

**CHICAGO THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

**CARING FOR THE MOST DISRESPECTED PERSON IN (ONLINE) AMERICA:  
BLACK WOMEN, IDENTITY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND SPIRITUAL CARE**

**A DISSERTATION**

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**BY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Digital space, specifically social media, is the new space where spiritual care takes place. Black women are the most abused group of people on social media today with violence specifically against Black women, Black Muslim women and Black trans women at an all-time high. Violence against these Black women is as a result of America's desire to still define these persons as stereotypical Jezebels, Mammies and Sapphires, continuing what Dr. Emilie Townes calls "the cultural production of evil" through social media now. My primary conversation partner, Dr. Na'im Akbar, suggests celebration is one strategy that breaks the chains of psychological slavery which negatively impacts African American people. With Dr. Akbar's theory of celebration in mind, this paper examines how the act of celebration can be utilized as a spiritual care practice on social media today to care for Black women, Black Muslim women and Black trans women who experience violence on social media. Celebrating these Black women specifically restores dignity.

I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Agnes Haymon, who rests with the ancestors.  
Thank you for always seeing me and thank you for always celebrating me.

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**INTRODUCTION.**  
**THE MOST DISRESPECTED PERSON IN (ONLINE) AMERICA: BLACK  
WOMEN AND THE NEED FOR DIGITAL SPIRITUAL CARE**

"The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman."<sup>1</sup> The Black radical militant icon (who eventually evolved to a “humanness approach”) and “our shining Black Prince”<sup>2</sup> Malcolm X uttered these words during a speech at the Woman’s National Democratic Club in Washington, D.C., on February 16, 1965. Malcolm X was influenced by Nina Simone’s *Four Women* lyrics:

*My skin is black  
My arms are long  
My hair is woolly  
My back is strong  
Strong enough to take the pain  
Inflicted again and again  
What do they call me?  
My name is Aunt Sarah  
My name is Aunt Sarah  
Aunt Sarah*

*My skin is yellow  
My hair is long  
Between two worlds*

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm X, “The Most Disrespected Person in America Is the Black Woman,” speech delivered in Los Angeles, May 22, 1962, Speakola, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://speakola.com/political/malcolm-x-speech-to-black-women-1962>.

<sup>2</sup> Ossie Davis, “For Malcolm X: ‘A Prince, our own black shining Prince,’” speech delivered at Faith Temple Church of God, Harlem, NY, February 27, 1965, Speakola, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://speakola.com/eulogy/malcolm-x-by-ossie-davis-1965>.

*I do belong  
But my father was rich and white  
He forced my mother late one night  
And what do they call me?  
My name is Saffronia  
My name is Saffronia*

*My skin is tan  
My hair is fine  
My hips invite you  
My mouth like wine  
Whose little girl am I?  
Anyone who has money to buy  
What do they call me?  
My name is Sweet Thing  
My name is Sweet Thing*

*My skin is brown  
My manner is tough  
I'll kill the first mother I see  
My life has been rough  
I'm awfully bitter these days  
Because my parents were slaves  
What do they call me?  
My name is Peaches<sup>3</sup>*

While most Black women aspire to be “Peaches,” all four women are still victims of racialized sexism and Malcolm X’s assertion still rings true today, resonating deeply in the contemporary digital age. For centuries, Black women in America have been subjected to systemic and societal dehumanization, often compounded by the most pervasive stereotypes. From the oversexualized Jezebel to the subservient and overweight Mammy, and the sharp-tongued, emasculating Sapphire, these portrayals have been deeply ingrained in the American psyche, according to Womanist Ethicist Emilie

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<sup>3</sup> Nina Simone, “Four Women,” Genius, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://genius.com/Nina-simone-four-women-lyrics>.

Townes.<sup>4</sup> The stereotypes are not merely passive descriptions of Black women; they are weaponized tools of oppression, used to restrict their humanity, limit their potential, and justify their marginalization in society. Even today, in an era dominated by technology and social media, these harmful archetypes continue to circulate, evolving into new forms but retaining the same underlying intention: to dehumanize and disempower Black women.

The rapid rise of social media as a dominant platform for communication, expression, and interaction has created new challenges, especially for those who identify as Black women, Black Muslim women, and Black transgender women. Social media, while providing a space for marginalized voices to be heard, has also become a breeding ground for abuse, harassment, and discrimination. Black women on these platforms often find themselves navigating hostile spaces where their identities are met with mockery, hostility, and exclusion.<sup>5</sup> Black women are forced to contend with an oppression collide for bearing Black skin and woman genitalia. For Black Muslim women, the intersecting forces of racism and Islamophobia complicate their experiences. Black transgender women face the added burden of transphobia and the marginalization of their gender identity. These compounded layers of discrimination create unique challenges for these groups of women, who must contend not only with the racism experienced by Black people in general but also with the specific forms of oppression that come from their

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<sup>4</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International, "Crowdsourced Twitter Study Reveals Shocking Scale of Online Abuse Against Women," press release, December 18, 2018, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2018/12/crowdsourced-twitter-study-reveals-shocking-scale-of-online-abuse-against-women/>.

intersectional identities. As Audre Lorde poignantly stated, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."<sup>6</sup>

In response to these realities, this dissertation addresses a pressing and critical question: how can we provide digital spiritual care to Black women, Black Muslim women, and Black transgender women as they navigate the complexities of social media? Digital spaces, for all their promises of connectivity and democratization, are often spaces of harm and violence for marginalized communities, and Black women—as ones specifically with intersecting identities—are among the most vulnerable.<sup>7</sup> This research seeks to explore how digital platforms can be transformed into spaces that promote healing, dignity, and affirmation for Black women. By providing a framework for digital spiritual care, this dissertation emphasizes the importance of nurturing the well-being of Black women as they engage with the digital world, advocating for a vision of online spaces that uplift rather than diminish their humanity.

At the heart of this research is the framework of African-centered psychology, which provides a foundation for understanding the unique needs of Black people in the context of healing and spiritual care. African-centered psychology emphasizes the importance of cultural identity, community, and collective healing, drawing upon African traditions, spiritual practices, and worldviews.<sup>8</sup> For Black women, this means recognizing and embracing the full scope of their cultural heritage, personal dignity, and intrinsic worth. This dissertation also draws upon the rich tradition of Black pastoral care, a field

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<sup>6</sup> Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 131.

<sup>7</sup> Suzie Dunn, Tracy Vaillancourt, and Heather Brittain, *Supporting Safer Digital Spaces* (Waterloo, ON: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2023).  
[https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/SaferInternet\\_Special\\_Report.pdf](https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/SaferInternet_Special_Report.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Na'im Akbar, *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery* (Tallahassee, FL: Mind Productions & Associates, 1996).

dedicated to providing emotional, spiritual, and psychological support to Black individuals, especially those navigating systems of oppression. Black pastoral care understands that the intersection of faith, culture, and community is essential to the holistic healing process, and this approach can be equally powerful in the digital realm. One key aspect of my research is the application of Na'im Akbar's *Theory of Celebration*. According to Akbar, "To celebrate is to affirm the essential goodness of the universe and of our own lives."<sup>9</sup> Akbar's theory emphasizes the healing power that comes from celebrating the gifts, successes, and cultural contributions of African Americans. According to Akbar, celebration is not merely an act of recognition, but a deeply transformative process that reinforces self-worth, restores dignity, and affirms the humanity of Black people.<sup>10</sup> With Akbar's theory in mind, I contend that when we celebrate Black women online, we are engaging in a practice of spiritual care, affirming their presence and resistance to the forces that seek to diminish their value. This act of celebration becomes a form of digital resistance—a powerful countermeasure to the dehumanization that Black women face in society and in online spaces.

The question, then, becomes: How can celebration be manifest in digital spaces? The answer lies in creating platforms, communities, and networks that actively celebrate the gifts, achievements, and cultural contributions of Black women in all their diversity. This could take the form of social media campaigns that center the voices and experiences of Black women, hashtags that promote positive representation, or online spaces dedicated to sharing knowledge, art, and narratives that uplift Black women. These spaces can become sites of healing, where Black women are not only seen and

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<sup>9</sup> Akbar, *Breaking The Chains of Psychological Slavery*, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Akbar, *Breaking The Chains of Psychological Slavery*, 36-37.

heard but are actively affirmed for who they are and what they contribute to the world. This type of digital spiritual care can help to counterbalance the harm of toxic online cultures, creating a supportive environment where Black women can thrive and heal. Furthermore, by framing celebration as an act of spiritual practice, we also emphasize the importance of dignity restoration. In a society that has historically denied Black women their full humanity, the act of celebrating their worth is not just a nice gesture; it is an essential process of reclaiming their power and humanity. In this dissertation, I argue that the work of uplifting Black women, Black Muslim women and Black transgender women online is not just an act of care but a sacred practice that nurtures their spirit. It is an ongoing act of resistance to the stereotypes that have haunted Black women for centuries and a call for a more inclusive and affirming digital future.

This dissertation features seven chapters. In “America Hates Black Women”, this opening chapter addresses the central thesis of the dissertation, that Black women in America have historically been, and continue to be, subjected to deep disrespect, marginalization, and violence. Drawing on Malcolm X’s 1962 statement, the chapter provides a historical and socio-political context for understanding the societal dehumanization of Black women. It explores how systemic racism, cultural stereotypes, and media portrayals (such as the Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire) have shaped the public imagination and fostered a culture of anti-Black misogyny. The chapter sets the stage for understanding the significance of digital spaces as both sites of harm and potential spaces for spiritual healing and care for Black women.

Chapter two delves into Africana Pastoral Theology, highlighting its critical contributions to Black pastoral care. This chapter goes beyond traditional frameworks,

such as the Clebsch and Jaeckle model of pastoral care, by acknowledging the unique historical, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of Black life. It explores how Africana theology, with its focus on the lived experiences of Black communities, offers a robust foundation for providing spiritual care. The chapter argues that Africana Pastoral Theology, with its emphasis on cultural affirmation, unity and resilience, is essential for developing a holistic approach to digital spiritual care for Black women.

Chapter three, “Racialized Sexism, The Black Woman and Violence On Social Media: From Manufacturing Mammy to Maligning Maxine”, focuses on the intersection of racism and sexism—often referred to as racialized sexism—as it plays out in online spaces. It tracks the ways in which Black women’s identities are distorted, commodified, and attacked on social media. Drawing from historical archetypes such as the Mammy and Sapphire, the chapter argues that these racialized stereotypes persist and are exacerbated in digital spaces. The chapter examines how online violence and harassment, including the maligning of public figures like Maxine Waters, demonstrate the dehumanizing effects of these persistent stereotypes. It underscores the need for digital spaces that challenge these depictions and offer platforms for affirming Black women’s voices and dignity.

In chapter four, the dissertation shifts to focus on the particular experiences of Black Muslim women who face both racism and Islamophobia in digital spaces. It explores how social media has become a venue for exacerbating anti-Muslim sentiment, with Black Muslim women often subjected to intersecting forms of racial and religious discrimination. The chapter investigates how Islamophobic narratives are perpetuated online and how these narratives intersect with the racialized misogyny already directed at

Black women. The chapter discusses how this dual oppression calls for a more nuanced approach to digital care, one that takes into account the specific vulnerabilities of Black Muslim women in digital spaces.

Chapter five engages with the concept of "care-fronting," a term that blends pastoral care with confrontation of injustice. It examines the ways in which the Black Church can play a critical role in addressing transphobia, particularly anti-Black transgender female violence that is perpetuated and magnified on social media. Drawing upon the biblical figure of Rizpah, who demonstrated fierce protection and care for her children, this chapter argues that the Church must embrace a model of care that challenges transphobia within its own communities and responds to the violence that Black transgender women face online. The chapter explores how digital spaces can be leveraged to create a collective, theological response to transphobic violence and provide spiritual care for Black transgender women.

In chapter six, "Differentiating Digital Dignity: A Social Media Ethnographical Case Study & Digital Theological Anthropology", this dissertation highlights a social media ethnographical case study that examines how Black women, particularly those in marginalized intersections, engage with digital spaces. Using a mix of qualitative methods, including participant observation and content analysis, the chapter explores how Black women navigate online spaces while asserting their dignity, resisting violence, and creating communities of care. Drawing on digital theological anthropology, the chapter considers how online behaviors, and spiritual practices reflect the broader social and cultural dynamics of Black women's lives, offering insights into the ways digital spaces

can foster a sense of dignity and belonging. The chapter serves as an empirical grounding for understanding how spiritual care practices can be adapted for the digital age.

Last but not least, chapter seven, “Freeing A Captive (Digital) Mind: Individual and Communal Celebration As A Spiritual Care Practice In Digital Space” focuses on the concept of "celebration" as a spiritual care practice in digital spaces. Building on Na'im Akbar's *Theory of Celebration*, this chapter explores how celebrating the gifts, contributions, and cultural heritage of Black women can function as both individual and communal acts of spiritual healing and resistance. The chapter argues that digital spaces offer a unique opportunity to practice celebration in a collective, affirming way that restores dignity, empowers Black women, and combats the negative stereotypes that seek to undermine them. It concludes by envisioning a future in which digital spaces become sites of empowerment and healing where Black women are celebrated for their full humanity, agency, and potential.

This dissertation contributes to broader conversations and subjects of spiritual care, mental health, and cultural affirmation in the digital age. By centering the experiences of Black women in all their complexities and identities, this work seeks to create a vision for digital spaces that are not only safer but also empowering and affirming. It calls for a shift in the way we think about social media and technology—not as tools for harm or exploitation, but as vehicles for healing, community-building, and cultural affirmation. As we move forward into an increasingly digital world, we must ensure that Black women, in all their diverse identities, are not the most disrespected, but the most celebrated.

Lastly, the need for digital spiritual care for Black women, Black Muslim women, and Black transgender women is urgent and undeniable. As social media becomes a dominant force in shaping our world, it is crucial that we actively work to transform these spaces into environments that nurture, celebrate, and uplift Black women rather than perpetuate their harm. By embracing celebration as both a tool for healing and a spiritual practice, we can begin to envision a future where Black women are not just surviving in digital spaces but are thriving, honored, and respected in ways that reflect their true worth. This vision, though aspirational, is not impossible. It is, in fact, the work of our generation to make it a reality.

## **CHAPTER 1.**

### **AMERICA HATES BLACK WOMEN**

America hates Black women. This was made evident on November 6, 2024, one day after the presidential election to declare the 47<sup>th</sup> president of these so-called United States of America. A reputable, highly credentialed and current Madam Vice President Kamala Harris went toe to toe with an embattled, controversial former president, Donald Trump. In the end, election result polls would reveal that white women, white men and Latino men preferred a known racist and rapist as president over an upright, reliable and, at the very least, decent Black woman.<sup>1</sup> Kamala Harris' plight made Audre Lorde's wisdom spoken years ago still relevant today, "Black women have on one hand always

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<sup>1</sup> Domenico Montanaro, "Why Trump Won — 9 Takeaways from the 2024 Election," NPR, November 8, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/11/08/g-s1-33274/2024-election-how-trump-won-takeaways>.

been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism.”<sup>2</sup>

Some would cite inflation and the poor economy for Trump’s success at the polls. Others would highlight a majority’s desires to thwart left-wing progressive policies. However, the presidential election didn’t come down to political issues for many voters; unfortunately, neither presidential elections of 2024 nor 2016 that featured a woman as a primary candidate came down to political issues.<sup>3</sup> Missouri passed a law to increase minimum wage, a proposal backed by Vice President Harris, however most Missourians still voted for Donald Trump even though he was against the proposal. Most Floridians voted in favor of Democratic policies such as the legalization of marijuana and protections around abortion, however these same Floridians voted for Trump to be president.

With only 107 days available to mount a winning presidential campaign against a powerful white man who was also a former president with endless cash donations from the rich and powerful Elon Musk, Vice President Harris was doomed from the start. She would have had better luck pulling a rabbit from a hat. Yet, Democrats leaned on this Black woman to do the impossible: save America. Harris was amenable to almost every progressive proposed policy and issue tossed her way. She worked hard in those 107 days to bend over backwards gaining the hearts of Democrats and shifting the mindsets of middle-of-the-ground Republicans.<sup>4</sup> In the end, none of her hard work mattered. America

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<sup>2</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 42.

<sup>3</sup> University of California Free Speech Center, 2020 Compiled Works (Irvine, CA: University of California Free Speech Center, 2021), accessed April 22, 2025, [https://freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2020\\_UCI\\_CompiledWorks.pdf](https://freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2020_UCI_CompiledWorks.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Edward-Isaac Dove, “Where Harris’ Campaign Went Wrong,” CNN Politics, November 6, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/06/politics/harris-campaign-went-wrong/index.html>.

still leaned towards selecting someone who was indicted four times, convicted of 34 felonies<sup>5</sup>, lost the presidential debate, went back and forth on his thoughts about abortion, fought against minimum wage increases, could only articulate concepts of a plan for healthcare, refused to apologize for a comedian insulting Puerto Rican Americans at a rally, picked a Vice President running mate who referred to him as “America’s Hitler”<sup>6</sup>. In the end, none of these atrocities mattered because America just couldn’t bring herself to support a Black woman to be president. Lady Liberty weeps.

On November 6, Black women around the country experienced moral injury. Since the inception of African Enslavement in 1619 when ships carrying kidnapped African women and men arrived on the coast of Jamestown, Virginia, Black women have repeatedly been told to not be sexually pervasive, not be smart-mouth, not be docile, laid back and happily-go-lucky, yet America voted for this exact prototype to be the 47<sup>th</sup> president of these not-so United States. According to exit polls cited by The Washington Post, a majority 59% of white men voted for Trump over Harris, a majority 52% of white women voted for Trump over Harris, a small 20% of Black men voted for Trump over Harris, a majority 54% Hispanic/Latino men voted for Trump over Harris and a small 37% of Hispanic/Latino women voted for Trump over Harris.<sup>7</sup> The 2024 presidential

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<sup>5</sup> Michael R. Sisak, Jennifer Peltz, Eric Tucker, and Michelle L. Price, “Guilty: Trump Becomes First Former US President Convicted of Felony Crimes,” AP News, May 30, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-trial-deliberations-jury-testimony-verdict-85558c6d08efb434d05b694364470aa0>.

<sup>6</sup> “Fact Check: Yes, JD Vance Once Called Trump ‘America’s Hitler,’” MSN, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/fact-check-yes-jd-vance-once-called-trump-americas-hitler/ar-BB1qeFTu>.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Guskin, Chris Alcantara, and Janice Kai Chen, “Exit Polls from the 2024 Presidential Election,” The Washington Post, December 2, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/elections/interactive/2024/exit-polls-2024-election/>.

election placed racialized sexism on full display and unashamedly and unapologetically proclaimed: America hates Black women.

In a speech given in 1964, Malcolm X stated, “the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman.”<sup>8</sup> These words would be prophetic of the infamous Daniel Moynihan Report published one year later which concluded that the plight of the “Negro Family” was at the hands of Black women who sought to hoard employment opportunities from Black men, negate domestic duties for college degrees and advancements in the academy instead and become more and more comfortable being single mothers devoid of Black male partnerships.<sup>9</sup> Moynihan’s mythical report pitted Black men against Black women during an already fragile time when both Black men and women were struggling against White counterparts for equal racial rights during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. I venture to say the same dynamic exists today nearly 100 years later. While Moynihan’s report went viral in popular media during the 1960s, social media, the popular media of our time, also makes violence towards Black women go viral today.

According to a 2018 study by Amnesty International, Black women are the most attacked group on social media today.<sup>10</sup>

“Black women have always been the organizing backbone around civil rights work, even though men have often been in the leadership figure-head position,” Noble said. “Black women have actually been the ones who turned the people out for the marches, organized the boycotts, helped draft the policy and the language for the lawsuits. I think it’s much more

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<sup>8</sup> Malcolm X, “The Most Disrespected Person in America Is the Black Woman,” speech delivered in Los Angeles, May 22, 1962, Speakola, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://speakola.com/political/malcolm-x-speech-to-black-women-1962>.

<sup>9</sup> Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan>.

