not alone in their fight; it is a chance at solidarity.

“Perhaps [her] idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator” (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression* 32). Hurston frees

the creative soul here. She expresses that just because it does not fit the dominant society's definition, does not mean it is not what the creator says it is. This is permission to take back agency and culture. While this seems like an idea worthy of a sidenote, it is a huge stride for Blues women to be able to adopt this thinking.

Prayer is for those who need it. Prayer seems to me a cry of weakness, an attempt to avoid, by trickery, the rules of the game as laid down. I do not choose to admit weakness. I accept the challenge of responsibility. Life, as it is, does not frighten me, since I have made my peace with the universe as I find it, and bow to its laws. The ever-sleepless sea in its bed, crying out "how long?" to time; million-formed and never motionless flame; the contemplation of these two aspects alone, affords me sufficient food for ten spans of my expected lifetime. It seems to me that organized creeds are collections of words around a wish. I feel no need for such. However, I would not, by word or deed, attempt to deprive another of the consolation it affords. It is simply not for me. Somebody else may have my rapturous glance at the archangels. The springing of the yellow line of mourning out of the misty deep of dawn, is glory enough for me.

(Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* 226)

The sacred language around prayer is something that is doctrinal. The prayer that works for one of us may not work for us all. The caged bird song of Hurston allows the other caged birds to understand just because the conventional approach/idea does not work for you does not dictate anything negative about you. It simply means you have to find the ways that work for you.

The inability to fit into the box of expectations has long been a catalyst for the caged bird's song. She has had to sing about the difference in her hair, body shape, way of being, etc.

Hurston takes the box of expectations and hands it back with the line “Somebody else may have my rapturous glance at the archangels” (Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* 226). Her confidence allows her to end this chapter about religion with, “I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance” (Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* 226).

This is indeed the mind that wrote *Their Eyes were Watching God* in seven weeks. She explained this experience as being “dammed up in me, and I wrote it under the internal pressure” (Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* 175). This is a direct correlation to what Alice Walker presents in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.

How 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 and write? And the freedom to paint, to sculpt, to expand the mind with action did not exist. Consider, if you can bear to imagine it, what might have been the result if singing, too, had been forbidden by law. Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life. Then you may begin to comprehend the lives of our “crazy,” “Sainted” mothers and grandmothers. The agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short-Story Writers (over a period of centuries), who died with their real gifts stifled within them.

This is the pressure Hurston felt for weeks with her novel, but these women were never able to release this pressure. This pressure release valve did not exist for Blues women, but through

song. These *crazy Sainted* women were singing from their cages to express the roadmap to the freedom they knew.

This caged bird's song is a reshaping of free existence. It is a "return to sender" stamped on the envelope life tries to send the Blues woman. This song makes room for the renaming/reintroduction of self the Blues woman needs. It is a cleansing ritual, like that of amethyst, to be able to truly see the Blues woman for who she is and not who society has told her to be.

Despite the myth in white America that said black students were underqualified and incompetent, the majority of black students in universities across America had to work four times as hard, struggle for goods, services, and education as their white counterparts, for whom these precious things were assumed to be automatically guaranteed and available. Moreover, black students had to preoccupy themselves with fighting off racial attacks, while still having to compete academically on the same level as everyone else in the classroom ...

The pressures on black students were unrelenting. (Souljah, *No Disrespect* 90-91)

The ability to articulate this pressure that cannot be seen from the outside makes the internal narrative vital to the existence of the Blues woman. Understanding the pressures of her life that lend themselves to her asymmetry and ability to improvise when life throws her a curveball is to understand her rhetorical situation. Because she has to juggle all of the invisible challenges while competing with dominant society's best and brightest with nothing in the way, the autobiographical text is a sacred document that has the ability to guide, affirm, and inspire the Blues woman who may currently be experiencing the same exigences and constraints.

Blues women alive in America presently, did not physically survive the Middle Passage. Yet, the experience is not a thought that she cannot fathom. I lift this because, as Walker reminded us, those caged bird songs have carried us toward freedom for centuries. It is the caged bird songs that will continue to move the metaphoric freedom needle. This is the assurance that those chicks presently being birthed within the cages will understand how to get free. And they will understand what to do in the face of the unknown because of the caged bird's ever-present philosophy. This philosophy is present in everything Black women produce. It is pieced together through a layering of what is read, what is heard, what is touched and what is lived (K. G. Cannon, *Remembering What We Never Knew: The Epistemology of Womanist Theology* 13-14). It is the philosophy of the caged bird to sing the songs in hopes that they land on the eardrum in a way that cannot be forgotten. The caged bird understands her call and “[s]he is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty” with *No Disrespect*.

CHAPTER 3: A REALLOCATION OF BLACK WOMEN'S POETRY

Introduction

I treat this like my thesis

Well written topic broken down into pieces

I introduce then produce words so profuse

It's abuse how I juice up this beat like I'm deuce

Two people, both equal like I'm Gemini

Rather Simeon, if I jimmy on this lock, I could pop it

You can't stop it, drop it (Hill)

The poetic is often respected as its own genre. It is filled with Western rules, meters, figurative language, et cetera. When there is no identified pattern that the poem follows, it is then called freestyle poetry. In this space, the poet is given creative license. This license allows the poet to put the words together in any way that feels natural to her. It would only make sense that the Blues woman gravitates toward this creative license.

This woman not only crafts her own lyrical license, she crafts her own living license. Her discursive practices do not follow any rules or patterns. This is not to say that they do not exist within the Blues woman's poetic, it is just not consistent enough to claim any one category of poetry. This poetic seeps into all aspects of this woman's life. In essence, she is poetry in motion.

The above quote from Lauryn Hill makes an argument for the poetic being more than just a genre within literature. She expresses that her movements with words are intentional and do not follow anyone's rules. She is the master of her poetic in every sense. She has the ability to give you an entire thesis within a well-written poetic piece and proceed to annotate her poetry to give you footnotes for clarity. She comes at this poetry from at least two directions and it seems as if she is two people performing this poetic mastery. She even ventures into how she is the twin astrological sign Gemini and chooses instead to align herself with the biblical character Simeon, who was known as a righteous and devout man who was prophetic (NRSV Luke 2:25-35). Before she ends this introduction, she gives a clear indication that she holds the power to pop lock and there is no one who could stop her, thus giving credence to her ability to crack coded language and break invisible chains. She is stating boldly that her discursive practices are able to demystify the past, record the present, and craft gateways for future occurrences.

It is a beautiful notion that her poetry has this ability. This notion is taken to new heights when we understand the poetic is not a genre that the Blues woman uses solely for creative purposes. The Blues woman lives this poetic, and her life is lived on the terms of being married to this natural poetic. As Hurston explains in *Characteristics of Negro Expression*, Black people have a natural will to adorn. This willingness shows up in every aspect of Black life; every aspect does not exclude language. This poetic essence is laced so intricately into the discourse that without the poetic, Black language does not exist. (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression*) Understanding this, the narrative of civility makes every effort to demolish the extreme use of metaphor and simile, the double descriptive, and verbal nouns.

The Blues woman aligns with Hurston's explanation and adorns her language as well as her carriage. Even in an attempt to numb the pain of life, she "crooned lullabies to ghosts" or was

found “moving to music not yet written” (Walker 48). Her living is poetic and if one wishes to understand her, one must understand her poetic discourse.

It is for this reason that I insist we, rhetorical scholars of race and religion, tend to lean toward dominant societal discursive approaches by crafting a narrative based on the common standards of analysis to create a universal understanding of the Blues woman.

Important to realize dominant societal discursive approaches are associated with all conversation (discourse may be better here) because of the privilege of the people who are doing the analysis. To clarify, “discourse analysis is the study of the ways sentences and utterances are put together to make texts and interactions and how those texts and interactions fit into the social world” (R. H. Jones 2). This looking at language involves more than just what is being said. It is a gauging of what is being communicated, verbally and nonverbally. Keep in mind, the critic must also be analyzed. History has proven that the critic has an unmovable lens that determines the results of the analysis. This critique must be exercised with an understanding of the agents, agency, and purpose that undergirds the discourse.

While the discourse is a part of the same language as that of the dominant society, there is a difference in the discursive practice and culture that makes this discourse impossible to understand using conventional discursive methods. In other words, cultural difference changes linguistic interaction drastically. Understanding this, how do we analyze the discourse within the Blues woman’s community in a way that does not leave her defending her statements/actions later?

Since we see every culture has its own internal discursive practice, we end up misunderstanding the communication of the Blues woman when using conventional standards.

When we misunderstand the Blues woman, we misrepresent her. And when we misrepresent her, we put her in a cage. Wherein the bars provide a sense of security from the misunderstood foreign woman, and she becomes even more distant.

For example, my poetry begins with a line that will grab the attention of the crowd. It is always something that shocks, echoes their heartbeat, or poeticizes a colloquialism from the culture. The goal here is to immediately draw their attention to what I have to say. I am purposely grasping the attention of the people I am aiming this piece toward in a way that is culturally specific. The rest of the world does not have to understand the statement being made. For instance, “The Image outweighs the Academy/ An Oscar is a grouch... Award savagery” is not meant to be felt by anyone other than the people in my culture who could relate to our creativity being constantly discarded by the Academy Awards when the time comes to honor them. However, the films/music are often appreciated in private. Because the dominant society has discarded the art, but still bothers themselves to interact with it when it pleases them, they travel into this proverbial trashcan like Oscar the Grouch from Sesame Street. This *Oscar* is a double entendre in this sense because the Academy Award is commonly referred to as the Oscar. In this same way, *Image* also is a double entendre in the sense that the NAACP Annual Awards are commonly referred to as the Image and the *Image* of the Black community is what I am standing up for in this piece. I am making the claim that the *Image* should always outweigh the *Academy* in our world because the outside treatment of our art is savagery. This line needs no explanation when it is placed in the culturally appropriate vernacular setting.

In this chapter, I examine two presentations of poetry. The first is *Wild Women* by Sunni Patterson. The second one is Brion “Lady Brion” Gill’s poem *I Talk Black*. By drawing on my

understanding of cryptic codes, cultural syncretism, and communal cultivation, I argue they both are representations of Womanist Vernacular discourse.

Cryptic Codes

As a child, I was always intrigued by a television show that the adults in my community were enthralled with, *Tales from the Crypt* (Dodd). It was out of my reach as a child because it aired on HBO late at night and that was off-limits to me. It made me even more intrigued. What was it about this show that captured the attention of the people in my community in droves that was represented by a man who looked like he was coming out of a coffin to talk to the screen? Why would they want to listen to the dead? These are the innocent questions of a small child who was being sheltered from these *Tales from the Crypt*.

Like any other inquisitive womanish child, I waited up one night to see what the craze was about. I wanted to know about these tales that would be discussed by the people from my community who would not open a book to read. What I found was the Crypt Keeper telling horrific tales. They were meant to thrill the audience and take them on a ride through several plot twists that would keep them in suspense the entire way. This show did not hold my interest the way it did the others from my community. In fact, I found myself angry with the Crypt Keeper for leaking these stories about the happenings within the crypt without the permission of the crypt people.

What I did not realize then was this show was reflecting a divide within my community that had existed and would exist for generations. Understanding the crypt to be a chamber (or a vault) wholly or partially underground, especially one beneath the main floor of a church, used as a burial place or a location for secret meetings, its existence creates a barrier to understanding

from the outside. This area is insulated on purpose. It is shut off from the rest of the world in hopes of keeping the dominant society safe from the foreign practices and ideologies of the people within this crypt.

The Crypt Keeper, being a person rising from a coffin, presents this place as somewhere demonic or death-like. It paints the crypt as something to be feared. Truthfully, the crypt is crafted by the dominant narrative of society. It is a separation from those people who do not fit into the expectations of decorum and civility. It is a barrier that is put into place that seemingly protects those followers of the narrative while at the same time othering those placed in cryptic places. The cryptic associations serve as narrative security. As Morrison notes, “when we speak or write of the stranger, the outsider, the Other, we should keep in mind what the relationship signifies” (Morrison 25).

In the case of the Blues woman, the crypt is where she is sentenced to live by the followers of the narrative of civility because she refuses to denounce her culturally specific ontology or corporeal being. In fact, she takes pride in being Black and speaking a Blues vernacular that is native to the crypt. It finds its roots beneath the floor of the Black church, where the secret meetings are held. It is language that the followers of the narrative pretend does not exist in order to be accepted by the dominant society.

The blues is rich with this language. This language expresses the pain and joy of Blues people perfectly. It is able to capture the essence of Blues people without having to search for a translation that most likely will lose something in the process. “Black Talk crosses boundaries – of sex, age, region, religion, social class – because the language comes from the same source: the African American Experience and the Oral Tradition embedded in that Experience” (Smitherman 2). Because of the origin, there is great difficulty translating it to dominant language terms –

especially with the language deviation being away from the societal norms. The language of Black folk has a moan that undergirds it; this moan is much more prominent when speaking of blues language.

Blues as an autonomous music had been in a sense inviolable. There was no clear way into it, i.e., its production, not its appreciation, except as concomitant with what seems to me to be the peculiar social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience of a black man in America. The idea of a white blues singer seems an even more violent contradiction of terms than the idea of a middle-class blues singer. The materials of blues were not available to the white American, even though some strange circumstance might prompt him to look for them. It was as if these materials were secret and obscure, and blues a kind of ethno-historic rite as basic as blood. (Jones 148-149)

The cryptic language is not merely a communication tool. It is a culturally rich pouring from the soul that can only be accurately expressed from the soul immersed in the blues experience. It is used to communicate from soul to soul. “Without a critical framework, description occurs without self-reflection; hence, ideological presuppositions unconsciously may be reproduced” (Sloop 211). This framework has to be culturally specific. The intricacies of the unique lives of Blues women must be taken into account. Therefore, the outsider must venture into the culture in order to understand the vernacular (Morton 86).

For example, there is a misunderstanding of the volume within African American vernacular. The rise in the volume is not necessarily meant to convey the same thing as screaming in American English. “Blues had always been a vocal music, and it must be said that the instrumental accompaniment for rhythm & blues singers was still very much in the vocal

tradition, but now the human voice itself had to struggle, to scream, to be heard” (Jones 171-172). The blues voice is used to being in concert with the instrument. The tonality of the music that reflects the life does not disappear when the instruments are not physically playing. In this case, the blues voice is still playing those bent chords. Moreover, the rise and fall of the voice are in direct cultural association with the tonal requirements of the conversation. The struggle of being heard causes the voice to become acclimated to being boisterous. In many cases, it is just a necessary side effect of the cryptic blues atmosphere.

Therefore, to gain an understanding of the cryptic codes, one must first have a working knowledge of the crypt. This language is used to express what is happening in the soul in a way that is authentic to the members of the crypt. The language used within the blues, musically and culturally, is poetic. The poetic is often seen as a category within the literary tradition. It is a genre that stands alone, and it is interpreted as such. This becomes a difficult separation within blues language; this poetic language permeates every utterance of blues society.

Cultural Syncretism

I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight... poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change. (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 37)

The poetic does not have the luxury of being a category that stands alone as art for the Blues woman. It is her *how* that sets her apart. Her life is lived according to the poetic from within.

Therefore, for the Blues woman, the poetic is what Ono and Sloop refer to as *cultural syncretism*. In this way, “they are involved in a cultural syncretism that affirms various cultural expressions while at the same time protests against the dominant cultural ideology” (Sloop 21). While this poetic essence is as natural as breathing to the Blues woman, it is yet a protest against the narrative of civility – through which she is forced to denounce this natural occurrence. Her use of the natural essence of her culture is indeed a protest, whether it is intentional or not.

This use of the poetic pushes Smitherman’s *Black Talk* forward as her first language and sets her apart from the narrative’s claim of congruency to dominant society. This cultural syncretism affirms the expression used within the crypt. It is as Hurston argues, “Perhaps [her] idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator... It arises out of the same impulse as the wearing of jewelry and the making of sculpture – the urge to adorn” (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression* 32-34). This is a component of the discourse that has to be understood in order to begin to crack the cryptic code. Poetry is so deeply immersed in the culture that there is no way of separating it when looking to understand discursive practices between Blues women.

While it is adopting the English language as a base for formation, it does not necessarily adopt the rules of engagement along with it. In true Blues woman form, she is operating in the negotiated/inflected subject position, she is a participant on her own terms (Brummett 66). Her use of English terms, African tonality, and Black experience without being married to the conventional standards is what Ono and Sloop refer to as *pastiche*, “constructing a unique discursive form out of cultural fragments. Pastiche fractures culture in the process of appropriating it through reconstructive surgery” (Sloop 23).

