Spirit in Cinema: Representations of Black Christianity in African American Film

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Abstract

Since its early development, African American cinema has been engaged in an ongoing critical-cultural conversation on race, representation, and religion through the visual and aural storytelling possibilities of film. Representations of the black church and black Christianity have been prominent in the work of filmmakers, such as Oscar Micheaux, Spike Lee, Julie Dash, and Tyler Perry, seeking to represent and re-present discourses on blackness and religion through film. This dissertation aims to provide lenses through which scholars, critics, and artists can read representations of black Christianity and the black church in African American film in conversation with larger discourses on the relationship between race and religion in African American culture, politics, theology, and religious practices. I offer four lenses—cultural, gospel, critical, and political—through which to interpret cinematic depictions of black Christianity. These lenses echo dimensions of racial aesthetics, a term coined by Josef Sorett to refer to an historically continuous intracommunity discussion where the role of religion in the formation and continuation of the black community are debated as a part of a larger project of defining and redefining blackness. In this dissertation, I examine *Black Nativity* (Kasi Lemmons, 2013), *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* (Neema Barnette, 2012), *Burning Cane* (Phillip Youmans, 2019), and *The Birth of a Nation* (Nate Parker, 2016) through the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses as case studies for identifying and interpreting racial aesthetic discourses in cinematic representations of black Christianity. Recognizing black film as a part of this racial aesthetic tradition provides an essential starting point for examining the integration and interrogation of black Christianity in African American film. The analytical tools offered in this dissertation allow for scholars, critics, and artists to gain meaningful insight into the

discourses informing black Christianity as a form of black religion and spirituality, which, as Amiri Baraka suggested, have historically animated black art and identity.

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Dedication

To My Family

For all the Honesty, Grace, Faith, and Joy you've provided

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Introduction

> "We done took old gods and give them new names. . . . This hand. They from me, from them, from us. Same soul as you all be." – Nana Peazant, *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991)

> "God don't care about all that marching and going on, being all in the world. Get right. Live right. . . . Thank you, Jesus. Come and get saved." – Johnny, *Ninth Street* (Kevin Willmott, 1999)

> "But all praying is, is talking to God, having a conversation with him. . . . And at the end, you say the name of Jesus." – Madea, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (Tyler Perry, 2009)

> "'I go to prepare a place for you that where I am ye may be also'. . . . I know that brings me comfort. . . . One morning, we gonna break this boot from around our neck." – Hap Jackson, *Mudbound* (Dee Rees, 2017)

While these quotes must be read within the context of each film in order to fully understand their significance, we can glimpse through these examples some of the ways that black films have used references to Christian theology and religious practice in a variety of ways. Nana Peazant wraps ancestral artifacts around a Bible as she signifies the tradition of masking African religions in Christian institutions. Johnny castigates all "sinners" and rejects protesting in the name of separatism. Madea clumsily explains to a teenage girl how to pray. Hap Jackson preaches a sermon on "earthly" liberation. In this way, African American films have participated in critical-cultural conversations on religion, race, history, protest, politics, and other issues. Even within black Christianity and black church traditions these conversations broadly encompass a range of theological orientations, denominational affiliations, worship traditions, faith practices, and religious criticisms that have been integrated and interrogated in representations of African American communities in black films.

Within the traditional black church, as Paul Harvey observes, the "tensions and complexities of African American communal life" have been contained.[1] In a 2008 speech on race, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama described his experience with Trinity United Church of Christ as one reflecting many black churches across the country. He said, "The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and, yes, the bitterness and biases that make up the black experience in America."[2] This statement effectively captures the complexly entangled relationship between African American communities and the history of the black church, which as W.E.B. Du Bois noted has often been "the most characteristic expression of African character."[3] This relationship between the community and institution is marked by struggle, faith, contention, social action, liberation, and oppression. Pearl Williams-Jones describes the folk church as:

> . . . a mystical, invisible body of believers unified by a common Christian theology as well as a visible body and community of Black people unified by common cultural ties. We may consider the Black folk church as being an institution controlled by Blacks

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[1] Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 3.

[2] Barack Obama, "Transcript: Barack Obama's Speech on Race," NPR, March 18, 2008, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467.

[3] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 139.

> which exists principally within the Black community and which reflects its attitudes, values and lifestyle. It is a church of everyday people and one of any denomination.[4]

This church that Williams-Jones describes was forged under the circumstances of violence, slavery, and denigration to provide a space for affirmation, cultural creativity, and expression of black spirituality. The black church and black Christianity in the U.S. are distinguished by the particularities of its history of spiritually, socially, and politically negotiating black humanity within a society relentlessly advocating its denial.

While the black church's centrality in the community has shifted in various ways through time, understanding the church's function as a "vessel carrying the story of a people"[5] is integral to how we understand the development and sustainment of black culture and community in the U.S. Understanding this function also enables us to more fully comprehend the historical, cultural, religious, and political dimensions of its representation in media. Historically, the traditional black church operated as a microcosm of black life, advancing the social, political, economic, and spiritual strivings of the black community. Carter G. Woodson describes the black church as a space uniquely formulated for the maintenance of black communities, promoting education, membership in black fraternal organizations, as well as entrepreneurial enterprise.[6] Without the means to create dedicated spaces for these endeavors, the black church became central to the maintenance of black life where sermonic stories of David and Goliath and Moses and Pharaoh resonated with the everyday aspirations of a people who daily strive to overcome persecution and triumph over adversity. As various individuals, ideals, and ambitions converge in these church spaces, we see the heterogeneity and complexity of the community.

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[4] Pearl Williams-Jones, "Afro-American Gospel Music," *Developmental Materials for a One Year Course in African Music for the General Undergraduate Student*, ed. Vada E. Butche. Washington, DC: College of Fine Arts, Howard U, and U. S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1970, 201-219, quoted from Joyce Marie Jackson, "The Changing Nature of Gospel Music: A Southern Case Study," *African American Review* 29, no. 2, (1995), 187.

[5] Barack Obama, "Transcript: Barack Obama's Speech on Race," *NPR*, March 18, 2008, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467.

[6] Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921), 267, https://archive.org/details/thehistoryofthen38963gut.

Considering the strict notions of black religiosity that situated black people as, in Josef Sorett's words, "a racial anathema, as both religious and void of religion, by definition,"[7] it is important to note that black religion, spirituality, and faith is not monolithic. Not all black people are religious. Not all black people go to church. Black people may have Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist, or any other religious or non-religious affiliations. My research does not presuppose an essentializing characteristic of religiosity for black people. To the contrary, I use cinematic representations of black Christianity as a point of departure to identify the integration of multiple, co-existing (even opposing) dimensions of critical-cultural conversations on race and religion in African American film. My research focuses on black Christianity and the black church as a meaningful and contested site within the development of black history and culture. Even as there are many so-called "C.M.E." churchgoers (individuals who attend church only on Christmas, Mother's Day, and Easter), the black church has had organizational and cultural influence on the black community in the U.S. It has consistently played an important part in the development and preservation of African-descended cultural practices and the affirmation of black communities. The black community has associated many of its spiritual and cultural connections and education through the traditional black church. Considering this history, representations of black culture in media must engage with the complex and at times contentious relationship between the black church, Christianity, and community as an integral part of African American history and discourse.

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[7] Josef Sorett, "Secular Compared to What?," in *Race and Secularism in America*, ed. Jonathon S. Kahn and Vincent W. Lloyd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 52.

This dissertation presents a model for reading representations of the black church and black Christianity in African American film. This model centers the film as a text which itself is a part of critical-cultural conversations on the relationship between race and religion. Recognizing the complexity and heterogeneity of black religious representation in African American film illuminates the work that has been done by filmmakers to not only challenge monolithic and caricatured depictions of African American religion but also engage in an ongoing discussion to define and redefine blackness by and for the community. By examining the various discourses with which representations of black Christianity in black cinema engage, this research opposes dominant imaginations of African American religious practices as childlike superstition and aims to demonstrate the ways that spirituality, influenced in the U.S. by black church traditions, has played an integral role in the development and maintenance of culture, community, and its representation. Further, within the black community itself, the relevance of the black church as a social institution, along with other African-influenced religious practices, have been foundational concerns within overarching discussions of self-definition through which black art and discourse have sought to answer the question once phrased by Stuart Hall as "What is this 'Black' in black popular culture?"[8] The traditional black church, founded under segregation as a uniquely black space, addresses this question through African-descended traditions of black religious aesthetics, such as call-and-response and an 'ethos of interconnectedness.'[9]

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[8] Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black popular culture?" *Social Justice* 20, no. 1 (1993).

[9] Judylyn Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women's Film and Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005). Ryan uses this term to describe a traditional African world view in which there is fundamental unity between the physical and spiritual worlds and that values community responsibility, preservation, and connection over individualism.

Through religio-cultural and close readings of four films released between 2010 and 2019, I examine representations of black Christianity in order to explicate the significance of spiritual and religious aspects of African American culture in community organization, self-definition, and self-representation. In an attempt to counter monolithic stereotypes of black religiosity, I aim to provide four lenses through which representations of black Christianity can be recognized within a critical-cultural discussion of blackness, black cinema, and African American religion. Within this framework, the lenses through which scholars can view cinematic representations of black Christianity are "gospel", "critical", "cultural", and "political". These serve as points of departure through which to recognize the critical-cultural conversation on blackness and black Christianity within African American cinema. The cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses echo broad dimensions of racial aesthetics as an historically continuous intracommunity debate on how to define blackness. Each of these lenses are informed by corresponding dimensions of African American discourses integrating and interrogating Christianity within questions on the social, cultural, spiritual, and political lives of African Americans. While the lenses that I propose are used for the delineation of discursive contours of portrayals, it is important to recognize that representations of black Christianity are polyvocal. One film, dialogue scene, or character may be viewed through multiple lenses simultaneously, revealing more depth and nuance to the film's use and characterization of black Christianity. Thus, the lenses that I discuss are not marked by rigid categories but are multidimensional, malleable, and overlapping.

In this research, I focus on four films—*Black Nativity* (Kasi Lemmons, 2013), *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* (Neema Barnette, 2012), *Burning Cane* (Phillip Youmans, 2019), and *The Birth of a Nation* (Nate Parker, 2016)—as case studies through which to demonstrate using the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses to interpret representations of black Christianity in African American film in light of racial aesthetic conversations. Each of these contemporary black films feature black Christianity and black religious aesthetics (i.e. shouting, prayer, gospel singing, church locale, preaching) as a part of narrative structure, character background, scene settings, and music. Also, since representations of black Christianity frequently involve depictions of a black preacher, this is one of the central threads that connect each of the films and my readings of them through the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses. Although the black preacher notably serves different narrative purposes in each film, the character broadly symbolizes the "black church" as a religious institution, cultural space, and body of believers. The films' portrayals of the black preacher provide necessary starting points for examining their representations of black Christianity more broadly. The four films analyzed in this dissertation offer prime examples for addressing three central questions guiding the research:

- How has black Christianity been integrated and interrogated in African American cinema? What are the dialectical dimensions of these integrations in light of racial and black aesthetics?
- How can scholars examine these representations within the contours of black cultural, religious, critical, and political discourses?

To address these questions, I center African American films, which I identify as films produced in the U.S. by black filmmakers for African American communities, as the objects of research that not only represent forms of black Christianity and traditional black church practices but are also themselves engaged in broader racial aesthetic conversations on race and religion. These questions address the work done within African American cinema to re-present blackness and black Christianity in nuanced and even oppositional ways. Ultimately, by understanding the range of African American discourses that inform the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses used in my readings on black Christianity in the above-mentioned films, scholars (as well as critics and artists) may begin to see the significance of black Christianity as a critical domain of racial aesthetics represented through African American films.

Representing Blackness: Discourse & Racial Aesthetics

The history of African American representation in media has largely been defined by an oppositional tension between typically caricatured mainstream commercial representations of blackness and re-presentations of black life and experiences through art, criticism, scholarship, and other forms of cultural production. Often the artistic endeavors, which seek to conscientiously represent personal and collective racial experiences, have been independently-produced and emerge from the community itself rather than through mainstream commercial channels. This tension between traditionally monolithic mainstream depictions of black life and cultural productions that attempt to capture the intricacies, heterogeneity, and commonalities of black experiences have broader implications for the ways that social and cultural discourses underlie the process of representation.

Stuart Hall explains the process of representation as a constitutive process, which is at the same time influenced by and influencing social discourses. Representation lies within a larger process of meaning-making and cultural production in which production, consumption, regulation, identity, and representation form an interconnected "circuit of culture."[10] This circuit contains the signs and symbols used to produce meaning, which are shared through various forms of language, including words, music, and imagery. While this is not a closed circuit and the process of meaning-making is complex and made up of variable signs, its meanings are enduring and its impact is real and felt for those existing within the system. They are tools used in the exercise of power and the positioning of individual and collective identities. As Hall states, "It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm."[11] Thus, as Michel Foucault insists, power should be "considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body,"[12] producing pleasure, knowledge, and discourse and rooting itself in the fabric of social functioning. As "economies of power" work simultaneously on all levels of society, adapting and circulating efficiently through hegemonic discourses,[13] white supremacist power underlying the representation of race likewise penetrates the circuit of culture throughout, constructing social, economic, and political classifications based upon this ideological foundation.

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[10] Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

For black communities living in the U.S., the restrictive functions of power are felt, especially when black lives are still undervalued by the ideological and symbolic systems that have both influenced and been influenced by the language that essentializes and demeans black communities within dominant discourses. These are the real consequences of centuries of caricatured representations, which have marked black bodies as dangerous and expendable. Early filmic representations of African Americans perpetuated egregious and overtly exaggerated images of watermelon-eating, chicken-stealing, ignorant, and contented black slaves, which were at first propagated through blackface minstrel shows then propagated through film and other media.[14] Postcards showing black children as pickaninnies being threatened by alligators or food packaging and restaurants using slave imagery as props for capitalist gain, for example, demonstrate the ways that the objectification and demeaning of black bodies has permeated American discourse throughout its history and have circumscribed black representation on a broad scale. As bell hooks notes, "white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination."[15] Thus, the white supremacist rhetoric underlying these stereotypes asserts black inferiority, primitivism, and inhumanity as a means of control. Seeing black individuals as dangerous, criminal, hypersexual, ignorant, and irrationally angry are among some of the stereotypes used to strengthen classifications of what is considered characteristically "black" in accordance with dominant Eurocentric standards. These stereotypes, in conjunction with the restrictive practices of mainstream commercial media production, have continued the problem. While mainstream depictions of black characters have changed as time has progressed, as Donald Bogle notes,[16] the discourses perpetuating the familiar stereotypes have constantly lurked beneath the surface working to continually discredit and confine the black community as a whole.

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[11] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture & Difference,* ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990): 226.

[12] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, trans. by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, and Kate Soper (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 119.

[13] Ibid.

As black communities have theorized, critiqued, and debated about their position within American society, these dominant discourses that have historically weighed heavily on the community are met with a range of black cultural discourses. African American cultural discourse generally refers to the articulation of ideas and the construction of cultural representations that are specifically rooted in African American history and experiences. Todd Boyd describes African American responsive discourses as “an intertextual network of cultural artifacts that must emphasize the existence of the AFRICAN half of the term ‘African-American,’ while realizing the historical circumstances which have made the AMERICAN half a reality.”[17] As dominant discourses are filtered through African American cultural discourse, they are always already positioned in relation to each other. Thus, it is important to note that African American cultural discourse, which formed under the same sociohistorical conditions in which dominant racial discourses have developed, can simultaneously challenge and reinforce the same hegemonic controls under which they were created. Further, Boyd’s assertion echoes other critical thinkers’ concern with discourse and identity. Geneva Smitherman describes this phenomenon as a “push-pull syndrome,”[18] which has existed since the beginning of slavery. W.E.B. Du Bois describes it as a “double-consciousness”[19] of which colonized peoples are always already acutely aware. Franz Fanon more broadly writes about this internal conflict as a “massive psychoexistential complex” with silences that must be overcome in order to free black individuals from their social and psychological oppression.[20] As Hall states, “This inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms,”[21] but giving name to these experiences is a significant liberatory step. bell hooks assigns this project of naming to black critical thinkers as a fundamental endeavor because “without a way to name our pain, we are also without the words to articulate our pleasure.”[22] In this way, the project of constructing language, even cinematic language, through which to voice African American experiences is essential to these debates.

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[14] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001); Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

[15] bell hooks, *Black Looks Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1981), 2.

[16] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001), 18.

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[17] Todd Boyd, "It's a Black 'Thang': The Articulation of African-American Cultural Discourse" (doctoral dissertation, The University of Iowa, 1991), 9.

[18] Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 10.

[19] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 8.

[20] Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; reis., London: Pluto Press, 1986), 14, https://monoskop.org/images/a/a5/Fanon_Frantz_Black_Skin_White_Masks_1986.pdf.

[21] Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture & Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990): 226.

I use racial aesthetics to refer to the assemblage of African American cultural discourses, which engage in this project of naming as a collective mode of negotiation and resistance to dominant ideological deformations. Racial aesthetics integrates not only the intellectual work of scholars and educators but also the work of writers, filmmakers, and other artists as black critical thinkers. Coined by Josef Sorett, the term refers to a centuries-old, intra-cultural conversation on the “essence” of blackness that attempts to answer Hall’s question on defining blackness in black popular culture and to understand black as a racial category.[23] As conceptions of blackness have constantly shifted, the answer to Hall’s question is not based in stability or essentialist identification, but rather, it is precisely the sociohistorical conditions and movements of the past, present, and future that constitute ‘black’ as having social, cultural, and political significance in a given time and place.[24] Within these movements, the rhetorical grounds of intra-cultural debates on blackness are informed both by internalizations of Eurocentric biological classifications of race and by redefinitions of blackness that challenge racist constructions. In other words, racial aesthetics, for example, encompasses both the stereotypical familiarity of Madea alongside Tyler Perry’s depiction of a black woman whose “mad as hell” anger is also her black feminist “superpower,” to echo Brittney Cooper, in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005). It contains Kanye West’s distorted statement that “slavery was a choice” as much as Dr. Umar Johnson’s project of raising consciousness through his “unapologetically Afrikan” lectures. Racial aesthetics encompasses the accommodationist, negotiated, and oppositional complexities within intracommunal conversations on blackness.

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[22] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1981), 2.

[23] Josef Sorett, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.

[24] Stuart Hall, “What is Black in Black Popular Culture?,” *Social Justice* 20, no. 1 (1993): 475.

Particularly for this dissertation, recognizing racial aesthetics as an ongoing debate occurring within black communities is important for reading representations of black Christianity in African American film. Within this framework, I offer the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses as tools that enable scholars to bring into focus the variety of discourses traced within the racial aesthetic debate on Christianity and blackness. These lenses signify broad dimensions of racial aesthetic conversations that are evident in sources, both academic and non-academic, which integrate Christianity and the black church into debates on race. In *The Negro's God*, for example, Benjamin E. Mays describes similar threads in his study on theological deliberations as evidenced in black literature of the early twentieth century. He outlines these threads as encapsulated within three main contentions: 1) ideas of God presented in the literature adhere to "traditional, compensatory patterns" of prayer and spiritual salvation; 2) ideas of God are useful for social, economic, and psychological adjustments within the process of organizing community; and 3) conceptions of God are abandoned, having outlived their usefulness for racial uplift.[25] These contentions are likewise contained within racial aesthetics through which theological concepts are debated, cultural traditions are celebrated (and critiqued), and traditional black church language is adopted for political rhetoric. These are the overlapping and, at times contradictory, conversations constituting the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses. These enable scholars to engage with the variety of discourses on black culture, Christianity, and politics to more clearly understand the discursive nuances presented through portrayals of black Christianity and the black church in African American cinema.

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[25] Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God As Reflected in His Literature* (1938; reis., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 10.

The gospel, critical, cultural, and political lenses are grounded in concerns evident in the work of black critical thinkers, including Judith Weisenfeld, Benjamin E. Mays, Curtis J. Evans, Tamura Lomax, and Brittney Cooper, who theorize the relevance of relationships between Christianity, the black church, and black communities. Artists and academics including Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Julie Dash, Ice Cube, Spike Lee, and Ava DuVernay have produced work negotiating the linkages between religion, particularly Christianity, and the sociopolitical circumstances of black communities. In *Christianity on Trial*, Mark L. Chapman argues that "no interpretation of black life in America can ignore the manner in which the debate concerning Christianity has affected the social, political, and religious dimensions of the African-American freedom struggle."[26] The relationship between the social, cultural, political, and religious lives of African Americans in the struggle for liberation is essential to my articulation of gospel, critical, cultural, and political lenses. In line with Sorett's study, analyses through these lenses concern the "languages employed, sources engaged, and the structure and boundaries of the debate."[27] These lenses enable and encourage the recognition of multifaceted, even contradictory, dimensions of blackness and demonstrate the heterogeneity of black communities. As black cultural discourses communicate shared histories, experiences, meanings, and values of black communities, racial aesthetics recognizes that they are not monolithic. They constitute the framework and the sources on which intracommunity discussions on black identity and culture are grounded.

Re-presenting Blackness: Black Aesthetics

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[26] Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 2.

[27] Josef Sorett, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.

Notably, the process of self-definition and re-presentation has often taken place through black art and aesthetics. While racial aesthetics marks a designation of the framework and terms of the historical discussion on blackness, black aesthetics is black representational praxis, intentionally concerned with black history and elevating black culture as a challenge to controlling imagery. It refers to the meaningful practice and the instrumental function of black cultural production in the development and maintenance of black communities. Since philosophical ruminations on aesthetics have traditionally posited whiteness as the epitome of beauty, the work of black aesthetics has been the revision and reimagination of blackness in the face of this history.[28]

Broadly, Jacques Rancière identifies aesthetics as referring to "a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships."[29] Aesthetics governs that which constitutes beauty, balance, wholeness, and value. It relates directly to what is rendered visible or invisible in the constitution of that which is intelligible. Simon Gikandi similarly describes the Eurocentric origins of intelligibility within historical correlations between race and aesthetics. Specifically, he argues that rather than excluding or ignoring blackness in the development of aesthetic theory during the eighteenth century, scholarship on this topic must recognize that the classification of racial difference was essential to conceptualizing aesthetics as a mode of intellectual inquiry and taste, especially in the influential philosophical and anthropological work of Immanuel Kant.[30] Gikandi contends that the key issues in the idea of the aesthetic—"its autonomy or disinterestedness, its concern with enlightened subjects, and its unique cognitive value"[31]—were also issues central to questions of race, civilization, intelligence, and religion, which such scholars as Curtis Evans and Richard Dyer likewise note in their work.[32] In this Eurocentric schema, blackness is classified in direct opposition to whiteness, wherein such dichotomies as black/white, dark/light, primitivism/ civilization, and sin/righteousness are intricately intertwined in racial stratification.

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[28] Evie Shockley, introduction to *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011).; Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016).

[29] Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible,* trans. Gabriel Rockhill (2000; reis., London: Continuum, 2006), 10.

[30] Simon Gikandi, "Race and the Idea of the Aesthetic," *Michigan Quarterly Review* XL, no. 2 (2001), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0040.208.

In light of this framework, the assertion of black aesthetics is political in that it challenges the simultaneous presence/absence of blackness in traditional aesthetic theory. Black aesthetics complicates classical aesthetic configurations as it considers the historical, political, social, and cultural conditions of racialization and subjugation in which racialized blackness has been tied to European aesthetic traditions and values. Although black aesthetic traditions have long existed, the term, "Black Aesthetic," was first mobilized as a part of the Black Arts Movement from the late 1960s and early 1970s. As the "aesthetic and spiritual sister"[33] to Black Power, the Black Arts Movement was a collective of artists seeking to reclaim for themselves a definition of black art and culture that would emerge from within the community itself, oppositional to western aesthetics and isolated from the white gaze. Larry Neal insisted that "[t]he motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world."[34] Black critical thinkers such as Neal, Addison Gayle, and Julian Mayfield attempted to clearly identify the characteristics of the Black Aesthetic in the early 1970s as a re-vision of aesthetic value.[35] Their prescription necessitated an artist's firm grounding in the black community, ardent opposition to European aesthetics, the creation of completely new forms, and the de-Americanization of black people. While the movements' classification of black art, community, and culture has often been criticized for being essentialist and nationalistic, its emphasis on reevaluating and reshaping aesthetic strategies in order to affirm blackness has had a lasting impact for creating and theorizing black art and culture.

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997); Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[33] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000*, ed. Hazel A. Ervin (New York: Twayne, 1999), 122.

[34] Ibid., 123-124.

[35] Addison Gayle Jr., ed., *The Black Aesthetic* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

Other scholars have since offered definitions of black aesthetics in order to uphold the value of black aesthetic work while also accounting for the heterogeneity of black communities and the influence that western aesthetics have had on black art and culture. In her discussion of African American literary traditions, Evie Shockley provides a definition of black aesthetics as a "multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies" that black artists may engage to negotiate the space between the personally expressive dimensions and political aspirations of their work.[36] She asserts a lower-case and plural form of "black aesthetics" to encompass the dynamic and heterogeneous characteristics of black artistry. Philosopher Paul C. Taylor likewise uses this lower-case, plural form to further define the concept. He refers to black aesthetics as an active practice, which is "to use art criticism, or analysis to explore the role that expressive objects and practices play in creating and maintaining black life-worlds."[37] According to this definition, the primary function of black aesthetics is the development and preservation of black communities, especially considering the history of severely fractured cultures, communities, and lives left in the wake of European colonialism and slavery. Further, Taylor's definition of black aesthetics refuses essentialist configurations but argues for a method of assembly grounded in the idea of conjuncture as "a fusion of contradictory forces" which nevertheless coalesce into a distinct discursive formation.[38] Based on Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall's use of the term, Taylor uses this idea to recognize the diversity of black art and cultural production while also theorizing black aesthetics as a notable and organizing practice. It presents a challenge to derogatory and oppressive classifications of blackness and, at the same time, asserts the reclamation of aesthetic agency through collective identification. Thus, the restorative and constitutive function of black aesthetics is foundational to the socially and historically contingent critical dimensions of black art. Black aesthetics concerns the physical and spiritual lives of black communities, reframing discourses around the beauty and agency of black bodies and spirits.

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[36] Evie Shockley, introduction to *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 9.

[37] Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016), 6.

Black Aesthetics in Black Religion and Black Film

Recognizing this tradition of black aesthetics is important for understanding the ways in which black Christianity (and, more broadly, black religion) and black film have provided opportunities for representing and re-presenting black history and experiences. C. Eric Lincoln insists that there is ". . . an attitude, a movement" to the practice of black religion that makes it especially notable in the constitution of a multitudinous variety of black religious communities.[39] Black religion is dynamic and spiritual, especially oriented to address the lived experiences of black people. Tamura Lomax defines black religion as "an innately plural signifying system and interpretive concept that refers to a multiplicity of black cultural forms, factions, motions, inspirations, articulations, and encounters deemed 'religious' by black diasporic peoples making sense of their lives."[40] In this process of meaning-making, black religion encompasses the diverse practices of traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Hoodoo, Santería, Yoruba religions and others through which African-descended peoples have interpreted their physical and spiritual lives and contemplated their relationships to divinity.

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[38] Ibid., 3.

[39] C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *The Black Church Experience in Religion*, (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1977), quoted from Charles H. Long, "African American Religion in the United States of America: An Interpretive Essay," *Nova Religio* 7, no. 1 (2003): 12.

Further, through practices of interpretation, contemplation, and embodied engagement, black communities have placed spiritual, communal, and political value in traditions of black religious aesthetics, which ground the possibility of engaging connective threads and heterogeneous distinctions constituted across generations and geography. As Ashton T. Crawley contends, the tradition of black religious aesthetics (especially black Pentecostal aesthetics) offers possibilities for redefinition and expression through embodied and spiritual experiences.[41] Anthony B. Pinn likewise asserts that black religious aesthetics drives the disruption of fixity in western classification of religion and race through which black bodies have traditionally been existentially and ontologically confined.[42] Black religious aesthetics foregrounds the black body as a valuable and necessary instrument in religious practices of spirit worship and transcendence. To place this in the language of black Pentecostalism, for example, black religious aesthetics make space for the improvisational, energized movement of the Holy Ghost and of the black body and spirit. Black religion and black religious aesthetics are distinguished by their intentional regard for the interconnection of the physical and spiritual lives of black religious communities.

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[40] Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.

[41] Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

[42] Anthony B. Pinn, introduction in *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in African and the African Diaspora*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2009.

As a segment of the broader tradition of black religion, black Christianity employs black religious aesthetics as embodied expression rooted in the interpretation and articulation of beliefs, values, and experiences of black communities, especially in spite of the history of religiously-justified white racism. For the focus of this dissertation on black Christianity and the black church in the U.S., I find the definition put forth by Kelly Brown Douglas and Ronald E. Hopson useful: “The black church is a multitudinous community of churches, which are diversified by origin, denomination, doctrine, worshipping culture, spiritual expression, class, size, and other less-obvious factors. Yet, as disparate as black churches may seem, they share a special history, culture, and role in black life, all of which attest to their collective identity as the black church.”[43] In this broad-sweeping definition, Brown Douglas and Hopson include not only the major nationally-networked black Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal denominations but also the local black churches whose denominational and doctrinal affiliations differ from those of the black Christian mainstream in the U.S. Like black aesthetics, this conception of the black church importantly embraces the heterogeneity of black Christian religious communities and the ways in which they have organized themselves in order to address the distinctive needs of their local communities. This definition of the black church also encompasses what Shayne Lee calls the “new black church,” which tends to eschew many of the traditional folk practices of the classic church rooted in the South while still integrating elements of spirited worship and black preaching, for example.[44] In this way, the black church is primarily delineated by its historical roots in the particularities of black sociocultural experiences in the U.S. through which it has developed under such conditions as slavery, segregation, urban migration, and the growth of the black middle class. Black Christianity more broadly encompasses the cultural traditions of the black church—namely its folk religious aesthetics, theological orientations, and language—and their integration into the experiences of the everyday. Whereas the black church refers to institutional organization and practice, I use black Christianity to refer to religious expressions, cultural languages, and rituals that connect individual experiences within and outside the walls of the church to collective identities and interpretations of sociocultural histories.

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[43] Kelly Brown Douglas & Ronald E. Hopson, “Understanding the Black Church: The Dynamics of Change,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 56/57, no. 2/1 (2001): 96.

[44] Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

Representations of black Christianity and the black church in African American film typically showcase these flows of religious and cultural practices inside and outside of the church. These representations include portrayals of black religious leadership, expressly Christian characters, folk religious traditions, iconography, as well as religious language within a film's integration and interrogation of religion and race. Although the representation of black religious life has consistently appeared in black film, there is relatively little scholarship on this topic of African American religion and film.

Judith Weisenfeld's *Hollywood Be Thy Name* is one of the few studies to examine the relationship between representing African Americans and religion in American films. Her study explicates the ways in which race and religion have been co-constituted, particularly in U.S. mainstream commercial cinema, and have reinforced the boundaries of religion, racialization, and subjugation.[45] She focuses specifically on portrayals of black Christianity in all-black cast films released between 1929 and 1949. In her historical analysis, she argues that on one hand, depictions of black religiosity became a spectacle for mass consumption, serving a larger ideological function of reifying racial and religious categorizations by othering African American religious activities. On the other hand, she explains that during the period in which

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[45] Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Hollywood released these types of films showcasing stereotypical depictions of black religiosity, many "race films" offered instead "a more nuanced and probing analysis" of African American religion.[46] These race films, produced for black audiences by such filmmakers as Spencer Williams and Oscar Micheaux, often interrogated the black church and its role in black urbanization while also recognizing its historical place within the black community.

In addition to Weisenfeld's work, scholars such as Tamura Lomax, Judylyn Ryan, and Montré Aza Missouri have examined representations of black spirituality and religion in film. Lomax, Ryan, and Missouri take explicitly gendered approaches to examining the use of black religiosity in cinema to represent black women and the black community more broadly. In *Jezebel Unhinged*, Lomax investigates this relationship between black women and the black church through an examination of the church's connection to black popular culture and the pervasiveness of the jezebel trope used to restrict black women's bodies.[47] Specifically, she interrogates films produced by Tyler Perry and T.D. Jakes—two prominent black filmmakers whose work explicitly integrates black popular culture with the black church. Her study elucidates the responsibility of these particular black filmmakers and the black church to critically examine the jezebel discourse, which has demonized the very black women who constitute the majority of their supporters. Lomax's critiques align with other scholarship written specifically on Tyler Perry productions, including the edited volumes *Interpreting Tyler Perry: Perspectives on Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*; *The Problematic Tyler Perry*; and *Womanist and Black Feminist Responses to Tyler Perry's Productions*, which also criticize Perry for capitalizing on black women’s trauma and perpetuating old stereotypes of black women at the same time that they wrestle with the appeal of these films for black female audiences.[48]

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[46] Ibid., 132.

[47] Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion & Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

Whereas Weisenfeld and Lomax focus specifically on portrayals of the black church, Ryan and Missouri center on cinematic depictions of traditional African religions and black spirituality more broadly. In her book, *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women’s Film and Literature*, Ryan focuses specifically on black women’s writing and filmmaking to explicate patterns of affirmation in which spirituality serves an integral function within the work to represent black women’s roles as community spiritual leaders and to connect the artist’s vision with the work’s larger purpose of empowerment. Through her analysis of films including *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991) and *Down in the Delta* (Maya Angelou, 1998), Ryan insists that spirituality is a “life-affirming ideology” in black women’s art, which black women have used to assert their own agency and challenge controlling imagery.[49] In this way, she identifies black women filmmakers as “conjurers” who make space for the inclusion of multiple “participatory” voices.[50]

To further this, Missouri’s *Black Magic Women and Narrative Film* adds a discussion of the Black Magic Woman as “cinematic coding for socio-political and cultural resistance” for African Americans to challenge the pervasiveness of Eurocentric notions of African primitivism and religion.[51] The Black Magic Woman represents the cultural hybridity of the Americas, moving between worlds of African and European cultural influences. Along with Ryan, Missouri shares the perspective that black artists' cinematic representations of race, gender, and spirituality have provided empowering imagery of diasporic connectedness and complexity within New World contexts. Centrally, she offers the Black Magic Woman as a theoretical framework through which to understand the work of African American artists as scholarly researchers and an approach to black artistic expression that "ultimately creates a distinctive cinematic aesthetic" in the blending of Afro-religiosity and black art in the U.S.[52] This insistence on distinctive aesthetic approaches to representing blackness and religion through film is central to the politics of re-presentation through black aesthetics and the need for a framework through which scholars as well as film critics and artists are able to read the multiplicity of voices and discourses informing representations of black religion in African American film.

