LET THE CHURCH SAY AMEN: THE (RE) NEGOTIATION OF BLACK WOMEN'S SEXUALITY IN LITERATURE

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

English – Doctor of Philosophy

2024

ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that the Black church deters Black women's identity and their ability to understand and seek what sexuality means to them. Specifically, through a book club conducted with a group of Black women who grapples with exploring their sexuality because of their upbringing in the church, I investigate how the experiences in the church affect how these women viewed sex through a shameful and sinful lens. I engage with scholars such as Brittney Cooper, Candice Benbow, and Patricia Hill Collins to investigate the history of sexual neglect of Black women and find ways for them to (re)negotiate what sexuality means to them. I introduce testimonial storytelling as a means of instruction for Black women on navigating the world in three distinct ways—through the act of vocally sharing one's story, through the process of self-writing of one's experiences, and through the presentation of Black women's stories in literature. I contend that this practice contributes to the promotion of sexual justice, which seeks to redefine and elevate the understanding of what it means to live in a Black female body. This research is significant as scholarship that recognizes the theorizing of pleasure through Black feminist theology, and the need to find the themes of this framework in Black women's literature.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Black women including cisgender, transgender, and non-binary individuals who identify as a Black woman, who grew up affected by the Black church. May you know your feelings matter, your body matters, and that you always have a sacred space in my heart and in the following pages. May the words written serve as a reminder to continue to resist and renegotiate what it means to live in the world that sees you for the multitudes of who you are.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This was a labor of love full of tears of joy, sadness, confusion, and all the in between. BUT I could not have done it without the village of wonderful people that God placed in my life. First and foremost, thank you to my committee members Drs. Brooks, Johnson, Baker-Bell and Lomax, for believing that I was capable even when the many drafts made you skeptical. Thank you for being an inspiration to the work I want to do, the people I look up to, and for the scholarship that makes Black people feel seen. HUGE shout out to the participants of my research for trusting me with your inner thoughts and most vulnerable memories. This would not have been possible without each of you.

Sarah and Dupe! Y'all been through it alllllll with me. You support me even when you don't understand what I'm doing. You listen through the tears and always find ways to help bring joy back into my life. Y'all are the true testament of finding your person in your friends.

My sister scholar! Kaelyn! We been riding them dissertation trenches together from our very first visit to Michigan. You don't know how much I valued walking down Wells Halls for three years and you picking my brain and trying to put into words what I can't. You became my home away from home. You created a space for me to live in the entirety of what makes me, me. And you always stood up for me even in the spaces I wasn't there to stand up for myself. Thank you for your tenacity, bravery, loyalty, and your everlasting friendship. Till the wheels fall off friend!

To my siblings, thank you for paving the way, for being the difference! I looked up to every single one of you and loved how you open doors that's never been opened. Y'all took me under your wing and sacrificed your wings so that I could always fly. I love you! Special shout

out to Tialy for calling me and praying for me on the random. You always knew what I needed even when I was too stubborn to ask.

To my parents, thank you for being my rock! This work that I breath is because you never silenced my voice. You may not have understood my viewpoints and the work that I've taken up, but you stood ten toes deep as I did them. I am where I am because you always made sure I did not lack and that I always knew the sky was the limit.

To my love, Roodson, thank you for your patience and your love. You carried me through the darkest seasons and the highest moments of my life, and I always knew I could count on you. I am so grateful that I get to share this moment of completion with you! You listened to my talks through every defense and rooted for me in the sidelines, the front, and the back. I prayed to God for peace, and He sent you. I could not have asked for a better partner to grow with.

Last but not least, thank you to all the women who studied, wrote, and read with me. Sen, Vanessa, Soo, Constance, and Doreen, y'all held a brick off my shoulder when the burden of dissertation became too much. Thank you for always being a listening ear and an extra pair of eyes. Thank you to the English (and WRAC) department for molding such amazing women and for providing endless amount of resources for our continued success.

To God Be the Glory!

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INTRODUCTION

Bondye fide'l!" ("God is good!") the pastor shouted into the microphone as he approached the front of the platform. And with an expectation of their heartfelt response, his voice resonated through the Haitian church, his gaze locked onto the congregation. In unison, the congregation bellowed, "*Pou tout tan*!" ("All the time!")

This rhetorical style exemplifies the call and response oral tradition, a practice rooted within diverse African American and Caribbean cultures. This tradition describes the exchange between a speaker and their audience, wherein the audience responds to cues from the speaker, to display their active participation in the exchange (Baker-Bell, 2020). In this discussion, I will specifically focus on two languages in which this tradition is prominent: Haitian Creole and Black Language. Haitian Creole is the primary language spoken in Haiti, while Black language has its roots in West Africa during which the enslaved developed ways to communicate with one another that were unrecognizable to the slaveholders (Baker-Bell, 2020). As such, both languages have their distinct semantical, grammatical, and rhetorical patterns (Baker-Bell, 2020; DeGraff, 2007). Although the context of call and response may vary based on the linguistic features of each language, the call and response style is evident in various aspects, including music, dance, and religious practices. This historical background is noteworthy to underscore that despite shared cultural expressions among Black communities, Blackness is not monolithic ("New Ethnicities" 2006). Rather, it embodies a diverse array of cultures, identities, and experiences. This diversity finds expression in the call and response tradition observed in the Haitian church.

The 10 AM service of the Haitian church started as a typical Sunday morning. I sat a few rows back from the front podium, staring blankly at the people in a *frenzy and shouting*[1] as they waited for the pastor to touch their forehead in prayer. I turned my head to my right, and I saw a woman with her eyes closed and tears streaming down her face. She approached my row, and I began to pray in my head that she was not coming for me. But of course, she was! With her eyes still closed, she took my hand to lead me toward the front of the podium. In the Black church, this is considered being *led by the spirit.*[2] At the front, the pastor, my father, motioned with his finger for me to approach him as he whispered in my ear:

"Tout bagay pasè pou yon rezon. Fo'w mande pep Bondye a padon pou sa'w te fe"

("Everything happens for a reason. You have to ask God's people for forgiveness").

He was talking about me getting my belly button pierced. It was meant for me to understand that when I ask for forgiveness, only then would I be forgiven. I was not sorry for what I had done, but I apologized anyway because that's what a "good girl" would do.

On many occasions, I heard the sermons the pastor preached about our body being God's temple, and we should treat it as such.[3] That being the case, I was taught that bodily piercings were considered disrespectful to God. At seventeen years old, I understood that I did not need to get it pierced, but I wanted to. It was the first time that I made a choice about my body that was not dictated by the church's rules and morality. Despite my best efforts to show indifference to the church, I was embarrassed that my father, the pastor, decided that my shame should be put on

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[1] *Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois references the frenzy and shouting associated in the Black church; frenzy is the call and response of the Black service and shouting is the low murmur or scream from somewhere in the pews, entailing clapping or stomping. This animation stemmed from slavery and served as an expression of engagement with the religious experience in the service (p. 127-9).

[2] Growing up in the church, the pastor preached that being led by the spirit meant that God is leading you.

[3] 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: biblical verse often used in the church I attended as a young girl to clarify the body being a temple of God.

the platter for the entire congregation as a learning example for the other youths. I was being used as a lesson to “stay in line.” Cultural theorist Tamura Lomax describes “staying in line” in the article, “Theorizing the Distance Between Erotophobia” as the means to present oneself in a proper Black female body to maintain heteronormative issues within the church such as social order and respectability politics (265). This definition brings attention to the intricate interplay between race, gender, sexuality, and religion, unveiling how these intersecting factors influence the formation of expectations and behaviors within religious communities. The importance of the term “respectability politics,” coined by Evelyn Higginbotham in 1993, lies in its focus on the challenges faced by Black girls and women. They navigate societal and religious expectations, to defy negative stereotypes and find avenues to be seen. This underscores the idea that societal norms and religious frameworks can shape and constrain the experiences of Black girls and women, often requiring them to conform to a narrow set of ideals to be deemed acceptable. By examining these intersections, the definition invites a critical exploration of the power dynamics, social pressures, and identity negotiations that occur within religious settings. As such, this memory contributed to my understanding of how Black girls within the church face scrutiny solely based on their humanity and gender. It illustrates how even a seemingly harmless act like getting my belly button pierced was perceived as too grown and sexual. I longed for a sacred space in which I did not feel the need to sacrifice my spiritual and sexual needs as a young, Black girl to meet the demands of the church.

In this context, I acknowledge three key aspects that this dissertation aims to explore, which are the cultivation of Black women’s sexual identity, the significance of their stories of sexual repression, and the creation of a sacred space for women. Consequently, I facilitated a book club using a dialogical approach emphasizing themes of restoration, communal

engagement, and an epistemological framework. The study involved five Black women participants with varied experiences in the church, all of whom experienced inner conflict regarding their spiritual and sexual lives. This research sought to address three questions: 1) How do Black women's experiences within the Black church contribute to how they see themselves as sexual beings? 2) How does literature help Black women heal from the spiritual violence associated with the Black church? 3) What practices and strategies can Black women engage in to develop and strengthen their sexual politics?

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to explore the topic of sexual politics and the feelings of shame experienced among Black women within the Black church. It is important to note that while the Black church encompasses various denominations, this research specifically focuses on Black evangelicalism. Black evangelical churches prioritize preaching centered around the gospel of Jesus and the act of repentance and turning away from sin (Gilbreath, 2008). By employing Todne Thomas's observations in *Kincraft* (2021), which examines the interpretation of Black evangelicals based on her study of an Afro-Caribbean and African-American evangelical church in Atlanta, as well as drawing from my personal experiences with Black evangelicals in the Haitian church during my upbringing, a shared spiritual kinship emerges. This kinship is characterized by the formation of a collective identity based on shared spirituality, mentoring relationships, and communal practices (83). To simplify the terminology for the diverse Black evangelical practices, the term Black church will be utilized throughout the remainder of this dissertation.

Additionally, it is necessary to emphasize that although women within the evangelical church encounter similar instances of shame, the unique experience of Black women stems from

factors such as racism, classism, and the stereotypes associated with their identity. I argue that certain teachings within the Black church foster detrimental attitudes toward Black women's sexuality, resulting in feelings of shame and sin among them. To address this issue, I propose storytelling as a potential avenue for healing among Black women. As a Black woman myself, it is imperative for me to resist negative stereotypes and to seek alternative meanings of sexuality that are not rooted in oppression but in agency. Thus, the examination of Black female sexuality is critical to this research as I delve into the history of how Black women approached gaining autonomy over their bodies, spanning from the times of enslavement to the present day. In this exploration, I draw upon the insights of scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, Evelyn Higginbotham, bell hooks, and many others toward a cultural understanding of the female body. My approach stems from the perspective of a literature scholar immersed in theological discourses. Considering this background, I transition to the context regarding Black female sexuality and its influence on specific church doctrines that affect the sexuality of Black women.

Historical Background

During the era of enslavement, Black women frequently became victims of rape by white men, who viewed them as property for economic gain. This was exacerbated by the 1662 doctrine of "partus sequitur ventrem," which declared that a child born to an enslaved mother would also be born a slave (Byrd & Thorps 2002). This legal status contributed to Black women reproducing the slave labor force, rendering them vulnerable as both sexual objects and profitable slave breeders. Consequently, they found themselves detached from their own identities as sexual beings. In response to these challenges, Black women employed three methods that displayed their efforts to assert agency over their bodies: sexual abstinence, abortion, and infanticide (Hine, 1997). By abstaining from sexual engagements with their white

“master” and, despite the psychological challenges of both abortion and infanticide, these methods served to prevent the reproduction of more children into the slave labor force. Together, these actions constituted a form of resistance and agency over Black women’s bodies, reflecting their approach to sexual autonomy. Despite these harsh circumstances, white individuals sought to justify these sexual assaults by falsely claiming that Black women willingly initiated such interactions, thereby emerging stereotypes of their alleged sexual deviance and impurity (hooks, 1981; Hine, 1997). It is important to acknowledge that these constant assaults resulted in the devaluation of Black womanhood, influencing societal perceptions, and shaping the social status of Black women even after the abolition of slavery. Wallace-Sanders expressed this impact effectively in *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong* (2002) with the following statement, “the black woman’s allegedly innate racial traits (promiscuity, filthiness, vulgarity, lewdness, indecency, ugliness) tended to cancel out those uniquely feminine traits that white women were assumed to possess (modesty, purity, chastity, beauty)” (24). These alleged racial traits underscore how Black and white women experienced their gender differently.

Barbara Welter outlined the fundamental principles of 19th-century true womanhood, which encompassed virtues such as “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (“The Cult of True Womanhood” 152). The characteristics associated with true womanhood are determined by a woman’s self-assessment and the judgment she encounters from her husband, neighbors, and society (Welter, 1966). This concept sheds light on the societal norms and expectations imposed upon women that enforce specific roles and behaviors that women are expected to adhere to. However, the concept of true womanhood posed a complex challenge for Black women. They faced a dual tension, as they were expected to conform to the rules of true womanhood, which were designed to exclude and oppress them. This concept functioned as a

rationale for white individuals to justify slavery. As a result, true womanhood did not extend to Black women due to the constraints of slavery. These restrictions hindered them from developing qualities akin to those expected of white women and from dedicating their lives to the traditional roles of wifehood and motherhood (Wallace-Sanders, 2002). This tension constitutes the manifold aspect of the historical conversation surrounding the formation of Black women's identity, particularly concerning their sexuality.

Spirit Murdering

I conclude that the tension faced by Black women can be seen as a form of spirit murdering. Education theorist Bettina Love defines spirit murdering as a process in which "school practices and officials are slowly killing Black children by murdering their spirits through intentional actions, physical assaults, and verbal stabbings" ("Anti-Black State Violence, Classroom Edition" 2). While this definition primarily pertains to educational environments, I contend that it is also applicable to the phenomenon of spirit murdering within the Black church. Specifically, the purity ideology of true womanhood can be seen as a force that kills the spirit of Black women. The expectation imposed by this ideology can restrict the individuality and autonomy of Black women, who often shape their faith and spirituality according to the doctrines of the church. Consequently, it is unsurprising that Black women experience a deep sense of shame when they fall short of this moral obligation. Their faith is often framed as separate from their bodily desires, leading to internalized shame and suppression of their true selves. An illustrative example of this can be found in the personal account of Black feminist Brittney Cooper, who reflects on spirituality and shame. She states, "I was trapped in a raging battle between my spirit and my flesh. The evangelical teachings of the Baptist churches in which I grew up insisted that our flesh—our bodies and their longings and impulses—were sinful,

dangerous, and unhealthy. We were admonished each week to bring our unruly flesh in submission to our "spirit man" (*Eloquent Rage* 127). Cooper's account invites reflection on the impact of the purity culture on individuals' relationship with their bodies and their ability to embrace their natural desires and impulses. It also raises questions about the potential consequences of framing the body as something to be subdued and controlled in that it impinges on Black women's agency and overall well-being.

The separation of the spirit and flesh is validated by the teachings of the Apostle Paul in the New Testament of the bible. Specifically in Corinthians, Paul denounced sex outside the confines of marriage as an immoral act and sin against the body. In her book*, What's Faith Got to Do with It,"* Kelly Brown Douglas articulates Paul's perspective as he admonishes faithful Christians to "flee from sexual immorality" while cautioning that "he who sins sexually sins against his own body" (1 Cor. 6:18)" (location 712-725). In the Black church, this verse emphasizes the significance of sexual purity and the avoidance of sexual sins. It suggests that engaging in sexual immorality is not just a transgression against others but also a sin against one's own body. It raises the need for discussions around the need for biblical hermeneutics that explore the complexity of sexuality and morality within the Black church. In *Sexuality and the Black Church* (1999), Brown Douglas affirms this by stating, "bible study must be approached in such a way that a creative engagement in sexual discourse can occur. This means that Bible study should provide an opportunity for personal inspiration *and* serious reflection on complex issues, such as sexuality" (136). Douglas highlights the need for biblical interpretation that is attentive to the complex realities and diverse experiences of individuals. By encouraging a reflective approach to sexual discourse, allows for a more holistic understanding of the bible's

teachings and the sexual lived experiences of Black women. It also encourages a definition of sin that does not condemn the body but empowers it.

Furthermore, within the book *Sexuality and the Black Church,* Brown Douglas delves into the connection between sexuality and the institution of slavery. As mentioned, the period of enslavement was marked by numerous dehumanizing conditions, resulting in the emergence of harmful stereotypes and stigmatization. In response to these damaging narratives, Douglas Brown introduced the concept of a "sexual discourse of resistance," aimed at challenging the racist and sexist ideologies that underpinned them. She argues that the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and sexuality within a culture dominated by white influence sought to devalue the humanity of Black individuals. The paramount importance of this resistance lies in its capacity to subvert and redefine the prevailing white perspectives that have been accepted as the norm.

#BlackSkinWhiteSin

The #BlackSkinWhiteSin forum in *The Feminist Wire* serves as a platform for challenging and reimagining the prevalent stereotypes surrounding the bodies of Black women and girls within the context of the Black church. One specific aspect that it addresses is the response to Pastor Juanita Bynum's Facebook video titled "No More Sheets Part 2." In this video, Bynum discusses her concerns regarding women's aesthetic expression in the church, such as wearing skirts that are deemed too tight or short, which she proclaims is an attempt to seduce men within the church. She goes on to compare women who dress in such a manner to prostitutes and implies that men of God would not desire a woman who presents herself in that way. Bynum's message reflects violence towards Black women's self-expression and their commitment to their faith, rooted in patriarchal, heterosexist, and respectability norms. A

noteworthy example from the forum that acknowledges the sacred and virtuous nature of Black women's bodies is titled "#BlackSkinWhiteSin: Received" by Neichelle Guidry:

> if my body is good for discernment, why can't my body also be good for desire? Bodies talk, and mine is insistent and quite clear about what she needs to wholly flourish and to lead me into joy unspeakable...The sad fact of the matter is that such preachers are simply not equipped with their own self-love (or theological education) to teach Black women how to trust in our own bodies as sites of beautiful, sacred, holy mediation. Bynum's ideas, and the proliferation of misogynist and white supremacist theologies in blackface, have pushed Black women into valleys, surrounded by dead and dry bones: dead desires, dead relationships, dead impulses, dead hearts. In receiving such teachings, we have received death; figurative enough for us to still be walking, but real enough for many of us to be zombies masquerading as good church girls.

This statement highlights Guidry's frustration with preachers like Bynum, who fail to acknowledge the importance of self-love and theological education in teaching Black women to trust their bodies. This criticism extends to the perpetuation of ideologies that prioritize the dominance of white individuals over others, as suggested by the metaphorical use of "blackface." The symbolic representation of a "valley of dry bones" serves to illustrate a state of spiritual desolation and hopelessness, leading to a sense of despair. The metaphorical demise caused by these teachings has resulted in an existence that is empty and devoid of genuine life and joy. Consequently, I recognize the necessity for new constructions of scripture that provide alternative and imaginative ways of Black women being holy.

Another example provided by Melva Sampson within the forum is titled "#BlackSkinWhiteSin: No Redemptive Quality," which further illustrates the detrimental impact

of oppressive doctrines within the Black church. Sampson reveals the internal conflict and shame instigated by doctrines that label premarital sex as a sin. Despite being in love with and sexually in sync with a man, after their intimate moments, Sampson sometimes began praying and asking God for forgiveness. During Juanita Bynum's visit to a Washington, DC church, Sampson went to the alter to have Bynum lay hands on her to free her sexual urges. This intervention exposes the failure of attempts to align personal desires with church doctrine. In response to this encounter, Sampson reveals how her shame compelled her to take part in the alter call. She asked herself "how much was my shame worth," as she offered the tennis bracelet her lover gifted her to atone for the engagement in premarital sex. Her experience highlights how her shame made her feel like she had to deny parts of herself to receive grace. Her story further reveals censorship of her body and truth, leading to years of internalized thoughts that have disdained all aspects that make her feel complete. As she concludes the forum, she emphasizes the importance of preaching church doctrine that privileges Black women's agency over their bodies. Both these narratives contribute to the critical examination of how certain church doctrines contribute to feelings of shame and guilt for Black women regarding their bodies. This further emphasizes the imperativeness of interpretations of scripture that affirm and empower Black women's wholeness.

Both Guidry and Sampson's narrative highlights the violence done to the minds and bodies concerning Black girls and women sexual politics in the church. I present these narratives to contest the damaging societal and church doctrines that characterize the bodily desires of Black women as sinful, perilous, and evil, thereby restricting their sexual agency. It advances the notion of reimaging the significance of sexuality for Black women, empowering them to define their bodies on their own terms, separate from the standards imposed by church doctrine while

recognizing their inherent sanctity. As I examine this body of work from an academic perspective, it is important to note that this discourse is also being disseminated among Black women through various social media platforms. On the Instagram page of Grown Magazine (@grownmag), an online platform founded by Kaya Nova to amplify the well-being and empowerment of Black women, focusing on self-care, the celebration of Black culture, love, and personal growth, a quote from Shonette Reed's article titled "As a Church Girl" was shared on May 19, 2023. Reed expressed,

> like many Black millennial women who grew up in the church, I often heard the message of how sex should be saved for marriage. The message urged girls and young women, to hold onto their purity until they said "I do." As life went on, and I met people outside of my Christian bubble, I learned that sex meant different things for different people. For some, it can be a more serious step in their committed relationship, or it can be taking agency over their own body by not ignoring their desires. While I learned these things, I often wondered what it looked like for those Black Christian girls, who became Black Christian women, living in a world where our body is our own.

The statement demonstrates how Reed internalized the message of saving sex for marriage. Yet, as she engaged with people outside the Christian community, she encountered diverse viewpoints regarding the meaning and importance of sex. Furthermore, the presence of this message on social media platforms is found to encourage the exploration of alternative viewpoints, facilitating connections among individuals who share similar experiences and challenges. Reed's narrative is one among many included in this dissertation to aid in comprehending its purpose and impact. Through analyzing this statement, three essential factors for empowering and liberating Black women from emotional and spiritual bondage resulting

from the suppression of their sexuality have been identified: (1) fostering a sense of cultivation of Black women's sexual identity (2) acknowledging the significance of their stories of sexual repression as a catalyst for transformation and community building, and (3) providing a sacred space where Black women can thrive in their intersecting experiences of being Black, female, spiritual, and sexual.

Based on Reed's statement, it is evident that sexuality can vary greatly for individuals, with some Black women feeling safe in engaging in sexual experiences outside the confines of marriage, while others may not desire sex at all, thereby imbuing their sexuality with non-physical dimensions. It is therefore imperative to afford Black women the space and affirmation to identify and embrace their own unique interpretations of sexuality. Additionally, the power of storytelling becomes apparent as it allows Black women to recognize the diversity of their narratives and find empowerment through communal connections. Furthermore, the notion of a sacred space transcends physical boundaries, emphasizing the significance of emotional expression in the presence of individuals who can empathize with their lived experiences. The contention put forth is that when these three factors operate in harmony, they engender transformative change by fostering a sense of belonging and understanding toward personal growth and self-acceptance.

Literary Empowerment

Storytelling is and has been a form of language and literacy tool and practice for the Black community for many generations. In telling their stories, enslaved people were able to memorize language, sights, smells, and sounds from the homes that they were taken from. Also, it enabled them to keep in touch with family and friends, forge new ties, exchange information across plantations, and for perfecting language skills (Banks-Wallace, 2002). This dissertation

focuses on the presentation of stories in literature, encompassing various written forms such as novels and plays. Authors employ language and narrative techniques within these literary works to express their creativity, share ideas, and capture the essence of the human experience, transcending time and cultures. Notably, literature possesses the ability to ignite the imagination and inspire readers to envision the characters and situations depicted in the text (Morrison,1984). Trevor Cairney (2011) further affirms this notion in his essay "The Power of Story," emphasizing that literature has the capacity to educate, enrich, and transform individuals. Its enduring form signifies its long-lasting significance, relevance, and cultural landscape for future readers.