The Blues woman uses these fragments in the same way the blues uses the notes of classical music. Blues takes the notes and bends them toward cultural sound. The Blues woman does the same with the language.

On worn kitchen stools and tables

we are piecing our weapons together

scraps of different histories

do not let us shatter

any altar (Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* 417)

In line with being the artist she is, the Blues woman does not just accept what is given to her; she dissects the whole and purposely fractures it to garner the parts needed for her tapestry. She pieces together what will work for her. She is taking what life has given her and making it work for her. While this is linguistic surgery and should be studied with the same respect and intensity, it is culturally likened to quilting. (Thus, making the argument quilting should be given the same admiration.)-you may not need this sentence. These fragments of all of what her existence reflects, she pieces together to create her own vernacular. This tapestry cannot be crafted in isolation; the various parts have to be able to operate in harmony. Remember, this discourse honors the tonal semantic remnants of West African linguistic practices. Therefore, each cut and suture must be made with the whole in mind. This vernacular can only be translated so far without a thorough understanding of her existential being. The panoptical gaze that is not willing to travel into blues living will not grasp what occurs within womanist vernacular discourse; one must engage in her experience.

The Blues woman is undeniably an artist by just living. The dramatics, unique to Black expression (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression* 31-32), identified by Hurston categorizes this woman as nothing short of an artist. Ethicist Katie Canon argues that Black female artists “creatively identify the implicit, positive metaphors of interrelated symbols used in the community’s effort to assert its ingenuity and self-sufficiency” (Canon, *Black Womanist Ethics* 85). This is art in the sense that it is creatively piecing together the chosen fragments with aspirations of affirming while reflecting life within the crypt. This is a perfect example of what Canon refers to as *embodied theos*. “Embodied theos means that concrete personal experiences in the lives of people in particular times and places are central in justice making transformation. Each of us must unmask the truth of our life circumstances as identifiable referents” (Canon, *Remembering What We Never Knew: The Epistemology of Womanist Theology* 28). It is the capturing of personal experience as a reference to being able to study the divine essence they personify.

Communal Cultivation

The poetic is crucial to the generational cultivation of the Blues woman’s ancestral lineage. “And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read” (Walker 240). This poetic was the planting of seeds for the *Crazy Saint* who did not have the opportunity to pen the letter to her future. The lyrical delivery of the dreams was her way of planting the seed for a brighter future for her lineage. “The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 38).

The notion of true freedom is still something the Blues woman is reaching toward. She has yet to see or feel what true freedom is. Therefore, the poetic opens her ability to be able to plant her contribution toward the realization that it may not occur within her lifetime, but still hold fast to the dream for her lineage to one day experience it. Her cultivation of this language makes space for the actualization. “[F]irst made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 37).

In this sense, Blues women are constantly cultivating by conversing. The discourse of Blues women is poetic. The poetic is hopeful in nature. Again, the poetic permeates every utterance of Blues women’s language. Therefore, the discourse of Blues women cultivates hope through its existence. It reflects for future generations what they are able to create from the scraps they are left with and provides a roadmap of greatness throughout the process. As Audre Lorde notes:

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action... We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 37-38)

While the poetic flows within the language, there are codes embedded within the poetic delivery that send signals within the culture that communicate secrets perfectly in public.

Analysis

This reallocation is vital to understanding Blues women. In order to be able to fully embrace the dichotomy resting beneath not just in her identifiable skin but within her soul, one must understand her linguistic nature. The interpreter must understand that Audre Lorde was correct in her insistence that “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 37). It cannot possibly be a luxury because poetry permeates her language. The Blues woman is poetic in her living not just in her artistic efforts.

It is for this reason I have chosen to analyze the following two poetic presentations. The first is *Wild Women* by Sunni Patterson. She presented this piece as a Ted Talk, accompanied by a dancer. This piece examines the essence of women who are misinterpreted because of the misunderstanding of who they are. Patterson offers a lens through which to see her that does not follow the rules of the narrative of civility. She honors the natural character of these women without apology and invites the audience to do the same.

While Patterson takes the auditorium of listeners on an educational journey of wild women externally (she does not state she is a wild woman), Brion “Lady Brion” Gill takes a different approach. The second presentation is *I Talk Black* presented in an outdoor setting. Here, Gill takes the audience on a linguistic journey that explains that she does not apologize for her vernacular. Even the title boasts a certain braggadocio about the embrace of her inalienable right to the creative license of the poetic. In true Blues woman form, Gill embodies the essence of this rich tradition and serves it on a poetic platter for any audience that happens upon it.

“This slang is semantic resistance! Off with the head of the King’s English” (Gill Lines 19-20)! There is an intentional pushback from the Blues woman’s vernacular. She is making

every effort to inform the public that she is not contorting herself in the manner in which the followers of the narrative of civility require. This is her self-imposed stamp of crypt membership. She is a part of the casted off Black population. Like Lady Brion states in the above poetic lyric, the Blues woman is deliberate in her dramatic expression (Hurston, Characteristics of Negro Expression 31) that marches away from the King's English the narrative of civility demands her to be captive to.

They wanted her to be more like them
 Not knowing her conception was immaculate
 That she was birthed in sandalwood scented river water
 Sweet sapphire honey touched tongue (Patterson Lines 10-14)

Patterson gives credence to her separation. She talks about the identifying markers that explain why this woman is different. Her characterizations are not ones that meet the eye; they require a knowledge that comes from interaction. These qualifiers set her arrival and existence apart from the traditional western world. She is not what the followers of the narrative proclaim about Black people. Thus, qualifying her as a member of the crypt. And the *sweet sapphire honey touched tongue* speaks to the cryptic codes she is well-versed in.

After all, the narrative of civility required that she be

Un-spirited
 Un-African
 Uncultured

Under siege in the streets (Patterson Lines 18-21)

The narrative required that she denounce her natural essence. It required not that she lose her ability to tap into her spirit but that she loses herself of the expressivity of it. The idea that Black people were just like white people in its claim required that the remnant of the African traditions

be relinquished totally into the abyss of forgetfulness. In essence, the narrative made it mandatory to move away from the culture that birthed her and lives forever as a slave to the requirements of the perceived dominant culture's gaze.

The cryptic codes of the blues language would not allow itself to be silenced. This language is the equivalent to what the prophet Jeremiah describes as “a burning fire shut up in my bones” (KJV Jer. 20:9). The true Blues woman can only suppress the need to express herself for so long before it becomes what Hurston reports about writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) “It was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks” (Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* 175). The emergence of the suppressed when it has to fight its way through does not concern itself with formalities or decorum. “When solid objects deform they typically try to restore themselves and *spring back* to their natural shape. The heavier the weight, the greater the deformation, the greater the restoring force trying to bring the surface back to its natural shape” (Khan Academy). Therefore, the harder the narrative suppresses, the more likely it is that the Blues woman's natural form will come to the surface. Or, as Patterson explicates,

She who speaks in gusts
And cyclones
Blasting us back to high ground
High consciousness (Patterson 82-85)

She can only be suppressed temporarily. Her blues essence is not built to be denied. If this is who this woman is, the question is not an *if* it is a *when*. Even those Blues women who try to maintain a relationship with the Black church and abide by the traditions and practices find themselves erupting with spirit-led excitement/imploding from the pressure of trying to hold back. At some

point, what is meant to surface will surface, this is spiritual and scientific. Gill states, “Hieroglyphics hidden in my messages/ My breath is the building of the pyramids on repeat” (Gill Lines 43-44) and makes plain this linguistic expression was in place long before the current generation’s woman was even a thought. These cryptic codes in the vitally important poetic discourse make certain that she is heard.

Just as Virginia Hamilton made known in *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton), the time will come for the Blues woman to ascend from the oppressive environment she tries to contort and fit into.

Locked in this suffocating reification, I appeal to the Other so that his liberating gaze, gliding over my body suddenly smoothed of rough edges, would give me back the lightness of being I thought I had lost, and taking me out of the world put me back in the world. But just as I get to the other slope I stumble, and the Other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye. I lose my temper, demand an explanation.... Nothing doing. I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me. (Fanon 89)

Like Fanon, the Blues woman is caught in this matrix. This moment leaves a divisive barrier when attempting to understand her because it *others* her. When that normal force beckons her natural formation to spring back against the contorted version the narrative has forced her into, she is cast off and foreign.

When Patterson breaks into song at line 62, she exemplifies one of the characteristics of the Blues woman that the narrative tried to erase entirely. She begins with the Yoruba reference to the primary orisha, Oya which invokes the spirit of the wind. Oya is also the keeper of the

gates of death but is not a representative of death; she merely is the keeper of the gates and makes the decision about which souls will enter (Mazama). She is invoking the spirit that cannot be controlled and evaporated of emotion. The pathos of the narrative of civility frowns upon this invocation because of its outward expression. Patterson's song in a foreign tongue turns totally away from western practices of communication. She depends on the communicative coping mechanisms garnered by her ancestors who were shackled on the Middle Passage. "The moan became the first vocalization of a new spiritual vocabulary—terrible and wonderful, it was a cry, a critique, a prayer, a hymn, a sermon, all at once" (Thomas).

The Blues woman is the epitome of cultural syncretism and her poetic discursive practices prove this.

Can't you smell the riot on my breath?

Char in my esophagus?

My laugh... Ha!

Is arsenic!

And ain't enough opiates

in this elementary education to hook me on phonics

or gentrify the Djembe out of my pronunciation! (Gill Lines 21-27)

While she is using terms from the dominant society's language, she is pushing back against the oppression she lives under. Her voice is expressive of what is happening in her soul. She is opening her mouth and using these words that are not her own to drive her point home. This poetic scene is delivered from an implied *akimbo* posture and an embodied *bolekaja* (Williams 218-219) declaration. This is womanist vernacular discourse at its finest. This *semantic resistance* is affirming cultural occurrences while at the same time protesting the oppressive nature under which they are being crafted. The riot on her breath, the char on her esophagus, and

her laugh being arsenic all lean into H. Rap Brown's *Burn Baby Burn* where he states, "Violence is as American as cherry pie... If America don't come around, we're gonna burn it down" (Brown)! The fact that Gill's above quote follows the line that violently ends the king's English further drives this point home.

She would know...

She would feel...

That her body is more than battlefield,
more than bone-break and bleeding bigotry...
more than bridge over your troubled conscience,
more than used up-

walked on-

driven through-

Shot up-

more than your "Selma, Lord, Selma" Edmond Pettus.

They're more than your Killer Katrina Danziger-

more than your Bust'em Outta Baltimore "Highway to Nowhere." (Patterson
Lines 48-59)

Patterson takes us on a cultural syncretism voyage through this Blues woman's history and her self-esteem battles. This is taking the audience on a trip from her soul's vantage while at the same time proving to her that she is more than what she has been through. This affirmation calls for the people outside of the crypt to understand some of her actions and the discourse her soul pushes forward. There are traces of these experiences in her communication. This African tonality reference makes the audience pay attention to more than just the words expressed. The critic/analyst must dig into the adornment present here.

And despite

the white
 stuffed down my windpipe,
 I talk Black...
 (Ha!) with nappy phonics.
 Syllables that kink and twist
 Notty expression that beads on my palate.
 Soul glow in this spit-shined flow...
 Jheri curl jargon.
 Bongo drums in my diction. (Gill Lines 9-18)

This is Hurston's *Will to Adorn* (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression*) in action. She is embodying the willingness to adorn her language in Blackness. She is giving her linguistic stylings the accessories that make up her living. She is refusing to live by the syntactical rules of dominant society/the narrative of civility.

Lady Brion takes the Lorde approach to forming her culture's linguistic future as she boasts about the characteristics of her language. She makes the claim that this is an effective way to communicate and thus makes a strong shift away from the demand of the narrative of civility. She is liberating the Blues woman who does not subscribe to the tongue of the dominant society being the sole communication device. She leans into her ancestry with the separation of discursive practices. This liberation makes space for intracultural imperatives to move between interlocutors in a way that does not have to work for anyone outside of the conversation. This is a freedom the Black community has not been able to capture, even within the linguistic justifications of Ebonics. Therefore, it is what Lorde pushes forward as poetry not being a luxury for women because it makes room for the imagination to cultivate a better future. (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 37)

Much like Gill, Patterson explains Blues women “open portals to new worlds, new speech, new dreams” (Patterson Lines 99-101). Understanding her is a task worthy of the undertaking. Through language, she invokes a spirit that has been innovative throughout history. She is opening the conversation that has the propensity to craft new possibilities for Blues women and for the larger Black community.

Her poetic approach is able to use the natural soul of Black language to think new thoughts. It is through understanding the pastiche at work in her poetry that one could possibly gain an understanding of who she truly is. This understanding is imperative when attempting to offer her effective guidance, affirmation, or validation. The only way the inspiration can be effective is that it is tailor made to fit her embodied theos. After all, Blues women

Are not to be tamed...

Only admired...

Just let her in...

And witness her...

Set your days...

Ablaze. (Patterson Lines 106-111)

CHAPTER 4: A REROUTING OF BLACK WOMEN'S DRAMATIC EXPRESSION

Introduction

There are often references to novels or movies when doing a womanist analysis. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is often referred to when making a claim about ministry. Her character, Baby Suggs, holy's sermon in the clearing is something that echoes within the womanist community. She stands on the side of a flat rock in the middle of the forest and inspires the Black community to love themselves. She gives them permission to be human in the tucked away space in the forest. Baby Suggs, holy gives them hope from a very authentic space. (Morrison, *Beloved*)

Morrison offers a realistic character in an ideal setting and models what could occur in a traditional practice. She offers a different route for carrying out what occurs during a worship service. This depiction opens the conversation for analyzing what occurs during the sermonic moment. Morrison gives the Black community the gift of imagination. She allows the descendants of the Enslaved people to understand that there is more that can occur within the worship service. She models what could be for a people who have not been given the opportunity to dream.

Morrison provides affirmation, inspiration, and guidance for Walker's *Crazy Saints* (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*) in a manner that does not feel far away or force them to compromise who they authentically are. She puts the inspiration in their language and delivers in a way that is innovative and effective yet familiar to this woman who is expected to constantly produce without proper spiritual nourishment. She gives this woman the opportunity to recreate the hush harbor that birthed the Black church. This moment in the novel takes the Black church back to its roots. It forces the Black church to remember who they were prior to the narrative of civility. At the same time, it crafts a safe space for the Blues woman to see the

possibilities for a divine encounter in a way that does not require her to contort to mirror an image that is not her own.

It is for this reason that I state we, rhetorical scholars of race and religion, tend to limit the potential of the dramatic expression of the Black community by solely seeing it as an illustration to acculturate the biblical canonized divine encounters for African American consumption. Important to realize, Black dramatic expression is not merely the fictional literature of the culture. “The Negro’s universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates [her] entire self. And that thing is drama” (Hurstun, *Characteristics of Negro Expression*). This dramatic expression, for Black people, puts language to the acts to be able to be documented.

This documentation is recorded in poetic form, documentaries, speeches, and dramatic literary depictions. These dramatic episodes have served the Black community in a myriad of ways. Having formed out of familiar circumstances, the Middle Passage during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the language barrier presented the opportunity to communicate non-verbally. This traumatic event brought to the surface the ability of the Enslaved people to converse without having verbal interlocution. This nonverbal communication was never abandoned by the Black community throughout the experience on this soil; it has been optimized and so intricately woven into the culture that it is subconsciously employed by Black people, even those who are followers of the narrative.

For clarity, I am not suggesting that we replace the biblical text with stories from our community, but I am proposing that we look to those expressions that have been recorded as a means for inspiring the Blues woman. For the woman who has had a tumultuous relationship

with the church, this option allows her the opportunity to get the affirmation needed for inspiration. This way, she is still able to get the good news.

While the biblical text is not limited to the church, it is associated with the church. If this is the place that denounces the natural essence of the Blues woman, the likelihood of her embracing the text associated with this institution is slim. The attempt to inspire her soul must take into consideration the effects associated with the contortion requirement from the narrative of civility.

The narrative is protected by the institution in her community which is understood to be uplifting. This same institution requires that the Blues woman change her language, her carriage, her dress, and her culture to be accepted. Because this is the dominant voice in this community, it determines what images represent Black women. Since we see that the followers of the narrative control the image of the Black community, the Blues woman is left without a representative. When the Blues woman is left without positive representation, she is forced to boldly proclaim who she is to be not be ignored. And when she is forced to boldly proclaim who she is, her actions are misunderstood. Her existence becomes a hambone beating on a trashcan lid in the Black community's ensemble. Wherein she is forced to use the scraps she has access to in order to form her own instrument in the band we call life.