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[48] Jamel Santa Cruze Bell and Ronald L. Jackson, eds., *Interpreting Tyler Perry: Perspectives on Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Brian C. Johnson, ed., *The Problematic Tyler Perry* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016); LeRhonda S. Manigault, Tamura A. Lomax, and Carol B. Duncan, eds., *Womanist and Black Feminist Responses to Tyler Perry’s Productions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[49] Judylyn Ryan, *Spirituality as Ideology in Black Women’s Film and Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

[50] Ibid., 131.

[51] Montré Aza Missouri, *Black Magic Women and Narrative Film: Race, Sex, and Afro-Religiosity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10.

Broadly, debates on defining black film have been articulated in the work of several scholars including Mark A. Reid, Michael Gillespie, Thomas Cripps, and Manthia Diawara wherein one of the common threads connecting the variety of definitions is the question of historicity and dynamism.[53] Specifically, Diawara observes that it is possible to put such films as *Daughters of the Dust* (Julie Dash, 1991), *To Sleep With Anger* (Charles Burnett, 1990), and *She's Gotta Have It* (Spike Lee, 1986) together with regard to black aesthetics because they share common concern with representing the particularities of identity, community empowerment, and history as some of their underlying characteristics.[54] In this way, these films themselves take part in a tradition of signifying blackness, which is a term constantly-shifting along with movements of culture, through the film medium. Filmmaker and theorist Gladstone L. Yearwood insists that "black film represents a different point of view, a different way of seeing American society, and this point of view is produced through the signifying practices of the black experience."[55] This different way of seeing is based in the recognition of and orientation to the complexities and contradictions of black sociohistorical conditions.

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[52] Ibid., 15.

[53] Thomas Cripps, *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978); Manthia Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism," in *Black American Cinema* ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3-25; Michael Gillespie, *Film Blackness: American Cinema and the Idea of Black Film* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Mark A. Reid, *Redefining Black Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[54] Manthia Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism," in *Black American Cinema* ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3-25.

Black film is immersed in the language, practices, and history of black communities using film to represent these elements of black experiences through the storytelling and aesthetic possibilities of the medium. Specifically, as an enduring medium with the ability to encompass multiple artistic modes including instrumental music, speech, and visual expression, black film is uniquely positioned as a useful representational tool for showcasing the variety of vocal, visual, and performative aspects of black religious practices, especially when considering the traditional value of oral storytelling and embodied performance. Reading a written sermon, for example, provides a different experience than listening and watching black preaching, especially in context of a broader narrative story. Understanding these types of aesthetic possibilities requires the recognition and valuing of the black body, its movements, and oral traditions of communication.

As bell hooks contends, aesthetics is "more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming."[56] Aesthetics is thus understood through the particularities of history and culture. For black aesthetics articulated in the context of the U.S., it is necessary to acknowledge the confluences of western conventions of cinematic storytelling with black aesthetic representation as African

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[55] Gladstone L. Yearwood, *Black Film as Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2000), 120.

[56] bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 122.

American film employs forms of black folk expression (i.e. oral storytelling, folklore, and signifying practice), but the project of re-presentation is a process of negotiation and challenging Eurocentric constraints for understanding African American life, particularly black religious experiences. The cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses discussed in this dissertation provide ways of recognizing the multi-dimensionality of discourses on black Christianity as they have been represented in black film, highlighting the relationship between Christianity, intracommunal debates on (re)definitions of race, and representations of blackness onscreen.

Ultimately, as religion and spirituality have been central to the individual and communal lives of African American people, it is necessary to recognize the significance of spirituality and religion as one watches, critiques, and interprets meaning through their representation in black film. Appreciating black film requires attention to the variety of discourses surrounding the spiritual and religious lives of African American people as they have been continually integrated and interrogated in black film. This dissertation introduces the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses as tools for examining these cinematic engagements with racial aesthetic discourses specifically on black Christianity.

Methodology

In this dissertation, I use semiotics and black aesthetics as theoretical frameworks within which African American discourses on blackness and religion are engaged through cinematic representation. In the sense of aesthetics as "a way of looking and becoming,"[57] I put forth the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses as tools for scholars to re-vision their readings of black Christianity in African American cinema by first and foremost understanding the discourses that inform representations of black Christianity and the black church. I draw on Lomax's articulation of the term "religio-culture/al" as a way of looking that signifies the normative ways in which black culture and black religion are interrelated and inform each other.[58] In this vein of black religio-cultural discourses, I first map out the contours of the corresponding lens in each chapter. These contours are based on major discourses that inform one's application of the particular lens. For instance, if one were to use the gospel lens to analyze the representation of black Christianity in Tyler Perry films, one must understand the neo-Charismatic religious discourses that inform its depiction and the films' evangelistic messaging. Recognizing these contours enables scholars to orient their ways of looking through the cultural, gospel, critical, and/or political lenses in order to provide more informed and nuanced readings on representations of black Christianity in African American cinema.

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[57] Ibid.

In addition to outlining religio-cultural discourses, I conduct close readings of four films as case studies to demonstrate the application each of the lenses. Through the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses, I examine *Black Nativity* (Kasi Lemmons, 2013), *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* (Neema Barnette, 2012), *Burning Cane* (Phillip Youmans, 2019), and *The Birth of a Nation* (Nate Parker, 2016) in each respective chapter. All of these films, released between 2010 and 2019, are feature-length fictional narratives written and/or directed by African American filmmakers. Each film integrates representations of black Christian characters, folk religious traditions, black preaching, and religious leadership within their narratives. Additionally, across all of the films, black Christianity and depictions of black church leadership—namely black preachers—are integrated as essential (as opposed to marginal) elements of the films' narratives.

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[58] Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

For my close readings, I watched each of the selected films several times to take note of each moment in which black Christianity is represented in the films. Rendered through replications and revisions of mainstream cinematic formal conventions, these moments may include instances of characters quoting or paraphrasing scriptures, Christian iconography, individual or collective prayer, shouting, diegetic and nondiegetic gospel music, spirituals, theological discussion, and black preaching. I read these codes in light of the religio-cultural discourses that correspond with each lens. In this semiological approach advanced by Gladstone Yearwood and based on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., my interpretive reading places the filmic text in context with African American religio-cultural discourses and cinematic conventions. Yearwood insists that by using semiotics scholars can "listen to the work" by reading black film as "a text (in its own terms), in its context (in relation to social and historical forces), and in intertextual terms (how it relates to the African American tradition or to Hollywood cinema)."[59] In this vein, the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses enable scholars to read African American film on its own terms shaped by a history of cultural, theological, and religious discourses underlying the film's signification of African American communities. Thus, the contours of these lenses are marked by the dynamic history and shifting sociocultural and religious meanings of the traditional black church, its culture, social influence, theological perspectives, and criticisms, which enable scholars to view representations of black Christianity through the multidimensional, complex, and contradictory discourses that inform them. By understanding the discursive contours of the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses, scholars can further examine the polyvocal meanings signified through representations of black religion in African American cinema. Reading through these lenses illustrates that the conversation on race and religion is more than simply divergent forms of absolute adoption or dismissal.

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[59] Gladstone L. Yearwood, *Black Film as Signifying Practice: Cinema, Narration and the African-American Aesthetic Tradition* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2000), 118.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, I focus on the cultural lens as an approach to examining representations of black cultural practices in black Christianity through African American cinema. The contours of this lens focus on the relationship between spirituality and embodiment coded within portrayals of black culture and black religious aesthetics. I begin the chapter with a discussion of black culture as a process of reconciling black pasts, present, and futures rooted in core tenets of a traditional African worldview—an epistemological orientation grounded in the indivisible relationship between spiritual and physical worlds. From this perspective, conceptions of the sacred (in this case black Christianity and the black church) are interconnected with the secular (non-religious social organizing) as the lines between the spiritual/material and soul/body as separate dichotomies are consistently blurred.

I also discuss the traditionally expressive folk practices and oral traditions of black Christianity that have, in contrast to western philosophies of religion, concerned both the bodies and souls of black folk, especially considering the tensions of Du Boisian double consciousness. With this foundation, my reading through the cultural lens focuses on black religio-cultural practices depicted in *Black Nativity* (Kasi Lemmons, 2013) and the relationship between sacred and secular in the film's use of black music along with its depiction of black church theater in the adaptation of Langston Hughes's *Black Nativity* stage play. Following in the footsteps of Hughes's original play, these performances are a celebration of black cultural traditions within the black church and showcase the relationship between sacred/secular, spiritual/material, and spirit/body in black Christianity. The cultural lens sets the stage for reading representations of black Christianity in African American film through the gospel, critical, and political lenses as well. It enables scholars to locate performances of black religious aesthetics coded within a film and recognize the discourses informing the gospel, critical, and political lenses as grounded in sacred-secular entanglements.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the gospel lens through which scholars are encouraged to examine religious discourses of moral instruction and evangelism through representations of black Christianity in black film. I begin this chapter with an introduction to religious film as a multiracial evangelistic tradition that includes such filmmakers as Billy Graham, Spencer Williams, Tyler Perry, and Mel Gibson. While recognizing that this tradition is largely influenced by western evangelical Christianity, black religious film contributes to this tradition the distinctive practices and perspectives of Christianity born through the black church.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of three ecclesial perspectives—neo-Charismatic mainline, Word of Faith, and neo-Pentecostal—drawn from Jonathan Walton's *Watch This!* in which he characterizes the contemporary transdenominational landscape of black televangelism pertaining to its entertainment and evangelical dimensions,[60] which are especially pertinent to the idea of cinematic "entertainment with a gospel message" in African American film. Informed by this ecclesiastical framework, I present the "black cinematic sermon" as a mode of presenting evangelical messaging and moral instruction, which can be read through the gospel lens. This mode is characterized by the use of black preaching practices such as imaginative storytelling, dialogue, and vernacular expression. Through this lens, my reading of the black cinematic sermon in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* (Neema Barnette, 2012) focuses on the protagonist’s story as a parable for forgiveness and faith preached by megachurch bishop T. D. Jakes, who is the mouthpiece of the sermon.

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[60] Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

While the gospel lens is informed by discourses on the adoption of religious salvation, the critical lens, by contrast, is contoured by criticisms and correctives to these discourses. Thus, following this discussion of evangelical messaging through the black cinematic sermon, I present the critical lens in Chapter 3 as an approach to reading critical representations of black Christianity in African American cinema informed by the contours of critical perspectives on the black church, black religious leadership, and Christianity more broadly. This lens is informed by a tradition, as Chapman phrases it, of putting “Christianity on trial.”[61] This tradition is constituted by a variety of criticisms from Christians and non-Christians alike who have interrogated Christianity and critiqued the black church. In this chapter, I provide a broad overview of these critical perspectives, which include outright rejections of Christianity as the “white man’s religion” as well as challenges (and potential correctives) to the church’s shortcomings in the project of liberation. Drawing on black feminist and womanist critiques within this broader framework, I focus on what Ronald Neal calls “Abrahamic masculinity” as an interrogation of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal structures in which black masculinity and religion have been entangled.[62] Through the critical lens, my reading of Abrahamic masculinity in *Burning Cane* (Philip Youmans, 2019) focuses on the film’s depiction of the central characters—Daniel, Helen, and Rev. Tillman—as agents and victims of Abrahamic masculinist constraints and its grievous physical, psychological, and spiritual implications.

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[61] Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1996).

[62] Ronald Neal, “Engaging Abrahamic Masculinity: Race, Religion, and the Measure of Manhood,” *CrossCurrents* 61, no 4 (2011).

Lastly, Chapter 4 focuses on the political lens through which scholars can examine the use of black theological discourses and religious allegories to underscore political action in the representation of black Christianity in African American cinema. In particular, I provide a brief discussion of black theology and the tradition of integrating the vernacular of the black church into a language of political aspirations and spiritual striving. This history provides the contours of the political lens through which I examine the dramatization of Nat Turner's 1831 Rebellion in *The Birth of a Nation* (Nate Parker, 2016). Through this lens, I read the film's depiction of Turner's story as the narrativization of righteous anger and violent political action through the integration of black theological rhetoric and the re-presentation of history.

In the conclusion, I summarize the overall discussion of the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses providing a brief reading of a scene from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (George C. Wolfe, 2020) using all four lenses. Keeping in mind the traditions and contours of each lens introduced in the chapters, I present this reading as a demonstration of using the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses together in order to more fully understand the multidimensional ways in which black Christianity is represented in African American cinema. While these lenses are informed by particular traditions and perspectives on black Christianity and the black church, together they enable scholars to examine the ways in which African American cinema participates in racial aesthetic conversations on the relationship between blackness and religion. Furthering this, I also offer possible directions for expanding research on the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses as useful tools for examining stereotypes and representations of black Christianity in other modes of narrative media.

Chapter 1

For The Culture:

Reading Sacred-Secular Traditions through the Cultural Lens

Culture itself is a complicated subject identified by varying systems of signification within collective practices, values, and social meanings. In the study of culture, researchers have taken various approaches to classifying what counts as culture, whether artifacts of artistry, written records of ruminations on universal values, or rituals of everyday social life. Raymond Williams identifies the analysis of culture as necessitating the consideration of convergence in signifying systems and signifying practices including the artifacts of production, institutions, and meanings associated with the interaction of these elements within a particular system.[63] Fundamentally, Williams insists that "culture is ordinary," cultivated through the everyday interactions and productions of a whole people to produce meaning.[64] Understanding black culture and reading black Christianity through the cultural lens begins with this understanding of culture as a signifying system of beliefs, values, and rituals belonging to and connecting heterogeneous black communities. At the same time, culture is fundamentally unstable, constantly adapting to new ideologies and practices. The idea of "black culture" is especially subject to variability as it attempts to bridge the gaps between the cultural traditions of disparate ethnic groups throughout Africa and the African diaspora in order to illuminate threads of similarity and common ancestry at the same time that it recognizes difference.

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[63] Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[64] Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," in *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London: Verso, 1989).

Black literary scholar David Lionel Smith identifies black culture in any context not as a singularly defined entity but “a complex and ambiguous set of processes and interactions, facts and fantasies, assertions and inquiries, passionately held and passionately contested. The cultural identity that we designate ‘blackness’ is intangible, yet its effects are powerfully immediate.”[65] Black culture signifies a point of connection, shared experience, and meaning for a whole people who have been racialized and socialized as black. Rendered through black aesthetics, black culture includes the folklore, signifying language, spirit-consciousness, and creativity shared among African-diasporic people through a multiplicity of iterations. It is indeed intangible, but its significance is felt as a space of identity and belonging, born through ingenuity, agency, and loyalty to the resilience of the collective. The idiom “do it for the culture,” or simply “for the culture,” illustrates this relationship. While the phrase has deep roots in hip hop, its broader colloquial meaning has been used to designate black excellence, creativity, resilience, innovation, and trailblazing through such endeavors as music, medicine, education, entrepreneurship, and politics. It has been used to celebrate accomplishments, styles, and practices that connect the actions of the individual to a broader project of racial affirmation and showcasing the heterogeneity of blackness among the various roots and routes, as Paul Gilroy suggests,[66] that connect black communities. While these endeavors are often pursuits by individuals, they can be understood as working in service of uplift for both the individual and community. It is this relationship between the individual and community that is central to understanding black cultural identity and “doing for the culture,” particularly as culture and religion are intricately intertwined. Specifically, as a site for social gathering, dialogue, and community connection, the black church has provided a space of incubation for the culture, advancing the cultivation of communal sensibilities and collective affirmations.

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[65] David Lionel Smith, “What is Black Culture?,” edited by Wahneema Lubiano, *The House That Race Built* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 368.

[66] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

In the context of African America, the black church has served not only as a religious institution but also a site of cultural expression and uplift encompassing an assemblage of signifying practices. As sociologist C. Eric Lincoln observes, "The Black Church has always been the cultural matrix out of which has developed the genius of the Black experience. That genius embraces the whole spectrum of effective responses Blackamericans [*sic*] have made to the peculiar circumstances of their existence: their art, their politics, their humanism and their religious understanding."[67] Important in this statement is the recognition of the sociohistorical conditions of African Americans and the multiplicity of responses, including black religion, for dealing with these circumstances. The practice of shouting in black Pentecostal traditions, for example, offers a means of spiritual engagement, communal connection, and catharsis for a people daily confined by racism. Further, echoing the insights of theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich, Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya assert that fundamentally "[c]ulture is the form of religion and religion is the heart of culture."[68] In other words, culture intricately informs the practices and styles of religion while religion influences the values of the culture. As a space designated for religious and cultural experiences of black people, the black church has been a site to witness these types of flows between black popular culture and black Christianity. It has enacted doing for the culture through its preservation and promotion of the genius of the black spirit in creativity, resilience, innovation, and resourcefulness.

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[67] C. Eric Lincoln, *Christianity & Crisis* (1970), 225, quoted from Beretta Smith-Shomade, "'Don't Play with God!': Black Church, Play, and Possibilities," *Souls* 18, no. 2, (2016): 334.

[68] C. Eric Lincoln & Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

In this chapter, I introduce the cultural lens as a tool for highlighting black cultural performances through representations of black Christianity and the black church in African American film. This lens is informed by the traditional African worldview, which conceptualizes the spiritual and material worlds as entangled in everyday life. In this epistemological viewpoint, the lines of what delineates sacred/secular and spirit/body are blurred as is demonstrated in the embodied traditions of black religious aesthetics, which considers the connection between expressions of the black body and spirit valuable in spiritual and religious practices. In this chapter, I read *Black Nativity* (Kasi Lemmons, 2013) through the cultural lens to examine the film's engagement with black Christianity and culture through music and its depiction of black church theater. Through this lens, I highlight the ways in which the film uses depictions of black Christian characters and black church performances to signify a legacy of cultural practices, shared experiences, vernacular language, and history traced through the black church. My central goal in this chapter is to lay a foundation for identifying black aesthetic traditions that have characterized black Christianity and the black church. These traditions include the use of black music, performance of black preaching, and blending of sacred and secular worlds. While the aesthetic strategies of the black church mentioned in this chapter are not exhaustive, they illustrate a history of shared traditions and perspectives based in sociohistorical conditions and cultural identity, which as Stuart Hall insists, is about processes of *becoming* rather than a fixed state of being.[69]

Black Culture & The Cultural Lens

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[69] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture & Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990).

Culture plays a central role in the analysis of media representations of African American communities. Typically, the evaluation of a film's "authentic" portrayal of black life and culture is at the core of its classification as a black film. However, black film has been a notoriously difficult term to define especially since the idea of black culture is such a complex and variable concept. As a heuristic term used to signify cultural roots and routes moving throughout the Atlantic, black culture evolves and shifts with its own particularities among black communities throughout the diasporic world. In line with this, Paul Gilroy uses the term black Atlantic culture to draw historical connections between transatlantic African diasporic groups whose cultures are characteristically distinct but are influenced similarly by the conditions of collision between their African heritage and European colonization and slavery.[70] As American cultural historian Lawrence W. Levine asserts, "Culture is not a fixed condition but a process: the product of interaction between the past and present."[71] Black culture in particular emphasizes this process as a matter of reconciling the past, present, and future of black existence. Black cultural forms throughout the Atlantic exist within this process as the heritage of African traditions collide with the generational traumas of slavery, racism, and colonization to produce new forms of African-descended traditions that speak to the sociohistorical conditions of blackness in context.

Black culture cannot be conflated to be an essential designation of black racial identity nor can one draw a clear undisturbed line from the thousands of African traditional cultures to the varying cultural practices of black peoples throughout the diaspora. However, scholars have identified several consistencies based on specific ways of knowing and common threads that have been evident throughout many African traditional cultures and their descendants. In the vein of debates on African American cultures sparked by the Herskovits-Frazier Debate of the 1940s, the term "Africanisms" have been used to describe African-influenced traditions and beliefs that persisted through fragmentation and creolization despite the trauma of the Middle Passage.[72] One of these persisting threads is the idea of a "traditional African world view"[73] that has been transformed and creolized in various ways but nevertheless offers ideological connections throughout the diasporic world.

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[70] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

[71] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 5.

In her study of African American vernacular language, Geneva Smitherman identifies the traditional African world view as a foundational element of the cultural discourses and practices of black communities even as African and African diasporic groups have experienced centuries of traumatic separation and erasure of many African traditions. Based on studies by scholars such as Robert F. Thompson, Daryll Forde, Godwin Sogolo, and John S. Mbiti examining the arts, cultures, and religions of African peoples,[74] the traditional African world view that Smitherman describes reflects overlapping patterns of an "interlocking cultural and philosophical network throughout Africa."[75] One of the central tenets of this world view is the unity of spiritual and material worlds as fundamental aspects of existence. Smitherman describes the relationship between the spiritual and physical as one of "complementary, interdependent, synergic interaction"[76] in which matters of spirituality are indivisible from the concerns of the everyday.

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[72] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[73] Geneva Smitherman, Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977).

[74] John S. Mbiti, African Traditions and Philosophy (New York: Anchor Books, 1970); Daryll Forde, ed., African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954); Godwin Sogolo, Foundations of African Philosophy: A Definitive Analysis of Conceptual Issues in African Thought (Ibadan: University of Ibadan, 1993); Robert F. Thompson, African Art in Motion: Icon and Act (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974).

[75] Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 75.

[76] Ibid.

As Mbiti likewise observes, spirituality and religion in many traditional African cultures are fully integrated aspects of daily life and society as a communal "system of being" rather than an act of religious profession.[77]

While there are thousands of cultures belonging to the heterogeneous peoples of Africa, the integration of religion and spirituality into everyday existence has been found to be a common element among many, underlying the beliefs, values, and traditions within the varied social systems. This relationship between the spiritual and material also permeates other aspects of the traditional African world view which include the belief in the hierarchical structure of the universe in which God, followed by lesser deities, ancestral spirits, then people, animals, and plants exist in order, rhythm, and harmony; the primacy of individual responsibility to the community as necessary for its survival; the hierarchy of social relationships in the community with those who are closer to the spirit realm, such as elders, held in high esteem; and the rhythmic and cyclical (as opposed to linear) structure of the universe in which time is collapsed into the simultaneous existence of future and past in the present.[78]

This framework, founded upon an indivisible relationship between spiritual and material worlds, encompasses the likewise entangled relationship between the sacred and secular. Lincoln and Mamiya identify this worldview as a "black sacred cosmos" in which African heritage and conversion to Christianity during and after slavery influence African American religious worldviews.[79] In this view, the whole universe is sacred, as religious belief and practice are integrated into everyday experiences. In practice, while western theological delineations have reified distinctions between sacred/secular and soul/body, black religious aesthetic practices within black religion have continually blurred these lines. Levine describes the integration of the sacred and secular during slavery as a "process of incorporating within this world all the elements of the divine" to express and address the conditions of daily hardship and survival.[80] Scholars such as Melissa Harris-Perry, Tamura Lomax, and Josef Sorett have identified the persistence of this interconnection between the sacred and secular as arrangements that have never been fixed or stable but rather, as Sorett describes, are "constantly reconstructed, porous, fluid and are always made fresh and imagined anew."[81] This epistemological perspective challenges the dualities of sacred/secular, spiritual/physical, and body/soul that have pervaded western theology. In this vein, Stacy C. Boyd observes that "[w]hile Christianity theoretically asks African Americans to transcend their bodies, American culture and its insistence on racial categorizations continue to reduce black men and women to their bodies."[82] Thus, meditations on the souls of black folk have underscored the entangled relationship between sacred and secular, troubling the lines between embodied sacred practices of religion and racialized secular society. The black church (as a representative of the sacred) and "the streets," or non-religious organizations and productions, (as a stand-in for the secular) have likewise maintained a dialectical relationship in their organization of black life-worlds and mediation of African American experiences.

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[77] John S. Mbiti, *African Traditions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970).

[78] Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 75-76.

[79] C. Eric Lincoln & Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

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[80] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 31.

[81] Josef Sorett, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 147.; Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[82] Stacy C. Boyd, *Black Men Worshipping: Intersection Anxieties of Race, Gender, and Christian Embodiment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 9.

Across the black Atlantic, as Gilroy notes, the telling and retelling of folk histories and cultural narratives that link the diaspora to an inexact, often mythic pre-colonial African past is essential to the invention, preservation, and renewal of cultural identity.[83] It is through these stories enmeshed with the particularities of the diasporic context and creolization that one comes to understand the values, beliefs, rituals, and legacies of the culture. Hall characterizes this process of cultural identification as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being,'" belonging to the future as well as the past.[84] Importantly, the idea of "becoming" acknowledges the significance of history but leaves space for possibility in the complexity and instability of intersecting national, ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic identities. It takes into account the diversity of positionalities and experiences that exist throughout the black diasporic world. Although Franz Fanon aptly observes that within Eurocentric sociopolitical and ontological organizations "[the black man] must be black in relation to the white man,"[85] blackness as an all-encompassing classification defined by certain immovable characteristics is nonexistent. For this reason, Paul C. Taylor identifies black culture and aesthetics as an assembling of expressive objects, practices, philosophies, and contexts that contribute to the maintenance and complexity of black life-worlds.[86] While this assemblage is founded upon a history of social organization based on racialism, it is strategic and movable, underscoring the agency of black communities to disassemble and reform black race and culture for themselves. Ultimately, as Hall asserts,

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[83] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (London: Verso, 1993).

[84] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture & Difference,* ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 225.

[85] Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann, (1952; reis., London: Pluto Press, 1986).

[86] Paul C. Taylor, *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2016).

"Difference, therefore, persists – in and alongside continuity" as a way of reconciling the historical ruptures and oppositional tensions in black cultural identities.[87]

This process of culture and epistemological orientation sets the foundation for reading black Christianity in African American cinema through the cultural lens. Understanding the entangled relationship between the spiritual/material and sacred/secular allow nuanced insights into the significance of the body, soul, and spirit in representations of black Christianity. It sets the stage for scholars recognizing the cultural flows that blur boundaries between sacred and secular. Ultimately, recognizing the spiritual and religious heritage of African American culture places in context the representation of black Christianity in African American film wherein the black church and black Christianity is grounded in the epistemological influences of African traditional religions and the need to address the specific concerns of the everyday lives of African Americans. Reading black Christianity in African American film through the cultural lens requires the recognition of this heritage and its renderings through black aesthetics.

The Cultural Lens

African American cinema participates in cultural history by telling cinematic stories of common experiences, histories, and folklore that have been shared across generations and through which black communities have sustained themselves within the particularities of diasporic social conditions. Reading black Christianity in African American cinema through the cultural lens centers the telling of these stories and the representation of black culture as an engagement with African American stories and black aesthetic traditions through the cultural body of the black church. In line with this, the study of black Christianity and black religious aesthetics in film requires attention to black epistemological perspectives on religious values and practices that recognize the blurring of sacred-secular boundaries and the interrelatedness of the spiritual and material worlds. When examining black Christianity in African American cinema, it is likewise necessary to acknowledge the dominant discursive framework under which black Christianity has developed while also recognizing the agency and history of infusing of African-descended cultural traditions into common characteristics of black church folk culture.

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[87] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture & Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 227.

As a storytelling medium steeped in history, African American cinema provides a space of representation through which communal exchanges such as oral storytelling and spirit worship enacted through the church may be linked to the conditions and experiences of African American people inside as well as outside the walls of the church. Reading black Christianity through the cultural lens calls attention to the use of black aesthetics, specifically black religious aesthetics (described later in this chapter), and African American discourses to represent black culture in black film. Using the lens necessitates an understanding of black aesthetics as comprising strategies of negotiation used in the production of artifacts, which contemplate, represent, and revel in the particularities of blackness and black culture as shared among communities of African-descended people. Black aesthetics in film, like other forms of black aesthetic art, are not prescriptive but rather reflect the dynamism and heterogeneity of the black community and its processes of cultural production. Cultural thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and Smitherman have witnessed the presence and preservation of African-influenced traditions in the folk church and the impact of this presence on black culture more broadly.[88] For instance, the call-and-response style of black preaching and the body-centered performance of shouting are expressive modes held in traditional characterizations of the black church. These modes rely on the collective and embodied experiences of storytelling and spirit worship, reflecting African traditional cultures and an amalgamation of religious traditions in which the spiritual is entangled with the material and the individual is tied to the community. Call-and-response is a practice used not only in regards to black preaching but also in secular iterations of such activities as musical performances or spoken word to create a dialogue between the stage and the audience. In this way, practices incubated through the black church are meaningfully connected with customs used in secular organizations.

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[88] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography of Langston Hughes* (1940; reis., New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Laurel, 1976); Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977).

By adopting the cultural lens, researchers can focus on the representation of traditions, practices, and processes of black culture, highlighting and describing them as they relate to black Christianity and church traditions. The cultural lens on black Christianity enables scholars to examine cinematic depictions of black Christianity and the black church as elements of African American cultural and signifying discourses. The lens highlights aspects of a black cultural signifying system that integrate and interrogate black Christianity through aesthetics, performance, iconography, narrative, and representation in cinema. It highlights the practice and *process* of signifying on blackness and representation through cinematic representation.

In line with Henry Louis Gates Jr's articulation of 'Signifyin(g)' as a black linguistic tradition, the process of signifying is one that embraces tension, contradiction, indirection, and instability. It is a process rooted in repetition and revision, intertextual knowledge, and rhetorical maneuvering to produce multiple meanings for the interlocutors within the context of the conversation. This practice of signifying is evident within southern folk traditions of the black church in which phrases like "bless your heart" can signify a pronouncement of divine blessing but most often means that the person to whom the phrase is spoken has said or done something nonsensical. In another instance, one may not subscribe to the theological orientations of a church but still use black church language or call upon the Divine as a way to share meaning in everyday interpersonal interactions. The viral meme, “Fix it Black Jesus,” which references an episode from the 1970s TV show *Good Times*, is a prime example. As the meme circulated online through Black Twitter, it became a signifier used to comment on a situation or condition that would need the help of a divine source to fix the seemingly unfixable or laughable problem. Slipping away from the original episode and its debate on the racialized depiction of Jesus Christ, the meme is used rhetorically rather than theologically and is understood colloquially as a playful slight to the ridiculousness of the situation on which it signifies.[89] The intertextual roots of this meme are planted in black theological discourse but the meme itself is routed through social media, taking on several meanings as the phrase, the show episode, and corresponding memes are shared among the community. Likewise, film provides a means through which filmmakers may signify on black Christianity and the black church through black cultural traditions and vice versa.

Additionally, the cultural lens in particular helps to establish a foundation through which scholars are encouraged to examine black Christianity and black culture through the formal characteristics of the film including composition, cinematography, editing, sound, and performance with particular attention to representations of black religious aesthetics. The cultural lens brings into focus the mode of delivery within the diegetic world of the story itself along with the formal characteristics of the film, including sound (i.e. music and dialogue), editing, narrative structure, acting, and production design, which are interpreted with regard to the revisioning work of black aesthetics. These traditions include performances and expressive practices of orality (i.e. testifying, call-and-response), music (i.e. gospel, spirituals, R&B, blues), and physicality (i.e. shouting, clapping, dancing). This lens broadly highlights the communicative and expressive systems that have been shared through the organization and discourses of the black church. Using this lens enables scholars to examine the black religious aesthetics that broadly encompass traditional black church practices and expressions as well as the continual flow that exists between black popular culture and the church. Fundamentally, the cultural lens requires a type of cultural consciousness that recognizes the mediation of black religious aesthetics and discourses of black Christianity through cinematic language.

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[89] Robin R. Means Coleman and Novotny Lawrence, “Fix it Black Jesus: The Iconography of Christ in *Good Times*,” *Religions* 10, no. 7, (2019).

Although the foremost entrance into reading representations of black Christianity through the cultural lens is typically through depictions of the church itself, the use of the lens is not limited to the church setting just as the influence of black church culture is not limited by the church building. Even if the black church is not used as the primary setting for the story, the cultural lens can be used to highlight character traits, such as wardrobe (i.e. cross necklace, clerical collar) or vernacular (i.e. regular use of religious language), which provide pertinent background information to distinguish specific characters. *Fences* (Denzel Washington, 2016) provides an example of this. Although one of the central characters, Rose Maxson (Viola Davis), is rarely shown outside the house, her character is distinguished partly by her relation to Christianity and the church. Several times throughout the film she talks of "going down to the church" for various reasons; she wears a small cross necklace around her neck; in one scene, she is surrounded by a circle of black women praying for her; and, in many scenes, she is accompanied through mise-en-scène by Christian iconographic images (i.e. portrait of the last supper). In this sense, Rose's relationship with the church is a part of her characterization but is ancillary to the overall narrative.

Ultimately, through the cultural lens, scholars study the relationship between black culture, church, religion, and spirituality as they have been represented in African American cinema. This enables the examination of discourses, practices, and customs of African American communities as they have been sustained through black church traditions and depicted in cinematic narratives on black experiences. The cultural lens highlights the historical and cultural cadences used to represent black Christianity through black religious aesthetics, which integrate concerns of the sacred and secular.

Between Sacred and Secular in Black Christianity & Church Performance

Considering the historical circumstances under which black Christianity in America has existed, the very notion of fusing a black racial identity with Christian religious faith is marked by sacred-secular tensions in relation to the black spirit and body. It concerns the religious practices, theology, and transcendence of the spirit at the same time that it recognizes the sociohistorical conditions of the racialized body and the cultural specificities that arise from these conditions. Fundamentally, historian Shirley A. Waters White identifies the very idea of African American Christianity as a demonstration of Du Boisian double-consciousness. She explains,

> From the contradictions inherent in the involvement of Christians and Christian nations in the Atlantic slave trade; to the hypocrisy of evangelizing and converting Africans to Christianity yet keeping them in bondage; to the historic struggles of African Americans from the founding of this nation to reconcile the paradoxes of a God-fearing nation with the unjust and oftentimes inhumane treatment to which they are subjected, the downtrodden, 'buked and scorned African American Christian can—in every sense as

> completely as the socially and politically marginalized—be said to be caught behind the ‘veil’ so aptly described by Du Bois.[90]

The double-consciousness that W.E.B. Du Bois describes is a twoness that is both a gift and curse. In reference to the folk expression of a child being “born with a veil”—born with an ability of second sight to see beyond the ordinary,[91] Du Bois classifies the condition of being black in America as an existence of duality, “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”[92] The challenge for the black church, and the black community more broadly, has been to resist the othering of the black body and subsequent denigration of the soul. Away from the gaze of the amused outside world, the traditional black church reinvigorated the soul and elevated the black spirit challenging its denigration in white supremacist ideologies, particularly those inextricably linking Christianity and whiteness. Black theologian Raphael G. Warnock describes the tensions in black Christianity as that of “a faith profoundly shaped by white evangelicalism’s focus on individual salvation (piety) yet conscious of the contradictions of slavery and therefore focused also on sociopolitical freedom (protest).”[93] This tension, according to Warnock, has been central to the debates and “divided mind” of the black church in America since its formation. Likewise, ethicist and religion scholar Jonathan Walton describes these tensions as “theological double-conscious” in which black evangelicalism, in particular, has been shaped by white supremacist standards of black docility and submission as virtuous while, at the same time, black churches seek to make space for racial equality within the kingdom of God.[94]

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[90] Shirley A. Waters White, “A Consideration of African-American Christianity as a Manifestation of Du Boisian Double-Consciousness,” *Phylon* 51, no. 1, (2014): 30-31.