In my journey as a Black woman and scholar, I turned to Black women's literature to gain clarity about the experiences of Black women in their sexuality. During my teenage years, I was introduced to the authors such as Zane, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. In Zane's novel, *The Sisters of APF* (2003), the story revolves around a group of Black women who were members of the sorority Alpha Phi Fuckem (APF). The book contained explicit depictions of sexual encounters, including scenes of self-pleasure, as a means of exploring and empowering their sexuality. Similarly, Alice Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* (2003), depicted Celie's struggles in discovering her own sexuality, while Shugg embraced the fluidity of her sexuality by engaging with both men and women. These literary examples challenged the assumption that heterosexuality is the only valid expression of one's identity. Additionally, in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1998), the unapologetic character of Sula defied societal judgments as a Black woman exploring her femininity and engaging with multiple partners, introducing me to the concept of polyamory and the exploration of multiple relationships. These novels played a pivotal role in my personal development, providing healing for my younger self and contributing to the

formation of my Black female identity. They imparted valuable lessons on approaching sexuality from various perspectives, recognizing its manifold interpretations, and emphasizing the significance of individual self-definition, free from societal expectations. This realization led me to reject any sense of shame or inhibition regarding the Black church's teachings of purity and piety that suppressed the sexuality of Black girls and women.

Consequently, my definition of sexuality transcended mere physical intercourse to encompass a journey of self-exploration, and liberation for the mind, body, and soul. This aligns with my understanding of Audre Lorde's concept, where she discusses accessing our erotic being—a sense of internal self and contentment ("Uses of the Erotic"). Lorde emphasizes the importance of striving for authenticity and fostering our personal growth, even when it might challenge societal norms or our own comfort. This perspective underscores the idea that embracing our own desires and emotions imbues us with strength and agency (7).

This understanding paves the way for my argument that literature serves as a mechanism for disrupting the recurring patterns experienced by Black women within the Black church. It possesses the capacity to broaden our[4] perspectives and transport us to realms beyond our physical reach. Drawing from my personal encounter, literature has the ability to provide Black women with written representations of their lived realities, humanizing their existence. Numerous works of fiction authored by Black women writers are dedicated to the imaginative creation of pathways for healing. Novels such as *Mama Day* (1989), *The Salt Eaters* (1980), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and numerous others explore the theme of healing, delving into various aspects such as the influence of elders, self-actualization, and communal

[4] When using the word 'our' and 'us,' I am inserting myself to represent a shared common experience among Black women.

support. The experience of bell hooks as a professor serves as an illustration of the manifestation of healing. In *Sister of the Yam* (2014), hooks recount the time she had her women writer's class read Toni Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters* (1992). After reading, a few students approached her to talk through their connection to the character Velma, a Black woman who tries to take her own life. As a result of hearing these students express their feelings of alienation and solitude, hooks recognized that a support group was needed and took the initiative to facilitate one (5). This example underscores the power of literature to evoke personal identification and establish emotional connections among readers. Particularly within hooks' classroom, Bambara's novel catalyzed the students' introspection, prompting them to engage in discussions about their individual hardships and experiences of isolation. hooks' dedication to fostering a safe and supportive environment to reflect upon and share their personal narrative is noteworthy. Within her classroom, a sense of security prevailed, while her guidance demonstrated a collective understanding. Through their exposure to Velma's literary experiences, the students gained an opportunity to confront deeply ingrained thoughts, ultimately unearthing wounds that could pave the way for healing.

In the 1984 article "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Toni Morrison further expands that literature should contain elements that enlighten readers toward a path forward. She argues that it should allude to conflicts and problems without necessarily resolving them (341). Drawing on Morrison's interpretation, I assert that the healing effect of literature comes from Black women working with the author on the construction of the book. Their roles involve interpreting the deeper meaning of the text through the context that the author provides, and the parts of the text that are not explained. The healing aspect comes from them being able to interpret parts of the text that relate to them and even the parts they feel are missing in their lives.

This places them in direct authority over their feelings, and perceptions, enabling their own knowledge production of the text. Consequently, Black women will receive the representation they deserve without being silenced or pushed to the margins.

In an interview with Claudia Tate, the former editor of *Black Women Writers at Work* (2023), writer Alexis De Veaux emphasizes that literature should not just feature Black women, but also showcase them in a way that empowers them. She contends that the examination of Black women as fictional characters involves considering them as role models in places where they would not normally be. This approach aims to analyze the challenges and circumstances these characters encounter and observe how they navigate through conflicts. This implies that portraying Black women in diverse roles and settings can inspire and challenge preconceived notions. Additionally, De Veaux underscores the significance of understanding how Black women interpret, manifest, and construct love for both their partner and society (76). By mentioning the notions of interpreting, manifesting, and constructing love, De Veaux engages in a profound exploration of Black women's emotional lives and relationships, shedding light on their experiences and struggles. In essence, her writing becomes a vehicle of representation, interpretation, and discovery to navigate the pressures of what it means to be a Black woman. De Veaux unveils the need to read Black women's lived experiences through a critical lens, particularly by considering the intersecting dimensions of their oppressions.

Black Feminism

This aligns with the revolutionary approach embraced by the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist organization, as articulated in their 1977 seminal work, "The Combahee River Collective Statement." This statement stands as one of the early contributions that helped shape and define perspectives on embracing a Black feminist identity and approach to life. Notably,

they sought to recognize the personal as political (235). By emphasizing this idea, the Combahee River Collective aimed to validate and center Black women's experiences and emphasize their collective resistance. Within the statement, the group articulates its mission and goals as being dedicated to actively confronting "racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression [with their specific objective being] the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that...major systems of oppression are interlocking" (232). It underscores the importance of recognizing the interlocking oppressions that Black women endure and encourages a shift in perspective, where white individuals held racial privilege and power dynamics, and gender roles were shaped by heterosexuality and patriarchal norms. As a result, it prompts reflection on how our sexualities and colonial pasts contribute to molding our lived realities (Combahee River Collective, 1977; Collins, 2002). Furthermore, it can be inferred that this mission recognizes that dismantling systems of oppression requires the knowledge of those most directly impacted by them. This is precisely why Black feminist scholars spanning from diverse fields reject the concept of objectivity in research (Taylor, 2018; Steele, 2021). Therefore, by adopting a Black feminist perspective, we prioritize Black women's bodies, knowledge, and lived experiences toward liberation, and encourage transformative social change.

Henceforth, this dissertation employs Black feminist frameworks to empower Black women to fully embrace their subjective knowledge base. Moreover, it endeavors to redefine their consciousness of the multiple dimensions of intersectional oppression, with specific regard to their sexuality[5]. It creates opportunities for Black women to explore the relationship they have with their bodies, society, and the prevailing cultural norms, and pushes their stories at the forefront to deconstruct narratives positioning them as inferior. Ultimately, as Black women

[5] Refer to page 128 of Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought* for additional insights into the empowering impact of Black women's sexuality when they have the agency to self-define.

actively engage with literature that reflects their lived experiences, this process facilitates the cultivation of Black feminist frameworks. Consequently, this cultivation nurtures their diverse comprehension of the essence of being a Black sexual woman, while also nurturing their spiritual beliefs.

Defining Terms

These are some of the terms that are foundational to my work. I employ these terms in distinct ways to shape the trajectory of my analysis and discourse.

The **sexuality** of Black women during enslavement played a major role in how their sexuality was controlled within the Black church. Black women encountered sexual exploitation and abuse by their white enslavers, who exerted power and control over their bodies. These experiences had lasting effects on societal perceptions of Black women, leading to dehumanization and viewing them as objects of desire and property. While the Black church served as a space of refuge and spiritual liberation for Black women, it also perpetuated entrenched societal views of their sexuality. The Black church enforced sexual purity and piety as a way to portray Black women as being virtuous and morally upstanding. However, this enforcement became a means of controlling their bodies, regulating their behaviors, and upholding patriarchal power structures. This dissertation urges for new constructions of sexuality that affirm and empower Black women as sexual beings. It asserts that sexuality encompasses more than just the physical act of sex, but the ability to exercise agency over their bodies to heal the mind, body, and soul from misconceptions about their bodies. Drawing on Audre Lorde's work in *Sister Outsider* (1984), it encourages the embracement of diverse sexual identities and experiences of Black women's sexuality to challenge societal norms and reclaim agency. This aligns with the idea of a sexual discourse of resistance discussed by Brown Douglas in *Sexuality*

and the Black Church, which promotes an enriching view of Black female sexuality free from the influence of white, hetero-patriarchal culture.

Black women receive many social messages about their bodies and the **sin** that comes from not adhering to these expectations. Drawing from Brittney Cooper's insight in *Eloquent Rage*, she remarks, "telling grown-ass women that all sex outside of marriage is an affront to God is ludicrous." She further emphasizes that "healthy consensual touch is nothing short of holy. But the indoctrination is real, especially if you are invested in being a "good girl," especially if your goal in life is to not "repeat the cycle," to not "become a statistic." Black women find themselves navigating the pressures to conform to notions of marital sex and sustaining the suppression of their diverse identities, thus dissociating themselves from the perceived sexual immorality that supposedly stains them. This is a representation of the concept of the **politics of respectability**, through which Black women are reclaiming space for themselves by promoting the idea of holiness, purity, and conservatism to challenge negative stereotypes and humanize them (Higginbotham, 1993). While respectability politics initially had an important purpose upon its emergence in the 1900s, it has been utilized as a means of control. Therefore, it is essential to critique and rethink how we use this idea.

Consequently, I resist these damaging messages as sinful acts that compromise the self-worth, articulation, sexual autonomy, and sense of community of Black women. Any actions or discourses that undermine their self-esteem are considered a sin. The historical intention behind the devaluation of Black women was to diminish their self-worth and instill feelings of inferiority. This dissertation seeks to empower Black women and propose alternative ways of embodiment. In this regard, it aligns with the views of womanist scholar Delores Williams in her 1993 work "A Womanist Perspective on Sin", where she argues that devaluing Black

womanhood and sexuality, including Black lesbian women, constitutes sin. Accordingly, within a Black feminist dynamic, I am delineating the concept of sin as actions or systemic structures rooted in social power dynamics that devalue and dehumanize Black women, perpetuating their marginalization and suffering. Stated differently, sin obstructs Black women from understanding, identifying, and exploring their sexual agency.

The experience of **shame**, stemming from societal expectations and moral standards, poses an obstacle to the personal growth and well-being of Black women. Particularly within the Black church, shame arises when Black women deviate from prescribed moral and value systems for women, engaging in perceived misbehavior or poor choices. This feeling of shame emerges when individuals believe they are falling short and face criticism as a consequence. In her chapter in *You Are Your Best Thing* (2021), Tracey Michae'l Lewis-Giggetts exemplifies this occurrence by recounting how elder women in her Black church would drape scarves over the legs of women and girls wearing skirts considered too short, gossip about the apparent lack of self-control exhibited by a single mother raising four children on her own, or criticize young girls for being outspoken and "too smart for her own good" (55). These examples underscore the expectation for women to dress modestly, be silent in their speech, and conform to traditional gender roles to secure a "good" husband. Failing to meet these expectations evokes a sense of shame and marginalizes these women through covert disapproval.

Growing up in the church, Black women are surrounded by female role models, including mothers, grandmothers, and "sisters," who shape their perception of womanhood based on their service to the church. Lewis-Giggets highlights an important perspective on shame, explaining how it can be intertwined with love. She suggests that the shame experienced by church mothers acts as protection that may stem from a desire to shield them from potential hardships based on

their own experiences and knowledge (57). This concept is rooted in the belief that controlling the bodies and behavior of Black women can lead to increased respectability and protection within the community. In doing so, church mothers shield themselves from the need to confront any conflicts within their belief systems. However, within this protection, a judgmental atmosphere prevails, dictating that Black women navigate and negotiate their identities and beliefs, limiting their agency and self-expression. This situation exemplifies the politics of respectability, serving as a tool to fight against the dehumanization of Black women.

I argue that Black women can overcome their feelings of shame through exposure to literature that portrays their **lived experiences**. In *Black Feminist Thought* (2002), Collins defines this process as Black women gaining wisdom and understanding about their intersecting challenges of race, gender, and class toward survival. In essence, the cultural experiences that Black women face as an individual and collective, embody their Black womanhood. As a result, engaging with literature written by and about Black women allows them to establish a connection with the characters, dispelling the notion of isolation in their own experiences.

To facilitate this, the intervention I propose entails organizing a research study in the form of a book club. This book club was advertised on social media to bring together a collective of Black women who will engage in reading and discussing a specific book that resonates with their lived experiences. This intervention, which will be further discussed in chapter three, builds on the Black feminist-womanist **storytelling** (Baker-Bell, 2017**)** practice of exchanging personal stories as an integral part of cultural and literary engagement. By providing a platform for Black women to express their multifaceted identities and communicate with one another, it aims to contribute to the renegotiating of their Black sexual politics. Notably, this practice embraces and

promotes **Black feminist** research methodologies by recognizing the lived experiences and collective wisdom of Black women as valuable sources of truth and knowledge (Collins 256).

Through active participation in the book club, Black women are engaging in what I refer to as **sexual justice**. This concept entails the redefinition of living as a sexual Black woman. It signifies their faith in God as a personal journey they define, free from societal standards and expectations. This manifestation of sexual justice is a reinforcement of the values proposed in **Black feminist theology**. This theological perspective emphasizes the importance of Black women embracing and engaging with all aspects of themselves, effectively bridging the gap between their sexuality and spirituality. Lomax (2018) contends that this theology engrosses the "messy, inconclusive, and vulgar" aspects, alongside liberative understandings of God. According to Lomax, this theology moves away from a rigid understanding of theology in order to acknowledge its limitations in adequately addressing the experiences and concerns of Black women. It also challenges conventional ideas of respectability and purity, embracing an openness that fosters a more nuanced comprehension of spirituality and sexuality.

Chapter Discussions

There will be a total of six chapters in this dissertation. In Chapter 1, I examine the demonization of Black women's sexuality as it has been reflected by Black women thinkers and writers. I argue that Black women writers talk about Black women's experiences of sexual subjectivity in order to produce alternative understandings of what it means to inhabit a Black female body. In doing so, they help me reimagine a new social order in which their sexual agency is affirmed and elevated.

Chapter 2 describes the theory and methodology that guided this research, employing Black feminist theoretical perspectives and introducing *testimonial storytelling* based on these

frameworks. Chapter 3 highlights the design of the book club research study from the selection process to where we met, and how often we met. As the book club participants met, I analyzed how my participants reacted to the main character's quest towards sexual liberation and entreated them to reflect on how church doctrine has influenced their sexual experiences. I listen intently to the specific language that my participants use to describe their experiences to understand how language choices impact how Black women negotiate their sexual identities.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the book club research study gathered through a dialogical approach as a beauty salon engagement. It highlights the responses of the participants to the discussion questions raised. In chapter 5, an analysis of the themes that surface during the book club is presented, addressing the study's research questions. I conclude the dissertation with a discussion of the major implications of the study. I also point out the venue for future research in the field as it relates to biblical women and Black women preachers.

Conclusion

To conclude, my commitment to supporting Black women arises from my own journey of overcoming obstacles as a "troubled" pastor's daughter. I engage in testimonial storytelling to convey my understanding of Black women and girls' challenges within a system that seeks to oppress and dehumanize them. I confess that although my experiences may have originated in the church, I am increasingly moving away from it. However, I recognize that my spirituality remains a fundamental part of who I am. Hence, I aspire to cultivate a world where the values of my *inner* church align with principles of justice, particularly sexual justice.

CHAPTER ONE

In this chapter, I delve deeper into the historical context of how Black women's experiences under white supremacy have impacted their sexuality. The discussion encompasses the ongoing challenges to their sexual autonomy due to the emergence of damaging stereotypes. Additionally, an exploration is conducted into how Black women have adopted the principles of respectability politics to attain respect. The chapter further discusses the role of the Black church in perpetuating these stereotypes, imposing rules and regulations to uphold Black women's respectability. Furthermore, I analyze Black women's literature, testimonies, and songs to explore the lived experiences of Black women and to shine a light on how their bodies are used, misused, and maligned by society at large, as well as harmful church doctrine. Through this analysis, I aim to demonstrate the diverse forms of resistance that Black women have employed to navigate discrimination and reclaim their narratives. Moreover, the examples cited in this chapter underscore the necessity for frameworks that liberate Black women sexually, dismantling the harmful narratives and opening pathways for their sexual liberation.

History of Black Women's Experiences

Historically, Black women's bodies have been manipulated and denigrated. Notably, during enslavement, they endured sexual exploitation inflicted by white slaveholders. They were regarded as property and denied agency over their own bodies. Enslaved Black women often suffered from rape, coerced procreation, and painful separation from their families (Davis 1983). These experiences had detrimental impacts on their sexual lives. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a narrative written by Harriet Jacobs, she illustrates her firsthand account as an enslaved woman in the 19th century. While Jacobs underwent many arduous challenges, it is her

struggles concerning her sexuality within the oppressive conditions of slavery that I want to highlight.

Jacobs recalls the sexual harassment she endured at the hands of Dr. Flint, her married master. At the tender age of fifteen, Dr. Flint initiated his unwarranted sexual advances, employing tactics such as whispered messages and written notes, under the guise of him transforming Jacobs into a "virtuous" woman like his wife, provided she does as she's "required" (92). Jacobs expresses her feelings of discontent as Dr. Flint evades her mind with unclean images, fostering feelings of entrapment due to her obligation to obey him as her "master" (33). She brings attention to the power dynamics inherent in the relationship between an enslaved individual and their master. Her portrayal of the experience illustrates Dr. Flint's dominion over her life and his insistence on obedience. She further mentions the significant age disparity to exemplify how his conduct was degrading and demoralizing (33). He treated her as mere property depriving her of any autonomy over her own body. Despite her inexperience, he exposed her to the exploitation women experienced during slavery, denying her the ability to envision her own desires.

To protect herself and maintain her sense of agency, Jacobs willingly engaged in a consensual sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, an unmarried white man, who expressed a need to help her situation. This situation evoked a range of emotions within Jacobs, including the feeling of shame. Nonetheless, she perceived it as the only way to gain protection from the relentless advances of Dr. Flint. Additionally, it serves as a means for her to exert agency over her own body and navigate the challenging circumstances of the time. Jacobs illuminates her thought process, revealing an awareness of the divide between her and Mr. Sand. As an enslaved woman, she favored being the subject of interest for an unmarried man who was not her

"master." She articulates this viewpoint by expressing, "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (68). Jacob's perspective delves into the psychology of an enslaved individual, who had to explore difficult choices and justifications for their actions within a repressive environment. Jacob rationalizes her decision to engage in a sexual encounter with Mr. Sands as a means to reclaim her personal agency, granting her a sense of validation and pride as an enslaved person. Additionally, Dr. Flint's wife displayed jealous tendencies by attributing her husband's indecent behavior to Jacob. As previously mentioned, this is due to Black and white women experiencing their sexuality differently, where Black women are prescribed to sexual deviance and impurity, white women are attached to traits of modesty and purity (Wallace-Sanders, 2002). Therefore, in Jacobs's judgment, engaging with an unmarried man who was not her master spared her from dealing with a jealous wife, and fostered a relationship characterized by respect and decency rather than control. Jacobs's experiences illuminate the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality within the institution of slavery, and the measures Black women would undertake to assert autonomy over their own lives.

Jacobs's experience is emblematic of many women during that time who faced simultaneous hardships of sexual and racial oppression. These women were stripped of their humanity based on the color of their skin and treated as chattel. Even after the abolition of slavery, the deeply ingrained ideologies of control and ownership over Black women's lives endured. The perpetuation of degrading images persisted, further eroding Black women's sense of self, and undermining their way of being.

Stereotypes of Black Women

Black women are subjected to numerous prevailing stereotypes. In the book *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins highlights the controlling images of Black women that pervade society and impose specific labels onto their bodies. These images include the portrayal of Black women as mules, mammies, or jezebels, representing oppressive stereotypes that hinder their ways of being. In the context of Black women as mules, it displays how Black women are objectified and not seen as human. Collins states, "as dehumanized objects, mules are living machines and can be treated as part of the scenery" (46). This was an attempt to undermine and disempower enslaved individuals through negative perception as a deliberate strategy to immobilize their minds and perpetuate a sense of inferiority. Sojourner Truth, a prominent advocate for the rights of Black women, is known for her outspoken activism. Born into slavery in 1773 with the name Isabella, she experienced being sold away from her parents at age nine. Her former "master" was Dutch, resulting in her not learning English. Her inability to speak English proved to be disadvantageous and led to constant misunderstandings and punishments (Wallace-Sanders, 2002). It is important to acknowledge that despite Truth being unable to read or write, delivered the legendary speech "Ain't I a Woman" at the Women's Rights Convention in 1851. Interestingly, this speech was recounted in 1863 by Frances Gage, a white woman and abolitionist who was the president of the Convention. Reports have indicated clear errors in the recounting of Truth's lived experiences possibly due to Gage's southern dialect and language choices. This is significant because it accentuates the notion that a white woman may not be able to convey Black women's experiences, even when engaged in a common cause (Painter, 1996). Despite Truth being known for her fluency in multiple languages, a white woman characterized her in a manner that was not fitting to her history and way of life, distorting her true experiences.

Nonetheless, the essential theme of challenging the dehumanizing images of women prevailed in various accounts of this speech. Through the repetitive questioning in the speech, particularly the phrase "ain't I a woman," Truth asserts her own humanity and refutes the objectifying image imposed upon her. She draws attention to the disparity between societal expectations and her own experiences by mentioning her experiences as a laborer, mother, and woman to assert her individuality and reinforce her humanity (Truth, 1851). This aligns with the experiences depicted in Jacobs's autobiography, where enslaved women faced the agonizing reality of having their children sold into slavery without receiving any empathetic response. Despite their grief, they were still expected to exert themselves for their masters, with their fundamental humanity being ignored. Truth's speech stood as a testament to the resilience and strength of Black women who defy stereotypes imposed on them, such as being compared to mules.

In contrast to the objectification of Black women as mules, Collins also alludes to their portrayal as mammies. This image emerged during slavery and served to dispute the reality that slavery was "a harsh, cruel, and brutal system" (Jewell 171). The image of mammy stood in direct opposition to femininity and the prevailing American conception of womanhood. It depicted an overweight, dark-skinned Black woman, with unappealing attire, and her hair typically covered with a scarf. As Carolyn West suggests in the article "Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Their Homegirls," the depiction of the mammy figure as both overweight and devoid of sexual appeal discredits rape culture and sexual abuse toward Black women (291). This served to dispel any curiosity from the white male gaze directed at the Black female body, thereby posing no threat to the idealized white woman. The Pearl Milling Company, a small mill company that introduced Aunt Jemima pancake mix in 1889, capitalized on these racist portrayals of the fictional mammy image as part of their marketing strategy (Manring 21). Both

"Aunt" and "mammy" are terms associated with Southern house slaves (Morgan 89). The act of purchasing a box of Aunt Jemima pancake mix evoked nostalgic reflections of slavery, through the representation of a "slave in a box" (Mcelya 20).

In the early 20th century film *Gone with the Wind*, Mammy, portrayed by Hattie McDaniel, embodies the enduring depiction of the mammy figure. This role involved mothering the white children as if they were her own, presenting a more "acceptable" perspective on slavery. Situated in the late 19th century, Mammy is presented as the loyal and devoted servant to Scarlett O'Hara, the white female protagonist. Her portrayal emphasizes the nurturing and confidante aspects of her role, often providing advice akin to that of a mother advising her child. Despite Scarlett's multiple marriages and the birth of her child, Mammy is never shown with a husband or child of her own. Central to the mammy figure displayed, is her status as a non-sexual threat to the white wife. The complex dynamics of Mammy and Scarlett's relationship are evident in scenes where Mammy assists Scarlett with her dress, ensuring it is tight and flat on her waist. In contrast to this, Mammy is presented in a dress that accentuates the roundness of her curves and body. These scenes symbolize the extent to which mammy is involved in maintaining the appearance and social standing of the white family she serves.

This is elucidated by Jacobs through the narrative of her grandmother's role as an enslaver. Although her grandmother was granted "freedom" upon her mistress's death, she was subsequently offered for private sale by her new "master." Jacob recounts, "[Grandma] had for a long time supplied many families with crackers and preserves; consequently, "Aunt Marthy," as she was called, was generally known, and everybody who knew her respected her intelligence and good character" (11-12). Jacob's grandmother was called "Aunt" because of her faithful service to the family. However, when her mistress passed away, she again became disposable to

the next master. Despite the injustice, on the day of the sale, she sprung up at first call to accept her predetermined fate. She serves as a representative of enslaved women who ensured the hardships of slavery with a smile, consistently providing their best efforts, and displaying dedication to their community. I present this context not to imply that nurturing, caregiving, and serving others are negative traits. Rather, it is to assert the reality that portraying Black women as undesirable and dedicated to nurturing others while neglecting their own needs, is detrimental to them. This contributes to the perception of asexuality associated with the mammy figure, taking away their pleasure and propagating damaging images that undermine their sense of self (West, 2012).