For example, the pregnant teenage girl who has a rubber band clasp on her too small jeans. The rubber band is tied through the buttonhole and looped around the button to make space for the protruding belly. She does not have access to maternity clothes because the money is not available for something so temporary. She is making do with what she has access to. This child is possibly in this position because her teen body was enticing to someone who never had her best interest at heart. The attention paid to this child, who is otherwise ignored, felt good.

After all, she is a Blues woman in the making. According to the narrative, respectable teenage girls do not get pregnant. The homemade rubber band clasp is a slight glance at a symptom; it is merely a preface to a much deeper problem. While it is problematic in this societal situation, it is not uncommon. In fact, this situation is one of the most common gateways into life as a Blues woman.

Let us, therefore, consider *The Rerouting of Sacred Rhetoric for Blues Women Through Dramatic Expression*. This idea is best explored through identification, imitation, and imagination.

Identification

It is imperative that one be able to see herself. She needs to be able to see positive images of herself within her context. The womanish child needs to see successful women who share her origin. She needs to see that the world has possibilities for her to reach. Hometown success stories breed motivation. The trouble in this ideology for the Blues woman is that the narrative of civility makes it impossible for the Blues woman to see success stories of other Blues women. The image of the Black community has been sanitized by the followers of the narrative to the point where the Blues woman is invisible in public images.

This calls for an identification of a different sort. Identification is typically the act of recognizing a person by distinguishing characteristics to mark what makes them different. When I speak of identification here, I am still referring to recognizing a person by distinguishing characteristics, but I am looking for characteristics where Blues women see a reflection or similarities of themselves in others. This identification is a path toward community as opposed to dividing people.

Because of the relationship of Blues women with the church, an institution that has the reputation of being inspirational, her subject position is understandably subversive. For the Blues women who are not subversive, they are at best inflected/negotiated. The inspirational space from their community has a history of not accepting her. As a result, she is either totally against the idea of inspiration or interacting with the inspiration on her own terms. She is not easily trusting of the information being introduced, and at the first sight of trouble, she is likely to make a direct exit.

The person looking to affirm or guide this woman needs to do the work of getting to know her. She has to be able to see images of others like her being accepted. She has to see what the person offering the affirmation does with others like her. Ava DuVernay has had several successful films and television shows because of this understanding. Her depiction of Nova on *Queen Sugar* is a perfect example of giving light to a Blues woman. Nova Bordelon is one of the easiest characters to identify as a Blues woman. She does not bend to the normative practices of society in any way. She makes a concerted effort to remain true to who she is and seizes every opportunity to grow in that regard. Her spiritual practices even push back against the norm of Christianity, mostly practiced in the southern region of the United States.

Duvernay states in an interview with *Vanity Fair*, “In order to do a Black family drama for any significant length of time... you better own your own network. That is how it got on air. Because Oprah willed it” (Zook). This depiction of Nova is brought to light by women who understand this rhetorical situation. In the same way that August Wilson was adamant about the director of his plays being Black (D. Washington, *Urban View*), DuVernay was adamant about the directors of *Queen Sugar* being woman. As explained by Denzel Washington on *Urban View*, there are cultural differences that have to be understood in order to depict the scenes and

the director is in control. In the same vein as Wilson, DuVernay understands that the nature of women had to be reflected and she understood that certain things cannot be explained; they are cultural and natural based on their lived experience.-

The womanist vernacular is imperative when reflecting the Blues woman; she is dedicated to the cultural principles within the exchanges. As Courtney Bryant explains, “Through acts of care, creativity, and solidarity with the vulnerable, black women use their bodies to collaborate with the Spirit as vessels, conjurers and prophets, revealing the intrinsic connection of the erotic with the divine”. This erotic power is innate for women. In order for this power to be captured in its truest essence, a woman has to direct the scene.

This erotic power is a strong identifier for Blues women and is often exemplified in depictions of Black women written, visually, and orally. Because of how woman and how Black this erotic embrace is, the narrative of civility denies its existence. Therefore, this erotic power is being depicted in a positive light without having to justify its existence. There were hints of this power depicted by the Clair Huxtable character on *The Cosby Show* (Cosby), but she was a model’s size, a successful attorney, married to a medical doctor, and was always in line with the narrative of civility. Her brief moments of erotic power were colored by her credentials and she was “allowed” grace for these moments because of her heteronormative dominant societal status.

While the depictions of Black women on network television were easily accessible, they were controlled by the powerbrokers of society. There was a strong movement toward the Blues woman’s identification in 1987 with Terry McMillan’s debut novel *Mama* (McMillan, Mama). McMillan does not apologize for depicting this Black woman. She was scrutinized for not aligning with the narrative of civility and she made the conscious decision to continue along this path. Her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale* (McMillan, Waiting to Exhale), proved how badly this

depiction was needed; it sold more than three million copies. Not only does McMillan shift the trajectory of subject-position for Black women, but she also allows the public to see Black women are not monolithic; there are varied experiences of Black women. This not only gives the Blues woman visibility, but it gives her agency in her representation as well.

This closes the gap between the orator and the audience Jacqueline Jones Royster speaks of in *When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own* (Royster).

I have been compelled on too many occasions to count to sit as a well-mannered Other, silently, in a state of tolerance that requires me to be as expressionless as I can manage, while colleagues who occupy a place of entitlement different from my own talk about the history and achievements of people from my ethnic group, or even about their perceptions of our struggles. I have been compelled to listen as they have comfortably claimed the authority to engage in the construction of knowledge and meaning about me and mine, without paying even a passing nod to the fact that sometimes a substantive version of that knowledge might already exist, or to how it might have already been constructed, or to the meanings that might have already been assigned that might make me quite impatient with gaps in their understanding of my community, or to the fact that I, or somebody within my ethnic group, might have an opinion about what they are doing (Royster 30-31).

In this regard, the agents/agency deficiency is addressed through Black dramatic expression. This gap is closed through identification and this is accomplished through womanist vernacular discourse. The ability to experience self in authenticity is what is needed here.

This authenticity must have the characteristics of the culture in every sense. As Royster explains above, the representation has been flawed of the overall Black woman who now has herself mirrored in many ways. The flawed representation multiplies when narrowing the focus to the Black women who are also Blues women. It is impossible for her to identify herself when the representation is drastically far from accurate. And the barrier to understanding her is muddied by this misrepresentation.

This identification of self is noted best through the rituals and traditions; it falls under what Burke refers to as purpose in the pentad. (Brummett 40) The panoptical view of rituals tends to leave the critic with a limited understanding of what is occurring. Immersion is vital to understanding. The ways of knowing here go beyond observation. There is a story that rests behind the movements within the rituals.

For example, there was an analysis of Black church services in *Amen and Hallelujah Preaching: Discourse Functions in African American Sermons* (Wharry) by Cheryl Wharry. She gave the disclaimer that she had visited these churches prior to doing her tape-recorded analysis. While giving an account for the oral tradition, she reports that the “African American sermon is typically not written prior to the service. The reason she gives for this is the preacher is making space for God and the congregation. This is why the purpose is necessary in the analysis. Wharry, appearing to be from a different ethnic background, does not take into account the study of the preacher and the context in which this statement is made. Understanding the preacher has to divert from the planned text, the churchgoer does not assume that there is no manuscript. They understand that it is the game plan that can be adjusted as needed.

The various Black worship happenings mentioned in Wharry’s article all point back to the need for the purpose portion of the analysis. The incidents, such as how many times the

words *amen* and *hallelujah* were uttered, marks her as an “other” trying to make meaning out of what she is experiencing. This is not totally impossible, there is just more unpacking that has to be done. Much like the work done on the biblical text, there is both a hermeneutical and exegetical work that must be done to thoroughly understand what is actually occurring.

Like Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *I Have a Dream* speech, there was a written document. However, the narrative promotes the ideology of Wharry’s article. This speech was a game plan that was diverted from to cater to the people and needs present. This gift is utilized in Black sermons after doing the call-response that the *amens* and *hallelujahs* lead to. The call-response is a symptom examination that allows the orator to determine what needs to be cared for.

What is not understood by the “other” in this space is that these words, *amen* and *hallelujah*, have multiple uses within the Black worship service. While they are used in the dominant societal way, at the end of a prayer or hymn, they are also a piece of checks and balances. It is what Smitherman refers to as call-response. (Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* 108) In an effort to assimilate the worship service, the narrative of civility would paint the picture that the use of the term *amen* is in line with the dominant societal use. Thus, making it difficult to understand what is actually occurring in the service. This call-response is a tug-of-war with an invisible rope. It verifies for the orator that the congregation is following. For the Blues woman, this too is culture specific. There is an *amen* that means *I agree*. There is also an *amen* that means *do you agree*. And still, there is an *amen* that means *it is so*. African tonality plays a part here. While the same word is being uttered, the meaning is different with a slight raise or drop in tonal pitch. The outsider sitting in the service without a translator simply hears “*amen*” repeated 112 times.

While this seems like a minor occurrence, it is a major adjustment in identification. The Blues woman is very keen to the representation of who she is. She is critiquing the portrayal of her rituals, her music, her language, her movements, etc. There is no space to give anyone a pass when giving a view of her. The fraudulent depiction is easily recognizable to her and her attention is vacated. But an accurate illustration will garner her approval and provide the orator with the ability to travel deeper into her soul.

Imitation

The imitation of the dominant society is not lost on the Blues woman. She too imitates. She uses pieces of dominant culture. What makes her use unique is the cultural approach. She grasps parts that are useful to her and pieces it together in a manner that fits her *modus operandi*. This is the personification of what Ono and Sloop refer to as pastiche; in which she “borrows from without mimicking popular culture... constructing a unique discursive form out of cultural fragments” (K. A. Sloop 23). While this seems to be innovative and rare, it is what has happened with Black women on this soil for centuries. Her natural instincts have to adjust to the location in which she is forced to exist.

Nothing paints this picture more accurately than Olga Idriss Davis’ *kitchen legacy*. Here, the enslaved woman was required to be creative. She used American ingredients to accomplish the seamless African American dishes being served. The practices of the women within the kitchen were also a form of pastiche. The communication was reflective of what had to occur to produce (O. I. Davis 366). The metaphors of the Blues woman are rich with the language of the kitchen because this is the space that she brings to life that the narrative tries to eliminate. She is a reminder of the antebellum enslavement and the creative genius of the Black woman. As Hurston contributes, the Black person has an asymmetry that makes her difficult to follow. This

asymmetry is reflective of the flow of her life. While the segments hold their own rhythm, moving from one unit to the next is often difficult for the other (Hurstun, Characteristics of Negro Expression 35). The Blues woman is well versed in this because it is indicative of her lived experience.

This imitation travels a certain distance before branching off into culturally specific usage. While the parts/terms are borrowed from dominant societal discourse, the use of the parts/terms is drastically different. For instance, I watched a Black woman wrap a scarf around her hair in the airport just before boarding our flight. This is an occurrence that happens often in the lives of Black women. This woman takes a scarf that was initially created to be an accent to an outfit and worn around the neck and ties her hair up with it. It is no longer being used the way its designer intended, but it is commonly being used in a manner that is culturally effective.

There was a white woman who also observed this same wrapping. However, her understanding was drastically different from mine. She was impressed with the Black woman's ability to wrap her hair so swiftly, and she thought it was genius that she used a neck scarf to do so. She began to ask questions about her use of the scarf on her hair as opposed to around her neck. The Black woman cut her eyes at me, smiled, tucked her comb into her purse, grabbed her carry-on, and entered the plane. By the time I passed her seat, she was already asleep; the scarf gave every indication that this was about to occur on this long flight.

Her smile and nonverbal indicators made a statement about agency. The white woman, who was never invited into a conversation, decided it was time for the Black woman to educate her on being Black, and the Black woman politely gestured in the negative. This exchange was a total interlocution between the two Black women sitting at the gate. Sure, the conversation was using societal norm items, but the cultural references that are off-limits to the outsider change

their intention. There was a cultural knowledge that was a prerequisite to this exchange. Knowing what the scarf indicated in Black homes, knowing the importance of protecting the moisture in Black hair, knowing the way to wrap the scarf so that it will stay and cover all of the hair at the same time, all of this is cultural. The intrusive nature of the white woman is cultural as well. This entire scene was very indicative of imitation that is generations old. The difference with this exchange is the Black woman realized she was not required to educate this woman. This was a modeling for me that was life changing.

Kirt Wilson makes an argument for imitation in *Interpreting the Discursive Field of the Montgomery Bus Boycott: Martin Luther King Jr.'s Holt Street Address* (Wilson). He lifts the ways in which King used pieces of his various roles to craft the Holt Street program.

For the first few minutes, the event had all of the characteristics of a religious service: it began with two hymns, the Reverend Willie Alford consecrated the event with a prayer, and the Reverend Uriah Jay fields read from Psalm 34. King's Speech marked a significant shift, because although its form and performance resembled a traditional southern black sermon, its content was explicitly political. (Wilson 304)

This is an example of imitation in the sense that it is using characteristics of other gatherings to craft an effective delivery of the address.

Wilson's imitation is partially related to the imitation I am explicating here. Tanisha C. Ford's *SNCC Women, Denim, and the Politics of Dress* (Ford) is closer. Here, Ford looks to Anne Moody's acknowledgement of the clothing and hair modifications being made by the women and how the content was being adjusted for the context. She examines how Moody was immediately

aware that her attire might present a barrier between her and the audience. The attire of SNCC was much less formal than that of the Mississippi dress she was wearing. This move toward the dress of the working class made for a meshing that had been an exigence that seemed to be impossible to correct. The attire switch made for an imitation that made the audience and speaker relative. (Ford 625-626)

While Wilson makes an argument for programmatic pastiche and Ford makes one for wardrobe, both of these are a part of the imitation I am making a claim for. This imitation moves beyond programmatic and attire adjustments and deals with expression. This imitation is introduced continuously throughout Black drama. Much of the Black dramatic expression, both in linguistics and in literary sources, models a twist to the dominant narrative that has the propensity to offer inspiration for Black women and more specifically Blues women. The bridges built within the cultural depictions explains the actions of the agents. This makes it easy to decide which actions to imitate. The sensory identification provides a pathway that may work for the person who identifies with a particular character.

I opened the inaugural womanist dinner at the Richmond Hill Faith Ecumenical Center in Richmond, Virginia, with the definition of womanist as provided by Alice Walker (Walker, In *Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*). I provided the information in written and oral form and asked for feedback. The response was strained and minimal. Then, we showed a video from the 2010 Black Girls Rock Awards Show of Kelly Price, Marsha Ambrosius, Jill Scott, and Ledisi performing a rendition of Nina Simone's *Four Women* (Simone). The audio-visual explanation of the diversity of Black women brought about abundant honest conversation among the women in attendance. The small window into each woman's background allowed the women in the room to talk about themselves through an idea as opposed to having to tell their own stories initially.

The Black Girls Rock rendition of *Four Women* imitates the movements of the women they are portraying. The imitation is one that is reflective of the way the women talk, walk, exist in the world. For the womanish child, it is a modeling that affirms what will come naturally as she matures. For the Blues woman, this imitation validates her experience. It allows her to see that she is not an isolated character forced to live in the margins of society; she has community who understands her living. This is inspirational rhetoric in the form that is relative to the Blues woman.

Imagination

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 37)

Audre Lorde explains how vital imagination is to the Black community. Her above quote informs us that our imagined ideas are sanctuaries and spawning grounds for meaningful action. The radical change that is hungered for by even the followers of the narrative depends on the imagination. This imagination is created from dreams and hopes. It is safe space to identify, analyze, and create new versions of life.

As we are reminded by ethicist Katie Geneva Cannon, even Black women's fictional writing chronicles history. (K. G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* 78) This gives gravitas to the imagination being the spawning ground Lorde invites us to explore. The informed imagination makes realistic suggestions for future endeavors. The roadblock that often hinders the process is

the inability of the community to thoroughly understand the imagination. This makes the case for the dramatic being crucial to the inspiration for Blues women.

The dramatic is a blank canvas for the imagination. It is safe space to propose ideas for reality. Much like a business proposal, it is where the visionary can use sensory tactics to explain the imagined idea. The dramatic is where the community does not have to imagine the idea, they can see, hear, and feel the intricacies. This makes plain the imagination without having to make guinea pigs out of part of the community.