[91] James W. Perkinson, *Shamanism, Racism, and Hip Hop Culture: Essays on White Supremacy and Black Subversion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[92] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903, reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9.

[93] Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 3.

In his essay *The Devil Finds Work*, James Baldwin insists that Christianity, in many ways, was thrust upon Africans at the outset of colonization and slavery, but black communities would revisit and revise Christian symbols to serve the specific needs of the community. He says, “blacks did not so much use Christian symbols as recognize them—recognize them for what they were before the Christians came along—and, thus, reinvented these symbols with their original energy.”[95] This process of reinvention involves emptying Christian symbols and iconography of their tie to Eurocentrism and imbuing them with spiritual and religious meaning for the black church and community. It reinscribes the relationship between the black body and Christianity to make space for the black spirit in its dispensation of spiritual salvation and righteousness. The integration of the sacred and secular are foundational to these characterizations of black Christianity. Accordingly, the traditional black church developed in service of the social, psychological, and spiritual needs of the black community, particularly through black aesthetic worship and folk traditions such as music, preaching, testimony, shouting, and dance.

Cultural Forms of Expression in Traditional Black Church Performance

As religious studies scholar Anthony B. Pinn suggests, black religious aesthetics is rooted in the values and experiences of black bodies engaged in religious expression and spirit worship.[96] Religious performance in the black church involves a variety of practices including sermonic style, dance, and music wherein the body and spirit work in tandem to access realms of transcendent spirituality while simultaneously sharing in the human practice of creating religious community. Creating a space for black expression and catharsis, as Ashon T. Crawley suggests, the black church has characteristically integrated practices of orality through gospel music and sermonic style along with body-centered expressiveness in its endeavor to reframe Christianity for the unique purposes of the black community.[97] As described in *The Souls of Black Folk*, these constitute three of the key folk traditions that Du Bois witnessed when visiting black churches in the South—the music, the preacher, and the frenzy.[98]

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[94] Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 54.

[95] James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Laurel, 1976), 138.

The traditional black church, especially the development of black denominational churches post-emancipation, provided a space in which the communal and expressive functions of black music could be unchained. Lincoln and Mamiya argue for the importance of "black singing" as a method by which "black people 'Africanized' Christianity in America as they sought to find meaning in the turn of events that made them involuntary residents in a strange and hostile land."[99] In the oral tradition, black music has provided an important means of communion and communication. For example, the range of functions of black music are evident in the formation of spirituals during slavery, which had multiple communicative functions. Spirituals provided means of emotional expression and catharsis for the individual and collective; they offered a means of communing with the divine within the everyday physical world; and perhaps most notably, they provided a way to communicate signals for escaping from slavery.[100]

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[96] Anthony B. Pinn, introduction to *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[97] Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

[98] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[99] C. Eric Lincoln & Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 348.

Gospel music is one of the most noted aspects of contemporary black church culture and Christianity that has transformed the language, hymns, and religious tenets of western Christian traditions into ones that reflect the uniqueness of African American experiences. The term 'gospel music' began with Thomas A. Dorsey, often considered the "father of gospel music," who melded his work with the blues musical form into his writing of religious lyrics.[101] In her seminal essay, gospel music scholar Pearl Williams-Jones argues, "If a basic theoretical concept of a black aesthetic can be drawn from the history of the black experience in America, the crystallization of this concept is embodied in Afro American gospel music."[102] She describes gospel music as "a synthesis of West African and Afro-American music, dance, poetry and drama -- a body of urban contemporary black religious music of rural folk origins which is a celebration of the Christian experience of salvation and hope. It is at the same time a declaration of black selfhood which is expressed through the very personal medium of music."[103] Gospel music enables reflection on and expression of both faith and racial identity. Like the blues, which are necessarily entrenched in the daily lives of its musicians, gospel is personal at the same time that it speaks to and invites the recognition of collective faith experiences. Melinda E. Weekes further describes black “sacred” music (i.e. spirituals and gospel) as deeply rooted in the “theater” of the black church and its transformations influenced by social integration and secularization.[104] The theatricality of gospel music performance is rooted not only in the lyricism of the song but also the singer’s vocal presence and musical creativity.

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[100] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (1978; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[101] Jerry Zolten, "How They Got Over: A Brief Overview of Black Gospel Quartet Music", *Juniata Voices*, October 29, 2015, 84, https://www.juniata.edu/offices/juniata-voices/media/volume-16/vol16-Zolten.pdf. Known formerly as "Georgia Tom" when he played piano for blues singer Ma Rainey, Dorsey originally used the term "gospel" to distinguish his style of religious music from the older spiritual tradition. His style blended "rhythms of the barrelhouse blues" with religious arrangements. It directly entangles sacred and secular modes of black musical expression, in effect blurring distinguishing lines between their formal characteristics.

[102] Pearl Williams-Jones, "Afro-American gospel music: A brief historical and analytical survey (1930-1970)," *Development of Materials for a One-Year Course in African Music for the General Undergraduate Student* (1970): 373.

[103] Ibid., 376.

Features such as improvisation, vocality, and polyrhythms, which animate black musical performance, have been shared across black music genres blurring lines between sacred and secular spaces. In his description of a “changing same” in black aesthetics and music, Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones) also draws a connection between the expressive and spiritual function of early religious spirituals and characteristics of secular music. He contends, “to go back in any historical (or emotional) line of ascent in Black music leads us inevitably to religion, i.e., spirit worship. This phenomenon is always at the root in Black art, the worship of spirit—or at least the summoning of or by such force.”[105] In this, Baraka argues that in a process of unification and contemplation the meeting of the practical and mystical deities is evident in the connection between tones, moods, and creativity through which new forms emerge.[106] Raymond Wise also explains that a core characteristic of gospel music is the retainment of old elements of black musical traditions in addition to the new elements: “The new innovations create new musical forms and styles, but the old elements help to maintain the overall stability within the musical style and thereby continue the musical, historical, and textual line.”[107] John Legend also observed the aesthetic lineage of black music through a "natural synergy" between rap, R&B, and gospel music. For gospel music, its genealogy of spirituals and blues demonstrate the legacies of earlier genres and sacred-secular flows. These flows are also evident in the careers of Kirk Franklin, Kanye West, Yolanda Adams, Snoop Dogg, Nicki Minaj, Andre Crouch, Chance the Rapper, and Aretha Franklin who each, to various extents, have moved between sacred and secular spheres of black music and culture effectively blurring the lines through song collaborations and music charts.

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[104] Melinda E. Weekes, “This House, This Music: Exploring the Interdependent Interpretive Relationship Between the Contemporary Black Church and Contemporary Gospel Music,” *Black Music Research Journal* 25, no. 1/2, (2005).

[105] LeRoi Jones, “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music),” in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 120.

[106] Ibid., 130.

[107] Raymond Wise, “Defining African American Gospel Music by Tracing its Historical and Musical Development form 1900 to 2000,” Doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University, (2002), 316, quoted from Trineice Robinson-Martin, “Performance Styles and Musical Characteristics of Black Gospel Music,” *Journal of Singing* 65, no. 5 (2009): 596.

In addition to gospel music, the art of black preaching is central to traditional practices of the black church. Lincoln and Mamiya assert that the history of "Africanizing" Christianity is evident through the aesthetics of rhythm and musicality as characteristic of not only church music but also preaching performance and prayers. The rhythmic inflections in sermons, prayers, and song reflect African-influenced modes of communication in which the cadence and beat of the instrument (for example, the talking drum) itself speaks.[108] We see this in the rhythms of black singing as well as in the intonations of black preaching. The gospel singer and preacher (who may often be the same person) are both considered ministers of the gospel poised to "spread the Word of God" through different yet overlapping modes of communication. Influenced by the blues tradition, both must speak to the everyday experiences of the congregation, translating scriptures and stories into the contemporary vernacular language of the community. Both cultural performances also incorporate polyrhythmic vocalizations and improvisations as means of expression to carry the lyrics and deliver the message of the sermon.[109] Just as the gospel choir does not just sing the lyrics but performs them through synchronous movements and vocal musicality, preachers may use techniques, such as melodic chanting or moaning, to signify spiritual inspiration and excitement, especially building to the climax of the sermon.

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[108] C. Eric Lincoln & Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

[109] Oneal Cleaven Sandidge, "The Uniqueness of Black Preaching," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 49, no. 1, (1992).

Further, traditional black preaching is performed not only through rhythmic cadences, improvisation, and movement but also importantly through dialogue with the congregation. Call-and-response is essential to the co-creative art of black sermonic styles and musical performance. It is a mode of participation in which dialogue is initiated and continued through a word, phrase, or story offered in invitation to the co-converser(s) to reply. As Smitherman explains, call-and-response is "stating and counterstating; acting and reacting; testing your performance as you go."[110] She identifies this mode along with signifying[111] as a core characteristic of black preaching that is likewise seen in secular forms of oration (i.e. spoken word or black comedy). It is necessary to recognize that since every preacher is an individual, each one uses distinctive mannerisms and voice to construct a preaching performance that is unique *and* resonates with the local congregation. In his instructive book on black preaching, Henry H. Mitchell insists that while black preaching cannot be prescribed with any certainty of style, its model of centralizing dialogue and emotive storytelling is essential to any sermonic performance.[112] For example, literary and cultural critic Hortense Spillers explains that "[t]he minister weaves analogy and allegory into the sermon, comparing and juxtaposing contemporary problems in morality with and alongside ancient problems in morality."[113] The minster interprets religious language and scriptural references as gospel material that speak to the contemporary concerns of the people. This is the work of sharing the gospel and the definition of "making it plain," a process by which "[t]he familiar is used as a model for understanding the unfamiliar."[114] Thus, for the preacher, being knowledgeable about the community with whom one is speaking is of upmost importance. Understanding the experiences, culture, and vernacular language of the community are central to the preacher-congregation relationship and, ultimately, the delivery of the message. In black preaching, effective performance comes through not just what is said or sang but *how* the message is communicated and how the audience responds. (The evangelizing function of this practice takes center stage through the gospel lens examined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.)

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[110] Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 118.

[111] Ibid. Smitherman describes signifying as a mode of discourse referring to the "verbal art of insult in which a speaker humorously puts down, talks about, needles – that is, signifies on – the listener." This occurs through such characteristics as irony, rhythmic fluency and sound, and indirection.

[112] Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970).

[113] Hortense Spillers, "Martin Luther King and the Style of the Black Sermon," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 1 (1971): 14.

Finally, alongside music and the performance of the preacher, body-centered expressions among black church participants provide further evidence of the integration of African traditions in practices of worship in black Christianity. Specifically, shouting (or as Du Bois calls it "the frenzy") is a derivation of the African tradition of the "ring shout," a practice rooted in communal fellowship and body movement, which has persisted to various extents through the middle passage into the practices of a variety of black religions and black churches, especially black Pentecostal denominations. Crawley describes the shout as a performance of directional movement that nurtures sociality. He explains, "a Blackpentacostal shouter may jump up and down, or hold arms up, bent at the elbows with feet moving to the rhythm of a repetitious song or chant."[115] In this practice, some may fall to the ground saying that they are "filled with the Spirit" or "possessed by the Holy Ghost." Shouting is simultaneously a movement of the body and spirit. Its intensity and physicality are generally oppositional to European traditions of subdued, controlled practices of religious worship. In this way, shouting resonates with what Pinn suggests is the function of expression and experiences in the religious worlds of the African diaspora: "to counter the aesthetics used to restrain and warp their individual [black] bodies and collective body. The once despised Black body is rendered, at least in momentary spurts, valuable through an aesthetic shift."[116] Within the space of the church, the black body, which Crawley describes as queered within hegemonic discourses of black-white binaries, is valued for its dexterity, animation, and embodiment in worship.[117] While some black churches and denominations sought to distance their forms of worship from these distinct African religious influences,[118] recognizing the intentional engagement of the body to communicate spiritual communion is central to understanding the cultural and aesthetic functions of these practices as they exemplify the dialectical flow between spiritual and physical worlds. In addition to shouting as an experiential encounter with the Holy Spirit, these experiences might take several other forms including handwaving, clapping, glossolalia (or "speaking in tongues"), prophecy, and healing.

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[114] Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 98.

[115] Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentacostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 136.

Each of these elements—music, preacher, and "frenzy"—have been formed and performed differently in every denomination and black church. In the context of the U.S. in which western stoic religious traditions have held greater value in dominant society, engaging in these folk traditions has also meant towing a line between positive perceptions of western traditions and negative perceptions of African-influenced practices of Christianity. Michael S. Weaver, for example, describes an alter call moment at an African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.)

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[116] Anthony B. Pinn, introduction to *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 7.

[117] Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentacostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 136.

[118] C. Eric Lincoln & Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 354. Lincoln and Mamiya cite, for example, that Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne of the African Methodist Episcopal church pejoratively called spirituals "cornfield ditties" and the ring shout "ridiculous and heathenish."

church service during which the uniformed choir sang a hymn while congregants worshipped, some waving their hands, others patting their feet, and one person doing a "holy dance" in the aisle of the church. This service, he insists, would be considered by many A.M.E. members as more reserved in comparison to the Baptists, who "A.M.E.s often regard as too disorganized and too demonstrative."[119] Weaver further explains that,

> [i]ronically, the Baptists feel the same way about the Apostolic and Pentecostal churches often referred to as holy rollers. On the other hand, White Americans view Black believers of whatever denomination as more emotional and less official than White churchgoers. The expressiveness of the Black church makes distinct and salient this cultural difference between Black and White, on the one hand, and within Black culture, on the other hand.[120]

These value-laden differences that Weaver identifies are marked inter- and intra-racially placing the more expressive practices aesthetically "closer" to Africa while the more reserved forms of worship are attributed to European influence. Nevertheless, the folk traditions of the black church have been pervasive. Their historical developments and continuities as cultural traditions have assisted in the preservation of African American religious communities and maintenance of black life-worlds.

Recognizing these practices provides the necessary foundation for examining black Christianity in African American cinema through the cultural lens. Music, preaching, and body-centered expression provide visual and aural points of reference to begin analysis on cinematic representations of culture with regards to black Christianity and the black church. In the following section, I examine *Black Nativity* (2013) through the cultural lens as a case study of black cultural representation and its integration of the music, preaching styles, and body-centric performance of black Christianity.

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[119] Michael S. Weaver, "Makers and Redeemers: The Theatricality of the Black Church," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 1 (1991): 54.

[120] Ibid.

Through the Cultural Lens: Black Christianity and Aesthetics in *Black Nativity*

In 1926, W. E. B. Du Bois defined black theater as "about us, by us, for us, and near us."[121] Comparable to the black church as a tradition steeped in the black community, this definition requires the black theater to be likewise rooted in the cultural heritage of the community. Following the example of its theatrical predecessors, the cinematic adaptation of the Langston Hughes play, *Black Nativity* (2013), offers an example of placing black culture and black church heritage at center stage through its rendition of the performance and revision of the Christian nativity story in the vein of black aesthetic traditions.

Released in November of 2013, *Black Nativity* is a Christmas movie that, in rare fashion, features an all-star black cast that includes Angela Bassett, Forest Whitaker, Jennifer Hudson, and Tyrese Gibson. As an adaptation of Hughes's play written for the screen by its director, Kasi Lemmons, the film is fashioned in the spirit of Afrocentricity in line with its predecessor. The story centers black main characters interacting with members of the black community as they navigate through Harlem. The film follows the story of Langston (Jacob Latimore) who is sent to spend Christmas in Harlem with his estranged grandparents, Reverend Cornell (Forest Whitaker) and Aretha Cobbs (Angela Bassett). While his mother, Naima (Jennifer Hudson), struggles financially, his grandparents live comfortably in their upper-middle-class Harlem home. His grandfather is well-known in the community as the pastor of a local church. Throughout the film, while Langston uncovers the truth about the riff between his mother and grandparents, he finds his absent father, and ultimately reunites his family for Christmas.

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[121] Krigwa Players. "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theater, ca. 1926," Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, http://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b034-i165.

The narrative and thematic base of the story itself fits with mainstream commercial Christmas movies' tendency to promote family and togetherness at the holidays. However, the selections of music, styles of performance, and visual representations are indicative of distinctively black aesthetic traditions. Through the infusion of rap and spirituals, character reflections on black history and protest, commentary on the split between black upper-middle- and working-class social groups, and the use of black urban settings in and outside of the church, the film speaks to the multidimensionality of black communities and culture through its depiction of the Cobbs family. It demonstrates the relationship between sacred-secular worlds in its concern with the sociohistorical conditions of blackness and the cultural practices that have developed through the black church. The film represents concerns of history, community, and culture in its mode of musical genre film. Specifically, in my reading of the film through the cultural lens, I focus primarily on two moments in *Black Nativity* that exemplify the legacy of music and integration of embodied performance through the preacher in traditional black church culture.

As an adaptation of Hughes's play, Lemmons says that one of her goals as the film's director was to pay homage to Hughes as an important literary figure.[122] To do this, she sets the film in Harlem, uses lines from his poetry in the dialogue, and makes the main character his namesake. These intentional references to Hughes make clear the connection between the 2013 film and its references to the original stage play, which she calls a "celebration of the black church."[123] These connections between the original play and the film provide entry points for reading the film through the cultural lens, particularly since the stage play is actually performed during the film's story. Thus, understanding the black religious aesthetic traditions of black music and performance at the core of the original stage play is essential to understanding the film adaptation.

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[122] Kasi Lemmons, "The 'Black Nativity' Interview," interview by Kam Williams, *African American Literature Book Club*, accessed August 10, 2021, https://aalbc.com/interviews/interview.php?id=2216.

The stage play, first performed in 1961, was originally titled, *Wasn't That a Mighty Day*, but Hughes changed the name of the play to *Black Nativity* to "honor. . . his 'faith in the importance of a black racial sense'."[124] Using 'Black' in the show's title denoted his distinctly Afrocentric take on the story and an intentional focus on this black racial sense as a distinctive unifying racial identity forged through the particular sociohistorical conditions of black people. *Black Nativity* (both the play and film) is imbued with the dynamic performance and spirit of black church traditions. In preparing *Black Nativity*, Hughes visited several "gospel temples" in Harlem about which he wrote: "I was never bored. Song and a sense of drama swirled around me. A mingling of ancient scripture and contemporary problems were projected with melodic intensity and rhythmic insistence. Every night I was drawn into the circle of oneness generated by the basic beat of the gospel tempo."[125] His observations foreground the collectivity of black aesthetic religious practices in these black churches. The mingling of past and present through rhythmic cadences and collective expression signified the movements and possibilities of black culture. In particular, Hughes's work on gospel plays dramatize the ways that "the language of faith expressed their [black communities'] sufferings, their aspirations, and their triumphs."[126] The "language of faith" has referenced, for example, Old Testament biblical stories as allegories for black experiences and scriptural language as signifying devices for future possibilities. As demonstrated in *Black Nativity,* the use and revision of scriptural language and the blurring of lines between spiritual and physical worlds is evident in the polyphonic and rhythmic cadences of black music as well as the performance of black preaching.

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[123] Bilge Elbiri, "Kasi Lemmons on Directing *Black Nativity* and Not Shying Away from Religion," *Vulture*, November 26, 2013, https://www.vulture.com/2013/11/black-nativity-director-kasi-lemmons-interview.html.

124 Langston Hughes, "Gospel Plays: Black Nativity," in *The Collected Work of Langston Hughes: Gospel Plays, Operas, and Later Dramatic Works*, ed. Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 353.

[125] Ibid.

Cultural Legacy of Black Music: Motherless Child

In both the *Black Nativity* play and film, black music is central to the showcase of culture and characters' expressions. While Hughes's original play primarily features a choir performing a range of spirituals and gospel songs, the film incorporates gospel, spirituals, R&B, and rap into its musical selection throughout its narrative. The integration of these forms brings typically religious and nonreligious modes of black music into melodic conversation.

The song "Motherless Child" provides a pertinent example of the infusion of sacred and secular concerns in the use of black music in *Black Nativity*. By reading the film's use of this song through the cultural lens, we see that its rendition functions in several ways. First, the song establishes the tone of the narrative moment in which Naima sends Langston to visit indefinitely with his estranged grandparents. Langston is despondent, resenting his mother for sending him away knowing that his home would no longer be accessible (they were on the verge of getting evicted) when, or if, he ever returned to Baltimore. In this sense, the bus itself signifies liminality and uncertainty as Langston sits and sings while in transit. In conjunction with point-of-view shots from the bus moving along the highway past bridges and bare woodland trees, the close ups of Langston and medium close ups of other passengers, who likewise appear dispirited, illustrate the shared experience of uncertainty and transition in this moment. The experience is narrated by "Motherless Child," connecting Langston's story in the film to the longer tradition of signifying collective experience and expressive communication using nonreligious and religious renditions of the spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." Beside the spatial relationship established between Langston and the other passengers with whom he travels, the song especially provides a point of direct connection between Langston and another passenger, Isaiah the Street Prophet (Nasir Jones).

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[126] Ibid., 355.

As Langston rides, he looks longingly out the window saying, "sometimes I feel like a motherless child." To this statement, Isaiah sitting across the aisle reading his Bible responds repeating the words that Langston spoke during the film's opening: "When a mother bestows a name on her child, it reveals her hope. Mine named me Isaiah, like the prophet. Sometimes *I* feel like a motherless child." As Isaiah repeats this line, he reiterates the significance of the statement. In particular, this statement on naming signifies the West African cultural belief in *nommo,* or the power of the word. This power, as William R. Handley describes, is the metaphysical ability to "call things into being, to give life to things through the unity of word, water, seed, and blood."[127] This belief is translated through dialogue as Langston and Isaiah reveal their mothers' hopes by revealing their names. Further, the repetition of this line as they begin their rendition of "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" emphasizes the significance of the relationship between a mother and child. The words echo the lyrics of "Motherless Child" voicing a feeling of dejection and alienation from the comfort, protection, and love of the mother's home: "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child. A long way from home."

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[127] William R. Handley, "The House a Ghost Built: 'Nommo,' Allegory, and the Ethics of Reading in Toni Morrison's 'Beloved,'" *Contemporary Literature* 36, no. 4 (1995): 677.

"Motherless Child" is a remixed version of the well-known spiritual performed by such artists as Paul Robeson, Mahalia Jackson, and Louis Armstrong. In its repetition, revision, and reinvention across centuries of performance, the song has been used as a reference point to signify feelings of alienation and liminality. In his study of black musical tropes and signifying tradition, Floyd uses "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" to describe this intertextual tradition as a "'Sometimes' trope," referring to the tradition of "intergenre and cross-genre troping . . . with lines and phrases of songs being borrowed and used as needs and desires arise. Such troping, as momentary as it is, is nevertheless frequent."[128] The use of "Sometimes" in *Black Nativity* not only communicates the feeling of separation between Langston and his mother but also places the film in intertextual conversation with renditions of and references to the song across history from its origins in slavery to its blues references and use in black musical theater.[129]

The remake integrates an R&B melody with rap as Langston begins to sing joined by the lyrical poetry of Isaiah the Street Prophet. The repetition and revision of the lyrics within "Motherless Child" signifies the multiple meanings produced through its expression. The song's repetitious structure draws attention to both the delivery and the lyrics as the singer/speaker's intonation frequently changes, even subtly, with each line. The repeated lyric enables and encourages prolonged contemplation of the phrase, its associated meanings, and its revisions. On one hand, its lyrics express the pain and despair of a child who has been separated from both mother and home. The history of enslaved children being torn from their mothers and sold to another slaveowner is pertinent here. On the other hand, the lyrics speak to the cultural, geographical, and temporal distance between black Americans and their African ancestry. It references the ruptured connection between Africa and the diaspora, particularly for those forced out of their homelands through the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Further, it is an expression of the liminal space in which African Americans have consistently found themselves as citizens of a nation without many of the privileges and protections of that citizenship. The song is imbued with a spirit of suffering, longing, and expression that is integrated as a part of the musical mode of the film but also carries with it a history of the particular social conditions in which black populations have existed in the U.S. Notably, the lyrics extending earlier versions of the song speak more explicitly to religious matters of prayer and Heaven. The lyrics of some earlier versions of the spiritual include: “Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone, Way up in the Heavenly land.”[130] The exclusion of this line from many contemporary renditions of the song, including the version used in the film, is telling of its secularized usage and traditions of intertextuality and revision between sacred and secular texts within the black community. This song provides an example of the way in which black music may flow between religious and nonreligious spheres of culture, expressing a variety of social meanings through intertextual references. In this way, the film musically signifies African American history and experiences.

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[128] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. "Troping the Blues: From spirituals to the Concert Hall," *Black Music Research Journal* 13, no. 1 (1993): 36.

[129] Ibid. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" was popularized by such ensemble groups as the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Students. The song was codified as a part of the canon of spirituals in the 1901 edition of *Cabin and Plantation Songs as Sung by the Hampton Students*. Floyd examines the variety of references to the song, particularly the trope of the "motherless child," in music from artists such as blues musicians Furry Lewis and Washington "Bukka" White and in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

Other musical renditions, such as “Be Grateful” and “Can’t Stop Praising His Name,” showcase the vocality and performance of black aesthetic music through its characters. The vocal performances of Forrest Whitaker, Jacob Latimore, and especially Jennifer Hudson highlight the polyrhythmic cadences and vocal ranges of the actors as they interpret familiar gospel songs through their unique musical talents. While many of the songs in the film are used in service of the Christian-themed story, much of this musical, similar to Hughes's play, is about showcasing the vibrancy and creativity of black culture through this expanded story. It is the "celebration of the black church," a sentiment shared by Lemmons and Hughes, that is the major thrust of the film; and this celebration includes black music as one of the black church's most distinctive characteristics.

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[130] Felicia M. Miyakawa, “’A Long Ways from Home?’ Hampton Institute and the Early History of ‘Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child,’” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 6, no. 1 (2012). This version was written as a record based on a performance of the spiritual. In the late nineteenth century, it was recorded by the writers to “reflect” Black Vernacular English pronunciations: Sometimes I feel like I’m almos’ gone, Way up in de Hebbenly lan.”

Preaching Performance

In addition to the music used throughout *Black Nativity,* the rendition of the stage play taking place inside the diegetic world of the film is central to reading the film's representation of black Christianity through the cultural lens. The performance of the *Black Nativity* play at the church as a segment of the narrative illustrates the interdependent relationship between the narrator and the choir and the aesthetic performance of black preaching. Specifically, Rev. Cornell Cobbs is the preacher-narrator who stands at the center of the show and is assisted by a gospel choir to tell the story of nativity as the congregation talks back. To understand this moment, it is useful to recognize the connections between the stage play and its translation in the film adaptation.

While the nativity story traditionally centers Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, the stage play and film version of the show focus primarily on the dramatization of the story through the performance of the narrator alongside the choir. In the creation of the original stage play, Hughes insisted that a typical sermon would be at its best when accompanied by "swinging gospel choirs" who would bring to the sermon a quality of drama equal to the theatrical presentation of the preacher.[131] Often during a revival or church meeting, the rhythmic intonations of the preacher in sync with the movements and musical cadences of the choir would, to varying degrees, produce an atmosphere of spirit-filled elation. For example, the frenzy, or "shouting," that Du Bois describes as being "mad with supernatural joy" works in tandem with the music of the choir (and organist and drummer) and the preaching of the pastor.[132] This interdependent relationship involves constant interaction between the preacher, choir, and congregation in an act of religious communion and expression.

Hughes sought to embody this type of performance in his gospel plays, specifically "to enact and to celebrate"[133] his observations of the African American community and their spiritual lives. Thus, the dynamism developed and sustained by the communal cooperation of the preacher (as narrator), choir, and congregants is central to the play's performance both onscreen and onstage. For the narrator, Hughes insisted that this role required, "an actor of dignity and presence who can give the narration the simple, straightforward, yet poetic feeling of reverence and wonder which its performance should have."[134] This echoes Du Bois's characterization of the preacher as "a leader, a politician, an orator, a 'boss'"[135] who would saturate the church service (or film screen or stage play) with an air of reverence and jubilation as is noted in the only version of Hughes's play recorded in its entirety in writing.[136] In the same vein, Forest Whitaker, a distinguished black actor, takes on the role of preacher and narrator in the film's version of the show. In both the stage play and film, the preacher is the conductor of the performance while the singers and the congregation fuel the storytelling engine.

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[131] Langston Hughes, "Gospel Plays: Black Nativity," in *The Collected Work of Langston Hughes: Gospel Plays, Operas, and Later Dramatic Works*, ed. Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 353.

[132] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 129.

[133] Leslie Catherine Sanders, introduction to "Gospel Plays: Black Nativity," in *The Collected Work of Langston Hughes: Gospel Plays, Operas, and Later Dramatic Works*, ed. Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 355.

[134] Ibid., 354.

[135] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 129.

[136] Langston Hughes, "Gospel Plays: Black Nativity," in *The Collected Work of Langston Hughes: Gospel Plays, Operas, and Later Dramatic Works*, ed. Leslie Catherine Sanders (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 356.

In the film version, the show takes place in the church pastored by Rev. Cobbs, and as this sequence begins, we follow Langston and his grandmother as they walk into the front of the church. The music, muffled through the church walls, is heard even before they walk into the doors. Inside, the sound of the drums and the choir envelop the church as visitors continue to enter. Standing on risers on the stage, the choir dances as they sing in prelude to the entrance of the preacher. Rev. Cobbs strolls in from the back of the stage wearing his blue and gray traditional liturgical robe and stole, which prominently features crosses on each side of his chest. In tandem, he narrates the words of the song as the choir continues. The performance is centered around the reverend as he initiates the show. He welcomes visitors from various churches and denominations to the Holy Resurrection Baptist Church before he officially begins by saying, "We are here tonight on very important business because we are here to praise the Lord.… We are here to praise the Lord because today he sent his only son. Today the Lord is come. Good people, let me tell the story. Let me spread the gospel." At this moment, the music slows, the lights dim, and several choir members step forward to help Rev. Cobbs remove his clergy robe to put on a new black and brown garment, which features an African-inspired diamond-shaped pattern that outlines the hem of the robe. Members of the congregation respond clapping and saying 'yes', 'hallelujah', and 'alright now' as he dons the new robe at center stage.

The wardrobe change is a deliberate part of the performance. It is a conscious gesture toward an aesthetic and performative reconfiguration of the nativity story, shifting away from its typical Eurocentric representation toward an Afrocentric depiction. The traditional vestment is replaced by a dark robe lined with African print. The “important business” of religious worship begins with a visual acknowledgement of cultural heritage. The wardrobe change also unifies the preacher with the performers who would subsequently stroll down the center aisle from the back of the church playing traditional African drums and dressed in traditionally-inspired fabrics. After Rev. Cobbs signals to begin their journey down the aisle, the performers move slowly and deliberately toward the stage, emphasizing the theatricality of this storytelling moment through their stroll and the integration of traditional African fabrics and drums which signal the foregrounding of African ancestry within the representation of the play. Each of these elements come together to further promote the idea of a “black racial sense” that the play underscores, integrating African ancestral roots into the story’s representation and making space for blackness in narratives of Christianity.

In his role, Cobbs is the conductor for this aesthetic and ideological shift. He functions as a griot retelling the familiar story of Mary and Joseph through the oral tradition of black preaching. While he reads verses from the Bible, he references his own knowledge and memory of the story to improvise and connect the story with the everyday experiences of the congregation. He begins by announcing that the story is going to be interpreted “according to my brother Luke,” which personalizes the relationship between Cobbs and St. Luke as the writer of the biblical passage. Then, as he reads about the tax census called by Caesar Augustus, he interprets the passage from Luke 2 through an analogy of the “tax man” whom, he says, no one can outrun. A strict reading of the text is less important here than Cobbs’s presentation of it and his efforts to bring the story into conversation with the present. In service of maintaining the relationship between the spiritual and material lives of the congregations, Smitherman asserts that “the preacher’s job as leader of his flock is to make churchgoers feel at home and to deal with the problems and realities confronting his people as they cope with the demands and stresses of daily living."[137] Cobbs uses the idea of the tax man as one example.

The film itself visually represents this practice of imaginative storytelling as it translates the story of nativity into a contemporary urban context. One example of this revision occurs when Langston is transported through a dream sequence into New York City's Times Square. Just as Cobbs compares the tax census referenced in the Bible story to the modern-day tax man, the film integrates images and artifacts of pastoral life resembling ancient Bethlehem with Langston's dream of the urban city where, in particular, billboards lining the buildings of Times Square display videos of shepherds tending sheep in place of the oversized advertisements that typically distinguish the location. As Cobbs's voice initiates the transition from the church to Times Square, Langston is centered among the chaos of the city and surrounded by the grandness of the space. In this moment, Langston is transported into the Afrocentric, urban version of the nativity where the story comes to life for him. Guided by Cobbs's religiously knowledgeable narration, this scene fulfills the imperative for black preaching to connect biblical ideas to the everyday experiences of its local congregation.

Like a griot, Cobbs's role is to preserve, interpret, and perform the nativity story and the idiomatic ways in which African American churches have interpreted the stories of the Bible for their own conditions. While he periodically references the Bible that he holds, he only momentarily looks at the page in his telling of the story. Rather than the book itself, Cobbs holds the primary responsibility of narrating the story and "spreading the gospel" through the play.