Furthermore, Collins discusses the jezebel stereotype as a portrayal of Black women. She accounts that "jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black enslaved women" (81). The identity of jezebel emerged during slavery to rationalize the sexual desire and exploitation of enslaved Black women. Often depicted with fair skin and a seductive figure, she was falsely portrayed as excessively sexual and manipulative (Bell; Collins; Jewell). Despite this negative representation, the harsh reality remains that many enslaved Black women experienced sexual abuse and rape, as exemplified in Harriet Jacobs's lived experience during the time. As time passed, the jezebel figure became associated with exploiting the vulnerabilities of men, leading to her being labeled as hypersexualized, and held responsible for their moral faults, perpetuating this damaging reputation (West 462). Consequently, enslavers considering Black women as objects and sexually aggressive contributes to their dehumanization and lack of status in society. An example of this is shown through the nineteenth-century Black woman, Sarah Baartman. Baartman, a

member of the Khoisan group, was born in 1789 in the interior of the Cape Colony of South Africa (Sharpley-Whiting). In 1810, while in her early twenties, she entered a contractual agreement with Alexander Dunlop and Hendrik Cezar, who brought her to Europe with the purpose of exhibiting her Hottentot (Khoikhoi) body (Tillet 943-5). There, her body was commodified and transformed into the "Hottentot Venus," serving as a symbol of racial and sexual objectification, specifically designed to entertain European (French) men. Baartman's physical features, notably her large buttocks and genitalia, were considered unusual by French standards, rendering her body an anomaly. Sharpley-Whiting further discusses how Baartman's body was scrutinized "to discern identity, difference, and progress" of the stages of human evolution. The sketches of Baartman's body relegated her body as the "primitive other" in comparison to the European self, and therefore, reducing her to mere object of desire and amusement for the white audience. Sander Gilman further supports this notion by emphasizing the racial and sexual distinctions in the following statement, "The antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the black, and the essential black, the lowest exemplum of mankind on the great chain of being, is the Hottentot. It is indeed in the physical appearance of the Hottentot that the central icon for sexual difference between the European and the black was found" (83). In this context, Gilman highlights the binary opposition between European standards and the perceived "otherness" of Black individuals. The characterization of the Hottentot as the embodiment of sexual difference reinforces the idea of Black bodies as subjects of fascination and sexual deviance within European society. Her body came to symbolize the standard representation of "Africa" and Black female sexuality within the European context (Tillet).

Considering the negative portrayal of Baartman, it is similarly important to acknowledge the contrasting narrative that praises the bodies and physical attributes of Black women. This can be discerned in popular culture, exemplified by the song “Black Effect” by The Carters, where they rap about the beauty of Black women’s features, including “stunt with your curls, your lips, Sarah Baartman hips.” In this statement, The Carters are providing a narrative about Black women’s way of being such as with their natural hair, big lips, and wider thighs, as being unapologetically beautiful, unapologetically Black. The above positive affirmation for Black women makes room for their cultural experiences to be represented in multiple ways that position Blackness with excellence, beauty, and pride. Sarah Baartman’s hips went from a symbol of exploitation to a source of empowerment for Black women. The same attempt needs to be given when thinking and comparing Black women to jezebel.

Through the treatment of Baartman’s body and the context of the jezebel image, it becomes evident that the controlling images of Black women allude to the societal expectations regarding proper conduct and physical appearance pertaining to female sexuality. Collins highlights the significance of this concept by examining how the jezebel image manifests in class, racial, and gender oppression (Collins 132). She underscores the intricate ways in which the jezebel image perpetuates systemic injustices against Black women. The image is employed to justify the exploitation of Black women’s bodies through prostitution and sexual assaults while promoting the ideal of pure white womanhood. Baartman’s treatment serves as an example of how Black women’s bodily difference makes them vulnerable to exploitation and sets them apart from the presentation of white women to society. Consequently, this validates the unequal treatment of Black women, as to why they are hypersexualized. This intensifies the disruption and distancing of Black women from the 19th-century concept of true womanhood, characterized

by piety and purity. It continues to perpetuate the construct of white women in American society as embodying true womanhood. As a result, Black women face ongoing suppression in exploring their own sexual identities in order to preserve both their self-image and the image of the Black community. In essence, Black women are attempting to navigate respectability politics to establish a positive sense of self amidst the degrading depictions of Black womanhood (Collins).

jezebel in the Black Church

Collins's account of jezebel is significant in displaying how this distorted image impedes the sexual development of Black women. However, it is important to note that Collins does not encompass the biblical context of jezebel. Biblically, the story of jezebel is found in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. jezebel, a Phoenician princess from Tyre married the King of Northern Israel, Ahab. She was perceived as a cunning and seductive Queen, responsible for murder, and in opposition to God, leading to her being branded as the "bad girl of the bible, the wickedest of women" (Gaines). Not only seen as a seductress by her style of hair and how she carried herself (2 Kings 9:30-37), but her husband, King Ahab seems to listen to her in ways that are not proper conduct for a man and wife (1 Kings 21). As an example, jezebel worships the deities of her cultural background, Baal and Asherah, urging her husband Ahab to forsake his God of Israel, Yahweh. She further employs her influence to execute his prophets (Lomax 40). jezebel's lack of loyalty to Yahweh and the apparent authority she seemed to have over the throne, embodied a culture of change that challenged traditional gender roles of the time[6]. In other words, jezebel's problem arose from her exercise of power in a way typically associated with male monarchs in political affairs, that was unseemly for women. She was perceived as a foreign woman who brought danger with her (Pippin 35). Her success in political pursuits led to the demonization of

[6] See page 40 of *Jezebel Unhinged* to discover the conversation that Tamura Lomax and Wilda Gafney had in anticipation of the discussion of jezebel in Gafney's book, *Womanist Midrash*.

women as jezebels to keep them as sexualized figures and to remove the political agency they acquired. Consequently, she met a gruesome death in which she was thrown out of a window, and only her skull, feet, and the palms of her hands were recovered for her burial[7]. What intrigued me most about this story was how jezebel lived and died on her own terms. This is exemplified by her actions of applying makeup, wearing a wig, and dressing in nice attire as she awaited her death while gazing out the window. jezebel asserted control over her own body, even though she was perceived as the "other, a collection of things to be discard" (Lomax 43). The distinction between the misleading historical stereotype and the biblical representation underscores the consequences of such misrepresentations. According to the authors of *Breaking the Chains*, the jezebel stereotype is portrayed as one of the most prevalent and detrimental misconceptions about Black women. This stereotype perpetuates the false reality that Black women are promiscuous, seen as the community's harlot, and sexually permissive (Brown, White-Johnson, and Griffin-Fernell).

In addition to the sexual dimension of jezebel, there is an implicit understanding of her being a threat to the social order in ways that mirror Black women's status in American culture. An example of this is shown by Tom Buck, senior pastor of the First Baptist Church in Lindale, Texas referring to Vice President Kamala Harris as a jezebel. He stated that he has a problem with Harris's "godless character" due to her support of increasing women's access to abortion and protecting LGBTIQA+ people's right to marry (Wingfield). In reaction to this, in an article by Jane Clayson and Samantha Raphelson titled, "Unpacking What It Means to Call Kamala Harris A Jezebel," they cite the perspective of Tamura Lomax, a Black feminist religio-cultural theorist, who expresses comparing Harris to jezebel reinforces systemic sexism and fuels

[7] 2 Kings 9: 30-37

attempts to weaken women who challenge traditional gender norms by undermining their credibility and qualifications. As a Black woman myself, having grown up in the church, the name-calling of Harris is not unexpected, but it poses dangerous risks when such an inscription is attached to one's identity. Also, being perceived as a threat to society endangers Harris's safety as a Black woman but this discussion lies beyond the purview of this chapter. Nonetheless, this brings into vision the notion of disentangling the jezebel figure from Black women's interiority and exteriority. The essence of this idea is to recognize that the jezebel image does not reflect the identity of Black women but stems from discriminatory perceptions imposed on them by society. Acknowledging this allows for the celebration of the individuality and humanity of Black women while rejecting harmful stereotypes that have persisted throughout history.

In the book *Jezebel Unhinged*, Lomax strives to achieve this goal. She asserts, "unhinging jezebel means loosing her from black women's and black girls' bodies and black-and-white interpretations. It means unscrewing the symbolic bolts that clasp her together and letting her fall while also exploring and making sense of what keeps holding her together in the first place" (3). This statement indicates the necessity to extricate the jezebel image from Black women's bodies, as well as the dichotomous inscriptions that come with those two entangled: good vs. bad, pure vs. impure, or white vs. Black. In other words, it means to make space for the messiness that comes with the image but to also form positive definitions of Black women's bodies not associated with negative connotations and limitations. This brings me back to the primary purpose of this chapter, which is to discover alternative narratives for Black women's sexuality that are not rooted in harmful stereotypes, particularly harmful church doctrines.

Respectability Politics and the Black Church

Expanding on the examination of harmful stereotypes, this section of this chapter centers on the discourse pertaining to Black women's sexuality in the Black church. In her work *Righteous Discontent*, Evelyn Higginbotham coined the term "politics of respectability" to counter negative stereotypes about the moral conduct of Black people of the time, reclaim their humanity, and advocate for their rights. The politics of respectability served as a set of guidelines delineating how Black people should act to earn respect. This idea was centered on addressing the sexual assault faced by Black women, particularly at the hands of white men. This issue stemmed from historical bias that portrayed Black women as promiscuous, hindering legal punishment for rape victims (Higginbotham 190). One instance in particular that reflects this is the rape of Recy Taylor in 1944 Alabama, made into a documentary in 2018 by Nancy Buirski. Taylor was a 24-year-old wife and mother who was on her way home from church with her friend and teenage son when she was forced into a car at gunpoint and then gang raped by six white men. Police were able to identify the abusers, but they refuted the accusations, claiming they had compensated her. Retribution was never made for their crime, despite many attempts at the hopes of getting the rape to trial. Recy Taylor did not receive an apology from the state of Alabama until 2012 (McGuire, 2010; Buirsky, 2018). This case demonstrated that raping Black women was legally permissible, and those responsible for the assault would not be held accountable.

To address the sexual assault and dehumanizing stereotypes, Northern and Southern communities, alongside members of the National Baptist Convention, created organizations and groups that focused on Black women's issues, including those related to gender and sexuality. One organization was the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention which

addressed the needs, concerns, and empowerment of women within the church and the community as a whole. Specifically, this was a space that attempted to promote racial advancement and gender equality. Higginbotham emphasizes that the formation of the women's convention allowed "a national constituency of Black women asserted agency in the construction and representation of themselves as new subjectivities—as Americans as well as blacks and women. They contested racist discourses and rejected white America's depiction of Black women as immoral, childlike, and unworthy of respect or protection" (186). The above statement underlies the determination of Black women to reject labels of inferiority that had been forced upon them to challenge and change harmful narratives that perpetuated marginalization and oppression. The Black church also contested these problems, but its efforts were restricting and proved detrimental to Black women's sexuality. The prevailing patriarchal structure in the Black church has limited women's engagement, confining them primarily to roles such as cooking, teaching Sunday school for the youth, and providing community support (Gilkes). Consequently, these roles have imposed additional restrictions on women, regulating their dress, and controlling when they could even speak. Illustrating this point is Bynum's "No Sheets Video" which reinforces the idea that women should dress in modest apparel avoiding the appearance of greased-up legs. This aesthetic choice is meant to symbolize a rejection of a promiscuous demeanor (Bynum 21:05). This instance highlights how the effort to reshape representation and confront societal expectations is evident in various ways, including the modification of clothing choices and behaviors. In a similar vein, Hine's work "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women" introduced the concept of the "culture of dissemblance," wherein Black women restrain their sexuality due to disparaging narratives surrounding their sexuality. While these messages are likely received by all women, Black women are subjected to racial messages that

stem from a recognition of the prevailing stereotypes regarding their sexuality. As a result, Black women might be inclined to separate themselves from negative stereotypes in an effort that "proper" and respectable" behavior proved that Black people were worthy of civil and political rights ("African-American Women's History" 271).

By recognizing that racial discrimination was driven by perceptions of Black sexual deviancy, the Black church propagated the principles of respectability, especially around the topic of sexuality (*Black Sexual Politics* 106-8). Higginbotham elaborates upon this in the following statement:

> The church played the single most important role in influencing normative values and distinguishing respectable from non-respectable behavior among working-class Blacks...competing images of the church and the street symbolized cultural divisions within the mass of the Black working poor . . . [T]he street signified male turf, a public place of worldly dangers and forbidden pleasures. Churches and households, both rejecting the worldly attractions of male social space, signified fame and also sacred space. Women who strolled the streets or attended dance halls and cheap theaters promiscuously blurred the boundaries of gender (Higginbotham 204).

This statement suggests that respectability politics not only impose accountability on Black people's individual conduct but also for meeting societal expectations. The church and the household are portrayed as places that uphold sanctification and traditional values. In contrast, the street symbolizes a secular space with potential risks and forbidden pleasures. It also alludes to the limitations placed upon both men and women within the community. However, the focus on women's activities outside the church points to the potential for challenging established norms and further blurring the lines between appropriate behavior for men and women. The

quote further demonstrates the social and cultural influences the Black church's rules can have on one's identity and behavior. To understand this concept is to grasp that while respectability politics might have held significance in the past for racial uplift, there exists intricacy in the regulations it maintains, shaping the manner in which Black women live and exist in the world.

An instance of how respectability politics has been maintained within the Black church is exemplified by the transition toward recognizing Black women in positions of leadership. Wallace Best, in his work *Passionately Human, No Less Divine* delves into the religious transformation of the Great Migration to Chicago. This migration, initiated in the early 1900s, witnessed a large number of Black people relocating from the American South to Northern states in hopes of better opportunities. Best specifically highlights the emergence of a "new sacred order" characterized by urban religious practices and traditions within the Black churches of Chicago. These practices encompassed musical expressions, worship practices, and the pivotal role of Black women in developing acceptable boundaries for their church work. For example, Lucy Smith and Mary Evans, two Black women preachers, serve as exemplars of the profound influence of Black women as catalysts for change in religious leadership. In addition to their individual projects within their respective churches, Best notes that Smith and Evans were the first women to lead major churches in the city. Notably, they were also part of a select group of pastors who successfully oversaw the construction of church infrastructure from the ground up. Their collective effort encompassed the establishment of three sanctuaries, a community center, and a retirement home (149-50). However, even as Smith and Evans achieved pioneering feats, their leadership roles did not come without scrutiny, particularly with regard to their physical appearance.

Smith was characterized by a dark complexion, exceeding six feet in height, and weighing over three hundred pounds. In contrast, Evans was deemed short in height, lighter in skin complexion, with a stern facial expression (Best 151-2). Despite the disparities in their physical appearances, both women took steps towards diverting attention away from their bodies. As outlined by Best, the notion of the "masculinist conception of ministry" function to redirect attention from the work of Black women preachers towards speculations about their sexuality and bodies. Essentially, this implied that the role of preacher was typically reserved for Black men, partly driven by the fact that it allowed Black men to establish their authoritative presence within society (154). Hence, it is unsurprising that when young Mary Evans embarked on her path to ministry, she was reprimanded by her parents who asserted that preaching was a "man's work." Broadly, this dynamic worked to undermine the power and religious freedom of women while affording men the ability to exert control over aspects of Black women's existence.

In light of this, Black women preachers strategically employed the "mothering" image in their churches. This tactic was designed to desexualize and divert attention from the body, achieved through the nourishment and affection in which they addressed the congregation. It is important to acknowledge that, although the concept of mothering upholds positive connotations, exemplified by the mammy caricature, it can inadvertently limit the roles and identities of Black women. While this addresses dynamics beyond the scope of this research, it does underscore the intersections between gender, power, and motherhood (Collins; Davis, hooks). This can be done through the diminished perception of their leadership, where they might be seen as too gentle for roles involving decision-making and assertive authority. The concept also has the potential to reinforce patriarchal standards that place women within the spheres of domesticity and caregiving.

Evans, in particular, was known for taking on this approach by occasionally referring to her congregation as "children" and even sending them birthday cards to demonstrate her nurturing role akin to that of a mother. As illuminated by Best, "the mothering of her congregation effectively desexualized her…it presented the best way for black women preachers to de-emphasize the body, sex, and sexuality" (158). The "ironic power" of mothering proved especially efficacious in complicating the gendered reading of both women's physical appearances. It was a tool for navigating the complexities of Black women's roles and identities, while avoiding societal norms that emphasize the physical and sexual aspects of Black women.

Moreover, the romantic relationships of both women with their significant other were kept private or out of public view. Best hinted at Evans' rumored lesbian identity but it was never confirmed, while Smith attempted to keep her husband away from public scrutiny. These efforts to safeguard their personal relationships from the public eye underscored the distinct separation both women upheld between their sexual engagements and their religious commitments; they were separate entities. The narrative of Smith and Evans exposes the historical tendency is to "read" Black women's bodies as sites of cultural and sexual inscription" (150-1). This outcome has resulted in a climate of scrutiny and censorship within the Black community. Those who deviate from the established norms of "proper" and "respectable" behavior often face alienation or exclusion due to their perceived failure to conform to the standards set by respectability politics. This dilemma prevented Black women from fully expressing their authentic selves in a place where they sought refuge. This raises the question of how Black women can experience spiritual and sexual fulfillment while avoiding compromising their multiple ways of being.

Respectability functions as both a tool for survival and oppression, compelling us to ponder its implications. This perspective enforces specific behavior for Black individuals to be recognized as human and gain opportunities, fostering a culture of critique within the community. Although respectability politics can offer a way for Black women to obtain greater acceptance and respect, it can also yield negative outcomes by perpetuating damaging stereotypes and generating a climate of social control (Collins; Cooper). This is exemplified by Smith and Evans' experiences in ministry, where their sexual engagements and religious commitments were kept separate. Considering this complexity, this dissertation acknowledges the limitations of respectability politics and advocates for approaches that aim to advance social and sexual justice, promoting Black women's identities and ways of being without scrutiny, censorship, and confinement.

Conclusion

Overall, Black women's sexuality has been negatively impacted since the era of slavery. This fact is evident when examining the narrative of Harriet Jacobs, which illustrates how Black women had to resort to extreme measures to preserve or take ownership of their sexuality. Even following the abolition of slavery, harmful stereotypes prevailed such as mules, mammies, and jezebels to perpetuate the degradation of Black women. As a result, Black women embraced respectability politics to humanize their experiences and earn esteem. While this approach aimed to promote social progression, it stifled the diverse facets of Black women's identities, particularly regarding how they were perceived in the Black church. This calls for new frameworks that are not limiting Black women's experiences but inviting them to be free in their sexuality, attain self-actualization, and feel spiritually affirmed.

CHAPTER TWO

The purpose of this section is to present the theoretical and methodological foundations that guided this research. The outset involves an introduction to womanist theology, which shaped my understanding of Black women within the Black church. However, I gradually gravitated toward Black feminist theology because of its exploration of the multitude of Black women's ways of being. This theological framework challenges the exploitative and demeaning Christian rhetoric surrounding Black women and girls' bodies. Following that, I delve into Black feminist-womanist storytelling and its role in facilitating healing for Black women. Building upon this concept, I offer testimonial storytelling as an extension of Black feminist-womanist storytelling narrative tradition.

Accordingly, this is a research study that explores the following questions:

1. How do Black women's experiences within the Black church contribute to how they see themselves as sexual beings?
2. How does storytelling help Black women heal from the spiritual violence associated with the Black church?
3. What practices and strategies can Black women engage in to develop and strengthen their sexual politics?

Thus, I situate this conversation utilizing a multidisciplinary approach within the field of English literature, Women and Gender Studies, Religious Studies, and Language and Literacy studies.

The Influence of Womanist Theology

My experiences with the Black church of being told "my place," the dismissal of my sexuality, and the scholarship surrounding Black women in the church led me towards the study of womanist theology. Womanist theology delves into Black women's history, experiences, and culture, with a particular focus on their relationship with the Black Church and their expressions

of faith (Grant 209). This notion emerged by applying the concept of womanism by Alice Walker to theological discourse. In 1983, Walker developed a four-part definition of womanist in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden* (p.8)*:*

> 1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "you acting womanish," i.e., like a woman…Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one.
>
> 2. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually.
>
> Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually.
>
> Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.
>
> Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist…
>
> 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. Regardless.
>
> 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

Referring to the first component of the four-part definition, Walker's concept involves acting in a "womanish" manner. As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, womanish is associated with traits typically associated with women, often meant in a reproachful way (Merriam-Webster). In another sense, it references behaviors by women that deviate from traditional gender roles. In the context of the church, my decision to get my belly button pierced was deemed "womanish" because it defied the expected behaviors assigned to a Black girl by the Black church. However, in Walker's interpretation, womanish signifies acting bold, standing

firm in my views, and being able to challenge the Black church's norms by expressing oneself in ways that are not always conventionally accepted. In essence, this represented a form of empowerment and resistance because I was exercising my agency in making decisions about my own body. Building on this perspective of womanish as a form of empowerment and resistance, my introduction to womanist theology further deepened my understanding of what it means to be Black, female, and made in the image of God. However, it also led me to recognize the need for a broader framework that spoke to the multitudes of my identity that extended beyond my religious beliefs, but more on my attributes as a Black woman.

Candice Benbow provides insightful commentary that encapsulates what I was trying to convey. She states, "I didn't realize how much womanist theology could and would reorient my theological perspective. It gave me the language to walk toward understanding Black women and God more, both separately and as a collective, but it didn't go far enough…womanist theology didn't feel like it was created for women like me: sisters who didn't tuck in their ratchetness in favor of righteousness to occupy certain spaces or get in certain rooms" (*Red Lip Theology* XXV). Benbow acknowledges that womanist theology provided a framework for exploring the relationship between Black women and God, but it did not fully encompass the experiences of Black women who deviate from traditional expectations of behavior and appearance. According to Brittney Cooper in "(Un)Clutching My Mother's Pearls," to be "ratchet" refers to acts that are intentionally outrageous and exceed the boundaries of socially acceptable behavior. I interpret ratchetness as a way for Black women to challenge hegemonic norms and redefine themselves in a holistic manner. The term "ratchetness" illustrates the intersectional nature of Benbow's identity and suggests that womanist theology falls short of acknowledging the experiences of all Black women, particularly those who exist at the margins of society. Meg Thee Stallion is an

example of this approach, as she does not conform to stereotypes but shines despite them. Her song "Pimpin" includes the line, "Going to school, breaking the rules Patti LaBelle, gotta a new attitude," which challenges hegemonic expectations and demonstrates the multiple ways in which Black women can be both ratchet and respectable. Thus, I posit that Black feminist theology addresses both sexual and spiritual matters for Black women, while also recognizing and affirming their wholeness. Despite being a relatively new theoretical framework, I assert that it establishes sexual justice tailored to Black women, particularly in the Black church. This theology exemplifies awareness, courage, and hope for a better church that Black women would feel comfortable attending or participating in.