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International, “Toxic Twitter – A Toxic Place for Women,” Amnesty International, March 21, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1-1/>.

valuable to destroy the intellectual and emotional labor that goes into civil rights work than it is to just take down figureheads. Figureheads do get taken down too, but if we can take down Black women, we can take down these equity programs that are about social justice.” -Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*<sup>11</sup>

In essence, Black women are seen as threats particularly in the social political world and are therefore scapegoated and attacked in digital spaces. Tara Conley of *Hashtag Feminism* adds that social media has become the popular medium to attack Black women because it was the medium that three innovative Black women initially utilized to draw attention to police brutality against Black people, spearheading the #BlackLivesMatter Movement.

While Malcolm X unashamedly proclaimed, “the most disrespected person in America is the Black woman,”<sup>12</sup> I carry this statement a step forward and suggest that in our 2020s era, the most disrespected person in online America is the Black woman. What will we do about it because, in the words of Audre Lorde, “life is very short and what we have to do must be done in the now”?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Janell Hobson, “Black Women Caught in the Digital Crosshairs,” Ms. Magazine, May 15, 2024, <https://msmagazine.com/2024/05/15/black-women-online-abuse-beyonce-claudine-gay/>.

<sup>12</sup> Malcolm X, “The Most Disrespected Person in America Is the Black Woman.”

<sup>13</sup> Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*.

**CHAPTER 2.**  
**BEYOND CLEBSCH AND JAECKLE:**  
**Acknowledging The Gifts of Africana Pastoral Theology's Influence**  
**on Black Pastoral Care**

There are six major feelings that all persons experience: sad, mad, scared, peaceful, joyful and powerful.<sup>1</sup> Pastoral theology is concerned with studying or understanding how God cares for people in light of these six feelings that people experience. "Pastoral theology is essentially *theology*, deeply concerned about the nature of God and the relationship between humanity and the divine," according to Emmanuel Lartey.<sup>2</sup> Africana Pastoral Theology is specifically concerned with studying or understanding how God cares for the soul of persons of direct or indirect African descent who experience these feelings especially in light of racism, capitalism, globalization and colonization.<sup>3</sup> Africana Pastoral Theology contends that it's not enough to simply care for the personal or individual souls of African persons. While care is to be extended around one's personal or individual concerns, care must also encompass the social and political concerns that individuals grapple with as well that hurts their souls. "Pastoral care exists when the hungry are fed, when the naked are clothed, when the sick are healed,"

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Willcox, "The Feeling Wheel: A Tool for Expanding Awareness of Emotions and Increasing Spontaneity and Intimacy, Positive Psychology Practitioner's Toolkit," <https://www.gnyha.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-Feeling-Wheel-Positive-Psycology-Program.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Lartey, *Pastoral Theology In An Intercultural World*, 5.

according to Mary Clark Moschella and Lee H. Butler.<sup>4</sup> This is the prophetic, social justice component of Africana Pastoral Theology.

A second theme of Africana Pastoral Theology is that it is concerned with the social and political plight of the entire African community. “Pastoral care is a communal concept.”<sup>5</sup> In the face of individualism, Africana Pastoral Theology radically proclaims that the communal needs of the African community as a whole are important to highlight. For example, Africana Pastoral Theology, in the spirit of “Umoja” (meaning unity) was deeply connected to understanding how God cared for the entire community of South Africans during the period of Apartheid or how God cared for the entire community of Rwanda during genocidal oppression.

In addition to examining “the what” and “the who” that Africana Pastoral Theology is directed at and to whom, we must also examine the authorities that Africana Pastoral Theology affirms. This theological framework encompasses an African-centered psychological worldview that welcomes the ancestors to be co-authorities with God.<sup>6</sup> In addition to simply reflecting on “How is God in relationship with African bodies who currently wrestle against colonization, globalization, etc.?” Africana Pastoral Theology asks one to reflect on: “What are your ancestors saying to you right now (in addition to God’s voice) in light of your current social and political dilemma?” Africana Pastoral Theology also centers the authority of the Elder in the community. An African-centered worldview invites persons to connect with the Elder for support during crisis.<sup>7</sup> The Elder

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Moschella and Lee Butler, eds., *The Edward Wimberly Reader: A Black Pastoral Theology*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Moschella and Butler, *The Edward Wimberly Reader*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Na'im Akbar, *Know Thyself* (Tallahassee, FL: Mind Productions & Associates, 1998)

<sup>7</sup> Na'im Akbar, *Akbar's Papers in African Psychology* (Tallahassee, FL: Mind Productions & Associates, 2004).

sits in relationship with the young person in community where mutuality and an equal sharing of knowledge persists, highlighting intergenerational connectedness. Lastly, circular time is an influential authority in Africana Pastoral Theology. In comparison to western civilization's understanding of time as linear, Africana Pastoral Theology, again informed by an African-centered worldview<sup>8</sup>, suggests that care revolves in a circular progression, thus there is no formal expiration date for when care will expire or no longer be needed but can be ongoing and even permanent. It is important to note that our reference to Africana Pastoral Theology is grounded in a Christological framework given the word "pastoral" highlighted in this theological reference. Many Africana Pastoral Theologians would instead highlight Africana Spirituality Theological Perspective or Africana Spiritual Care Theology as a more inclusive framing given many practice African Traditional Religions, not only Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

Africana Pastoral Theology (or Africana Spirituality Theological Perspective) greatly influences Africana Diasporic Pastoral Theology.<sup>10</sup> In a similar fashion of how Africana Pastoral Theology was birthed in response to colonialism, capitalism, globalization and colonialization that African bodies faced living in the Motherland of Africa, Africana Diasporic Pastoral Theology was birthed in response to oppression that African American bodies faced living in the United States of North America.<sup>11</sup> Several ethnographers have written about the social and political plight of African Americans' lives especially during the periods of African Enslavement (1619-1865), Jim Crow (1865-

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<sup>8</sup> Akbar, *Akbar's Papers in African Psychology*.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob K. Olupona, ed., *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*.

1954) and the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1970). One example is W.E.B. DuBois' ethnography of Black life in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Africana Diasporic Pastoral Theology (or what I'll now term Black Pastoral Theology) was specifically born in response to the Civil Rights Movement and asks, "How do we care for the souls of Black folks in light of racism?" The Civil Rights Movement first inspired the creation of Black Liberation Theology which in turn inspired Black Pastoral Theology.<sup>12</sup>

Allow me to speak specifically about the induction of Black Pastoral Theology. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, two notable African American figures arose: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and The Nation of Islam's Shining Black Prince, Malcolm X. These prophetic gentlemen became the theological sources who inspired Dr. James Cone to give birth to Black Liberation Theology although he also built it on a much longer, larger legacy of black struggle. Dr. Cone, after the AME churches, Bishop and fiery political activist Henry McNeil Turner 1834 to 1915 declared, "God is a Negro." Dr. Cone was the first Black Liberation Theologian to proclaim, "God is Black" and "God sits on the side of the oppressed, specifically Black folks."<sup>13</sup> The Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Cone's Black Liberation Theology inspired Dr. Edward Wimberly to craft Black Pastoral Theology.

Edward Wimberly believed that the source of Black Pastoral Theology and Black Pastoral Care is ultimately The Black Church.<sup>14</sup> In 1979 and into the 80s, Wimberly proclaimed that The Black Church, which had been the source for community organizing during the Civil Rights Movement and The Black Pastor who lead many of these

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<sup>12</sup> James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), XX.

<sup>13</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 63–64.

<sup>14</sup> Edward P. Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979).

nonviolent protests, was also influential in providing Black folks pastoral care. Wimberly professed three themes or shifts in Black Pastoral Theology and Care during the height of his teaching career: contextual care, narrative care and prophetic care.<sup>15</sup> During the 1980's, Wimberly believed that contextual care centered on Black folks recommitting their relationship to The Black Church and subsequently The Black Pastor. Wimberly believed that if Black folks could make their way to the church, then their spiritual connection with God would realign, their connection to The Black Church would realign and their connection to the Black community would realign.

While Edward Wimberly works hard to give credit to the Black Church as the originator of Black Pastoral Theology and Black Pastoral Care, we must highlight what was the source that inspired Wimberly. After reading, The Edward Wimberly Reader, I contend that Wimberly was inspired by Africana Pastoral Theology and Africana Pastoral Care. In 1965, Wimberly began studies at Boston University. As a part of his dissertation, Wimberly highlighted the dynamic of contextual care as a center piece of understanding pastoral care. Wimberly believed that *where* and *under what circumstance* pastoral care takes place pushes pastoral care providers to function with a unique, specific pastoral care methodology.<sup>16</sup> Thus, pastoral care occurs based on the context of where the care recipient lives and functions and what social ills they must grapple with at the time.<sup>17</sup> For Wimberly the Black Church of the 1960s provided the context of where pastoral care takes place however what informed his view was his study of African Enslavement and how this period in America's history provided a particular context for how enslaved

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<sup>15</sup> Moschella and Butler, *The Edward Wimberly Reader*.

<sup>16</sup> Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*.

<sup>17</sup> Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*.

Africans cared for each other during the most traumatic, atrocious, and vicious time in their lives. Wimberly studied how African peoples cared for each other in the face of slavery using the oral tradition and the prophetic tradition and he would later adopt these dynamics and suggest the Black Church care for Black people in a similar fashion during the Civil Rights Movement through use of the oral tradition and the prophetic tradition.<sup>18</sup>

This Black Pastoral Theological framework created by Wimberly was groundbreaking in the field of pastoral care. William Clebsch and Charles Jaeckle, who until that time were considered the founders of pastoral care before Wimberly's entrance, suggested that there are four basic elements of pastoral care: healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling.<sup>19</sup> Wimberly believed that Black Pastoral Theology and Care primarily focuses on the elements of sustaining and guiding.<sup>20</sup> In light of his first theme centering contextual care, Wimberly believed that Black folks are the context for receiving care, The Black Church Pastor is the context for giving care, The Black Church is the context for where care takes place and racial oppression towards Black folks is the context for why care is needed in the first place.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1980's Black Pastoral Theology and Care also focused on encouraging Black self-esteem and confidence in one's Black identity. Wimberly wrote much about this along with his colleague in the field of Black Pastoral Care, Dr. Archie Smith. As the 1990s progressed, the United States began to experience more biased and racist media focus around Black male youth violence in urban communities, inspiring Wimberly to lean into care for young Black males specifically. Near the end of the 1990s and

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<sup>18</sup> Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*.

<sup>19</sup> Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*.

<sup>20</sup> Moschella and Butler, *The Edward Wimberly Reader: A Black Pastoral Theology*.

<sup>21</sup> Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*.

beginning in the 2000s, Wimberly shifted to highlighting Kohut's theory of "mirroring" and narrative therapy/theory in Black Pastoral Care.<sup>22</sup> This was the first of its kind. Wimberly focused on stressing how The Black Church Pastor can mirror healthy Black self-esteem, Black identity and consciousness and Black excellence is behavior and conduct. Further into the 2000s and 2010 period, Wimberly shifted to focusing on the political landscape and political plight facing Black people, thereby moving to empowerment as a Black pastoral care strategy.<sup>23</sup> Wimberly began to focus on the politics of oppression and how Black folks could heal through affirmation and empowerment. Dr. Wimberly and Dr. Lee Butler would shift to focusing on the power of Black folks reclaiming Black dignity.<sup>24</sup> Dr. Butler created The African American Communal Identity Formation strategy, ultimately fostering Black dignity.<sup>25</sup>

We began to see a shift in the field of Black Pastoral Theology and Care during the 2000s and beyond. One critique of Wimberly and Black Pastoral Theology until this point was the limited voices of Black women as contributors in the field. With the creation of Womanist Theology, Black Womanist Pastoral Care voices began to arise such as Linda Hollies, Carol Watkins Ali, Emillie Townes, Stephanie Crumpton, Sharon Ellis Davis and Chanequa Walker Barnes. Just as Womanist Theology began to challenge the patriarchy inherit in Black Liberation Theology, Carol Watkins Ali and other notable Black women pastoral theologians began to challenge the sexism and patriarchy inherit in Black Pastoral Theology.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care*.

<sup>23</sup> Edward P. Wimberly, *African American Pastoral Care and Counseling: The Politics of Oppression and Empowerment* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Lee H Butler, *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving Our Souls* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *Liberating Our Dignity, Saving Our Souls*.

<sup>26</sup> Carroll A. Watkins Ali, *Survival & Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999).

We've also seen Black LGBTQIA Pastoral Theologians surface such as Horace Griffin and Dr. Pamela Lightsey who challenge homophobia and transphobia in their works *Their Own Receive Them Not* and *Our Lives Matter*.

Questions we now grapple with in the field that my PhD dissertation will focus on: What happens when The Black Church is no longer the center of Black Pastoral Theology and Care? What happens when the Black Pastor is no longer the primary source or authority to give Black pastoral care? In light of the emergence of Spiritual Not Religious Movements, Muslim/Islamic influences and a reconnection to African Spirituality and African Traditional Religion, what happens when "Christian supremacy" in Black Pastoral Theology and Care is no longer just or the primary theological underpinning? What happens when pastoral care and spiritual care don't take place within the four walls of a church but instead take place in digital space and is offered by someone who didn't go to seminary and doesn't identify as a Christian pastor?

While I love and adore The Black Church and The Black Pastor, I propose that Black Pastoral Care be given outside The Black Church, for example, in digital space. In what ways does digital space represent the new context for care? I also propose that one does not necessarily have to be a pastor, or religious authority, to offer pastoral care. In what ways does the Black layperson community in digital space also offer Black pastoral care? Can we shift pastoral care to move away from the hierarchy and privilege evidenced in the field? How much of pastoral care is ultimately basic human decency skills that all humans are to possess? In what ways can we bring our African ancestors to the internet? What I mean by this is how can pastoral care and spiritual care practitioners incorporate an African-centered worldview and way of being to the social media in the

provision of digital care? How do we care for Black women online users especially, considering that they are the most disrespected person in online America?

### **CHAPTER 3.**

## **RACIALIZED SEXISM, THE BLACK WOMAN AND VIOLENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

### **From Manufacturing Mammy to Maligning Maxine:**

#### **The “Cultural Production of Evil”<sup>1</sup> On Social Media In Creating Stereotypical Myths About Black Women**

Her name was Saartjie Baartman. Her story is both fascinating and tragic. Sarah ‘Saartjie’ Baartman was an African woman born in 1789 in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, baby girl Sarah experienced turmoil at a young age. Her mother died when Sarah was just two-years-old and her father met an untimely death when Sarah was a teenager.<sup>3</sup> At 16-years-old, Sarah experienced joy when her male

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<sup>1</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> “Sara ‘Saartjie’ Baartman,” South African History Online, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/sara-saartjie-baartman>.

<sup>3</sup> “Sara ‘Saartjie’ Baartman,” South African History Online.

significant other proposed to her but this joy turned into sorrow yet again when he was murdered by Dutch colonist.<sup>4</sup> Sarah regained hope after discovering she was pregnant with her murdered fiancé's child, but then tragedy struck again when the baby died shortly after birth.<sup>5</sup>

Sarah's life story becomes even more pervasive when, at the age of 20, on October 29, 1810, although she didn't know how to read or write and cultural tradition prohibited her from retaining written records, "Sarah allegedly 'signed' a contract with an English ship surgeon named William Dunlop" in which "the terms of her 'contract' were that she would travel with Hendrik Cezar and Dunlop to England and Ireland to work as a domestic servant, and be exhibited for entertainment purposes" in exchange for a "portion of earnings from her exhibitions and be allowed to return to South Africa after five years".<sup>6</sup> According to author Marisa Meltzer:

"England was transitioning from a sentimental primitivism -- the noble savage -- to the popular Victorian notion of ethnology. With the slave trade being abolished just a few years before and the black population of London at about 20,000, their challenge was to make the investment -- Baartman -- conform to stereotypes and yet also seem like a novelty. They marketed her as a kind of 'scantly clad totem goddess,' the Hottentot Venus, sex incarnate. Hottentots, what European traders called the native Khoisan for the clicking sound of their language, 'signified all that was strange, disturbing, alien, and possibly, sexually deviant.' She was objectified in the most literal sense, put on display in front of gaping crowds six days a week, doing suggestive 'native' dancing and playing African instruments. Her costume was a flesh-colored silk sheath deliberately cut like a second skin, with copious jewelry at the seams to conceal the fact that she wasn't technically naked. They also fashioned her a kind of female codpiece, 'the effect of its soft folds, fur fringes, and pendulous extensions was to imply that its purpose was to modestly

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<sup>4</sup> "Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman," South African History Online.

<sup>5</sup> "Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman," South African History Online.

<sup>6</sup> "Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman," South African History Online.

conceal the supposedly elongated labia of a Hottentot woman' -- a subject of great interest and speculation among the gawking masses. She became an instant sensation, a subject of countless life drawings (many of which are included in the book), editorials and political cartoons. The London Morning Post wrote, of her body, that 'her contour and formation certainly surpass any thing [sic] of the kind ever seen in Europe, or perhaps ever produced on Earth.'"<sup>7</sup>

September of 1814, Sarah was transported to France where she was sold to a gentleman who showcased animals and exhibited her around Paris in a cage beside a baby rhinoceros and trained her to sit or stand in a parallel manner to animals in a circus:<sup>8</sup>

"At times Baartman was displayed almost completely naked, wearing little more than a tan loincloth, and she was only allowed that due to her insistence that she cover what was culturally sacred. She was nicknamed 'Hottentot Venus'."<sup>9</sup>

Attention to Sarah attracted medical research by French anatomists, zoologists and physiologists, who in 1815, surmised that Sarah was directly related to an animal --this medical research sought to justify the stereotype that Africans were oversexed and a lesser race.<sup>10</sup>

Sarah Baartman's tragic young life finally came to an end in 1816 when she was 26 years old. What was even more tragic, I contend, was her inability to rest in peace. A medical researcher "obtained her remains from local police and dissected her body", making "a plaster cast of her body, pickled her brain and genitals and placed them into jars which were placed on display at the *Musée de l'Homme* (*Museum of Man*) until 1974."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rachel Holmes, "Venus Abused," Salon, January 9, 2007, <https://www.salon.com/2007/01/09/holmes/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman," South African History Online.

<sup>9</sup> "Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman," South African History Online.

<sup>10</sup> "Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman," South African History Online.

<sup>11</sup> "Sara 'Saartjie' Baartman," South African History Online.

I argue that the racist, sexist, ageist, and classist sexualized manipulation of Sarah Baartman's naked body being exhibited and paraded as a circus animal both in England and France and, even after death, being dissected and displayed in a French museum was the first notable, well-known act of African female sexual *global* violence gone viral.

### *Videos of Violence Against Black Women Are Going Viral*

It has become trendy to attack Black women on camera, then post the videos to go viral on social media for the entire world to see -a twice as gruesome misfortune for the Black woman victim. In January of 2019, a grotesque video went viral on social media showing a homeless White man violently attacking a Black female employee of a fast food restaurant because there were no straws readily available for patrons to retrieve on their own in a public space of the restaurant. According to a witness:

“The Florida man had just gotten his order...at a McDonald's in St. Petersburg. ‘He got upset when there weren't any plastic straws out at the condiment station,’ witness Brenda Biandudi told CNN. ‘He walked back to the counter and got in a heated argument with an employee about the straws,’ Biandudi said. Then, video shows him reaching over the counter and grabbing the employee, Yasmine James. By the end of the night, Daniel Taylor, a 40-year-old homeless man, would be arrested on two charges of simple battery, according to an arrest affidavit from the St. Petersburg Police Department.”<sup>12</sup>

The reason that drinking straws were not readily available was at no fault of the worker.

According to CNN, “A city ordinance went into effect on January 1 that requires

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<sup>12</sup> Christinia Zdanowicz, “A Man Attacked a McDonald's Employee over a Straw — and She Fought Back,” CNN, January 2, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/02/us/customer-attacks-mcdonalds-employee/index.html>.

customers to ask for straws. It's a way for businesses to adjust before a ban on single-use plastic straws takes effect in January 2020.”<sup>13</sup> According to the witness, the White male patron became enraged at not being able to retrieve a straw on his own so he approached the counter where the Black female fast food worker was stationed and he “reached across and tried to grab her and hit her.”<sup>14</sup>

The video shows the worker trying to defend herself against the man’s attempt to grab her by her neck and his repeated attempts to hit to her face. What makes this video even more devastating is fellow African American male workers present during the altercation seemed paralyzed and wouldn’t help intervene for their victimized African American female colleague until several seconds go pass. The fast-food worker reported fearing for her life:

“I didn't know if he had a gun, a knife or what was he going to do to me. I felt very alone because no one helped me or anything," James told CNN. "I was very overwhelmed and stressed because a man just grabbed me and tried to attack me.”<sup>15</sup>

I insist that the video showed how, first, even a poor, homeless White man feels existentially privileged and superior to an employed Black woman. Second, even an inanimate object, such as a plastic straw, is considerable by some to have more value than Black Life.