Further, Cobbs shares this responsibility with the congregation as they dialogue throughout the onscreen production. Pastor and theorist Oneal Cleaven Sandidge refers to the congregation as a “supporting cast” in the practice of black preaching.[138] According to Sandidge, an “effective” sermon moves the congregation—most often spiritually emotionally, and physically—through such forms as clapping, waving of hands, cries of ‘hallelujah,’ and shouting.[139] The “very important business” that Rev. Cobbs shares with the congregation is presented as a collective activity. Although Rev. Cobbs is at the center of the performance, the onscreen congregation (potentially offscreen audience as well) is encouraged to join in the presentation of the story. The congregation in the film talks back to the reverend with ‘amen’s and ‘yessir’s helping him to preach. This act of collective engagement with the story is just as important to the storytelling process as the narrator’s oration. In this way, the signification of meaning and storytelling is communal and, as Du Bois stated, for the community and by the community.

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[137] Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 87.

Overall, while Langston’s story of family reconciliation constitutes the primary narrative focus in *Black Nativity*, the blending of black genre music and the diegetic performance of the play provide primary instances of folk traditions in which black Christianity, history, and culture are signified through the film. In particular, Langston’s expression of feeling like a motherless child is not only indicative of the tone of the narrative moment but also places Langston in solidarity with Isaiah the Prophet and highlights the songs’ intertextual significance as “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” is signified through the film. Additionally, Rev. Cobbs’s rendition of the stage play illustrates some of the basic tenets of black preaching through which the congregation, preacher, and choir are collective participants in the “very important business” of sharing the gospel. Echoing key elements of signifying practice, the emphasis in this cinematic revision of *Black Nativity* is on *how* the story is told more than what is narrated in its content. My reading through the cultural lens highlights the use of black gospel music and the depiction of black preaching as they are rooted in the signifying context of African American history and culture.

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[138] Oneal Cleaven Sandidge, “The Uniqueness of Black Preaching,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 49, no. 1 (1992): 91.

[139] Ibid.

Conclusion

The 2013 adaptation of the original stage play is a revision of Hughes's revision, reinterpreting the Christian nativity story as a drama centering black characters and their witness to the nativity. While traditional western representations of the nativity story tend to dramatize it through a Eurocentric lens, the process of revision in this cinematic iteration of *Black Nativity* emphasizes the folk traditions of music and black preaching blended within a contemporary context. My reading through the cultural lens in this chapter thus focuses on how the story is conveyed through black religious aesthetics and coded revisioning. This reading focuses on two specific instances in *Black Nativity* that characteristically represent the use of two key elements of traditional black church culture—black music and preaching.

Broadly, the cultural lens that I discuss in this chapter is useful for recognizing black cultural traditions and reading the sacred-secular significations in representations of black Christianity in African American film. This lens is especially informed by the traditional African world view described by Smitherman in which the indivisibility of the spiritual and material worlds aligns with the blending of sacred/secular and spirit/body relationships. The cultural lens enables scholars to illuminate the relationship between black Christianity and the cultural history of African American lived experiences. Thus, this lens is foundational in that any reading on representations of black Christianity in African American film must begin with a recognition of these traditions. If scholars begin by identifying a film’s depiction of black aesthetic practices and recognizing the cultural significance of these traditions, they can build from these readings to explicate the evangelistic, moral, critical, or political functions of representations of black Christianity in African American film. While I focus on the traditions of gospel music and black preaching in this chapter, I apply the gospel lens in the next chapter to read black preaching in light of evangelistic messaging, morality tales, and salvation narratives represented through depictions of black Christianity in African American film.

Chapter 2

Entertainment with a Gospel Message:

Reading The Black Cinematic Sermon through The Gospel Lens

In a 2005 interview with the *Chicago Tribune* discussing his film *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Darren Grant, 2005), media mogul Tyler Perry insisted that his productions are "not just about the church. We would like to tap into the church audience, but we don't want that to be our exclusive audience. . . . [T]his film is just entertainment with a great message."[140] From this statement, the emphasis on producing films that focus on pairing entertainment with a “great” gospel message of Christian faith is shared by megachurch bishop, best-selling author, producer, and businessman T.D. Jakes. Jakes insists that his approach to filmmaking is to “try to blend [faith] in such a way that it’s palatable” wherein a film would not be “totally preachy or totally secular.”[141] In this approach to filmmaking, Jakes and Perry seek fundamentally to entertain audiences with a compelling story. At the same time, the infusion of faith-based messages of forgiveness, healing, and love lie at the heart of their productions and make up the core of the gospel that they share whether through chronicling their personal faith journeys or sermonizing through onscreen characters.

While today Perry and Jakes are some of the most prominent producers of African American faith-based media, the practice of infusing Christian religious meaning into film has a long tradition in the U.S. In particular, the compatibility of entertainment and Christian education has long been a question posed by filmmakers and critics. Film scholars have frequently noted the contentious relationship between the Christian church and Hollywood during the formative years of the U.S. film industry.[142] This relationship resulted in regulatory policies, namely the Motion Picture Production Code and Catholic Legion of Decency of the 1930s, used to restrict the content of Hollywood films for the "maintenance of social and community values in pictures."[143] At the same time, other scholars, such as Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke, have observed the often-overlooked legacy of religious groups and individuals adopting film as a tool for communicating Christian messages.[144] This legacy has included such internationally-distributed films as Cecil B. DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927) and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) alongside Alex and Stephen Kendrick's *War Room* (2015) and the more than a dozen feature films produced by evangelist Billy Graham's production company World Wide Pictures.

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[140] Mark Olsen, “Tyler Perry puts his faith behind, and into, his work,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 4, 2005, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2005-03-04-0503040351-story.html.

[141] T.D. Jakes and Kasi Lemmons, “’Black Nativity’ T.D. Jakes & Kasi Lemmons On Faith Based Films,” EURweb, video, 1:52, accessed August 10, 2021, https://vimeo.com/79168262.

Importantly, black filmmakers such as Spencer Williams and James and Eloyce King Patrick Gist were some of the early producers of religious film who sought to specifically address African American religious experiences, centering black characters and communities. Judith Weisenfeld notes that understanding these films within the broader context of African American religious history and culture reveals that Williams's *The Blood of Jesus* (1941), for example, sought "not necessarily to convince viewers of the literal truth of these things [God's power over evil in the world] as embodied in the film but to promote the moral truths that underlie the film's story and iconography."[145] Notably, this approach seems to echo Perry and Jakes's sentiments as well. Rather than proselytizing religious conversion, these take the form of morality tales based in principles of religious instruction. In this vein, Christian education using filmic parables as a way of transforming lives through moral instruction has been central to this tradition and has grounded the filmmaking legacy that informs contemporary films such as *The Gospel* (Rob Hardy, 2005), *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (Tyler Perry, 2009), *Preacher's Kid* (Stan Foster, 2010), *Just a Measure of Faith* (Mechelle & Marlon Wilson & Larry Clark, 2014), and *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* (Neema Barnette, 2012).

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[142] Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: Cultural History of American Movies* (1975; reis., New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

[143] "The Motion Picture Production Code (as Published 31 March, 1930)," https://www.asu.edu/courses/fms200s/total-readings/MotionPictureProductionCode.pdf.

[144] Terry Lindvall & Andrew Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

In this chapter, I discuss the ecclesiastical contours that majorly comprise the landscape of contemporary black churches and black Christianity. These contours set the foundation for reading representations of black Christianity through the gospel lens, which is on the one hand an approach to reading portrayals of black Christianity in African American film for evangelizing and advancing faith-based moral instruction. On the other hand, the gospel lens helps scholars to read the religiously-affirmative dimensions of debates on race and religion as depicted in black film. Reading through the gospel lens foregrounds the use of spiritual or religious themes, stories, and iconography for the purpose of Christian education, spiritual inspiration, and spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through this lens, scholars are able to examine depictions of black Christianity and the black church in conversation with historical and contemporary religious discourses and sermonizing practices.

Additionally, as the case study for this chapter, I examine what I call the "black cinematic sermon" in *Woman Thou Art Loosed On the 7th Day* (Neema Barnette, 2012). Reading through the gospel lens, I focus on the film's use of the protagonist's story as an illustrative parable upon which the sermonic message of faith and forgiveness is built and driven by the neo-Pentecostal voice and star power of T.D. Jakes. Ultimately, my reading of the black cinematic sermon in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day*, highlights the core tenet of imaginative storytelling in black preaching and the denominational contours of sharing the “good news” of the Christian gospel.

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[145] Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 112.

Spreading The Gospel & The Gospel Lens

Whether called ‘faith-based films,' ‘Christian movies,’ or ‘religious motion pictures,’ understanding evangelistic cinema means recognizing its legacy as a vehicle for spreading the gospel message of Jesus both in and outside of church settings. In this way, the mission to share the gospel through religious film is primarily rooted in evangelicalism, which scholars such as James Russell and Heather Hendershot explain is broadly characterized by believing in a Christian God, experiencing salvation as personal conversion, recognizing the Bible as an authoritative text applicable to daily life, and having a divinely-inspired responsibility to share the gospel of salvation with others.[146] While these types of films have used various styles and modes, this evangelical imperative drives their creation and approach to storytelling.

In their book *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986*, film historians Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke narrate an (predominantly white American) evangelical history of filmmaking as a tool for evangelizing. They describe early films as essentially “extensions of [preachers’] sermons,” shown in churches and theaters as supplements to other forms of religious communication.[147] Lindvall and Quicke explain several broad categories of American religious motion pictures that the Harmon Foundation identified during the early twentieth century, which are applicable to early twenty-first century religious films. First, (1) "Bible Stories and Bible Lands" films, which were most popularly used, are renderings of Bible stories such as the crucifixion of Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Second, (2) "The World and Its Peoples" films used narrative fiction and documentary modes to teach audiences about Christian education and the work of missionaries around the world. Third, (3) "Religion Historically Treated," "Church Activities," or "The Church in Action" films are historical and biographical. Used as visual documents to record people and events, such as church services or conventions, these types of "talking picture church service" films are predecessors to contemporary televised broadcasts. These categories also encompass historical documentaries on the history of churches or denominations. Lastly, (4) "Dramatic Films," or "Religion and Life," are inspirational, focusing on fictional stories of every day "life situations" to teach audiences about Christian living. These films covered a variety of styles and genres as they emphasized parabolic and anecdotal storytelling above direct religious instruction.[148] This mode of teaching through narrative illustration is especially central to Christian education as it echoes the way that Jesus uses parables for religious instruction in his ministry. These types are useful for understanding the range of filmmaking modes that have been historically used as vehicles to accomplish the underlying goal of evangelizing.

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[146] James Russell, “Evangelical Audiences and ‘Hollywood’ Film: Promoting Fireproof (2008),” *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010): 393; Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

In addition to the genres of films produced, approaches to creating evangelistic cinema have also been characterized by denominational diversity. Lindvall and Quicke further explain that, for Protestant fundamentalists, a film might illustrate a message of repentance and conversion while, for other more liberal religious groups, a film might promote social justice and consciousness.[149] James Russell likewise identifies these distinctions in evangelical culture in the 2000s where "[t]he most extreme of them [evangelicals] view Hollywood as an epicentre of atheistic, liberal and irreligious values" while, alternatively, other evangelical groups have sought to spread the gospel message of salvation specifically through social engagement and media.[150] These considerations are important for recognizing the potential for cinema as a tool for evangelism and the influence of this perception on religious representation. As Lindvall, W. O. Williams, and Artie Terry argue, just as there are expectations for white religious representation, representations of black Christianity must resonate with the spiritual practices, experiences, and language of black communities.[151] Thus, for black evangelicalism within the context of the U.S., the consideration of racial representation within religious films is likewise essential. While some black evangelicals may downplay the importance of intersectional oppressions in service of post-racial Christian unity, race remains a central part of broader conversations both inside and outside the church. Even the enduring validity of the familiar phrase "the most segregated time of the week is Sunday morning" discredits the idea of a post-racial society. These considerations are essential to reading black Christianity in African American cinema through the gospel lens. Centering black characters and communities while highlighting black religious aesthetics (as described in Chapter 1) distinguishes representations of black Christianity in African American cinema even while recognizing the flows of influence across racial and denominational boundaries. Thus, scholars must maintain an awareness of black denominational diversity and its influences on the representation of black culture, religious traditions, social conditions, and evangelism. In particular, the contours of the contemporary black ecclesial landscape set the discursive stage for gospel messages represented in film.

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[147] Terry Lindvall & Andrew Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons: The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 3.

[148] Ibid., 14.

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[149] Ibid., 3.

[150] James Russell,. "Evangelical Audiences and 'Hollywood' Film: Promoting Fireproof (2008)," *Journal of American Studies* 44, no. 2 (2010): 393.

[151] Terry Lindvall, W. O. Williams and Artie Terry, "Spectacular Transcendence: Abundant Means in the Cinematic Representation of African American Christianity," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 7, no. 3 (1996).

Black Ecclesial Contours

Historically, the Christian gospel for African American communities was forged in fire, so to speak. The Christian gospel of spiritual salvation was contorted and thrust upon African slaves as white supremacists justified the chaining of black bodies at the same time that missionaries offered conditional, otherworldly freedom for their souls. Within this framework (as discussed in Chapter 1), black religious communities adapted Christianity to fashion a "communal eschatology" as historian Brian K. Clardy suggests,[152] which would allow this community whose bodies were enslaved to hope for a future of equality even if in another world. This sort of adaptation and interpretation of the Bible, as black theologian James Cone argues, is grounded in context and shared experiences among black communities in the U.S. This provided the impetus for theological perspectives on salvation informed by the conditions of black life in the U.S., which bolsters the significance of the term "gospel," meaning "good news," for the black community. The good news of Christianity, especially for African American communities oppressed under white supremacy, was the hope of freedom from spiritual and physical bondage made possible through Jesus, who would "set at liberty those who are oppressed."[153] While the gospel message of Jesus has been carried through preachers and churches differently as practices of worship, doctrine, and theology vary among churches and denominations, the Christian message has been carried across denominations and churches with similar goals of freedom for the soul.

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[152] Brian K. Clardy, "Deconstructing a Theology of Defiance: Black Preaching and the Politics of Racial Identity," *Journal of Church and State* 53, no. 2 (2011): 203.

[153] Luke 4:18 New King James Version

The contours of the gospel have shifted throughout history as the good news of Christianity has been interpreted and integrated into black religious communities in a variety of ways. Black theologies, proclaiming Jesus as fundamentally concerned with the struggles oppressed of society; womanist theologies, centering the intersectional experiences of black women in theology; social gospels, applying Christian ethics to issues of social justice; prosperity gospels, professing material wealth and capital gain as an essential sign of faith; gospels of inclusion, promoting the dissolution of dividing lines between religions and rejection of exclusionary practices; in addition to teachings of the canonical gospels as scriptural accounts of Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John comprise some of the various iterations of gospel advanced to directly and indirectly address the needs of the black community at various moments in history.[154] Along with this, black believers and churches identifying as Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, and other Christian sects have maintained a multiplicity of ways to access and experience the good news of the Christian gospel for their local congregations.

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[154] Benjamin E. Mays describes in *The Negro's God* several changes in black social and economic conditions such as mass migrations from rural to urban areas, increased financial wealth in the growing black middle class, the creation of secular institutions committed specifically to the social and economic advancement of the black community, as well as landmark achievements for black civil rights. These changes were influential in shifting conceptions of God and the relationship between the black church and the black community. For more on these theologies and gospels see: Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969); Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Jonathan Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); James H. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970).; Carlton Pearson, *The Gospel of Inclusion: Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism to the True Love of God and Self* (New York: Atria, 2006).

Based on the contemporary moment marked by transdenominational Charismatic movements begun in the 1960s and increasingly mass-mediated religious experiences in the U.S., ethicist and religious scholar Jonathan L. Walton classifies three dominant ecclesiastical perspectives—Word of Faith, Charismatic mainline, and neo-Pentecostal—that are useful for understanding the diverse-yet-overlapping messaging of many technologically-mediated black church ministries that seek to spread the gospel to all the world.[155] First, the Word of Faith (also known as prosperity gospel) perspective encompasses a network of churches, based in a larger neo-Charismatic movement. These churches are led by pastors who may have previously had personal ties to traditional denominational ministries but have since cut those official ties, frequently even eschewing some of the religious practices associated (i.e. whooping, shouting, etc.) with black folk churches.[156] The distinguishing feature of this perspective is its interpretation of the Bible as a means to accumulate material wealth. Anthropologist Marla F. Frederick observes, "[t]he ministry of prosperity teaches that the degrees to which one obeys God, prays, and 'sows seeds of faith' (gives financially to the ministry) are the exclusive determinants of one's financial increase."[157] This Word of Faith perspective has been characterized by this belief that the creation of one's world—especially the achievement of personal health, wealth, and general well-being—is based primarily upon the believer's ability to believe, speak, and sow seed. It places divine power in the spoken word, particularly in the use of scriptural language to speak to and change one's situation. As Milmon F. Harrison explains in his study of the Word of Faith Movement, "The Faith Message is a mélange of elements drawn and recombined anew from a variety of traditions, including Evangelicalism, neo-Pentecostalism, and, most important, New Thought metaphysics."[158] Thus, positive confession is central to this perspective as it promotes faith as spoken word confession to produce what Walton calls "metaphysical physicality" through which a believer may transcend the limitations of existence in the physical world including financial prosperity and healing.[159]

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[155] Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 77.

[156] Ibid., 93.

[157] Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 142.

The second ecclesiastical perspective that Walton identifies is the Charismatic mainline, which refers to ministries that derive from traditional mainline black denominations—namely Baptist and Methodist. Walton attributes the Charismatic association to those ministries that integrate Pentecostal-style experiential worship into their traditionally denominational religious practices. This view emphasizes "life in the Spirit" wherein spiritual gifts such as "speaking in tongues" (or glossolalia), prophecy, and healing abound as evidence of spiritual conversion and the presence of the Holy Spirit.[160] Additionally, in his broad overview of the twentieth-century Charismatic shift, Richard Quebedeaux explains that despite the variety of denominations and churches influenced by Charismatic renewal "[i]t is the knowledge of this [present and caring] God, given through the experience of his Holy Spirit, that binds Charismatics together."[161] Quebedeaux's emphasis on the experiential potential of communion with God is central. At the same time, his statement echoes Walton's delineation of Charismatic mainline ministries wherein, despite being influenced by Charismatic shifts, respective denominations have preserved their own traditional aesthetics and ecclesiastical practices, including showcasing

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[158] Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.

[159] Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 95.

[160] Stanley M. Burgess & Eduard M. van der Mass, eds., *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal Charismatic Movements* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

[161] Richard Quebedeaux, *The New Charismatics: The Origins, Development, and Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

Christian iconography in the church building, participating in baptisms and communion, and ministers wearing clerical garments to signal their ministerial status.[162]

Lastly, the neo-Pentecostal perspective is similarly characterized by life in the spirit, but it is specifically derived from association with the spiritual practices of classical Pentecostalism while integrating contemporary cultural characteristics. This perspective places emphasis on being "in the world but not *of* it." In classical Pentecostalism, this emphasis means that salvation requires both spiritual and behavioral conversion to the extent that one's faith is measured by one's ability to remain separated from "worldly" concerns (i.e. gambling, wearing makeup, dressing in gaudy attire). However, neo-Pentecostals are more apt to blur the lines drawn in classical Pentecostalism between the church and its people as sacred sites that are set apart from secular sites such as social clubs and movie theaters. The emphasis for neo-Pentecostals is being "in the world but not of it, unless it is in the name of Jesus."[163] In other words, the focus on personal salvation and spiritual conversion remains a core aspect of neo-Pentecostalism, but the imperative to refrain from worldly activities is reframed to embrace the commercial culture, styles, and technologies of contemporary society as long as the cultural products are rebranded as Christian. For instance, hip hop, as a secular genre of music, is appropriated and recast as hip hop gospel to be used for the purpose of sharing the gospel of Jesus within and outside the church. Additionally, such scholars as R.G. Robins, Amos Yong, and Estrelda Y. Alexander, have characterized neo-Pentecostalism as closely related to the Charismatic movement in its emphasis on experiential encounters with the Holy Spirit.[164] While deemphasizing traditionally stringent doctrinal rules and discourses of judgement and blame, neo-Pentecostals emphasize personal empowerment especially through spiritual encounters with the divine.[165]

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[162] Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[163] Ibid., 77.

[164] R. G. Robins, *Pentecostalism in America* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010); Amos Yong & Estrelda Y. Alexander, introduction to *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*, eds. Amos Yong & Estrelda Y. Alexander (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

The neo-Pentecostal perspective is especially important as its neo-Charismatic emphasis on the experiential power of the Holy Spirit has significantly influenced the landscape of the contemporary black church. Shayne Lee describes tenets of neo-Pentecostalism as central to what he calls the "new black church."[166] Some of the characteristics of the new black church that Lee identifies includes: greater inclusion of women in ministerial roles, iconoclastic preaching, focus on personal empowerment, embrace of contemporary styles of gospel music, ecstatic praise and worship influenced by neo-Pentecostalism, incorporation of media technologies, promotion of social professionalism, and the unprecedented celebrity status of many of its leaders. Within this new black church, believers from various congregations follow (or are at least familiar with) the prominent ministries of such megachurch leaders as T.D. Jakes, Eddie Long, Creflo Dollar, and Frederick Price whose churches follow many of the contemporary organizational and aesthetic principles. Frederick, for example, explains that among the black women in her study on everyday faith there were common threads in their perceptions of televangelism, which were based largely in the perception that ministers on television would "teach" (as opposed to preach) principles based in the Bible that had the potential to "make things better."[167] In this framework, denominational boundaries are deemphasized as instructional teachings on Christian faith-based health, wellness, salvation, and grace are uplifted and used to appeal to more general audiences.

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[165] Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

[166] Ibid.

[167] Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 134.

This shift away from classical denominational lines toward nondenominational and transdenominational movements is relevant not only for understanding contemporary networks of religious affiliations but also for recognizing attempts at universalizing messages apart from denominational particularities in order to reach larger audiences. For example, one of the theological criticisms leveled against T.D. Jakes is his doctrinal ambiguity regarding whether he aligns his teachings with traditional Pentecostal belief in the Trinity—God as a tripart being (Father, Son, Holy Spirit)—or Apostolic belief in Oneness theology—only Jesus as God.[168] His appeasing response is that his faith has been importantly influenced by a melding of both Baptist and Oneness Pentecostal theologies.[169] In this way, such theological divisions are largely divorced from media produced in association with the new black church (i.e. books, TV broadcasts, recorded sermons, fiction films). Instead, as scholars have described, the spiritual "self-help" genre of messaging that Jakes (along with other televangelists) has used contributes to his mass appeal as a pragmatic faith teacher attempting to speak to the issues of thousands of women. This is especially important for examining cinema as a medium through which filmmakers most often seek to reach the largest audiences possible, using media as a tool to promote evangelical salvation by spreading the gospel of Jesus.

This landscape of mediated religious entertainment along with the heritage of distinctive ecclesiastical perspectives within the black church are informative for understanding the range of African American cinematic narratives with similar entertainment and religious appeal. Recognizing the contours of black denominational and nondenominational affiliations is important for reading black Christianity through the gospel lens without homogenizing black religious experiences even within Christianity. While there have been common aesthetic practices that are recognizable in black church history, differences between denominations and churches influence the variability of experiences within the black church and how those experiences may be represented onscreen. While my examination of *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* in this chapter is based on influences from neo-Pentecostalism, reading through the gospel lens can highlight other denominational particularities that inform other filmic depictions of black religion. Weisenfeld describes Spencer Williams's black-audience religious films, for example, as espousing evangelical Protestant sensibilities with Roman Catholic influences when the physical blood of Jesus becomes a part of the main character's narrative of salvation, echoing Roman Catholic emphasis on the crucified body and blood of Christ.[170] These contours of theological influence are informative for scholars reading black Christianity in African American cinema through the gospel lens.

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[168] Douglas LeBlanc, "Apologetics Journal Criticizes Jakes," *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/february7/5.58.html.

[169] Elliot Miller, "T.D. Jakes Responds to the Journal," Christian Research Institute, June 9, 2009, https://www.equip.org/article/t-d-jakes-responds-to-the-journal/.

The Gospel Lens

Reading representations of black Christianity through the gospel lens allows scholars to specifically examine the elements of a film, such as narrative conflict or character dialogue, that may be used as parables for sharing a gospel message. As a practice that is often overlooked or trivialized in scholarly literature, the gospel lens allows scholars to examine the evangelizing function of a film's representation of black Christianity. It enables scholars to place a film in context and in conversation with the diversity of theological perspectives and experiences in black Christianity along with evangelical histories of using cinema to spread the gospel.

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[170] Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

For scholars reading representations of black Christianity through the gospel lens, it is useful to understand what I call a "black cinematic sermon." Centering the film text, I use this term to refer to the collection of moments strategically placed throughout the narrative that provide direct or indirect religious commentary on the main character's story and offer a faith-based resolution to the narrative's central conflict. These moments may be at times pejoratively referred to as "preachy," but within the context of the black cinematic sermon and its evangelistic function, these moments are essential to making plain the moral lessons and religious messaging advanced within the film. An example of this can be found in Tyler Perry's 2005 film *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* in the main character Helen's (Kimberly Elise) journey from abuse, dependency, and anger to personal agency, love, and happiness. Specifically, as Helen tries to overcome years of abuse from her now-ending marriage, she seeks guidance and inspiration from Madea (the controversial character played by Tyler Perry in drag), her mother (Cicely Tyson), and a Sunday morning black church service. With each moment of faith-based counsel, Helen moves closer to her final resolution of faith, forgiveness, and personal empowerment underlying the overall message that healing and restoration is possible with God. As demonstrated in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, a black cinematic sermon importantly incorporates aesthetic and storytelling traditions of black preaching (i.e. emotive language, imaginative storytelling, allegories, repetition) to offer specific moral instruction (i.e. love your neighbor) and/or promote personal conversion to Christian faith (i.e. Jesus is the answer to any problem). On one hand, this can often take the form of a church service in which a minister speaks directly from the pulpit about the religious theme of the film. On the other hand, black preaching techniques may also be used in scenes of interpersonal dialogue in which such traditions as imaginative storytelling are employed to signify meaning for characters. Each of these “moments of commentary” on the protagonist’s story ultimately contributes to the advancement of religious messaging in a film.

Reading through the gospel lens enables scholars to examine the thematic significance of these types of moments as they are threaded throughout the narrative using the characters and their stories as parables. Translating parables by sharing the moral lesson plainly through vernacular language and shared experiences of the community is essential to black preaching. Thus, the parable used to underscore the black cinematic sermon must speak to the shared cultural experiences of its target audience. Even as the parable recounts a specific story, the lesson must be more broadly applicable. The faith-infused moral teachings in Perry’s films, for example, Shayne Lee describes as “prescriptive ‘re-visions’” for improving the social conditions of modern life through the representation of contemporary characters’ challenges and triumphs.[171] With this in mind, the central focus when reading a film through the gospel lens is explicating the use of black preaching techniques to communicate religious themes especially within the frame of narrative structure, character arcs, and dialogue.

While this chapter focuses specifically on the use of African American faith-based film as a vehicle for evangelizing, the gospel lens also enables scholars to examine representations of black Christianity in other more secularly-oriented films, which may feature African American religion or religious characters as marginal aspects of the story, and analyze meanings signified through their integration of Christian characters or institutions in onscreen conversations regarding blackness and religion. This lens encourages scholars to place moments of dialogue or individual characters espousing Christian discourses in context with broader discourses of theology and religion. These moments in a film, which frequently occur as dramatic dialogue scenes between characters, place characters' critical perspectives on religion in contrast to and in conversation with characters who explicitly espouse religious beliefs. The gospel lens encourages scholars to recognize not only the history of adopting critical perspectives on Christianity (as discussed in Chapter 3) but also the religiously devout elements of a conversation. While filmmakers may or may not ascribe to explicitly evangelical intentions as they integrate theological or faith-inspired ideas into their films, the gospel lens allows scholars to analyze the ways in which the religious legacy of the black church and Christianity more broadly inform both the discrete and overtly "preachy" uses of black Christianity in African American cinema.

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[171] Shayne Lee, *Tyler Perry’s America: Inside His Films* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 2.

It is important to note that the central purpose of this lens is to explicate the function of black Christianity in black film for sermonizing purposes and to take seriously these efforts, which are at the same time representational and evangelistic, as a means of speaking with African American audiences. Broadly, the gospel lens encourages scholars to recognize the importance of agency and devotion in personal faith and religious affiliations rather than pigeonholing black religiosity as primitive or stereotypically childlike. Through this lens, analyses of depictions of black Christianity in African American cinema are informed not only by a history of strong religious beliefs in African American communities but also by a tradition of Christian evangelism and religious morality propagated inside and outside of formal religious institutions.

With these contours of the gospel lens in mind, I apply this lens to reading the black cinematic sermon in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day*. Through my application of the gospel lens, this reading focuses on the fusion of Kari's story and Jakes's star persona into the film as a vehicle for communicating the overall message of practicing forgiveness and letting go of bitterness. In particular, the narrative of Kari's journey through faith is used as a parable to complement Jakes's sermonizing voice in service to spreading the gospel of Christian faith and the power of forgiveness.

Through the Gospel Lens: The Black Cinematic Sermon in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day*

The 2012 film *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* is a franchise production with transmedia connections across several modes of communication and storytelling. This multimillion-dollar franchise is driven by the neo-Pentecostal spiritual leadership of Bishop Thomas Dexter Jakes Sr. who presides over the 30,000-member megachurch The Potter's House. Before delving into my reading of the black cinematic sermon through Kari's parable in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day*, it is important to understand the significance of Jakes's inclusion in the film as its sermonizing voice and starring celebrity preacher.

In a 2004 interview on the release of *Woman Thou Art Loosed* (Michael Schultz, 2004), film producer Reuben Cannon remarked, "If you define a star by popularity and recognizability, Bishop Jakes is a star."[172] Cannon explained that after witnessing Jakes lead a conference attended by tens of thousands of women and broadcast to thousands more, the decision to cast the Bishop as himself became clear as he would provide the "bankable element" needed to greenlight the film. Richard Dyer characterizes a star as one that is produced through production, audience imagination, and ideology. The star image is constructed through the interconnectedness of one's onscreen and offscreen personality from which ideological imaginations surrounding the image pervade perceptions of the individual's persona. Dyer explains that “[a]s regards the fact that a given star is in the film, audience foreknowledge, the star's name and her/his appearance (including the sound of her/his voice and dress styles associated with him/her) all already signify that condensation of attitudes and values which is the star's image.”[173] When Jakes performs on screen as himself, his black preaching style, voice, religious affiliations, and celebrity are signified through his performance in the story. Although typically he is not the central character in the story nor does he take up much screen time, his stardom is grounded in his recognizability particularly for African American religious audiences.

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[172] Julie Salamon, "Preacher in a Star Turn on Film Draws the Faithful," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2004, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/18/movies/preacher-in-a-star-turn-on-film-draws-the-faithful.html.

In 2001, Jakes’s rising ministerial stardom was noted in mainstream media when he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, wearing a dark suit and sitting confidently with an open Bible looking into the camera. The photo is accompanied by the caption “Is this man the next Billy Graham?” with a subheading written in smaller font that describes him as one of the “galvanizing preachers . . . who are changing the way we see the world.”[174] This comparison to Billy Graham along with the subheading on “galvanizing preachers” recognizes Jakes, a black preacher with roots in Charismatic black Pentecostalism, as a ministerial force at the vanguard of American Protestantism. Using Graham as a benchmark, this secular magazine’s characterization of Jakes as “America’s Preacher” places him not only as an influential figure in his black church and community in Dallas but also as a national influencer, especially across racial boundaries. In similarly charismatic and multitalented fashion, both Jakes and Graham have sat with presidents, counseled celebrities, produced a number of media products, and drawn thousands internationally to their ministry events. Their notability as religious leaders have soared above many other influential figures. As Jakes consistently moves between worlds, acting as a pastor,

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[173] Richard Dyer, *Stars* (1979; reis., London: BFI Publishing, 1998), 126.

[174] Michael O’Brien, Cover, *Time Magazine*, September 17, 2001, http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,20010917,00.html

CEO, motivational speaker, musician, author, actor, media producer, and preacher, Lee insists that "Jakes is distinguished by the breadth of his personal talent and the scope of his intellectual reach and business savvy"[175] even while there are several other preachers, such as Creflo Dollar or Eddie Long, who are also able to reach millions of viewers each year through their ministries.

While he maintains that he draws a line between business and ministry, Jakes uses his distinctive baritone voice, knowledge of religion, and business acumen to expand his ministry, build non-profit organizations, and grow his enterprises. He helms both TDJ Enterprises and TDJ Ministries with the charisma, intellect, and voice to contextualize Christianity and make biblical lessons plain for his audiences. Such topics as existential purpose, forgiveness, gender, and even weight-loss are placed in context of biblical interpretation especially through books such as *Maximize the Moment: God's Action Plan for Your Life* (1999), *Let It Go: Forgive So You Can Be Forgiven* (2012), *He-Motions: Even Strong Men Struggle* (2004) and, most notably, *Woman Thou Art Loosed!: Healing the Wounds of the Past* (1993). He explains that his emphasis in each of these endeavors is communication, using films, music, books, or the pulpit to share a message of hope, liberation, and empowerment through the gospel of Jesus Christ.[176]

One of Jakes's most notable ministry teachings, "Woman, Thou Art Loosed," provided the main thrust for his international ministry. What became a series of books, sermons, conferences, films, and a stage play started as a Sunday school lesson in the mid-1990s meant to empower women, especially those who had experienced abuse and trauma. The lesson, titled "Woman, Thou Art Loosed," as Jakes describes, was designed as a short teaching on Luke 13:12

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[175] Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2.

[176] Victor Anderson, "Bishop T.D. Jakes on Hollywood with New Film," *The Christian Post*, August 20, 2010, https://www.christianpost.com/news/bishop-td-jakes-takes-on-hollywood-with-new-film.html; T.D. Jakes, "Lessons On Forgiveness from T.D. Jakes," interview by Michel Martin, NPR, April 5, 2012, https://www.npr.org/2012/04/05/150062615/lessons-on-forgiveness-from-t-d-jakes.

which says, "And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him and said unto her, Woman thou art loosed from thine infirmity."[177] In this text, the woman, whose physical mobility had been severely limited for years wherein "she could in no wise lift herself up,"[178] was made free from the limitation through Jesus's declaration. Jakes's teaching based on this story centers the woman as symbolic of many women who he says "are able to lift up other people . . . but they have difficulty with self-esteem and lifting up themselves."[179] He interprets the scripture as a call to women for spiritual, mental, and emotional uplift. Since its introduction in 1996, the Sunday school lesson has expanded through Jakes's production of resources to help women, in particular, become "loosed" from their past traumas, abuses, mistakes, and relationships. Broadly, the spiritual message of Jakes's work in developing his multimedia, transmedia series is that women do not have to be "bound" by their pasts, but they can be freed from abuse, trauma, mistakes, and illness through belief in the redemptive, healing power of faith in God.