The Call to Black Feminist Theology

Black feminist theology represents a sexually liberatory framework that seeks to create a harmonious relationship between Black women's religious beliefs and their view of sexuality. The term was introduced by Brittney Cooper in a Facebook exchange with Tamura Lomax in 2010[8]. The footnote below sheds light on the dialogue between them as they engaged in the development of Black feminist theology employing both Black feminist and womanist tools, but distinctively not womanist theology. Following their reading of Monica Coleman's 2006 roundtable discussion "Must I be a Womanist," Cooper and Lomax recognized their resonance

[8] "Black feminist theology, to my knowledge, first coined by black feminist Brittney Cooper in a 2010 Facebook post where she and I exchanged ideas in response to her likening Beverly Guy-Sheftall's *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (1995) to a black feminist bible and Patricia Hill Collin's *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) to "black feminisms' systematic theology," notes a womanist/black feminist theoretical engagement on theological phenomena, categories and interests. That is, in addition to a study of religio-cultural signs and meanings, it deploys womanist and black feminist tools to examine "the statement of the truth of the Christian message" in black women and girls' lives. It does this work through critical discourses invested in accounts of God's existence and/or activity and concepts such as belief, good news, and faith, with hopes of broadening, deepening and complicating black women and girls' theological parameters and religious identities, interpretations and experiences." [block quote was taken from Tamura Lomax's book *Jezebel Unhinged*]

with Coleman's ideas, but their critical thinking went far beyond that point.[9] In the article, Coleman address two issues of concern. Firstly, she grapples with the distinction between identifying as either a womanist or Black feminist. While Coleman acknowledges the influence of womanist religious scholars in guiding her academic scholarship of God, she also critiques their limited discussions of homosexuality. Coleman perceives their silence on heterosexism and homophobia as forms of oppression affecting Black women, irrespective of their sexual orientations, as complicity in these issues (88). This speaks back to recognizing the multifaceted identities of Black women and promoting a discourse that encompasses the entirety of who they are.

Conversely, Coleman highlights the significant role of Black lesbians in shaping the development of Black feminism, exemplified by the active and vocal contributions of the Combahee River Collective. It is worth noting that scholarship produced by womanist theologians, such as Pamela Lightsey's *Our Lives Matter*(2015*)*, specifically addresses the theological perception of Black lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer women. This scholarship represents a response to the historical lack of attention to issues related to heterosexuality. It strives to create space for the LGBTQ community to feel affirmed in their

[9] "I should say that my tussling between womanist theology and black feminist theory began in my early years of seminary sometime around 2000. As well, the womanist/feminist push and pull between Cooper and I began long before 2010. If memory serves correctly, this wrestling began when she and I were classmates at Emory University sometime between 2003-2004, where she was a first year Ph.D. student and I a Master's of Theology student. We took a course, The Black Female Body in American Culture, with Kimberly Wallace-Sanders that perhaps changed the course of both of our lives in very good ways. Our critical inquiries were, of course, further informed by the essential dawning in Monica Coleman's "Must I be a Womanist" (2006). Yet Cooper and I, in our own ways, imagined something in conversation with Coleman – but also, more. Nonetheless, while our collective discourses were pivotal, they had yet to articulate Cooper's framing terminology: black feminist theology. The few lines provided here hope to not only mark this discourse in history but further clarify aims." [block quote was taken from Tamura Lomax's book *Jezebel Unhinged*]

belief that they are loved by God, regardless of whom they choose to love. However, there is a scarcity of such scholarly work by womanist religious scholars.

Secondly, Coleman also brings attention to the absence of religious pluralism in Black women's faith affiliations. My review of existing literature reveals a predominant focus that leans toward the Christian faith. While this dissertation focuses on Black evangelicalism, a subset within Christianity, its objective is not to advocate for the adoption of this faith tradition by Black women. Instead, it aims to address specific challenges that Black women encounter within this particular religious branch. Moreover, Monica Coleman's *Bipolar Faith* contributes to the discourse on heterosexism and religious inclusivity by sharing her personal experiences with women. This aspect sheds light on why Cooper and Lomax found themselves immersed in a more profound discussion regarding Coleman's article. It prompted them to delve deeper into their understanding of Black feminism, with a focus on the theological perspective of Black women.

I gather that Cooper and Lomax's discussion led to the concept of Black feminist theology to attend to the issues mentioned by Coleman. Both Cooper and Lomax identify as Black feminists, albeit they approached this concept from different angles—Cooper as an American studies scholar and Lomax as a scholar of religion. This illuminates the need for a theology that examines the way the Christian messages affect Black women and girls' lives. Simultaneously, it should seek to challenge patriarchal barriers that undermine the experiences and voice of Black women. In her work *Eloquent Rage*, Cooper explicates that Black feminist theology confronts the obstacles Black women face in reconciling their religious beliefs with feminist principles pertaining to their sexuality. She underscores the need for a nuanced approach within Black feminist theology that grapples with the tension between sexuality and spirituality

to find a sense of belonging and empowerment within both spectrums. Furthermore, she highlights that the scope of Black feminist theology extends beyond the confines of religious settings, encompassing the broader spectrum of Black women's daily experiences, even extending into professional environments (142). This perspective arises from the indirect advocacy for Black women's sexual agency without judgment or censorship. As bell hooks echoes in *Ain't I a Woman*, the purpose of feminism is to transcend the struggle against patriarchy and equal rights for women with men. She states, "[feminism] is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class" (194-5). This commitment signifies an aspiration to formulate an emboldening and non-negotiable appreciation of Black womanhood.

In the 2019 special issue of *Black Theology*, several articles examine the Black church, its biblical interpretations, and its cultural practices. Within this context, the commitment articulated by hooks in her feminist statement gains particular significance, as it underscores the importance of addressing issues related to race and sexuality for Black women. More specifically, these articles sought to attend to the multiple and intricate narratives of Black women, delving into their various nuances and expressions. This approach aims to establish a politics of pleasure that empowers Black women and cultivates feelings of joy, rather than shame. The introductory article titled "Black Bodies in Ecstasy" helped in identifying the two key aspects that these scholars were attending to that relate to the focus of this dissertation. 1) It presents a theological perspective that challenges conventional ideas of respectability and purity. 2) It defines pleasure in a manner that acknowledges and validates that Black women desire and experience pleasure, while also giving them permission to continue to do so. Through this special issue, it proposes

the fundamental values of a Black feminist theology, which encourages Black women to embrace and engage with all aspects of themselves.

The article "Theorizing the Distance" by Lomax details the essential values necessary for a theology centered on healing. It calls for a new social and economic order that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the humanity and rights of Black people. It further places a strong emphasis on prioritizing freedom and dignity, as well as distinguishing between Black women's "sexual being (interior identification) and being sexualized (cultural projection)" (268). This distinction is particularly crucial because it empowers individual autonomy, while the alternative involves objectification and external judgments imposed upon them. Consequently, this new social order calls for protection against objectification, fostering respect for privacy, nurturing healthy relationships, and working towards reducing the stigma attached to various expressions of sexuality. It also condemns any actions that undermine these principles as sin. Incorporating Lomax's explanation of this new social order contributed to my understanding of the core values encompassing self-worth, articulation, sexual autonomy, and community among Black women.

The same article delves into the shame that Black women grapple with within the Christian worldview, society, and their inner lives. It acknowledges this by recognizing that its purpose is not to promote respectability and a sanitized version of Black womanhood. Instead, it seeks to embrace the complexities of life and accept the coexistence of messy and contradictory realities (274). This signifies that it scrutinizes concepts such as consent, coercion, resistance, appropriation, and complicity within the context of both oppression and pleasure (274). This holistic approach allows for the multifaceted experiences of Black women that can be ratchet, lesbian, "churchy" and still having sex. This theological perspective empowers Black women to

assert control of their sexual identities, freeing them from stereotypical narratives. In the process, it creates space for the exploration of what pleasure entails.

Lomax proposes that within Black feminist theology, pleasure becomes intricately connected to the redefinition and reclamation of agency over one's own identity, sexuality, and spirituality. This involves challenging and dismantling harmful ideologies and stereotypes that have historically constrained Black women. She articulates that the ultimate goal of a Black feminist theology of pleasure is to "[unbind] Black female promiscuity from notions of social-political regress; unhinging Black women and girls from the marketplace of shame; and de-weaponizing respectability, virginity, sexual closeting, erotophobia, hyper-moralism, and heteronormativity as symbols of dignity and worth ("Theorizing the Distance" 278). In essence, pleasure is intimately tied to the idea of liberation and the restoration of dignity and worth to Black women and girls by freeing them from shame, respectability politics, and oppressive norms regarding sexuality and gender identity. This theology further grants Black women permission to break free from the confines of society and conservative Christian theology, propelling them towards self-love, sexual autonomy, and self-exploration.

Womanist sexual ethicist Monique Moultrie[10] approaches the politics of pleasure within the Black church. However, her perspective on pleasure differs from that of Black feminist theology. Moultrie places emphasis on sexual honesty and responsibility, coining the concept of "womanist erotic justice." Her scholarly contributions have led me to reflect upon the essence of honesty and responsibility in the realm of Black women's sexuality. This inquiry is central to her book, where she advocates for the use of protection and finding physical and emotional self-awareness before seeking pleasure (132). However, it is essential to recognize that many Black

[10] *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality*

women, especially those who have endured feelings of shame and a lack of sexual visibility within the Black church, may grapple with where to begin their journey toward erotic self-awareness. Considering Black women's history of sexual repression and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes targeting their bodies and identities, I posit that many Black women may find themselves infants to their politics of pleasure. Building upon Lomax's conceptualization of pleasure, I interpret it as the process of taking ownership of one's life and desires. Therefore, there is a need for more efforts to educate Black women about their own identities as sexual beings before expecting them to navigate responsibly and honestly.

I contend that this can be accomplished through the pedagogical endeavor of teaching Black women about self-love and self-exploration. An example of this approach can be found in the utilization of storytelling as an educational tool to foster their comprehension. For instance, Elaine Richardson shares an *ill literacy narrative*[11] (2009) about being raped and losing her virginity at 12 years old to a man she did not know and did not give consent to[12]. She was unaware of what it meant to be sexually responsible and honest. She required a deeper understanding of what it meant to inhabit a Black female body with sexual agency before anything else. However, the act of sharing her narrative did serve the purpose of pushing back against the dominant narratives of Black girls and validating her existence. This is because her experience as a young girl enabled her to understand that "the black female body is ascribed in society as a body without knowledge, a body to be commodified, a body that will serve at the

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[11] In the article, "My ill Literacy Narrative: Growing up Black, Po and a Girl, in the Hood" Richardson calls her narrative an *ill* literate narrative because she redefines what ill means. In white mainstream English, ill means to be sick. In opposition of white mainstream English, she understands *ill* to mean skilled. In Black language (BL), the reversal meaning of a word is called semantic inversion. Richardson's narrative is considered a "skilled literate reading" from those who are viewed at the lower level of society. In other words, her narrative "talks back' to the dominant way of viewing her story.

[12]See page 763 in the article above for the detailed description of this account.

pleasure, ultimately of the system of white male patriarchy" (763). As a young girl, she encountered an experience of submission that those enslaved had to endure, without the proper knowledge and the lack of language to expose her truth. Unbeknownst to her during that period, by the age of five, she was already perceived as having knowledge of subjects typically associated with adults, thereby denying her innocence (Epstein Rebecca et al, 2017). I assert that the self-writing of her experiences is a form of healing the trauma of her 12-year-old self. Her narrative pushes forth the values of Black feminist theology of pleasure through the articulation of her lived experiences. That said, I recommend the adoption of storytelling as a deployment of Black feminist theology for exploring Black women and girls' sexual liberation, as it serves as a prime example of what constitutes sexual justice.

Methodology: Black Feminist-Womanist Storytelling

It becomes clear that adopting storytelling as a means of exploring Black women and girls' sexual liberation aligns with the call made by critical race theorists Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic in their book *Critical Race Theory* (2017). Delgado and Stefancic introduced the concept of counterstorytelling, which allows Black and Brown individuals to tell their stories to counter the dominant narrative that dehumanizes them (50). In this context, it is important to recognize that while counterstorytelling is critical for Black and Brown people in giving voice to their own stories, language and literacy scholar Lamar Johnson, in his 2017 article "The Racial Hauntings," emphasizes a broader role for storytelling. He contends that storytelling should not only "counter and disrupt" the dominant narrative but also give space to anyone's racialized stories towards self-transformation and self-actualization through the practice of *racial storytelling* (482). He asserts that "educators can utilize racial storytelling as a response to our racialized memories, repressions, suppressions, and oppressions. Racial storytelling enables us to

tackle our racial hauntings and to work against our own miseducation while working toward self-transformation and liberation" (482). The idea of "racial hauntings" suggests that unresolved racial issues can linger and negatively impact individuals and society. Therefore employing Johnson's method can lead individuals toward self-transformation from racial oppression and miseducation. In light of this perspective on addressing unresolved racial issues through storytelling, it is important to explore the role of Black feminist-womanist storytelling.

Black feminist and womanist storytelling expands upon the foundation of racial storytelling by serving as a literacy tool that helps Black women and girls collect, write, analyze, and theorize their stories while simultaneously healing from them (Baker-Bell 531). This storytelling approach integrates many elements, including autoethnography, African American female language and literacy traditions, and Black feminist and womanist theories. Autoethnography holds particular importance in this dissertation. As defined by Adams, Ellis, and Holman Jones in "Autoethnography," autoethnography involves self-reflection to identify and explore the relationship between the self and society. They further state that it assists people in processing "what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (1). Additionally, the utilization of Black feminist and womanist theories offers a means to reflect on the complex intersection of Black women's experiences concerning race, gender, class, and sexuality. Baker-Bell argues that this method positions Black women's stories at the forefront and allows their way of storying to interpret their intersectional realities (532). Nevertheless, as I recount my experience with shame and sexual repression within the Black church in the introduction, I contend that I employed the elements of Black feminist-womanist storytelling. Through this approach, I engaged in self-reflection on my own experiences and sought to connect them with

the experiences of other Black women in society. By embracing my own experiences as truth, I am applying the principles of Black feminist and womanist thought.

Ultimately, Black feminist-womanist storytelling made room for Baker-Bell to do the *soul work*[13] required for human freedom. She confirms that "writing about my experiences through storytelling provided me with space to reconcile past trauma; bring closure to situations; understand how my past, present, and future selves are always in conversation with one another; and imagine new ways to negotiate, resist, and preserve myself" (532). In essence, this practice transcends mere dialogue about Black women's stories; it explores the healing power that arises from self-writing ourselves free. Through the selection of stories she chose to share, and the ability to analyze and interpret them personally, Baker-Bell, much like Richardson, exercised agency over the wounds that hurt her, liberating herself from them. Furthermore, this storytelling method is important to Black women as it empowers them to prioritize their own wellness by permitting them to identify themselves on their own terms and explore what it means to inhabit a Black female Body. That said, I am contributing to this methodology by proposing *testimonial storytelling* as an extension of Black feminist-womanist storytelling into the realm of spirituality.

Testimonial Storytelling: An Expansion

The act of testifying has long been a means through which Black women share their stories. Geneva Smitherman defines testifying as a form of communication in which one gives a verbal witness to an experience in their life (*Talkin and Testifyin* 58). Theologically, scholar Mae G. Henderson defines it as a "spontaneous expression to the church community [by whomever]

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[13] Lamar Johnson coins this in "The Racial Hauntings" article as a practice that is performed by teachers in the classroom as a form of pedagogical practice. He defines it as "a deep excavation of the self(ves)…requires us to illustrate our vulnerabilities from taking a look within and tapping into our repressed memories and the subconscious. It requires us to revisit memories that we hope to forget but that continue to live on—memories that trigger feelings of joy, guilt, happiness, sadness, frustration, anger, and rage" (481).

feels the spirit" ("Speaking in Tongues" 58). Historically, in the Black church, testimony served as a way for those enslaved to express themselves, demonstrating enduring faith and resilience in the face of adversity. In *Witnessing and Testifying*, Rosetta Ross quotes Thomas Hoyt's[14] description of the impact of giving testimony among the enslaved: "in testimony, people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for edification of all…in testimony, a believer describes what God has done in her life, in words both biblical and personal, and the hands of her friends clap in affirmation. [The] individual speech thus becomes part of an affirmation that is shared" (Hoyt as cited in Ross 2003, p.13). This process transforms individual speech into a shared affirmation, highlighting the authenticity and vulnerability required in testifying. It also underscores how testimony uplifts and enlightens, resonating with others in the community and creating a shared bond of faith and affirmation. It is important to note that testifying is not limited to the church setting and can have healing power beyond religious contexts. This idea aligns with Audre Lorde's assertion in *Sister Outsiders*, where she writes "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation (42). By connecting Smitherman and Henderson's definitions of testimony, I propose the concept of testimonial storytelling. This form of storytelling serves not only as a narrative and literacy practice but also as a cultural approach that Black women can engage in to find healing in matters concerning their sexual and spiritual engagements. What sets testimonial storytelling apart is its incorporation of a spiritual dimension as an additional facet of Black feminist-womanist storytelling. This dimension allows for discussions rooted in faith alongside discussions of racial, gender, and sexual oppression. It provides a platform for empowerment,

[14] Thomas Hoyt Jr., "Testimony," in Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*

healing, and resistance to Black women's conduct because of the harmful Christian rhetoric of the Black church.

I argue that testimonial storytelling can serve as a means of instruction for Black women on navigating the world in three distinct ways—through the act of vocally sharing one's story, through the process of self-writing of one's experiences, and through the presentation of Black women's stories in literature. This is because recounting their own experiences can provide the storyteller solace and empowerment about the world in which they live. For example, Baker-Bell explained the role of storytelling practices aiding in conveying the wisdom gained from her mother as a young girl about the essence of being a Black woman in America and the intersectionality of their experiences ("For Loretta"). While all women confront patriarchy and all Black individuals experience racism, as a Black woman, she lives at the intersection of race, gender, and sex, as discussed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in "Demarginalizing the Intersection[15]." In this way, Baker-Bell came to understand the societal positioning of Black women, their distinct worldview, and how to navigate her identity as a Black woman. Another example of the importance of storytelling is celebrated by Walker where she articulates, "through the years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories---like her life---must be recorded" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Garden* 240). This statement illustrates the educational nature of storytelling and the significant impact that listening to someone else's narrative may have. It also emphasizes the act of recording and sharing one's stories allows individuals to ensure their experiences are not forgotten and can provide future generations with a connection to the past. By using comparable

[15] See page 149 of "Demarginalizing the Intersection" for further explanation.

techniques for sharing their personal narratives, Black women who have similar experiences within the Black church can connect through the practice of testimonial storytelling and engage in self-reflection. This practice contributes to the promotion of sexual justice, which seeks to redefine and elevate the understanding of what it means to live as a spiritual and sexual Black woman.

In chapter five, an illustration of the practice of testimonial storytelling will be displayed within the context of a book club. I specifically selected a book that reflects Black women's experience in the Black church. Participants and I met weekly to discuss the book and I employed questions to foster connections between our own lived experiences (more of this will be elaborated in the following chapter). The outcome of the book club showcased the practice of Black women sharing their experiences, engaging with literature that mirrors our own realities, and the act of self-writing ourselves free. My intention was that the practices within the book club would challenge established notions of respectability politics, reclaim the power of tongue from others, and give the power back to Black women. Through this empowerment of Black women, we acknowledge our agency in defining the language of our Blackness, womanhood, sexuality, and spirituality.

Conclusion

I assert that Black feminist theology can be observed through the use of testimonial storytelling, operating in the lives of Black women to foster healing, nurturing self-love, and helping liberate them sexually. Providing a space in which Black women can engage in literature that mirrors their lived experiences and be in communion with other Black women that also share similar experiences, is a reflection of Black feminist theology actively working in their lives. The practice of testimonial storytelling contributes to building the components of Black

feminist theology which I identify as self-worth, articulation, sexual autonomy, and community. By participating in a book club, we witness Black women actively engaging in testimonial storytelling and gain exposure to healing practices that support their journey toward wholeness.

I conclude with the lingering thought of thinking through the tension between Christian indoctrination of how Black women are taught to see themselves in the Black church and the inability to see who they can actually be. There's a desire for Black women to kill the kind of subjugated versions of themselves, shedding the burden of shame and desexualization. I suggest testimonial storytelling as a spiritual rebirthing project, enabling them to draw insights from stories in literature to understand, theorize, and strategize ways to engage their spirituality and sexuality. This approach not only offers pathways to healing their Black womanhood but extends to their Black girlhood too, which may have wrestled with the same internal battle.

CHAPTER THREE

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the recruitment process taken to conduct a book club. This book club served as a platform for dialogue among a group of participants that drove forth the research's objectives of providing alternative viewpoints of Black women's sexuality, after experiencing feelings of shame. I outline my procedure for recruiting participants and then provide some demographic data about the participants. This led to the exploration of the way I gathered data in the book club format, detailing the book we read, as well as some other media we engaged with. I conclude this section by describing my approach to analyzing the data.

Recruitment Process

Before conducting the study, I circulated a flyer on my social media platforms—Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat. In my social circle, I had approximately 700 connections on both Instagram and Facebook, as well as around 200 connections on Snapchat. My aim was to find people within my existing networks and encourage them to share on their platforms. The flyer included a link to a questionnaire that the interested participants were required to fill out (see the questionnaire in Appendix A). The goal of the questionnaire was to collect demographic information to ensure the participants met the basic criteria to participate, specifically focusing on Black women who have an understanding of and engagement with spirituality and sexuality. In order to maintain a comfortable environment for those sharing their experiences, my intention was to keep this group relatively small, which consisted of approximately six women. However, I recognized the sacredness of the topic of spirituality and sexuality and did not want to exclude anyone genuinely interested in participating. Ultimately, I wanted these Black women to come together to represent an *interpretative community*,[16] as they embarked on a journey to trust

[16] See Black Women as Cultural Readers by Jacqueline Bobo, p. 22.

themselves and each other with their vulnerabilities and strive to discover valuable representations of themselves.

Limitations

The flyer only generated interest from two participants within the month-long deadline. Despite receiving much interest in my messages, I could not understand why more people did not fill out the survey. My understanding of the limitations of this work was not formed until I re-read the flyer (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Seeking Research Participants Flyer

The above flyer limited participation by two variables: age and language. Initially, I chose to focus on Black girls falling within the 17-24 age range because I was interested in the personal growth and journey of younger Black women during this particular phase of life. I questioned the religious messages that influenced their perception of their bodies, and how it impacted their understanding of sexuality in their early twenties. I also wanted to explore whether they

experienced any fear about not aligning with those messages. Reflecting on my own experiences as a seventeen-year-old piercing my belly button, I recognized that my understanding of sexuality had been shaped long before that by the disapproving looks I received from older church women if my dress was above the knee or if I dared to wear red lipstick to church. It was implied that the more I drew attention to myself in a non-traditional way as a Black girl, the more I was sexualized as being "fast." It was not until graduate school, in the later part of my 24 years, that I was introduced to theories advocating for positive perspectives on sexuality. Therefore, I wanted to see if this particular age range served as a common thread connecting my experiences with others in that age bracket, and when or if their self-actualization journey began.

I observed that one of the two people who completed the survey was 19 (within the age requirement) and the other person was 30 (beyond the age requirement). Interestingly, I received inquiries from several women above the age bracket who expressed their interest in participating. This raised questions about why the flyer did not reach a larger audience of younger Black women, despite being advertised in spaces frequented by this demographic. As a result, I recognized the necessity of expanding the distribution of the flyer across additional networks to garner increased interest. Consequently, I enlisted the support of my colleagues and family members to share the flyer within their social networks. Additionally, the committee members also promoted the flyer on their platforms. Finally, I made the decision to remove the age restriction and extend participation to all Black women aged 18 and above. I believe that older Black women might bring valuable experiences and insights to the subject matter due to their potential broader life experiences. It occurred to me that older Black women, much like myself in my later twenties, might have experienced different periods of unlearning and relearning about matters related to sexuality and spirituality. Conversely, younger Black women might still be in

the process of unpacking their narratives, searching for appropriate language to articulate and comprehend their experiences. Importantly, I did not need to make any major changes to my research aside from adjustments to the flyer. I also welcomed the opportunity to hear from older Black women and gain insight into the experiences they encountered that shaped how they recognized the need for unlearning and how they attempted to overcome their religious forms of violence.

The flyer also used the words *hyper-visibility* and *shame*. I recognized that I gave the participants the language to describe their experiences, and that these terms do align with the vernacular commonly used by Black women in their everyday descriptions of their experiences. Therefore, I acknowledge an alternative need for this study to analyze the language used by these women to think through how we can theorize Black women's experiences through their everyday language and everyday experiences within/because of the Black church. In other words, I listen intently to the specific language that my participants use to describe their own experiences to understand how language choices impact the way Black women negotiate their sexual identities. Having said that, I revised the flyer to appeal to a wider range of ages and removed the language that described *my* personal experiences in the church. I also extended a $25 Amazon gift card as a token of gratitude for participation in the book club, helping cover the costs of their book purchase upon completion (see updated figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Updated Seeking Research Participants Flyer

Participants

Having shared the revised flyer on my social media platforms and through the assistance of my family, friends, colleagues, and committee members, I established a deadline of one month for interested participants to complete the questionnaire. Within three days, 26 participants filled out the survey. Although many were interested, only five participants actually participated in the book club (see Table 1.1). All of the participants were given a consent letter about joining the book club (see Appendix B). The letter contained a brief summary of the book club, potential risks in participating, assurance of research confidentiality, the potential for future research, and the option to withdraw at any time. Participants were informed that only their age would be disclosed and were given the choice to use a pseudonym for identification. They were also able to view any information written about them, ensuring no harm would come from their involvement.