Last but not least, when a homeless White male can violently attack a Black female employee of a fast-food restaurant while her Black male employee colleagues

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<sup>13</sup> Zdanowicz, “A Man Attacked a McDonald's Employee over a Straw.”

<sup>14</sup> Zdanowicz, “A Man Attacked a McDonald's Employee over a Straw.”

<sup>15</sup> Zdanowicz, “A Man Attacked a McDonald's Employee over a Straw.”

standby paralyzed and powerless, some Black women are reminded that they can not turn to some Black men for protection and provision, adding to some of the distrust and destruction of Black male-female relationships.<sup>16</sup>

These types of videos showing violence to the Black female body are trendy on social media in recent months:

“In the early hours of a Thursday morning [in Dallas], L’Daijohannique Lee, a Black woman, found herself in fear for her life as she suffered an assault from a gun wielding White male in the Deep Ellum section of the city. Cell phone video, which has gone viral, allegedly shows Austin Shuffield knocking Ms. Lee’s phone out of her hand as she attempts to call the police. The man in the video brandishes a weapon, pummels her and unleashes racial slurs in what was apparently rage over a parking space. Lee was brutally beaten. At a hospital, she was diagnosed with cranial swelling and post-concussion syndrome. Mr. Shuffield was initially arrested and faced misdemeanor charges in the March 21 attack, including assault causing bodily injury, intoxication, and interfering with an emergency call. He was released from jail on a \$1,500 bond. A week later, felony charges were filed against Mr. Shuffield for his alleged attack on Ms. Lee. ‘We are pleased to learn about the additional felony charges against Austin Shuffield referred to the Dallas County District Attorney’s office by the Dallas Police Department detectives,’ said Attorney Lee Merritt, who is representing the victim. Blacks in Dallas had expressed outrage the White male was not initially charged with felony crimes given the firearm and what they called hate speech.”<sup>17</sup>

The list continues. A Detroit police officer was demoted after making "racially insensitive" jokes on Snapchat while filming a Black woman walk home, including using

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<sup>16</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> Jihad Hassan Muhammad, “Who Will Protect Her? – Viral video assaults on Black women stoke anger and serious questions,” April 2, 2019, [https://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/National\\_News\\_2/Who-Will-Protect-Her---Viral-video-assaults-on-Black-women-stoke-anger-and-serious-questions.shtml](https://www.finalcall.com/artman/publish/National_News_2/Who-Will-Protect-Her---Viral-video-assaults-on-Black-women-stoke-anger-and-serious-questions.shtml).

caption "celebrating Black History month", after the officer impounds the woman's car.<sup>18</sup>

The incident unfolded during a traffic stop in the city's West Side. Detroit Police Chief James Craig said the officer, later identified as Corporal Gary Steele, and his partner pulled over 23-year-old Ariel Moore for expired registration on her license plate and seized her vehicle.<sup>19</sup>

Viral videos of violence to Black women also show that White men are not the only perpetrators of violence to the Black female body. It seems White women are not more caring for the Black female body either. An African American female Marine veteran, Zandrea Askew, is seeking \$1 million in damages from the LaSalle County Sheriff's Office after three White female deputies 'forcibly and maliciously' strip searched her on a jail floor.<sup>20</sup> The viral video is disturbing to say the least.

Even Black female bodies that have yet to develop into full adulthood are victimized on video and go viral. A Texas daycare recently come under fire for mishandling a young Black 3-year-old babygirl:

"The video shows an unidentified woman standing behind a toddler, holding her hair and preventing her from walking away from a table. The woman can be heard saying, 'She's for real making me mad.' The woman briefly lets go of the child. When the little girl tries to leave the table again, the woman grabs her hair and yanks her backward. The person who recorded the video can be heard laughing at various times."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> George Hunter, "Detroit cop who posted mocking Snapchat video fired," *The Detroit News*, <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/detroit-city/2019/02/27/detroit-cop-who-posted-racist-snapchat-video-fired/3002187002/>

<sup>19</sup> Hunter, "Detroit cop who posted mocking Snapchat video fired."

<sup>20</sup> David Heinzmann and Juan Perez Jr., "LaSalle County Settles Lawsuit with Woman Stripped After Arrest," *Chicago Tribune*, April 8, 2014, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2014/04/08/lasalle-county-settles-lawsuit-with-woman-stripped-after-arrest-3/>.

<sup>21</sup> David Lohr, "Video of Daycare Worker Pulling Black Girl's Hair Sparks Investigation," *Huff Post*, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/video-daycare-black-girl-hair-texas\\_n\\_5c424140e4b027c3bbc1b7a5](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/video-daycare-black-girl-hair-texas_n_5c424140e4b027c3bbc1b7a5).

Added to this is also a new trend among some African American parents of videoing physical abuse and other forms of child abuse to their Black children (female daughters in particular) then intentionally posting the videos on social media for “likes” and “shares”, resulting in the act of shaming and emotionally damaging the child’s psyche.<sup>22</sup> This new trend is called social media shaming or simply media shaming.<sup>23</sup>

While these videos are commonplace on social media today, I believe that viral videos of abuse to the Black female body originated during the time period of African Enslavement. The Auction Block, Whipping Post and Lynching Tree were America’s first social media displaying viral violence to the Black female body.

*African Enslavement’s Auction Block and Jim Crow’s Lynching Tree: America’s First Social Media Depicting Violence On The Black Woman’s Body and Creating Viral Memories*

On March 10, 2019 at about 3am, a slender, 40-year-old Black man was caught on camera viciously attacking an elderly Black woman on a number 2 subway train in the Bronx.<sup>24</sup> Another passenger recorded the incident on their camera phone then later the video was uploaded to social media, eventually going viral with several million views.<sup>25</sup> The video, along with witnesses on the train, showed the man kicking the helpless

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<sup>22</sup> Brian Edward Kingh, “Why shaming your children on social media may make things worse,” *The Conversation*, December 13, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/why-shaming-your-children-on-social-media-may-make-things-worse-108471>.

<sup>23</sup> Kingh, “Why Shaming Your Children On Social Media May Make Things Worse.”

<sup>24</sup> EyeWitness News ABC 7, “Disturbing Video Shows Man Kicking Elderly Woman In Face On New York City Subway,” <http://abc7chicago.com/woman-kicked-in-face-on-subway-crime-mta-attack/5211895/>.

<sup>25</sup> EyeWitness News ABC 7, “Disturbing Video.”

woman repeatedly in her and body causing her to bleed.<sup>26</sup> There was no rhyme or reason for why this man sporadically attacked this woman. However, the lack of intervention by fellow passengers along with the salacious desire to repeatedly see the attack through widespread circulation on Facebook speaks to a larger cultural phenomenon in our society today. Violence towards Black women is a cultural norm in America today. Worse yet, social media primarily creates and fans the flame of this culture norm. However, social media is not the first media outlet to make violence against Black women go viral. The Auction Block during the period of African Enslavement in the United States (1619-1865) and the Lynching Tree (prominent during the period of Jim Crow from 1865 to 1954) was America's first "social media" depicting violence towards the Black woman's body and the heinous, traumatic memories of these incidents later go viral in the DNA genetics of future generations.

On August 20, 1619, ships carrying enslaved African bodies arrived on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia at where is now identified as Hampton, Virginia.<sup>27</sup> As African Enslavement began, in addition to experiencing racism because of the Black hue of their bodies, African women in particular were subjected to experiencing attacks of their womanly body parts including groping of their breasts and vaginal area, molestation, sexual assault and rape. These physical attacks were mostly detrimental on the psyche of the Black woman during their process of being sold and bought on the Auction Block.

The Auction Block, the birth of capitalism in the United States through the traffic of human flesh, was extremely violent. The truly violent nature of the Auction Block isn't

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<sup>26</sup> EyeWitness News ABC 7, "Disturbing Video."

<sup>27</sup> William Waller Hening, *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia, from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619*, vol. 1 (Richmond: Samuel Pleasants, 1809)

often talked about or is maybe even taken for granted. Former enslaved Africans and African Americans bear witness to the grim environment of “being greased for display, stripped for meticulous examination, forced to dance to look healthy, rejected if too intelligent or too inclined to run away, beaten if they didn't ‘induce the spectators to buy them,’ and perhaps most painful, being separated forever from family.”<sup>28</sup>

The largest auction in United States’ history occurred on March 2-3, 1859.<sup>29</sup> A total of 436 men, women, and children, including 30 babies, from one plantation in the the Georgia Sea Islands were sold to buyers and speculators from New York to Louisiana.<sup>30</sup> Known as “weeping time,” these moment was violent and vicious especially for African and African American enslaved women. One such example is the fate of Dorcas:

“At exactly 11:55 a.m. on March 3, 1859, Dorcas, chattel number 278, was sold away from her first love, Jeffrey, a twenty-three-year-old ‘prime cotton hand’ She stood on the auction block motionless – emptied of words, emptied of tears. She spent the greater part of that cold and rainy Thursday morning contemplating their final separation. Now the moment came and she stood as still as a bronze cast, her head covered with a beaded gray shawl. She stared vacantly at the auctioneer who, with one stroke of his gavel, declared a death knell on her future.”<sup>31</sup>

Dorcas suffered the traumatic sting of grief, loss, sorrow and sadness in these moments as she was inevitably about to be separated from her kinship tie with Jeffrey. Worse yet, in the midst of her unimaginable scared and distraught feelings, potential buyers physically assaulted her body while “inspecting” her:

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<sup>28</sup> “Sale,” National Humanities Center Toolbox Library: Primary Resources in U.S. History & Literature, <https://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/enslavement/text2/text2read.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Anne C. Bailey, *The Weeping Time: Memory and the Largest Slave Auction in American History*, (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 4.

<sup>30</sup> Bailey, *The Weeping Time*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Bailey, Anne C. *The Weeping Time*, 4.

“He approached Dorcas with white-gloved hands and first opened her lips to check her age. He turned her around, as if spinning a top, and bade her take off her turban. As she turned, his white-gloved hand would alternately brush against her back and breasts. He examined her limbs one by one and put his hands around her ample waist. Yes, these hips might be worth something.”<sup>32</sup>

Not only did the auction block cause emotional torture and physical abuse, but psychological trauma as well. African and African American enslaved women had to sit and listen to hurled insults and disrespectful talk by white slavemasters:

“ ‘250 going once, going twice; SOLD! To the good man from Georgia,’ said Walsh scarcely containing his laughter as Anson and Violet were led off the stage. ‘Cheap gal, that, Major!’ said one of the buyers to another. ‘Don’t think so. They may talk about her being sick; it’s no easy sickness she’s got. She’s got consumption, and the man that buys her will have to be a doctrin’ her all the time, and she’ll die in less than three months. I won’t have anything to do with her – don’t want any half dead niggers about me.’”<sup>33</sup>

African and Black women who were at the height of child-rearing age were considered most profitable commodities and were usually reserved for high-end, rich “clients”.

These sisters were considered a huge catch and better than others because they could reproduce children at higher, faster rates, commonly referred to as “breeders.”

The period of African Enslavement also gave birth to racialized sexism. This double jeopardy oppression represents the intersectionality of oppression that Black women contend with in all areas of their life in daily functioning.<sup>34</sup> Black women grapple with racism and sexism creating a double conundrum that they must face of being

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<sup>32</sup>Bailey, *The Weeping Time*, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Bailey, *The Weeping Time*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241.

discriminated against because of their racial identity AND being discriminated against because of their gender identity.

Beginning in 1619, the body of the African woman was assaulted.<sup>35</sup> The African woman's body was oversexualized as a guinea pig for white men's (and sometimes white women's) sexual fantasies.<sup>36</sup> As a result, African women were repeatedly raped, groped and sexually abused in various shapes and forms. To justify their unethical behavior, avoid accountability and absolve themselves of shame and guilt for their atrocious actions, racist white slavemasters created a myth that African women were sexually promiscuous.<sup>37</sup> African women were theologically assaulted as well during this time as racist evangelical Christian church pastors, working as conduits with slavemasters to progress African Enslavement, began comparing African women to the biblical character Jezebel, which unhealthy and unethical theological interpretations often painted as sexually promiscuous and ultimately sinful against God.<sup>38</sup>

The Auction Block further fostered racialized sexism because it often served as a weapon to further the oversexualized Jezebel labelling of African and Black women as white slavemasters forced them to stand naked during purchases and sales, demonizing their nakedness and therefore connecting their demonized nakedness to their sinful identity.<sup>39</sup> In addition to demonizing their nakedness, African women were also demonized for their bodies repeatedly being "with child".<sup>40</sup> African women's bodies were

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<sup>35</sup> ChanequacWalker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*.

<sup>37</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*.

<sup>38</sup> Tamara Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>39</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>40</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

viewed as breeding stations to further the capitalistic venture of African Enslavement. Thus, African women were forced to always be pregnant. Their pregnant bodies, especially when on display on the Auction Block, were perceived as evidence of their oversexualized Jezebel nature.

The period of African Enslavement further gave birth to racialized sexism as it fostered a sociological class division of relationships between white women and African/Black women. Many white wives grappled with low self-esteem and lack of confidence when their white slavemaster husbands would sneak away to find sexual pleasure in the body of African/Black enslaved women.<sup>41</sup> Instead of directing accountability and/or hatred towards their rapist husbands, the African/Black enslaved woman became the target of many white women's jealousy. In turn, some white women would emotionally, verbally and psychologically abuse African/Black enslaved women who were raped by their white husband slavemasters. In some sick instances, some white women would desire to see what all the fuss was about and therefore seek to explore for themselves the insides of the African/Black women's body. This dynamic caused many white women to perceive themselves as on top of African/Black women on a hierarchal scale. This perceived power felt good to many white women who experienced feeling as though they were victims to white men and beneath them on the scale, therefore, the oppressed became oppressors. In psychology and human development, I contend that many people who are victims of oppression, secretly desire to oppress other folks they deem socially lower than them. In justice circles, we may not fight against all oppressions

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<sup>41</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

because we secretly desire to hold privilege over another and be oppressors ourselves as it relates to a different oppression.

The period of African Enslavement additionally gave birth to racialized sexism as it fostered a sociological class division of relationships between African/Black men and African/Black women.<sup>42</sup> Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl highlights how African/Black men who attempted to maintain committed relationships with African/Black women experienced feelings of threat and violation when their African/Black woman would return back to slave quarters after being raped by the white slavemaster. The brothers struggled to look at the sisters in the same light, wondering “Did she like it?” or “Did she like being with the white man more than being with me?” Many African/Black men began to adopt the oversexualized Jezebel myth created by the white slavemasters,<sup>43</sup> fostering not only division within the African/Black marriage but also a perception amongst African/Black men that African/Black women are now in a lower class specification and therefore sociologically beneath them.<sup>44</sup> If the African/Black enslaved woman could not cater to the fragile African/Black male psyche and prove that she either hated being raped by the white man and/or enjoyed sexual encounters with her African/Black mate more, she was doomed and no longer considered equal to her African/Black male counterpart, dropping to a lower space in the caste system. Another effect of racialized sexism during this time period of America’s history was the African/Black woman’s plight of experiencing an oppressive act, in this case rape by the white slavemasters, but yet, still needing to be chaplain and caretaker of the

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<sup>42</sup> Walker-Barnes. *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*.

<sup>43</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>44</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

African/Black enslaved man's feelings and perceptions all while putting her own feelings and perceptions to the side.<sup>45</sup> The victim, in this case the African/Black women, is still expected to care for someone else, the African/Black male. She cannot sit in her victimization or receive care in these moments because she's been called "for such as time as this".<sup>46</sup> With the biblical story of Esther in mind, I will argue in my Ph.D research that is the general plight of Black women today especially in social justice circles. Racialized sexism manifests in contemporary society particularly in social justice movements.<sup>47</sup> For example, a few years ago, a majority of folks in Georgia refused to vote for Stacey Abrams, a dark skinned, large framed well-educated and experienced Black woman, to be governor. Instead, a racist white man with limited credentials was elected. Meanwhile, two years later, many white and Black politicians, religious leaders and everyday folks of Georgia, who refused to vote for Abrams for governor in the previous election, then begged her to campaign for and organize a formal, large scale grassroots movement for Raphael Warnock, a Black man, to be elected to the Senate. Abrams complied. Warnock won. As a result of Abrams hard-working efforts specifically around increasing voter registration rates of Black folks and fighting against and overturning several voter suppression laws in Georgia, Abrams facilitated a communal win on behalf of the Black community across the nation, but what did Abrams win for herself, her individual Black womanhood?

In addition to the negative emotional, physical and psychological impact of the Auction Block, I'd argue that the Lynching Tree was also one of America's first social

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<sup>45</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*.

<sup>46</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*.

<sup>47</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

media tools that spurred violence towards the African and Black women's body because it too created heinous, traumatic memories that went "viral" in the psyche of future generations.<sup>48</sup> In the year 1918, a harrowing episode unfolded in Valdosta, Georgia, when a mob, frustrated by their inability to locate Sidney Johnson—who had been accused of murdering his employer, Hampton Smith—turned their rage toward another individual.<sup>49</sup> They seized upon Haynes Turner, a Black man known to have had a contentious relationship with Smith. In an act of profound injustice, the mob wrongfully targeted Turner as a substitute for their original quarry.

Turner's wife, Mary, who was heavily pregnant and nearing her due date, stood firm in her protests against the mob's actions. She was determined to seek justice for her husband, a sentiment that resonated deeply in the face of such cruelty. However, her courage was met with brutal repression; the sheriff, rather than protecting her, arrested Mary and subsequently handed her over to the very mob that sought vengeance.

In a grotesque display of violence and inhumanity, Mary Turner<sup>50</sup> was subjected to horrific acts in front of a crowd that included women and children. She was stripped of her clothing, hung upside down by her ankles, drenched in gasoline, and set ablaze. Amid this unimaginable suffering, a white man callously sliced open her swollen belly with a hunting knife, allowing her infant to fall to the ground, where it was tragically stomped to death. Mary Turner was lynched during a new era in America's history occurring after the Civil War.

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<sup>48</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>49</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, "Mary Turner, Pregnant, Lynched in Georgia for Publicly Criticizing Husband's Lynching," *A History of Racial Injustice*, May 19, 1918, <https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/may/19>.

<sup>50</sup> Equal Justice Initiative, "Mary Turner."