The cinema segment of the *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* franchise began in 2004 with a film championing the same name of the many books and sermons promoted by Jakes. The film was one of the first in a collection of black religiously-inspired films released during the period, which included *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Darren Grant, 2005), *The Gospel* (Rob Hardy, 2005), and *Not Easily Broken* (Bill Duke, 2009). These films spoke to an audience that was largely comprised of black, churchgoing women who had been largely underserved in mainstream media.[180] Directed by Neema Barnette, *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* is the second installment of the franchise's filmic element. The story follows two upper-middle-class black professionals, Kari (Sharon Leal) and David Ames (Blair Underwood), whose seemingly perfect lives are turned upside down when their six-year-old daughter Mikayla (Zoe Carter) is abducted and their personal secrets begin to unfold. They have six days to find a serial killer, whom they believe to be the kidnapper, before Mikayla is killed; and as their secrets are uncovered, Kari and David's relationship and faith are challenged. Echoing Jakes's perspective on weaving entertainment and spirituality in cinematic storytelling, the film's abduction plot is used primarily to underscore the use of thriller-suspense genre conventions while the theme of finding spiritual and emotional freedom through forgiveness and faith is carried through the relationship line of the narrative. Additionally, while this story is not a sequel to the first film, it similarly foregrounds the central conflict arising from the protagonist's traumatic past as a victim of incestuous rape as a child at the same time that it capitalizes on Jakes's celebrity and preaching virtuosity to propel its spiritual message of uprooting bitterness through forgiveness. Through the gospel lens, my reading of black Christianity in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* focuses on these central elements of the film's black cinematic sermon—Kari's story as a parable and T.D. Jakes as the mouthpiece of the religious message.

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[177] Luke 13:12 King James Version

[178] Luke 13:11 King James Version

[179] T.D. Jakes, "T.D. Jakes October 11, 1995 – CBN.com," The 700 Club, Posted March 10, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNuZHMR0lFg.

[180] Jacqueline Coley, "Tyler Perry: Can Black Audiences Celebrate His Success Without Enjoying His Movies?," *Indiewire*, March 29, 2018, https://www.indiewire.com/2018/03/tyler-perry-acrimony-taraji-p-henson-black-movies-1201944825/; Mary Claire Kendall, "T. D. Jakes Builds Bridges in Hollywood, Back to the Future," *Forbes*, July 27, 2013, https://www.forbes.com/sites/maryclairekendall/2013/07/27/t-d-jakes-builds-bridges-in-hollywood-back-to-the-future/?sh=1bf8845128db. In an article in Indiewire, Jacqueline Coley asserts that Tyler

The Parable of Kari, Bishop Jakes & Uprooting Bitterness

As a pedagogical technique essential to Christian teachings, the parable of Kari lies at the core of the faith-based messaging in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day*. Her story of surviving childhood sexual abuse and attempting to bury her traumatic past under the façade of her upper-middle-class, domestic lifestyle provides the parable upon which the cinematic sermon

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Perry's success is largely due to his appeal to this underserved audience. Other filmmakers have likewise commented on this gap in mainstream commercial media.

is based. Essentially, the parable of Kari is the narrative thread that connects the film's plot with the overarching evangelical message. Kari's character arc follows her journey of faith from avoiding her past to finding freedom through forgiveness and faith in God.

Kari is the embodiment of the "Woman" in Jake's *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* series. She is a woman plagued by the past that she tried to keep hidden from her family and friends to shield herself from the effects of trauma and at the same time preserve her upper-middle-class, heteronormative, domestic lifestyle. She obscures the major details of her past, attempting to bury the traumas of being raped by her father as a child, forced into prostitution as a young adult, and addicted to drugs. Kari represents the imagined audience for the books and previous film in the *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* series. In an interview on the first *Woman Thou Art Loosed* (2004) film, Jakes explains,

> Michelle [the protagonist in *Woman Thou Art Loosed*] is a composite character of all the women that I have counseled throughout the 28 years that I have been in pastoral counseling. And I turned it into a book because I think that somewhere in her story there's a little to take for everybody. I turned it into a book because most of the women who talked to me don't have the platform to have their story told. I brought Michelle to screen to dedicate to the lives of all those women who have endeared [*sic*] hardship.[181]

While Tamura Lomax asserts that the "Woman" in *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* is largely "a piece of merchandise, a material and symbolic concept" for Jakes's entrepreneurial enterprise, she also takes note of the thousands of women watching the films, reading the books, and attending the conferences who feel empowered from the idea of "loosing" as freedom from bondage and abuses that have especially affected women.[182] These are the women with whom the character is meant to speak. Like the main character from the original *Woman Thou Art Loosed* film, Kari is a stand-in character signifying the "Woman" who has not yet been "loosed." In this metaphor, the Woman needs healing from the past traumas and abuses that still haunt her present.

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[181] Tonisha Johnson, "Woman Thou Art Loosed: An Interview with Bishop T.D. Jakes," blackfilm.com, October 2004, https://blackfilm.com/20041001/features/tdjakes.shtml.

In light of this, the opening sequence of *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* is particularly important as it establishes Kari as the central protagonist and embodied Woman of the film's title. It introduces the audience to Kari's "picture-perfect" family in order to challenge their image of flawlessness and set up the central conflict of the filmic parable as a matter of Kari's mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Further, as she testifies of her experiences, she places into a rhetorically religious context the feelings of depression and despair that permeate other similar moments for her character throughout the film. In this analysis, I focus on this opening scene as a representative sample of her story on wrestling with faith in God. In order to read the black cinematic sermon presented in this film, one must recognize these elements as essential components of parabolic storytelling—introducing the main character, establishing the central conflict, and setting up the context for the story's faith-based resolution.

In the opening, we see Kari in close up as she speaks to someone offscreen. Although it is revealed later in the film that Kari is speaking to her church pastor T.D. Jakes, in this moment Kari is the center of attention as she begins to tell her story. She begins:

> You know, they say that God created the world in six days. On the first day there was light. But there was no light. . . . There was no heaven on earth that I could see. There was no Garden of Eden that I lived in. . . . There wasn't even earth under my feet that I could feel. I mean nothing. I felt nothing.

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[182] Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion & Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 131.

Within the larger story, this scene is a moment from the counseling session in which Kari reveals her anxieties and frustrations regarding the events that will unfold in the film—her daughter's abduction, sexual harassment, her husband's infidelity, and her own distressing secrets. These fragmented moments from her counseling session are used as a framing device for the narrative through which she testifies of her challenges and triumphs through faith. The language that she uses to animate her story fits within the discursive framework of Christianity as she uses the Bible's six-day creation story to express the interwoven relationship between her anxieties, traumas, and faith. Through this, she establishes the central conflict of her story as one that is an internal struggle.

Kari specifically uses the Garden of Eden rhetorically as a point of reference by which to juxtapose her own life's circumstances. To understand this particular reference, one must recognize the biblical significance of the Garden of Eden as a symbol of earthly paradise before agony, sin, and death are introduced to humanity.[183] From the book of Genesis, this place of perfection parallels Kari's projected image of domestic bliss. As the film's trailer proclaims, "David and Kari had it all"[184] until their secrets are uncovered and it is revealed that their picture of perfection had been a façade. In the opening we see images of Kari with her husband and daughter intercut into the sequence. These familial moments include: Kari and David flirting while getting dressed in the morning; Kari helping Mikayla choose which brightly-colored dress she would wear; and finally the family getting into their Range Rover and leaving for Sunday morning church. These images, which showcase the family's affluence and joyful domesticity, are brightly lit, and they are placed in juxtaposition with the comparatively dark brown colors and harsh shadowing on the close up of Kari's face in her testimonial.

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[183] Lester R. Kurtz, "Freedom and Domination: The Garden of Eden and the Social Order," *Social Forces* 58, no. 2, (1979).

[184] Codeblack Movies, "Woman Thou Art Loosed: On the 7th Day – Official Movie Trailer," January 23, 2012, Video, 1:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISF2zO48hcQ.

As Kari speaks, the editing of the sequence fragments her face as the film cuts between tight close ups of her whole face and extreme close ups of her eyes and mouth. The fragmentation of her image visually illustrates the mystery and duplicity of her life as she proclaims, "Everyone that loved me I lied to, even myself." This visual sequence along with Kari's narration signals the burdensome split between her tumultuous past and present. Along with this, through biblical symbolism, Kari's testimony implies that the image of her ideal life—her Garden of Eden—was lacking heavenly perfection. Understood within a Pentecostal framework of conversion, this moment of dissection is essential to the process of personal salvation. As biblical references for this imperative, preachers frequently cite 1 John 1:9 or Romans 3:23 to profess that "all have sinned" and must confess to be forgiven.[185] In this narrative, however, religious concepts of sin and judgement are deemphasized in service of a story that focuses rather on the pain of guilt compounded with traumatic memory as the central concern underlying Kari's internal conflict. Ultimately, her testimony is about triumph over adversity and the faith necessary to bring her through strife.

For the purpose of the parable, we are introduced to Kari's vulnerabilities, frustrations, and anger as the beginning of her character's spiritual journey and the setup to the faith-based resolution. As detectives struggle to find her missing daughter and her interpersonal relationships deteriorate, Kari frequently expresses her fears and frustrations through language wrapped in theological implications. Her questions about God's omnipotence and judgment underlie the larger issue of theodicy (i.e. How can a good and all-powerful God allow the existence of evil?)

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[185] 1 John 1:9 King James Version; Romans 3:23 King James Version

as it pervades the film's story but is never explicitly addressed. For example, when David attempts to console her with the familiar sentiment "God works in mysterious ways," she responds emphatically with an indictment of his blind faith in God saying, "You better open your eyes. There's no reason for anything. God is like Mikayla's blankey, just because it made you feel safe doesn't mean it had any power." This moment represents the height of her anger and the low point of her religious faith. While in the final resolution Kari proclaims to find her faith again, these moments of vulnerability and losing control are essential to the black cinematic sermon as they provide parabolic points of reference primed for religious commentary.

After Kari begins drinking excessively shortly following this scene, she is urged to attend a meeting at the Survivor's Abuse Center where she meets with one of the counselors with whom she had worked years before. As the counselor tells Kari to remember that "God is here," Kari responds similarly to the previous scene, saying that she was "looking for a message—some kind of help, and nothing is there." In this instance, however, the counselor retorts with "God is here!" and encourages Kari to learn how to heal herself by forgiving her father.

Placing this dialogue scene in context with Jakes's teachings outside the film, the counselor's instruction for healing resonates with his assertion that there is power in forgiveness. In a blog post titled "The 4 Types of Forgiveness" appearing on Jakes's website, unforgiveness is compared to "drinking poison and expecting the other person to suffer."[186] In other words, he contends that to withhold forgiveness is to harm oneself. In this view, forgiveness is a personal responsibility, which has psychological, spiritual, and physical consequences. By referencing a blog from *Psychology Today* to support his classifications,[187] Jakes demonstrates the neo-

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[186] T.D. Jakes, "The 4 Types of Forgiveness," TD Jakes.com, 2021, https://www.tdjakes.com/posts/the-4-types-of-forgiveness.

[187] Karyn Hall, "Revenge: Will You Feel Better?," September 15, 2013, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/pieces-mind/201309/revenge-will-you-feel-better.

Pentecostal approach to explicitly blurring the lines between sacred and secular spaces in order to underscore pragmatic, faith-based instruction. In religious terms, practicing forgiveness resonates with what Jakes calls a faith-based process of "uprooting bitterness."

Presented in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* as the subject of a Sunday morning lesson, Jakes sermonizes the idea of the root of bitterness using the aesthetics of black preaching to animate the delivery of the message. In this scene, Jakes stands onstage wearing a dark-colored suit, holding his microphone and maroon sweat rag while preaching to hundreds of people in the predominantly black congregation. The close ups and medium close ups used in this scene resemble a televangelist broadcast aesthetic with similar compositional framing, which features the preacher in center focus with a choir and/or live-broadcast projection screens blurred in the background of the image. In this way, Jakes's physical and vocal presence fills the scene, showcasing his potency as a preacher and the magnitude of is ministerial superstardom. We enter the scene toward the latter half of the sermon as Jakes has already begun building to the climax and the energy in the room intensifies. The church is filled with congregants standing and responding to Jakes's sermon by lifting their hands, clapping, and shouting verbal exhortations. This moment exemplifies what Lee describes as Jakes's mesmerizing "performance art of preaching."[188] In the tradition of black preaching, the dynamism of Jakes's preaching style, as Lee describes, lies largely in his mastery of storytelling through vocality and intentional gesturing.[189] This style of performance contributes to the dialogical relationship between Jakes and the audience. This illustration reinforces his credibility as a character and spiritual leader as we witness what Walton observes is a necessary "seal of approval" from the congregation in the form of 'amen's, 'hallelujah's, and handwaves. In the context of black religious televangelism, these play an essential role in validating the religious potency of the sermon.[190] For this scene in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day*, the animated dialogue between Jakes and the congregation sets the stage for his message.

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[188] Shayne Lee, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 86.
[189] Ibid.

In his message, Jakes urges the members of the congregation to dig up the roots of bitterness that might hold them back from spiritual, emotional, psychological, and social stability and progress. He begins,

> The Bible talks about a thing called a root of bitterness. You may have cut down all of the leaves and all of the branches and the tree. And the trunk is gone. But my question to you is 'have you dug up that root of bitterness?' Because until you get rid of that root, you can't go to the next level.

In this statement, Jakes begins with reference to the Bible, implying that his reading of the root of bitterness is grounded in his personal knowledge of the material. For context, the scripture that Jakes references is Hebrews 12:15 which implores the reader to follow peace and holiness with everyone, "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you."[191] While the verse may be interpreted as instruction to fully embrace the fruits of the spirit mentioned in scripture such as love, joy, peace, and longsuffering, Jakes uses the metaphor of the root to illustrate the extent to which traumatic experiences may be physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally paralyzing. Notably, in his statement, Jakes does not cite any specific scripture. Rather, his reference to the Bible is primarily used to signal that the interpretation that follows is rooted in biblical text. In this practice, as Henry H. Mitchell explains, scriptural references and stories are used primarily for "preaching material, not systematic history."[192] The interpretation of the text is less about explanation and more about application. Jakes uses the root of bitterness as an analogy wherein picturing a tree with branches and leaves serves as an illustration of the psyche. In his analogy, the elements of the tree growing above ground are recognizable and more readily accessible for purging while the root, which is most often hidden below ground, is more difficult to access. Jakes uses the language of the verse from Hebrews, which may be unfamiliar to many, and interprets it through the familiar image of a tree in order to apply it to contemporary concerns.

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[190] Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 6.

[191] Hebrews 12:15 King James Version

In the context of the black cinematic sermon in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day*, this scene (and the few other scenes in which Jakes appears) must be read in relation to the parable—the protagonist's story—and the scenes of spiritual commentary that make up the black cinematic sermon. For example, as I examine the aesthetic and hermeneutic practices of Jakes's preaching on the root of bitterness, I read the scene thematically in connection with the advice on forgiveness given to Kari by the counselor at the Survivor's Abuse Center. Although Jakes's diegetic sermon does not explicitly mention forgiveness or trauma, the idea of the root of bitterness is embedded in the story. Kari has metaphorically cut down the branches and removed the trunk of the "bitterness" tree and created an immaculate picture of life for herself, but the root of bitterness remains buried beneath the surface as she hides her past abuses from her family and friends. Metaphorically, the abduction of her daughter is the storm that uncovered the root. Then, in the scene at the Survivor's Abuse Center, the counselor states explicitly that the pain and anger from the trauma that Kari has endured has continued to weigh heavily on her. This is the "root of bitterness" in the parable of Kari for which the counselor prescribes forgiveness as the antidote.

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[192] Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 138.

One of Jakes's sermons titled "Uproot It" from 2019 helps to make clear this connection in the film. In the sermon, Jakes reads Luke 17:3-6 as Jesus telling his disciples that repetitious forgiveness requires faith. He draws a link between the analogy of the "root" used in Hebrews 12:15 and Luke 17:3-6 to assert that the root of anger and unforgiveness is stifling, preventing people from "go[ing] to the next level" as he preaches in the film. In his "Uproot It" sermon, Jakes declares, "I have to forgive you so I can survive because if I hold that in I don't have room for creativity and power and life and joy and strength and deliverance. I have to let it go."[193] This statement also sheds light on the significance of Jakes's other "moment of commentary" in the film. In this scene, only Jakes's voice is heard as we see a montage of images depicting everyday people doing mundane activities. We see images of a man sitting on a porch grinning, a man drawing a picture while sitting in a park, a daughter sitting with her father, and homeless men sitting on the streets of New Orleans. This sequence, which marks the sixth day of Mikayla's abduction in the story, represents the sixth day on which God created man in the Bible's story of creation. While throughout the film each passing day opens with images of creation to echo the Bible story, this sequence is particularly potent as Jakes's narration draws specific attention to these images and grounds his message of divine purpose in the ordinariness of life. We hear Jakes's voice preach:

> In the beginning, God created man from the very dust of the earth. He breathed into him the breath of life. And he became a living nephesh, a living soul. God breathed into him his destiny. He breathed into him his purpose. He breathed into him goals and concepts and creativity. Whether you know it or not all of that is down inside of you.

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[193] T.D. Jakes, "Uproot It – Bishop T.D. Jakes [October 20, 2019]," October 20, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhzVipHrCew.

With each of the images of mundane activities and everyday people, the film insists on broadening the title's primary focus on the "Woman" of the series. The use of images predominantly featuring black men signify this reframing wherein Kari is shown in this montage as just one person within a larger community of people. The living souls captured through these images breathe the "breath of life"—the potential and purpose of divine intentionality. They embody the creativity, power, and life that Jakes argues is restrained by the root of bitterness. The breath of life in black Pentecostalism, as Ashon T. Crawley argues, is the "breath of divinity—working in the flesh" and shared through aestheticizing the process of inhaling and exhaling.[194] In the context of a history in which violence has engulfed black communities, breathing in black Pentecostal worship importantly underlies the expression of life, spirit, and power. In this tradition, the expression of Holy Spirit possession and empowerment is demonstrated through the staggered breath of the preacher, speaking in tongues, or belting out a gospel song. In line with this, Jakes accentuates the "breath of life" in his delivery of this narration as he slowly and deliberately breathes out his words. He especially accents his breath as he exhales the words 'life,' 'soul,' 'destiny,' and 'purpose' through which he places particular emphasis on the potentialities of living wrapped in reference to the Christian story of creation.

In addition to pronouncing divine purpose in the everyday lives of the broader community, Jakes's indirect commentary in this scene places the issue of forgiveness and uprooting bitterness in context of Kari's faith and future. After Kari has written a letter to her father and placed it on his grave, Jakes reassures her that she has "done the hard part"—forgiving her father, forgiving herself, and getting her daughter back. While typically Christian discourses tend to focus on forgiveness from God through which redemptive power flows from the deity to the parishioners, Jakes places more emphasis on the agency of the individual and the spiritual power of forgiveness on an inter- and intra-personal level of human interaction. In his neo-Pentecostal approach, he deemphasizes legalistic teachings on judgement and sin that pervade classic Pentecostalism, which would have explicitly condemned Kari's involvement in prostitution and illegal drugs. Instead, the core message that Jakes espouses is that there is healing power in faith and forgiveness. The black cinematic sermon in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day* proffers this message of faith and forgiveness through Kari's parabolic story and T.D. Jakes's voice as a counselor and preacher.

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[194] Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 39.

Conclusion

The history of religious film in the U.S. is marked by evangelical drives to share the message of the gospel of Jesus. This message is signified through film in a variety of ways based on theological orientations, denominational practices, and religious movements, which have marked transdenominational shifts in the largely technologically-mediated contemporary religious landscape of Christianity. This landscape provides discursive contours for reading black religious film, featuring the black cinematic sermon, through the gospel lens. In this chapter, my application of the gospel lens focuses on the black cinematic sermon as illustrated through the parable of Kari and commentated by Bishop T.D. Jakes in *Woman Thou Art Loosed on the 7th Day*. Through this lens, I read Kari's story as an allegorical reference through which the religious message of faith and forgiveness is sermonized in context with contemporary discourses of black evangelical neo-Pentecostalism espoused by T.D. Jakes. Broadly, using the gospel lens enables scholars to read representations of black Christianity in film through informed interpretation based on the film's religiously-infused terms of representation.

While this chapter focuses on the use of black Christianity in African American cinema as an affirmation of religious salvation through the gospel lens, the next chapter focuses on reading representations of black Christianity through the critical lens. As theologian Tamura Lomax asserts, the black sermon may paradoxically be simultaneously "tinged with liberatory aims that make use of oppressive strategies."[195] The personal salvation and conversion narratives posited as liberatory in religious discourses of Christianity, as discussed in this chapter, have frequently been challenged through criticisms of institutional, religious, and theological shortcomings of black Christianity and the black church particularly for African American communities. Thus, the gospel and critical lenses are dialectical. Whereas the gospel lens may highlight a liberatory religious message of the "good news" of Christianity, the critical lens highlights the criticisms leveled against the traditional black church and black Christianity as essential to reading representations of black Christianity in African American cinema.

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[195] Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 53.

Chapter 3

Church Makes Me Sick:

Reading Black Masculinity in Burning Cane through the Critical Lens

In her 2018 essay on the black church, activist and scholar Roni Dean-Burren declared, "Church makes me sick. Christians make me sick. . . . *We* make me sick. . . . Too many of us get up on too many Sundays to bemoan the mass exodus of people from the church, but do not ask the right questions about why they leave."[196] In her critique, Dean-Burren points to the larger trend of individuals, especially millennials, leaving the church for a variety of reasons including rejecting Christian religious rituals, exclusionary doctrines, as well as theological beliefs.[197] To address this within the church, Dean-Burren explains that the right questions regarding this exodus must concern issues of prison reform, LGBTQ rights, sexual health, and broadly, protecting black lives. She asserts that the traditional black church has the potential to be a productive force in the project of liberation but instead it has frequently taken the form of an "anti-liberation agent"[198] with conservative tendencies inhibiting it from realizing its message of salvation and freedom for the oppressed.

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[196] Roni Dean-Burren, "Church Makes Me Sick: How Black Christians are Stalling Black Liberation," Black Youth Project, January 2, 2018, http://blackyouthproject.com/church-makes-me-sick-how-black-christians-are-stalling-black-liberation/.

[197] Pew Research Center, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace," October 17, 2019 https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/; Courier Newsroom, "Jesus Take the Wheel, Why Millenials are Leaving Religion," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 5, 2020, https://newpittsburghcourier.com/2020/09/05/jesus-or-somebody-take-the-wheel-why-millennials-are-leaving-religion/.

[198] Roni Dean-Burren, "Church Makes Me Sick: How Black Christians are Stalling Black Liberation," Black Youth Project, January 2, 2018, http://blackyouthproject.com/church-makes-me-sick-how-black-christians-are-stalling-black-liberation/.

Dean-Burren's criticism of the black church is reminiscent of a long history of frustration with and criticism of the institution and religion. Based on this history, historian Mark L. Chapman argues that criticism is foundational to the tradition of African American religion. He asserts that "black people have always put Christianity on trial" as they wrestled with the contradictions of Christianity for African Americans—namely that the Bible was said to offer spiritual freedom while religiously justifying their oppression.[199] Concerning the relationship between Christianity, the black church, and liberation, this history is inscribed with critiques from a variety of believers and nonbelievers who have helped shape the relationship between the black church, black culture, and the black community in the U.S. Reading through the critical lens on black Christianity in African American cinema begins with a recognition of this tradition of critical reflection on the function of the black church and Christianity more broadly.

In this chapter, I focus on the critical lens, which is an approach to reading representations of black Christianity in African American film within the context of critical discourses on black Christianity and the black church. Reading through the critical lens enables scholars to examine depictions of black Christianity and the black church through their engagement with critical conversations on blackness and religion. In particular, the lens allows scholars to place these depictions in context with ideological histories critiquing religious discourses on the classification and subjugation of social groups especially based on such categories as class, race, gender, and sexuality.

Through the critical lens, I focus on the dissection of Abrahamic masculinity in *Burning Cane* (Philip Youmans, 2019), represented through the actions of its central characters—Daniel, Helen, and Rev. Tillman—as agents and victims of hegemonic masculinist ideologies. Through their interactions, the film interrogates religio-cultural mandates of the Abrahamic ideal, which problematically necessitates capitalist wealth and patriarchal power as measures of manhood. Using *Burning Cane* as a case study, I read the representation of black Christianity through the critical lens to highlight the film's interrogation of the black church as an institution perpetuating restrictive hegemonic ideals of black manhood to the detriment of the whole community. My reading through the critical lens in this chapter is especially informed by black feminist/womanist critiques of patriarchal structures and the black church that have entangled African American masculinity in a complex of religious-ideological precepts.

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[199] Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 3.

Contours of Critical Perspectives & The Critical Lens

Informed by the various critiques leveled against the black church and Christianity, the critical lens on black Christianity in African American cinema enables scholars to examine film through an engagement with discourses of religio-cultural challenges to and debates on black Christianity and the black church. This lens enables scholars to highlight depictions of black Christianity and the black church which challenge discourses, ideologies, theologies, and practices of the institution and its members. The subject of these critiques may include for instance the hypocrisy of individual Christians, the perceived infallibility of the preacher, or the power of the institution as an ultimate divinely-sanctioned authority. These types of challenges are a part of historical discourses and are pertinent to understanding the representation of the African American community and black Christianity in African American cinema.

The critical lens is especially useful for recognizing and analyzing what I call "critical moments" on black Christianity in black film. I use the term critical moment to refer to a particular scene or sequence in which characters voice critiques of the church, preacher, and/or

Christianity often through dialogue. In these scenes, characters may make brief statements on their religious beliefs, or they engage in extended conversation about such topics as theology, religion, and/or church politics. The recent film adaptation, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (George C. Wolfe, 2020), provides a pertinent example of this type of critical moment in which characters engage in an extensive dialogue on theodicy. In one scene, a group of black musicians rehearse in the basement of a recording studio, as one of the protagonists Levee Green (Chadwick Boseman) argues with another character about whether or not God intervenes in incidents of racial violence. He denounces Christianity and questions the other character's religion as he emphatically declares, "Jesus don't love you, nigga. Jesus hate your black ass." Then, the two characters begin to fight. In this dramatic moment, Levee's dialogue provides the primary point of reference for reading the scene through the critical lens as he voices his contempt for God and berates black Christians. (I read this scene through all of the lenses in the Conclusion to this dissertation.) In addition to dialogue, critical moments may also be read through interpretation of cinematic techniques particularly as they depict certain characters (i.e. preacher) or religious moments (i.e. shouting). The use of such techniques as canted angles, intercutting, or low-key lighting may be used to interrupt and defamiliarize moments of religious worship or draw attention to duplicitous characters. For example, the main antagonist in the film, *The Gospel* (Rob Hardy, 2005) is a black preacher who is emotionally abusive and conniving for the majority of the film. In several scenes, he is shown in low-key lighting with shadows obscuring part of his face as he mistreats his wife and becomes money-hungry. In this way, examining the visual as well as sound characteristics of a film is likewise useful for reading its representation of black Christianity through the critical lens.

Broadly, adopting the critical lens highlights the way that aesthetics and religious discourses of black Christianity are represented within a film's interrogation of Christianity and the black church. This interrogation is often centered on one of the most important figures in the black church—the preacher—whose depictions tend to embody many of the criticisms of the black church including judgmentalism, hypocrisy, otherworldliness, and deception. For instance, Judith Weisenfeld explains that Oscar Micheaux's critique of the traditional black church and religion frequently was founded upon his aversion to preachers who wrap their motives in religious rhetoric and use their platforms to deceive congregations.[200] His silent film depictions of crooked, money-hungry black preachers such as in *Body & Soul* (Oscar Micheaux, 1925) provide pertinent moments for examination through the critical lens on black Christianity in African American cinema. However, while in many cases the preacher as a central figure is the focus of critique, critical representations of black Christianity are not limited to this central character since the influence of the black church stretches beyond the words of a single (although important) individual and the walls of the church building.

Ultimately, through the critical lens, scholars examine the ways in which films use representations of black Christianity and the black church to offer criticism of the religious institution, theological perspective, historical legacy, and individual enactment of Christianity. In these ways, criticisms of black Christianity have been leveled against the actions of individual Christians as well as the ideological positionings of the religious institution. These are the types of critical moments brought into focus when reading through the critical lens.

The following section is meant to provide only a short introduction to a broad scope of the challenges leveled against Christianity and the black church in the U.S. Recognizing this history is central to using the critical lens to analyze representations of black Christianity in African American film. Critiques of black Christianity in black film are informed by the tradition of putting Christianity "on trial," importantly recognizing these criticisms as rooted within intracommunity conversations held by those who have embraced, adapted, and rejected the faith. The critical lens allows scholars to examine the film as an artifact engaging in these critical conversations within this history.

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[200] Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929-1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

Mapping Out Critical Perspectives

Throughout the history of black Christianity and the black church in the U.S., critical perspectives and debates on the value of Christianity and the church for individual salvation and community liberation have remained a part of its legacy. Criticisms of the black church have complexly engaged questions of faith, history, identity, politics, tradition, and community. As Barbara Dianne Savage describes, "[t]he criticisms often had shifting targets—sometimes the religious leadership, sometimes it was church members, sometimes the hypocrisy and racism of American Christianity, sometimes the conservatism and passivity of black Christianity."[201] In particular, these shifting targets have frequently been called out in order to dissect inadequacies in addressing the needs of the community, whether economic, social, political, or spiritual. Critics have critiqued such aspects as religious leaders, organizational practices, religious doctrine, and the Christian God as the problem at various times. Notably, one of the central questions underlying these critiques related to issues of race, integration, religious unity, and justice through historical and contemporary threads is stated plainly by Shirley A. Waters White: "if the church was the Black Christian's refuge from a hostile world, how then did he reconcile the concept of a benevolent God not only with his suffering, but with the horrors visited upon him by what should have been fellow Christians?"[202] This central question has bolstered theological and institutional challenges from both Christians and non-Christians alike, who have interrogated histories and traditions of Christianity and the church, especially regarding the interconnections between race and religion.

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[201] Barbara Dianne Savage, "W. E. B. Du Bois and 'The Negro Church,'" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568, no. 1 (2000): 246.

Broadly, these challenges have been based in several indictments including: denouncing Christianity as foundationally and irreconcilably the "white man's religion"; lambasting the black preacher as irresponsible, predatory, and money-hungry; condemning the failure of many black churches to consistently and actively address the spiritual *and* material needs of the black community; and, in conjunction with the third indictment, challenging the church's shortcomings in the project of liberating the black community while acknowledging the significance of such intersecting identities as race, gender, sexuality, age, and class in the lives of black people.[203] Underlying each of these criticisms is the question of the efficacy of Christianity and the black church to engage the social, political, economic, and spiritual particularities of African American life-worlds both inside and outside religiously affiliated circles. While in this chapter I address only broad strokes of these criticisms, it is important to recognize these as constituting a larger critical tradition that has consistently placed Christianity on trial.

Widely introduced during colonization and enslavement, the Christian religion was adopted, adapted, and resisted to varying degrees in the religious lives of African slaves as their own religious beliefs, traditional practices, and languages were intentionally scrubbed from collective cultural memory. Some slaves outright rejected Christianity and continued to practice their traditional religions while others adopted the religious practices that were thrust upon them by their white captors.[204] This history lies at the core of the characterization of Christianity as the "white man's religion." An idiom, often attributed to South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, provides a pointed example of this argument: "When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land." This quote on the role that Christian missions played in the theft of African land signifies more broadly the historical relationship between Christianity, European colonization, African enslavement, and white supremacist ideologies. As Kirsten T. Edwards notes, the inclusion of monotheist beliefs and justifications in the process of imperialism and enslavement "repackages colonization as a Divine purpose, a 'Manifest Destiny,' as opposed to simply political, economic, and social conquest."[205] In other words, European colonization and slavery took on the guise of religious salvation for the souls of African people that were deemed always already damned. This historically entangled relationship has provided the impetus for many to reevaluate and reject Christian religion and black church organization as useful for black community progress. Both historical and contemporary concerns about direct linkages between European Christian missions, imperialism, and the persistence of racist ideologies in the Christian church mark areas of concern for those working to eradicate those racist ideologies and create more equitable systems of society.

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[202] Shirley A. Waters White, "A Consideration of African-American Christianity as a Manifestation of Du Boisian Double-Consciousness," *Phylon* 51, no. 1, (2014): 33.

[203] Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1968); Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1996); Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Some critics of the "white man's religion," including researchers, theologians, and artists, explained their rejection of Christianity as a problem with the religion itself, which had been said to encourage African Americans to be nonaggressive, docile, and ultimately unproductive in the fight against racism. For example, in 1928, George Gordon, a black journalist, contended that he could not support a religion that "lays emphasis upon [a] future life to the neglect and detriment of [this] present life in a hard-fisted, uncompromising, cunning, and militant world."[206] In other words, hoping for a future of freedom in another world is worthless to the fight for freedom in this world where communities are in need of food, water, healthcare, protection from physical violence, and basic human rights. In this view, Christianity encourages individuals to pray for a better, more equitable future without addressing the immediate conditions of the community's suffering. Likewise, the leader of the Nation of Islam Elijah Muhammad, disparaged Christianity for perpetuating a "love thy enemy" ethos that underscored the perpetuation of black bondage during slavery and what he argued was an ineffective impulse to nonviolence during the civil rights movement.[207] Alternatively, Muhammad promoted following Islam as the black community's divine solution to Christianity, which he argued was fundamentally the source of black Americans' problems.[208]

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[204] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (1978; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[205] Kirsten T. Edwards, "Christianity as Anti-Colonial Resistance?: Womanist Theology, Black Liberation Theology, and The Black Church as Sites for Pedagogical Decolonization," *Souls* 15, no. 1-2 (2013): 151.