For example, my second novel was suggesting recovery options for a teenage girl recovering from a traumatic event. Those suggestions are written out in realistic fiction in a way that the community I was writing to would not have to imagine my suggestion; they could read how the main character experienced them in a familiar setting and circumstance. It also explicates the feelings that come along with the life circumstance. For the person in the community who has not had to experience this specific trauma, the dramatic makes a pathos appeal that creates a feeling that travels into the soul.

This pathos is vital for the inspiration of the Blues woman. After all, the feeling/emotion is what the Blues people refused to surrender for acceptance. This use of the erotic is where the Blues woman finds her power. “The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 53).

This erotic power is exemplified in Shug Avery’s depiction in *The Color Purple* (Walker, *The Color Purple*), Winter in *The Coldest Winter Ever* (Souljah, *The Coldest Winter Ever*), and Nawi in *The Woman King* (G. Prince-Bythewood, *The Woman King*). The pastiche used by each

of these women makes suggestions that come from that deeply female and spiritual plane Lorde offers and are made out of the embodied episteme of their life circumstances. In order to truly make an educated suggestion, each of these writers had to have a thorough understanding of the culture and the intricacies of the working parts they were piecing together to create something new.

Walker introduces the idea of *contrary instincts* in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 50) that takes the vitality of the imagination even deeper for the Blues woman. The willingness to be contrary to the norms of society opens a cauldron of options that would otherwise be off-limits. The contrary instinct makes possible the narrative of civility's taboo avenue. Because of her denial of suppressing her natural essence, the Blues woman has the ability to tap into what Ladrica Menson-Furr refers to as *blood's memory* in which a cultural ethos is created to pave a perfect gateway to retentions of African traditions and practices. It is from this space that the imagination makes Cannon's *remembering what we never knew* possible (K. G. Cannon, *Remembering What We Never Knew: The Epistemology of Womanist Theology*).

Lorde's erotic power married with Walker's contrary instincts makes great dramatic possibility. In fact, it is upon this contrary erotic that most Black dramatic expression is hinged. For example, Shonda Rhimes gifted the world Olivia Pope in *Scandal* (S. Rhimes, *Scandal*). This character was based on the lived experience of Judy Smith. Olivia Pope gives credence to the erotic power she possesses by simply calling it a gut feeling. She does not pretend to have an ethos or logos approach to fixing the political scandals, she embraces the pathos ability and manipulates the public through this area that the masculine world she exists in dares not tap into. After all, Lorde reminds us "the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the

woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 54). Understanding this, Rhimes gives Judy Smith’s model contrarian instincts and total erotic power through the imagination in the dramatic presentation of Olivia Pope.

The imagination offers the Blues woman the inspiration she cannot find in her current reality. It is through this imagination that we are able to quilt the offerings of Cannon, Walker, and Lorde. Here, we are able to remember what we never knew through contrary instincts and erotic power.

Analysis

The canon for this analysis is vast. However, I have chosen two dramatic presentations, Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined* (Nottage) and the Starz original series *Power Book III: Raising Kanan* (Penn). Having outlined the identity, imitation, and imagination vitality for inspiring the Blues woman, it is easy determine how these dramatic presentations have the capabilities of offering inspirational opportunities.

RUINED

In the opening scene we meet Mama Nadi who is the madam of a brothel. She is being coerced into taking in a girl named Sophie who has been *ruined*. Mama is reluctant to take her in, but Sophie’s uncle, Christian, is relentless in his insistence. It is not a place that respectable women would enter, but Christian is begging Mama for his niece to be accepted (Nottage 5-19). This location creates the cryptic atmosphere that would qualify any woman entering as a Blues woman.

Mama has a conversation with Sophie that provides the audience with a slight foreshadowing as to a soft place within this woman, Mama, who makes every attempt to appear tough. She makes a connection with Sophie that speaks to her ability to identify with this young woman. This identification makes her hesitant initially. It is eventually revealed that she sees her own reflection in Sophie. She knew first-hand the pain this woman was feeling and understood what it would take to be able to cope and eventually heal. This familiarity with pain is yet another affirmation that both of these women are Blues women.

As Sophie begins to cry, Mama takes her own skirt and wipes her tears. The symbolism in this gesture is prolific. The skirt being used to wipe her tears gives a nod to the Black woman being the nurturer and caregiver for all wounds. Having allowed herself to really see Sophie, her natural instincts render her helpless in her attempt at a denial of care. She sees herself and provides the care she knew she needed after being *ruined*.

This identification provides the tools to begin to build a community for Sophie. Mama surrenders and Christian is dismissed. This is the grace period between mother and child; it is a bonding moment where Mama lets Sophie see that she is going to nurture her and strengthen her to be able to continue the journey. It is the perfect model for how Blues women have to be able to identify with the girls who are inevitably Blues women in the making. Mama's care for Sophie in this scene does not follow the Black societal norm nor the Black familial norm. She cares for her in a way that only a woman who is familiar with her struggle knows to. She relates to her, embraces her, feeds her, and then advises her. While it is a process, it happens in a matter of moments.

In this scene, Mama is in line with *Puah's Soliloquy* in *Securing the Sacred: Usable Truths, Sacred Pledges, and Clarion Calls in the Story of Shiphrah and Puah, the Midwives* by

Alison Gise Johnson and Vanessa Monroe (Monroe 39-49). She is clear in her role as the midwife to birthing new life within Sophie. She is affirming Sophie's experience and guiding her into the Blues realm in true womanist form. Much like Baby Suggs, holy, in *Beloved*, this provides a unique model for what a nurturing relationship could be.

Mama is determined to be perceived as strong. She embodies the hush harbor practice every step of the way. She is clear on the balance of sexual prowess and strategic businesswoman persona she must present in order to maintain the success of her bar, but there are moments away from the public that she relaxes that persona and allows her true erotic power to surface. Her private actions allow the audience to see she is a master of imitation; she mimics the fierce strength she witnesses from the respected soldiers and mimics the historical ways in which women of the African diaspora have provided care. Her character provides for the Blues woman what Vice President Kamala Harris's persona provides for the Black woman politician, a blueprint for how this could be done.

Mama has an intricate understanding of the erotic. This understanding is how she is able to regulate the demilitarized zone she has created. She is able to be forceful and coy at the same time. She knows her erotic power well and gives lessons to the women who depend on her. She educates them on how to be who they have to be to survive. For example, when a few of the women are sharing a romance novel, one asks Mama if she cares for romance, and she responds with, "I already know how it's going to end. There'll be kissing, fucking, a betrayal, and then the woman will foolishly surrender her heart to an undeserving man" (Nottage 51). The lesson to the women who come in very intimate contact with men constantly was not to foolishly give their hearts away. Ultimately, Mama knows it would be bad for her business. She also knows that the soldiers who frequent the bar go home to women who are not sex workers. She is warning them

of the danger of believing the emotional fantasy the men may present in private space. It is a vital lesson for the Blues woman to be able to survive.

While this may paint Mama Nadi as hopeless, there are still those scenes that prove she harbors hope. Act One Scene Five provides a perfect view of Mama's hope. She discovers Sophie is stealing money from what is understood to be hers. She becomes ruthless with Sophie until Sophie shares that she is trying to get the operation that will restore her genitalia. It is one of the few scenes that causes Mama to pause. As the title reminds us, the women who have had their genitals cut are seen as *ruined* and thrown away. Sophie's mentioning of a possible path to restoration brings a different pathway of hope to Mama. Her wheels immediately start to turn.

This invokes imagination in Mama Nadi that was understood to be dead. Until this moment, Mama appears to be a version of Walker's *crazy saints*, but the vacated understanding of the ruin has been fulfilled in the sense that ruin does not have to be the final destination; there is a reason to hope. Her desolate understanding of women coming to her ruined has changed and this knowledge makes room for the imagination. She is able to piece together the possibility of life after being *ruined* (Nottage 54-55).

This is Lorde's *sanctuary and spawning ground* for new ideas. It is where Mama is able to dream. Her erotic power and business savvy give her an innovative wisdom that makes for the perfect propensity to imagine a new path for these *ruined* women. She is modeling for Blues women that when new ground is broken, there is always a possibility for change. This is very much akin to what surgeons do prior to performing groundbreaking surgery; they plan ways to improve a situation with the knowledge available to them.

While Lynn Nottage's pen has eloquently provided a blueprint, this ideology is not new. This is the same ideology presented by Olga Idriss Davis when she writes, "Black women's creativity and nurturance enabled Southern plantation kitchens to become the black-dominated spaces, spaces that enabled enslaved women to struggle toward equality and to develop creative strategies for self-empowerment through transformation" (O. I. Davis 368). This practice is what has propelled progression for Black women for centuries. So, while this image is not new to the culture, Nottage's dramatic presentation provides a manageable offering that the Blues woman can identify, imitate, and imagine for personal and communal use.

POWER BOOK III: RAISING KANAN

Raquel Thomas is the leader of a major drug operation and Laverne "Jukebox" Thomas is her niece who is a hustler in her own right. The outside world requires them to have a tough public persona and be twice as skilled. After all, they are females operating in a male-dominated world. The opening episode forces the audience to understand exactly how ruthless both women are. We get small snippets along the way that allow us to meet the softer sides of them.

Season One Episode Three: *Stick and Move* (Penn) gives us the opportunity to see both characters involved in womanist vernacular discourse. Until this moment, we are only privy to their conversations with the outside world. Raquel and Jukebox get a moment to allow the necessary defensive barriers to come down and be human. Raquel is the only person Jukebox is vulnerable with. While it is understood that she loves Kanan, she is tough when it comes to him. It is clear in these moments she is being groomed to become the next Raquel, but the outside world believes Kanan is the heir.

A girl mirrors the women in her community until she is old enough to begin to craft her own ways of being. This is also true about Jukebox. While her mother is absent, Raquel serves as

that role model. Because we meet Jukebox as a teenager, the formative years that lead her to understand she is a lesbian is a mystery to the audience. Aside from this difference, Jukebox is a carbon copy of Raquel. Because of this, Raquel is able to relate to her. She is able to pour in the wisdom she has gained through lived experience.

Raquel's ideas on love become gospel to Jukebox. "Don't be embarrassed... We deserve to smile" (Penn Season 1, Episode 3). She reinforces the necessity of love in private space. This opens the door for her to allow her secret romance to build. Even the secret relationship mirrors Raquel's secret relationship. Both are in romantic relationships with people who are not forced to live in their world.

The identification Jukebox experiences when looking at Raquel covers the hole her mother left. Notice the use of the word covers instead of fills. It is not a replacement; it is a top on the bottle of unresolved emotion. In turn, Raquel identifies with Jukebox's emotion here. While her mother was not physically absent, her battle with addiction created a similar hole. Raquel's embodied theos allows her to adequately understand her niece's struggle. She knows what she needed when her mother was not the nurturing caregiver she needed, and she makes the conscious decision to step in and try to be present for Jukebox in the ways that no woman was for her. As a result, the cryptic conversations between them model a unique connection for Blues women.

Because of the conditions both Raquel and Jukebox are forced to live in, their natural instincts have to adjust to the situation. This Blues specific action is one that is a requirement in what Hurston refers to as asymmetry. It is the ability to adapt to the situation when the transitions are not smooth. It is the ability to move from one segment to one with a totally different rhythm

and never lose a beat. The Blues woman is a master of this. This is proven through the drastic moves in music/life and her ability to make the transition.

This is what we learn first about Raquel. She is faced with the task of being the mother of a little boy who is growing up in Southside Jamaica Queens who has been in a fight with boys who are stronger than he is. She has to make decisions quickly to prepare him to be the person he is supposed to be. Without training of her own, she is raising him to be tough enough to survive the streets they live in. She has to make the decision on her feet about how to make him into a man in that moment.

The same skill is required of Jukebox during a botched robbery. When the security guard catches her crew, she makes the decision how to maneuver on her feet. She has the ability to not lose her cool in tight situations. This asymmetrical ability is a necessity that is innate for Blues women. The ability is only celebrated within Blues specific spaces because it is seen as a luxury in other Black spaces. It is a matter of life and death for Blues women.

Another example of this is the hip-hop show where Jukebox takes over the segment when she was supposed to be a background singer. When the headliner drops the ball, she takes over direction and speaks directly to the crowd. In this moment, Jukebox's blues ability is heightened. She is able to read what is needed in the moment and put everything where it needed to be.

This ability is reflected in Season Two when Jukebox sings *Mary Don't You Weep* in a church. While the church members are moved in this scene, they try to change her appearance and way of life in later scenes. Her singing voice is celebrated, but her lifestyle is denied. The voice is enhanced by the trials and tribulations of her personal life, but the gift is appreciated in isolation. Without the life, the gift would not be as pronounced. Her pastiche in the church scene

makes for a soul moving experience. This moment is a surgical piecing together of her knowledge of church and performance in church, her hurt about her girlfriend overdosing, and her desire to impress her estranged mother. This pastiche is celebrated prematurely by the church. Prematurely because the church has not done the research to see that Jukebox is the epitome of what the narrative of civility denies.

Interestingly, Raquel has a church scene in Season 1 Episode 9 that sheds light on her Blues ontology. She takes in the sermon presented, but her conversation with her mother is what provides backstory for who Raquel has become. She asks, “You ever think about how I ended up the way I did?” Her mother responds with, “You’re your own person... grown... made your own decisions... none of that is on me. So, don’t try to put it on me.” She responds with, “I’m not trying to put nothing on you Ma. I’m just asking a question. You gave me a answer.” Her mother retaliates with, “That’s right I did. So, stop asking me questions. Your mama ain’t your problem Raquel. You are.”

This exchange reinforces the tough exterior Raquel purposely has in place. She reaches to the source of understanding, her mother; her mother never considers what she is processing, she just makes a defensive claim that who Raquel has become is not her fault. She pushes the fate of her daughter away from her responsibility. Because of this denial throughout Raquel has had to piece together her understanding of the world. She did not have a woman to model her action behind. Her imitation is of a different nature than Jukebox’s in this sense. Her femininity took its natural course, but her understanding of how to be in the world was shaped by her interactions with men.

This perfectly introduces Raquel’s ability to imagine. Her imagination has propelled her to the drug lord position she holds. She is able to maneuver in the current state and see business

moves that are not readily visible to the men in her world. She moves in the very masculine world while being in touch with what she understands about her erotic power. She is able to see things that men would never fathom because of her nature. She witnesses the world from a different lens than her counterparts. This gives her an edge when she begins to dream. Her dreaming depends on her ability to tap into her feelings. She is the personification of what Lorde means by “The Black mother within each of us – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 38).

Her conversation with Symphony, the man she is sleeping with but fights his attempts to get to know her beyond sexual encounters, informs the audience that she desires something other than the drug life. She relays that she, too, has dreams of having a life she can live above board. This desire is also pronounced in her dealings with her son, Kanan. While he is making every attempt to become a part of the drug world, she does her best to make other paths available to him. In Episode 5, her desire for her son to be something different becomes yet another failed attempt as he convinces her to teach him to create the illegal product her organization sells.

While Raquel’s imagination aligns with the whispers of the Black mother from Lorde, Jukebox’s imagination is more in line with Walker’s crazy saints (Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 49-50). Jukebox is a person of very few words; she only speaks when she wants to and has something to say, which makes a case for her agency as well. It is through her art that she communicates her imagination. The lyrics she provides through song gives light to what is happening internally. In the beginning episodes, Jukebox is boosting stolen goods to be able to pay for studio time. She is silently working for the opportunity to record her dreams. This is where she is able to dream. She is free to tap into that vacant space left by her mother that is filled with unresolved emotions and question. The emotions that have to be stifled in life is the

one she is able to embrace in that creative space. This is the manifestation of the dreams of the women Walker references who were not allowed to release in this manner. She is not allowed to freely do it either, she is truly *in search of her mother's garden* and is experiencing this search lyrically.

Conclusion

The sacred ability of the dramatic for the Blues woman is undeniable. As the biblical text has been the sole sacred source for the Black church since the invisible institution came above ground, it is ill-equipped to properly affirm, guide, and inspire the Blues woman. The void that is left is best filled through Black dramatic presentations. It is understood that the dramatic provides the necessary identifying markers that the narrative has purposely eliminated in hopes of furthering Black assimilation into dominant society. This identification is vital to the ability to speak to the Blues woman. She has to understand exactly how well the inspirational source understands her circumstance.