If participants agreed to these terms, they were instructed to sign the form and return it to me via email. This consent form was a mandatory requirement, as I needed ethics approval from Michigan State University because I was working with human subjects, overseen by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). I could only submit the consent form to participants upon approval from the IRB of the study and the requirements for each participant. Upon receiving the signed consent forms, I stored the information in a password-protected file on my computer to protect the participants' information.

The participants were Sarah, Lex, Altalie, Sam, and Tony. Sarah, Lex, and Altalie resided in New York, while Sam and Tony were located in Georgia. Despite living in the same states, the participants were not acquainted with each other. As elaborated in the next chapter, the participants did not attend any church regularly and grappled with reconciling their views on sexuality with their spirituality. However, their religious backgrounds stemmed from Church of God in Christ and non-denominational affiliations. Although I lacked specific details about these religious backgrounds, it was evident that their beliefs are rooted in the Christian tradition, centered on the belief of Jesus' crucifixion for the redemption of sins. Additionally, the participants ranged in age from 28 to 42 years old, underscoring that the conflict between spirituality and sexuality transcends specific age demographics but can persist throughout life stages. Lastly, their motivations for joining the book club varied, including the desire to connect with other women, interest sparked by engaging with the book's summary, and readiness to confront these challenging issues. Refer to the table below of a breakdown of the participants' race, gender, age, and religious affiliation.

Table 1.1: Study Participants

Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age		Religion?	
(5) Black	Females	1	28	1	Church of God of Christ (COGIC)
		1	34		
		1	36	3	Non-denominational
		1	41		
		1	42	1	Spiritual

Procedure

I combined close readings of the literary text, *Sugar* (2000), with transcripts of the book club as literature that needs to be analyzed, produced during six weeks. This was to see if engagement with literature that reflects Black women's lived experiences offers them a way to feel empowered about their sexuality. Furthermore, I facilitated discussions during the book club on the relationship between sexuality and shame to posit the necessity of a theological approach to Black women's lived experiences — both real and imagined —in the Black church.

Together, we attended weekly book club meetings on Sundays starting October 23rd to December 4th of 2022. An extra week was added because the last week of the book club landed during the Thanksgiving holiday, and therefore, that week was an off week. This book was selected because it tells the story of a Black woman who was raised listening to biblical teaching in the Black church but chose to live a life of sexual exploration and unrepentant pleasure. In her growth as a Christian, Sugar (the titular character) learns not to be governed by the sexual alienation of the Black church members. This context provided a framework for the participants to consider the ways in which the Christian rhetoric of the Black church contributed to issues of race, gender, power, identity formation, spirituality, and sexuality. I intended to stimulate discussion about these issues to understand how Black women feel about and address the issue of

shame, and to discover how they can begin to heal. Beyond the usual structure of discussion in traditional book club formats, this book club makes room for the participant's ability to name and frame their own language about their experiences in the church, in connection to the novel, while utilizing multimodal content such as Beyonce's soundtrack of "Church Girl" to address oppressive factors for Black women. I selected this song because it touches upon the concept of Black church women embodying qualities of sexuality, sensuality, and spirituality. The choice aimed to stimulate the initial reaction of the participants to this theme and whether the song connected with their personal experiences or aspirations. The participants were the storytellers of their experiences while connecting with fictional characters that affirm their existence. Toliver (2020) upholds, "stories are more than just basic commentary, for they are a means to reaffirm the humanity of the storyteller because they share their lives with those willing to listen" (507). Therefore, the participant's stories served as testimonials of their lived experiences.

Data Sources and Data Collection

I conducted the book club sessions in a video-recorded format using ZOOM. ZOOM is a digital technology that can be used on mobile devices such as cell phones or iPads. The main purpose of using this method is that we have been undergoing a global pandemic called COVID-19 for about three years now. Despite the removal of mask mandates and gathering restrictions on both the state and federal levels, I deemed it essential to prioritize the community's care and protection. With the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regularly updating information regarding emerging strains (CDC, 2022), safeguarding an already at-risk community remained the most important. While ZOOM provided protective measures for participants, it had its drawbacks, such as the potential limitation of creating intimacy online. However, my primary

focus revolved around building rapport[17] with participants prior to the start of the book club. This involved connecting with them on social media, if not already, and sharing more of my background and motivation behind this work to build on my own vulnerability. Ultimately, my goal was to minimize power imbalances by transparently acknowledging my positionality as someone who also struggles with issues presented in this study. Furthermore, ZOOM had the ability to record and store data internally, eliminating the need for third-party software (Archibald et al 2). This feature is important for the protection of sensitive information. Consequently, ZOOM was a practical choice for ensuring the security of my participants during the global pandemic, while also offering accessibility for continued learning at any given time and place. Additionally, during and after the ZOOM sessions with the participants, I maintained a research memo of my thoughts and ideas. This practice aided in promoting reflection and analytic understanding of various aspects, including the participants' facial expressions, the nuances in their language — both shared and distinct, and additional observations capturing the diverse personalities of the participants. I utilized the memo to assist in presenting the findings of the book club in a manner that authentically represents the culture and experiences of Black women.

Coupled with the ZOOM sessions, I concluded the book club with a writing activity, as a form of self-writing in which the participants wrote their reaffirmation into existence. This activity was guided to answer the sub-field questions a) How do Black women's experiences within the Black church contribute to how they view sexuality? (b) What does the engagement of testimonial storytelling look like in a book club research study? I selected these concluding questions to gauge whether their answers aligned with the discussions we had and to determine if

[17] See Tauhis Khan and Ellen MacEachen's 2022 article titled "An Alternative Method of Interviewing" for more explains on how to build rapport with participants.

engaging in discussion and reading about these issues had proven beneficial to them. Finally, during the last session, we had a guest speaker named Pseusennes Bay, a holistic therapy doctor who utilizes meditation to facilitate self-healing. His expertise primarily focuses on a practice known as womb work, aimed at building individuals' self-perception of their body, reducing stress, promoting vaginal health, and strengthening emotional well-being. Before this study, I had no prior knowledge of womb work. Interestingly, one of the participants mentioned their personal experience with Pseusennes Bay and the sense of agency they gained from working with him. I must admit that during our discussions, I had reservations about a man teaching women about womb work. However, I turned to bell hooks' *The Will to Change* to explore the intersection of race and gender, which delves into men challenging traditional ideals of masculinity and engaging in feminist approaches. Although this topic deviated from the main focus of this dissertation, it prompted me to question the extent of Black men's support for Black women's healing. I began to contemplate what it would be like if Black men not only understood Black women's experiences but worked alongside them in creating change. Therefore, I welcomed Pseusennes Bay's perspective and his potential to contribute to the ongoing efforts to challenge societal expectations regarding how individuals should navigate and engage in the world.

Introduction to the Research Study

To begin the study, I created lesson plans that explored different topics for discussion for each week. For discussion, each participant was asked to bring one question related to the book. I also provided discussion questions to allow for further engagement with the novel. Included below is the tentative lesson plan created for each meeting of the book club, with the readings and some of the discussion questions I provided (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2: Black Women's Book Club Meetings

Week:	Readings:	Discussion:
1 "Church Girl": Pop, Lock, and Drop It"	Intro Week: • Discuss the lyrics of the "Church Girl" by Beyonce Sample Questions: 1. Why do you think Beyoncé chose those lyrics? 2. What message do you think Beyoncé was trying to convey? 3. Which line from the song resonates with you the most? And why?	Discussion Questions: • What does the song mean to you? • How did the song identify Black women's sexual agency? • What does it mean for Black church women to reimagine simultaneously being sexual, sensual, and spiritual?
2 Testimony & Trauma	***Read Pages 3-47*** Sample Questions: 1. How is race portrayed in these chapters? 2. Let's talk about the sexual agency among the Lacey women. 3. Why do you think Pearl is interested in Sugar the way she is?	• Come with one question about the chapters for discussion

Table 1.2 (cont'd)

3 Girls vs. Woman (Sisterhood)	***Read Pages 48-106*** Sample Questions: 1. What are some ways we see Sugar as the young Black girl that still needs healing? 2. What do these chapters reveal about women's pleasure during sex? 3. What similarities, if any, can you tell between Pearl and Sugar?	• Come with one question about the chapters for discussion
4 Pleasure vs. Love	***Read Pages 107-169*** Sample Questions: 1. What does Pearl's reaction to Sugar using the word 'pussy' reveal about language usage for conservative Black church women? 2. How can Pearl's newfound self-expression be compared to a form of rebirth? 3. What truths did Sugar's presence in Bigelow bring to light?	• Come with one question about the chapters for discussion

Table 1.2 (cont'd)

5 Pleasure vs. Pain	***Read Pages 170-229*** Sample Questions: 1. What did you think of the ending? Was it missing something? If not, why did you like the ending? 2. What can we say about language in conversation with sexuality in these passages? 3. Are there any questions you still have after reading this book?	• Come with one question about the chapters for discussion
6 Conclusion of Study	***Wrap-Up Session*** {Guest Speaker: Pseusennes Bay}	

Transcription Process

Upon the conclusion of the book club, I proceeded to the transcription phase, utilizing Otter.Ai technology to convert each discussion into written form. Employing this platform, I transferred the audio files into the transcription database and devoted considerable time meticulously listening to each discussion once again. During this process, I made revisions to the digital transcript by associating the names of individual participants with their respective statements, comments, or questions. This is a critical step as it requires close attention and editing skills. Subsequently, I printed the transcripts and looked for patterns and themes within them, whether they were common themes present across multiple transcripts or unique to individual stories. These annotated transcripts were then organized in a binder, offering an efficient means of navigating and retrieving the data. As previously mentioned, participants were

identified using pseudonyms to mitigate potential risks associated with harm and privacy breaches. Furthermore, in conjunction with protective measures, the data was securely stored in a private file, accessible solely through a unique pin number.

Analyzing Method

This dissertation employs a dialogical approach within the context of a beauty salon setting to present and analyze the findings. This approach involves the incorporation of direct quotes of participants' speech during group discussions held in the beauty salon. It was important for me to maintain linguistic integrity and refrain from applying any hegemonic influence to their language usage or way of thinking. As part of the participants' identity formation, my aim was to accentuate their way of being, talking, and thinking as valuable and significant. Also, considering I am the only person the participants have been in direct contact with, I also incorporated my own experiences in the dialogues to promote a sense of comfort when sharing their experiences. Additionally, I wanted this experience to feel like a collaborative effort, wherein each participant felt empowered to express their most vulnerable selves.

I use the beauty salon metaphor to demonstrate a site of affirmation of community with other Black women. Similar to the characterization of "kitchen tables" from the *Black Girl Literacies Collective*, Black beauty salons also evoke:

> an inclusive space for Black girls and women to come together, to be seen, to be heard, and to just be. [It] signifies the rich history of our foremothers and grandmothers who…beyond gossip and social talk…bared their souls and received healing and affirmation in the company of their sisters. ("At the Kitchen Table" 380).

Like the Black church, the beauty salon is a site of literacy for Black women in which they go to learn, engage, understand, and connect with other women who not only understand their

struggles but live them too. Language and literacy scholar April Baker-Bell affirms this notion, asserting that “beauty salons are not only spaces where Black women’s language and literacy practices are cultivated, legitimated, and valued but also spaces where they flourish and evolve” (“For Loretta” 527). Ultimately, I posit that when Black women come together and find safety and comfort among each other, it fosters a process of healing.

This dialogical approach builds upon the foundations of Black feminism by embracing a cultural tradition practiced by Black women that highlights restoration, communal engagement, and an epistemological framework. It accomplishes this by acknowledging the central role of dialogue within Black women's communities. In her 2015 article titled “Inheriting Patricia Hill Collins’s Black feminist epistemology,” Kristie Dotson outlines the four tenets of Collins’ Black feminist epistemology tenets. The first and second tenets underscore the importance of lived experiences in shaping how Black women generate knowledge and highlight the role of dialogue as a “criterion of assessment.” This positions dialogue as a valuable tool in the process of ‘vetting’ knowledge (Collins as cited in Dotson 2015, p. 2325). Hence, employing a dialogical approach with research participants proved beneficial for gathering, evaluating, and analyzing my research data.

The idea for a beauty salon engagement emerged during our interactions when we regularly met on Sundays at 11 a.m. It was apparent that the participants did not attend church on Sundays. This sparked my interest because I assumed that Sunday meetings might be problematic due to their church commitments. What I did observe was that each participant attended each session with different hair stages (i.e. hair wrapped in a scarf, deep conditioning in their hair, or braids). As a Black woman myself, I recognized that Sundays were a common day for resetting one’s hair day in preparation for the upcoming week. Consequently, I wanted to

extend this cultural experience beyond the virtual realm, inspiring the development of a symbolic beauty salon experience. That said, I have characterized the discourse within the beauty salon into five hair care practices: consultation, wash, treatment, style, and post-styling. I opted for these stages because they represent the fundamental steps of most of my personal hair care experiences. However, it is important to note that there is no universal way to manage all of Black women's hair. Much like their ever-changing and dynamic identities, Black women's hair care routines are tailored to their individual needs and can take many hours and even multiple days to complete (Rowe, 2019; Steele, 2021). The process that I identified above comprises the basic steps essential for the purpose of this study, yet each hair care experience can include many additional steps before reaching completion.

Furthermore, the use of the transcripts from the beauty salon engagement can be classified as performative writing. According to Denzin (2001), performative writing describes the way the world is being performed through an autoethnographic and vulnerable approach. In alignment with the Combahee River Collective perspective, it emphasizes the personal narrative as a political act to "imagine new worlds, worlds where humans can become who they wish to be, free of prejudice, repression and discrimination" (Denzin 43). Additionally, performative writing offers researchers an unconventional means of conveying their research findings. Utilizing their own lived experiences as a gateway to engage the performer and their audience, allows for the exploration of individual interpretations within the narratives being shared. I employ this approach to imagine a site where the dialogue of the participants authentically represents the lived experiences and realities of Black women. The goal was to create a sacred space for Black women to not only feel seen but heard, but also have the opportunity to share their private thoughts openly. Through this, the performer (the Black woman speaking) and the

audience (the other Black women listening) can actively engage in discussions regarding prejudices or feelings of shame, judgment, or censorship they have towards their Black sexual politics.

To conclude, I have included Table 1.3 below that presents the research questions, data sources utilized, methods of the study, and the Black hair care practices explored in the study.

Table 1.3: Research Questions, Data Sources, Analysis Methods, and Potential Conclusions

Research Questions	Data Sources	Analysis Methods	Black Hair Care Practice
1. How do Black women's experiences within the Black church contribute to how they see themselves as sexual beings? 2. How does literature help Black women heal from the spiritual violence associated with the Black church? 3. What practices and strategies can Black women engage in to develop and strengthen their sexual politics?	• Zoom recordings • Memo notes taken during and after book club discussions	**Dialogical Approach:** • to demonstrate the common themes of the book and the connection to the participant's lived experiences. • to find the commonalities between the characters in the book and the participants' perceptions of sexuality and the way it is perceived in the church. • to identify the participants' newfound understanding of sexuality and spirituality and the positive affirmations displayed in the text.	1. Consultation 2. Wash 3. Treatment 4. Styling 5. Post-Styling

CHAPTER FOUR

In this chapter, I present the findings from the book club research study as a discussion within a fictional beauty salon setting. I've categorized five distinct Black hair care practices: consultation, wash, treatment, style, and post-styling. Each of these hair care practices are allocated into one-hour segments to explore the metaphorical significance of these processes and their relevance to the various themes explored within the book club. Additionally, I provide a brief analysis in *italics* of each theme following the discussion, serving as a wrap up of that hour. In the next chapter, a more detailed reflection on the themes will be provided. This concept emerged from the different hair phases observed among the participants during each book club session. Additionally, the book under discussion, *Sugar*, features *Fayline's House of Beauty* salon as a cultural site that serves as a communal space for townswomen to gather and discuss the town events. Consequently, I've taken inspiration from this cultural setting and the significance of beauty salons within Black communities to reimagine a space that serves as a form of therapy for Black women. This practice is in line with the concept coined by Afiya MBilishaka as "PsychoHairapy," which includes facilitating group therapy sessions within salon settings by a mental health professional. In this approach, the psychologist participates in fostering relationships within the salon by facilitating storytelling and providing additional emotional support (MBilishaka 389). The dialogues I'll be sharing from the book club research study mirror this approach, with a shared objective of reaffirming Black women's identities concerning matters of spirituality and sexuality. However, my role in this context is that of a facilitator rather than a trained mental health professional.

The history of Black women's hair began in Africa, where hairstyles unique to Black people have been associated with age, social status, and ethnic identity within the community

(Banks, 2000; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Gill, 2010). In the early fifteenth century, hair functioned as a means of conveying cultural messages in Africa. For example, within the Wolof tradition in Senegal, a young girl's shaved head with a single tuft of hair left on top symbolized that she was not at the appropriate age for marriage (*Hair Story* 2). What is most interesting is that hair held great value in African countries, such as Senegal, due to its proximity to the heavens. In their book *Hair Story*, Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps quote Mohamed Mbodj, a professor of African studies at Manhattanville University and a native of Dakar, Senegal, who comments that communication from the gods and spirits was believed to pass through the hair to reach the soul (Mbodj as cited in Byrd & Tharps 2001, p. 4). Consequently, hairdressers were highly esteemed within their communities for their meticulous care, which included washing, combing, oiling, braiding, twisting, and garnishing the hair with various accessories (5). This dedication to hair care sessions also fostered a sense of fellowship among community members (6). Below, is a description of five common hair care routines in contemporary Black hair care culture, along with insight into what the process involves. This knowledge is drawn from my personal experiences as a Black woman who regularly engages in these hair care practices. However, visual demonstrations of these practices are shared by Black women on social media, with Instagram being a notable platform where Black women often share such content[18].

Another important aspect to consider is that during enslavement, the appearance of enslaved individuals reflected on their "masters," and an unkempt slave was more challenging to sell. Therefore, Sundays became a designated day of rest for them, and it evolved into a day for combing and styling hair, along with going to church. When the participants of this study showed up in their diverse hair processes on Sundays, I aimed not only to acknowledge this but

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[18] Some Instagram public pages of Black women engaging in these hair care routines are: @dhatgirlbecca; @teerachelle_; @iesha_hairbraiding

also create a space that encourages their multitude of hairstyles and the beauty they represent. This is a tribute to the extensive history associated with the Black beauty culture.

Sugar **Unhinged**

Sugar was one of many books that touched on the themes of sexuality and spirituality. I particularly gravitated toward this book due to the complexity of one of the main characters, Sugar. Her upbringing was marked by exposure to sexuality while being raised by three sisters who used their home to deliver sexual experiences in exchange for money. After leaving their household, she resided with another woman who also employed Sugar's body for the same business. In essence, Sugar's understanding of sexuality revolved around pleasuring others, with little consideration for her own pleasure. It was only when she met her neighbor, Pearl, that she encountered someone who harbored no demands or desires from her. Pearl taught Sula what it meant to be valued for one's authentic self rather than what your body possesses. Additionally, she introduced Sugar to the church, where, despite facing judgment from the church members, Sugar experienced a sense of belonging and self-worth. Sugar, in turn, played a crucial part in assisting Pearl in connecting with her own femininity and embracing sensuality, all while maintaining her faith in God. Sugar's journey resonates with many women I've conversed with—those who were raised in the Black church but felt constrained by judgment, hindering the exploration of sexuality for themselves. As Sugar's character blossomed throughout the book, her testimony and trauma became intertwined with self-love and friendship. I believed that the participants could connect with parts of the text, if not its entirety, regarding the process of self-discovery in defining one's sexuality.

Hour 1: Consultation

When a Black woman finds the right stylist, it is important to meet with them before their hair styling appointment. This ensures that the stylist knows, understands, and can treat the hair without causing damage. Although Black women may engage in similar hair care practices, their hair has unique qualities such as length, curl patterns, and texture. The ideal stylist can revive the hair by trimming split ends and using suitable products to restore moisture, providing advice for long-term hair health. With the right hair stylist, you can *slay*[19] in different hairstyles. Altalie's hair is styled in a disheveled high bun, appearing void of any hair product, giving it a completely natural look.

In this context, during the consultation stage, the participants discussed the challenges they faced due to preconceived notions instilled in them while growing up in the church. Before delving into the discussion on *Sugar*, I wanted to understand the issues these participants encountered as a result of these teachings. We explored Beyonce's "Church Girl" to gain insight into what Black women's sexual agency looks like and to investigate how popular culture addresses the problems they face. Additionally, we sought to unveil what it means for Black women to reimagine what it means to be sexual, sensual, and spiritual. The discussion was guided by three key questions: 1) What does sexuality mean to you? 2) How has the black church informed your approach to how you view your sexuality? 3) How do you feel about your spiritual relationship affecting how you embrace your sexuality? Through these questions, the discussion revealed themes of mental imprisonment, judgment, and guilt.

I radically imagine the following discussions taking place at the center of the beauty salon. The salon's color scheme features shades of green, Black and tan, with six green chairs

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[19] Slay is a slang word in Black language to describe a noun that is cool or pretty such as an outfit or people. Please see the urban dictionary for more context on the word.

arranged in the center, mirroring a serene atmosphere like that of nature. The walls of the salon are adorned with paintings showcasing Black women in various shades of melanin and a range of hair styles, including stretched out natural curly hair pattern, braids, locs, and silk press. Participants and I are gathered in a circle as we discuss the following themes:

Mental Imprisonment

Marlisha: I define sexuality as more than just a physical act of intercourse, but also a site of self-exploration and liberation for the mind, body, and soul. I believe that Black women can develop tools to cope with sexual discrimination by using literature that represents their lived experiences. So today we'll be reading Sugar by Bernice McFadden, which displays a Black woman being unrepentant in her advocacy for her sexuality and ways of being. We uncover the deep layers of pain and trauma that make the main character, Sugar who she actually is. To begin, I want you all to answer the question, do you go to church? If not, is there a reason you don't go to church?

Lex: Like Altalie, I took a non-traditional route. I started going to a non-denominational church because I believe that you don't necessarily always have to be in a particular building in order to be spiritual. And also the timeframe of that church was less than the traditional one that I was accustomed to. Also, like Altalie, I'm interested to find out more about, why there are so many sexuality issues when it comes to certain subject topics relating to women.

Sam: *(Sam raises the hand emoji on ZOOM to go next)* I do go to church. It is a Christian church. However, I'm spiritual. I don't identify with one specific religion, like Lex and Altalie. *(I notice the way they all are referring back to each other which is great because they are all learning each other's name as they go along)* I just want to have an open mind. Over the years

we've seen sexuality evolve with pronouns and gender classifications. I just want to get more knowledge on the different things that are happening around us.

Sarah: I do not go to church anymore. I kind of stopped going since the Covid pandemic. I actually agree with the other ladies, especially Sam. I feel like salvation is personal. So I'm on a spiritual journey, where I'm separating from, the religious stigma and trying to separate from the different religions and their particular views. I believe if there's one God, then, we all serve that one God. And so I don't like to be included in the separation of particular religions and the restrictions that they impose on people. That’s why I haven't returned back to church, but I do feel like my connection with God is a personal one and it still continues to prevail in my life.

Tony: Currently, I do not go to church. I was raised in the church. I've dealt with different denominations. But I haven't been to church in about three to four years. Even though I was raised in a church, I'm not religious. I'm more spiritual. I've dealt with Bible study and all that. I usually have too many questions for them, so I guess I kind of make those higher up in the church at times uncomfortable because I inquire too much.