Religious humanist William R. Jones likewise rejected Christianity as a religion marred by what he calls "divine racism,"[209] which places God on the side of white racists. Centrally, if the God of Christianity is active in human history but could allow the suffering of black people for so long, then, Jones concludes, the question of divine racism must inevitably arise. Through his interrogation of black theological arguments and liberationist frameworks, Jones argues that the question 'Is God a white racist?' is central to every discussion of theology in relation to black suffering. [210] In addition to a study of history examining the social conditions of African-descended peoples throughout the diaspora since the coterminous arrival of European colonizers and Christian missionaries to Africa, Jones challenges assertions that the black church or black Christianity could be "*instruments of liberation.*"[211] Instead he argues that "black Christianity was a form of mis-religion that fulfilled a vital role in keeping blacks oppressed."[212] From this perspective, the church is not disregarded as an unimportant part of African American life but rather it is conceived as a principal agent of miseducation in the sense that Carter G. Woodson describes.[213] African American humanist and theologian Anthony B. Pinn furthers Jones's work by advancing a study of black theology through a perspective of African American nontheistic humanistic theology.[214] Through this approach, he takes seriously the historical use value of God for African American communities to reconcile their social, political, and economic conditions throughout modern history, but he offers the idea of God as one that must be steeply rooted in black humanity and their ways of organizing, navigating, and coping in this physical world rather than a transcendent spiritual world. These theological perspectives conceptualize the otherworldly Christian God as antithetical to the work of black liberation and challenge the black church's holistic potential for contribution to liberation struggle.

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[206] Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 232.

[207] Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

[208] Ibid.

[209] William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?: A Pre-Amble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

Other detractors from the black church have likewise frequently challenged the validity of Christian theological beliefs while recognizing the church's potential for social organizing and community empowerment from an institutional perspective. They not only work to expose the historical use of religious ideologies for justifying enslavement and racial subjugation as others have done, but they also more pointedly critique the failure of many churches to actively address the spiritual and material concerns of the black community. The criticism of the black church's insufficient actions in addressing the community's socioeconomic concerns is often directed toward the preacher as the designated leader of the organization and the reluctance of the many denominations and church leaders to join forces in service of socioeconomic and political uplift for the community. For example, criticizing the theological differences that often insurmountably divide black church congregations, Du Bois poignantly demanded, "What difference does it make whether the whale swallowed Jonah or Jonah swallowed the whale, as long as Justice, Mercy and Peace prevail?"[215] This question is less about biblical stories or denominational particularities and more about overcoming what he sees as miniscule disagreements to unite for a larger social purpose. The critique illustrates the point several other critical thinkers including Woodson and Raphael G. Warnock have also made in their criticisms of the church. In their view, the black church had the potential to be a powerful organization for social change but its dogmatic theological disagreements have prevented its unification and, most importantly, its collaboration in the fight against oppression.[216]

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[210] Ibid.

[211] Ibid., xv.

[212] Ibid.

[213] Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, ed. Itibari M. Zulu (1933; reis., *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2009), http://www.jpanafrican.org/ebooks/3.4eBookThe%20Mis-Education.pdf.

[214] Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

In addition to these criticisms, others have critiqued the shortcomings of the church while maintaining some affiliation with Christianity or the black church and offering correctives to the church's deficiencies. In line with Dean-Burren's concise articulation of what "makes [her] sick" about the black church, Chapman describes the practice of critique as central to African American religious tradition. He argues, "Self-critique is a biblical mandate and an important part of the African-American theological tradition. Dialogue in the churches must be seen as an act of worship, just like preaching, singing, and praying."[217] His statement speaks to a history of self-critique and self-awareness in African American religious traditions. In particular, the idea of theological double-consciousness that Jonathan Walton articulates has been central to self-reflexivity in black Christianity as the black church has consistently had to wrestle with affirming notions of black equality for all in the kingdom of God while white supremacist notions and racism continue to pervade religious organizations and ideologies.[218] Chapman maps this history of reflexivity identifying key arguments in historical and theological debates on Christianity and black power from the critical perspectives of black clergy actively redefining the Christian message for the liberation of the black community. He draws a distinction between pre- and post-black power criticisms of Christianity using the 1960s as an historical marker of change. He identifies pre-black power theologians, such as Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, and Martin Luther King, Jr as primarily charging white clergy and American Christianity for failing to act in pursuit of social justice, which they identified as a central tenet of Christian teachings.[219] These theologians exemplify historical challenges to racism, white supremacy, and political inaction in the church while maintaining faith in the universality of biblical teachings in their appeal to an integrationist moral consciousness.

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[215] Barbara Dianne Savage, "W. E. B. Du Bois and 'The Negro Church,'" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568, no. 1 (2000): 242.

[216] Carter G. Woodson, *History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921), https://archive.org/details/thehistoryofthen38963gut.; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Conversely, Chapman identifies post-black power theologians, such as James Cone, Albert Cleage, and Henry McNeal Turner, as Christian black nationalists who likewise condemned white supremacist ideologies and political apathy in the church. However, rather than adhering to a conception of Christian universality and integration, they adhered to a fundamental reorganization and reinterpretation of Christian theology that posits God and Jesus Christ as on the side of the oppressed because they themselves are (ontologically) black.[220] Black theology characterizes the Christian God as necessarily a God of the Oppressed, whose character aligns with the gospel of liberation for the most vulnerable in society. In particular, Cone, the father of black theology, describes the foundational function of black theology as "to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed black people so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression. This means that it is a theology of and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community."[221] In his critique of Eurocentric theologies and white supremacist practices, Cone reframes Christianity and the theology of Jesus to place the oppressed conditions of black people at the center of concern. (The implications of black theology for the political lens are addressed in Chapter 4.)

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[217] Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 11.

[218] Jonathan Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[219] Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

Black feminist and womanist theology intervenes in these conversations on black theology to challenge the male-centered discourse permeating these conversations while continuing the project of challenging Eurocentrism. The naming of womanist theology, in particular, is drawn from Alice Walker's articulation of womanism in her seminal text, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.[222] She posits womanism as a corrective to challenge feminism's tendency to focus primarily on white women's lives, to the exclusion of women of color, and to confront the invisibility of black women's experiences in the struggle for black community liberation. Walker offers a definition of a “womanist” that is often summed up with this statement: “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.”[223] Centrally, a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color “[c]omitted to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female,”[224] as it centers women who love other women (“and sometimes individual men”[225]) sexually and/or nonsexually. In line with black theology’s assertion that to free the most oppressed groups in society from their chains is to free the whole society from its chains, womanist theology posits the importance of simultaneously challenging dominant white supremacist, patriarchal, classist, sexist, and heterosexist social and religious structures.

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[220] Ibid.

[221] James H. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 23.

[222] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1984), https://archive.org/details/insearchofourmot00walk_0/page/n11/mode/2up.

Black feminist/womanist theology primarily centers the stories and voices of black women and girls to makes space for their perceptions of God as relevant for their particular lives and experiences. By doing so, it promotes the salvation of the whole community by attempting to address the plight of “the least of these.”[226] It centers black women as essential actors in the church and challenges the patriarchal structures that would marginalize and oppress them within this space and the broader community. Brittney Cooper states that “[her] black feminist theology is not just focused on what happens in the church, but rather is a call to those of us who are Black feminists to remember that lots of Black women are still quite religious. We need a way to reconcile our feminist politics and our spiritual lives, not only at church or mosque, but at the office, too.”[227] Broadly, black feminist and womanist scholars and theologians including Cooper, Kelly Brown Douglas, Emilie Townes, Tamura Lomax, Melissa Harris-Perry, Katie Cannon, Stephanie Mitchem, and Jacquelyn Grant illuminate the need to address the marginalization of black women and significance of intersectional oppressions in the divine task of liberation. In particular, Grant insists, "The failure of the Black church and Black theology to proclaim explicitly the liberation of Black women indicates that they cannot claim to be agents of divine liberation."[228] In this endeavor, bell hooks also questions the possibility of LGBTQ liberation within the traditionally conservative space of the black church[229] while, by contrast, such scholars as Ashon T. Crawley and Michael Eric Dyson characterize embodied worship in especially black Pentecostal practices as fostering a connection between the freedom of the soul and the expressive movement of the queer black body.[230] In this vein, black theologies have the potential to explicitly integrate the concerns of intersectional oppressions within its liberationist framework in order to fulfill its proclamation of the gospel of liberation. Further, working in tandem with black theology, womanist theology challenges historical narratives centered on black men as patriarchal saviors of the race with marginal regard for longstanding traditions of black women at the center of the struggle.

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[223] Ibid., xii.
[224] Ibid., xi, emphasis in original.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Matthew 25:40 King James Version
[227] Brittney Cooper, *Eloquent Rage* (New York: Martin’s Press, 2018), 189-190.

For this chapter, I draw on black feminist/womanist critique of patriarchal structures to analyze the religiously-infused hegemonic prescription of Abrahamic masculinity as it is represented in *Burning Cane*. Recognizing the entanglement of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal structures and religious discourses provides a foundation for examining gender through a particular set of power relations propagated through the church. Before delving into my reading of *Burning Cane* through the critical lens, I discuss more specifically the scripted parameters of black masculinity as related to the notion of Abrahamic masculinity.

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[228] Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," in *Black Studies Readers*, eds. Jacquelyn Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel (New York: Routledge, 2005), 427.

[229] bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[230] Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); Michael Eric Dyson, "When You Divide Body and Soul, Problems Multiply: The Black Church and Sex" in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* eds. Rudolph P. Byrd & Beverly Guy-Sheftall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

Scripting Black Masculinity in America

Over a century ago, W. E. B. Du Bois posed a question which he suggested was a central question of black existence in a white-dominated world: “How does it feel to be a problem?”[231] This question still resonates with the contemporary world as it speaks to the sociohistorical conditions under which the African American community has formed in its struggle for self-determination and liberation. Within this struggle, stereotypes and prescriptions of black masculinity have been molded. Broadly, black men have been cast on one hand as savage, hypersexualized brutes and on the other hand as desexed, pious, and mystical servants. Both of these broad classifications of black manhood dismiss the heterogeneity and nuances of black masculinity in service of stereotypes used to subordinate black manhood to white hegemony. As many feminist and womanist scholars have argued, intersecting anxieties around attempting to conform to (or challenge) expectations of gender performance are compounded when considering the integration of race, gender, class, religion, sexuality, nationality, and other variables. Further, in the sense of gender performativity that Judith Butler describes, gendered repetition and ritual are essential to achieving the effects of performativity “through its naturalization in the context of the body” and, especially, in the particularities of it cultural contexts.[232] In this way, gendered performance and racialized representations within the realm of cultural expectations is rooted in imitation and duplication but muddled within a white supremacist dominant society, which has scripted black men as dangerous thugs and criminals, for example.

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[231] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7.

[232] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2007), xv.

For black men in the U.S., recognizing the historical relationship between hegemonic white masculine discourse, gender roles propagated through the black church, and the construction of black masculinity is essential to understanding the intersecting anxieties surrounding this interplay of race, gender, and religion. As Stacy C. Boyd notes, “By equating whiteness with superior masculinity and disseminating these notions as natural and pure, dominant groups therefore represented black men as being outside the realm of normative masculinity.”[233] In this view, hegemonic masculinity in America places white, cisgender, heterosexual men “naturally” in the dominant hierarchal position regarding race, gender, and sexuality while all others are subjugated underneath. Further, with valuations on good/bad and civilized/savage religion contributing to the interconnections of these classifications, white hegemonic masculinity justified through religious discourses, namely Christianity, is sanctioned as the divine standard which, as Richard Dyer notes, is impossible to achieve.[234] These are the standards by which all other performances of masculinity and manhood are judged within a western social context.

Religion and cultural theorist Ronald Neal furthers this discussion on standards of masculinity to describe a particular model, which he refers to as “Abrahamic masculinity.”[235] Abrahamic masculinity is a particular performance of masculinity sanctioned by the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, also known as Abrahamic religions. Abrahamic masculinity, based on the story of Abraham found in the Hebrew Bible, hinges on the assertion of a “benevolent yet abusive hierarchical paternalism” that is divinely ordained.[236] In this model, Abrahamic manhood is the ideal. Neal describes Abraham in this way:

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[233] Stacy C. Boyd, *Black Men Worshipping: Intersection Anxieties of Race, Gender, and Christian Embodiment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 5.

[234] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[235] Ronald Neal, “Engaging Abrahamic Masculinity: Race, Religion, and the Measure of Manhood,” *CrossCurrents* 61, no 4 (2011).

> He is a property owner who possesses land and slaves; he is a husband and father whose relations with women and children are paternalistic and benevolent. Surrounded by slaves, a subordinate wife and subordinate male relatives, Abraham displays an exalted level of masculinity and social status that is legitimated and ordained by God, the ultimate dominant character in the text. Through Abraham, a tradition of patriarchy is established and continued through his male progeny. Ultimately, this Abrahamic masculinity will develop, expand, and lead to an empire that entails a succession of kings, whose powers and authority are legitimated on theological grounds. Empire is the ultimate end of Abrahamic masculinity.[237]

This model of masculinity is defined by socioeconomic wealth, patriarchal family relationships, and empire-building predicated on religious directive and social elevation. The Abrahamic position of power is absolute, having dominance over women, children, and other men who have not ascended to his social position. In this model, each of these components is essential to realizing “real” manhood, and to lack in any of these areas—wealth, social status, and divinely-ordained patriarchal power—is to be perceived as lacking in masculinity. Neal uses Abrahamic masculinity to theorize historical frameworks of masculinity in which white domination and black subjugation are constructed through a matrix of relationships based on discourses of race, gender, class, religion, and sexuality.[238] In particular, as bell hooks asserts, narratives of racial uplift, echoing paradigms of white patriarchy, have frequently posited that the key to the redemption of the black community is the reclamation of patriarchal black manhood in order to create a society in which black men assume the stereotypical role of provider and head of household within a traditional nuclear family.[239] Neal asserts that within the context of the U.S., especially the South, Abrahamic masculinity has been intricately tied with standards of white masculinity as occupying a hegemonic patriarchal space.[240] This ideological history provides the basis and context through which contemporary black masculinity is understood in relation to racializing, gendering, performance, and social power.

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[236] Ronald Neal, “Race, Class, and the Traumatic Legacy of Southern Masculinity,” in *Trauma and Resilience in American Indian and African American Southern History*, eds. Anthony S. Parent Jr. and Ulrike Wiethaus (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 243.

[237] Ronald Neal, “Engaging Abrahamic Masculinity: Race, Religion, and the Measure of Manhood,” *CrossCurrents* 61, no 4 (2011): 559.

While black masculinity is not monolithic, bell hooks explains that the white supremacist, patriarchal politics of slavery have had a lasting impression on societal definitions of black manhood.[241] For African American men subscribing to standards of Abrahamic masculinity, structural constraints and a history of systematic racism in the U.S. have hindered the majority of black men from meeting these standards for better or worse. Particularly, unequal distributions of wealth, disparities in education opportunities, and unemployment across various racial groups in the U.S. make realizing the standards of Abrahamic masculinity impossible. As hooks observes, "Patriarchal socialization says you are responsible if you get a job, bring your wages home, and provide for your family's material well-being. . . . Many black males accept this definition of responsible manhood and spend their lives feeling like a failure, feeling as though their self-esteem is assaulted and assailed on all sides, because they cannot acquire the means to fulfill this role."[242] In this way, subscribing to the patriarchal ideals of Abrahamic masculinity is detrimental not only to interpersonal and communal relationships but also to the psyche of the individual.

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[238] Ronald Neal, "Race, Class, and the Traumatic Legacy of Southern Masculinity," in *Trauma and Resilience in American Indian and African American Southern History*, eds. Anthony S. Parent Jr. and Ulrike Wiethaus (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

[239] bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[240] Ronald Neal, "Race, Class, and the Traumatic Legacy of Southern Masculinity," in *Trauma and Resilience in American Indian and African American Southern History*, eds. Anthony S. Parent Jr. and Ulrike Wiethaus (New York: Peter Lang, 2013).

[241] bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

The ideological pervasiveness of Abrahamic masculinity coupled with social stereotypes of emasculating black women, absent men, and intergenerational pathology legitimated by such sociology reports as the infamous "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action" by Daniel Moynihan[243] have bolstered the view that racial progress and black liberation lie in the hands of patriarchal black men who simply need to take their authoritative place. As examples of this perceived need to reclaim a black patriarchy to save the black community, Boyd points to such events as the Million Man March, organized by Louis Farrakhan, and the ManPower conferences, organized by T.D. Jakes and attended by thousands of African American men, as demonstrations of a contemporary crisis in masculinity embodied in attempts to reclaim the black man's role as the head of the household and black community.[244] In these assertions, fulfilling the patriarchal standards of masculinity is placed at the center of the drive for African American community progress. This also echoes what Neal refers to as "guardian masculinity," which is an ethic of the strong black man who is charged with the protection, uplift, and salvation of the black community.[245] This male-centered approach, however, unduly places the burden of black bondage or freedom primarily on the shoulders of black men while also marginalizing the essential work done by black women in the struggle for black liberation throughout American history.

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[242] Ibid., 80.

[243] Daniel Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action," Office of Policy Planning and Research, United States Department of Labor, March 1965, https://web.stanford.edu/~mrosenfe/Moynihan%27s%20The%20Negro%20Family.pdf.

[244] Stacy C. Boyd, *Black Men Worshipping: Intersection Anxieties of Race, Gender, and Christian Embodiment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[245] Ronald Neal, "Spike Lee Can Go Straight to Hell! The Cinematic and Religious Masculinity of Tyler Perry," *Black Theology* 14, no. 2 (2016).

Several scholars have offered challenges and solutions to patriarchal prescriptions of black masculinity, which could break the yoke of black patriarchy for men and woman throughout the black community. hooks posits the acknowledgement of individual black men who have subverted notions of black patriarchal rule in their own lives as a critical intervention to black men's entanglement in racist, sexist, homophobic politics.[246] She suggests that "we can break the life threatening choke-hold patriarchal masculinity imposes on black men and create life sustaining visions of a reconstructed black masculinity that can provide black men ways to save their lives and the lives of their brothers and sisters in the struggle."[247] Additionally, black feminist/womanist scholar Gary L. Lemons contends that womanism could be a "liberatory location for remaking black manhood toward a male identity that transgresses the boundaries of patriarchy—freeing us from the oppressive racist/sexist, sexually 'othered' space we occupied in the past."[248] Neal suggests what he calls "Masculinist Work" which would challenge the patriarchal ideals of Abrahamic masculinity and come alongside feminist and womanist projects to lift the burden of black patriarchy and help to further the work of racial progress.[249] Each of these promote the possibility of reformulating dominant perceptions of black masculinity—tackling issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality simultaneously—as a way to contribute to the advancement of liberation for the entire black community.

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[246] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1981). See esp. chapter on "Reconstructing Black Masculinity."

[247] bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), xii.

[248] Gary L. Lemons, "To be Black, Male, and "Feminist"—Making Womanist Space for Black Men," in *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 17 no. 1/2 (1997): 35.

[249] Ronald Neal, "Engaging Abrahamic Masculinity: Race, Religion, and the Measure of Manhood," *CrossCurrents* 61, no 4 (2011): 559.

Since the reinforcement of Abrahamic masculinist ideals are perpetuated within the black church as well as outside of it, this work of reconstruction must play out in and outside the black church as an institution which has had social, cultural, and ideological influence in the black community. These prescriptions of black masculinity assessed through the restrictive standards of the Abrahamic ideal inform my reading of *Burning Cane* through the critical lens. The challenge to Abrahamic masculinity as a restrictive paradigm is central to the religiously-infused performance and policing of black masculinity in the film.

Through the Critical Lens: Reading Abrahamic Masculinity in *Burning Cane*

As demonstrated by the range of criticisms leveled against the black church and Christianity from within African American communities and discourses, the relationship between politics of race, gender, class, sexuality have frequently been a part of conversations surrounding the social and cultural organization of the African American community and religious institutions. Contemporary African American cinema such as *Da 5 Bloods* (Spike Lee, 2020), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (Barry Jenkins, 2018), *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016), *Fences* (Denzel Washington, 2016), *Straight Outta Compton* (F. Gary Gray, 2015), and *Not Easily Broken* (Bill Duke, 2009) have explicitly interrogated perceptions of black masculinity and manhood with and without explicit consideration of the ways that Abrahamic religious ideals impact the patriarchal standards by which black men and boys are measured. By contrast, *Burning Cane* (2019) draws direct attention to the relationship between race, gender, class, and religion in understanding intergenerational forms of toxic black masculinity bound by white supremacist histories and restrictive patriarchal mandates propagated through the church.

Burning Cane (2019) was written and directed by Phillip Youmans, who was nineteen years old at the time of its release. Set in a rural town in southeastern Louisiana, *Burning Cane* follows the story of Helen Wayne (Karen Kaia Livers), her adult son Daniel (Dominique McClellan), and her pastor Joseph Tillman (Wendell Pierce), all attempting to navigate a particularly turbulent moment in their lives and wrestling with their religious convictions. The characters in the film are active members of the agricultural, working-class black community in this small southern town. Helen Wayne is a faithful churchgoing woman who has taken the responsibility to care for her son, grandson, pastor, and mange-ridden dog while dealing with her own health issues. Daniel Wayne is an unemployed alcoholic who spends his days taking care of his young son, Jeremiah (Braelyn Kelly), while attempting to deal with his own feelings of inadequacy and patterns of abuse. Reverend Joseph Tillman is the leader of a local black Baptist church, who throughout the film must deal with his own history of abuse, alcoholism, the recent death of his wife, and the decline of his church membership. *Burning Cane* interrogates black masculinity through these main characters, depicting the psychological, emotional, and physical turmoil produced under Abrahamic masculinist constraints that are not only restrictively damaging but also impossible to fulfill.

Through the critical lens, I focus first on the depiction of Rev. Tillman as a figure of the black church, a traditionally conservative religious institution insisting on the preservation of the Abrahamic masculinist mandate. I also focus on the depictions of Helen and Daniel as characters who are both agents and victims of this religiously-sanctioned patriarchal social system. While Rev. Tillman is a representative of the traditional institutionalization of the Abrahamic masculinist model, Helen and Daniel illustrate the pervasiveness of this model outside of the church walls. Considering these depictions together, my reading of this film through the critical lens focuses especially on the ways in which *Burning Cane* represents the performance and policing of Abrahamic masculinity as a critique of intertwining religious ideology with prescriptive notions of black masculinity and the social uplift of the community.

Performing & Policing (Black) Abrahamic Masculinity in Burning Cane

As the central figure of the church, Reverend Joseph Tillman (most often just referred to as “Pastor”) is the representative of the institution to which he has dedicated his life. He is a southern black pastor who authoritatively preaches to his congregation about what he sees as the spiritual concerns of the community by admonishing the Devil’s tricks, encouraging the congregation to “invest in love,” and warning of false doctrine. On Sundays there are some congregants in attendance to fill the pews but not to capacity. The influence that he presumably once had in the community has begun to wane.

In one scene while inebriated and speaking with two members of the church in his office, he reflects on the mass exodus that Dean-Burren characterizes in her article and laments about what he sees as the grim future of the church and community:

> Seems like we’re losing our futures to a generation of girly men who don’t know how to take care of their families, their businesses, their woman, or their church. . . . this church is dying off and ain’t nothing we can do about it. . . . These young people don’t believe a goddamn word I’m preaching up there on that stage and I know it. . . . I don’t blame the children. I blame y’all for telling them that they can wear dresses when they got a penis between their legs. I blame you for telling them they could do whatever that want to do when it’s God who tells us what we’re gonna do and ain’t nothing we can do about it.

In this statement, Rev. Tillman contemptuously blames the parents of the generation on the one hand and pejoratively lambasts nonheteronormative performances of masculinity on the other hand. His apparent disdain, especially for queer identities, echoes an ideology often propagated through the traditionally conservative black church. This ideology places high importance on hypermasculine performances of manhood while subjugating or dismissing all other gender performances as weak or ineffectual for the maintenance of the church, family, and community more broadly. This reflects a familiar sentiment voiced by megachurch minister Taffi Dollar who said, "if a man will step up and take his rightful position as the leader, then order can be established."[250] The "rightful position" to which she refers is the head of the nuclear family and the guardian of the community. In his work, Neal describes this insistence on guardian manhood as especially characteristic of prescriptions for southern black Christian manhood and classifies its "most aggressive purveyors" as black preachers.[251] Following this view, Rev. Tillman insists on the tenets of Abrahamic masculinity—entrepreneurialism, heterosexual marriage, and God-ordained patriarchy—as the structure by which the church and community must be sustained. However, reading the film through the critical lens, highlights the way in which his depiction in *Burning Cane* challenges the soundness of this framework as even he, the ambassador of this standard, is unable to carry the weight of its mandates.

Rev. Tillman's admonishment is especially ironic when one considers that he does not live up to the ideals of Abrahamic masculinity by which he judges the younger generation. As younger generations continue to move further away from institutional religion, his church likewise continues to lose members and money; his leadership power continues to diminish; and his ability to police matters within the community disappears. These, according to the Abrahamic standard, signal Rev. Tillman's own deficiencies in his performance of masculinity. His wife, toward whom he was abusive, has died; his church is dying; and there is no mention of him having any other family members or organizational leadership positions. If the church and community rely on his ability to be financially wealthy, socially dominant, and sustain patriarchal control, then his failure to maintain a vibrant church and leadership status in the community is linked to his inadequacy as a man.

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[250] Jonathan Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

[251] Ronald Neal, "Spike Lee Can Go Straight to Hell! The Cinematic and Religious Masculinity of Tyler Perry," *Black Theology* 14, no. 2 (2016): 141.

Additionally, reading Rev. Tillman's depiction through the critical lens, highlights his depiction through formal characteristics as critical commentary on the adverse effects of lacking in Abrahamic masculinity and the fallibility of the black preacher and by extension the black church. In particular, the film's introduction to Rev. Tillman showcases his instability and challenges the authoritative image that he projects. In this scene, we see Rev. Tillman standing at the pulpit listening to the organist play as he prepares to speak. The congregants and the choir, sitting behind him, respond as he begins to preach into the microphone. We see him in close up as he speaks while the handheld motion of the camera and slightly canted angles signify the destabilized image as a precursory illustration of his instability. As we hear, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul?" being preached from the pulpit, the film cuts between shots of his emboldened performance in church to shots of the pastor appearing lethargic while drinking from his flask and swerving his car as he drives down a long country road. In this sequence, his confident display of religious self-assuredness in church is juxtaposed with his typical condition of excessive intoxication and dejection outside the pulpit. The film humanizes Rev. Tillman as it also visually destabilizes the projected image of the orator, leader, and “boss” qualities of the black preacher that Du Bois describes.[252] If in Rev. Tillman’s assessment, the church, community, and manhood are inextricably linked, then this scene, which undermines the stability of the preacher and the church, likewise challenges the insistence on Abrahamic masculinity as a stable notion of manhood. This framework of religiously-sanctioned masculinity, which he promotes as the redemptive model for the community, is based in physically and psychologically injurious constraint, adversely affecting not only Rev. Tillman but also Daniel and Helen who have yielded to its parameters.

While Rev. Tillman’s depiction signifies the link between Abrahamic masculinity and its propagation through the traditional institution of the black church, *Burning Cane*’s depiction of Daniel and Helen signify the perpetuation of the Abrahamic ideal outside of the church walls as they are both victims and agents of this paradigm grounded in religion. Daniel is a working class African American man who is recently unemployed. He spends most of his time at home doing repairs and taking care of his young son, Jeremiah, while his wife Sherry (Emyri Crutchfield) works long hours. While he and Jeremiah are together, they dance to old records, color pages from a coloring book, watch TV, eat, and share sips of whiskey from his bottle. While problematic at times, Daniel is attentive to Jeremiah as they both seem content to simply share the same space although they say very few words to each other.

Daniel also spends significant time with his mother, Helen. They frequently sit together smoking, talking about her dog Jojo’s mange condition, and praying over the meal that they share. In their close mother-son relationship, Helen not only instructs Daniel in matters of religious practice, but she also instructs him in the performance of patriarchal manhood. In one scene, Helen calls Daniel to question him about the job from which he had recently been fired.

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[252] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Initially, Daniel lies saying that he had been working hard at his job. He says, "I think they're finally starting to appreciate the work that I been putting in. Might even be up for a promotion." Frustrated, Helen interrupts Daniel's story to admonish him not only for lying but also for "letting some girl take care of [him]." She harshly declares, "You're just like your pa, lying through your fucking teeth. You are a failure, as a son, as a man, and as a father." Then, Daniel stands silently holding the phone to his ear contemplating Helen's words. Notably, Daniel stands blurred in the background of the shot while Jeremiah is in focus in the foreground as he sits at the kitchen table. Jeremiah's position at the center of visual focus demonstrates that this conversation with Helen concerns both Daniel and Jeremiah who have been (or soon will be) trained in the principles of Abrahamic masculinity. This moment is also especially telling of Daniel's anxieties and the ways in which he perceives his manhood to be intricately tied with not only his status of employment but also his ability to receive promotions and accolades from others. These anxieties are further provoked as his mother challenges his performance of masculinity. bell hooks observes this pattern in black parenting where "[i]t is as if black parents, cross-class, believe they can write the wrongs of history by imposing onto black boys a more brutal indoctrination into patriarchal thinking."[253] For many, this belief is grounded in the idea that this indoctrination would rescue black men and the rest of the community from the ills of black pathology often blamed on the "emasculating" black woman. Through the frame of Abrahamic masculinity, this thinking is religiously legitimated as it is often said that men are supposed to be the head of the household while women are cast as the submissive "weaker vessel."

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[253] bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 83.

The notion of masculinity to which Daniel and Helen subscribe in this scene align with these fears and the standards of Abrahamic masculinity which classify social and financial ascendency as essential to "real" manhood. Without employment, the type of masculinity that this model stipulates moves even further out of reach for Daniel. In addition, since Daniel is failing as a father because of his inability to ascend in Helen's view, the consequence of this failure is the removal of his son—the progeny through whom his patriarchal lineage would presumably continue generationally in accordance with the Abrahamic model. Helen takes Jeremiah away to take care of him herself. The responsibility that Helen assumes for her son and grandson's condition is consistent with what James Baldwin describes as a "disease peculiar to the black community."[254] Taken from Andy Young's assessment of this disease which he called "sorriness," Baldwin describes the condition as one that is "transmitted by Mama, whose instinct—and it is not hard to see why—is to protect the Black male from the devastation that threatens him the moment he declares himself a man."[255] This devastation is marked by joblessness, excessive policing, a history of stereotyping and denigration, and physical, emotional, and psychological violence. Further, when wrapped in patriarchal religious discourse, this is the problem that Abrahamic masculinity is supposed to solve.

In Daniel's failed attempts to adhere to the Abrahamic standard, his environment becomes increasingly toxic for himself and those around him as he struggles with depression, alcoholism, and physical pain. Several times, he is shown vomiting in the toilet or lying unresponsive on the bed. However, at each point when Daniel is asked about his emotional, physical, and psychological state, his vague, often nonchalant response is simply "I'm alright" despite the pain he is experiencing. This is a part of what Richard Majors describes as the "cool pose" in his essay "Cool Pose: The Proud Signature of Black Survival." In this essay, he suggests that "[p]erhaps black men have become so conditioned to keeping up their guard against oppression from the dominant white society that this particular attitude and behavior represents for them their best safeguard against further mental or physical abuse."[256] While black women have likewise taken up cool, calm, and collected models of self-representation for better or worse, this type of "cool" attitude is characterized by a projected mode of fearlessness, suppressed emotionality, egocentrism, and invulnerability which has been associated with standards of enacting "real" black manhood. In their book-length study of the "cool pose," Majors and Janet Mancini Billson describe cool as a coping strategy, one that attempts to mask the struggles and pain of African American life.[257] The cool pose, which echoes the trope of the strong black man, invites some sense of control over one's self image, restricting access to one's own emotional and psychological inner lives while aware of the history of surveillance and violent control over black men's bodies by the dominant society. Daniel's repetitive assertion of "I'm alright" masks the physical and psychological tumult he faces. He attempts in these moments to maintain some sense of control over his own life and livelihood, but, damagingly, he refuses to admit that he needs help.

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[254] James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1985), 19.
[255] Ibid.

Placed in religious terms, Helen describes Daniel's anxieties, patterns of self-destruction, and abusive behavior as a matter of wrestling with the Devil. We hear Helen's voice as we see Jeremiah roam through the orange trees. In this scene, Jeremiah is again visually centered as the prospective heir to the anxieties of Abrahamic masculinity that his father has faced and the toxicity that his father has cultivated. Thus, the story that Helen tells is a warning not only for

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[256] Richard Majors, "Cool Pose: The Proud Signature of Black Survival," quoted in bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1981), 111.

[257] Richard Majors & Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (Lexington Books: New York, 1992).

Daniel who has already begun his struggle with the Devil but also for Jeremiah who, presumably, has not yet been captured by the Devil but who is likely to encounter him in the future once he declares himself a man. Whether carrying spiritual, symbolic, or metaphorical meaning, Helen describes Daniel's battle with the Devil as one that is futile. She says,

> [I]t's hard to dance with the Devil on your back. Every time you try to move your feet, nails as sharp as a cleaver cut deep into your flesh. When you got the Devil on your back, you ought to just stay still, let him do as he pleases 'cause once he's done, find a cleaver for your throat because the Lord has seen your treason.

Helen's description of this dance with the Devil is based in her belief in an overwhelming external power exerting pressure and inflicting pain on the individual. On the one hand, while one tries to "dance" (or navigate society and experience life), there are systems of control and oppression that attempt to restrict the bodies and minds of African Americans and seem almost impossible to avoid. These systems have used practices of lynching, enslavement, segregation, excessive policing, imprisonment, economic disempowerment, as well as limited education opportunities as tools to confine and control. On the other hand, the Devil in many Christian discourses is an invisible being, who is fundamentally evil, can possess bodies, and cause physical and psychological pain. The "dance" with this Devil is a process of wrestling with a supernatural, otherworldly evil rather than a particular social structure or governmental entity. In both of these ways, the "Devil" is often an intangible oppressive spiritual, psychological, or societal force whose work is the devastation of the individual and community. In Helen's description, the Devil is a torturous being, but he does not or cannot kill the person. Rather, suicidal death is enacted by the victim for fear of the Lord's wrath. The individual engaged in this dance wrestles with both internal and external forces, and the onus is upon the individual to fend off these powers.