In addition to the identification, imitation is important. It is a connecting factor between the Blues woman and the Blues woman-in-the-making. This womanish child has to have role models to reach toward. This gives the child an accurate guidance that does not force her to deny who she naturally is. She is able to see possibility within her culture and frame her reality around this image. While imitation of this sort is important, the imitation needed for pastiche comes into play here also. The pastiche of the Blues woman is crucial to her existence. Having to live in the community that denies your existence limits your resources. As a result, the Blues woman is forced to take the fragments and make her way using them. She uses what is available to her and continues to live life on her own terms.

Finally, imagination is key in Black dramatic presentations and holds major sacred power. The imagination presented within drama allows the ideology of *what could be* to be shown without having to risk trying it out on real people. Imagination is the crux of the reach toward the future. It is where ideas of the wise is formed and communicated to provide the erotic encounter expressed by Audre Lorde as “a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 55).

CONCLUSION

The Blues woman is ostracized for the sake of the survival of the narrative of civility. She is forced into a further marginalized existence and effectively erased from the public representation of the Black community because of her refusal to deny her authentic self. She is forced to live out her existence away from the church her ancestors built in an effort for her people to be accepted by the dominant society. In this regard, her corporeal being is left in the margins misunderstood and misrepresented. She becomes a foreign being to the Black community at large and is not consulted when honoring the communal/spiritual responsibility of caring for her and her soul. The sacred text of the institution that shut her out is not fully adequate when attempting to guide/affirm/inspire her.

In an ideal situation, the Blues woman would be celebrated for harboring the African traditions and refusing to mask the true essence of who she is. She would be included in communal planning and traditional practices in hopes of progression for the totality of the Black community. She would be a vital part of the Black church's existence because she is a vault of their past. She represents the beginning of the invisible institution and how eroticism was utilized to conjure the divine spirit and carry out its purpose. Her alluring spirit would be applauded as she can speak to parts of the community with which the other ministers/ deacons/ congregational leaders cannot build a connection. She would be the residential scholar consulted when making the effort to connect with the feminine members of the community. After all, she is the expert of life in the deeply Black and feminine experience.

The difference between reality and the ideal causes a tension that seems minute; it appears to be an easily fixed situation to the naked eye. But after reviewing the implementation of the narrative of civility, one can understand how complex this dichotomous realization is. This

separation not only leaves the Blues woman without adequate access to the necessary resources for thriving, but it also leaves her without access to the affirmation/guidance/inspiration support from the Black church. While the sacred text of the Christian church is available outside of the ecclesial edifice, the likelihood of the Blues woman embracing the respected text of the institution that strategically shut her out is understandably slim at best. And when she does embrace it, there is a gaping hole in the text in her regard. I am arguing that this hole can be filled. So, the question becomes, *how do we fill the biblical gap for the inspiration of Blues women?* The answer I have offered is Womanist Vernacular Discourse utilized within sermons, autobiographies, poetry, and dramas.

A Reimagining of the Sermon

The exploration of the use of Womanist Vernacular Discourse in the sermonic allowed me to explicate how the preparation of the sermon is much like preparing a meal. This was explored in three parts: setting the atmosphere, seasoning the salve, and serving the meal.

Setting the atmosphere is creating safe space for the Blues woman to be vulnerable by using sensory tactics that are culturally specific to adequately feed the soul. This requires the preacher to remember the focus is solely on inspiring the Blues woman and should cater to her creature habits. This entails unpacking several elements to ensure the scene is conducive and least restrictive for the Blues woman to be able to be fed.

Seasoning the salve is incorporating language and care into the impartation by appropriating ideas and objects the Blues woman is familiar with to make the message possible to consume. This involves more than just tucking the seasoning into the salve; it has to be inserted in a manner that it will be taken in by this specific community. Therefore, the salve must

be well-versed in the challenges the Blues woman faces and have a deep knowledge of what her life needs to unclog her stuck places. It is for this reason that the preacher must be willing to do soul work. The Blues woman requires a message that will travel below her neck; it has to be a full-bodied, seasoned salve.

Finally, serving the meal is delivering the food to the Blues woman's soul in a language she recognizes by tailoring the message to be compatible with the tools she is well versed in to give her inspiration that she can apply to her life naturally and fluidly. This requires an understanding of the Blues woman's subject-position and the ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions of language.

This meal preparation simile is exemplified through two sermons with vastly different approaches. Senior Pastor Gina M. Stewart's *Imagine a Different Ending* purposely breaks several homiletical rules when exploring Tamar's story for domestic violence awareness month. It is in this breaking of the rules that she inserts Womanist Vernacular into her message, and it permeates the atmosphere in a unique manner. She sheds light on the social location of Tamar and what sets Tamar's life off course. She points to the communal rituals and lack of healing for Tamar and relates it back to the current day people. She delivers a word for which she has to give a disclaimer. Then, she proceeds to walk the congregation into this biblical Blues woman's situation. Through Tamar, Stewart offers hope to the Tamars of today.

Associate Minister then and Co-Pastor now, Lisa Johnson's *He Loosed Me But He Didn't Let Me Go* was a perfect example of the use of Womanist Vernacular Discourse at work. She looks to the woman who was bent for eighteen years from Luke 13: 10-14. The interesting twist that makes this sermon a perfect example is her telling of Max Lucado's story about a bird named Chippie. The significations used set the atmosphere perfectly. She can examine the

unnamed woman's infirmity (never identified) through the story about Chippie. The refrain about Chippie being "sucked in, washed up, and blown over" painted the picture of the social location of this bird and how it correlates to the life of the Blues woman. Johnson used Womanist Vernacular Discourse masterfully to fill the biblical gap left in the Luke 13 woman's story.

Both Stewart and Johnson use Womanist Vernacular Discourse to fill the gaps in the biblical text. This gives a feeling to the text that is not only feminine, not only Black, but is expertly woven together to speak to the soul of Blues women.

A Repurposing Black Women's Autobiographies

The exploration of the use of Womanist Vernacular Discourse in Black women's autobiographies allowed me to express how we, rhetorical scholars of race and religion, tend to ignore these culturally specific texts of possible inspiration for Blues women that currently exist to craft messages that follow traditions not invested in the affirmation or progression of these women. This was explored in three parts: voice, validation, and vitality.

Black women's autobiographical voice is the vehicle through which communication occurs by incorporating her vantage and embodied theos in a culturally specific manner to connect with Blues women's souls. Because this is in first person, in its authentic form, it has no choice but to be Womanist Vernacular Discourse. The voice of the person who lived this adds a feeling to the experience that cannot be described from the outside. Thus, making it perfect for culturally filling the gaps in the biblical text.

By validation I mean a communal approval by ensuring genuine motives to determine if they have the Blues moan. Because historically the Blues woman has been misrepresented and

exploited, there is a strong hesitation about who is able to speak to her. This validation is a checks and balances that allows the Blues woman to let her guard down and fully embraced what the orator is attempting to impart.

Finally, a blues vitality is a necessary cultural component through which effective impartation can take place to open the possibility of inspiration. In essence, it is imperative that the Blues woman have firsthand stories of the experience and an accurate account of the journey. It must be steeped in blues. The storytelling must have that twelve-bar bent chord of the blues in its delivery for the story to land effectively.

The use of Womanist Vernacular Discourse in Black women's autobiographies is examined through two culturally specific texts. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* depicts the experience of the poet's upbringing in Stamps, Arkansas. She takes the audience on a journey through her obstacles and the use of her voice. Her use of blues language allows the listener to feel the ebb and flow and asymmetry of her life. It gives her the perfect validation to be able to speak to the Blues woman's soul. This fills the gap of the biblical text for this woman in a way that no story from the recognized sacred canon has capacity to. She proficiently paints the picture of the rural caged bird existence.

Sister Souljah's *No Disrespect* (Souljah, No Disrespect) gives the caged bird's existence as well. However, her scene is vastly different. Growing up in the Bronx borough of New York City gives a diverse cultural relatability to Blues women. While the music during the time of Souljah's rearing was hip-hop and the concrete jungle was her stomping ground, her voice echoed a blues influence that was just as powerful as Angelou's. Within the first few lines of the preface, she has already provided ample confirmation for the hesitant Blues woman. By the first

chapter, her embodied theos is validated and she has exhibited the blues vitality that makes her story an undeniable guide for Blues women in an urban environment.

A Reallocation of Black Women's Poetry

The exploration of the use of Womanist Vernacular Discourse in Black women's poetry allowed me to explain how rhetorical scholars of race and religion tend to lean toward dominant societal discursive approaches by crafting a narrative based on the common standards of analysis to create a universal understanding of the Blues woman. This was explored in three parts: cryptic codes, cultural syncretism, and communal cultivation.

Cryptic codes are culturally specific communication tools through which there is a pouring from the soul immersed in the Blues body experience to send and receive messages in familiar jargon. Purposely taking away the societal connotation of the crypt being a house for a casket or burial space, this understanding of the crypt paints the picture of what the faulty narrative has done to the Blues woman's existence. Her refusal to contort for the narrative has placed her living within the invisible walls of cryptic living. This forms a community and communal traditions, practices, and colloquialisms organically develop. In true Blues woman form, she is operating in the negotiated/inflected subject position; she participates in the English language on her own terms and crafts her own version.

Here, cultural syncretism remains mostly as Kent Ono and John Sloop (K. A. Sloop) define it. However, keeping with the ways of both womanism and a blues approach, I am incorporating elements of Zora Neale Hurston's *Characteristics of Expression* (Hurston, *Characteristics of Negro Expression*). So, the pastiche definition of cultural syncretism is the protesting against dominant ideology by purposely not meeting conventional standards to ensure

the language satisfies the soul. This is a crucial component in Womanist Vernacular Discourse because she is leaning into what Kimberly Johnson refers to as *redemptive self-love* where she reminds the audience, “this individual is not on a journey toward self-love because she already loves herself *regardless*” (Johnson 59).

Finally, communal cultivation is planting seeds for the Blues woman by lyrical delivery of her dreams to manifest a brighter future for her lineage. Looking back to Alice Walker’s *Crazy Saints*, the Blues woman has always had modes of recording her dreams. The obstacles placed in her path to counteract this have caused Black women to lean into what Katie Cannon identifies as “the irresistible power... to convey the assumed values of the Black community’s oral tradition in its grasp for meaning” (K. G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* 84).

The use of Womanist Vernacular Discourse is examined through two spoken word pieces. Sunni Patterson’s *Wild Women* (Patterson) is delivered as a Ted Talk and is told in third person but caresses the nature of Blues women. Patterson makes a case for the cryptic codes from the omniscient narrator who understands the cultural reality of the Blues woman and how her natural essence could not be silenced. This leans into cultural syncretism as well when Patterson expresses how she pushes back against those forces attempting to silence her culturally specific gifts. Patterson affirms this woman and gives a nod to the followers of the narrative of civility who are fighting against their nature out of fear of setting the faulty narrative.

Brion “Lady Brion” Gill’s *I Talk Black* (Gill) offers an affirmation of the Blues woman’s cryptic code through the title before ever walking into the lyrics. She does not secretly use cryptic language; she puts her utilization on display and expresses the moves of her cultural syncretism boldly in first person. She is penning and narrating this greatness to ensure this guidance and inspiration shifts the trajectory for future Blues women. She proclaims that it is

perfectly normal to be your authentic self and proceeds to expertly use pastiche to make this communal cultivation abundantly clear.

A Rerouting of Black Women's Dramatic Expression

The exploration of Womanist Vernacular Discourse in Black women's dramatic expression allowed me to expound upon the limitation of the dramatic expression of the Black community by solely seeing it as an illustration to acculturate the biblical canonized divine encounters for African American consumption. I clarify this idea in three parts: identification, imitation, and imagination.

Identification, for the sake of this work, is the act of recognizing a person by distinguishing characteristics to see a reflection or similarities of self and others. The need for this identification is amplified by the strategic erasure/exclusion of Blues women for the sake of maintaining the narrative of civility. Seeing success achieved by women who share her vernacular is vital to her affirmation. This identification creates pathways to moving beyond the panoptical gaze and intimately understanding her. This is a move away from the narrative's attempt at denying the difference and a move toward valuing the unique essence.

Imitation, in the case of this work, is the epitome of what Ono and Sloop refer to as *pastiche*. It is a "borrowing from without mimicking popular culture... constructing a unique discursive form out of cultural fragments" (K. A. Sloop 23). Keeping with the traditions of womanism, this definition of imitation is blended with pieces of Olga Idriss Davis's *kitchen legacy*. Looking to identify the role imitation plays in the inspiration of Blues women is to see it on display. Delving into the orientation of the womanish girl who grows into the Blues woman, Davis paints the picture perfectly how the antebellum plantation kitchen marked the ways in

which the women modeled for the younger generation how to live within the confines of their rhetorical situation. Understanding the exigences and constraints of the Blues woman crafts a clarity that is not otherwise recognized.

Finally, imagination is safe space to identify, analyze, and create new versions of life by proposing ideas for reality from hopes and dreams to use sensory tactics to explain a vision without having to make guinea pigs out of part of the community. Because the feeling/emotion is what the Blues people refused to surrender, this pathos approach is vital to the guidance and inspiration of Blues women. In the exploration of the imagination, I lean into Audre Lorde's use of *erotic power* (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 53) and marry it with Alice Walker's *contrary instincts*.

The first dramatic presentation I analyzed was *Ruined* (Nottage) by Lynn Nottage. *Ruined* utilizes Womanist Vernacular Discourse in many ways. Mama Nadi, the madam of a brothel, has crafted a demilitarized zone in a tumultuous war zone, and the soldiers abide by her rules. Her influence turns the brothel into a safe space for the women who would otherwise be in danger. The cryptic codes crafted within the space make for a tale that heavily leans on identification. Mama and Sophie's relationship is a nurturing one that is unique. Sophie and the audience are unaware of this identification until the end of the story. Mama Nadi sees herself when she looks at Sophie. She is educating her on how to survive after being ruined. There is a Blues essence that looms in Mamma Nadi's that creates an imitation model between the women that craft bonds and creates possibility in a seemingly impossible situation. This walks perfectly into the imagination example. Mama offers her most prized possession to save Sophie's life and the possibility is snatched away. But the bond is solidified in this hope moment.

This play utilizes Womanist Vernacular Discourse to portray what a nurturing relationship could be in a Blues woman's atmosphere. The scenes shared by these women

promote respect of position, admiration of talent and skill, and sacrifice for the chance at a better future for *ruined* women.

The second dramatic presentation I analyzed was Power Book III: Raising Kanan. More specifically, I analyzed the identification, imitation, and imagination displayed by the characters Raquel Thomas and Laverne “Jukebox” Thomas. This aunt/niece relationship provides another unique view of Womanist Vernacular Discourse at use. Their family is deeply involved in a drug organization that Raquel heads. Jukebox has a different orientation because she is a teen who is homosexual. Both have a unique position as women navigating a very masculine space. The identification is strong with the two women. Raquel sees herself in Jukebox and wants to prepare her for what is sure to come. Jukebox looks to Raquel as the one with wisdom. It is a nurturing relationship between two people who cannot risk being vulnerable.

Outside of her sexuality, Jukebox imitates everything about Raquel; she learns how to be in the world from watching her aunt. When she is lost, she seeks counsel from Raquel. Raquel is piercing her reality together as she navigates her unique position in the world; she is making her own blueprint. There are moments where both Raquel and Jukebox give the audience glimpses of their imagination. Jukebox’s music is where she dreams and heals. She pours her emotion and hope out that way. Raquel shares her fascination with astrology, architecture, and art and how she wants to move toward something else other than the life she is forced to live in the moment. They are both making plans to be other versions of themselves.

Both Raquel and Jukebox utilize Lorde’s erotic power and Walker’s contrary instincts masterfully. As women navigating masculine space, they can see the situations through a lens that their counterparts are incapable of. They push the limits and use their feminine power and

intuition to navigate space. The identification, imitation, and imagination at use explores an alternative to the nurturing relationship between Blues women.

Filling the Biblical Gap

As I read Ethicist Kelly Brown Douglas' *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, I felt a tug at my soul. This pulling was an ache for the blues bodies who are left without an intentional inspirational guide. There is no shortage of preachers within the Black community. So, why is there a vacancy when looking for inspiration for Blues people? The void comes because of the narrative of civility making a concerted effort to cast out anyone refusing to contort themselves to promote its faulty portrayal of all Black people. My surrender to God's call was to love God's people. *Regardless* (Walker, In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens).