Marlisha: Thank you all for sharing. I personally don't really have a church home. And I'm in and out of the church, but the particular reason is like Nell, I had so many questions and I had so many experiences that I had questions about that were never really answered. And only through books did I actually find those types of answers. I felt like I was connecting with other literary Black women that were going through similar issues. Before diving into the book, I want to understand your particular view of sexuality. What does sexuality mean to you? How has the Black church informed your approach to how you view your sexuality, and how do you feel about your spiritual relationship affecting how you embrace your sexuality?

Lex: Sexuality to me means being comfortable with yourself and expressing it freely. Based on my personal experience, I became more comfortable with my sexuality over time. Growing up in a Christian-based church, the belief was you hold onto your sexuality until you get married. So for many years, I had this jaded perspective in terms of not wanting to have sex and waiting to find the perfect match. However, when do you find the perfect match? Some people never.

Altalie: For me, sexuality means embracing who you are, understanding who you are, and being self-aware. It's about identifying what you identify yourself as and all that encompasses who you are and what your makeup is. Growing up in a Black church when you think about sexuality, you think about the fact that you go into a marriage, and then the purpose is to procreate.

You hold onto your sexuality or your virginity, for instance. you get married. You procreate, and then you continue life and that's what God wants you to do. You get into a marriage to, you know, populate the world. Then forgetting the pleasure aspect. You know, the church is not gonna teach you that there's a pleasure aspect to it. How do you enjoy it? Is there a way that you can do both? So it's more of a connection, and less of a chore or less of a burden that you have to give your husband this, or you have to do this in order to procreate. I don't know if I let my spirituality and sexuality intertwine or combine in any sense. Because my spirituality is one thing, and then my sexuality is another because the relationship that I have with my significant other is a bond. It's something that we create together. So I don't know if it's connected in any way.

Marlisha: You actually raised two important valid points, Altalie. This idea of the purity culture that both you and Lex touched upon as well as your saying that spirituality and sexuality should not conflate right, but all of our teachings actually put them as one. It's like in order for you to be spiritual, you can't engage in this type of activity. Yet, the perception that you have of it is it's two separate entities. So that's what I'm trying to understand, this idea that you can still have a sexuality, you can still be spiritual, and you can still have a relationship with God.

Sam: *(Sam raises the hand emoji on ZOOM to go next)* I love those points you all touched upon. But sexuality to me is more of an identity. When I think of sexuality, I don't necessarily intertwine it with being like sexual. It's more like, who are you as an individual? In the Black church, I've learned that you're born a woman and we have assigned roles. So that's the part I'm still conflicted with through the teachings of the church and what the roles of a woman look like. I'm a woman that's independent, having my own theories and thoughts. I have a relationship with God and at times when I engage in sexual activities because I'm not married, I'm like, am I failing myself? Am I doing what's expected of me? Is this right? Is this wrong? So I'm always in a battle back and forth and I ask myself, should I repent? But I think it's more of a journey and finding my own path and what works for me and what doesn't work for me.

Sarah: When I think of sexuality, the first thing that comes to mind is self-awareness. Being raised in a strict cultural background, I've dealt with a lot of judgment from adults from an older generation based on how they grew up. They tried to impose their views on their kids and how they should be, especially growing up in the church. So for me personally growing up, it was shunned, so you couldn't explore your sexuality as a woman. Like you kind of had to just abide by certain rules. That hindered me from being able to explore my sexuality as a woman growing up. But then when I steered away from that, I was able to actually feel like, okay, I'm

not doing something wrong by feeling this, not even physical pleasure, but mentally. I no longer was imprisoned mentally. As Sam said, I was always going back and forth thinking am I doing something wrong? Because I believe in God, because I know right from wrong, so is my exploring myself as a woman a sin? I often felt guilty and I'm still dealing with that sometimes. *(she paused as if contemplating her next response)*

As a 28-year-old going on 29 next month, I'm still dealing with that as a grown woman. I feel like sometimes I am living two, not two separate lives, but in a sense like hiding my true self. Because it's still looked down on by society. Women kind of have to carry themselves in a certain way, especially being married, because there's an image to protect. *(she takes another pause)* So that's the part where it's like I separate the two, my spiritual life and my sexuality. I feel like because of the judgment, or how it could be viewed, I might be doing something wrong by expressing myself. It's like, I have to keep that sexuality part private, and then embrace my spirituality more to be accepted. So it's a battle to this day. I'm still trying to figure that out.

This theme of mental imprisonment is prevalent in the above discussion because it reveals the societal, religious, and cultural expectations for Black women concerning their sexuality. Participants Lex, Altalie, and Sarah, share their personal journeys wherein they had to reconcile their spirituality with their evolving understanding of their own sexuality. The concept of abstinence until marriage and specific gender roles for women, often lead to feelings of guilt and shame when exploring one's sexuality outside these boundaries. Their experiences underscore the need for fostering open and non-judgmental discussions on this subject to assist in promoting self-acceptance and sexual liberation.

Judgment

Tony: Sexuality to me means being free. Being comfortable being yourself, knowing yourself and the pleasurable aspect I would tie it with just confidence within yourself. I had my first child at 21. I grew up in the church, but I guess you could say I took a break from the church life, pretty much my high school days up until I turned 21. At that time it was a Church of God in Christ *(COGIC)*. And that's where I would say I experienced my worst times in dealing with the church. I was judged heavily. At the church I was attending, I pretty much sat in the back, and I was at that church through the rest of my pregnancy, so about three to four months.

It was interesting. *(She hesitated. It seemed as if she didn't want to say much more than that).* I had to deal with a lot of judgment from the church mothers. I can give one example. Even though I was 21, they had the nerve to approach my mom and complain because that church only allowed women to wear skirts. Although I was wearing a skirt and a shirt, I was like seven, eight months pregnant. Everyone knows usually about that time your belly button starts poking out. They approached my mom and complained my shirt being too tight. I don't get how they thought I could hide my stomach. That incident did not sit right with me especially since I wasn't married nor was I with my child's father.

Tony's account serves as an illustration of judgment and how it can underscore critical predispositions and double standards that can be pervasive in the Black church. Consequently, this can have an adverse effect on individuals' self-worth. Furthermore, it demonstrates the way in which religious communities may fall short of displaying empathy or understanding.

“Church Girl”

Marlisha: Thank you all for sharing your experiences. I know it may have been difficult to open those wounds. Like everyone, I've dealt with experiences in the church that wasn't ideal. My experiences stiffened me. Like Nell, I also experienced isolation in the church too and felt like I didn't really belong. And I longed for a sacred place where those feelings no longer existed. So I am extremely grateful for this space to reveal those inner thoughts, as we connect or maybe disconnect with the characters from *Sugar*. Before we get into the discussion of the book, I want you all to listen to Beyonce’s song “Church Girl,” a hymn and meditation song for Black church women to celebrate their authenticity. While listening to the song, keep these three questions in mind: 1) Why do you think Beyonce chose these lyrics? 2) What message do you think Beyonce was trying to convey? 3) Which line from the song resonates with you the most and why?

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[After playing the song, the participants begin to articulate the deeper meaning of the lyrics, and how it identifies Black women’s sexual agency in a liberating way.]

Sam: I think Beyonce chose those lyrics based on the perception of what a church girl is supposed to be. She sang nobody can judge me. And that's exactly what it is. When you are a church girl, you're supposed to be a certain way and act a certain way. So the part where she said “drop it like a thotty” means you can still be a church girl, and still embrace your sexuality. You can be who you are without being concerned about what people have to say about it. So I think she was trying to say embrace yourself, love yourself for who you are, as opposed to what the church says you have to be.

Altalie: I agree with Sam on that. I remember a friend of mine I grew up with. She was Pentecostal and I remember her going to church and complaining how they wanted her to

separate worldly music from church music. She wasn't allowed to listen to what was on the radio or everything else even though she wanted to. But this song is saying, you can still enjoy what's out there and that doesn't necessarily have to conflict with who you are spiritually. You can still go to church, you can still love God, you can still pray. That shouldn't tie into what you wanna do and how you wanna enjoy yourself. Like Sam said, embrace your sexuality and be out there. There's nothing wrong with it. I wish I could have told my friend that back then.

Sarah: I agree with the other ladies on Beyonce's song meaning to just be yourself, be free. That freedom part just keeps sticking out to me. One particular part that stuck out was "you could get it tatted if you want to." Because my first tattoo was last year at the age of 28. And I felt so liberated doing it. But I actually went out of state and didn't let nobody know that I was going or whatever. And then when I got back home, I still felt like I had to hide it, so that freedom I felt doing it was taken away again. I still felt like I had to hide it because I felt like I'd be judged by it, which I actually was. My aunts and my parents were shaking their heads and looking down at me. I have to keep reminding myself that *you are your own woman, so do what makes you happy*. It's a constant daily battle because I'm so used to how I grew up and what I grew up knowing or was taught, and then trying to free myself from that. It's a constant daily battle for me but I try to remind myself to live my life with no regrets and just be happy. Like, do you. But it's hard.

I introduce "Church Girl" as it addresses two main issues that it attempts to renegotiate: censorship and judgment. The participants' interpretation of the song posited that Beyonce focuses on the power of loving oneself and resisting the narratives that oppress them. In her response, Sarah highlights the challenges of negotiating between what is expected of her and what she wants for herself. Her tattoo was a liberating experience, but she felt condemned and

compelled to hide it. She grasps the importance of living life without regrets, even though it is a difficult task. She strives to avoid conforming to other people's expectations because it minimizes her own desires. Both the song "Church Girl" and the book Sugar expose the participants to alternative narratives for living. It exposes them to freedom of the mind, body, and spirit in challenging preconceived notions of how Black women are supposed to act, think, talk, or dress. Having identified the problem in the consultation phase, in the wash phase, the book aids the participants in embracing new ways of living that do not constrain them.

Hour 2: Wash

Washing the hair involves removing the accumulated residue from it. The right cleanser or shampoo should not contain ingredients that dry the hair but should instead eliminate dirt and infuse the hair with moisture. This process can be seen as a detoxifying step, ultimately shedding the hair of any build-up. I consider this step to be the acceptance stage, where participants acknowledge the necessity of new concepts of sexuality due to issues related to race, gender roles, and judgment that Black women continually face, spanning from historical times to the present.

During our conversation, we concentrated on the first half of the book *Sugar*. Our discussion revolved around Sugar's arrival in the town of Bigelow, where she faces immediate judgment based on her appearance and her public behavior at her home windows. However, Pearl made an effort not to pass judgment on Sugar by how she looked, how others talked about her, or what she did in her own home. Instead, Pearl attempted to welcome Sugar into the community. This exploration delves deeper into the societal roles of women role, highlighting the differences between Sugar and Pearl. Sugar is criticized for being too sexual, while Pearl is

revered as a “holy” woman. Our discussion allowed us to further examine the influence of race and geographic location on perceptions of women.

We also examined the murder of Jude, Pearl’s daughter, as an illustration of the dehumanization of the Black female body and the necessity for healing from traumatic experiences. The questions that guided our discussion were: 1) What role did women play in Bigelow? 2) How is the concept of race depicted in these chapters? 3) Why does Pearl show an interest in Sugar?

Societal Expectations & Gender Roles

Altalie: A lot of times when you start reading a book with a new author, you're just trying to understand their writing style. Because with Bernice, she's very like, graphic, in a sense, where she's really trying to make you sit in that scene to kind of understand what's going on. And also understand the build of each character understanding what their sentiments are. So I really got a lot of that. The first chapters were about understanding the main character Sugar coming into this whole community, and the people not knowing her but are ready to judge her. She was being labeled something all because of the way she looks. This was written way before 2022 and we're still going through that today. So nothing has changed societal-wise. So we're still seeing a lot of her own people judging her. And we have Black people being judged by not only their own but by society too. Do you all find that this book ties a lot into today's society and current state?

Lex: It's funny that you said that. I actually thought about the role of women in the way it’s identified. Especially the part about keeping her man well-fed and fucking him, are the top priorities that she can't slack on. So if you look at societal norms, the woman is the one who really takes care of the household. And her role is to primarily make sure that her mate is

satisfied in terms of maintaining the house, looking a certain way, and making sure that he is sexually pleased. There's this stigma in terms of a church girl being your holy woman.

Altalie: And then we're also like talking about the South right, where there are norms and values that are completely different from other parts of the United States. Not saying women are oppressed in the South but there are some general themes of men working and women being the homemakers. And so when they're home, they are expected to do these things, these are their roles, and this is what they have to do. And on top of that, you have to make sure that your man is well taken care of in the bedroom. Maybe that's why Bernice kind of placed this story in the South.

The participants recognize the relevancy of the book's depiction of societal expectations and gender roles to contemporary times. Lex examines the expectations placed on women for domestic care, maintaining their appearance, and satisfying their partner's sexual desires. Additionally, Altalie highlights the regional differences, notably within the South, where certain cultural norms and values dictate gender roles. She acknowledges the general themes of men being the primary financial providers and women being the homemakers, thereby reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Interlocking Systems of Oppression

Marlisha: The idea of geographical location plays an impact on the role women have. I'd love to discuss further the way race is portrayed as well. Because it's the South it's probably more racially problematic. What can we say about the way in which race is showing up similar to our modern world?

Sam: Race to me was portrayed in the beginning by the dehumanization of Blacks, especially women. Bernice described the way Jude was murdered. The person cut off her vaginal

parts, and they chop off her limbs, and it's like if you're gonna kill somebody, just kill them. But to bring them almost to an animal-like state of nothing. That went back to race because if it was a white person, would they have killed them in that manner? And I know, they talked about other people at the beginning of the story who were beaten until they shed blood and the imagery of the bruises being purple is vivid. When you think about it, if you fall, you just get black and blue, but to be purple is to be severely beaten to an animal-like form.

This discussion primarily focuses on racial oppression. However, it alludes to the interplay of multiple systems of oppression including gender oppression. This is evident through the vivid depiction of the violence and brutality of Jude's murder, emphasizing the dehumanization of Black lives. Furthermore, Sam's interpretation of the bruises being purple touches on the symbolism and imagery used in the book, illustrating how this violence is intertwined with the racial identity that is part of Black women's lived experiences.

Sexual Awareness

Altalie: There was a scene that stood out to me. It was when Sugar came out of the shower and then Pearl and Shirley had this view of what her private parts looked like. It was difficult for them to embrace seeing it. But Sugar embraced herself like she was just being free and herself. And these women are just prudish in a way where they couldn't even embrace something that was part of them. It's like taboo to even think about it for them, and I thought that whole scene was funny.

Tony: Although Pearl was shocked to see Sugar in that way, I definitely value that Pearl is somewhat open-minded. She has an open heart. Because when it comes to a group of women, especially ones that like to gossip and judge, there's usually that small percentage of women who are different and understand everyone has their own story. I think Pearl is the epitome of that

right now. Like, it's following this model of just treating everyone equally. You don't know somebody's past; you don't know their present, and what's to come of their future. And I think a lot of that is just Pearl in general. I think it's just welcoming like that.

This discussion underscores the varying levels of sexual consciousness among the characters. Sugar exhibits self-confidence and body positivity by being comfortable in her own skin. Conversely, Pearl and Shirley's reaction reflects a more conservative perspective, marked by a challenge in embracing their own bodies. Nonetheless, Tony emphasizes Pearl's open-mindedness to treat everyone equally, serving as a paradigm of her ability to appreciate and respect diverse experiences and identities. This model of acceptance is important in the progression of their friendship, fostering opportunities for mutual learning and growth.

Restoration

Marlisha: What are some examples that we see that display that Sugar needs some healing? I can start off by explaining what I mean by that. On page 91, when Sugar is having a conversation with Pearl, she says:

> S-some of us make our living breaking our backs and some of us in this world make our livings on our backs." Sugar didn't know why she put it that way. A simple yes would have been sufficient. She suppose she needed, in some small sick way, to sting Pearl, just as she had done to Sugar with her own words. Pearl's arm dropped to her sides. She stared at Sugar with eyes that held years of tears. "Why?" she uttered. Pearl was not seeing Sugar, but Jude. "Why," she said again as one small tear worked its way down her cheek. Sugar shrugged her shoulders and hugged herself. She suddenly felt vulnerable, like a child.

Just that whole interaction of hugging herself, reveal some sort of innocence of a Black girl to me. What are other ways in which we see that throughout this text?

Sam: I love that example that you just shared. It also reveals itself when Sugar and Pearl go back and forth between calling each other people's names like Sugar calls Pearl, Mary, and Pearl calls Sugar, Jude. We know Mary was Sugar's play mom. They lived together and Mary raised her and told her the do's and don'ts. Mary made her feel special. It wasn't a relationship that she wanted or willingly walked into. However, Mary was her sense of protection. And for Jude, you see the relationship with Pearl when she's talking to Sugar and asking her to answer her and telling her the neighbors are whispering about her. Pearl said this is what they say you're doing. So it's like a motherly feeling that they're both relying on. Both of them are going back into their pasts. Or their mother-like figures, more so sugar, because you can see that her innocence was stolen from her. And I think Pearl is just trying to guide her.

Lex: I do too. But I think Pearl wants to understand because when the women were sitting in the parlor, and they were talking, and Pearl kind of confronted everybody by asking who's without sin or not trying to run away from their past. And the women were still set on calling Sugar a whore. Pearl then tells the old tales that her mother used to tell her about a woman called Shirley Brown. And how Shirley Brown was 13 years old, but she was living in the house of her master and her master took advantage of her. It's not something that Shirley's proud of. But like Pearl was explaining everybody has a past. But it seems to be only Pearl is grasping that concept.

The discussion explores the theme of restoration by illuminating the characters' need for healing, exposing their vulnerabilities, and their attempts to confront their pasts and reclaim their lost innocence. Sugar's self-embrace and her and Pearl's reference to names from their

past exemplify how one's respective trauma can persist within them as one matures and encounters fresh experiences. This stresses the need for compassion and support in their efforts for recovery, as they rely on each other for comfort.

Hour 3: Treatment

The right treatment not only adds moisture but also strengthens the hair strands, preventing breakage and providing the necessary support for healthy growth. Not all hair care routines require treatment after each wash. Most often, you can apply treatment every 4-6 weeks to provide the extra nourishment the hair requires over time. In this step, Lex wears a plastic shower cap over the treatment in her hair, indicating she is using it to set her hair before styling it. Metaphorically, this section involves participants discussing the strategies they have learned while reading Sugar. At this point, three-quarters of the book has been read, and the themes of sexual liberation and sisterhood have been presented through scenes featuring Sugar and Pearl agreeing to attend a juke joint and church. The women have developed a friendship in which they transform and embrace all aspects of their identities. This reveals that the community of sisterhood not only teaches us about ourselves but also aids in our healing process. It has exposed the participants and me to ways of addressing the issues we are presented with and how the strategies in the book can be applied to our own lives. The guided questions for this hour were: 1) What do these chapters reveal about women's pleasure? 2) Are there any similarities between Pearl and Sugar that you can identify?

Sexual Liberation through Sisterhood

Altalie: There's the scene of the conflict that Pearl was having when she was getting ready to go to bed and she was looking at the bible and clutching on to it as if she was doing something wrong. She just agreed to go to the juke joint with Sugar. She had to compromise with

Sugar by agreeing to go and Sugar agreed to go to church with her. It was a sacrifice for Sugar because she clearly wanted to help Pearl find herself. She did not want to step foot in the church, but Sugar said she wanted Pearl to see something different. She wanted Pearl to experience herself outside of the church, outside of the normal cadence of her life. Then there's another part where they were arguing about what a whore is and Sugar said on page 134:

> "The only difference between you and me, Miss Pearl, is you began your whoring life in front of a congregation, dressed in white with God's blessing!"

I thought that was an interesting dialogue between the two that displayed different perceptions and language regarding people's life choices.

Tony: Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up because I've been thinking about Sugar's opinion of that. That actually would have been my response. The rebel in me would have said the same thing.

This theme speaks to the notion of personal growth and self-discovery through the acts of sacrifice undertaken by both Pearl and Sugar. Sugar agrees to attend church, while Pearl joins Sugar at a juke joint. The dialogue surrounding the definition of a "whore" is significant, as Sugar confronts traditional concepts of morality and the virtue of women. Her response disrupts conventional ideas of sexual liberation and personal choice in contrast to societal and religious restrictions. Tony's response to Sugar's statement reflects a spirit of resistance that resonates with her pursuit of sexual liberation on her own terms.

Power of Articulation

Sam: I love Sugar because I feel like she is our inner voice; the voice we really want to express but we just don't have the guts. A lot of the things she says, I'm in the background dying laughing. The theme that stood out to me was strength. Despite the fact that what the women

were saying about Sugar was common, they had a lot of negative things to say, and she took it. She took it and she played with it in a way that did not affect her. So I think that Sugar displays a lot of strength and courage, although her path may not be what somebody else would have chosen. She is not easily offended. She just rolls with the flow. Even when she is being called all these crazy names, she still shows up as herself and she speaks her truth. Now that she's opened up to Pearl about who she is, she's finding ways to evolve and possibly heal, because the only person she was hiding from was Pearl. This goes back to what I mean about respect. It’s not that she wanted to hide per se, it’s that she really respected Pearl and her opinion.

Altalie: I like that Sugar is not faking. The other women are hiding behind the Bible in a sense, but deep down they probably wish they had Sugar’s strength or confidence, and because they don't have it, they take that anger out on her. I hate that they take their frustration out on Sugar because they don't have that same confidence. I hate that she always has to be so strong. On another note, I think the thing that really stuck out to me was the revelation that Lappy was behind that hideous crime against Jude, and just him being that type of person that tricks people That was big, but then I wasn't too shocked. Because like, his character seemed a little shady. And just like the fact that he was this white man placed in a black community. And the fact that Sugar decided not to say anything about knowing he’s the one behind Jude’s death, I'm a little conflicted with that, because I feel like people should know.

Sam: I don't know if the truth would have really made a difference for Black people. It’s during a time of the suppression of Black people and their voices and everybody kind of just looked the other way, and fear that their own safety would have been jeopardized. And again, if Joe and Pearl knew, what would have happened? Just like when Lappy hurt Sugar, there was a whisper that said she can't call the police, nothing's gonna happen. Telling them would just bring

more pain. That is why I really love Sugar's character because she just endorsed all of it for everyone. Although everyone sees her as the horrible villain. She's actually brave and she takes on everybody's problem.

Marlisha: I do agree that telling Pearl and Joe the truth would bring more pain. But I also know there are detrimental effects when staying silent too. Sugar's ability to take on so much may seem admirable but as Altalie said earlier, she shouldn't have to be strong all the time. Is there not healing in exposing the truths too?

This discussion underscores the complexities of vocalizing one's truth. Sugar serves as an example of someone who has the courage to articulate what others may keep suppressing. By expressing her thoughts, despite the judgment she receives, demonstrates the power of articulation as a tool for resilience. This also reveals that sometimes speaking one's truth can be hurtful and come with possible consequences, but it can also be a step towards healing and closure.

Hour 4: Style

After a style is completed, the client experiences a sense of renewal. Black women have many different styles to choose such as braids, weaves, twist-outs, or silk presses. During the consultation stage, it can be challenging to visualize the final look due to potential hair damage. However, with the right style, Black women leave the stylist's chair feeling transformed and more confident in their appearance. Tony, for example, opted for Fulani braids, which feature cornrows on the top half of her hair and knotless braids on the bottom half.

During this hour, participants talk through the ending of the text. The conversation touched on Sugar falling back into her previous lifestyle and associating with the wrong people. We also explore the practice of testimonial storytelling towards sexual justice from harmful

church rhetoric on our sexuality. The participants considered the following questions to guide their discussion: 1) What were your thoughts on the ending? 2) Did you relate to any of the characters and why? 3) How did this character shape your own personal experiences with sexuality in the Black church? The responses further developed the themes of rebirth and healing through self-writing of one's experiences.

Rebirth

Sam: I was wondering something. Even with the compromise that Sugar made with Pearl, it shows that there was a part of Sugar that wanted to come out of the lifestyle by agreeing to go to church. And I just questioned, is it possible to come out of a certain lifestyle that somebody chooses? Like, how do you change your life around? Because it seemed like Pearl was going to help her and Sugar was willing to change. And then she fell right back into it with Lappy. So I'm wondering, do the choices we make dictate the rest of our lives or just the moment in which we make them? And who determines that?