After the Civil War ended, America entered a period commonly referred to as “Jim Crow” from 1865 to 1954.<sup>51</sup> During this period, lynchings were a common disciplinary practice utilized by the Ku Klux Klan to physically, mentally, and spiritually torment African Americans in response to the Reconstruction Act.<sup>52</sup> This act, initiated in 1865, sought to give economic rights to recently freed African Americans no longer enslaved during the era of African Enslavement from 1619-1865.<sup>53</sup> Those African Americans, now left homeless because they were no longer forced to live and voluntarily work on White slavemaster’s plantations, struggled to find housing and paid work opportunities. The Reconstruction Act granted African Americans the right to buy and sell property for economic resources and subsequently build financial capital and wealth, which ultimately incited small pockets of racist white vigilante groups throughout the south.<sup>54</sup> In 1866, one of these vigilante groups in Virginia formally organized and created what is now known as the KKK.<sup>55</sup>

While the physical act of hanging a criminal body from a tree had been a common law enforcement practice in Europe, the KKK (taking the name of a judge who’s last name was Lynch) birthed the practice of lynchings in the United States during Jim Crow to specifically instill terror on the psyche of innocent African Americans. Initially in 1867, often times in the middle of the night, The KKK would attack African American homes, kidnap the male patriarch of the family, beat him, sexually violate him, then hang him from a tree for the entire family to see and internalize “staying in their place”.<sup>56</sup> The

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<sup>51</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>52</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>53</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>54</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>55</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>56</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

KKK would especially go after upstanding Black men with a proclivity to business ventures. However, as the period of Jim Crow progressed, the KKK used more insidious techniques to attack the African American psyche by scheduling lynchings and creating the sadistic moment as a community event, inviting white members of the community to come and watch the lynching and even consume food and beverages, turning the moment into a festive time such as a birthday party or Christmas gathering.<sup>57</sup> Pivotal to this act of terror on the African American psyche, the KKK would initially gather the family of the victim being lynched, make them attend the festive moment, sit in agony in these moments and watch white folks party first and then force them to watch the pervasive act of their loved one dying a slow, painful suffocating death.<sup>58</sup> The act of making the family watch their own loved one being lynched is what I contend was an act of what we'd say today as violence gone viral. To add further insult, photographers would be present at the event to take pictures and later turn the pictures into postcards that would be mailed around the country. With this in mind, I propose that the lynching tree represented a social media outlet. I suggest the lynching tree was America's Facebook from 1865-1954. The Lynching Tree had a profound affect on the mental, physical and spiritual health of African Americans during the period of Jim Crow. First, according to Brian Stevenson's Just Mercy, lynchings specifically caused terror on on the psyche of African Americans. To watch a loved one being lynched, according to Emilie Townes, creates an unhealthy memory now lodged in the psyche and unconscious mind.<sup>59</sup> Worse yet, Townes suggests this memory will now, moving forward, continue playing like a tape recording both

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<sup>57</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>58</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>59</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

consciously and unconsciously in the mind of the African American observer of the lynching.<sup>60</sup> Whenever this person desires to advocate for their authentic voice, speak up for their equal rights or act towards justice, she/he will remember this memory and remain docile, which was the ultimate goal of racist white folks conducting a lynching. Townes suggests this act of “re-membering” causes the observer of the lynching to be re-traumatized over and over again.<sup>61</sup> With this in mind, I contend that repeatedly watching videos of violence, particularly towards African American women, causes African American women social media users to experience re-traumatization over and over again. Second, lynchings of African Americans caused physical genocide of the African American collective community. According to James Cone’s The Cross and The Lynching Tree, roughly one million African American people were lynched during nearly 100 years of Jim Crow in America from 1865-1954. Lynchings also caused the continued physical destruction of the African American family. In 1865, initially African American men were lynched primarily, causing the African American family to be divided as many mothers became single parents and, in turn, the family was left economically desolate. As Jim Crow progressed, African American mothers began being lynched. Worse yet, pregnant African American mothers were initially lynched and their babies ripped from their wombs to continue the genocide of the African America community. Such was the case for Turner. This grim narrative highlights a painful reality: while many historians emphasize the plight of Black men who were lynched during the Jim Crow era, the stories of Black women like Mary Turner often remain overlooked and marginalized. The

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<sup>60</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>61</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

collective trauma experienced by Black women extends beyond the immediate violence of lynching; when Black men were murdered, these women were left to grapple with profound loss. They mourned their sons, husbands, brothers, uncles, nephews, and cousins, and faced the added burden of enduring public degradation and economic hardship.

Lynchings also affected the spiritual health of African Americans. During the Jim Crow era, racist white Christian pastors misrepresented and misinterpreted the Bible's Deuteronomy 21:23, which surmises "anything that is hung from a tree is cursed by God."<sup>62</sup> This scripture was utilized to suggest that lynched African American bodies were cursed by God and therefore not entitled to an "abundant life" while here on earth and not entitled to a glorious eschatological eternal life.<sup>63</sup> Lynchings supported what Katie Cannon calls white supremacy's theology that the enslavement and mistreatment of African American bodies was ultimately "Divine Will."<sup>64</sup>

### *Social Media is a Digital Lynching Tree for Black Women Today*

Social media become the digital lynching tree for African American women today. I propose that social media is the new space where racist white folks attack African American women today. According to research from the Human Rights Campaign conducted from 2010 to 2020, African American women online users are the most attacked on social media, specifically Facebook and Twitter. I conducted ethnographic

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<sup>62</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>63</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

<sup>64</sup> Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

social media research from 2018 to 2023.<sup>65</sup> There are five pivotal cases of violence towards Black women that went viral during this time. I'd like to highlight dynamics of each of these specifically.

### *"Kerosene Maxine" & The Threat To Black Women's Health*

"All I have to say is this: if you shoot me, you better shoot straight."<sup>66</sup> These were the courageous words echoed by California's Congresswoman Maxine Waters to then-present Donald Trump during a political rally in 2018. Waters has been referenced as Trump's "public enemy number one"<sup>67</sup> because of her no-nonsense, bold accountability of the oppressive former president. Of all those critical of the president, Waters has been the most outspoken, pushing back against Trump's political legislation couched in racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, ableism, Islamophobia, and ultimately white supremacy. Conservative, rightwing, evangelical political foes nicknamed her "Kerosene Maxine" and violent threats to Waters' personal and professional well-being went viral at an all time high during the week of July 1 to July 7, 2018.<sup>68</sup> Images went viral during this week depicting Waters in graphic, insensitive photos as a smart-mouth, dumb ape or gorilla. At the helm of social media harassment towards Waters was Donald Trump who tweeted racial epithets towards Waters at an intense hourly rate, shocking behavior never seen before by a sitting president of the United States. Trump went on a rampage this week

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<sup>65</sup> Brooke Auxier, "Social media continue to be important political outlets for Black Americans," December 11, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/12/11/social-media-continue-to-be-important-political-outlets-for-black-americans/>.

<sup>66</sup> Carroll, Roy, "'You Better Shoot Straight': How Maxine Waters Became Trump's Public Enemy No 1," *The Guardian*, July 7, 2018, <https://amp.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/jul/07/maxine-waters-trump-progressives-california-congress>.

<sup>67</sup> Roy, "'You Better Shoot Straight.'

<sup>68</sup> Roy, "'You Better Shoot Straight.'

calling Waters an “extraordinary low IQ person” and directly threatening her by saying, “Be careful what you wish for Max!”<sup>69</sup> About 200 Black women (activists, pastors, academics, and elected officials attempted to come to Waters’ rescue, challenging the Democratic Party to protect Waters and hold Trump accountable.<sup>70</sup> They, along with Waters, even challenged Facebook’s originator, Mark Zuckerberg, to restrict Trump’s social media account but to no avail. These online threats were so pervasive that Waters had to cancel scheduled appearances in Texas and Alabama until her security could be enhanced with more personnel. For self-care, Waters has had to take several social media breaks.<sup>71</sup>

Trump and other political foes utilized Facebook and Twitter as a weapon to attack Waters’ mind, body and spirit and paint her as a smart-mouthed Sapphire, one of the stereotypical myths created about Black women during the period of African Enslavement, Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>72</sup> From a psychodynamic perspective, the underline message that Trump and his allies wanted to highlight: Black women are not allowed to challenge and hold accountable white men. Black women are to stay in a subservient role in comparison to white men. By attacking Waters, Trump and others were sending messages to the larger African American community, and Black women in particular, that you have no voice and dignity especially in relationship to White men. Trump was also sending a message to White America, displaying how it’s worthy and normal common practice to attack a Black women’s being on social media.

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<sup>69</sup> Roy, “‘You Better Shoot Straight.’

<sup>70</sup> Roy, “‘You Better Shoot Straight.’

<sup>71</sup> Roy, “‘You Better Shoot Straight.’

<sup>72</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

Congresswoman Maxine Waters hasn't been the only Black woman to be viciously attacked on social media. WNBA basketball star Angel Reese has been the recipient of viral attacks by racist white folks in the sports industry for her gift of exuding confidence and self-esteem both on and off the court which instead has been hailed as pride, an inability to be a team player and selfishness.<sup>73</sup> Reese often takes breaks from social media citing harassment from racist, sexist online users. In another instance, an African American young lady was attacked on social media as being stupid and dumb simply because her desire and effort to be creative and use Gorilla Glue for a hairstyle failed, deeming many to now bash her and tragically rename her "Gorilla Glue Girl".<sup>74</sup> In response, she ultimately had to delete her social media account, change her real name and go into hiding. However, what if her invention would have worked? We would be applauding her innovation and creativity instead. Notable pastoral theologian Dr. Chanequa Walker Barnes experienced major and global harassment for writing a prayer advocating for justice that evangelical conservatives took offense too and, subsequently, digitally tormented Walker Barnes for to the point where she had to close her Twitter account.<sup>75</sup> Lastly, I'd like to draw attention to the attack of Leslie Jones, who starred in a remake of "Ghostbusters" and was digitally attacked by racist white movie goers suggesting a Black woman should have never been casted in a remake film which

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<sup>73</sup> Susan M. Shaw, "Why WNBA Fans Are Calling Out Racism in the League," *Forbes*, October 4, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susanmshaw/2024/10/04/whats-the-hubbub-about-racism-around-the-wnba/>.

<sup>74</sup> Toyin Owoseje, "This woman used Gorilla Glue instead of hair spray. She ended up in the hospital," CNN, February 9, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/08/us/gorilla-glue-girl-scli-intl/index.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Amy Julia Becker, "A White Woman's Response to the 'Prayer of a Weary Black Woman,'" United Methodist Insight, April 14, 2021, <https://um-insight.net/in-the-world/advocating-justice/a-white-woman-s-response-to-the-prayer-of-a-weary-black-woma/>.

originally featured only white actors, and actresses.<sup>76</sup> Jones would later temporarily delete her twitter account, citing emotional and psychological abuse she'd received online.

Social media as a digital lynching tree affects Black women's mental, physical and spiritual health.<sup>77</sup> First, many Black women turn to social media for community and connection. Social media's gift of creating community and connection was especially helpful during the height of COVID-19. Many Black women social media users continue to receive community and connection from social media even as COVID-19 cases have declined. To attack a Black women on social media and cause her to delete her social media presence negatively affects her ability to receive community and connection. For many professional Black women, social media serves as a marketing tool to forward their career. To attack a Black woman online and cause her to limit or delete her social media access also negatively affects her financial wellbeing.

With Emilie Townes work in mind, I propose that to view another Black woman online user being "digitally lynched", creates an unhealthy memory now lodged in the psyche and unconscious mind of other Black women online users.<sup>78</sup> This memory will now, moving forward, continue playing like a tape recording both consciously and unconsciously in the mind of the other African American women online users.<sup>79</sup> Whenever these Black women desire to advocate for their authentic voice, speak up for their equal rights or act towards justice especially on a social media platform, she/they

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<sup>76</sup> Leslie Jones, "Leslie Jones: Racist 'Ghostbusters' Trolls Nearly Broke Me," *Rolling Stone*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/leslie-jones-memoir-ghostbusters-racist-trolls-kate-mckinnon-1234827643/>

<sup>77</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>78</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>79</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

will remember the memory and remain docile, quiet and passive, which is the ultimate goal of racist and sexist white folks who conduct digital lynchings.<sup>80</sup> I suggest this act of “re-membling” causes African American women online users who observed the digital lynching of one of their own to be re-traumatized over and over again.

In turn, experiencing isolation, lack of connection and community apart from social media as well as violent attacks on social media impacts the holistic self of Black women and they will subsequently begin to wrestle with spiritual and theological questions such as “is God punishing me?” or “why is God testing me?”.

*The Media Fosters A “Cultural Production of Evil”<sup>81</sup> Against Black Women*

How has media created a “cultural production of evil”<sup>82</sup>, according to Emilie Townes? According to Emilie Townes, in Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil, white supremacy has created three stereotypical, mythological images of African and Black women.<sup>83</sup> During African Enslavement from 1619 to 1865, first racist European slavemasters justified the enslavement of African women by citing their desire to tame the oversexualized body of the African woman slave.<sup>84</sup> Slavemasters created a myth that African women were sexually promiscuous instead of highlighting white men’s tragic desire to rape African women.<sup>85</sup> Instead of naming their own rape fantasies and conduct, white slavemasters instead blamed African women, lying that the African

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<sup>80</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>81</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>82</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>83</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>84</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>85</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

enslaved sisters sexually propositioned them, overpowered them and they had no other choice but to have sex with them.<sup>86</sup> The Auction Block was used to promote this myth.

On the Auction Block, the enslaved African woman was forced to take off all her clothes, be naked and expose her body and genitalia to hundreds of salacious onlookers. Slavemasters demonized the African woman's nakedness in these moments and connected her sinful nakedness to a Christian biblical Jezebel theological interpretation.<sup>87</sup> During African Enslavement, African women's bodies were also primarily used for breeding so that slavemasters could profit from capitalism and make more money from the sale and purchase of more African bodies.<sup>88</sup> Thus, many African enslaved women remained pregnant most of the time. Their pregnancy, like their nakedness, was also demonized.<sup>89</sup> To observe a repeatedly pregnant African woman also gave the connotation that this woman is overly promiscuous and sexual. I contend that the Auction Block was America's First Facebook from 1619 to 1865. Negative stereotypes about the African woman's body went "viral" through use of the Auction Block.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, D. W. Griffith produced *Birth of a Nation*.<sup>90</sup> In this movie, a married senator begins a sexual affair with a Black mulatto woman. This movie, according to Townes, begins the "cultural production of evil".<sup>91</sup> This movie affirmed the Black woman as an evil, oversexualized Jezebel who sexually tempted the Godly white statesman.<sup>92</sup> President Woodrow Wilson would cite the movie as a masterpiece however it

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<sup>86</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>87</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>88</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>89</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>90</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*.

<sup>91</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>92</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

was the beginning of the demise of the Black woman's image.<sup>93</sup> According to Townes, *Birth of a Nation*, produced a culture in America to view the Black woman as sexually promiscuous.<sup>94</sup> While sin can be theologically defined as negative actions that one person commits against another person, evil is theologically defined as negative actions committed against an entire collective group of particular folks.<sup>95</sup> Thus, Townes highlights that *Birth of a Nation* was a "cultural production of evil"<sup>96</sup> because D. W. Griffith's production of the movie was a sinful act that created a stereotypical image of the Black woman that subsequently assaulted all Black women.<sup>97</sup>

The further "cultural production of evil"<sup>98</sup> against Black women persists with the production of *Gone With The Wind* in which Hattie McDaniel stars as "Mammy", a jovial, dark complected, pleasantly plump, asexual, Godfearing Black woman who stood in complete contrast to the Jezebel image.<sup>99</sup> As African Enslavement progressed, white slavemasters could no longer justify African/Black enslaved women as being Jezebel's because these were the same women taking care of their white babies and running the domestic functions of their white homes. Thus, they created the image of Mammy. The image was highlighted on pancake syrup bottles and this image was highlighted, in a major fashion, with the production of *Gone With The Wind*.<sup>100</sup> America affirmed and empowered this image of the Black woman as Mammy by even bestowing on Hattie McDaniel an Oscar award, making McDaniel the first Black actress to ever receive the

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<sup>93</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*.

<sup>94</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>95</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>96</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>97</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>98</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>99</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*.

<sup>100</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*.

honor.<sup>101</sup> The movie became a “cultural production of evil”<sup>102</sup> against Black women because now Black women were viewed as ugly for being dark complected and fat, void of respect, dumb, and theologically superficial in their desire, like the Mammy character in the movie, to only love the Lord and “go on about my day”.

Finally, white supremacy sought to cause destruction within the fabric of the Black family. During the Civil Rights Movement, U.S. Labor Secretary Daniel Patrick Moynihan produced the infamous “Moynihan Report”<sup>103</sup> on the status of “The Negro Family”<sup>104</sup> suggesting that the demise and lack of progression of the Black family at the time was as a result of the selfish, slick-talking Black woman who takes all the jobs and educational opportunities from Black men. He suggested she even takes all the leadership roles in the Black church.<sup>105</sup> This report caused major division within Black families, churches and the Civil Rights Movement. During the 1960s and 1970s, movies and television shows were created demonizing the characteristics of Black women that Moynihan pointed out in his report.<sup>106</sup> Thus, the Sapphire image of the Black woman was created. The Sapphire image was a character most notably birthed on the Amos and Andy show which Townes highlights as another “cultural production of evil”<sup>107</sup> against Black women.<sup>108</sup>

As time has progressed, often times the three negative portrayals of Black women continue to pervade all forms of media outlets. Blaxploitation movies of the 70s and 80s

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<sup>101</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*.

<sup>102</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>103</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan>.

<sup>104</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, “The Negro Family.”

<sup>105</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, “The Negro Family.”

<sup>106</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>107</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>108</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

along with the John Singleton era of movies during the 90s most of the time feature Black women as either Jezebels, Mammys/Matriarchs or Sapphires. Our beloved television shows of the 80s and 90s such as “Living Single”, “The Facts of Life”, “Neil Carter”, and “Julia” primarily highlight Black women in one of these stereotypical roles.

*Social Media's Contribution to A “Cultural Production of Evil”<sup>109</sup> Against Black Women*

Social media continues to produce this “cultural production of evil”<sup>110</sup>. I argue that social media today, through viral videos, continues to showcase Black women in these three stereotypical roles. For example, Maxine Waters, Angel Reese, Leslie Jones and Chanequa Walker Barnes are showcased as smart mouth Sapphires on social media. The “Gorilla Glue Girl” is showcased as a dumb Mammy. Hip hop artists such as Sexy Red and Meg Thee Stallion are showcased as Jezebels simply because they embrace nakedness and pregnancy and reject the negative stereotypical connotations that white supremacy attempts to connect nakedness and pregnancy to ultimately. Thus, social media continues the “cultural production of evil”<sup>111</sup>.

Social media's contribution to a “cultural production of evil”<sup>112</sup> impacts Black women's memory, identity and health.<sup>113</sup> Emilies Townes suggests that the Jezebel, Mammy/Matriarch and Sapphire mythological images created by media ultimately become the memory and identity of Black women.<sup>114</sup> In other words, when Black women

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<sup>109</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>110</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>111</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>112</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>113</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>114</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

see portrayals of themselves in movies and television shows as Jezebels, Mammies and Sapphires, they both consciously and unconsciously began internalizing these images in their psyche and they began to embody these images as a part of themselves. Thus, I contend that social media then pushes Black women to begin believing:

- “I am sexually promiscuous.” (Jezebel)
- “I am fat, ugly, docile and passive. My only purpose in life is to care for my family and never have an independent identity outside my family.” (Mammy/Matriarch)
- “I am smart-mouthed. The Black man is against me. I don’t need to live in community with the Black man.” (Sapphire).

In turn, Townes suggests that when these statements become a part of the memory and identity of the Black woman, she unconsciously begins living unhealthy behaviors that compromise her health.<sup>115</sup> Thus, I contend that when Black women begin internalizing Jezebel, Mammy and Sapphire stereotypes as a result of viewing these messages on social media, they are more susceptible to engaging in unhealthy sexual encounters, poor eating habits, lack of exercise and nutrition, high blood pressure, diabetes, and low self-esteem and confidence. They unconsciously make the myths true!

I also contend that Black women online users experience psychological trauma after viewing videos of violence towards other Black women. Monnica Williams, clinical psychologist and director of the Center for Mental Health Disparities at the University of Louisville, says graphic videos (which she calls vicarious trauma) combined with lived experiences of racism, can create severe psychological problems reminiscent of post-traumatic stress syndrome.<sup>116</sup> According to a 2012 study, which surveyed thousands of

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<sup>115</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>116</sup> Kenya Downs, “When Black Death Goes Viral, It Can Trigger PTSD-like trauma,” *PBS News*, July 22, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/black-pain-gone-viral-racism-graphic-videos-can-create-ptsd-like-trauma>.