It is for this reason that I began to look to the people being further marginalized. Who are they? What are their challenges? What do they need spiritually? This led me to *The Moan of Black Folk: The Complex Trajectory of the Black Church Moan from Slavery Toward Freedom*, my thesis for my Master of Theology in Ethics degree. I define this moan as an audible manifestation of the soul by which the unique essence of the individual connects with the divine to communicate what is experienced internally. During this process, I discovered the moan of the church was constantly hushed to preserve this narrative. I also discovered that even if this woman were to still reference the sacred text of the institution that requires her to contort, her moan is minimal in the places in the text where it is included. As problematic as this is, the Black church does not rewrite the narrative of civility. The abandonment of a portion of the Black community does not cause this inspirational institution to reassess its participation in the promotion of this narrative. Instead, the church further perpetuates this abandonment and remains faithful to what has become traditional. The emergence of the moan and its lamentation

capability has proven there is healing in it. But even the emotional release was not enough payoff to break character and betray the narrative. Unfortunately, the narrative has become the focus of the Black church, not the people from the community.

As a result, my search intensified and gave birth to this work. I began to cast my inquisitive net further into the community to find echoes of this moan. As this moan emerged, I noticed there was an erotic undercurrent every time; there was a love that roared along with it. This moan appeared at open mics, on television and movie screens, in personal stories, and even in some sermons. Understanding this moan to be authentically womanist, I began to inspect the places I saw this moan emerging for common threads. What I found was the components of what I now define as Womanist Vernacular Discourse. It is a verbal interplay of lessons and precepts manifesting as language resonating among African American women handed down from generation to generation through contextually specific fragments structurally underpinned and delivered as music, storytelling, poetry, sermons, and folktales to produce a repository of Black wisdom crafted from an exploration of various experiences through the feminine power of emotion, sentiment, and intuition (Morton).

If Womanist Vernacular Discourse is both faced and framed in love, how do we identify those texts and then use those texts to affirm, guide, and inspire this Blues woman? More specifically, do the texts exercising this discourse have the necessary factors to fill the gap left in the biblical text for the Blues woman? My answer is in the affirmative; the confirmation is this work. Here, I have given a blueprint to crafting a canon of inspiration for the Blues woman through recorded loving encounters. It is my hope that this research will continue expanding to meet the needs of this worthy woman. Through this lens we will be able to discover additional

crevices and other voices being silenced and a new call will arise for the moan to resurface as fresh literature to meet the void.

Virginia Hamilton records an account of *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton). I was always intrigued as to why the word *could* was used instead of *can*. As I have journeyed through this work, I have found the reason and unearthed why it stuck in my craw the way it has. In this work, this woman is suffering an enslavement that seemed impossible to escape. It is not until the inspiration, referred to as “*kum yali, kum buba tambe*” (Hamilton 169), arrives in a vernacular that she is able to grasp that she realizes that she does not have to remain in slavery. The entire time, she *could* fly; she lacked the affirmation, guidance, and inspiration to discover the remarkable gift lying dormant within. She had what she needed to move toward freedom the entire time. She was just waiting on the gap to be filled to move her *could* to her *can*.

The Blues woman is in the same posture. She is existing in the margins without her *kum yali, kum buba tambe* because her community is remaining faithful to a flawed text and faulty narrative. It is time that she takes flight. Her *could* is awaiting the inspiration to be delivered through Womanist Vernacular Discourse to become her *can*.

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APPENDIX

Imagine a Different Ending

A SERMON BY REV. GINA M. STEWART, DMIN.

On today, we thank God for another day that the Lord has made... I am grateful to God for this privilege to stand behind this sacred desk and thankful to all of you who have gathered in virtual space to share with us, our visitors, and our members. As Pastor Chuck has already... welcomed you and invited you to share and like in this service. We thank God because we know that there are a lot of options that you have. One thing about the pandemic it's decentralized church. Amen. None of us have a monopoly, and so we know that you have a lot of places, a lot of options this morning, but we thank God for those of you who are joining us and want to invite your attention now to Second Samuel Chapter 13, verse one through 22. If you're at home, your home is your sanctuary. I don't want you to get out of the habit of being at church. So, act like you're at church, stand with us for the reading and hearing of the word of God. One of the things that pandemic is teaching us that wherever we are, we can build an altar. And if we really believe as I was taught in my first year of seminary, that all of life is sacred, then every space becomes a space that can be hallowed ground. So, we invite you to stand now with us for the reading and the hearing of the word.

It's a rather long passage, but we need to read it. Amen. And I'm reading from the Common English Translation of the Bible.

Sometime later, David's son Amnon fell in love with Tamar, the beautiful sister of Absalom, who was also David's son. Amnon was so upset over his half-sister that he made himself sick. Somebody say... That's really sick! She was a virgin and it seemed impossible in Amnon's view to do anything to her. But Amnon had a friend named Jonadab... Y'all remember that name

Jonadab... Shimeah's son, David's brother, was a very clever man. Prince, Jonadab said to him, why are you so down morning after morning? Tell me about it. So, Amnon told him, "I'm in love with Tamar, the sister of my brother Absalom." "Lie down on your bed and pretend to be sick," Jonadab said to him. "And when your father comes to see you, tell him. 'Please let my sister come and give me some food to eat. Let her prepare the food in my sight so I can wash and eat, watch and eat from her own hand.'" So, Amnon laid down and pretended, somebody say, *pretended* to be sick. The king came to see him, and Amnon told the King. "Please let my sister Tamar come out and make a couple of heart shaped cakes in front of me so I can eat from her hand." And David sent word to Tamar at the palace. Please go to your brother Amnon's house and prepare some food for him. So, Tamar went to her brother Amnon house where he was lying down, she took dough and kneaded it, made heart shaped cakes in front of him and then cooked them. She took the pan and served Amnon, but he refused to eat. Everyone leave me, Amnon said. So, everyone left him. Then Amnon said to Tamar, bring the food into the bedroom so I can eat from your hand. So, Tamar took the heart shaped cake she had made and brought them to her brother Amnon in the bedroom. When she served him the food, he grabbed her and said come have sex with me, my sister. She said to him, no, my brother; don't rape me. Such a thing shouldn't be done in Israel. Don't do this horrible thing. Think about me. Where could I hide my shame? And you? You would become like some fool in Israel. Please just talk to the king. He won't keep me from marrying you. But Amnon refused to listen to her. He was stronger than she was, and so he raped her. But then Amnon felt intense hatred for her. In fact, his hatred for her was greater than the love he had felt for her. So, Amnon told her get out of here. No, my brother, she said, sending me away would be worse than the wrong you've already done, but Amnon wouldn't listen to her. He summoned his young servant and said get this woman out of my presence and lock the door behind her. She was wearing a long sleeve robe because that's what the Virgin Princesses wore as

garments. So, Amnon's servant put her out and locked the door after her. Tamar put ashes on her forehead and tore the long sleeve robe she was wearing. She put her hand on her head and walked away crying as she went. Her brother Absalom said to her, Has your brother Amnon been with you? Keep quiet about it for now, sister; he's your brother. Don't let it bother you. So, Tamar, a broken woman, lived in her brother Absalom's house. And when the King David heard about all this, he got very angry. But he refused to punish his son Amnon because he loved him as his oldest child. Absalom never spoke to Amnon, good word or bad, because he hated him for raping his sister Tamar.

I wanna put a tag on verse 20, *her brother Absalom said to her, Has your brother been with you? Keep quiet about it now, sister; he's your brother. Don't let it bother you. So, Tamar, a broken woman, lived in her brother Absalom's house.* This is the word of the Lord. The grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God shall stand forever.

I wanna talk today from the subject... Imagine a Different Ending. Imagine a different ending...

I'll say straight out of the gate. That this is a difficult story to listen to and read. It is - some of us are even surprised that it's in the Bible. It's one of those stories that makes us uncomfortable. Some may even be inclined to ask why is this story even a part of the canon? Is this really the word of God for the people of God? We don't read this story often in worship. We don't study it in Bible study and after hearing it and reading it. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to tell us why. Because this story is about a topic that we really don't like to talk about. And we certainly don't want to hear about it on Sunday morning. Nevertheless, this story must be told. Because stories like this remind us of the evils in our own world. But the truth is, when we come to worship, even though we know that there is evil in the world, we don't necessarily want to be reminded. About all of the evil that's in the world. For many of us, worship is reality denial... not reality adjustment. For

some of us, we want worship to be a retreat if you will... from the challenges... the trials, the vicissitudes and the tribulations of life. We would prefer to skip over stories like this... ignore them because of the uncomfortable nature of what we read. Perhaps we do this because we often go to the Bible for encouragement... for a word of peace, a word of hope and a word of comfort. We don't come to church or even go to the Bible... or come to worship to hear about rape, violence, abuse, secrets and cover ups. Sounds like almost an episode of the now defunct nighttime drama *Scandal*.

How did and why it's such an ugly, tragic tale of dysfunction in the Bible? How did it get in the canon? This story offers insight. Into the tragic aspect of the human condition, and what this story teaches us that I need to alert you to is that this is not just any family with this dysfunction. This family is the family of Jesus. Which suggests to us that we don't have to be shamed... Somebody say you don't have to be shamed! Because if Jesus family had dysfunction in it, it suggests to us that we are not the exception. Come on here. But we are the rule.

This is a story about Jesus family. These are Jesus's kinfolk. These are Jesus's ancestors. Jesus, we say the son of David the lion from the tribe of Judah. Jesus is one of the descendants of David. This is Jesus- *hear me with your good ear*- family tree, and the agonizing truth of this event... is that it happened in Israel's royal family. But it also tells us that similar events happen in ours and the reason why is not because we are so bad per se or that we have this mark over our heads or this badge of dishonor over us. The reality is, is that we live in a world where people are broken... people are flawed... where people hurt each other... where hurt people hurt people... and people do bad things to other folks. And what we discovered, even if we don't talk about it in church, is that even people who are connected intimately by family relationships can misuse and abuse their power and sexuality to hurt other people.

You don't expect this to happen in royal families. I mean, that's the misnomer. But this story is a powerful reminder that abuse can happen anywhere. I don't care how upright... how rich you are... how much you may be respected... It can happen in any family, including a churchgoing family an influential family... a wealthy family. This story is really *our* story. This story is set in an ancient patriarchal context comprised by ruthless competition within a royal dynasty. But it also exposes dynamics of power, sexualized violence, and abuse that's still happening today. And these stories, as ugly as they are, somebody shout... It sho' is ugly... as ugly as stories like these are we as the body of Christ who are on the side of life, cannot afford to ignore them.

Tamar must be heard... Who is Tamar? Tamar is the daughter of King David. Her mother is Macca. One of David's, several wives, David had several wives in addition to Tamar's mother, including, Ahinoam, Michelle, Abigail, and Bathsheba. Most of us know about Bathsheba... 'cause we know the story of how she became David's wife. But many of us don't know about the other wives of David: Macca, Ahinoam, Michelle, and Abigail.

Tamar is surrounded by men who determine her actions. Her father, King David, her half-brother Amnon, who desires her, her brother Absalom, who later avenges her, and Amnon's friend Jonadab, who engineers and plots the scene for the seduction and the rape. The truth of the matter is, if we look at Tamar... because she is the daughter - come on here - of the king, we would assume that Tamar would be safer than anybody else. And yet... in this family tree... Jesus family tree... Tamar's full-blooded brother is Absalom, and her half-brother is Amnon. Amnon is also the eldest. And so, Amnon is probably heir to the throne. He was the first born... and born into privilege... with all of its attendant opportunities and advantage.

But here's what happened... The text tells us - and we just read it - that Amnon fell in love with his sister... his half-sister. But the reader has to wonder if love is really an accurate translation. Because love ought to be healthy and what happens in this story is a far cry from agape love.

Amnon becomes so obsessed with Tamar, so much so that it makes him ill. With a little bad advice from his cousin Jonadab. We all got some Jonadabs in our lives who encourage us to get into mischief, who encourage us and push us across the line. All of us have some Jonadabs in our lives who, even though they know it's not the best thing to do, will encourage us to do what we are considering doing, even if it's not in our best interests or the best interests of someone else.

Jonadab gives Amnon some bad advice. And Amnon gives into his obsession for Tamar by conceiving a plan to take advantage of her. His misdirected lust overrules his moral judgment, and despite Tamar's protests, Amnon forces himself on her. It's in the text. Verse 12 verse 13 says, *but she said to him, no, my brother don't rape me. Such a thing shouldn't be done in Israel. Don't do this horrible thing. Think about me. Where could I hide my shame? And you? You could become like some fool in Israel. Please just talk to the king. He won't keep me from marrying you.*

She knows that the laws in Leviticus 18 and 19... 11, Chapter 11 and Chapter 20 verse 17, and Deuteronomy chapter 27 verse 22 prohibit such unions. She also knows that once violated her status as a virgin daughter of a powerful king, and the potential for companionship to a neighboring royal family is over. Her future... is getting ready to be over.

So she tries to talk her half-brother Amnon out of doing what he has decided to do, but despite her protests, Amnon overpowers her and rapes her. Watch the text, verse 14, it says, *but Amnon refused to listen to her. He was stronger than she was and so he raped her.*

And then after sexually violating her... He views her with a loathing that's greater than the lust he initially felt. After robbing her of her dignity and her future, Amnon throws her out like a used piece of trash in an attempt to distance himself from his actions, and he says, *put this woman out of my presence.* Unable to deal with himself in his own guilt, Amnon... now... can no longer bear to look at Tamar. The reproach that she had said she could not bear when she asked the

question, “*Where could I carry my shame?*” is now hers. The thing that she hoped would never happen possibly has now happened. She tears the robe she wears. She puts ashes on her head and cries out loud. Expressing her grief for everyone to hear.

This text sounds like a nighttime drama. It sounds like something we would be watching on Lifetime, rather than a story from the Holy Scriptures. And if this story were to be created for movies or cast as a motion picture, it would without question receive an R rating, 'cause it has adult themes, violence, abuse, sexual content.

Tamar is raped and discarded and left desolate, but her family responds with violence. And then her brother, brother-brother, somebody say... brother-brother, not a half-brother... but her brother-brother, Absalom, hears about it and he minimizes what has happened. He tells her... hush now... be quiet... don't set your heart on this matter. And then, David the king, who has all kinds of power at his disposal, is mad as hell, but he doesn't do anything. Yeah, I said mad as hell. But he doesn't do anything. He is outraged that this has been committed in his family and the Kingdom. And as father, he is required to act and intervene and advocate on behalf of his daughter. He is his obligated as the King of Israel, to uphold the laws of Israel. The daughter of David, however, lives - according to the text - desolate... King Jimmy calls it. The Common English Bible says she lives as a broken woman.

And calamity within David's family escalates not only in the family but within the Kingdom. Tamar doesn't remain silent because the text tells us she screams... and she protests... and she lifts her voice. But everybody else does. Her brother Absalom tells her to keep quiet while he internally burns with hatred toward his half-brother. We're told that King David is angry, and that he burns with anger, but he cannot bring himself to hold his first born son accountable.

In some ways, we shouldn't really be surprised about this, because even though I know David is all of our boy... I love David... I love the scriptures... I love the songs... I love the

scriptures that inspire us. But at the end of the day, David, who was also heralded as a great king and a man after God's own heart, did the same thing technically... that Amnon did... Come on, bible readers. He saw Bathsheba on a rooftop... he saw her... and she looked good to him. Come on here. He was playing when he should have been working. 'Cause everybody else was gone to war. He sends for Bathsheba, sleeps with her, takes another man's wife. Then when she ends up preg- it's a soap opera, I tell you - when she ends up pregnant, he plots to kill another man's wife. And now, when his own daughter is raped. He remains silent.

This is the same man that slew Goliath with five smooth stones - come on - and a slingshot, but he cowers in the face of this traumatizing event, most likely to avoid public shame and to ensure that his son still holds onto power.

There are people in positions of power now that do that too. We remain silent while innocent folks sit in desolation, brokenness and despair. The tragedy of this story is that it is a story of men and women, and in some cases, men we don't hear about men as much because men underreport. But at the end of the day, it's a true story and a true tragedy that this is the story of men and women, and some men who have been victims not only of violence but sexual violence.

What the text teaches us is that Tamar's life is changed forever. The rape sets her future in stone and she is left without options because in her culture she is looked upon as used goods. She warned Amnon about this and told him for she knew her future, and she knew his, she said, "Where am I gonna carry my shame?" You will be like one of the scoundrels in Israel. But the text says *despite her protests and despite her lifting and raising her voice Amnon forced himself on her, overpowered her, raped her and she lives as a desolate woman silently with her brother Absalom.* She carries the shame. She carries the trauma. She carries the anxiety. She carries the anger and the sadness of her experience. And she lives out her days as a broken woman... in her brother's house.