Marlisha: I definitely think that our circumstances can be changed over time. The theme of rebirth really stood out to me because I found a lot of different moments in which Pearl was becoming something new. But I also feel like what's stopping Sugar from being this new person that she can be is fear. Sometimes you go after what you know, as opposed to placing yourself in positions of unknown. And I think that's what happens with her. She knows how to run. She knows a life of pain and trauma. And when everything is hard, that's what she turns to. And it didn't matter how much Pearl wanted to save her. Sugar had to feel like she wanted to be saved. There were parts throughout the text where she started to open up. And then she closed it off, as we see later on throughout the text. She needs to want it for herself. I hope my perception was helpful in thinking deeper about Sugar's circumstances.

Sam: It did, thank you.

Marlisha: I also want to add another part that I felt showed a rebirthing moment. It's on page 169, where Pearl said:

> God done sent you here to soothe my hurting heart. I see that now. He could have sent you anyplace else, but he chose Bigelow. He sent you here to put a smile back on my face and laughter back in my mouth. He knew I had turned my back on him after Jude, I told him I would continue to serve him, but I couldn't trust him no more. That was, until you showed up." Pearl placed her hand over Sugar's. "I love you for helping me trust again.

And Sugar asked her in return:

> "You think you love me because I remind you of Jude."

Pearl responds:

> "That may have been so in the beginning, but now I love you for you, not for who you remind me of."

I really think that was a very monumental moment for both Pearl and Sugar.

Altalie: That line you just read was the turning point of this book for me. It really is sticking with me a lot. I love it because it shows the healing they found in their sisterhood.

This discussion focuses on the fact that individuals have the capacity to change and make choices that lead them toward personal development. However, the fear of stepping into the unknown can be a hindrance in the transformation process. Despite this fear, we see the way that the power of acceptance can bring about a profound transformation. The sisterhood that has developed between Pearl and Sugar becomes a driving force for rebirth, as they lean not on the fear they feel but on the love they have cultivated for one another.

[everyone was given 15 minutes to write their response to the questions above]

Testimonial Storytelling Engagement

Lex: I actually took some time to write a poem. I said:

Who is sugar? She is a woman possibly hurt by men hurt by her past and constantly moving fast. She stands tall and signifies the pain for all. She tries to embrace love and friendship, but only to realize that she carries most of the pain in her hip. Needless to say, she's the life of a party and not afraid to say it's time for healing.

I took the time to just write about some of her experiences in terms of the pain that she endured. And I ended it with black is gold and old is gold because your past experiences make you a stronger person so even though at times it might link to some struggles but if you acknowledge them and constantly work on yourself, you will achieve success in the long run.

Altalie: That was beautiful, Lex. Thank you for sharing. *(everyone was talking at once thanking Lex for sharing)* I'll go next:

My body is my own despite its trauma, I love it. Only I can heal it. I care for it and cherish it my body is my own and I get to choose who I want to share it with.

I wrote this because I resonated with the book and Sugar owning what she had and despite the people of Bigelow feeling a certain way. She had to be confident in what she was doing in a sense and for me as far as like experience is concerned and how I felt, I just think about myself. I've had some trauma with my own body, like juggling surgeries and people taking advantage. And only I can make that difference, only I can change and heal it and grow from those experiences like Lex was saying. Having those experiences and taking it as, hey, I'm gonna grow from it so only I can make myself heal from what my body went through.

Marlisha: Thank you for your vulnerability in sharing. That's a great perspective to have. I can go next. Growing up literature always humbled me; it gave me an opportunity to connect with others that looked like me. The topics of sexuality and spirituality were taboo in my household, and even so in the church. I was condemned for piercing my belly button, nose, and ears. I was even chastised for wearing dresses and skirts, not past my knees in length. Seeing Sugar grow into who she is, despite the trauma of her upbringing, I felt for her. I cried for her because she paved the reality that helped me to be seen despite my own pain. I dedicate the following piece to her:

> You may be a figment of someone's imagination, but you stand behind the truth of my heart. You raised above the ridicule; you stepped within your own light. I only wish that you learn to explore your other gifts. That room and space were made for you to do so. I would have loved to hear your singing voice heal you in the way your friendship with Pearl did. I would have loved to see you grow in ways you couldn't imagine. You may not have had space to breathe the way you deserve. But you made space for me to excel. Thank you for your transparency. Thank you for your bravery. I feel seen, I feel understood. I feel sensual. I feel wounds trying to heal. And that's because I found a safe space in your story.

Tony: That was beautiful Marlisha. Thank you. I guess the biggest thing I took out of the book was acceptance. Sugar would be the first character that I related with, because just based off her actions and her choice of words. I don't know if anyone else seen it, but she screams through the text. The little girl in her is screaming to be heard, screaming to be seen and most importantly, screaming to be accepted. And so that did somewhat open up a slight wound for me. Similarly to what you spoke of earlier Marlisha with your personal experience with the church

and everything with your body and what was acceptable, not acceptable. I can't fully relate to that only because I've always been more reserved. So a lot of things people never knew. They didn't know about piercings or any tattoos, I kept that a secret and kept it covered. So with that, there was always this pressure because people always held me high on this pedestal and it was annoying, I didn't like it. But I ended up having to look up a poem I wrote a long time and I will share it with you. It's a poem I wrote over a decade ago and the crazy thing is the title of it, I actually have that tattooed on me. It's called "Speak Little Girl." And it says:

Voice be heard.

I know you've been trying to speak since you were a little girl.

Never was the usual

Always had dreams of being seen other than as beautiful, struggled to figure out self

Needing encouragement but wouldn't ask for help.

A mind of intellect but your creativity treated with neglect.

Notice by tongues of crooks your little light constantly deceived about the truth.

Lies became all that you knew. Often painless herb, a little understanding of your words escaping reality because life only seemed fair in your mentality.

Speak little girl I know you once seemed like a seed compared to the world

Speak little girl let your mind forgive the root and be heard.

I see that a lot with everything Sugar went through. Other than her, Pearl would be the only other character that I relate to just as far as just constantly letting others' perceptions and opinions shape me and how I move amongst others. One thing I was really proud of with Pearl would be her going to juke joint and her giving in and letting Sugar do her hair and her wearing the dress and even having a drink. I know later on down the line she and Joe still ended up supporting

Sugar and attending the juke joint often and not caring about what the other church people had to say like that meant a lot to me.

The writing that the participants gathered highlights the healing, empowerment, and transformation that engaging in testimonial storytelling can catalyze toward sexual justice. They represent the importance of acknowledging one's experiences and using them as a source of strength. Drawing a parallel to Sugar's journey in the story, Tony's poem encapsulates the struggle to be heard and understood, illuminating the impact of societal pressures on one's individual development. Lex and Altalie's writing demonstrates the power of taking ownership of one's body and experiences as a means towards liberation.

Healing in Self-Writing

Marlisha: How was the experience with writing your experiences down?

Tony: The writing out is actually easier for me. It definitely got me to open up my memory vault. These chapters got better and better, and writing helped me find many relatable notions within this book, was really therapeutic, and an eye-opener for my own personal shadow work journey.

Sam: It did the same for me.

Tony's relatability to the book fostered a sense of shared experiences, which can be comforting and healing. This allowed her to process her emotions and experiences in a safe and creative way. Her reference to shadow work implies that self-writing can be a process that contributes to personal growth. It entails confronting and integrating aspects of oneself that have been suppressed or ignored, leading to healing.

Hour 5: Post-Styling

After each visit to the beauty salon, it is necessary to receive tips and strategies to help maintain the style until your next appointment. Following these steps correctly will ensure that your styles continue to boost your confidence long after you have left the stylist chair. As an example, Sam takes measures to protect her style by wearing a bonnet, which serves as a symbol of her decreasing reliance on the stylist for style maintenance. During these moments, the participants no longer need assistance from a facilitator. They share what they have learned throughout the process, discussing how it can benefit them beyond the space of a book club. To enhance this discussion, I also invited a guest speaker to share insights on self-healing practices that Black women can incorporate into their journey of sexual discovery. This speaker provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions and gain a deeper understanding of the process of womb work.

Sexual Discovery

Lex: Like Sugar, I learned to stray away from the concepts of the church and started to explore within, in order to be more comfortable and freer with how I express myself sexually. I think now as an adult I have evolved. I understand the power of masturbating and through that, I've learned to free myself from certain stigmas. I think if women took the time to work on themselves, and that could be by accepting who they are through their prayers or their meditation, it could help with all the issues they've experienced while being in church. I know we touched on mental health briefly, but I wanted to add that sometimes I see a Yoni coach, who has really helped me evolve sexually.

Sarah: What's a Yoni coach?

Lex: So it's like having a massage therapist, but what he specializes in is womb therapy through massages or different crystals that are being utilized and also through meditation and deep breathing techniques.

Sarah: Oh, okay. If you don't mind, I want to know since you've been seeing him, how has it impacted your life?

Lex: I've been seeing him for quite some time, and I remember when he was doing my massages, he was like, "You're so stiff." And I was like, "I'm stiff? I work out, I'm flexible." He responded, "No, no, no. You have to understand that your strength is in your yoni." And I asked him, "Well, what exactly does that mean? Because I've never heard of that type of theory before or those types of conversations." He says, "Well, as a woman, your strength is in your womb and you have to be able to embrace yourself and release, and by doing so, you'll let go of all of your insecurities." So that's what it has done for me. I think it also helped me to get deeper into my fitness and nutritional regimens.

Sarah: Okay. Thank you.

Altalie: Thank you, Lex, for that. Super, super enlightening. I think some things like that are important for women to hear so they do not feel ashamed about exploring those things for themselves. So, I really appreciate you being open and very candid about it.

This discussion showcases the journey of sexual discovery and its connection to one's mental well-being. The alternative approach to sexual wellness, which involves womb work, allows connection with one's own body and the release of insecurities. It also encourages open conversation towards self-pleasure and the opportunity for the participants to learn from each other.

~

[*After this brief exchange, Lex extended her coach's information to me and suggested I reach out to him. I did reach out and he agreed to join the last session and do a mini-lecture on what his work is and the impact it has on women who engage in it*]

Womb Work

Psusennes: Hi ladies. My name is Psusennes Bey. I'm a Holistic Doctor of Therapy. My business is called Pain Solutions NYC. What I do is practice yoga which yoga is a lot more spiritual and a lot more about self-development. So throughout that practice of meditation, I use that mechanism to help people do self-analysis, self-healing, basically seek the path towards inner revolution, in other words discovering the things within yourself. This allows you to be able to have a fuller experience of reality. As we know, a myriad of symphony happens within the body, so the primary thing that I'm always concerned about when I'm treating somebody is, what's going on inside of them, and what is their typical state of health because those things will be expressing themselves inside of the body, and particularly inside of the gut, the face, and particularly, the womb. I described the womb as unlocking the most vital part of a woman's primal self. It's a gateway to the spiritual realm, the central location in the body where women can learn the most about themselves, a secondary nervous system, and the proprietary location that expedites a woman's ability to purify all imbalances and toxins in herself.

As far as what I can consider womb work, it's the ability to define things ourselves outside of how society has shaped our perception of our bodies. And by mending the womb, women can begin to unravel deep renewed stress, increase overall vaginal health, and strengthen the emotional psychological, and anatomical bond with the womb itself.

Sam: I do have a question for you. I wanted to know what advice you have for women when it comes to womb care.

Psusennes: There are many practices women can engage in at home that can unravel their sensuality. By unraveling your sensuality, that is in relation to womb care because a women's sensuality observes and expands due to its connection to our five senses. For example, when you lose your sense of smell, or when you lose your sense of being able to go out and communicate with people that bareness is a response to something that you were used to being stimulated with, sensually through the five senses. And the spirit holds onto the records of what we feel good about, about the way that we interact with the outside world, and that can give us a lot of different securities. So paying attention to how the womb works really plays a vital role in your evolution as a woman.

If you want to you can do womb work with a partner, you can do it with a dildo, you can do it with a Yoni egg, or you can do it with no hands. But it all has to do with the sensitivity of how the womb feels. And basically, there's something called armoring. And armoring is whenever your nerves lock up on a particular part of your body to try to protect itself, but it can happen to any part; it can happen around the heart, and it also happens inside the womb. It is like numbing down your sensitivity and nerves, consciously trying to protect yourself.

Marlisha: You raised a really valid point about the way our body holds on to memory. In the book *Sugar*, we discussed the idea of sexual abuse and sexual liberation. So I wanted to know, the type of trauma that can actually be held in the womb, and ways in which we can kind of start releasing that.

Psusennes: Trauma can be held anywhere in the body because your body can hold energy. A woman deciding to go down the path of trying to heal generational trauma through womb work and understanding themselves sexually, and getting deeper into themselves, requires various layers of vulnerability, to get to the deeper levels. So, as far as like tools that you can use

to practice womb work, of course, there are small and large Yoni eggs, which will go inside the vagina. And then you basically do pelvic floor Kegels, or you can just hold them inside. You should start with a larger one to increase your sensitivity by wearing it a lot. And you can wear it around the whole day or just for five minutes. But every time that you engage with the egg, you should have a relationship with the experience.

By using a Yoni wand, you're manually doing what the Yoni egg is trying to do, but you're doing it in a systemic rhythmic type of way. You would use this for the labia, vulva, and clitoris. The larger wand is meant to reach the cervix by using a few different shapes. There are also Yoni steams which you squat over a hot bucket with herbs in it. Women can also engage in traditional yoga, tai chi, or swimming because those practices open up the nervous system and help the journey of emotional health throughout the body.

As far as ailments, not practicing Yoni work can lead to ovarian cysts, cancer vaginosis, STIs, etc. So a lot of times when you're getting any of those things it can be because of tension that's stuck along the pelvic floor which is connected to the womb. By healing the spirit, the heart, and the mind, you have a greater possibility of clearing all these. Yoni work is something that you use for cultivation, literally. And by understanding what your relationship is with yourself and how deeply you really want to go on this journey, it's all the better. Health and Yoni work are synonymous. One’s spirituality and the way that the divine means something to us is a secondary part of our human experience. If we don't take care of the first part, we won't be able to understand the second part.

Tony: What does it mean when you can't tolerate the yoni steam?

Psusennes: What you do is boil hot water, then after it’s boiling, you throw the herbs in for a few more minutes. Then turn the water off and pour the contents into your bucket and let it

sit for 10 more minutes. Make sure to buy a bucket with a lid to cover it while you let the water cool down. The reason the lid is important is that you're going to test the water to allow yourself to know when it’s too hot and when you can stand it. You have to walk yourself through the comfort.

Marlisha: This information was extremely important and informative. And of course, this is something that's going to take time to actually learn and really dig deep into it. I was especially interested in the tools that you described and the different types of methods that allow women to start at the pace and place where they are most comfortable exploring. Thank you so much for joining us today, Psusennes.

The encouragement of womb work as a means of addressing trauma and a deeper connection to one’s body represents a practical approach that women can embark on toward their path to achieving sexual justice. Psusennes’s discussion of this practice points out the body’s potential for healing as women navigate at their own pace and explore their personal comfort levels. This is an exploration of learning to appreciate one’s body without judgment or restrictions.

Following Psusennes’ visit, we concluded our discussion with hopeful anticipation and newly formed friendships. In the upcoming chapter, I will delve deeper into the themes explored during our discussion by addressing the three original research questions of this study.

CHAPTER FIVE

In this chapter, I analyze the discussions from the book club research study. I argue that Black women grapple with feelings of shame from harmful church doctrine, particularly related to the teachings of purity culture and the promotion of respectability politics. Consequently, I explore the ways Black women draw upon their lived experiences to foster knowledge production, community building, and the promotion of healing regarding their sexuality. Through the close readings of texts about Black women, the Black church, and sexuality, and the dialogues that transpired over a 6-week book club, I maintain that engaging with literature that mirrors Black women's lived experiences empowers them.

The book club discussion incorporated various themes, including trauma, shame, and sexual repression to posit the necessity of adopting a theological approach to Black women's lived experiences in the Black church. Therefore, I propose Black feminist theology, a framework that seeks to establish sexual justice for Black women. The results from this study revealed a significant range of experiences of sexual alienation and how the participants attempted to authenticate their pleasure. Accordingly, this scholarship addresses three research questions.

Research Question #1: *How do Black women's experiences within the Black church contribute to how they see themselves as sexual beings?*

During the consultation stage, my aim was for the participants to identify the challenges they encountered concerning their sexuality within the Black church. As a result, the participants revealed feelings of mental entrapment and judgment due to the oppressive experiences they experienced. Sarah admitted, "I feel like because of the judgment, or how it could be viewed, I might be doing something wrong by expressing myself. It's like, I have to keep that sexuality

part private, and then embrace my spirituality more to be accepted. So it's a battle to this day. I'm still trying to figure that out." This statement highlights her need to live between two worlds to protect her image, yet it also hinders her sense of wholeness, leaving her with the constant question, "is exploring myself as a woman a sin?" Sarah acknowledges that understanding one's sexuality requires self-awareness of how certain expectations can influence a woman's choices. In acknowledging this, she battles with the decision of choosing herself over how others perceive her. The importance of the word *sin* is especially eye-catching when one considers how she intertwines it with the Black church disapproval she experiences. Delores Williams, a womanist theologian, researched the autobiographies of Black women in the 1900s and highlighted that sin was understood ontologically, implying that an individual's fault or flaw is inherent in their existence ("A Troubling in My Soul" 142). This understanding of sin was imparted through teachings within their Christian community. However, Williams introduces a womanist theologian's perspective on sin, which I contend serves as the central definition in this dissertation. A womanist notion of sin encompasses four distinctive features, with the most relevant to this research being the idea that "Black womanhood and humanity are synonymous and in the image of God; Black women's sexual being is also in the image of God; therefore to devalue the womanhood and sexuality of Black women is sin; to devalue the womanhood and sexuality of Black lesbian women is also sin (146-7). Understanding this perspective, it becomes evident that Sarah, much like Black women of the early 1900s, internalized the Christian doctrines. These teachings framed sin in terms of how they were operating in the world, often without realizing the broader notion that sin encompasses anything that disregards their humanity and womanhood.

Tony defined sexuality as the freedom to be comfortable with oneself. She came to this realization when she was 21 years old and pregnant, facing criticism for the way her belly button was visible through her clothes at church. Her self-esteem was affected because she was unmarried and not in a relationship with her child's father. As a result, she chose to sit at the back of the church, seemingly to avoid any more judgment. She chides, "seven, eight months pregnant… everyone knows usually about that time your belly butting starts poking out…I don't get how they thought I could hide my stomach." In the third trimester of her pregnancy, it is unfortunate that her primary concern became harsh judgments directed at her. Both Sarah and Tony's experiences demonstrate their longing for freedom to be expressive of their whole identity. Similar to Jacobs in her autobiography, these women needed a safe space characterized by grace and empathy, void of judgment.

In the wash section, several scenes in *Sugar* left an impact on the participants. One particular scene that stood out was the gruesome death of Jude, Pearl's
daughter. The announcement of Jude's death was delivered by a townsperson named Black John, a blacksmith. Regrettably, in stark contrast to the need for understanding and empathy, Black women often are met with physical violence too. When Black John arrived at the site of Jude's death, he found her on the ground, her womanhood mutilated, displayed for all passersby to see:

> Glistening in the sun. His shadow stepped forward and shaded the glare. Black John knew immediately what it was, although he had never seen one without a woman's support, protection and guidance behind it; something like that, once seen, always known. He leaned down and with the sweat-soiled handkerchief retrieved Jude's womanhood. He would later recount (and he often did) how it quivered in the palm of his hand (5).
>
> history…suffers from lack of access to the rich histories of Black women's ideas.

McFadden vividly portrays the scene in a way that makes it come alive. In the quoted passage, I can visualize the horrific moment when Black John held Jude's womanhood in his hand. Lappy, her murderer, not only murdered her but also desecrated her body and left her there as if a monument to be idolized. This grueling scene exemplifies the perpetuation of anti-Black racism and sexism against the bodies and lives of Black girls and women. For example, the mistreatment of Jude's body during her death draws a parallel to how this country has failed Sandra Bland. Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old Black woman, was arrested during a traffic stop in Texas in July 2015, allegedly due to a confrontation in which she assaulted an officer. Three days after her arrest, Sandra Bland was found hanging in her cell, leading to outrage and protests across the United States because many believed her death was suspicious (ABC13 Houston). Utilizing the concept of critical race autopsy[20] in Critical Race English Education (2022), Lamar Johnson explores the pervasive nature of race, racism, whiteness, and white supremacy. He asserts that "if we were to perform a critical race autopsy on Sandra Bland's body, the report would tell us that this country has an intimate history with the maltreatment of Black women (e.g. sexual harassment, rape, reproductive health issues, and human trafficking just to name a few)" (2). In this light, Jude's womanhood was violated and left beside her lifeless body. Her body was objectified and dehumanized, and her murderer was able to carry on to do more heinous acts.

While the participants from the book club may not have experienced the physical violence that Black women often endured, they did encounter the mental violence resulting from restrictions imposed on their sexuality, which had equally detrimental effects on their sense of being. This situation mirrors the circumstances surrounding Sugar's arrival into town, where she

[20] A metaphorical concept used to show how modern-day state violence is rooted in colonialism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and racial capitalism (p.1).

was subjected to derogatory labels such as “slut,” “whore,” and other demeaning terms. McFadden portrayed Sugar’s confidence juxtaposed with the townspeople’s judgment in the following statement:

> Tall and black as the day was long. She walked with a confidence most people in Bigelow had never known. She swaggered along like a cat in heat, leaving swirling curtains of dust in her wake. People named her right there and then. Named her without an introduction, without two words ever passing between them. Called her things they had only whispered under their breath, or in their bedrooms when the doors were closed tight and passion drove them into saying it. Words no self-respecting, God-fearing man or woman would ever use in public (p.12-3)!

Sugar’s display of confidence can be interpreted as sinful to the town, as it leads others to view her with disdain, conflating it with qualities that are deemed ungodly. Amidst this perspective on Sugar’s portrayal, it is noteworthy that, during an interview with Diverse Spines on Instagram[21], McFadden shared the inspiration for Sugar’s creation. She explained that the idea of Sugar came to her while she was in the presence of the spirit(s) that frequently visited her home[22]. It was during this encounter that she envisioned Sugar as a character, one who exuded confidence and stood tall with a beautiful presence, despite the inward pain. The above quote signifies the essence of Sugar’s character, as she walks through the town of Bigelow. Despite her self-

[21] Direct Link to the interview: https://www.instagram.com/tv/CHBTFuygpae/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

[22] More context on this can be found in Solimar Otero’s *book Archives of Conjure: Stories of the Dead in Afrolatinx Culture* (2020). There, she discusses the dead serving as active agents in sites like libraries, rivers, and living rooms to activate embodied practices like writing. As an archival practice, conjuring provides an opportunity for the dead to act as muses or collaborators in the creation process of one’s work.

confidence, a trait that many women feared and envied at the same time, it captured the attention of both the men and the women. This revelation sheds light on the deeper layers of Sugar's character and the inspiration that brought her into existence.

Research Question #2: *In what ways does Black women's literature provide a platform for healing and empowerment for Black women who experienced spiritual violence within the Black church?*

By introducing the participants to the themes of judgment and shame in *Sugar*, they gain insights into how these issues are portrayed in the lives of literary women and the strategies they employ to overcome them. This exploration builds upon the wash stage, where participants observed how Sugar puts her self-confidence to the test despite the judgment. This was important to display because it showcases the demonstration of sexual agency by Sugar, the journey of sexual discovery by Pearl, the importance of community in our efforts to unlearn and rebirth a new understanding of ourselves, and the restoration that one receives in living in their wholeness.

In McFadden's description, Sugar was captured in a moment, sitting by her window, with one leg up on a chair while flipping through the pages of a magazine. The sheer white curtains revealed, "Sugar's dark triangle of pubic hair" (50). Shirley, a critical member of the town, witnessed this scene and admonished Sugar's candidness. Meanwhile, Pearl thought about her "cootie-cat," untouched since the loss of her daughter. The use of the word "cootie-cat" symbolizes women's discomfort with discussing our anatomical parts openly in an unadulterated manner. In my view, this choice of words underscores Pearl's innocence and lack of experience with openly expressing herself sexually. McFadden describes how "Pearl had avoided looking at her own cootie-cat for fifteen years. And Joe [her husband], well he wished he could say that he had touched it or caressed it within those years" (51). These lines illustrate how Sugar's

openness about her womanhood made Pearl think of her *closeted* womanhood. For fifteen years, Pearl's body had been devoid of pleasure, intimacy, and the softness of touch due to the grief and pain that had consumed her mentally and physically.