African-Americans, Hispanics and Asian-Americans, found that “blacks who perceived discrimination the most, were more likely to report symptoms of PTSD.”<sup>117</sup> Although African-Americans have a lower risk for many anxiety disorders, the study reported a PTSD prevalence rate of 9.1 percent in blacks, compared to 6.8 percent in whites, 5.9 percent in Hispanics, and 1.8 percent in Asians.”<sup>118</sup> “Social media and viral videos can worsen the effects. During the week of Sterling’s and Castile’s deaths, a scroll through timelines of black social media users could uncover subtle expressions of mental and psychological anguish, from pleas for others not to share these videos, to declarations of a social media hiatus. These expressions of anger, sadness and grief can hint at something much more serious, according to Williams”<sup>119</sup> “It’s upsetting and stressful for people of color to see these events unfolding,” she says. “It can lead to depression, substance abuse and, in some cases, psychosis. Very often, it can contribute to health problems that are already common among African-Americans such as high blood pressure.”<sup>120</sup> Challenging racism continuously leads to “African Americans [regardless of income],” having “disproportionately higher levels of blood pressure and more instances of chronic disease and earlier deaths than whites.”<sup>121</sup>

Phillip Atiba Goff, a social psychology expert and president of the Center for Policing Equity, highlights:

“The perception that the perpetrators of violence face no consequences for their actions can transform that trauma into terror. If you’re conditioned to

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<sup>117</sup> Downs, “When Black Death Goes Viral.”

<sup>118</sup> Imani J. Jackson, “The Trauma of Police Brutality: Column,” *USA Today*, September 2, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/policing/spotlight/2016/09/02/trauma-police-brutality-column/89019122/>.

<sup>119</sup> Downs, “When Black Death Goes Viral.”

<sup>120</sup> Downs, “When Black Death Goes Viral.”

<sup>121</sup> Downs, “When Black Death Goes Viral.”

a trauma, and that trauma occurs and recurs in a context where it feels you have no control over it, and it's being done by powerful people for whom there are no consequences — that's why I'm saying we move from trauma to terror.”<sup>122</sup>

While videos of police brutality to Black men are currently trending on social media and cause high rates of PTSD, anxiety and poor eating habits to online viewers, I hold fast to the belief that violence to Black female online users via Twitter is far more detrimental.

*#ConcubineLivesMatter:*

*Rereading Judges 19 as Embodied Social Media Violence Gone Viral*

According to Phyllis Tribble,

“The betrayal, rape, torture, murder, and dismemberment of an unnamed woman [in Judges 19] is a story we want to forget but are commanded to speak. It depicts the horrors of male power, brutality, and triumphalism; triumphalism; of female helplessness, abuse, and annihilation. To hear this story is to inhabit a world of unrelenting terror that refuses to let us pass by on the other side.”<sup>123</sup>

The basic synopsis of the story features a concubine who runs away from her master's home to retreat to her father's home in Bethlehem.<sup>124</sup> Later the master leaves his home in Ephraim to retrieve his concubine in Bethlehem and return her back home.<sup>125</sup> No one intervenes justice on behalf of the voice of this concubine. While traveling back home,

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<sup>122</sup> National Library of Medicine, “Adolescents’ Experiences, Emotions, and Coping Strategies Associated With Exposure to Media-Based Vicarious Racism,” <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8207240/>.

<sup>123</sup> Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 65.

<sup>124</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*.

<sup>125</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*.

the master and concubine detour through Gibeah in Benjamin and accept an invitation of a male stranger to be a guest in the stranger's home.<sup>126</sup> While at the male stranger's home, an angry mob of men apprehends the concubine from Ephraim, offered to the angry mob by the male stranger in exchange for not sexually assaulting the master instead.<sup>127</sup> No one intervenes justice on behalf of the voice of this concubine. The concubine is tortured and raped throughout the night by the male mob and subsequently dies from her massive injuries.<sup>128</sup> While the entire story of Judges 19:1-30 has strong elements of physical violence against a woman, I argue that the most heinous part of the story is the conclusion. In response to the angry mob's actions, the master/husband brings the concubine's body home to Ephraim then cuts her body into twelve pieces and shares the pieces to each of the 12 tribes of Israel.<sup>129</sup>

This concubine's body is not deemed sacred even after death. I contend that the concubine of Judges 19 could empathize with the African woman Sarah Baartman. The concubine's body is shared in death and put on display similar to the plight of Sarah Baartman. I affirm that the concubine woman could empathize with African/African American women who's bodies were displayed and visually shared on the Auction Block, Whipping Post and Lynching Tree. I claim that the act of sharing the concubine's body in Judges 19:29 is symbolic of a social media video gone viral. I uphold that the concubine becomes an embodied social media video of violence to women of color gone viral. I stress that women of color, Black women in particular, reading Judges 19:1-30 can lead

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<sup>126</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*.

<sup>127</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*.

<sup>128</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*.

<sup>129</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*.

to psychological trauma.<sup>130</sup> What if America took on the new prophetic task of not sharing details of violent biblical stories as a way to help readers avoid being psychologically traumatized?

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<sup>130</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and The Cultural Production of Evil*.

**CHAPTER 4.**  
**ISLAMOPHOBIA, THE BLACK MUSLIM WOMAN AND VIOLENCE ON**  
**SOCIAL MEDIA**

**Showing & Shaping Hate:**

**The Violent Impact of Social Media On Black Muslim Women**

“How about Omar of Minnesota?” Trump said at a rally in Moon Township, Pa., outside Pittsburgh.<sup>1</sup> “We’re going to win the state of Minnesota because of her, they say. She’s telling us how to run our country. How did you do where you came from? How’s your country doing? She’s going to tell us — she’s telling us how to run our country.”<sup>2</sup> These were the insidious words spoken and tweeted by President Donald Trump about Minnesota Congresswoman Ilhan Omar.

Hate on social media against Black Muslim women is a trend in recent years, spearheaded by the vicious racist behavior of President Donald Trump who’s repeatedly attacked Congresswoman Omar.<sup>3</sup> Born in Somalia, a country in Africa, Omar maintains U.S. citizenship which she had to of course to be elected a U.S. political official.<sup>4</sup> However, this doesn’t stop Trump from attempting to harass Omar and remind the American population that Omar wasn’t born in the United States. Trump has used Twitter

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country’: Trump Again Goes After Ilhan Omar’s Somali Roots,” *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/22/trump-attacks-ilhan-omar-420267>.

<sup>2</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

<sup>3</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

<sup>4</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

and Facebook to proclaim and incite that Omar is a terrorist.<sup>5</sup> Since running for office in 2018, Omar has been the victim of never-ending racialized sexism and Islamophobic attacks on social media.<sup>6</sup>

In 2019, “Trump called for Omar and some of her progressive peers in Congress to ‘go back’ to ‘the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came.’”<sup>7</sup> Trump supporters also chanted ‘send her back’ during a rally last year, a line that has become common among his base.”<sup>8</sup> In 2020, “Trump called Omar an ‘extremist’ and said Democrats wanted to allow into the country Somali and Yemeni refugees who he said were coming from ‘Jihadist regions.’”<sup>9</sup> He also bragged about deporting Somali nationals during that rally, calling them ‘hardened criminals’ who are ‘back in their country where they can do all the complaining they want.’<sup>10</sup> He held the rally in Minnesota, the state with one of the largest ethnic Somali communities in the country.”<sup>11</sup>

In the midst of the emotional and psychological trauma that Omar has suffered as a result of viral attacks by the commander-in-chief, she hasn’t wavered in her commitment to hold the president accountable. Unfortunately, hate against Muslims, and Black Muslim women in particular, isn’t a new phenomenon. To add insult to injury, the media has always been used as a tool to establish racial sexism and Islamophobia especially since the September 11 attacks.

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<sup>5</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

<sup>6</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

<sup>7</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

<sup>8</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

<sup>9</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

<sup>10</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

<sup>11</sup> Choi, “‘She’s Telling Us How to Run Our Country.’”

### *The Power of Media in Shaping Muslims as Threats*

It was the day that rattled America in the new millennium. September 11, 2001. Islamic extremists coordinated four terrorist attacks killing thousands of people, injuring thousands more, and causing at least \$10 billion in infrastructure and property damage.<sup>12</sup> More people died of 9/11-related cancer and respiratory diseases in the months and years following the attacks.<sup>13</sup> Unlike other acts of national or global violence, what set the September 11 attacks apart was the media coverage of this tragic event. When news spread that two American domestic planes had been hijacked and were heading in the direction of New York's World Trade Center, media flocked to the area with cameras to provide live coverage. Unfortunately, when the hijacked planes dived into the twin towers of the WTC, America watched this occur live from their television screens, feeling dismayed and helpless.<sup>14</sup> Minutes later, America watched the twin towers collapse to the ground.<sup>15</sup> I believe that it was the act of visually watching the towers attacked then visually watching them fall as dominoes that created psychological and emotion fear and anxiety in many American viewers. When it was discovered that a radical Islamic group was behind the coordinated, pre-conceived attacks, some of America's fear and anxiety turned to hate of Muslims and the Islamic faith tradition, leading to Islamophobia. I argue that much of that Islamophobic hate was the embedded psychological effect of visually seeing live media coverage of the towers being attacked and falling. Thus, the power of

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<sup>12</sup> "How much did the September 11 terrorist attack cost America?" Institute for the Analysis of Global Security, <http://www.iags.org/costof911.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Lauren Dunn and Maggie Fox, "9/11 first responders begin to feel attack's long-term health effects," NBC News, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/9-11-anniversary/9-11-first-responders-begin-feel-attack-s-long-term-n908306>.

<sup>14</sup> Mona Eltahawy, "The Challenge of Being a Muslim in Post-9/11 America," The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/sep/09/muslim-post-9-11-america>.

<sup>15</sup> Eltahawy, "The Challenge of Being a Muslim in Post-9/11 America."

media in how the 9/11 attacks were reported shaped some American's Islamophobic perceptions of Muslims as threats.

While the media coverage of 9/11 was a real-life event that painted Muslims as political threats, pop culture movies released long before 9/11 had long taken up this mantra to portray Muslims as war hungry, political threats. In “Haqq and Hollywood: Illuminating 100 Years of Muslim Tropes and How to Transform Them”, researcher and author Maytha Alhassen asserts that “A Night in Casablanca” (1946) was a hit for U.S. war-making against Muslims.<sup>16</sup> The movie developed the fictional Iraqi village “Wadi al-Sahara,” which included 500 Iraqi role-players, as combat simulation for “Operation Mojave Viper” for military campaigns in Iraq.<sup>17</sup>

The impact of these movies, along with the 9/11 event, caused some in the West to create a mythical and imaginary perceived “Good Muslim” and a perceived “Bad Muslim”.<sup>18</sup> While some chose to view all Muslims and Islamic-practicing persons as bad in light of the 9/11 event, some others chose to view those who facilitated the 9/11 attacks as “Bad Muslims” versus different from “Good Muslims.”<sup>19</sup> According to Alhassen:

“‘Good’ Muslims are often secular assimilationists, defenders of U.S. imperialism, or submissive Muslim women in need of being ‘saved’ by the West from ‘evil, oppressive’ Muslim men. The ‘Good Muslim’ is coded as a brown, foreign other, or a Black Muslim who expresses patriotism, operates as an agent of the state, and volunteers as a martyr for American militarism. Each of these types, such as secular assimilationists and defenders of imperialism, are described more fully below. The ‘Bad’ Muslim signifies a ‘traitor,’ one who is critical of U.S. foreign policy and/or American militarism—a critique usually decontextualized from a

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<sup>16</sup> Maytha Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood: Illuminating 100 Years of Muslim Tropes and How to Transform Them* (New York: Pop Culture Collaborative, 2018), [https://popcollab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HaqqAndHollywood\\_Report.pdf](https://popcollab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HaqqAndHollywood_Report.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

<sup>18</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

<sup>19</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

rarely acknowledged anger in response to the destruction caused by our foreign and domestic wars on Muslim populations.”<sup>20</sup>

Alhassen goes on to give specific examples of the “Good Muslim” versus “Bad Muslim” motif in cinema:

“Network hits such as ‘24’ and ‘Homeland’ initially played up the conventional cowboy-and-Indian script, dressed in Orientalist tropes. But later seasons attempted to “flip the script” by introducing the “Good Muslim,” usually a supporting character who operates as a spy or CIA agent serving the white man or woman's ultimate mission of decapitating a global terrorist network. Films that portrayed Muslims (primarily Iranian and Arab characters) in a counterterrorism framework or on a battlefield at war with the U.S. have been well regarded by the Hollywood establishment— ‘United 93’ (2006), ‘The Hurt Locker’ (2008), ‘Argo’ (2012), ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ (2012), and ‘American Sniper’ (2014). All were nominated for or received top prizes, including Oscars.”<sup>21</sup>

This “Good Muslim” versus “Bad Muslim” motif in cinema has also impacted African American Muslims.<sup>22</sup> Alhassen suggests that Black Muslims are only identified as “good” when they are demonstrating American patriotism, highlighting the following list as examples<sup>23</sup>:

- In “Sleeper Cell” (2005), Los Angeles-based undercover FBI agent “Darwyn Al-Sayeed” (Michael Ealy) joins a cell containing “unlikely” white Muslims (and the Arab head terrorist) to foil a terrorist plot.
- In “Five Fingers” (2006), Laurence Fishburne, a U.S. agent, operates in the guise of Moroccan-Muslim chemist “Ahmat” to extract information from “Martijn” (Ryan Phillippe), a Dutch banker who is planning to set up a “food program” in Morocco. “Martijn”, we later learn, is a white Muslim convert who is part of a Dutch terrorist cell “Ahmat” is investigating.
- In “The Kingdom” (2007), Jamie Foxx plays “Ronald Fleury”, a member of a U.S. government bomb squad sent to Saudi Arabia to investigate a bombing at an ARAMCO compound.

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<sup>20</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

<sup>23</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

- In “Traitor” (2008), Don Cheadle plays “Samir Horn”, an undercover FBI agent born to a Sudanese-Muslim father, who travels the world to gather information and break up a worldwide terrorist cell.
- In “Unthinkable” (2010), Samuel L. Jackson as “Henry Herald “H” Humphries” is a special agent who tortures a white Muslim suspected of terrorist activity to coerce information out of him.

What does it mean to understand Muslims as religious, political and cultural global threats?

*Muslims As Religious, Political and Cultural Global Threats: What Does This Mean?*

In *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*,<sup>24</sup> author Deepa Kumar first asserts that in order to understand Islamophobia one must first understand that Muslims have been perceived as “threats”<sup>24</sup> to Europe. The persons who create this perception are the ruling elite, primarily those in the West. Kumar underscores an important dynamic to highlight in Muslim studies that some parts of Western Civilization “defines other traditions, culture and customs in comparison to its own traditions, culture and customs.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, Eastern ideas are not allotted their own unique, individual power.

This ruling elite used several mechanisms to paint the narrative of Muslims as threats to Europe. First, Kumar asserts that Christianity of the West sought to pit Christians against Muslims by referencing the biblical narrative of Ishmael (Hagar’s son) as the original “father” of Muslims in contrast to Isaac (Abraham’s son with Sarah who is favored and chosen by God) as the ancestor of Christians.<sup>26</sup> Christianity also challenged

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<sup>24</sup> Deepa Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 9.

<sup>25</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 11.

the validity of Islam as a faith tradition by asserting that Jesus was the last revealed prophet while Islam believes that prophet was Muhammad, who rose to fame in the seventh century. Christianity also promoted Islam as a violent religious tradition, citing Muhammad as a violent character in Islam who sanctioned Muslim evangelism, conversation and submission at all costs -even if those costs were violent.

Second, the ruling elite highlighted Muslim's military conflict against Europe and Spain as another threat. Thus, there is no religious "clash of civilizations" (as Bernard Lewis highlights), but rather political wars occurring between what has been deemed "European West" and "Muslim East".<sup>27</sup> To make matters worse, as Muslim military rule throughout Arabia, North Africa and Europe persisted, converts to Islam increased steadily, threatening Christianity.

Third, some in the West felt most threatened by Muslim's military conquest of the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>28</sup> The Spanish Moors, who owned the Iberian territory, were gifted in science and urban development and transformed the territory into a desired modern metropolis which angered some in other parts of the West who still struggled with living in the Dark Ages. In response, Christians sought to reconquer the Iberian Peninsula, labeling Muslims as demonic. Kumar goes on to assert that understandings of Muslims and the Islamic faith tradition have swung on a back-and-forth pendulum primarily as a result of various political military conflict between some of European Christian western civilization and Muslim Islamic eastern traditions.

### *The Power of Media in Shaping Orientalism*

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<sup>27</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 33.

<sup>28</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 12.

In 2010, Warner Brother's motion picture "Sex And The City 2" created controversy for being anti-Muslim.<sup>29</sup> According to Wajahat Ali, the movie "completely" offends "the Middle East, its people, its religion and its culture," by "ignorantly and inaccurately" painting Abu Dhabi as an "oppressive dungeon populated by intolerant men who cannot comprehend cleavage or bare shoulders," and does so "in a wacky cultural vacuum blissfully unaware of its own arrogance and prejudices."<sup>30</sup> Other critics agree with Ali. Brian Lowry wrote in Variety: "There's also some not-very-convincing rumination on the treatment of Muslim women — even in what's supposed to be a relatively progressive Arab country — that seems more condescending than stirring."<sup>31</sup> Some offensive scenes were highlighted by Sky News:

"One scene even features the four main characters being rescued by Muslim women who strip off their burkhas to reveal the stylish Western outfits they are concealing beneath their black robes. While in another scene, the ladies perform a karaoke version of Helen Reddy's I Am Woman in an Abu Dhabi nightclub, as man-eater Samantha shocks the locals with her sexual escapades."<sup>32</sup>

Hadley Freeman of the Daily Mail also slammed the film's Islamophobia: "Not since 1942's Arabian Nights has orientalism been portrayed so unironically. All Middle Eastern men are shot in a sparkly light with jingly jangly music just in case you didn't get that these dusky people are exotic and different," Freeman stated.<sup>33</sup>

"Sex And The City 2" was not the first movie to stereotype the Orient. In "Haqq and Hollywood", Alhassen asserts that Europeans created an imaginary "Orient", Middle

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<sup>29</sup> "Is 'Sex and the City 2' anti-Muslim?" The Week, <https://theweek.com/articles/494064/sex-city-2-antimuslim>.

<sup>30</sup> "Is 'Sex and the City 2' anti-Muslim?"

<sup>31</sup> "Is 'Sex and the City 2' anti-Muslim?"

<sup>32</sup> "Is 'Sex and the City 2' anti-Muslim?"

<sup>33</sup> "Is 'Sex and the City 2' anti-Muslim?"

Eastern and African people, who were stereotyped as “oversexed, indulgently sensual, queer, psychologically weak, barbaric, and inferior.”<sup>34</sup> Alhassen goes on to show how television and movies are the leading forums to perpetuate these stereotypes. Such was the case in 1959 with the release of the first Muslim inspired movie in the United States entitled, “1,001 Arabian Nights”, a movie Alhassen says “inspired fantasy desert lands brought to life by magical genies (or jinns), flying carpets, and harem sensuality.”<sup>35</sup>

Alhassen’s most pivotal critique about the portrayal of the Orient in movies and television is the use of “whitewashing” the actors and actresses:

“Hollywood has a long history of casting white actors in stories about ancient Egypt and the Orient, from Rudolph Valentino as “The Sheik” in 1921, Charlton Heston as “Moses” in “The Ten Commandments” (1956), and Elizabeth Taylor as “Cleopatra” (1963) through the 2000s, when whitewashed belly dancers, jinns, and mystics graced popular films and TV shows. For example, from 1965 to 1970, “I Dream of Jeannie” portrayed Barbara Eden as a “slave” to U.S. astronaut Captain Tony Nelson. She fulfills a patriarchal Orientalist fantasy by eventually falling in love with her “master” (as she calls him). Even as late as 2014, we see this whitewashed Orientalism explicitly practiced in “Exodus: Gods and Kings”, starring Christian Bale and Ben Kingsley.”<sup>36</sup>

How does one interpret orientalism and the impact of its myths?

### *Understanding the Power of Orientalism and Its Myths*

Next Kumar asserts that in order to understand Islamophobia one must understand the development of Orientalism and its myths.<sup>37</sup> Kumar acknowledges and sheds light on how Eastern countries have been negatively impacted by Western colonialism and

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<sup>34</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

<sup>35</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

<sup>36</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 10

<sup>37</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*.

imperialism, citing “Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798.”<sup>38</sup> This time period saw the beginnings and implementation of colonialism and imperialism.