While Helen sees the fight against the Devil as a futile effort, Rev. Tillman preaches the possibility of resisting through his sermonic warning about the Devil's tricks. In the sermon, he references 1 Peter 5:8 saying,

> They say he is our adversary. He is a roaring lion that walks amongst us seeking whom he may devour. His attacks are so heinous, so insidious, so malicious, so meticulously calculated that often we don't know that he done already come up on us. Without us even being aware, corrupted our children and taken they're life away right before our very eyes. . . . Wherever you go, he's right behind you and you got to say 'Devil!' Right to his face. . . . say 'Devil, you nor anyone else will ever pull me away from the power of the Lord.'

This statement implies agency for the individual in resisting the Devil through "the power of the Lord." Rev. Tillman implores the congregation to challenge the Devil "right to his face." In call-and-response fashion, he leads the congregation in a verbal affront to the Devil through which they collectively state their rejection. Despite Rev. Tillman pronouncing the possibility of resisting the Devil, Daniel continues to be depressed and out of work, Rev. Tillman continues to be despondent and drink excessively, and Helen's body continues to ache while she searches for solutions to her son's ailments. In particular, handheld shots of Rev. Tillman preaching his sermon on the Devil are intercut with images of Helen screaming at her unconscious son, desperately calling for him to wake up. These images are juxtaposed to showcase the stark differences between the evenly-lit scene of Rev. Tillman in church and the dark, shadowed image of Daniel lying outstretched and barely conscious on a bed. This juxtaposition challenges the efficacy of Rev. Tillman's affirmative message for fighting against the struggles that Daniel and Helen face. Thus, understood in light of the characters' circumstances, the affront to the Devil via religious confession fails to decrease their mental, emotional, and physical hardships. This religious confession also fails to place Daniel or Rev. Tillman in the ideal Abrahamic position of wealth and power to lift the material burdens of the rest of the community, which is the ideal outcome proposed through this model.

This reading echoes the critique of Christianity and the black church as ineffective or insufficient in addressing the material as well as spiritual needs of the black community. While Helen and Rev. Tillman's references to the Devil both characterize him as having "earthly" influence over individual's lives, neither of their warnings about the Devil speak explicitly to the white supremacist, capitalist systems under which black communities have existed. Thus, such critical thinkers as W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and James Cone have objected to the church's focus on needing to fight spiritual or otherworldly battles at the expense of protest and political action against agents and systems of oppression. In this vein, speaking against the Devil does not uplift the community unless that speech is followed by direct action. This criticism of prioritizing speaking or praying instead of engaging in direct action is applicable not only to the religious institution but also to the film's final resolution, which can be read as a corrective and critique of the toxicity produced under the weight of Daniel's anxieties and failed performance of Abrahamic masculinity.

During the latter half of the film, Daniel becomes physically abusive toward his wife Sherry. The particular incident of domestic violence is largely shrouded in ambiguity. Sherry's mother reports to someone that she had not seen her recently nor had Sherry shown up to work in recent days. While the film does not reveal the specifics surrounding Sherry's disappearance, the audience knows that she has been the victim of domestic abuse, and we might reasonably conclude that Daniel has murdered her. When Helen questions Daniel about what happened to Sherry, he finally relaxes his “cool pose” to explain the incident to his mother. He begins to recount the times in which he felt “disrespected” and inadequate. He says that Sherry intentionally ignored the repair work that he had done around the house along with the stacks of newspapers that he had been using to try to find a new job. With each recollection, Daniel is increasingly convinced that “she deserved it.” He formulates his justification of the attack based on the patriarchal notions of manhood in which he had been instructed by his church-going mother and her pastor. Perhaps, Daniel was comfortable trying to convince his mother that Sherry “deserved it” because Helen too could be classified as an agent of patriarchy. However, as Helen sits across from Daniel at the far end of the table, she appears visibly disturbed by Daniel’s confession.

Subsequently, Helen drives to Rev. Tillman’s house to receive counsel for what to do in this situation. Rev. Tillman implores her that “this is something you have to keep inside the family. . . . No outside influences. Just you and God.” This instruction to be silent is likewise a problem in the African American community, which has frequently been enabled by the church. Toinette M. Eugene posits that the traditional response of silence surrounding violence committed against women and children in the black community “does not stem from acceptance of violence as a Black cultural norm. . . but rather from shame, fear, and an understandable, but nonetheless detrimental sense of racial loyalty.”[258] She asserts that the black community and the black church must acknowledge this fear and unveil the shame to effectively cure the disease of abuse and silence and contribute to the healthy advancement of the whole community. Tamura Lomax likewise asserts, “To be sure, black men and boys need healing, too. The fear of emasculation, devaluation, stigma, lost kinships, death, abandonment, disability by violence, communal shunning, and ranking. . . . perhaps [T.D.] Jakes and others in the Black Church and black popular culture may be better served by interrogating black male fear of being left alone, unloved, disrespected, ignored, and ridiculed.”[259] This would require the deconstruction of the Abrahamic masculinist mandate and an unmasking of the cool pose to face these fears and anxieties in order to do the work of healing the community. Further, as Eugene and Lomax assert, the erasure of silence surrounding domestic violence with the African American community must intricately involve the work of the black church for justice.

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[258] Toinette M. Eugene, “’Swing Low, Sweet Chariot!’: A Womanist Ethical Response to Sexual Violence and Abuse,” in *Violence Against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, Eds. Carol J, Adams and Marie Fortune, 185-200, (New York: Continuum, 1995), 187.

When Helen returns home after meeting with Rev. Tillman, she stands in front of the bathroom mirror as she smokes and contemplates what she has decided to do. Along with keeping the incident a secret, Rev. Tillman has advised Helen to “[b]e strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. . . . stand with the sword of the spirit, which is the might of God and perform as God might” in reference to Ephesians 6:10-18. As Helen sings “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” she inhales a few final puffs of her cigarette and gulps a bit of whiskey. Through a lighted window, we see her in silhouette. She picks up a rifle and limps out of the bathroom presumably into the room where Daniel is watching cartoons on television. Moments later we hear two gunshots as the screen cuts to black with the final sound.

While we can infer that in this resolution violence begats more violence, the final result of Helen’s action is notably ambiguous. In particular, several questions surrounding this final resolution remain: Does Helen kill her son? Does she kill her grandson? Does Daniel take the gun and kill himself? Is this the resolution that Rev. Tillman envisioned? Was this performing "as God might"? While the answers to these questions are unclear, using the critical lens, I read these final moments as Helen taking direct action against toxic masculinity while continuing her role as a policing agent of Daniel's performance of Abrahamic masculinity. In particular, Helen is responding to Daniel's inability to adhere to the guardian mandate, which Neal observes is a part of the divinely-ordained role assigned black men in the family and community in this religious paradigm. Neal's characterization of Abraham requires an element of patriarchal benevolence, which entails taking responsibility for the protection of women and children along with the accumulation of wealth, social status, and empire-building. Daniel did none of these. Instead, under the pressure of Abrahamic masculinity, he became self-destructive and violent, and Helen responds with further violence.

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[259] Tamura Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 207.

This cycle of violence and toxicity undermines the utility of the model of Abrahamic masculinity. If no one can live up to the tenets of this model and the resulting anxieties are debilitating, then the model itself is counterproductive to the uplift of the community. If the model is fundamentally rooted in the subjugation of black women, then the model is likewise damaging to the community's liberation. Further, if the black church continues to propagate this model as the organizing structure for the black community, then the black church may have outlived its use value (or at least must change its organizing principles).

As Rev. Tillman sends Helen back home advising her to keep the secret of domestic violence, he reinforces the notion that violence can be overlooked in the maintenance of patriarchal power. Infused with religious language and justifications, Rev. Tillman endorses the silencing of victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence in an attempt to maintain the organizational structure of the institution. This prioritizes the perception of institutional stability over the well-being of the individual. He calls upon Helen to be “strong” and to shoulder the burden of this secret even to the detriment of her own psychological health.

The ending of the film is the culmination of toxicity, anxiety, and violence produced within the constraints of adhering to the Abrahamic masculine ideal. Ultimately, through the critical lens, I read the relationship between black masculinity and Christianity in *Burning Cane* as bringing into focus the confines of Abrahamic masculinity propagated through the black church and policed by its victims/agents. By specifically examining the depictions of Rev. Tillman, Daniel, and Helen through the critical lens, we see the restrictive endorsement of Abrahamic masculinity as not only fostering masculine anxiety and toxicity but also undermining the project of community uplift. The patriarchal model by which the whole community is supposed to be uplifted is challenged as inviable through the film’s depictions of Rev. Tillman, Daniel, and Helen’s daily struggles.

Conclusion

Echoing Dean-Burren’s critique of the black church, the range of critical discourses on the church have been largely rooted in questions of use value for black Christianity in the project of liberation for the entire community. For some, the central criticism is that the church has not lived up to its potential to be an organizing space for addressing the material and spiritual needs of the black community. For others, the frequently racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist practices of the traditionally conservative church present a largely insurmountable hurdle to conceptualizing black Christianity as a liberationist framework. These and other challenges to black Christianity and the black church shape the contours of the critical lens described in this chapter.

Reading through the critical lens, my case study in this chapter focuses on Abrahamic masculinity and the representation of black Christianity in *Burning Cane*, examining the interactions of the three main characters—Daniel, Helen, and Rev. Tillman. Through the critical lens, I read the portrayal of these characters and their connections to the institutional black church in light of black feminist/womanist critical discourses on deconstructing patriarchal frameworks. This reading highlights the ways that the film interrogates the entangled relationship between restrictive patriarchal notions of Abrahamic masculinity, its propagation through the black church, and the toxic environment produced through this framework that ultimately ends in violence in the film. Broadly, the critical lens enables scholars to place depictions of black Christianity and the black church in context with the long tradition of challenging black religious leaders, organizational practices, and theological beliefs of the black church. Additionally, many of these critiques involve political questions regarding power relations on interpersonal and societal levels. The critical lens discussed in this chapter and the political lens introduced in the next chapter overlap in this way. However, as I discuss in the next chapter, the political lens is distinguished by the black theological and rhetorical signifying practices using depictions of black Christianity to underscore the spiritual and physical drives for direct political action.

Chapter 4

Try Jesus, Not Me:

Reading Black Theology & Righteous Anger through the Political Lens

"Try Jesus, not me" is the first line of a song titled "Try Jesus" by Houston hip hop artist Tobe Nwigwe featuring gospel guitarist and singer Jabari Johnson. Included on *The Pandemic Project* album, the song was self-released via YouTube in 2020 during a particularly contentious contemporary moment compounded by a global pandemic, racialized police violence, religiously-infused white supremacist rhetoric, and political protests and riots. "Try Jesus," accompanied on the album by such songs as "I Need You To (Breonna Taylor)" and "Make it Home," speaks directly to the frustration and rage demonstrated throughout the summer of 2020. In light of the continuation of institutional violence and disregard for black lives, the song designates defensive violence as a viable option in the protection of oneself and others within the black community. As Nwigwe says in the song, "I know what He [Jesus] said about getting slapped. But if you touch me or mine, we gon have to scrap. So, try Jesus, not me."[260] Nwigwe uses the phrase rhetorically as he references Jesus as a benevolent figure who in Matthew 5:39 said to "turn the other cheek"[261] when struck. However, his reference is not insistent on making a theological argument, promoting religious doctrine, or critiquing the scripture (although he does this in other songs). Rather, he uses the figure of Jesus as a basis for contrast to make a rhetorical statement about himself as one who in the protection of his family and community is willing to use physical violence. It uses religious language and biblical reference to signify the self-proclamation of the individual’s tenacity and a warning to be heeded by the person to whom this statement is spoken.

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[260] Tobe Nwigwe and Jabari Johnson, "Try Jesus," Released July 2020, video, 1:53, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFU0PTsykeU.

[261] Matthew 5:39 King James Version

This example is pertinent for understanding the political lens, which is an approach to reading the rhetorical use of black Christianity to represent black political history and action in African American cinema. The lens is informed by the African American tradition of signifying and the frequent use of biblical language and allegory in articulations of black liberation struggles. Signifying is a practice of textual revision, metaphorical reference, and double-voiced discourse enabling and encouraging the interpretation of multiple meanings as one speaks simultaneously to multiple groups using intertextual references and rhetorical language.[262] This practice has been used both for survival and play, often appropriating Eurocentric colonial language and repurposing it for the use of the oppressed community for example. In this sense, the rhetorical appropriation of the symbolism of Jesus echoes the use of scriptural references and allegories in discourses on black political history and social uplift projects. These types of religious references have been a part of the tradition of constructing and revising language to give voice to black experiences both painful and joyful as bell hooks insists.[263] Thus, recognizing this tradition within the framework of both black theological perspectives and rhetorical signification provides insight for understanding representations of black political action, which infuse religious rhetoric, settings, and iconography into cinematic depictions.

The political lens described in this chapter is informed by this history of using religious language and allegorical references to signify black experiences and communicate political aspirations. In this chapter, I specifically use the political lens to read the relationship between black Christianity and black liberation in *The Birth of a Nation* (Nate Parker, 2016). I focus on the relationship between the representation of Nat Turner's 1831 Rebellion and the rhetorical functions of religious discourse in the pursuit of racial justice in the film. Placed within the context of African American political history, the film brings to light an under-told story of black agency and resistance infused with black theological discourses on liberation. Through the political lens, I highlight the ways in which *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) dramatizes the rebellion as a narrative of righteous anger fueled by Turner's radical reinterpretation of scripture to energize his violent assault against the agents and institution of slavery.

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[262] Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977); Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[263] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York: Routledge, 1981).

The Political Lens

The terms "political" or "politics" maintain a variety of connotations in their usage. Politics can encompass concerns of the state, social activity, public participation, interpersonal exercises of power, types of media representation, as well as structures of knowledge. While these iterations on the term inform how one may use the political lens (especially as it overlaps with critical perspectives discussed in Chapter 3), my focus on the political lens in this chapter centers on political action as protest against white supremacist governmentality and the nation under which black persons have been historically denied full citizenship and protected human rights. In this vein, political action is based in an endeavor to influence those structures whether through legal means, protest, or declarations of war. With this in mind, examining the representation of black Christianity in African American cinema through the political lens focuses on the ways in which biblical language, scriptural allegories, or black church practices are tied to character depictions and actions through which the state-sanctioned institutional structures are challenged. Reading through the political lens is grounded in recognizing the rhetorical influences that the black church and black Christianity have had in the struggle for black liberation as it has been depicted in films such as *Selma* (Ava DuVernay, 2014), *Harriet* (Kasi Lemmons, 2019), and *The Hate U Give* (George Tillman Jr, 2018).

Reading through the political lens illuminates the historically entangled relationship between pursuits of black salvation and liberation, which have permeated discourses surrounding the ongoing drive for freedom from oppression marked by wide-spread exclusion from various social, economic, and political landscapes in the U.S. Through the political lens, scholars can highlight a film's depiction of black Christianity and the black church as a source of spiritual empowerment and/or rhetorical language to be used in the drive for racial justice, citizenship, and civil rights. Reading through this lens requires scholars to consider who is being depicted (i.e. single or collective protagonist, individual or institutional antagonist, fictional or historical figure), how the character(s) is depicted (i.e. character arc, dialect, religious affiliation, character traits), the political context in which the character(s) lives (i.e. abolitionist movement, civil rights movement, black power), and the role of religious iconography, religious music, preaching performance, and discourse in the characters' political pursuits.

To illustrate, *Selma* is a 2014 film chronicling the voting rights campaign and the beginning of the march from Selma, Alabama to the state capitol in Montgomery, Alabama during the civil rights movement in 1965. The film centers Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the main protagonist, but it also expands the narrative of this drive beyond the typical single-hero story. Reading this film through the political lens, one would consider King's depiction along with such historical figures as Diane Nash, Coretta Scott King, and John Lewis who were likewise included in the narrative. Through this lens, scholars would examine moments in which religiously-charged rhetoric and spiritual practice intersects with the central figures' preparation for and engagement in political action. In *Selma*, one of these moments takes place at the Edmund Pettis Bridge as they are confronted by a crowd of police ready to attack. King and other religious leaders kneel silently to pray. Through the political lens, we take note of the significance of silence and prayer in this contentious moment as a strategy born from their engagement with politics of respectability.

In this way, reading through the political lens enables scholars to especially highlight the ways in which black religion informs cinematic interpretations of historical figures and events. Using this lens encourages scholars to examine the representation of black Christianity in African American film in light of academic and public discourses surrounding the history of the person or event depicted. This enables scholars to address the film's engagement with black religion and spirituality through revision, reinterpretation, or re-inscription of historical narratives. Within this frame, the political lens must also be understood through the influence of black theology and the language of liberation on the history of black political action. The interplay between theology and politics in African American history shed light on the use of scriptural references and the language of the black church in cinematic representations of black history.

Black Theology & A Language of Black Liberation

Since the early conversion of slaves to Christianity, religion has been central not only to the production of racial meaning in the U.S. but also the assessment of African American fitness for political participation. Meanings associated with black religiosity became increasingly entangled with racialized determinations of black intellectual capability, and throughout history what resulted "was heightened attention to religion as the signal quality of blacks in America and as the central locus of their actual and potential contributions to the nation."[264] As reflected in the nomenclature of early European colonialism, to be 'Europeanized', 'civilized', or 'Christianized' were often indistinguishable.[265] Then, if blacks, as a race, were deemed incapable of religious (primarily Christian) acuity, they were likewise considered incapable of advancing civilization or contributing substantially to human progress.[266] The discursive battleground for civil rights and racial equality has been notoriously religious since the beginning. As historian and theologian Gayraud S. Wilmore asserts,

> Black religion has always concerned itself with the fascination of an incorrigibly religious people with the mystery of God, but it has been equally concerned with the yearning of a despised and subjugated people for freedom—freedom from the religious, economic, social, and political domination that whites have exercised over blacks since the beginning of the African slave trade. It is this radical thrust of blacks for human liberation expressed in theological terms and religious institutions that is the defining characteristic of black Christianity and black religion in the United States.[267]

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[264] Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4.

[265] Carter G. Woodson, *History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921). https://archive.org/details/thehistoryofthen38963gut; Paul Harvey, "Themes in African American Religious History," in *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011). In Carter G. Woodson's *History of the Negro Church*, he includes an image of a "Christianized Negro" posing for a portrait in European clothes. We see this similarly in early colonial images of Native American children who were forced into education camps, where getting a Christian education meant the deliberate erasure of indigenous cultures in order to replace them with European traditions and values. In *Through the Storm, Through the Night,* Paul Harvey also notes this conflation of Christianizing with civilizing and Europeanizing particularly through colonization.

[266] Quoted in Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Negroes in Negroland; The Negroes in American; and Negroes Generally* (New York: G. W. Carleton Publisher, 1865), 162-163. This quote from Baker's *Great Basin of the Nile* exemplifies this perception: "The obtuseness of the savages was such, that I never could make them understand the existence of any good principle; . . . Human nature viewed in its crude state as pictures amongst African savages is quite on a level with that of the brute, and not to be compared with the noble character of the dog. There is neither gratitude, pity, love, nor self-denial; no idea of duty; no religion; but covetousness, ingratitude, selfishness, and cruelty."

[267] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), quoted in Melinda E. Weekes, "This House, This Music: Exploring the Interdependent Interpretive Relationship Between the Contemporary Black Church and Contemporary Gospel Music., *Black Music Research Journal* 25, no. 1/2, (2005): 45.

In this vein, the relationship between black religion and black liberation has maintained two primary orientations. The first is theological, which concerns matters of communion between humanity and deities in light of black sociohistorical conditions. It relates to a perspective of Christianity that places God in the midst of human struggle. The second orientation that Wilmore observes is rhetorical and allegorical in which workers in the struggle for black liberation in the U.S. have often integrated religiously-derived terms and rhetoric to give voice to the trauma of slavery and racism and the hope of liberation in African American life. Black political action has been initiated and engaged within this space between black spirituality, religion, and liberation.

In the theological pursuit of liberation, the legacy of the black church has been evident as a complex institution that, as political theorist Terrence L. Johnson notes, has traditionally "weaved together religion and politics to create thick and thin versions of liberation theology."[268] In his "thick" articulation of a black theology of liberation, James Cone declared in the late 1960s a reformulation of Christianity in America that condemns white Christianity and upholds that "black theology is Christian theology" because of its insistence that God stands absolutely on the side of the oppressed.[269] In his influential work, he explains that black theology fundamentally recenters and recasts the Christian message in light of African American historical oppressions. His assertion of black theology is rooted in the argument that Christianity, based in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, is a religion of liberation at its core, which advocates justice for the political, social, and economic oppressed of society.[270] He contends that "there can be no theology of the gospel which does not arise from an oppressed community" since the gospel of

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[268] Terrence L. Johnson, "Black Lives Matter and the Black Church," Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, October 19, 2016, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/black-lives-matter-and-the-black-church.

[269] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), 23.

[270] Ibid.

Christ is “inseparable from the weak and helpless in human society.”[271] Then, in this view, spiritual salvation and liberation is intricately tied with breaking the chains on the body as well. Further, while black feminist and womanist theologians have contributed intersectional nuance as correctives to Cone’s male-centric theological assertions (as described in Chapter 3), Cone specifically positions blackness as the stand-in for all who are oppressed by American white supremacy.

The continuity of this entanglement of salvation/liberation and earthly freedom is apparent in Amiri Baraka’s remarks on slave religion: “The God the slaves worshipped (for the most part, except maybe the “pure white” God of the toms) had to be willing to free them somehow, someway . . . one sweet day. . . . The churches the slaves and freedmen went to identified these Gods, and their will in heaven, as well as earth.”[272] Baraka reiterates Cone’s ontologically racialized theology in which the God in whom slaves hoped would free them from bondage, whereas the “pure white” God of the white oppressors would never free the oppressed. In 1966, the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (which became the National Conference of Black Christians) also wrote a statement on black power that echoed this sentiment of salvation/liberation on earth as it is in heaven. In their statement, they declared, “We commit ourselves as churchmen to make more meaningful in the life of our institution our conviction that Jesus Christ reigns in the ‘here’ and ‘now’ as well as in the future he brings in upon us.”[273] From this perspective, black theology places emphasis on God’s involvement in human affairs in which God is always on the side of those held in bondage.

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[271] Ibid., 23.

[272] LeRoi Jones, “The Changing Same (R&B and the New Black Music),” in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle Jr., 118-131, (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 122.

[273] National Committee of Negro Churchmen, “Black Power,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 1966, E5 https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/files/original/65f9d1d9a7fbb097a43284ec4b8f3d8e.pdf.

This type of reframing in black Christianity is evident in the language of liberation, words and stories used to give voice to black political struggles and aspirations. Since the civil language of U.S. American politics has had its roots in biblical discourse since the country's inception, pleas for black participation in society and citizenship rights have likewise tapped into these discursive structures. For example, when Sojourner Truth asked a conference of suffragettes, 'Ain't I a woman?', she intermingled a proclamation of her black womanhood with a refute of the claim that women could not have certain rights because Christ was not a woman. She remarked, "Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with Him."[274] This statement spoke rhetorically to gender, race, and religious politics in which the virgin birth of Christ is used to place women at the center of conversation. Just as traditional Negro spirituals were used for coded messaging about paths to freedom and similar to Sojourner Truth's rhetorical statement on Christ, the religiously-infused and spiritually-coded language of the black church has been foundational to giving voice to the African American community's strivings for freedom. Another example is evidenced by the idea of community survival signified through the phrase 'gittin ovuh,' which as Geneva Smitherman explains, is relevant both to the spiritual and material work of striving. While the gospel song reflects on "how I [the individual and/or community] got ovuh" troubles and tribulations through the resilience of the black spirit, the phrase's secular usage speaks to the continued struggle for material survival in a world of racial oppression.[275]

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[274] Oxford African American Studies Center, "'Ain't I a Woman?' (1851)," accessed August 10, 2021, https://doi-org.www2.lib.ku.edu/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.33624.

[275] Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), 73.

Additionally, when King said “we, as a people, will get to the promised land,”[276] the words, which reference the story of Israel’s journey from the wilderness to the promised land, painted a picture of hope and the need for perseverance that would eventually lead to a better future. His words echo the religious and social significance of Phillis Wheatley referring to slaveholders as “modern Egyptians” and Harriet Tubman being nicknamed Moses as a deliverer of enslaved people. In parallel with the Exodus story, Du Bois wrote,

> Away back in the days of bondage they thought to see in one divine event the end of all doubt and disappointment; few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites. . . . At last it came, -- suddenly, fearfully, like a dream. . . . Years have passed away since then, -- ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation’s feast.[277]

Du Bois’s statement not only uses religiously-charged language to tell where black people in the U.S. have been since the early 1600s but also to narrate the continued struggle and the failings of the post-Civil War society to deliver to former slaves their full measure of freedom. He uses the “eyes of wearied Israelites” and the unfulfilled hope of a promised land in his elucidation of the country’s failure, especially in light of its claims that “all men are created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” and his appeal for the full recognition of citizenship and the souls of black folk. Similar to Du Bois's reference, Barack Obama likewise uses the analogy of the "promised land" as the title of his book, *A Promised Land*, released in 2020. He explains that the title and his memoir speak to the long journey of African Americans in the symbolic wilderness as they continue looking to one day arrive in the promised land of liberation.[278] While admittedly he says that they may never get there, he contends that the journey itself is a noble one. This journey in which people "kept reaching for something higher. . . reaching for one another" is encapsulated in what emeritus pastor Jeremiah Wright calls the "audacity of hope"—the power of an aspirational spirit in the face of oppression.[279]

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[276] Oxford African American Studies Center, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop (1968),” accessed August 10, 2021, https://doi-org.www2.lib.ku.edu/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.33654.

[277] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 10-11.

In the space between black theology, spirituality, politics, and liberation, the discursive language of the black church integrated with the political aspirations of the community carry with it the weight of African American spiritual and material strivings. Particularly during the civil rights movement, "the church served as that spiritual heart behind nonviolent protests. Not all churches, not most churches, but enough for the church and political freedom in black America to be forever linked. The influence that ministers in these churches had took on political dimensions, shaping national discussions, politics, and social agendas."[280] In other words, at the same time that some black churches and clergy promoted the integration of religion, political protest, and social criticism, other black churches opposed what they viewed as disruptive and divisive political strategies. This is true in the case of the civil rights movement, which was spearheaded by black male religious leaders, just as it is the case in the contemporary black lives matter movement, which many conservative black clergy have rejected largely because of its decentralized leadership with roots in the activist work of three queer and “radical” black women.[281] Nevertheless, while institutionally black churches have maintained largely complex and divided stances on interfering with racial politics outside of the church, the stories and language drawn from black church and the Bible not only became allegories for freedom, faith, and salvation used to affirm the souls of black people in churches but also functioned as rhetorical devices to undergird demands for racial justice and equitable political participation.

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[278] This explanation is from a sound bite played in 2020 on the Detroit Praise Network gospel music radio station for the promotion of the book release for *A Promised Land*.

[279] Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Crown, 2020).

[280] Ytasha L. Womack and Derek T. Dingle, *Post Black: How a New Generation Is Redefining African American Identity* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2010).

Whereas white supremacist notions, undergirded by Eurocentric biblical interpretations, have sought to exclude African Americans from social, economic, political, and religious equality in the U.S., black communities have challenged Eurocentric Christianity through reframing and reinterpreting the scriptures as a part of their afront to oppressive institutional structures. Whether through the religiously-charged rhetoric of Dr. King or through the origination and circulation of the “fix it black Jesus”[282] meme (described briefly in Chapter 1), reinterpretations of stories and language developed through the black church have been used to signify the experiences and aspirations of black communities. In this vein, reading through the political lens takes into account the use of religious language and scriptural interpretation as a thread of continuity and tradition in which black religion, spirituality, and political history are intertwined. In the following section, my reading of black Christianity in *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) uses the political lens to highlight the representation of black theological interpretation of scripture and the dramatization of violent political action bolstered by righteous anger in the story of Nat Turner’s 1831 Rebellion.

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[281] Lawrence T. Brown, “The Movement for Black Lives vs. the Black Church,” *Kalfou* 4, no. 1 (2017).

[282] Robin R. Means Coleman & Novotny Lawrence, “Fix it Black Jesus: The Iconography of Christ in *Good Times*,” *Religions* 10, no. 7, (2019).

Through the Political Lens: Black Theology & Righteous Anger in *The Birth of a Nation*

The narrative of Nat Turner's 1831 Rebellion is an often-untold story of slavery, violence, revolt, and religion in American history. Through cinematic dramatization, *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) narrates this story of Nat Turner (Nate Parker), an enslaved black preacher who leads a violent rebellion against white slaveholders in Southampton County, Virginia killing over 50 white men, women, and children (as young as infants) in the nineteenth century assault. While the film takes creative liberties with the narrative of the insurrection and Turner's personal story, *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) reinterprets historical accounts often filtered through the eyes of the slaveholders[283] to depict Turner as a heroic figure fueled by righteous anger. Presented through the perspective of someone born into the peculiar institution as a slave, *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) follows Turner's life from a young boy, whose inordinate intelligence is remarked upon by blacks and whites alike, to a man, whose religious faith inspires him to lead the charge for a bloody uprising. It dramatizes the story of Turner's Rebellion in which anger, violence, agency, and faith are the driving forces.

The Birth of a Nation (2016) dramatizes a part of American history that is essential to understanding historical discourses on race, religion, violence, and political action. While the controversy around the intimate involvement of the film's co-writer, director, producer, and star Nate Parker casts a shadow on the conversation surrounding the film (a conversation that I return to later in the chapter), the narrative depicted shines a light on a legacy of black anger, frustration, and rebellion that has been most often villainized or obscured. As James Baldwin remarked, "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage."[284] This rage has been felt with each remembrance of bodies in chains, each image of attack dogs and water hoses being unleashed on protestors, and each hashtag of another black person killed at the hands of police. As a form of this rage, I identify righteous anger as spiritually or divinely inspired, born from grief, and strategically inscribed using anger as a productive force in the pursuit of justice. *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) historicizes the racial tensions still undergirding social and political unrest, underscoring generations of righteous anger and demands for justice.

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[283] Tragle, Henry Irving, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1971).

The film dramatizes Turner's life as that of a heroic figure of righteous anger, who takes "God's justice" into his own hands leading a group of black slaves to wield their masters' swords in an all-out assault against their masters. In his historical portrait of Turner, Karl Lampley argues that Turner's Rebellion must be placed in context to the particular brutalities of the institution to which Turner was responding and the black theological perspective undergirding his religious justification for the rebellion. Lampley also asserts, "Within the African American religious tradition of protest and resistance is included the nonviolent black revolution of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. alongside the violent black revolution of Nat Turner."[285] He positions these religious leaders, whose historical contexts and tactics are quite different, as existing within the same African American religious tradition. This statement speaks to the entangled history of racial politics, direct action, and African American religion that has had to wrestle with the pervasiveness of white supremacist discourses in American Christianity while at the same time affirming black personhood. Both Turner and King affirmed their humanity through the reinterpretation of scripture and used its language rhetorically to bolster violent and nonviolent political action, respectively.

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[284] "To Be in Rage, Almost All the Time." NPR. June 1, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/06/01/867153918/-to-be-in-a-rage-almost-all-the-time.

[285] Karl Lampley, *A Theological Account of Nat Turner: Christianity, Violence, and Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 32-33.

As a re-presentation of black history, *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) uses the dramatization of Nat Turner's story to subvert the white supremacist religious rhetoric used to justify the institution of slavery. Reading the film's narrative of righteous anger through the political lens brings into focus the ways in which Turner assumes a black theological perspective and uses scriptural references rhetorically to wage war against the institution of slavery and its slaveholding agents. Through this lens, I also highlight the use of formal characteristics to visually signify the black theological perspective that the film dramatizes.

Re-Presenting Nat Turner & The Birth of a Nation

In line with films like *The Birth of a Race* (John W. Noble, 1918) and *Within Our Gates* (Oscar Micheaux, 1920), *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), in its subject-matter and title, directly challenges the stereotypical imagery in D.W. Griffith's original film, which solidified black caricatures in the American cinematic imaginary one hundred years before. Released in 1915, Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* has often been recognized as the first American epic feature film, as an aesthetic masterpiece, and notoriously as one of the most overtly racist films produced in U.S. history. Based on Thomas Dixon's novel, *The Clansman*, the film narrates the story of star-crossed lovers and countrymen divided by the politics of war in a struggling post-Civil War South. In the reunification of the country's North and South, the film denigrates ambitious blacks and progressive whites as the story's villains and casts the struggle for black freedom as the greatest obstacle to the unity of the northern and southern Aryan brotherhood. Ultimately, the film touts the creation of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) as the cure to the "disease" of black freedom.

The birth of the Union, according to Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), was established as a matter of divine destiny and moral order in which the mutual agreement between the North and South considered it necessary to subjugate black people (freed or enslaved) under white social control. In particular, at the end of the film, after the newly-formed KKK has saved the nation from its inevitable demise due to black citizens who dared to rise above their former slave status to stand at the helm of local government, Colonel Ben Cameron (Henry B. Walthall) and Elsie Stoneman (Lillian Gish) sit and stare out into the sunset imagining a post-apocalyptic world where there would be no more war (or black people). In this scene, an all-white crowd roams heavenly streets while an image of a Europeanized Jesus is superimposed into the sky. Jesus waves his hands over the people in the City of Peace as if to proclaim that the divine right for white dominance has been restored and the now-united nation can move forward toward this end. While this scene is not often discussed in-depth in academic scholarship, viewing the proceeding 12-reels of the film with this end scene in mind further clarifies the link between the 1915 and 2016 narratives and the historical significance of the religiously-charged rhetoric embedded in the 2016 film. According to Griffith's film, the unification of the nation and the salvation of its soul necessitated the subjugation of black people, especially their participation in governmental politics. In this way, Christianity, white supremacy, and U.S. politics have been historically linked.