The participants drew attention to Sugar's sexual openness causing discomfort for the women in the town. As Altalie pointed out, "The other women are hiding behind the Bible in a sense, but deep down they probably wish they had Sugar's strength or confidence, and because they don't have it, they take that anger out on her." In response to Sugar's openness, they chose to isolate her, making her feel like an outcast. Despite that, Pearl formed a friendship with Sugar because she recognized the value of everyone deserving a chance. Both women were coping with their traumas, and their friendship brought these traumas to the forefront. Pearl saw in Sugar a daughter she could mentor, something she could not do with her deceased daughter. On the other hand, Sugar saw in Pearl the mother figure she wasn't raised with. As participant Sam brought up, they called each other names from their past, reflecting the maternal connection they both craved. In a passionate discussion about Sugar's profession, Pearl demanded clarification:

> You answer my question. You answer my question, Jude! Pearl referred to Sugar by her dead daughter's name before during light conversation. It would just tumble out, innocently, like cotton candy, sweet and light. Sugar never commented on it, she herself has called Pearl Mary on certain occasions (p. 90).

The exchange of names between Pearl and Sugar conveys the depth of their connection, illustrating the healing and support they provide to each other. Pearl believed it was necessary for Sugar to openly acknowledge her profession as a sex worker, but Sugar felt that her choices about her body were her own business. As a mother attempting to protect her child from the harsh realities of the world, Pearl exclaimed, "I ain't raise you like that, Jude. Me and your father

ain't raise you to be loose" (91)! Pearl was in a trance, attempting to teach her "daughter" how to survive as a Black woman. This commitment aligns with one of Alice Walker's 4-part definitions of a womanist[23], where Pearl is committed to ensuring Sugar's survival and wholeness, recognizing the cruelty that Black women face. She is haunted by the loss of Jude, and her desire to protect Sugar appears rooted in her inability to protect her own daughter's innocence.

Sugar calls Pearl "Mary" because Mary served as a mother figure in her life. Sugar spent five years under Mary's guidance and learned about the world of sex work. Throughout this time, Sugar had never experienced love not tied to her role "underneath" a man, preventing her from experiencing love for just being herself. Sugar lamented, "small town ain't fit for a woman that ain't never had a mamma. It ain't fit for a woman that never had any friends." However, Pearl showed her that her presence was needed in the small town of Bigelow. Participant Tony emphasized the healing power of the community of Black women stating, "There's usually that small percentage of women who are different and understand everyone has their own story. I think Pearl is the epitome of that right now. Like, it's following this model of just treating everyone equally. You don't know somebody's past; you don't know their present, and what's to come of their future." As Sugar and Pearl accepted their roles in each other's lives, they confronted their fears and found mutual support. The participants were able to witness the healing that can result from having a community, realizing that a community does not have to be a large group; sometimes, just one person can be all you need.

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[23] *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden*

As an analysis of the treatment stage, the participants gained a deeper understanding of what sexual liberation looks like, and how Pearl and Sugar's friendship contributed to their sexual awareness. McFadden demonstrated that their friendship was a reciprocal learning experience, with both of them eager to learn from one another. Therefore, Pearl's decision to go visit the Memphis Roll juke joint one night and Sugar's choice to attend church for two months were predictable decisions. In a previous discussion about the song "Church Girl," Altalie talked about the conflict a friend of hers faced between church music and worldly music. She mentioned, "She wasn't allowed to listen to what was on the radio or everything else even though she wanted to. But this song is saying, you can still enjoy what's out there and that doesn't necessarily have to conflict with who you are spiritually." Pearl grapples with the conflicting values represented by the juke joint and her strong faith. However, a key aspect of this situation is Pearl's willingness to step outside her comfort zone, just as Sugar is ready to do the same. Participants read about Pearl's transformation from a super-conservative woman to someone who learned sexual techniques to enhance her marriage. Pearl's journey embodies the struggles that Black women face in exploring their sexual identities, especially in light of the biblical hermeneutics in the Black church. Despite her initial reservations, Pearl allowed Sugar to assist with her appearance and even learned how to "give hand and head" using a cucumber.

Furthermore, the participants admired Sugar for her strength in the face of criticism from the townspeople. However, Baker-Bell shed light on the enduring struggle that Black women face, always expected to display strength, even when they are going through hardships. She expressed, "Black women are always expected to be strong, even when we are dying" ("For Loretta," 528). Participant Sam also noted that, in addition to Sugar's strength, she carried many secrets and relied on different coping mechanisms, such as alcohol and cannabis. This

observation is significant because, despite both Pearl and Sugar's personal growth, true healing involves accepting and loving even our darkest aspects. While their friendship opened pathways for communication and support, the process of internal healing is unfolding gradually and takes place from within oneself. Both women found a sense of community in each other and learned valuable lessons that would sustain them beyond their shared experiences. Regrettably, the townspeople, particularly those who frequented Fayline's House of Beauty, perceived the transformations as sinful, neglecting to recognize the wholeness the women gained. They believe it was necessary to "reintroduce the lord back into Pearl's life" (153). However, they overlooked their own past and experiences. As the participants concluded, Sugar's presence exposed the underlying issues within Bigelow – certain expectations of women that do not allow them to look within themselves. This can also imply that even when we evolve, acquire knowledge, and embrace the wholeness of who we are, it does not necessarily guarantee acceptance from those who consistently judge us.

Ultimately, the participants observed how Pearl and Sugar created a sacred space for one another to love and receive grace for every version of themselves. McFadden anchors this story with the Black church as a sanctuary. In spite of this, she does not shy away from raising indirect challenging questions, such as the judgment from its attendees and the patriarchal influence of the reverend, who happened to be one of Sugar's regular clients. McFadden did not portray a flawless Black community, unstained. She incorporated cultural elements like the power of oral tradition in the Black community, to introduce issues of anti-Blackness, sexism, and patriarchy. In my final analysis, I assert that Sugar emerged as the Black heroine of Bigelow because her presence effectively catalyzed truth and inner healing.

Research Question #3: *What practices and strategies can Black women engage in to develop and strengthen their sexual politics?*

Black women can employ various practices and strategies to enhance their sexual politics. In this dissertation, my focus centers on the role of their lived experiences in shaping their knowledge production, and I aimed to introduce them to literature that mirrors their lived experiences. To facilitate community building, I established a book club where Black women who share similar life experiences can connect and form a supportive network. Additionally, I have introduced a wellness workshop to discuss self-improvement practices. After engaging in dialogues surrounding the issues of sexuality and spirituality, I recognized the need for a framework that allows for the personal exchange of experiences aimed at advocating for sexual justice through cultural and literary engagement. This framework, which I refer to as testimonial storytelling, becomes central to the findings of my study.

During the style stage, participants engaged in a writing activity where they were encouraged to reaffirm their sexuality in response to reading *Sugar*. This practice not only serves as an outlet through which Black women can communicate but also provides a platform for the (re)negotiation of their Black sexual politics. Throughout our discussions, it was evident that the participants understood the unfair treatment of Sugar. However, I wanted to explore any therapeutic moments they encountered while or after reading. I sought to understand how their perspectives on harmful Christian rhetoric had evolved, and whether there were memorable moments in the text that held significance for them. This approach challenged the participants to share their experiences, leading to discussions on rebirth and how to heal their inner Black girlhood. An example of this is illuminated in the following lines written by participant Tony:

"Speak little girl I know you once seemed like a seed compared to the world

Speak little girl let your mind forgive the root and be heard"

Tony mentioned writing the lines above a few years ago, and as she read *Sugar*, it evoked memories of her inner Black girl who needed a reminder to not only forgive but to heal. These lines convey the idea of breaking the grasp of silence and internalization and creating alternate images of oneself. While recognizing the historical dominance of the *culture of dissemblance*[24] may have allowed Black women to build a "protected cloak" over them, it also rendered them more invisible. By permitting herself to express her truth, Tony is actively advocating the mental and physical survival of Black women in a world that can be hostile toward their sexual identity. She articulates and asserts her sexual agency, redefining what it means for her Black female body to take up space and demand to be heard.

Considering the participants' diverse experiences with sexual repression, I recognized their progress toward sexual liberation was at varying stages. My goal was to offer participants options and potential solutions for achieving sexual justice that extended beyond the book club. Accordingly, in the post-styling stage, Psusenne's discussion on healing sexual trauma through womb work was necessary. He explained that since the body is capable of retaining energy, engaging all our senses is necessary for womb cultivation. As Lyvonne Briggs (2023) points out, when we do healing work on our bodies, our senses are activated. She affirms, "You're in a luscious body, darling one; and healthy bodies respond to stimuli. If all of your faculties are functioning properly, you can literally sense it. You can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. What a

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[24] Darlene Clark Hine (1989) described this idea as "the behavior and attitudes of Black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" ("Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 912). It highlights a survival strategy utilized by Black women to protect themselves from further oppression, discrimination, and harm.

delicious gift it is to journey on this earth in a sensory temple" (6)! To help participants grasp these concepts, they were introduced to exercises that could be practiced individually or with a partner, such as using yoni eggs or wands to connect with their bodies at every step. Yoni steams were also mentioned as a way to control one's experience by determining the right temperature for the steam and stimulating the nervous system. All the while, taking into account that the healing process is not immediate, rather it is a constant and ongoing journey. In summary, the primary objective of the post-styling stage was to demonstrate that there is no single solution to sexual repression. Instead, there exists a range of practices available to promote sexual liberation, tailored to the unique needs and experiences of each individual.

> "Her hurt had been replaced with tranquility. The anger that had laid heavy in her heart for so many years was no longer present in her mind and soul" (*Sugar*, Bernice L. McFadden, p. 223).

CHAPTER SIX

Dear God,

Why you ever fix your hands to make a Black woman? I ain't worth of the good schools, the good water fountains, the good neighborhoods. I ain't worthy of your pulpit. You say after you looked over everything you made, it was good. Did you make Black girls? Did you make Black girl hair and Black girl lips and Black girl thighs and Black girl hips and Black girl teeth and Black girl feet and Black girl backs and Black girl necks and Black girl laughs and Black girl tears and Black girl words and Black girl ears and Black girl breasts and Black girl rest and say this was good? I feel bad. They tell me I am bad. Your people tell me to be quiet, to be covered, to be small, to make them Lord. If I'm good, then they bad. And if they good, then I'm bad. I don't think we all good cuz they seem more free in and out of your house than me.
And I'm left wondering whose image I came from.

-Alexis V. Jackson, *My Sisters' Country*, p.48

Summary

After reading Jackson's above poem/prayer for the first time, I was overcome with emotion. My emotions of internalization clashed with a sense of fondness I felt as a Black woman. As Sojourner Truth did during an anti-slavery rally in Indiana, I bare my breasts proud to be born Black and female (*Ain't I a Woman*, 159). Despite this, I am aware that Black women are subject to sexist oppression. From the women's movement during the 1900s, when women fought to be seen, to the attempts to shed light on Black patriarchal issues, there has been a growing need for more empowering and affirming representations of Black women's sexual politics, as opposed to demeaning and degrading ones. As such, my research is informed by the history of violence perpetuated on Black female bodies. In other words, I recognize how violence

is created by censoring Black women's sexual beings. My experience as a Black woman born and raised in the Black church has exposed me to the sexual discrimination that Black women endure because of the white, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal systems that oppress Black women. Consequently, I am committed to advancing sexual justice and liberation through research rooted in a Black feminist theoretical and pedagogical approach that explores the role that sexuality and spirituality can play in the dehumanization of Black women. As a transdisciplinary scholar, my research contributes to the fields of Women and Gender Studies, Religious Studies, Black studies, and Language and Literacy studies.

Throughout these areas, I seek to develop and/or identify transdisciplinary frameworks and methodologies to dismantle the narrative of shame and open pathways to sexual liberation for Black women. Specifically, I investigate how Black women draw upon their lived experiences within the Black church to facilitate knowledge production, foster community, and promote healing. I also explore how their experiences demonstrate the influence of Christian rhetoric related to purity culture and respectability politics on their sexual experiences, contributing to feelings of shame and sin regarding their sexual identity. I accomplished this by combining in-depth analyses of literary works, such as *Sugar* (2000), with conversations that emerged during a 6-week book club, highlighting how Black women engage with literature that mirrors their lived experiences. My intervention is that literature can be employed to understand, theorize, and devise strategies for Black women to embrace their sexuality and seek wholeness. Ultimately, I propose *testimonial storytelling* as the deployment of Black Feminist Theology, a sexually liberatory framework, operating in the lives of Black women fostering healing, self-love, and sexual liberation. Thus, I identify liberation and healing as the true purity codes for Black women.

The study's outcome exposed a diverse range of experiences, all aimed at enabling the participants to renegotiate their sexuality. I presented my findings resembling a conversation in a beauty salon, a space commonly frequented by Black women for discussions on various subjects. The choice of a beauty salon is symbolic because the goal of the stylist is to revitalize the client's hair. In these moments, a special connection forms between the stylist and the clients, establishing a platform for them to openly share their emotions and thoughts about their lives. This fosters a sense of community, sisterhood, and rapport, often resembling a therapeutic session. I organized the discussion into five distinct hair stages that Black women engage in: 1) Consultation; 2) Wash; 3) Treatment; 4) Styling; and 5) Post-styling.

Implications

In chapter three, I emphasized my intent to focus exclusively on Black girls. In alignment with Ruth Nicole Brown's idea in *Black Girlhood Celebration* of the fluidity of Black girlhood, I defined Black girls based not solely on their age but on their lived experiences of being in a body identifiable as a young girl. However, I've encountered certain constraints with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application process. For instance, when submitting the IRB forms, I was required to specify an age range for participant inclusion, which I specified as 17-24 years old. This led to complications in articulating the central themes of "healing the inner Black girlhood," primarily due to additional guidelines about participants under the age of 18 since they are considered not of adult age. Furthermore, these limitations created feelings of discomfort within me regarding the exclusionary nature of the study. Consequently, I recognized the necessity of adopting a framework that would allow Black women to engage in discussions concerning both their Black girlhood and womanhood experiences, without the age-related constraints. Thus, I expanded the study to include individuals above the age of 18 to mitigate these restrictions.

Hence, I developed testimonial storytelling as a means to facilitate Black women's exploration of their inner Black girlhood as a form of healing. This is embodied through instances such as literary Sugar's efforts to restore her inner Black girlhood, and participant Tony granting her inner Black girlhood the freedom to express itself. Drawing from the stories written in *Well-Read Black Girl: Finding Our Stories, Discovering Ourselves* by Gloria Edim, I further contend that Black girlhood represents a transition of time marked by the evolving lessons of selfhood that we discover over time. Even at the age of fifty, I maintain the belief that we retain elements of Black girlhood because we continue to grow and learn about what it means to inhabit a Black female body. The experience of Black girlhood does not adhere to any age restrictions, rather, it involves a process of rebirthing oneself through the recollection of memories, experiences, and storytelling. The goal is to cultivate their own sense of self and fearlessness, regardless of how many times they fail and need to start over. The empowerment tool lies in the ability to choose one's own path. As a result of testimonial storytelling, Black women gained insights into their Black girlhood, rebirth themselves from stifling experiences, and challenged them by immersing in literary works that depict their lived experiences to find alternative ways of being. While I acknowledge the limitations I encountered at the start of this study, I also recognize that as a young Black woman, I did not possess the knowledge I now do. It was my sense of displacement that led me to seek scholarship that awoke me. This is why I included the voices of ordinary Black women in the study because I wanted them to speak out against oppressive spaces where they feel marginalized.

Future Research

This dissertation utilizes a Black women's novel to present the experiences of Black women's self-advocacy and healing as ways to challenge the internalization of self-doubt and shame. As a result of the book club discussions, I have gained insight into a variety of alternative approaches to the sexual politics of Black women. In this section, I suggest a few future research directions.

Research Recommendations

Additional research avenues could explore Biblical figures like Ruth and Rahab, as they are closely related to notions of sexuality and femininity in traditional biblical exegesis, and thus frame sexual injustice against women as a theological problem. Ruth's story[25] is often used to display the obedience of a woman, and what women should strive to be in the context of finding the right partner. Specifically, it highlights Ruth's persistence in pursuing a relationship with Boaz. In one pivotal moment in the story of Ruth, she was told to lay at Boaz's feet while he was intoxicated, and the next morning, Boaz proposed to her. This scene is often presented to display Ruth's patience and care. Yet, in the Hebrew Old Testament the word "feet" was a "euphemism for genitals," implying that Ruth may have used her sexuality to win over Boaz (*Eloquent Rage*, 137). This suggests the need for the bible to encompass multiple meanings of female sexuality. As further validated by Brittney Cooper in *Eloquent Rage*, Black women in the church should refrain from limiting themselves and instead actively strive for their happiness.

In her role as a prostitute, Rahab's[26] choice to use her body on her own terms stands as a resistance against the male desire to control female sexuality. Rahab experiences marginalization

[25] Ruth 3:14 in *The Holy Bible*
[26] Joshua 2 in *The Holy Bible*

in her society due to its failure to celebrate women who are sexually active outside the bounds of marriage. In a much larger conversation surrounding sin and shame within the Black Church, Rahab's story serves as a powerful reminder that one's profession and society's perception should not define one's identity. Notably, Biblical scholar Wilda Gafney has offered an insightful *womanist midrash*[27] of Rahab's feelings. "Rahab believed that it didn't matter what you had done or what had been done to you, there is a place for you in the people of God. Rahab knew it didn't matter if folk call you out of your name when God calls you daughter. That's who Rahab is God's daughter. Never mind that the Epistle to the Hebrews and James still call her a prostitute." Rahab's agency in shaping her own image represents a critical and resistant act that is vital for the representation of Black women.

Beyond providing different biblical hermeneutics, it is important to recognize the emergence of Black women preachers, with particular attention to Sarah Jake Roberts. An aspect of Robert's narrative is the depiction of the experience of premature adultification, harsh judgment, and abandonment. I am interested in how her Christian rhetoric embodies notions of grace and repentance tailored to the experiences of Black women. I am curious about the ways in which her evolving Christian rhetoric creates a *hush harbor*[28] for Black women. I believe that this research can address scholarly gaps regarding the plight of Black women preachers who may not conform to traditional patriarchal discourses. In addition, this research offers new insights into the social production of Black women preachers.

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[27] Describe by Wilda Gafney in *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* as, "a set of interpretative practices, including translation, exegesis, and biblical interpretation, that attends to marginalized characters in biblical narratives, especially women and girls, intentionally including and centering non-Israelite peoples and enslaved persons" (3).

[28] Hush harbors are spaces for Black women and girls to find healing and wholeness. These spaces do not only have to be physical spaces but can be a conversation with someone, music, and literature (Womack, 2021)

Concluding Thoughts

Connection to Literary Texts

In the year 2020, I enrolled in the course "Writing to Save Our Lives" with language and literacy scholar April Baker-Bell. As part of the course expectation, we were tasked with maintaining a personal journal, and our entries often featured reflections written at the beginning of class. These reflections encouraged us contemplate how we were practicing tenderness with ourselves through the mind, body, and soul. In a journal entry dated January 13, 2020, I recorded:

> I often talk to God but since the semester began, I feel like I haven't been prioritizing my mental health the way I need to…in a way, my spiritual life is changing. My views are changing, my understanding is expanding. Therefore, my spiritual life is going through a moment of transition; a rebirth.

Back then, I lacked the right language and understanding to navigate my own stories effectively. However, the wisdom shared by womanist scholar Stephanie Y. Mitchem (2001) helped me comprehend that my journal entry marked the foundation step in my journey toward recognizing, naming, and transforming my pain. Presently, I have incorporated a research agenda situated around storytelling and Black feminist theoretical frameworks, aimed at empowering Black women to embody their inherent power and autonomy. In this dissertation, the study was designed to help Black women to exalt, evolve, elevate, and the recognition that these qualities encapsulate how they should navigate and exist in this world.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY

I used google forms and provided a link for participants to complete the survey
LINK: tinyUrl.com/BWBookClub

Brief Introduction to Survey:

This is a study that will look at Black women's experience in the Black church, specifically geared toward feelings of shame, sex, and respectability. The goal of this study is to use literature to connect with literary Black women who are advocating for their sexual agency through the five themes of Black feminist theology: self-worth, articulation, sexual autonomy, community, and sin. The study will take the form of a book club that will meet 1 time a week for 6 weeks. We will be reading *Sugar* by Bernice McFadden Participants will be assigned about 60 pages from the book for each week.

I'd appreciate it if you took 5 minutes to respond to the questions below so that I can see if you fit into the study requirements.

Feel free to email me (marcelli@msu.edu) with any questions!

Questionnaire for the Participants:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender identity?
3. What is your racial identity?
4. Do you have a religious affiliation? If so, what is it?
5. To what extent does faith contribute to your well-being?
6. Have you or someone you know ever been perceived as sexually promiscuous?
7. Have you or someone you know ever been objectified based on their physical features?
8. Do you have time to meet virtually 1 time a week (one hour for each meeting) for 6 weeks?
9. In the 6 weeks, will you be able to devote time to read the 50-60 pages assigned for that specific week?

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Study Title: Let the Church Say Amen
Researcher and Title: Marlisha Marcellin, Doctoral Candidate
Department and Institution: English Department at Michigan State University
Contact Information: marcelli@msu.edu

BRIEF SUMMARY:

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form to inform you about the research study, to convey that participation is voluntary, to explain the risks and benefits of participation including why you might or might not want to participate and to empower you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to discuss and ask the researchers any questions you may have.

You are being asked to participate in a research study of Black women's experiences in the Black church. Your participation in this study will take about 6 weeks in total. You will be asked to participate in a 6-week, meeting one time a week book club on the book Sugar by Bernice McFadden. All communication will be conducted on ZOOM.

The most likely risk of participating in this study is your age being known. However, pseudonyms will be used for the name of the participants. This is to ensure protection from any identifying markers about the participants.

You will not directly benefit from your participation in this study. However, your participation in this study may contribute to the understanding of Black feminist theology, and the healing when its founding themes are represented in one's life.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH:

The purpose of this research study is to encourage the need for a Black feminist theology in Black women's lives that pushes them towards self-love, sexual agency, and healing. In addition, literature will be used to provide ways in which literary Black women are advocating for their sexual agency through the themes of Black feminist theology. The hope is for the participants to see their stories written down and the ways literary Black women have worked to overcome their shame and hyper-visibility to find their wholeness.

POTENTIAL RISKS:

Based on the topic of this conversation, participants may experience discomfort in sharing their experiences. Hence, this is why the book club will be in a discussion format to create a sense of sisterhood and community.

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY:

Data for this study will be kept for 3 years after completion. The data will include memo notes, signed consent forms, and audio recordings to ensure the accuracy of the study. Also, to reference the study for larger book projects and teaching presentations. Data will be saved on a personal computer with locked access and destroyed after the 3 years. Still, the data will be stripped of identifiers and used in future research without anyone being aware of the personal information of the participants. If I were to leave MSU, the copy of the data will be taken with me and will not be accessible to others.

YOUR RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATE, SAY NO, OR WITHDRAW

You have the right to say no to participating in the research. You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop, and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THE STUDY:

You will receive a $25 gift card to amazon for participating in this study. This is to help with any cost of literature that the participants would like to purchase after the study.

RESEARCH RESULTS:

If the participants would like me to share the study findings or any additional resources related to the study, it would be no problem to share that information.

FUTURE RESEARCH:

Your name and church attended collected as part of the research, even if information that identifies you is removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

In the case of a research-related injury or if you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact the researcher (Marlisha Marcellin: marcelli@msu.edu, 516-255-7165).

If you have questions or concerns about your role and rights as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, the Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, Fax 517-432-4503, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 4000 Collins Rd, Suite 136, Lansing, MI 48910.

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT.

Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

____________________________________ ____________________________
Signature Date

***As required to be in the project, you will be audiotaped/videotaped. Please check the box and initial below that lets me know that you agree to allow audiotaping/videotaping of the interview.

Yes No Initials____________

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.