When one hears the word ‘Orientalism’, one may immediately be drawn to reflecting on the culture, traditions and rituals of Asian persons. However, Kumar highlights how, in 1978, Edward Said turned this concept upside down in his groundbreaking book simply titled, ‘Orientalism’, by asserting that ‘orientalism’ is a concept that primarily refers to how European culture has sought to define Asian and Arab Muslims.<sup>39</sup> In other words, ‘orientalism (from a Western civilization perspective) does not take into consideration the direct voice of many Asian and Arab Muslims. According to Said, ‘orientalism’ primarily focuses on the usurped power and colonization of Asian persons and Arabs by European Americans.<sup>40</sup>

Resisting some of the West’s desires to define and control others means understanding different cultures as being intelligent. Some in Western tradition, typically view the “other” (which in most cases is Eastern culture and traditions) as unintelligent. One’s view of unintelligence transcends to value and power. Thus, that which one, in the West, doesn’t view as sophisticated or classy is deemed nonhuman and powerless. Kumar confronts readers worldview and pushes readers to widen their belief system and classification of intelligence.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, maybe one would give humanity and power to those entities as well. For example, many African rituals and traditions are viewed as uncivilized and animalistic. Kumar asks readers to take up the mantle of respecting these

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<sup>38</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 29.

traditions as meaningful and purposeful.<sup>42</sup> While one may experience the “other” as being limited from our perspective, this “other” has served a purpose for a particular group of people.

### *The Power of Media in Shaping Myths About Muslim and Islamic Identity*

The media is powerful in shaping myths about Muslims and Islamic Identity.<sup>43</sup> In 2008, a video went viral on social media showcasing presidential Republican candidate John McCain putting aside politics and compassionately and eloquently defending then presidential Democratic candidate Barack Obama’s religious and cultural identity.<sup>44</sup> A white woman attending a McCain rally session referred to Obama as distrustful because he’s Arab. McCain immediately responded with sensitivity and education: “No ma’am, no ma’am, he is a decent family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with.”<sup>45</sup> The short video of this encounter shown a flashlight glimpse of some Americans views about Arabs, Muslims and Islamic religious traditions. In a nutshell, some do not feel trusting of those from the Middle East.

Kumar asserts that there are generally five myths that some persons believe about Muslims and Islam:<sup>46</sup>

- Myth One: Islam Is a Monolithic Religion
- Myth Two: Islam Is a Uniquely Sexist Religion
- Myth Three: The “Muslim Mind” Is Incapable of Reason and Rationality
- Myth Four: Islam Is an Inherently Violent Religion
- Myth Five: Muslims Are Incapable of Democracy and Self-Rule

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<sup>42</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

<sup>44</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 41-46.

Alhassen asserts that some of these myths highlighted by Kumar are primarily shaped by the media.<sup>47</sup> One overarching myth about Islam that both Kumar and Alhassen agree on is that Islam is an inherently violent religion. Alhassen maintains that the media has been critical in promoting this myth, suggesting that a “common trope and trap” is portraying Muslims as “violent terrorist, angry hijacker”<sup>48</sup>:

“As a result of U.S. foreign policy being “at war” with Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Iran, and OPEC member countries, the Middle Eastern emerges as Stock Terrorist #1. Chuck Norris as “Major Scott McCoy” in “The Delta Force” (1986), Arnold Schwarzenegger as “Harry Tasker” in “True Lies” (1994), and Kurt Russell as “David Grant” and Steven Seagal as “Lt. Colonel Austin Travis” in 1996’s “Executive Decision” battle Arab terrorists who either hijack planes or possess nuclear weapons. Not only are the terrorists genocidal barbarians, they’re inept fools who accidentally blow themselves up in “True Lies” and bring a sword to a gun battle with “Indiana Jones” in “Raiders of the Lost Ark” (1981).”<sup>49</sup>

A second overarching myth about Islam that both Kumar and Alhassen agree on is that Islam is a uniquely sexist religion. Some parts of the West promote a reoccurring theme of the importance of ‘saving Muslim women’ from patriarchy, heterosexism and male dominance.<sup>50</sup> This theme plays out in the media according to Alhassen:

“Films like “Protocol” (1984) and “The Sheltering Sky” (1990) .... demonstrate the invisibility of women literally cloaked by the veils that suggest cultural subordination by Muslim men. Meanwhile, the harem member is an overly sexualized belly-dancing prop. In 1966’s “Cast A Giant Shadow”, the viewer is presented with an undulating, voluptuous belly-dancer whose head is cut off by the frame for the entire tent scene. Two decades later we see a similar portrayal in “Head” (1968), featuring the rock group “The Monkees”. These belly-dancing (or Balady dancing) sequences conflate brown women’s dances, from Africa to the Middle East to India—and almost all feature white women.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

<sup>48</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 16.

<sup>49</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*.

<sup>51</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 19.

### *Other Myths in the Limelight*

Alhassen brings to light two other Muslim and Islamic myths not highlighted by Kumar: stereotypical images of the Arab Sheikh and Muslim children as “Killer Kids.”<sup>52</sup> First, Alhassen draws attention to how the Arab Sheikh is highlighted by “big-hair, heavy-mustache, [and a] post-OPEC boycott ‘80s”<sup>53</sup> image: “In “Cannonball II” (1984), Jamie Farr plays a wealthy oil sheikh—“The Great Prince Abdul Bin Falafel, Master of all deserts, Prince of Princes”—who recklessly spends his money, yelling, “Twelve suites! Better yet, the whole floor!” while lusting over white women.”<sup>54</sup> The image of the Arab Sheikh is also portrayed as one who is economically affluent and spending money lavishly without any wisdom:

“In the acclaimed movie “Network” (1976), unhinged TV anchor “Howard Beale”, as part of his uncensored “truth-telling,” feeds an Arab-takeover phobia by “revealing” that the Arabs “have taken billions of dollars out of this country, and now they must put it back!... They're buying it for the Saudi Arabian investment corporation! They're buying it for the Arabs!... Listen to me, God dammit! The Arabs are simply buy us! There's only one thing that can stop them! You!” Here Western audiences are being told to fear the viral spreading of Arab culture and lifestyle.”<sup>55</sup>

Alhassen suggests that the most “pernicious and dangerous” myth is showcasing Muslim children as America’s war enemies which was the case in “Rules of Engagement” (2000), in which a small girl, a victim of Marines shooting at demonstrators, is revealed as an “unsuspecting” shooter who had shot at the Marines, sparking reverberated reactions around the world, from Arabs in the U.S. to people in Yemen, and outraging The Yemeni

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<sup>52</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 17.

<sup>54</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 17.

<sup>55</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 18.

ambassador to the United States, Abdulwahhab Alhajri, who frustratedly remarks: “A little girl shooting at Marines! Can you believe it?... “the movie reaches millions of people. It's ruining our image.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Islamophobia in Television Newscasts*

While Alhassen highlights Islamophobia in United States entertainment movies and television shows, Kumar highlights Islamophobia in United States television news broadcasts such as Fox News.<sup>57</sup> In fact, Kumar asserts that Islamophobia has been “amplified” through right-wing mainstream media television news outlets and cites the following examples:<sup>58</sup>

- The new McCarthyites have long claimed that 80 percent of mosques are controlled by jihadists;
- In 2004, Republican congressman Peter King stated on the Fox News network’s “Sean Hannity Show” that “eighty to eighty-five percent of mosques in this country are controlled by Islamic fundamentalists”;
- In 2010, Pamela Geller stated that “four of five mosques preach hate” on CNN;
- In March 2011, Peter King held his “green scare” hearings on the supposed radicalization in American Muslim communities. A few months later, in June 2011, Yerushalmi made the same claim in the spurious report mentioned above. Gaffney immediately endorsed the findings in his column in the Washington Times.

To make matters worse, Kumar suggests that Islamophobia is not only promoted by right-wing conservative media news outlets, but liberal “native informers” such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Fouad Ajami, Azar Nafisi, Irshad Manji, Kanan Makiya, and Ibn Warraq as well who

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<sup>56</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 185.

<sup>58</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 185.

“reinforce anti-Muslim and anti-Arab racism through their dismal accounts of their countries of origin.”<sup>59</sup>

*Where is the Hope? Recommendations for Addressing Media’s Influence in Shaping Islamophobia*

Where is the hope? Despite the dismal past, Alhassen is optimistic about the future. She highlights how the U.S. 2016 election of a president who promotes “anti-Blackness, xenophobia, nativism, and anti-Muslim racism”, has drawn television and movie executives to promote a vastly different, more authentic, compassionate image of Muslims and Islam.<sup>60</sup>

For further progress forward, Alhassen recommends the following steps in addressing media’s influence in shaping Islamophobia:

1. Understand the diversity of Muslim communities—and frontline their participation in, and ownership of, the creative process.<sup>61</sup>
2. Build and expand creative and career pipelines for Muslim artists within the entertainment industry.<sup>62</sup>
3. Invest in Muslim communities’ ability to advance long-term narrative change and participate in the pop culture for social change field.<sup>63</sup>

While I appreciate and values the recommendations raised by Alhassen, in addition there is a responsibility for the larger public to be held accountable as well. I suggest challenging American television and movie viewers to resist watching and economically supporting Islamophobic television shows and movies. To be honest, the television and

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<sup>59</sup> Kumar, *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 86.

<sup>60</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 8.

<sup>61</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Alhassen, *Haqq and Hollywood*, 8.

movie executives promote that which sells to the larger public. What if the larger public were to refuse to support these stereotypical Muslim and Islam tropes? Thus, I wholeheartedly believe that a chain reaction would occur. This boycotting, act-of-resistance reaction would vastly affect the economic purse strings of media executives, which would inherently strike their attention and limit production of Islamophobic media. In conclusion and retrospect, showing and shaping hate is genuinely in the hands of the larger viewing public. There is not a visual media problem, but a violent American problem.

Kumar concludes that the world needs to re-do what it did in its fight against imperialism, suggesting a united liberation response from around the world “to create a brand new society free of racism and war... a world where the ideology of Islamophobia will be dumped into the dustbin of history, and that will be the end of that.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Kumar *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*, 200.

## CHAPTER 5.

### RETWEET RIZPAH:

#### Care-fronting The Black Church In Addressing Black Female Transphobia On Social Media

Nearly everyone has heard of the social media hashtag: #BlackLivesMatter.

The hashtag was started in response to the not-guilty verdict in the George Zimmerman case. Zimmerman, a member his neighborhood watch committee, had been charged with murder after he pursued an unarmed African American teenage boy, Trayvon Martin, in a gated community complex while Martin returned home from purchasing snacks.<sup>1</sup>

Enraged by the injustice of the verdict, three African American lesbian women took to Twitter in protest using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>2</sup> It went viral, being used nationwide, and the women transformed the hashtag into “a Black-centered political will and movement building project.”<sup>3</sup>

While racist violence is ever-present through police brutality and those who believe they are in positions of power, there is a growing trend of violence toward transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming persons with overwhelming focus on Black trans women and femmes. In the 12 months, from October 1, 2017 to September 30, 2018, approximately 369 trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming people were murdered.<sup>4</sup> As of November 20, 2019, the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Transgender Day of

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<sup>1</sup> “Our History,” Black Lives Matter, March 19, 2024, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/our-history/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Our History,” Black Lives Matter.

<sup>3</sup> “Our History,” Black Lives Matter.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Morgan, “Beheaded, Gunned Down and Stoned to Death: 369 Trans People Killed this Year,” November 20, 2018, <https://www.gaysonoma.com/2018/11/beheaded-gunned-down-and-stoned-to-death-369-trans-people-killed-this-year/>.

Remembrance, 29 trans people have been killed in 2019.<sup>5</sup> They were predominately Black trans women, according to GLAAD. This I declare that by not sharing information about Black trans murders on social media, the public is denied access to seeing LGBTQIA powerlessness, which fosters a lack of justice.

While the liberation Black Church has gotten on board with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, where is the response to Black trans murders? There is silence about this topic because discussions on LGBTQIA sexuality in the Black Church are still taboo. The Black Church's silence has also caused Black trans persons to experience psychological trauma and terror from the high rate of Black trans murders gone unacknowledged thereby influencing how the Black trans community makes spiritual meaning of this current existential trauma. I emphasize that readers re-identify Rizpah's character (as concubine and "secondary wife" to King Saul) and her sons' characters as symbolic of Black transgender identity, therefore reinterpreting the death of Rizpah's sons as paralleling the trauma and terror experienced by the Black trans community in recent surmounting Black trans murders.

*When It's Good, It's Good:*

*Social Media's Voice in #BlackLivesMatter Movement*

"Get away [garbled] ... for what? Every time you see me, you want to mess with me. I'm tired of it. It stops today. Why would you...? Everyone standing here will tell you I didn't do nothing. I did not sell nothing. Because every time you see me, you want to harass me. You want to stop me (garbled) Selling cigarettes. I'm minding my business, officer, I'm minding my business. Please just leave me alone. I told you the last time, please just leave me alone. please please, don't touch me. Do not touch

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<sup>5</sup> Morgan, "Beheaded, Gunned Down and Stoned to Death."

me..... I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe," he said, as officers restrained him.”<sup>6</sup>

These were the last words of Eric Garner, an obese African American middle-aged male suffering from asthma and cardiovascular disease, on July 17, 2014, in Staten Island, New York City, after a New York City Police Department (NYPD) officer, Daniel Pantaleo, put him in a NYPD policy-banned chokehold for between 15 and 20 seconds while attempting to arrest him under suspicion that he was illegally selling individual cigarettes.<sup>7</sup> Moments later Garner lost consciousness, and subsequently died.

The New York City Medical Examiner's Office report stated that Garner's primary cause of death was “compression of neck (choke hold), compression of chest and prone positioning during physical restraint by police”.<sup>8</sup> Eric Garner's name joins an unfortunately long list of other noted names -Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Sean Bell, Diallo Amadou, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile and Mike Brown just to name few, who were killed by police officers' excessive use of force, making the popular hashtag #BlackLivesMatter a trending focus on Twitter and other social media outlets.

Initially, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag sparked popularity following the George Zimmerman not guilty verdict in which neighborhood patrolman Zimmerman pursued and stalked an unarmed African American teenage boy, Trayvon Martin, in a gated community complex when Martin was simply returning home from walking to a convenience store to purchase an Arizona Ice Tea and a bag of Skittles. After the verdict

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<sup>6</sup> Susanna Capelouto, “Eric Garner: The haunting last words of a dying man,” CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/12/04/us/garner-last-words/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Capelouto, “Eric Garner.”

<sup>8</sup> Ray Sanchez, “Police Choke Hold Killed NY Man, Medical Examiner Says,” CNN, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/08/01/justice/new-york-choke-hold-death/index.html>.

was announced, three African American young female supporters of the murdered Trayvon Martin, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, took to Twitter in protest, voicing their anger and frustration in tweets and concluding their tweets with the hashtag slogan “#BlackLivesMatter”. The hashtag picked up notoriety and was then used by Martin supporters nationwide. Garza, Cullors, and Tometi then went further and turned the hashtag into “a Black-centered political will and movement building project.”<sup>9</sup> Their project progressed forward in 2014, when unarmed African American male teenager Mike Brown was murdered by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, causing outrage and protest by primarily African American community members.

As law enforcement began to use tear gas, pepper spray and other forms of brutality to halt protestors, #BlackLivesMatter community organizers and protestors turned to social media as a resource to shine light for the nation and world to see on the happenings of Ferguson. Videos began circulating online on Facebook and Twitter showing protestors being tear gassed and pepper sprayed. Just as the media was pivotal in showcasing police brutality against protestors during the Civil Rights Movement, it was also helpful in highlighting police brutality against Ferguson protestors.<sup>10</sup>

Social media has also been helpful in the Eric Garner case specifically because the actual video of Officer Pantaleo forcing Garner into a chokehold has been viewed and shared widely to date around the world.<sup>11</sup> Viewers actually witness his last moments of

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<sup>9</sup> “Our History,” Black Lives Matter.

<sup>10</sup> Sanchez, “Police Choke Hold Killed NY Man.”

<sup>11</sup> Alan Feuer and Matt Apuzzo, “With Prosecutors at Odds, U.S. Inquiry Into Eric Garner’s Death Drags On,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/12/nyregion/with-prosecutors-at-odds-us-inquiry-into-eric-garners-death-drag-on.html>.

life and hear the last words Garner ever spoke. Eric Garner's name joins a list of others whose final moments of life at the hands of police officers were recorded live, including Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. While much social media attention has been given to police brutality of unarmed African American males through the #BlackLivesMatter movement, on the other hand, little to no social media attention has been given to the high number of Black trans murders happening now.

*But When It's Bad, It's Bad:*

*Social Media's Silence on Epidemic of Black Trans Murders and America's Amnesia of Black Trans Psychological Trauma and Terror*

Michel Foucault emphasized the ground-breaking notion that sexuality and sexual relations symbolizes power in that the powers that be like to have and maintain control and power over the bodies, sexuality and sexual relations of the underclass in particular.<sup>12</sup> The sexual regulation of bodies is the central means of power. In some sense, I claim that trans persons have taken that power back by the sheer nature of transforming their gender identity. Thus, forcing the powers that be to in fact be powerless in relation to trans persons. I insist on the notion that social media's silence on Black trans murders is an effort by racism, patriarchy and heterosexism to reclaim power taken by trans persons. In other words, silence on social media communicates meanings of trans persons as having non-value and worthlessness.

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<sup>12</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 122.

In 12 months, from October 1, 2017 to September 30, 2018, approximately 369 trans, non-binary and gender-variant people were murdered.<sup>13</sup> Worse yet, 28 of the trans murder victims were reported to be teenagers, with some as young as 16.<sup>14</sup> In total, there were five beheadings, nine people were stoned to death and the majority of the people killed were trans women of color, often gunned down or beaten to death.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Brazil, with 167 murders, and Mexico, with 71, once again, lead the list of the most reported killings of trans women and men, while the United States has seen 28 trans people killed, (an increase from last year's 25) –in addition, other killings have been reported around the globe including Pakistan, Colombia, France and the the UK.<sup>16</sup>

In the United States, Black female trans murders have hit an all-time high.

According to the Human Rights Campaign:

In 2017, advocates tracked at least 29 deaths of transgender people in the United States due to fatal violence, the most ever recorded. These victims were killed by acquaintances, partners and strangers, some of whom have been arrested and charged, while others have yet to be identified. Some of these cases involve clear anti-transgender bias. In others, the victim's transgender status may have put them at risk in other ways, such as forcing them into homelessness. While the details of these cases differ, it is clear that fatal violence disproportionately affects transgender women of color, and that the intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia

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<sup>13</sup> Morgan, "Beheaded, Gunned Down and Stoned to Death."

<sup>14</sup> Morgan, "Beheaded, Gunned Down and Stoned to Death."

<sup>15</sup> Morgan, "Beheaded, Gunned Down and Stoned to Death."

<sup>16</sup> Morgan, "Beheaded, Gunned Down and Stoned to Death."

conspire to deprive them of employment, housing, healthcare and other necessities, barriers that make them vulnerable.<sup>17</sup>

According to David J. Johns, who serves as the executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition, the nation's leading civil rights organization dedicated to the empowerment of Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and same gender loving (LGBTQ/SGL) people, including people living with HIV/AIDS, "in 2017 there were 52 reported anti-LGBTQ/SGL homicides, the highest death rate of these types of murders on record, according to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP). Nearly half of these tragic deaths (22) were Black transgender women, a community that continues to experience a disproportionate share of anti-LGBTQ/SGL violence."<sup>18</sup> The most notable cases in 2018 have occurred in Jacksonville, Florida: "Since the beginning of this year, Celine Walker, 36, was found shot to death inside a hotel room on February 4; Antash'a English, 38, was found wounded between two abandoned houses on June 1 and later died at a hospital; and Cathalina Christina James, 24, was found shot to death at a hotel on June 24."<sup>19</sup> As of July 2019, approximately 12 Black trans women have been killed, according to the Human Rights campaign.<sup>20</sup> Despite these high numbers, where is the media's outcry?

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<sup>17</sup> HRC Foundation, "Fatal Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2018." <https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2018>.

<sup>18</sup> David J. Johns, "Why All Black People Should Care About The Brutal Slaughter Of Jacksonville, FL's Black Transgender Community," *The Grio*, July 18, 2018, <https://thegrio.com/2018/07/24/jacksonville-black-transgender/>.

<sup>19</sup> Johns, "Why All Black People Should Care."