But inquiring minds want to know is, 'Where is the good news in this?' Better yet, 'Where is God... when this is happening? Where is Jesus in this?' There is no positive spin on this story. What do we do with a story like this? What message is there in a story like this for contemporary Christianity? How do we change or shift this narrative? Better yet, why do stories like this continue to persist? Because the tragedy is... that just like you have not heard of Tamar... probably... There are a lot of others who have suffered in silence... Who have lived with similar situations that we know nothing about.

Why do stories like this continue to persist? Well, I wanna suggest that the text provides us some insight. One of the reasons why I believe - this is me - I'm talking by permission, not by commandment... based on my exegetical work and my interpretive lens that I bring to this text. I believe that one of the reasons why these stories like this continue to persist is because of the bystander script. The bystander... It's one script that we really need to consider. You see, we may not be servants of the king. We may not be Amnon. We may not be Jonadab. We may not even be Absalom or members of the royal family... but we all know - myself included - what it's like to be part of a crowd that is just watching and ain't saying nothing. We know what it's like to be witnessing and choosing to look the other way. We know what it's like to declare, 'Well, it's none of my business.' We know about political expediency and complicity and conspiracies of silence. We know about the tension between altruism (our desire to do good) and altruistic inertia (where we want to do good, but we can't seem to get off go). We find ourselves sitting on neutral. We know what it feels like to not want to get involved. Choosing to remain silent when violence is done, ignoring the bruises and the blackeyes. 'Cause we say it's none of our business.

Bystanders are not the only ones in the text... they're not the only ones in the family circle who should give us pause... There's also Absalom. Tamar's whole brother... somebody shout her brother-brother... her brother-brother, who advises her to keep quiet for now. A script which bears

an uncomfortable resemblance to many victims whose stories are often met with disbelief and who are told to keep quiet. Then there's King David. Somebody shout... David King... David, Tamar's father, who hears of these things. He's angry, but he does not punish or hold his beloved firstborn accountable... A script that continues to play out over and over in our contemporary society, where we know about the things that people do and they are not held accountable.

Absalom gets the last stop. He speaks neither good nor bad to his brother Amnon... and we aren't sure whether he's just biding his time to come back and get him... and doing an eye-for-an-eye or a-tooth-for-a-tooth... or whether he's truly sickened by his brother's actions. But what we do know is that there's nothing between these brothers but hate.

And the tragedy about this story... Here's the preaching moment! Is that this is where the story ends... It ends in unspeakable tragedy... and we are left wondering... Could things have been done differently? Could Tamar's life... have looked different? Could Tamar had lived not as a woman that was broken... but a woman who was flourishing? If the father had punished Amnon... Or, if the younger son had spoken up... Perhaps, if somebody had just had a slither of courage or a measure of integrity... Perhaps justice could have been done for Tamar. It would have required painful speech. It would have required painful accountability. It would've required holding Amnon accountable for his violation of his sister. And it could have happened, but it didn't. And a few chapters later we read this, this Bible, we find out that these boys of David are dead. And his beautiful daughter has disappeared.

Preaching Professor Annie Carter Florence offers a word that I believe is so instructive for a text like this. It's instructive because this is a hard text to preach, and yet we become complicit in the body of Christ if we fail to at least mention it sometimes in church. Professor Annie Carter Florence offers us a word that I believe is instructive for this moment, she says, "Scripture is a script that's already published." I could shout out my shoes! But our lives -hear me with your good ear- at

least in the time that is before us are not. She said the narrative is still in process. That's some shouting information right there. The narrative is still in process... asking of the text, how it might go differently is another way of asking how our lives might look different.

When we enter this story of Tamar's rape, and we hear her cry for help. We not only see Tamar... We see ourselves... We see our daughters... We see our sisters... We see our nieces... We see perhaps even our sons... and our brothers... and our nephews... The challenge that is presented to us today is that we don't leave them to suffer alone. The challenge presented to me as a pastor... In this month, that is domestic vio- as much as I'd like to shake you and rock you and rock you and shake you. As much as I'd like to hold my ear and holler and squall... as much as I would love to gloss over this and pretend like it's not in the scripture. The challenge for me as a pastor, and a woman, is that we do not allow Tamar to suffer alone. That we claim strength by standing with Tamar. We give Tamar her voice back by telling Tamar's story. And we apologize to Tamar for our complicity in our silence, because Tamar is not just in some dusty book that was written some centuries ago... But Tamar sits in our pews... She sits beside us at our desk... She sits with us in sorority meeting... She sits with us as we do the work of ministry... And we go about the challenges and the daily activity of our lives.

The challenge presented to us today is to ensure that Tamar doesn't keep suffering by herself. The challenge presented to us today is that we claim the strength... as risky as it is... as risky as it is... Risky as it is... To stand here on a Sunday morning and tell Tamar's story. Yet we claim strength... by planting her feet... And we claim freedom to imagine new endings. Wonder what would Tamar's life have looked like if she could have had a different ending? A different ending that could go so differently so that her life would not end as a broken woman... or a desolate woman... But a woman who reached her full potential in Christ Jesus. A woman who reached her

destiny as a daughter of the king. Not just in terms of concern... not just conceptually... but in a way that she lived out her identity as a daughter of the king. And yet, we couldn't change it for Tamar...

Here is what I come to tell you... We can change it for other folk... We could change it... And make sure that there is justice for Tamar... Because the unresolved pathos of her story transcends thousands of years to startle us awake.... And, if we long for a cathartic or a better ending, as my friend Jackie Williams would say- Jackie says, I like happy endings. If we want a happy ending, we couldn't help Tamar, but we can help Tamar's sister. We couldn't help Tamar, but we could help Tamar's niece. We could help Tamar's auntie. We could help Tamar's son. We could help Tamar's brother. We could help Tamar's nephew. To imagine... not just imagine a different ending... but as the body of Christ... and people of faith... We have the capacity to create... a different ending. It's one thing to imagine it, but in order for it to really be concrete... we have the opportunity to create a different ending. A different ending... So that a woman can live her life with purpose or a person who is living with violence doesn't have to live in fear... doesn't have to live with the fear of - you watched the video this morning that we showed you - doesn't have to worry about text being taken eisogetically, out of context, to abuse and suppress and subjugate.

We have the opportunity to not only imagine a different story or a different ending, but to create... a different ending. And can I say... Even though this is not an easy story to hear... It's a story that must be told because we don't want to keep encountering Tamar's story. We don't wanna keep experiencing and hearing about Tamar's story. And so these characters in the text provide for us a window of insight to interrogate ourselves, whether we are the bystander... whether we're Jonadab... whether we're Absalom... or whether we are King David. The script is still being written. The narrative is not yet finished. We have the opportunity... even in this dispensation... to ensure that folk don't suffer alone... but we stand with them. That's really the beauty of a

relationship with God... That's really the reason why preachers all over this country spend hours preparing messages week after week, month after month, year after year... Because what we are really trying to do... is shift... the narratives - **S-H-I-F-T** - shift the narrative so that we can not only imagine a different ending, but live a different ending.

How fitting and appropriate that as we come to the table - I'm through - How fitting and appropriate that as we come to the table to commemorate, to remember what Jesus did... as Jesus not only lived a life... that showed us how to live... but Jesus lived a life that showed us how to die... and then Jesus conquered death and got up from the grave so that we could live life and have life... more abundantly... To the full... And to overflowing... So that we could have... Not just imagine... a different ending. But so that we could live a different life... So that nobody has to live out the balance of their days as a broken woman... as a broken man... As a matter of fact, the church... the body of Christ... the extension of the incarnation ought to be one of the safest places in the world... Where the bound receive strength... Where the bound are set free... Where the wounded and the broken receive strength... Where those who feel that their lives are over are encouraged to believe that they can have a brand new start.

This is the word of God. This is the challenge for the people of God, and this is the good news of our faith. Good news about faith is that this text ended on a sour note. But thanks be to God... Because God is still speaking. I believe God is speaking right now. That we could have... or imagine... a different ending.

He Loosed Me, But He Didn't Let Me Go

A SERMON BY REV. LISA M. JOHNSON, DMIN.

Now, let's get to the word... I won't be before you long... but I do believe that there is a word and deliverance from the Lord this morning. Please turn with me to Luke 13, verses 10 – 14. I would like to tag as a topic to this message: He Loosed Me, but He Didn't Let Me Go.

Max Lucado, a well-known pastor and author, tells a story about a bird named Chippie. Chippie never knew what hit her. One moment she was perched high, queen of her world, secure and singing her heart out. But her owner decided that today was cage-cleaning day, and she would do it the quick way, with a vacuum cleaner. As the last attachment was snapped on and the cage door opened, the phone rang. Turning to answer, the owner heard a "swoosh." Poor Chippie had been sucked into the vacuum. Hanging up the phone, the woman quickly tore open the bag, and there sat poor Chippie, dirty and stunned, but still alive. Grabbing the little bird, the owner rushed into the bathroom and turned the faucet on to rinse Chippie off. But she felt the shivers shaking that tiny body. So, doing what any compassionate owner would do, she grabbed the hair dryer and hit Chippie full blast with hot air. Chippie never knew what hit her! In less than two minutes, her world had been turned upside down. She had been sucked in, washed up, and blown over. A couple days later, the friend who had initiated the call, checked on Chippie. "Well, her owner replied, Chippie doesn't sing much anymore."

Can any of you identify with Chippie? I know I can, because life isn't fair. Life does not have a set of failure proof rules. The bottom can drop out of your world without a moment's notice. It takes only one call from the police station about your child, one doctor's report, one officer delivering divorce papers, one business to downsize, one meeting in your boss's office, or one knock on your door with bad news to have a Chippie moment. It's impossible to believe that one mammogram, one prostate test, or one culture report can throw your whole world into chaos and leave you feeling like Chippie – sucked in, washed up and blown over. Chippie moments steal your song and shake your faith.

The scripture read in our hearing doesn't tell us the woman's name. But, it does tell us that this woman is bent and can in no wise lift herself up. Had she had a Chippie moment? Had she ever been able to raise herself up? Or, had life sucked her in, washed her up and blown her over and this caused her infirmity? We never know what her name is but what we do know is that

misfortune has no boundaries. It doesn't matter your gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, or sexual preference. It does not discriminate. It doesn't care about your job title or your income. I don't care how many trips you take or how many trips take you; calamity will hunt you down like a fugitive and cause you to feel anxious, helpless, and confused – sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

In all of our lives, there are times when we are hit with life's situations that leave us feeling bent or bowed down. We have been weakened by so many evil spirits that we begin to think that that's just the way life is. Sometimes we've been bent because of the pains of childhood traumas, addictions (and not just drugs), divorce/separation, sometimes being married, being a single parent, being single PERIOD; jealousy, loneliness, feelings of abandonment, financial stress and strain. At other times we are bent because of unforgiveness, bitterness, pride, adultery, or fornication. When we recognize this, I suggest that we go to that place where we are in the presence of God, where we can hear from Him and receive all that He has for us; there we too can be restored to that place of praise for Him. As Matthew says, we should come to Him when are carrying heavy burdens that we can't seem to get rid of.

In our scripture today, we see a woman who had been bent over for 18 years; and you know, some of us can't take being bent over for 18 minutes. *Unlike "Chippie"*, the scripture doesn't tell us how she became bent. We don't know if this was a birth defect such as: scoliosis or kyphosis, or if she was an elderly woman – who was suffering with osteoporosis, causing the curvature of her spine. It only says that for 18 years this woman was infirmed with a "spirit" from Satan.

When I began to study this scripture, it spoke volumes in my spirit, because it caused me to look at the bent places in my personal life. And you know most of us don't want people to know when we are bent, especially if it is inward. If you can't see it, then we don't talk about it. But I'm glad the text doesn't stop there; because more than it being about our inadequacy, it reminds us of God's grace and His awesome sufficiency. I'm so glad that even when I'm bent over in a situation, He is yet a healer and a deliverer. Hallelujah!

When I realized that I had to deal with issues that cause us to be bent, the first thing that came to mind was how many people are walking around, dressed to the nines; face painted up, hair immaculate, hands and feet done; just got out of the barber's chair with a Versace suit on; got the bling-bling going on, on the outside; but if we had a spiritual x-ray machine to see the

inside – I dare to say, that our song, like Chippie’s, would be lost also. The difference with the woman in our scripture today is that her infirmity *can* be seen from the outside. But as quiet as it’s kept, most of ours show up on the outside too. It shows up in our friendships, our eating, in our spending, and dating habits, and then it shows up in the way we treat people. Let’s not get it twisted and think that because we don’t have a hump in our back, that people don’t know that we’ve all got one issue or another cause we’ve all been sucked in, washed up and blown over at one time or another.

My curiosity wouldn’t let me rest because I needed to know what had caused this woman’s infirmity. What had life hit her with? When the scripture said that she was bent over and could in no wise lift herself up, was her infirmity only spiritual or was it physical as well?

Please allow me to eisogete this scripture and use my Holy Ghost imagination to deal with this in the physical realm for a moment. Let’s just say this woman did have a physical deformity. According to the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, over 28 million Americans develop some kind of musculoskeletal problem every year, and in that same time, 3 million people require hospitalization for their problem. Okay preacher, that’s good information, but what was the cause of this woman’s curvature of the spine? Was it a car accident? Was she dropped like Mephibosheth? Was it scoliosis or some other bone disease? Well research says that scoliosis usually develops in childhood but it can progress in adults. The AAOS also stated that only 2% of the population is affected by scoliosis which tends to be more common in girls and run in families. It is usually detected during a screening at school. But x-rays of the spine will show if there are any abnormalities. *Just like in our lives.* It may not be until we go through a spiritual x-ray that we find out that there are some abnormalities in our life also. All right, we might be on to something here. It may be scoliosis or it may not be - let’s dig a little deeper. *Was it kyphosis?* Some of you are looking at me like, it might very well be; but what is kyphosis? Kyphosis is usually applied to the curve that results in an exaggerated “round-back”. It is often attributed to “slouching.” When your parents constantly say or said, “Sit up, straighten your back, and stop slouching.” They were trying to prevent postural kyphosis. We still don’t know what happened to cause this woman’s condition. *Had she had a Chippie day* that turned her world completely upside down or had she been like this since birth?

Or was it osteoporosis? Well, I found out that osteoporosis is a generalized skeletal disorder of low bone mass and deterioration in the bone’s architecture. Type 1 osteo is

postmenopausal. It generally develops in women after menopause when the amount of estrogen greatly decreases. Type 2 osteo is senile osteo and typically happens after the age of 70 and affects women twice as frequently as men. But it is important to know that osteo may either be a primary problem or may be secondary to another problem.

A lot of our conditions are showing up as the primary problem, but there are some underlying problems that are causing them to manifest. It may be showing up as a drug problem, a financial issue, or low self-esteem. But the question is: is this the primary or secondary problem? It may be a sexual addiction or food addiction. Because you do know that our outward behaviors are a manifestation of an inward issue? Let me make this plain. I traveled to Beijing, China a few years ago. My first act upon arriving in the hotel after flying for 21 hours was to take a shower. (Tell the rest of the story).