Retelling the story of Turner's rebellion from the perspective of a slave complicates the narrative on Americanness, white supremacy, and Christianity that pervaded discourses religiously justifying the denial of black citizenship and political participation. These discourses posited that black individuals were morally, ethically, and intellectually unfit to participate fully in civilized society. As Evans notes, the pathologizing of black communities, which in the early twentieth century had become grounded in sociological research claims, disparaged practices of black folk religion as indicative of black primitivism.[286] From these notions, the historical continuity of conceptualizing black/white, primitive/civilized, and emotionalism/reason as related dichotomies are entangled with conceptions of idealized American citizenship. Thus, if slaves were considered unfit for freedom largely because of these claims of inherent intellectual inferiority, *The Birth of a Nation*'s (2016) depiction of Nat Turner's strategic intellectual abilities challenges these notions. He is an enslaved black man, who in America had been cast as less than human and inherently unqualified for certain unalienable rights endowed to white citizens by their Creator. Despite this, he retorts the scriptures used by slaveowners to keep blacks in chains with verses from the same Bible demanding freedom. He has the intellectual acuity to outwit and outrun slaveholders, whose mental capabilities are supposed to be far beyond the reach of someone like him. As a preacher, Turner also claimed a spiritual closeness to God and a divine right to be free, which contradicted the racial and religious status quo. As slaveholders feared, this was the inspiration and justification for the rebellion—the spiritual freedom preached in Christianity must also mean freedom from the conditions of slavery.[287] By reading through the political lens, I highlight these attributes as a part of the rhetorical and spiritual undercurrent of black Christianity used in the dramatization of Turner's Rebellion.

From the beginning, *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) sets up the entangled relationship between political action, righteous anger, violence, and theology. The film begins with a quote by Thomas Jefferson from 1785: "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever." In this statement referencing *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson signals white anxiety and fear of the immanent violence that would befall the country because of the persistence of slavery. He ruminates on the spiritual and material consequences of this institution and prophesies the rebellions and wars fought in the name of its maintenance and destruction including the Haitian Revolution of the late eighteenth century, Turner's Rebellion, and the American Civil War. God's justice, in this sense, refers less to otherworldly consequences than to the imminence of violent repercussions. The film introduces the story of Nat Turner and the narrative of the rebellion through this address by one of the country's Founding Fathers to emphasize the moral, spiritual, material, and political implications and repercussions of the institution of slavery. Jefferson foreshadowed Turner's Rebellion, which would set the stage for emancipation and the U.S. Civil War.

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[286] Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[287] Ibid.

Another quote from Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* in 1782 also relates to the disastrous implications of the racial tensions depicted in the film: "Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and the many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions, which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."[288] Parker could have just as relevantly used this quote to foreshadow the turmoil underlying the insurrection. The violence and prejudice that Turner witnesses throughout the course of his life fuel his rage and rebellion. Although relatively little is known about Turner's real life, the film dramatizes just a few of the "ten thousand recollections" of injuries sustained during slavery. Turner is forced, consistently, to be confronted with the realities of the institution. He sees his father run for his life after he is caught stealing food for his family and kills a white man in defense; he sees the insect-infested carcass of a black man lying on the side of the road; he witnesses the abuse and rape of black women, including his wife; and he is whipped and left for dead after he water baptizes an outcasted white man who all others refused to baptize. Turner is engulfed by the atrocities of the system. Throughout the film, Turner is loaned out to other plantations to preach obedience and otherworldly salvation to slaves who are dispirited or classified as insubordinate in order to "keep them in line." It is primarily in these moments that Turner witnesses the many horrors of the system.

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[288] Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia" in *The Complete Works of Thomas Jefferson* (Hastings: Delphi Classics, 2019), 500.

One scene in particular begins to fuel Turner's moral fire. In this scene, Turner watches as an enslaved man is chained up in a barn and force-fed through a funnel with blood gushing from his mouth after his teeth are chiseled out. Turner is brought to this plantation specifically to preach to the other slaves in order to quell rebellion. Speaking on this purpose, one slaveholder remarks, "Truth is, even the meanest niggers fear for the gospel. Maybe a good word from your boy there—a disciplined word—would go a lot further than my pistol would." Each slaveholder posits that the gospel of Christianity—preached within the bounds of certain pre-approved scriptures—would help to sustain slaver control over the plantation. Turner, however, is enraged by what he witnesses as evidenced in the message that he subsequently preaches.

As Turner looks into the eyes of the men, women, and children to whom he is supposed to preach, he appears disturbed and distressed. He forces himself to begin with tears welling in his eyes: "Brethren, I pray you sing to the Lord a new song. Sing praise in the assembly of the righteous. Let the saints be joyful in glory. Let them sing aloud on their beds." In this first half of Turner's sermon, he is outraged at the cruelty of slavery yet he is hesitant to speak outside the pre-approved message, which must involve only what was "absolutely necessary"[289] to explain the responsibilities of the servants and the masters' dominant privilege. The camera moves across the faces of slaves as they listen dispassionately to Turner's exhortation to sing a new song. While Turner is visibly distressed and impassioned, it is only when he begins the second portion of his sermon that the enslaved congregation to whom he preaches reacts affirmatively. As tears roll down his face, the pace and fervency of his speech builds as the pacing of the editing in the sequence likewise increases. He continues as he raises his fist to proclaim, “Let the high praise of God be on the mouths of the saints and a two-edged sword in their hand to execute vengeance on the demonic nations and punishment on those peoples. To bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron to execute on them this written judgement. This honor have all his saints. . . . Sing to him a new song.” In this latter half of the sermon, the congregation responds emphatically shouting “Praise the Lord!” while slaveholders stand and watch unbothered. The film focuses especially on the congregation’s reaction through close ups of their individual, determined faces. The close ups, in conjunction with quick cuts, reinforces the urgency of the moment and the importance of this scene as a building block toward the final rebellion.

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[289] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (1978; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 169.

Reading this moment through the political lens highlights the use of scripture to construct meaning for physically violent action, otherworldly justice, and theology through this sermon. Specifically, while Turner performs the assigned task of preaching to the slaves, he subverts the pacifying expectations of the slaveholders. Instead of preaching the message of “wait on the Lord” as he had during other moments in the film, he preaches a signifying message of vengeance and violence against slave masters. While slaves may rejoice in the possibility of a just future free from oppression in a heavenly world, slaveholders anticipate that the joyous reaction to the sermon will effectively suppress any plans for mutiny. This sermon, however, signifies the opposite. For this film, it foreshadows the moment when slaves will literally pick up their swords to attack white slavers. Additionally, the use of tight close ups especially on the faces of enslaved children as they watch and listen intently to Turner's sermon signifies the future for which Turner and his followers will fight. As it foreshadows the events of the film, this scene positions God on the side of the oppressed wherein, as Lampley states, Turner "rejected enslavement and oppression through prophetic vision and God's counterviolence."[290] In this moment, he prophesies of the coming day in which slaves will have the weapons to wage war against the "demonic nations."

As Turner is forced to consistently confront the realities of the institution, these moments fuel his righteous anger and set up his morally religious justification for insurrection. With each incident, Turner's preaching would shift from waiting on the Lord for heavenly salvation toward a message of divinely-inspired vengeance for earthly liberation. In particular, Turner explains that he reinterprets the Bible by reading stories of Old Testament heroes and reframing the gospel in light of the black slave condition. In one scene, as Turner and his followers begin planning for the insurrection, Turner says,

> I've been following the Lord a long time. Preaching. Citing scripture. Sharing the gospel from the few pages and sections I've been allowed. But I've gone back through this word, all of it, with new eyes. I see now for every verse they use to support our bondage, there's another demanding our freedom. Every verse they use to justify our torture, there's another damning them to hell for those actions.

Turner explains in this moment the meaning of scriptural reinterpretation beyond the confines of what has been propagated by white clergy on the maintenance of the slave institution in the U.S. He illustrates this in one moment when slaver Samuel Turner (Armie Hammer) and Reverend Walthall (Mark Boone Jr.) question him about baptizing a white man. When Rev. Walthall recites scripture such as “Exhort servants to be obedient to thy own masters and to please them well in all things” referencing Titus 2:9, Turner replies with “You were bought with a price, do not become slaves of men” referencing 1 Corinthians 7:23. Rev. Walthall and Turner alternate scriptural references several times before Turner is struck.

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[290] Karl Lampley, *A Theological Account of Nat Turner: Christianity, Violence, and Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 15.

While the escalation of this altercation is evident in the gradually increased pacing of the edits, the change in camera angle also signals a shift in the relationship between Turner and the slaveholders confronting him. At the beginning of the scene, Samuel Turner and the other slaveholders appear enlarged as they are shown from a low angle while Nat Turner is shown sitting servilely from a slightly higher angle. As Turner continues to rebut Rev. Walthall’s scriptural citations and becomes more adamant in his defiance, he stands and the camera moves with him shifting the visual relationship between the characters. We see both Samuel and Nat at similar eye levels as the adjusted camera angle now reflects Nat’s emboldened position to speak the same rhetorical language as the slaveholders and to dare assert equality by looking them directly in their eyes. This type of exchange is the basis upon which historian Albert J. Raboteau asserts that some white clergy objected to the idea of black preachers and, further, some slaveholders were weary of the very idea of plantation missions for the conversion of slaves to Christianity.[291]

Complexly, in contrast to early conceptions of African peoples as savages incapable of understanding “the existence of any good [Christian] principle,”[292] the belief that Christian conversion was possible and would effectively quell black rebellion was rooted in a fundamental shift in discourse from Africans having no religion (namely Christian moral standards) to enslaved Africans being innately religious with a moral Christian character that is especially suited for slavery.[293] At the same time, some slavers became trepidatious as they questioned if the gospel message of freedom could actually coexist with the message of master control. Some especially feared that if enslaved black people were taught to preach this gospel then it would only be a matter of time before they began to perceive themselves as socially, religiously, and politically equivalent to their white counterparts. Specifically, Raboteau quotes Whitemarsh B. Seabrook, a prominent plantation owner in South Carolina, who rejected the idea of black preachers because "[the South] cannot allow any slave or free negro to assume an authority and influence, in derogation of the right, which, in this community, should be the exclusive property of the whites."[294] In other words, Seabrook asserts that any position of religious power occupied by white clergy should not also be occupied by black clergy to avoid any black person considering themselves equal to whites. Given these fears, Turner's position as an enslaved black preacher is important.

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[291] Albert J. Raboteau, *The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (1978; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[292] Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Negroes in Negroland; The Negroes in American; and Negroes Generally* (New York: G. W. Carleton Publisher, 1865); This shift is also explained in Winthrop D. Jordan’s book, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 190.

When Turner responds repeatedly to Rev. Walthall's assertions then looks him and Samuel in their eyes, he asserts his humanity and his right to equality. As bell hooks notes, "eyeballing" is a political act as slaves were denied the right to look directly into a white slaveholder's eyes.[295] This tactic is one of establishing power relationships based on who possesses the right to gaze. In this case, Turner as an enslaved black man is stripped of the right to return the gaze of white slaveholders. Thus, when he does return the gaze he is beaten. Understood through the political lens, this is a direct challenge to not only the notion of black inferiority based on intellect but also the religious justification of slavery. Prophesying on the eventual realization of black freedom, Turner declares, “The Lord has spoken to me. . . . The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” Here, Turner again references scripture to speak prophetically about the imminent violence that will occur later in the film. He places particular emphasis on the ordering and re-ordering of the “first” and the “last” to prophesy the possibility through attacking the structure of slavery that frames this racist organization.

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[293] Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[294] Albert J. Raboteau, *The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (1978; reis., New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 170.

[295] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992).

In addition to the black theological and political groundings of Turner’s dialogue, examining the use of formal characteristics in *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) through the political lens likewise illuminates the ways in which black theology, allegorical scripture references, and political action are interconnected in the film. In particular, the crucial narrative turning point for Turner is illustrated visually through a sequence of shots intercut to bring together disparate incidents of dehumanization and atrocity that drive his conviction. These events culminate in Turner’s decision to rebel against the institution of slavery. This sequence occurs when his grandmother “who was very religious, and to whom [he] was much attached”[296] dies. In this moment, Turner sits by his grandmother’s side and reads from his Bible. As the camera moves slowly toward him, the film intercuts scenes of the inhumane treatment and brutality that he had witnessed previously. We see the image of a young black girl being led by a rope around her neck as if she is a toy; the image of Turner’s wife lying in bed after being sexually assaulted by a group of white men in the woods; and the image of the enslaved man being force-fed through a funnel. In line with the anxieties expressed in Jefferson’s *Notes on Virginia*, these images illustrate some of Turner’s recollections on the brutality of slavery. These are the images that fuel his fire and righteous anger.

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[296] Thomas R. Gray, Nat Turner, and Paul Royster (Depositor), "The Confessions of Nat Turner (1831)," *Electronic Texts in American Studies*, accessed August 10, 2021, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/15.

As the sequence ends, the film lingers on a close up of the page that Turner reads from 1 Samuel: "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." In biblical context, this verse is based in a divine command given to Saul for the avengement of Israel. For the film, the verse is interpreted similarly as a divine command but reframed in light of American slavery. It is applied to the conditions of bondage and cruelty that Turner and other slaves had endured. Reading through the political lens, the visual relationship created between the images of brutality, Turner, and the Bible page illustrates the connection between the insurrection that follows and the biblical interpretation that sustains his political conviction. Toward the end of the sequence, the image of the page lingers for a moment before cutting back to Turner exiting the door with his grandmother's body in-hand. The passage foreshadows the indiscriminate bloodshed that follows.

In addition to these images of righteous anger, the film challenges the historical dichotomy between black/white, evil/saintly, and body/spirit in its depiction of Turner's visions. At several points throughout the film, we see scenes in which Turner encounters spirit beings in dreams and visions. In contrast to traditional imagery in which whiteness is characteristically uplifted as heavenly and transcendent,[297] these scenes center black characters in glorious light. The black angel, shown during multiple moments in the film, is a prime example. During the scene in which Turner is whipped, his arms are draped over a wooden post as a slaver lashes his back repeatedly. The camera moves slowly into a close up of his face as we see the blood dripping from his mouth and tears falling from his eyes, strenuously enduring each lash. The film dissolves into a close-up image of a black angel. The angel has smooth, dark skin and wears her hair tightly wrapped into a braided bun on top of her head. She basks in the glow of the white light behind her as it illuminates the outline of her shoulders and wings, emphasizing her beauty and elegance.

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[297] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 127.

This imagery is important for recognizing the black theological and visually rhetorical perspective evident within this black aesthetic depiction. As Richard Dyer argues in *White*, the Eurocentric tradition of Christianity uplifts white Victorian images as *the* representations of Christian holiness and spirituality. The image of an angel in this tradition has typically been a white woman with pale skin and blonde hair that glows from the heavenly light shining down on her. This image of angelic whiteness is meant to transcend the white body wherein the plain white beauty of the body is indicative of the inner beauty of the soul that has "let Christ dwell in your heart."[298] Wrapped in discourse dichotomizing whiteness and blackness with notions of good and bad religion and inner beauty, this ubiquitous image came to stand for Christian holiness and transcendence. Dyer explains, "The white woman as an angel was in these contexts [U.S. and Britain] both the symbol of white virtuousness and the last word in the claim that what made whites special as a race was their non-physical, spiritual, indeed ethereal qualities."[299] Although they represented idealizations that even white people could never live up to, they provided visualizations of religiously-legitimated hegemonic whiteness. With this history in mind, the reinterpretation of angelic imagery centering on a black angel directly challenges the traditional aesthetic correlation between a saved Christian soul and glowing white skin.

In *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), as the black angel looks on when Turner is brought near to death, she represents Turner's vision and a heavenly affirmation of his righteous indignation. For instance, we see this angel appear again with open arms when Turner is later hanged after his conviction. He looks up at her while a young man, who had previously betrayed the rebellion, looks on at Turner. As the angel welcomes Turner into an otherworldly life, the young man is shown in close up with a tear falling from his face. The close up of the young man dissolves into another close up of him as an adult fighting for his freedom with the union army in the Civil War, which would come 20 years after Turner's death. In this way, the scene again integrates American politics, slavery, violence, and black theology. This moment of retribution for Turner is directly linked with the young man's later involvement in the Civil War. The film dramatizes the bloody violence of Turner's Rebellion along with Turner's hanging and angelic oversight as an important historical moment leading up to the war fought for black freedom on U.S. soil.

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[298] Ibid.
[299] Ibid.

Ultimately, my reading of *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) through the political lens brings into focus the black theological perspective evident in Turner's reinterpretation of scripture as well as the rhetorical use of biblical figures and stories to challenge the religious justification of the institution of slavery and underscore Turner's rebellion. This challenges the entanglement of white supremacy, Christianity, and U.S. politics in Griffith's 1915 film as it places Turner's Rebellion at the center of importance for understanding the birth of the U.S. However, while the film's dramatization of Turner's Rebellion depicts a story of revolutionary politics within the film, the narrative that surrounded the film's theatrical release in 2016 concerned the violence of sexual assault and politics of silencing victims.

A Note on Nate Parker Controversy

As the co-writer, director, producer, and star of *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), Nate Parker explained that his goal behind making the film was for "everyone to be challenged" to deal with the pervasiveness of racism not only in mainstream film but also in society.[300] In this way, the film was lauded as an answer to the problem succinctly captured in the viral hashtag #OscarsSoWhite following its Sundance Film Festival premiere. However, the challenge that Parker upheld was stunted by another imperative—to dismantle the culture of silence surrounding sexual abuse, which has since been catalyzed in mainstream discourse under the hashtag #MeToo.

In 1999, Parker and Jean Celestin—his wrestling teammate and co-writer for *The Birth of a Nation* (2016)—were charged with the rape of a young woman with whom they attended the same university. Parker was acquitted at trial. Celestin was convicted, and he later appealed after which the verdict was overturned. In 2016, the charges resurfaced and the facts of the case were revealed to a national audience. Then, the issue was exacerbated by the fact that the victim committed suicide in 2012 and that Parker's response was perceived as unremorseful and defensive rather than apologetic or sensitive to the realities of sexual assault and its impact on women's lives. The question of whether or not audiences could separate the art from the artist was brought to the forefront of discussion.

Considering these issues, the director's history shrouds the film in a feeling of somewhat detached empathy for rape victims themselves. For example, when one of the characters, Esther (also known as "Unnamed Slave Woman," played by Gabrielle Union), is raped by one of the slaver's visitors, the film seems to focus largely on the devastated reaction from Hark (Colman Domingo), the woman's husband, more than the horrific experience endured by the woman herself. This is perhaps worsened by the fact that the woman remains nameless in original versions of the script and speechless throughout the film. The film frames sexual assault against women in the film as actions taken primarily against black men as a part of their justification for acts of violence during the rebellion. This especially is where the link between Parker's auteurist aspirations and personal history interfere with this film's ability to retell Turner's story.

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[300] Dominic Patten and Patrick Hipes, "Nate Parker on Sundance Record-Breaker 'The Birth of a Nation' As a Battle Cry: 'I Want Everyone to be Challenged,'" January 26, 2016, https://deadline.com/2016/01/nate-parker-birth-of-a-nation-sundance-record-sale-interview-1201690825/.

For many, such as Roxane Gay, Parker's past could not be overlooked because it would be impossible to separate the art from the artist.[301] For others, they considered seeing the film primarily because of the significance of its story, but they objected to supporting the artist, especially financially. For example, Aunjanue Ellis, who played Turner's mother in the film, described an instance when she asked a friend to come to a screening, but the friend would only do so with a free ticket so that she did not contribute financially to Parker's work.[302] In this vein, some commended the potential of the film as a spark for important conversation about race while others maintained objections to its political and social merit.[303] The central question underlying the discussion was eloquently expressed by the editors of the *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* in this way: "Whether Nate Parker was guilty or innocent of sexual assault, can we as a community, begin or continue the sensitive discussion about how devastating rape is for Black America?"[304] The question that these editors ask importantly speaks to a broader concern with the harm done not only by the physical violence of sexual assault but also by the silencing of women, especially in the name of "racial unity" within the black community. As Ellis remarked, "We cannot say that our movie seeks to heal the past when we do not acknowledge and show respect to this present pain."[305] As much as the film challenges the power of white supremacy in institutional slavery, the film fails to give critical attention to the sexual abuses that women have endured and the culture of silencing them, even within the film's own depiction of sexual violence against enslaved black women.

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[301] Roxane Gay, "Opinion: Nate Parker and the Limits of Empathy," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/opinion/sunday/nate-parker-and-the-limits-of-empathy.html.

[302] Aunjanue Ellis, "Exclusive: Aunjanue Ellis on Nate Parker & the 'Birth of a Nation' Controversy," *Ebony*, October 7, 2016, https://www.ebony.com/entertainment/birth-of-a-nation-aunjanue-ellis/.

[303] The Editors, "Editorial: The Birth of a Controversy," *Cineaste* 42, no. 1 (2016).

[304] "Editor's Note: 'Are you gonna go see the Nat Turner movie when it comes out?,' *Journal of Black Sexuality and Relationships* 3, no. 1 (2016): vii.

Conclusion

The story of Nat Turner's Rebellion is an historical narrative that illustrates threads of continuity in the practice of adapting Christianity and reframing its theological discourse in light of the sociohistorical conditions of black people. This reframing echoes black theology, as articulated by James Cone, to place the experiences of black people as a group that has been historically oppressed at the center of theological discussion and interest. Further, through the practice of signifying, this history likewise reflects the intertextual references, repetitions, and revisions of biblical language and stories to imbue new meanings specifically suited for voicing the experiences and aspirations of black communities. In light of this, my reading of *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) through the political lens, focuses on the theological reinterpretation and rhetorical use of the biblical text to bolster the cinematic dramatization of Turner's violent action against the agents and institution of slavery in the U.S. This reading highlights the rhetorical, spiritual, and strategic significance and function of black Christianity in the representation of black political histories. Overall, as an approach informed especially by the tradition of using biblical language, stories, and religious figures as rhetorical references, the political lens is useful for highlighting the politics (i.e. racial, class, gender, civic), which the film addresses at the same time that it engages with discourses of criticism and evangelism in its representations of black Christianity.

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[305] Aunjanue Ellis, "Exclusive: Aunjanue Ellis on Nate Parker & the 'Birth of a Nation' Controversy," *Ebony*, October 7, 2016, https://www.ebony.com/entertainment/birth-of-a-nation-aunjanue-ellis/.

Conclusion

The recent documentary produced by Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song* (Shayla Harris & Stacey L. Holman, 2021), describes the black church as a "site of African American survival and grace, organizing and resilience, thriving and testifying, autonomy and freedom, solidarity and speaking truth to power."[306] Inside church buildings, African Americans have gathered for Sunday services, Sunday school, political meetings, film screenings, and other social gatherings. The traditional black church was the place where black children, who were denied access to white schools, learned to read. The Bible was their textbook. The church was the place where social and business connections were made. The church offered a place that was (relatively) isolated from the racial subjugation and anti-blackness of the world outside. This is not to say that the black church has been an irreproachable haven for all black people without its own colorist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist issues, but the church's role in the maintenance and development of African American communities cannot be ignored.[307]

Recognizing the significance of the black church in African American history and culture, black cinema has thus had a long tradition of integrating and interrogating portrayals of black Christianity and the church within its representations of black life. Filmmakers such as Oscar Micheaux, Spencer Williams, Gordon Parks, Spike Lee, Julie Dash, and Ava DuVernay have included depictions of black religious life in their cinematic work, placing these representations into racial aesthetic conversation within which a variety of intra-cultural discourses have been used to debate the fundamental relationship between religion, race, and the black community. However, especially when it comes to religion, stereotypes, and racism in the U.S., African American representation has had to walk a fine line. On one hand, black stereotypes place the idea of innate black religiosity at the forefront of images like the Tom and Mammy caricatures wherein the notion of black slaves as joyful and pious made them naturally fit for servitude and happiest in the place of subjugation. On the other hand, implications of black savagery and evil casted blackness as an insurmountable hurdle to Christian salvation and spiritual transcendence. Tyler Perry's films, for instance, have especially had to wrestle with these issues as his films have been criticized for perpetuating stereotypical imagery, especially of black women, at the same time that his films are made financially successful because they have appealed to many of those black women, especially working-class churchgoing women. As Nicole Hodges Persley explains, in order to more fully appreciate (and critique) Tyler Perry's production, scholars and critics must actively contend with the contradictory use of familiar stereotypes, black church culture, and heteronormative depictions of black social life as they have pragmatically "translate[d] black feminism into recognizable acts across generational and class lines."[308] The struggle to negotiate re-presentations and readings of black religion and social life in African American cinema with regard to the heterogeneity and nuances of black religious experiences remains a critical concern in the work of scholars and artists.

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[306] PBS, "About the Film," accessed August 10, 2021, https://www.pbs.org/weta/black-church/.

[307] Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1921), https://archive.org/details/thehistoryofthen38963gut; Cedrick May, *Evangelism and Resistance in the Black Atlantic, 1760-1835* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses enable scholars to cultivate informed readings of representations of black Christianity in African American film by recognizing the film's engagement with a variety of discourses on the integration and interrogation of race and religion. This recognition is vital to interpreting meaning in black religious representation in

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[308] Nicole Hodges Persley, "Bruised and Misunderstood: Translating Black Feminist Acts in the Work of Tyler Perry," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 1, no. 2 (2012): 218.

African American film because it enables scholars to identify multiple dimensions of racial aesthetic conversations to avoid essentialist readings of black religiosity in film. The cultural lens enables scholars to focus on black cultural traditions, particularly black religious aesthetics, in representations of black Christianity in African American film. The lenses provide points of entry for recognizing black religious aesthetics in black film as signifying the entanglement of the sacred and secular in everyday, lived performances of black Christianity. Subsequently, the gospel, critical, and political lenses build upon the cultural lens as scholars must first be able to locate performances of black religious aesthetics as they are coded within the film in order to read those depictions within the contours of African American discourses on race and religion. The gospel and critical lenses are closely related as dialectical approaches. Based in a framework of racial aesthetic conversation, these lenses are contoured respectively by discourses promoting the gospel of Christian salvation on one hand and critiquing or disparaging Christian religion on the other. The gospel lens is especially informed by pervading evangelical imperatives to spread the gospel through the black cinematic sermon, which uses interpersonal dialogue, church scenes, and characters' spiritual encounters to narrate a parabolic story of salvation. By contrast, the critical lens is shaped by criticisms of Christianity and the black church especially concerning the church's shortcomings in the project of liberation and the matrices of oppressive strategies used within the traditionally conservative institution. Lastly, the political lens focuses on black theological discourse and rhetorical references to black church language used in political discourse. This lens highlights the politics of representation as well as the representation of political action.

In this dissertation, I focus on one lens in each chapter for the heuristic purpose of explicating the discursive contours informing each lens and to provide case studies applying each lens to reading representations of black Christianity in a film. However, the overlapping relationship between each of the lenses is likewise essential for recognizing the dimensionality of black cinematic representations of black Christianity and the black church. It is necessary to both recognize the discursive contours informing each individual lens and to employ each lens as interdependent tools by which one may more fully understand black religious representation in African American film. For example, one scene from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (George C. Wolfe, 2020) may be read simultaneously through the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses to illuminate these broad aspects of racial aesthetic conversation and to provide insight into the significance of the scene as a depiction of the entanglement of racial and religious interrogation in the film.

The cinematic adaptation of August Wilson's stage play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is a story about the pioneering blues singer Ma Rainey and her band, who engage in heated conversations about black life and music as they wait in the basement to complete their recording session. Although the conversations infuse dialogue about religion and race at various points throughout the film, the scene in which these conversations erupt into a brawl and Levee (Chadwick Boseman) attempts to kill one of the other band members, Cutler (Colman Domingo), is especially potent in its conversation of race, religion, and theodicy. Reading this scene through the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses highlight several elements, which scholars could investigate further and place more directly in context with the entire film.

Through the cultural lens, scholars may begin with recognizing the use of African American Vernacular English and the centrality of oral storytelling. This is especially important for an adaptation of Wilson's play since his works tend toward heavy dialogue and limited space in the story settings. This invites audiences to pay closer attention to the words spoken and stories told by characters. Further, as theater artist and scholar Kimmika L. H. Williams-Witherspoon explains, Wilson's use of compressed space often signifies the social, political, and economic confinement of the characters as they reveal "discoveries about themselves, their space, and their place as black folks in America," which often erupt in expressions of rage.[309] The cinematic adaptation likewise focuses on characters' dialogue and interaction in one confined space—the basement of a recording studio—as they share their stories. In this way, the film places particular importance on the close spatial relationship between characters as well as language and oration as a means of establishing interpersonal connection and community not only with each other but also with God as an interlocutor as Levee proposes his divine challenge.

Also, viewing this example through the gospel and critical lenses together enables scholars to recognize the theological assumptions and criticisms represented through Cutler and Levee's interaction. Primarily, Cutler and Levee represent two sides of the dialectical relationship between adoption and rejection of Christianity in which Cutler affirms his relationship to the church and tradition while Levee continually challenges the use value of both. Beginning with an assumption of God's existence as a divinely powerful being and Jesus as the embodiment of this being, Cutler and Levee diverge in their beliefs in the theological nature of God. In particular, whereas theological discourses on the gospel may proclaim, based on the God of the Old Testament, that God is actively involved in human affairs,[310] Levee challenges God's benevolence toward black people especially in light of his personal experiences with racism and violence in the U.S. Fundamentally, in order to fully understand Levee's emphatic rejection of the Christian God and Cutler's violent reaction to the pronouncement that God hates him, one must recognize the theological assumptions of benevolence and justice that have been especially promoted through the black church. With this in mind, the political lens further highlights the entanglement of racial politics with questions of God's goodness and justice in relation to African American people. Levee's declaration that "Jesus hate your black ass" not only comments on Cutler's relation to God but, perhaps more importantly, implicates God in black oppression contending essentially that God is not on the side of the oppressed. Ultimately, in this conversation, questions of faith, race, justice, and theodicy are all entangled in a story of history and blues music. Further, this brief reading of the scene demonstrates the overlapping and interdependent relationship between the discourses that inform the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses. For this moment in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, recognizing the political, racial, social, and economic implications of theological assertions of God's goodness and justice are essential to understanding Levee's criticisms and the religiously-charge conflict between Levee and Cutler in the scene.

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[309] Kimmika L. H. Williams-Witherspoon, "Challenging the Stereotypes of Black Manhood: The Hidden Transcript in *Jitney*," in *August Wilson: Completing the Twentieth-Century Cycle*, ed. Alan Nadel (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 47.

[310] C. Eric Lincoln & Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

Together, the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses also enable scholars to read not only films that explicitly center black religion as a narrative thread, but also films in which religion is marginal to the narrative yet included as a part of the story or traits of an individual character. Especially in these instances, the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses may be useful for identifying and assessing stereotypical depictions of black religiosity. As black film scholar Michele Prettyman insists, scholars "need ways to demarcate images that depict Black spiritual experience from the familiar, deformed depictions of Black religious experience."[311] This imperative is rooted in the need to challenge controlling imagery of black religiosity at the same time that we recognize the significance of various forms of spirituality and religion in black communities.

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[311] Michele Prettyman, "On the Collection: Flash(es) of the Spirit: Images of Black Life as a Spiritual Encounter," World Records Journal 3, no. 9, accessed August 10, 2021, https://vols.worldrecordsjournal.org/03/09.

Religious confession, black preaching, and images of spiritual ecstasy or shouting practices, for example, often become caricatures of black religious life when the depictions lack the depth of racial aesthetic discourses on black Christianity. In particular, the stereotype of the corrupt black preacher, which is historically prevalent in cinematic representations of black religion, tends to stand in as a superficialized embodiment of black religiosity and symbolize the susceptibility of a mindless congregation. While depicting hypocritical or unscrupulous black preachers may importantly function as a conscious critique of black religious leadership, the one-dimensional stereotype of the "jackleg black preacher" perpetuates notions of black intellectual inferiority, naivete, and criminality when presented without consideration for the multiplicity of social, theological, and critical discourses on the role of the black preacher in black communities and varied practices of faith through adoption, adaptation, and critical consciousness.

Broadly, when folk traditions are isolated from theological discussions *and* critical interrogations, the corresponding images reproduce overdetermined characterizations of black religiosity that are simplistic and often innate and childlike. Multidimensional depictions of black religious life must take into account the cultural practices, political implications, and theological debates that underlie intracommunal conversations on race and religion and the complex ways in which they are integrated into the everyday. Through further development of the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses, these lenses can be particularly useful for assessing the extent to which cinematic representations of black religious characters and communities engage these critical-cultural conversations and address the polyvocal layers of theology, history, culture, and politics in these discussions.

Additionally, if black religious representation fails to address the multiplicity of discourses and practices of black religion, then they will fall short in their representation of the complexity and heterogeneity of black religious communities. Thus, although I focus in this dissertation on representations of black Christianity in African American film, this need to delineate superficial, exoticized depictions of black spirituality from layered representations of black religion and black life remains critically important for scholars, critics, and artists working to re-present black spiritual and religious experiences such as those of Hoodoo, Vodun, Yoruba religions, and others. Although the discourses informing each lens would differ when considering a variety of black religious traditions, the central thread of racial aesthetics as the connective tissue remains pertinent to other research questions and readings of black religious representation. Particularly, identification of the dividing lines between stereotypical depictions of black religiosity and multilayered representations of black spirituality and religion is essential for scholars, critics, and artists to continue the critical work of challenging controlling imagery of black communities.

While the focus of the case studies in this dissertation have been fictional feature-length films, the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses discussed are also useful for reading black Christianity in media texts such as documentary and television. Such documentaries as *Say Amen, Somebody* (George T. Nierenberg, 1982), *Black Is, Black Ain't* (Marlon Riggs, 1995), *I Am Not Your Negro* (Raoul Peck, 2017), and *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song* (Shayla Harris & Stacey L. Holman, 2021) engage with discourses on religion, blackness, gender, sexuality, class, and politics through their non-fictional inquiry into a range of African American experiences. Television shows, which have likewise often sincerely and satirically integrated religious characters, church settings, folk traditions, and theological questioning into their fictional narratives, have included *Amen* (1986-1991), *Good Times* (1974-1979), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), *Sister, Sister* (1994-1999), *Girlfriends* (2000-2008), *Greenleaf* (2016-2020), *Black Lightning* (2017-2021), and *Black Jesus* (2014—). These types of integrations and interrogations of black Christianity through a variety of visual narrative media illustrate the significance of African American religious history in representing the experiences and stories of black life.

In the face of ideological histories that have attempted to pigeonhole black communities through entangled racial and religious classification, the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses used to read these representations enable scholars, critics, artists, and audiences more broadly to recognize the religio-cultural discourses that have pervaded black religious life and have been represented through African American cinema. Beyond constraining notions of black people as either inherently religious or incapable of religion, the relationship between race and religion has continually been questioned and negotiated within the history of African American discourses and racial aesthetic conversations. With the cultural, gospel, critical, and political lenses to help focus our "looking" at African American representation, we can see these practices of interrogation, negotiation, and integration as evident in representations of black Christianity in African American film and other visual-aural media through which black communities engage with religion and culture.

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