<sup>20</sup> HRC Foundation, "Fatal Violence."

Psychiatrist Judith Herman highlights how victims of violence face psychological trauma that the larger society chooses to “forget”<sup>21</sup>. This “amnesia” inspires a “forgotten history” by the larger society.<sup>22</sup> Herman suggests:

“In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrators first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.”<sup>23</sup>

I proclaim that Black trans women who are murdered are not seen as victims by the larger society because the larger society has an ongoing questioning of the credibility of Black trans womens’ sexual identity. I avow that by not sharing info about Black trans murders on social media, the public is denied access to seeing LBGTQIA powerlessness, which fosters a lack of justice.

*When Social Media Goes Silent on Black Trans Sexuality:*

*Black Trans Visible Powerlessness Unseen and Heterosexual Guilt Unexperienced*

The Civil Rights Movement was the period from the early 1950’s to the late 1960’s in the United States when African Americans engaged in peaceful protests and

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<sup>21</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 7.

<sup>22</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 7.

demonstrations throughout the South to boycott racial segregation –the separation of African Americans and European Americans in educational classrooms and public facilities.<sup>24</sup> African Americans were forced by the mainly White legal judicial system to sit in separate spaces at movie theaters, restaurants, parks, and sports arenas.<sup>25</sup>

The face of the Civil Rights Movement was a calm, young African American charismatic preacher from Atlanta, Georgia named Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a middle-class, Ph.D. scholar-activist and orator who believed that the key to gaining equal rights was only through non-violence, peaceful protests and boycotts.<sup>26</sup> King and the Civil Rights Movement most notably successfully navigated voting rights, desegregation of education and labor unions for African Americans.<sup>27</sup> But the success of the movement could never have happened without the support of television media.

The success of the Civil Right Movement was grounded in a pivotal dynamic. As the United States' first trending national news story, I emphasise that television empowered the Civil Rights Movement's protests and boycotts to become visible Black powerlessness. According to psychologist Valerie Miller, there are three main types of powerlessness.<sup>28</sup> One is called visible powerlessness, that which people can visibly see as oppression being done to a person.<sup>29</sup> For example, when certain people are prohibited to vote, that's visible powerlessness. When certain people are victims of police brutality, that's visible powerlessness. When certain schools in certain neighborhoods don't have the same resources as other schools in other neighborhoods, that's visible powerlessness.

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<sup>24</sup> "Civil Rights Movement," <https://www.history.com/articles/civil-rights-movement>.

<sup>25</sup> "Civil Rights Movement."

<sup>26</sup> "Civil Rights Movement."

<sup>27</sup> "Civil Rights Movement."

<sup>28</sup> Valerie Miller, *A New Weave of Politics, Power and People* (Antigonish, NS: Coady International Institute, 2001), <https://coady.stfx.ca/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/Valerie%20Miller.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, *A New Weave of Politics*.

Other forms of visible powerlessness include unemployment, lack of affordable health care, foreclosures, predatory lending practices, lack of gardens and healthy food markets in certain neighborhoods.

The second type of powerlessness is called hidden powerlessness, what others think about a person; how people label other folks based on their ill-informed perceptions.<sup>30</sup> When black people are labeled as thugs, stupid or dumb based on the color of their skins then are turned down for employment opportunities or home loans, that's hidden powerlessness. When women are judged as sex objects then don't receive equal pay in the job market, that's hidden powerlessness. When a particular group of people are looked down upon and called low-class and Walgreens or CVS stores refuse to build in their neighborhood, that's hidden powerlessness. The third type of powerlessness is called invisible powerlessness, which means how a person perceives him or herself.<sup>31</sup> This is the most detrimental powerlessness. It doesn't matter what people do to a person or what people think about a person, what is most harmful to a person is what their own psyche tells them about themselves.

This I argue that African Americans have always wrestled with hidden powerlessness and invisible powerlessness as a result of external sociological factors as well as internal psychological mechanisms. However, both hidden and invisible powerlessness can easily be ignored by the general public, those who want to pretend as if sociological and psychological issues don't exist can easily take a blind eye to these atrocities. But, visible powerlessness is undeniable. Visible powerlessness has eyes

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<sup>30</sup> Miller, *A New Weave of Politics*.

<sup>31</sup> Miller, *A New Weave of Politics*.

starring right back into the eye of the oppressor. Television became America's window or mirror to see Black visible powerlessness during the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>32</sup>

When White television viewers were forced to see videos of unarmed, peaceful, nice Christian Black protestors, who in particular were boycotting for desegregation, voting rights and labor unions, attacked by police dogs, sprayed with water hoses, beat with police batons and spat on, this visual violence began to pull on the heart strings of White America, specifically those in the northern states. When White television viewers in the North were forced to investigate why these protestors were boycotting in the first place, because Jim Crow segregation laws were still being practiced in the South, Black hidden and invisible powerlessness came to light and had to be acknowledged by White America. For many Whites and even some upper class Blacks in the north, in witnessing these injustices on television, seeing became believing and invoked guilt. This white guilt found its way into American politics, impacting social change primarily through equality-seeking legislation such as the Voting Rights Act and Brown vs. Board of Education.

It's also important to name another important dynamic in this conversation. Language and oppression are a powerful couple. Racism. Sexism. Homophobia. Classism. Ageism. Differently-abled-ism. The power to actually verbally express aloud the words "racism" or "homophobia", from a psychology and human development perspective, causes discomfort and uneasiness alone for some.<sup>33</sup> There is a psychological

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<sup>32</sup> William G. Thomas III, "Television News and the Civil Rights Struggle: The Views in Virginia and Mississippi," Southern Spaces, November 3, 2004, <https://southernspaces.org/2004/television-news-and-civil-rights-struggle-views-virginia-and-mississippi/>.

<sup>33</sup> "The Five Faces of Oppression," <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/deib-explorer/files/five-faces-of-oppression.pdf>.

dynamic that occurs when persons attempt to resist naming oppression. The irony: the sheer fact that one struggles with uttering the words “sexism”, “classism” or “ageism” speaks volumes. The inability to speak out loud words descriptive of oppression is within itself an act of oppression.<sup>34</sup>

Naming is important. Naming specific oppression is even more crucial.<sup>35</sup> Naming oppression gives witness to the powerlessness of victims of that particular oppression.<sup>36</sup> Witnessing that powerlessness then encourages progressives/liberation-seekers or convicts perpetrators to action.<sup>37</sup> America’s silence around naming the oppression in some sense overlooks the powerlessness of the victims of those oppressions and subsequently supports the ongoing oppressive status quo.<sup>38</sup> In some sense, I believe that the media becomes a “naming forum” for oppression.

Just as television was instrumental in spurring justice during the Civil Rights Movement in the 50’s and 60’s, the same is true of social media today. In some sense, sharing on social media more about Black trans murders along with homophobia and transphobia allows the public, in particular homophobic and transphobic Black church institutions, to see the visible powerlessness of Black LGBTQIA persons that would invoke conviction and change. In our current times, while the liberating Black Church has gotten on board with protesting police brutality through the #BlackLivesMatter social media movement, where is the Black Church in responding to Black Transphobia, and specifically unaddressed Black Trans murders?

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<sup>34</sup> “The Five Faces of Oppression.

<sup>35</sup> “The Five Faces of Oppression.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, *A New Weave of Politics*.

<sup>37</sup> Miller, *A New Weave of Politics*.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, *A New Weave of Politics*.

Thus, I champion the belief that homophobia still rises to astonishing rates in African American circles, particularly the Black Church. While many African Americans may struggle with gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships, there is still a tad bit more acceptance of these nonhomogeneous relationships rather than African American transgendered, non-binary relationships. One particular media art form, the Netflix hit, “Orange is the New Black”, starring African American trans actress Laverne Cox, has tremendously increased African American’s awareness of Black trans identity and acceptance. Laverne Cox is not alone. Openly gay Black actor Billy Porter has landed national attention for highlighting the high rates of transphobia and hate crimes against Black trans females in the cable network FX hit, “Pose”. But there is still much work to be done.

*Rizpah Parallels Black Trans Women’s “Double Consciousness” & “Twoness” Identity*

I propose assisting the Black Church to reread the Biblical story of Rizpah in 2 Samuel through the lens of Black Transgender oppression. Dr. Allan Boesak highlights how the story of Rizpah is rarely shared:

“Even books on women in the Bible, many of them written by feminist theologians, easily skip her. There is a very authoritative women’s commentary on the Bible written especially by women for women, intended to make up for the gaps in interpretation and understanding that men have so often allowed in their interpretation of the Bible. But even in that book, The Women’s Bible Commentary, the name of Rizpah is not mentioned in its treatment of Second Samuel.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Allan Boesak, “Biblical Reflections on 2 Samuel 21:1-14,” Kairos Southern Africa, <https://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com/2011/05/08/biblical-reflections-on-2-samuel-21-14-by-dr-allan-boesak/>.

As the story goes, Rizpah was the concubine of King Saul. Concubines were usually persons identified and treated as social outcasts by the larger society.<sup>40</sup> According to Dr. Wilda Gafney, Rizpah was a “secondary wife”.<sup>41</sup> Dr. Stephanie Crowder refers to Rizpah as a concubine.<sup>42</sup> Is she a secondary wife or concubine? In some sense I propose that Rizpah had a “double consciousness” in that she has an external public identity as concubine that is condemned and shamed and at the same time, an individual identity and interpersonal relationship specifically with King Saul as second wife where she finds celebration, affirmation and empowerment. I assert that Rizpah’s double consciousness or twoness is synonymous with W.E.B. DuBois’ understanding of African American dualistic identity. DuBois asserts that African Americans learn early on to obtain both a Eurocentric American worldview and an African worldview, and successfully hold those views in tandem with one another.<sup>43</sup> I assert that like Rizpah, African American trans persons have a double consciousness whereby they must face the intersection of oppression in being identified by both race/ethnicity and gender identity. I also suggest that trans persons who have not yet had gender confirmation surgery may also experience a double-consciousness in that they may carry a physical gender identity tied to their genitalia and imposed by society and at the same time, an affirming gender identity expressed in safe spaces and with close friends.

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<sup>40</sup> “Rizpah, Faithful Mother of Murdered Sons,” <https://womeninthebible.net/women-bible-old-new-testaments/rizpah/>.

<sup>41</sup> Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 198.

<sup>42</sup> Stephanie Buckhanon Crowder, *When Momma Speaks: The Bible and Motherhood from a Womanist Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 54.

<sup>43</sup> “Double Consciousness,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/>.

Some African Americans use the story of Rizpah, specifically the government-sanctioned murder of her sons, to draw present-day comparisons to young African American men and boys killed by white police officers who go unpunished for their blatant crimes. I assert that Rizpah's story could also be used within African American circles to challenge transphobia. Rizpah's sons could challenge David for the throne, therefore they were killed because they were "embodied threats,"<sup>44</sup> specifically to King David, just as Black transgender persons are killed in present day because they are experienced as embodied threats. Specifically, the Black Church remains quiet, on social media in particular, because Black trans persons are experienced as "embodied threats"<sup>45</sup> to the Black church.

*David's Insecurity, Anxiety & Perceiving Rizpah's Sons as "Embodied Threats"*

At first glance, according to 2 Samuel 21:3, it would seem that King David, on behalf of Israel, attempts to "make expiation" with the Gibeonites who, years ago, were wronged by King David's predecessor King Saul. King David and Israel believe that their current plight of suffering from an environmental drought is as a result of King Saul's nebulous past actions against the Gibeonites. Humanity often interprets human suffering as punishment from God for past sins. Thus, King David begs the Gibeonites to consider what must be done to make right King Saul's sins and thereby "bless the heritage of the Lord"<sup>46</sup> and end the drought. According to 2 Samuel 21:5-6, the Gibeonites response is "The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place

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<sup>44</sup> "Rizpah, Faithful Mother of Murdered Sons."

<sup>45</sup> "Rizpah, Faithful Mother of Murdered Sons."

<sup>46</sup> 2 Samuel 21:3, New Revised Standard Version.

in all the territory of Israel— let seven of his sons be handed over to us, and we will impale them before the Lord at Gibeon on the mountain of the Lord.” King David willingly says to the Gibeonites, “I will hand them over.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, Saul’s remaining heirs (two sons birthed by Rizpah and Saul along with five grandsons by Saul’s daughter) become victims of what this I argue is state-sanctioned violence.

This I assert that King David’s actions toward Saul’s surviving sons and grandsons however were more sinister. In essence, King David agrees to “hand them over” to the Gibeonites because David perceived Saul’s surviving male heirs represent what I assert were “embodied threats” against King David’s throne I assert that violence occurs when persons perceive or experience a feeling of threat from someone or something else. According to Merriam Webster, when one feels threatened, one is in actuality wrestling with “insecurity” and “anxiousness.”<sup>48</sup> I assert that while many view King David as the “Captain America” figure of the Old Testament Hebrew Bible King David wrestles with insecurity and anxiety because his conception was never to be. The story surrounding David’s birth is controversial and heart-wrenching to say the least.

According to Chana Weisberg, editor of TheJewishWoman.org, David’s conception was unintentional.<sup>49</sup> Weisberg highlights how David’s father, the notable Jesse (Yishai) at one point questioned the authenticity of his Jewish ancestry, believing that his grandmother Ruth, a Moabite, did not legally marry his Israelite grandfather Boaz.<sup>50</sup> This possible notion of an illegitimate marriage between his grandparents caused Jesse to feel guilty about his own current marriage to an Israelite woman named Nitzevet.

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<sup>47</sup> 2 Samuel 21:6.

<sup>48</sup> “Threaten,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threaten>.

<sup>49</sup> “Rizpah, Faithful Mother of Murdered Sons.”

<sup>50</sup> “Rizpah, Faithful Mother of Murdered Sons.”

Jesse believed that if he was not a truly conceived Israelite offspring (through a recognized Israelite marriage), then it was illegal for him to be currently married to another Israelite as customary law prohibited marriages between Israelites and non-Israelites.<sup>51</sup> Jesse therefore believed that the legitimacy of his children with Nitzevet born up until this point would be called into question. Jesse decided to not have sexual relations anymore with his wife again, instead opting to have sex and bear children with another non-Israelite, his Caananite maid in order to secure the legitimacy of any future children he bore.<sup>52</sup>

A monkey wrench in Jesse's plan occurred when, on the night Jesse was to have sexual relations with his Caananite maidservant, she instead switched with Jesse's wife Nitzevet. Unbeknownst to Jesse, he had sexual relations with Nitzevet instead of the Canaanite maidservant and thus conceived David in this act. When Jesse realized that Nitzevet was pregnant and he had in fact been tricked, Jesse grew contempt and disdain for both his wife and his yet-to-be-born youngest and last child, David. After birth, as David progresses through childhood, he feels the disdain that his siblings and other family have for him: "I was a stranger to my brothers, a foreigner to my mother's sons; they put gall in my meal, and gave me vinegar to quench my thirst."<sup>53</sup> According to Weisberg, "David was not permitted to eat with the rest of his family, but was assigned to a separate table in the corner. He was given the task of shepherd because 'they hoped that a wild beast would come and kill him while he was performing his duties,' and for this reason was sent to pasture in dangerous areas full of lions and bears."<sup>54</sup> Because David

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<sup>51</sup>"Rizpah, Faithful Mother of Murdered Sons."

<sup>52</sup> "Rizpah, Faithful Mother of Murdered Sons."

<sup>53</sup> Psalms 69.

<sup>54</sup> "Rizpah, Faithful Mother of Murdered Sons."

was an unwanted conceived child, I assert that Samuel's later calling and anointing of David as the second king of Israel sent shock waves through the family and community. Because David was an unwanted conceived child, I also assert that his victory over Israel's arch enemy, the giant Goliath, sent further shock waves through the family and community. This I assert that David's heart-wrenching birth story impacts David's desire for power and control of his throne from Saul's surviving heirs.

David is not only impacted by a heart-wrenching birth story of being conceived unknowingly and unwanted, but David must also contend with the family systems theory effect of being the last-born child.<sup>55</sup> According to psychologist Kevin Leman, being the last-born child has psychological and sociological effects.<sup>56</sup> I will connect the dots of how these effects resonated in David's life. First, "youngest children in the family are typically the outgoing charmers, the personable manipulators".<sup>57</sup> I argue that David's charming manipulative tendencies arose in his scheme to have Saul's surviving heirs killed by the Gibeonites to protect his throne, highlighting Leman's assertion that lastborn children can also be "rebellious, temperamental, manipulative, spoiled, impatient, and impetuous."<sup>58</sup>

King David's life is one of both triumph and tragedy. In essence, Bradford Wilson and George Edington summarize, "Some lastborns become very adept at charming the world in various ways, while others grow up with a feeling that the only way they can gain anybody's attention is by making a mess; by being a problem child or a pest or a rebel who enjoys shooting spitballs at City Hall. If you are a typical lastborn, you have a fair share of both the charmer and the rebel in your makeup, and other people are often

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<sup>55</sup>Kevin Leman, *The Birth Order Book: Why You Are the Way You Are* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> Leman, *The Birth Order Book*.

<sup>57</sup> Leman, *The Birth Order Book*, 101.

<sup>58</sup> Leman, *The Birth Order Book*, 101.

caught off guard by the fact that you can be endearing one minute, and hard to deal with the next.”<sup>59</sup> This explains the dual complexity of King David’s legacy. King David is the one who used his power to restore the Ark of the Covenant and, at the same time, causes state sanctioned violence against Rizpah’s sons and Saul’s grandsons. David’s insecurity and anxiety parallels the Black Church’s insecurity and anxiety.

*The Black Church’s Insecurity, Anxiety & Perceiving Black Trans Women as “Embodied Threats”*

The most noted historically voiced threat to LGBTQIA sexuality dates back to 1929 when the well-known Black pastor Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. initiated what he believed was a prophetic social justice campaign to “protect the Black family because homosexuality was an alarming social trend that greatly threatened African American families with men leaving their spouses for other men, and women choosing to never marry and instead engaging in relationships with other women.”<sup>60</sup> The operative word in Powell’s comment is “*threatened*”.<sup>61</sup> Powell’s comments echoed from the past and predicted in the future the sentiments of a larger conservative Black Church community grounded primarily in one of three historically Black Christian denominations: Methodists (AME, AMEZ, and CME), Baptists (NBC, NBCA and PNBC) and Church of God In Christ (COGIC).<sup>62</sup> Thus, I assert that the historical Black Church experiences African American LGBTQIA persons, especially Black trans persons, as a threat.

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<sup>59</sup> Leman, *The Birth Order Book*, 171.

<sup>60</sup> Angelique C. Harris, “Homosexuality and the Black Church,” *The Journal of African American History* 93, no. 2 (2008): 262.

<sup>61</sup> Harris, “Homosexuality and The Black Church.” 262.

<sup>62</sup> Harris, “Homosexuality and The Black Church.” 262.

Discussion on LGBTQIA sexuality in the historically Black Church is still a taboo subject. Even academic circles have failed to delve into the subject full on. According to Angelique C. Harris, as of 2008:

“There has been an increasing number of books and articles published that examine homosexuality in African American communities, but most of these works simply have a chapter or a section on the black church such as Delroy Constantine-Simms's *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in African American Communities*, Michael Eric Dyson's essay in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*, or Keith Boykin's *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*). There are also books that examine the larger issue of sexuality in the African American community such as *Black Sexual Politics* by Patricia Hill Collins, or explore sexual issues in the black church such as *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* by Kelly Brown Douglas, and Susan Newman's *Oh God!: A Black Woman's Guide to Sex and Spirituality*. However, these books contain only brief discussions of homosexuality and the black church. Jeffrey S. Siker's 1994 edited volume on homosexuality in the black church was one of the earliest significant texts to fully address the issue and offer a variety of perspectives. Although there are a growing number of articles that explore homosexuality in the church (and these most often examine religiosity among African American LGBT people as it relates to AIDS), there are few books on the topic.”<sup>63</sup>

According to Kelly Brown Douglas and Patricia Hill Collins, one of the many reasons is because any conversations on sexuality and gender in general continue to make our Black Church uncomfortable.<sup>64</sup> In recent years, M. Shawn Copeland initiated a Black queer theology highlighting how Jesus' death on the cross is not only for solidarity with oppressed heterosexual Black people but for oppressed gay and lesbian Black people as well.<sup>65</sup> Horace Griffin recently performed an extensive examination of homophobia in the Black Church and specifically drew attention to particular methods the Black Church

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<sup>63</sup> Harris, “Homosexuality and The Black Church.” 262.