We still don't know what really caused this woman's condition. But what we do know is that she didn't allow her situation keep her from the location, where she would receive her transformation, as she moved into her place of celebration. Let me repeat that. She didn't allow her situation keep her from the location, where she would receive her transformation, as she moved into her place of celebration. So, preacher I'm having a Chippie moment! How do I receive my transformation and move to my place of celebration Lisa? – I'm glad you asked! Because your situation is designed to bring you into the presence of God, which brings me to my first point;

1. Location: Where you have you been hanging out? Your *location* is extremely important – don't let your situation keep you from the place where you can meet Jesus. We can wake up with a headache; nothing to put on; no baby-sitter; no money for offering; a bad hair day; and the list goes on. We can make all sorts of excuses for not coming to Jesus, just as we are. The woman in our scripture didn't care what else was going on. She knew that she had to make her way to the temple – to the place where Jesus would be teaching. *Just envision her making her way to the synagogue*; listening to people make fun of her as she passed; never getting the opportunity to see anybody else's face or anybody ever really seeing who she was, because all they could see was her condition. *Probably in pain*, but still pressing her way. Not feeling any connection to the people, other than those who were pushing to get to where Jesus was, but still making her way. What was she expecting, going to the place where Jesus would be teaching? Didn't she know that women weren't supposed to go to the synagogue on

the Sabbath? Was she just going to hang around outside? Had she heard that he was a healer, a deliverer, and a restorer? Did she know that her faith would be increased, because faith comes by hearing the word of God? Why did she want to gather around the word with others? What was she expecting? *More importantly, what were you expecting as you made your way into this temple this morning? There is a message about the power of faithfully showing up.* It had to be a trial to this woman to move about in public – not just physically challenging, but emotionally and psychologically as well. And yet, she refused to let her sickness determine the limitations of her world. Don't let anything or anybody keep you from getting to the location where your transformation is going to take place. This woman made her way to the place where Jesus was, and *she found that there was blessing in her pressing.*

2. For the bible says in verse 12, “And when Jesus saw her. He called her to Him”. This is *identification*. You don't have to jump around acting like donkey on Shrek, “Here I am Lord, pick me, pick me.” She didn't ask Jesus for anything. She doesn't corner Him or try to force His hand. She doesn't try to negotiate a deal with Him. *You know how we do.* “Well God, if you do this for me, I'll do that for you”. If God doesn't do another thing, He is still God, and He has already done more than enough. She didn't come to church angry with Him because of her infirmity. *She simply wanted to hear a word from the master teacher. And He saw her* and said, “Woman, thou art loosed from thy infirmity”. One translation says, “Set free from your infirmity”; another says, “Released from your sickness”. Whichever way you look at it she no longer had to fight this demonic spirit. She no longer had to go out to the snickering and whispering of the people in the street who thought they were better than her; to the people who cracked on her because their stuff was hidden on the inside and hers was not. She no longer had to feel ostracized because she was bent and couldn't lift herself up. The truth be told, none of us can straighten our own mess up. Take your hands off of your situation. This is a God thing! We know this because God promised us in Isaiah 40:5 that He would make the crooked places straight. And every time we put our hands on our stuff, we make matters worst. Let go, and let God! *He sees us. He knows* who the people are who are here tonight, that had to *press their way*, just to hear a word from Him. Just listen for His voice. He loosed her, but He didn't let her go. Ask me how I know?
3. Because the best part is what He does next: I love this verse because it makes a point to say, “His hands.” The scripture says, “And He laid *his hands* on her. And immediately, she was

made straight.” Which is my third point: transformation. He touched her and there was an immediate *transformation*. That’s how I know he didn’t let her go. God cares enough to reach out and touch us in our messed up situations. Stop letting just anybody lay hands on you! There are people laying hands who have not been anointed to do so, that means whatever spirit they are operating in can be transferred to you. Just like you have sexually transmitted diseases, there are transferences of spiritual dis-eases also! You’ll know when God is using someone to lay hands on you and your situation. He touched her and not only was she healed but she was able to stand up again. *The songwriter writes: He touched me; Yes, He touched me and oh what joy that floods my soul; something happened and now I know; He touched me and made me whole.* How many of us are in need of an immediate blessing, a touch from the Lord? A blessing that we know, beyond a shadow of doubt that it was the hand of God that touched our situation? How many of us know that right now our money is shorter than our needs? How many of us know that if people could see under the public mask that we wear, that our stuff would be so jacked up that if it were uncovered it would probably ooze out like infection all over this place? *How many of us know* that when we are smart and nasty to people, constantly griping, complaining and criticizing other people, it’s a defense mechanism to keep people from seeing who we really are and we need an *immediate blessing*. How many of us will be honest enough this morning to admit, “God, I need you to do an immediate thing; God if you don’t do it, it won’t be done.” We’ve tried everything we know. Talked to everybody we could, prayed on it, laid on it, stood on it and waited on it. Smokie Norful says, “Not another second, or another minute. I need you NOW!” The scripture said, immediately. Can’t you see her starting to stand up? For the first time in 18 years, she can look people in their face without shame or degradation; because the word says there’s no condemnation to them who love the Lord. I’m sure she had a moment where she had to remind herself of Philippians 4:13 – I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. The Bible says that if anyone be in Christ, they are a new creation. Look at her starting to rise up from that bowed down position. Romans 12:2 says, do not conform to the things of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. The sister received an immediate transformation. She went to the right location, experienced

identification, received her transformation and had been loosed, released and set free to do what?

4. To have a *celebration*. In verse 13, the text says, “And she recognized and thanked and praised God.” *Oh, you better recognize!* Real praise is a celebration offered up to God. Now it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure this part out. When God has touched you, changed you, picked you up and turned your situation around – it ain’t for you to sit on your blessed assurance and act like He owed it to you. He wants to be glorified. God could turn your situation around before it even starts getting bad. But will you remember to praise Him for it. God is on a move right now where He’s doing things that *NOBODY CAN TAKE CREDIT FOR*. The doctors, the lending institutions, the judges, the car dealers, even the preachers are scratching their heads trying to figure out what God is doing. We have been giving the wrong people credit for some God stuff that has been happening in our life and God is not going to allow anybody to steal His glory. He’s cutting people and things off in our lives so that we will KNOW that it was Him who turned it around; he’s allowing our conditions to go to the grave so that He can show Himself strong as He did with Lazarus. Some of our stuff has died, gone to the grave and if the truth be told – it’s beginning to STINK! I admonish you today, don’t wait until He calls it from the grave to praise Him, praise Him right now!!! Begin to bless the name of the Lord, and not just today, in the sanctuary. Bless Him in your house (that He gave you); bless Him riding to work (in that car that He gave you); I dare you to just lift up the name of Jesus and see if He won’t come to see about you. We have to be in the right location, with the right identification, to receive a transformation in order to have a celebration. But, do know, there will be some *hateration*, on this you can be assured.
5. It’s in the word: check out vs. 14 – there was some *indignation* going on! Don’t look now, but there are some haters sitting right on the row with you. Please understand that everybody is not going to be glad about your transformation. Can’t you hear them whispering? *Who does she think she is? Where did she come from? Why did He pick her?* They are mad at you, when all you did was show up, be open to receive and then praised God for the healing! There are some folk in your family, on your job and in right here in church, that wants you to remain bent. And that same demonic spirit is mad at the Lord for healing you! The leader of the synagogue became indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. He tried to act like his issue was that this woman came to be healed on the Sabbath, when there were six

other days in the week when she could have come. But *nowhere* in the text does it say that this woman came for healing. It says that Jesus was teaching, but not a word was said that Jesus would be healing. *These are church folk. Traditional church folk.* You know the kind - who wouldn't let the Holy Ghost in if He was trying to get into the service because that would cause us to get off of the agenda and that would be out of order. The same kind who don't believe that it takes all of that to praise God, nor do they understand when deliverance is taking place. You don't know the cost of the oil in my alabaster box. You don't know what I had to go through for this deliverance, this breakthrough.

But generally, when someone is upset because another person has gotten blessed, it's because they don't have anybody to look down on anymore. If you get well, what are they going to do? Who will be the conversation piece in their midst now? *But Jesus was uncompromising.* He said to them: "You hypocrites! Don't each of you loose your ox or your donkey from the stall to lead it out to drink water on the Sabbath?" In other words, is it more important that the animals in the street are cared for, while we (the church folk) sit back watching hurting, dying people and tell them that they have to wait because they came to the house of God on the wrong day? Please don't get me wrong, I'm all for taking care of your animals, but there are people who are more concerned with animal rights than human rights. *I am so glad God is sovereign and doesn't have to ask permission to do what He wants to do, how He wants to do it, when He wants to do it.* Talk about not sweating the small stuff; sister girl is still having a praise party and doesn't even know that an argument is going on between Jesus and these synagogue rulers. Can you imagine what it is going to be like when He takes you to that place that surpasses anything you could ever even imagine? And then He takes her to a new place; to a place that she realizes that she's a child of the king!

Fred Craddock tells of meeting a man one day in the restaurant. The man asked him, "Are you a preacher?" Somewhat embarrassed, Fred said, "Yes". The man pulled a chair up to Fred's table. "Preacher, I'll tell you a story. There once was a little boy who grew up sad. Life was tough because my mama had me, but she never married. Do you know how a small Tennessee town treats people like that? Do you know the words they use to name kids that don't have no father? "Well, we never went to church, nobody asked us. But for some reason or other, we went to church one night when they were having a revival. They had a big, tall preacher, visiting to do the message and he was all dressed in black. He had a thunderous voice that shook the little

church. “We sat toward the back, Mama and me. Well, that preacher got to preaching about what I don’t know; walking up and down the aisle of that little church, just a’ preaching. After the service, we were slipping out the back door when I felt that big preacher’s hand on my shoulder. I was scared. He looked way down at me, looked me in the eye and said, ‘Boy, who’s your daddy?’ I don’t have no daddy. That’s what I told him in a trembling voice. ‘I ain’t got no Daddy.’ ‘O yes you do’, boomed that big preacher, ‘you’re a child in the Kingdom, you’ve been bought with a price and you are a child of the King.’ I was never the same after that.” The man said to Fred Craddock, *“For God’s sake, preach that. Let people know that when they have been abandoned by their earthly parents, they still have a father in heaven who love them beyond measure.”* The man stood up and introduced himself. He was the legendary former governor of Tennessee. What I’m saying is, we all have some issues that have us bent or bound, but God can turn all of them around if would only believe and trust Him.

As Jesus was fighting on behalf of this daughter in Zion, he put the rulers of the synagogue to shame. While she was having her celebration, He caused the very people who were hating on her healing to feel *humiliation*. Isn’t He just like that? The word promised that he will prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. The real test of faith is when you can watch others get blessed while you wait on God to bless you and still rejoice. When you’ve got a yet praise in your spirit – even though there’s no outward manifestation of your promise. Praise Him anyhow! Start practicing your shout as He blesses others. So when it’s your turn you’ll already know how to do it!

As I close and take my seat, I just want to remind you that Jesus has given us the power, the authority, and the mandate to intervene with loving, healing care for both the Chippie among us and the Chippie within us. *For many years I tried to find people and things to satisfy a hunger and emptiness in my soul that only God could fill. I tried to find other things to straighten up my crooked places. I am so happy to say that the Holy Ghost didn’t give up on me and He won’t give up on you either. The hand of Jesus touched me. It touched my mind and my spirit, and the healing process began in my life.* Allow Him to stand up in your life. Trust Him. He already knows all of your pains and your struggles. He said in Jeremiah “Before I formed you in your mother’s womb, I knew you and had a plan for your life.” Wherever you go when you leave her look around. Be attuned to the spirit of discernment that allows you to look beyond a smiling face and view the broken heart and wounded spirit that lies beneath that mask. *Stop judging and*

start praying. In every place, even in my life, there are Chippies who have been sucked in, washed up and blown over. I thank God for the opportunity to intervene in the lives of shocked birds. Chippie moments keep on coming, but we serve a God who will restore our song and remind us that wounded birds do fly again.

My prayer is that you will get to that location, not just the physical location (as in the church); but also the place in your heart (that secret place) where you can hear from God. Trust Him to recognize you as His child. Receive the healing that He has for you. Allow Him to straighten up the crooked places in your life. When you've been sucked in, washed up and blown over, get to know Him as a healer and deliverer. Give Him a radical praise. Pray for your haters. And then party with the people who are excited because of your transformation. These are the benefits of following Christ.

1

Wild Women

SUNNI PATTERSON

2 They wanted her piecemealed

3 papier-mâchéd

4 practically broken

5 limp like and loveless

6 a litany of exaggeration

7 They wanted her low

8 And high

9 flat and wide,

10 filled with all of their empty.

11 They wanted her to be more like them,

12 not knowing her conception was Immaculate,

13 that she was birthed in sandalwood scented river water,

14 sweet sapphire honey touched tongue

15 She was too much of a mouthful for the greedy.

16 Just a small amount of her was more than they could stand,

17 oh, they wanted her bland...

18 and barren...

19 Un-spirited

20 Un-African

21 Uncultured

22 Under siege in the streets

23 they wanted her face down ass up

24 hands cuffed and ankles strapped.

25 They wanted her knowing she could never want them back,

26 Oh, they wanted her holy.

27 Baptized in her divine,

28 they wanted her secrets...

29 pearls to swine.
30 They wanted to unravel the mystery of her design.
31 Fascinated by her glory,
32 hypnotized by her kind.
33 Oh! They wanted her complete.
34 They wanted her whole.
35 Though they came fractioned...
36 half-hearted half-soul
37 with no regards and no knowledge as to who she really was...
38 oh, but if they knew...
39 If they knew her...
40 Praise songs with rain from the clouds of their eyes,
41 clearing the vision,
42 bathing the heart.
43 They would bow every time they saw her...
44 be their best selves when she was around...
45 If they knew her...
46 knew she was the glue to their revolution...
47 The life flow of blood through their veins...
48 If they knew her...
49 She would know...
50 She would feel...
51 That her body is more than battlefield,
52 more than bone-break and bleeding bigotry...
53 more than bridge over your troubled conscience,
54 more than used up-
55 walked on-
56 driven through-
57 Shot up-
58 more than your "Selma, Lord, Selma" Edmond Pettus.

59 There more than your Killer Katrina Danziger-
60 more than your Bust'em Outta Baltimore "Highway to Nowhere."
61 If they knew her...
62 She would know...
63 (Singing)
64 Wild women.
65 Wild women, they walk with Buffalo...
66 have lightning on their tongues...
67 fly whisks as weapons...
68 Wild Women they walk with machetes...
69 with wisdom...
70 with grace...
71 with ease...
72 Wild Women have hurricanes in their bellies...
73 releasing a flood of a lesson...
74 Oh, Wild Women...
75 They fly free....
76 Just watch their ways...
77 How they rip!
78 and shred!
79 Oh, who can understand her?
80 This winding Niger River of a woman...
81 one who is unafraid to tear away,
82 only to roam and then become the wind...
83 she who speaks in gusts...
84 and cyclones...
85 blasting us back to high ground...
86 high consciousness...
87 She turns...
88 and so does the world...

89 feel her spinning...
90 and spanning...
91 several lifetimes...
92 hear her speaking...
93 sparking alarm...
94 See her dancing...
95 summoning the dead...
96 resurrecting new life...
97 Heaven hears her knocking on the door
98 safely transporting the ones who call for her assistance...
99 Wild Women...
100 they open portals to new worlds...
101 new speech...
102 new dreams...
103 Oh, dearly beloveds...
104 So dearly departed from the ways of the Guardian...
105 Beware...
106 For Wild Women
107 are not to be tamed...
108 Only admired...
109 Just let her in...
110 and witness her...
111 Set your a days...
112 ablaze.

1

I Talk Black

BRION "LADY BRION" GILL

2 I have been folding my tongue beneath itself...
 3 Bleaching my language...
 4 Clenching my jaw with shackled teeth...
 5 because the moment I open my mouth uprisings spring from my saliva...
 6 my dialogue is cruddy...
 7 Trampled with the muddy boots of trade and migration.
 8 Battling nations in my diaphragm
 9 so the rhythm and my diction sounds like a war cry.
 10 And despite
 11 the white
 12 stuffed down my windpipe,
 13 I talk black...
 14 (Ha!) with nappy phonics.
 15 Syllables that kink and twist
 16 notty expression that beads on my palate.
 17 Soul glow in this spit-shined flow...
 18 jheri curl jargon.
 19 Bongo drums in my diction.
 20 This slang is semantic resistance!
 21 **OFF WITH THE HEAD OF THE KINGS ENGLISH!**
 22 Can't you smell the riot on my breath?
 23 Char in my esophagus?
 24 My laugh... Ha!
 25 Is arsenic!
 26 And ain't enough opiates
 27 in this elementary education to hook me on phonics
 28 or gentrify the Djembe out of my pronunciation!

29 Love the taste of this cornbread accent...
30 sugar cane slang...
31 My tongue is Motherland...
32 Mother of Civilization...
33 Birth of EVERY Nation.
34 SCAT! BOOM! BAP!
35 High-Hat! Jazz! Sax!
36 There is music in my melanin!
37 And, (Taps head and rolls neck) I be talkin' hella Black!
38 With a neck roll to articulate my tone!
39 Conversations get you high as my cheekbones
40 and lingo 'bout lush as these hips done grown!
41 Thick thighs and
42 deep-fried vernacular
43 hand motions and sound effects
44 hieroglyphics hidden in my messages!
45 My breath is the building of the pyramids on repeat...
46 I'm like a Negro spiritual...
47 sampled over a trap beat!
48 There is a Black Anthem inside my belly!
49 So, I will always...
50 Lift Every Voice...
51 and SPEAK.