<sup>64</sup> Harris, “Homosexuality and The Black Church.” 262.

<sup>65</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

could employ to be welcoming and affirming.<sup>66</sup> Pamela Lightsey pushed the conversation forward in 2015 with a Womanist queer theology which sought to encourage and challenge the Black community to fight for the rights of Black LGBTQ women with the same vigor found in responses to racist police brutality and the overarching support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.<sup>67</sup> I celebrate, value and humbly stand in awe of the ground-breaking work of these well-respected theologians and scholars. At the same time, I contend that there still continues to be a need for dialogue, both in the church and in the academy, specifically addressing transphobia in the Black Church and how the Black Church can be welcoming and affirming of transgendered persons.

This I assert that the Black Church is uncomfortable with spearheading conversations about sexuality and gender, and because white slave masters taught Africans and African Americans to dislike their bodies, their sexual identity and their sexual functioning beginning on the very first slave ships in August 1619. How did white slave masters define the Black body? According to psychiatrist, philosopher and activist Franz Fanon:

“My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The negro is an animal, the negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a [Negro], it’s cold, the [Negro] is shivering ... shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the [Negro] .... I sit down at the fire and I become aware of my uniform. I had not seen it. It is indeed ugly. I stop there, for who can tell me what beauty is?”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

<sup>67</sup> Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

<sup>68</sup> Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 16.

The Black Church would have to reconcile the notion that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons in fact do exist in Africa and have been existing long before 1619 when African Enslavement begun, according to Horace L. Griffin who cites *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, edited by Will Roscoe and Stephen O. Murray.<sup>69</sup>

The period of African Enslavement also impacts why The Black Church is both homophobic and transphobic. This I argue that the Black Church has been psychological traumatized by perpetrators of African Enslavement in that the perpetrator (white slave masters) have become, as Judith Herman points out, “the most powerful person in the life of the victim [African and African American enslaved persons], and the psychology of the victim is shaped by the actions and beliefs of the perpetrator”.<sup>70</sup> I assert that the white slave master perpetrator has instilled a psychology in African and African American enslaved victims that African and African Americans are over-sexualized and sexually promiscuous. Thus, Horace Griffin highlights how The Black Church has worked so hard to break this historical myth that Black bodies are over-sexualized and sexually promiscuous by therefore attempting to present a perfect, well-to-do, “normal” image of black male-female committed sexual relationships; ironically, a normalcy that African and African American enslaved victims unconsciously believes only inherently exists with white slave master perpetrators.<sup>71</sup> In some sense, LGBTQIA relationships are deemed abnormal and a threat to the “normal” image that conservative Black persons try earnestly to promote (in their attempt to be like white slave master perpetrators).<sup>72</sup> Thus,

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<sup>69</sup> Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not*.

<sup>70</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 75.

<sup>71</sup> Harris, “Homosexuality and The Black Church,” 266.

<sup>72</sup> Harris, “Homosexuality and The Black Church,” 262.

when conservative Black leaders try to take control of their bodies from racist, White patriarchy and dominance, I assert that Black transgendered women then boldly and prophetically snatch that control away from Black evangelical conservatism, causing the Black Church to be frustrated with power being taken away yet again. When Black transgendered persons choose to take control of their own bodies, in some sense, they tell the conservative evangelical Black church that they refuse and reject living within the confines and boundaries of an inauthentic perfect image or mirage crafted by the other.

*Viral Messages of Lynched Bodies:*

*The Visual Witness of Trauma to Entire Black Transgender Community*

When Rizpah's sons were lynched by the enemies of their father, King Saul, I assert that Rizpah participated in an act of resistance by refusing to allow birds and other "fowls of the air"<sup>73</sup> to pick and eat at their remains. Their deaths "go viral" then the community is neurologically impacted by watching Rizpah for three to six months physically defend their bodies from being further attacked by animals. Thus, as a result of Rizpah's actions, the community is psychologically guilted in remembering that these sons of the community are really victims. The deaths of Rizpah's sons (and Saul's other male descendants) become experienced as community violence and thus, community trauma. I understand that sharing the narratives of murdered Black transgendered women on social media may lead to visual trauma experienced by the Black trans community as a whole.

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<sup>73</sup> 2 Samuel 21:10.

Many African American readers of Rizpah's story can relate given the United States' sordid history of lynching Black people. The act of lynching was popular in the United States during the Jim Crow era.<sup>74</sup> The period of Jim Crow (1865-1954) seemed to pick up where African enslavement left off. While Africans and American Americans suffered great physical and psychological abuse as slaves, White Christian slavemasters always committed to leaving their enslaved property *alive*.<sup>75</sup> Beaten, tortured, and lambasted, at least an enslaved one could say he/she still had breath. The killing of a slave was considered a threat to slave owner's economic success as slaves were deemed property needed to mind cotton fields and care for domestic duties in the house.<sup>76</sup> With African enslavement being outlawed via the Emancipation Proclamation and later, Juneteenth, former slaves had a new terror to grapple with – death.<sup>77</sup> While those once enslaved enjoyed new liberation and freedoms, it was all very short lived, temporary compared to the new conundrum those once seized in bondage were forced to face. The Jim Crow era brought a new paradigm shift with it that meant Africans and American Americans were no longer property to “cherish”, but now indispensable like animals – one could be killed with no threat to success.<sup>78</sup> According to James Cone, Black bodies were no longer valued “when the 1867 Congress passed the Reconstruction Act granting black men the franchise and citizenship rights of participation in the affairs of government.”<sup>79</sup> In response:

“Many felt that it was one thing to lose the war to the North but quite another to allow ignorant, uncivilized “niggers” to rule over whites or

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<sup>74</sup> Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*.

<sup>75</sup> Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*.

<sup>76</sup> Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*.

<sup>77</sup> Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*.

<sup>78</sup> Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*.

<sup>79</sup> Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*.

even participate with them in the political process. White supremacists felt insulted by the suggestion that whites and blacks might work together as equals. Whether in the churches, colleges, and universities, or in the political and social life of the nation, southern whites, who were not going to allow their ex-slaves to associate with them as equals, felt that if lynching were the only way to keep ex-slaves subservient, then it was necessary.”<sup>80</sup>

Thus, I contend that the lynchings of Black bodies for White people’s own political success parallels the lynching of Rizpah’s sons for David’s own political success. White people attempted to maintain their social status in the same fashion that David attempted to maintain his social status. The lynching or killing of Black trans bodies helps the Black Church attempt to maintain its perfect, undefiled status in supporting “normal” heterosexual male-female identity and relationships.

I also assert that the lynching of Black bodies represented a divine experience for many White people. According to James Cone, after witnessing “Birth of A Nation” (1915), a film which sought to justify lynchings of Black bodies and portrayed Ku Klux Klan lynch mobs as much-needed and celebrated superheroes, many white movie-goers in the South reported encountering “a ‘religious experience’ that ‘rendered lynching an efficient and honorable act of justice’ and served to help reunite the North and South as a white Christian nation, at the expense of African Americans.”<sup>81</sup> In the same sense, I contend that King David experienced the lynching of Rizpah’s sons as divine will and a religious experience which was an efficient and honorable act of justice in securing David and his offspring’s retainment of Israel’s throne. The lynching or killing of Black trans bodies helps the Black church justify what is believed as God’s divine will in response to

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<sup>80</sup> Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*.

<sup>81</sup> Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 5.

sexual pervasive identities and acts outlined in the biblical books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

While lynchings took place across the nation, they were most common in southern states, particularly Florida and Mississippi.<sup>82</sup> It's estimated nearly 4,000 Africans and African Americans were lynched in the south during the Jim Crow era.<sup>83</sup> I assert that the commonness of lynching Black bodies was just as common as the lynching of Rizpah's sons in that only Rizpah stood watch over the bodies for several months, protesting alone at this injustice. This commonness of lynching bodies as a meaningless event parallels the ways in which Black trans bodies have been lynched or killed with no stirring responses from the Black Church compared to police brutality against Black bodies.

While lynchings decreased the African American population, as a method of Black genocide, the purpose of lynchings was to more important deliver a message to other African Americans living in the area to submit to the power and control of European Americans. Lynchings became a media forum of viral violence. Lynchings also foster a viral neurological message of guilt to some spectators:

“James Ellen, in his book *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* (2000), discusses his photographs from the lynching events of Black Americans from 1182 to 1950. A record number of incidents (3,436) had been reported in this period and most of them had gone unreported. The photographs depicted perpetrators and bystanders, and which were often proudly circulated as postcards. An image that particularly struck Ellen was of a male bystander who thought that the “lynching festivities” would make for an entertaining evening with women....Many other spectators have recalled public emergency situations from events of stoning, stabbing and even domestic violence after the fact. For most

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<sup>82</sup> Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*.

<sup>83</sup> Sarah M. A. Gualtieri, “Strange Fruit?” in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, ed. Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 171.

people, it doesn't occur to them to do anything, let alone place themselves in mortal danger. At the same time, Ellen's book discusses how the photographers, in retrospect, wished that they had stood up against the attackers and avoided the guilt they'd now bear for the rest of their lives."<sup>84</sup>

This is similar to the neurological impact of guilt viewers experienced after attending Emmett Till's funeral and viewing his open casket, highlighting his badly beaten and dismembered body. While visiting family in Money, Mississippi, 14-year-old Emmett Till, an African American from Chicago, is brutally murdered for allegedly flirting with a white woman four days earlier:<sup>85</sup>

"After seeing the mutilated remains, Till's mother decided to have an open-casket funeral so that all the world could see what racist murderers had done to her only son. *Jet*, an African American weekly magazine, published a photo of Emmett's corpse, and soon the mainstream media picked up on the story... The Emmett Till murder trial brought to light the brutality of Jim Crow segregation in the South and was an early impetus of the African-American civil rights movement. In 2017, Tim Tyson, author of the book *The Blood of Emmett Till*, revealed in the book that Carolyn Bryant recanted her testimony, admitting that Till had never touched, threatened or harassed her. 'Nothing that boy did could ever justify what happened to him,' she said."<sup>86</sup>

In some sense, I assert that Bryant was guilted to tell the truth after being a spectator to Till's lynched body. While Till's murder didn't result in criminal convictions of the assailants, it did however result in a social justice moment of African American Civil Rights.

Viewing the lynched bodies of Rizpah's sons on display drew attention to the injustice of death that Rizpah's sons faced. This attention created a social justice

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<sup>84</sup> Sumaiya Shaikh, "The Cognitive Neuroscience of a Lynching," *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/science/neuroscience-lynching-autoimmune-hate>.

<sup>85</sup> "Emmett Till is Murdered," <http://history.com/this-day-in-history/august-28/the-death-of-emmett-till>.

<sup>86</sup> "Emmett Till is Murdered."

movement causing King David, God's chosen vessel, to experience conviction and thus seek redemption by warring against the murderers of Rizpah's sons. This parallels the social justice #BlackLivesMatter movement created in response to the Mike Brown police-lynched killing, in which a video went viral showing Brown's lifeless body laying in the middle of a Ferguson, Missouri street for several hours.

On the contrary, I suggest retweeting stories of Black trans murders not only contributes to solving many of these unsolved crimes, but also addresses transphobia in the Black Church as well as resists Black heterosexual normative gaze. While such writers as W.E.B. DuBois, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin and Ta-Nenihi Coates spend a lifetime challenging the white normative gaze in which some European Americans desire to view the world through White lens and force Black people to do the same<sup>87</sup>, I assert an invitation to Black Church to resist Black heterosexual gaze. White gaze entails European Americans' use of their personal imagination to create a fantasy about Black people<sup>88</sup>, likewise Black heterosexual gaze entails the Black church imagining Black trans persons and creating a fantasy about Black trans people. In "Citizen – An American Lyric", poet Rankine reflects on the current existential Black experience that is framed by whiteness, writing: "Because white men can't police their imagination, black men are dying."<sup>89</sup> I carry this thought a step forward, asserting that because The Black Church can't police their imagination, Black trans females are dying.

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<sup>87</sup> Stan Grant, "Black Writers Courageously Staring Down The White Gaze – This Is Why We All Must Read Them," *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/31/black-writers-courageously-staring-down-the-white-gaze-this-is-why-we-all-must-read-them>.

<sup>88</sup> Grant, "Black Writers Courageously Staring Down The White Gaze."

<sup>89</sup> Grant, "Black Writers Courageously Staring Down The White Gaze."

*The Black Church's Silence and Contribution to Psychological Trauma and Terror of Rizpah & Black Transgender Community*

The Black Church's silence has caused Black trans persons to experience psychological trauma and terror from the high rate of Black trans murders gone unacknowledged, thereby influencing how the Black trans community makes spiritual meaning of this current existential trauma. Witnessing trauma can have profound impact on the observer.<sup>90</sup> What are the psychological effects suffered by Rizpah and Black female bodies after witnessing violence? First, according to Judith Herman,

“After a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert as if the danger might return at any moment. Physiological arousal continue unabated. In this state of hyperarousal, which is the first cardinal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly.”<sup>91</sup>

Rizpah became “permanently alert.”<sup>92</sup> 2 Samuel 21:10 says “Rizpah [the daughter of Aiah] took sackcloth, and spread it on a rock for herself, from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens; she did not allow the birds of the air to come on the bodies by day, or the wild animals by night.” This verse tells us that she remained watchful around the clock. Rizpah guarded the bodies not only right a wrong or bring justice to an unjust situation, but because Rizpah had experienced hyperarousal as a result of experiencing psychological trauma and terror.

This hyperarousal or permanent alertness shows up in Black LGBTQIA communities who witness and experience psychological trauma and terror as a result of

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<sup>90</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

<sup>91</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 35.

<sup>92</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 35.

high rates of Black trans women murders. “It’s always in the forefront of our minds, when we’re leaving home, going to work, going to school,” said Kayla Gore, who lives in Memphis.<sup>93</sup> “Guys were flirting with me at the gas station, and the first thought was, ‘This could go horribly wrong.’”<sup>94</sup> The American Medical Association has declared this wave of violence an epidemic, stating “the killings, which have been reported across the country, have, for some, prompted a heightened sense of vigilance.”<sup>95</sup>

The second stage is a fixation to the trauma which becomes an “intrusion” in the victim’s life.<sup>96</sup> According to Judith Herman:

“Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continuously recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal courses of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. Thus, even normally safe environments may come to feel dangerous, for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of the trauma.”<sup>97</sup>

The notion that Rizpah kept watch over her decaying sons’ bodies “from the beginning of harvest until rain fell on them from the heavens” suggests that she spent a lengthy period at this gruesome site. Experiencing their traumatic deaths due to state sanctioned violence caused Rizpah to stop moving forward with her life. The murderous act of the Gibeonites caused an intrusion on Rizpah’s psyche, life mission, and purpose.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Rick Rojas and Vanessa Swales, “18 Transgender Killings This Year Raise Fears of an ‘Epidemic,’” *The New York Times*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/27/us/transgender-women-deaths.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Rojas and Swales, “18 Transgender Killings.”

<sup>95</sup> Rojas and Swales, “18 Transgender Killings.”

<sup>96</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 37.

<sup>97</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 37.

<sup>98</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 37.

Intrusion and fixation to trauma shows up in Black LGBTQIA communities who witness and experience psychological trauma and terror as a result of high rates of Black trans women murders and violence. Just as the unhealthy visual of decaying bodies in Rizpah's view caused an intrusion in Rizpah's psyche, I assert that an unhealthy viral video of a Black trans women being beaten causes an intrusion in the psyche of Black trans persons.

## CHAPTER 6.

### DIFFERENTIATING DIGITAL DIGNITY:

#### A Social Media Ethnographical Case Study & Digital Theological Anthropology

##### *Historical Timeline and Key Themes of Ethnography*

What is Ethnography as a field of study? Ethnography can be defined as “a qualitative research method that comes from the discipline of anthropology but is applicable to other disciplines. Ethnography is the in-depth study of a culture or a facet of a culture. Because of this, ethnographic research often looks very different compared with other research designs.”<sup>1</sup>

There are three distinct characteristics that define ethnography. First, ethnography takes place over an extended length of time<sup>2</sup>:

“Traditionally, ethnographers spent a minimum of one year living amongst members of the culture they are studying. This extended period of data collection allowed local people a chance to know and get used to the ethnographer, and this also allowed the ethnographer to build rapport with local people. Today, ethnographers still spend as much time as possible collecting data, though not necessarily an entire year or more like in the past.”<sup>3</sup>

Second, ethnography focuses on participant observation whereas the ethnographic research scientist becomes immersed in the culture one is studying:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “What is Ethnography?” Intellectus Consulting, <https://www.statisticssolutions.com/what-is-ethnography/>.

<sup>2</sup> “What is Ethnography?” Intellectus Consulting.

<sup>3</sup> “What is Ethnography?” Intellectus Consulting.

<sup>4</sup> “What is Ethnography?” Intellectus Consulting.

“An ethnographer not only observes the phenomenon under study, but also becomes a participant in daily life. The goal is to understand a practice or set of practices within a culture; that is, why a practice might make sense in the context of the day-to-day life of a group. For example, an ethnographer studying the religious practices of a culture would not only attend religious services but also participate in them, because this would allow them to truly understand these practices from an insider’s point of view.”<sup>5</sup>

Last but not least, ethnography takes place through the detailed field notes of a researcher.<sup>6</sup> Field notes become a key element in ethnographical study: “Field notes are written daily logs, almost like journals, that describe daily life and events that the ethnographer witnessed and took part in. Field notes are detailed and descriptive enough so that another person could read them.”<sup>7</sup>

The characteristics of ethnography were first developed in 200 BCE by the Greek traveler and historian Herodotus who observed roughly 50 different peoples in travels throughout the world.<sup>8</sup> In 1743-44, Gerhard Friedrich Muller, a professor of history and geography, is credited with developing the term “Ethnography” in his work during the second Kamachatka Expedition.<sup>9</sup> Nearly one hundred years later, in 1840, anthropology was established "as a recognized field of study" in American and Europe.<sup>10</sup> Six years later, the Smithsonian Institution became a big supporter of anthropological research.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “What is Ethnography?” Intellectus Consulting.

<sup>6</sup> “What is Ethnography?” Intellectus Consulting.

<sup>7</sup> “What is Ethnography?” Intellectus Consulting.

<sup>8</sup> “History of Ethnography,” Timetoast Timelines, <https://www.timetoast.com/timelines/history-of-ethnography>.

<sup>9</sup> “History of Ethnography,” Timetoast Timelines.

<sup>10</sup> “History of Ethnography,” Timetoast Timelines.

<sup>11</sup> “History of Ethnography,” Timetoast Timelines.

In 1914, Bronislaw Malinowski's fieldwork among Trobriand Islanders was recognized by some as shining light on the new groundbreaking ethnography characteristic of participant observation.<sup>12</sup> I propose also crediting African American sociologist and social activist W.E.B. DuBois with creating this phenomenon of participant observation as a result of his ethnographical work originally documented in 1914 (the same year that Malinowski's fieldwork was published) in Souls of Black Folks. DuBois ethnography specifically shed light on the influence of racism on African Americans in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. DuBois' research sought to show how racism negative impacts the social, emotional and physical well-being of African Americans. Central to DuBois work was introducing the world to the phrase "double-consciousness". DuBois argued that African Americans living in the United States are forced to integrate an internal, biological African world view into a learned, environmental-driven Eurocentric world view in order to survive in America, thus fostering a "double-consciousness". Unfortunately, DuBois work has been classified as "urban ethnography", thereby separating it, in my opinion, from being highlighted and subsequently valued in the same category of general ethnography.

Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead introduced the impact of Cultural Relativism to the field of ethnography. Boas was the mentor and influencer of anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. I propose celebrating Hurston as the earliest recognized African American female ethnographer. Hurston was the first African American anthropologist to highlight the sexual degradation of the Black female body.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "History of Ethnography," Timetoast Timelines.

<sup>13</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1935).

As my dissertation features an ethnographical study of the oppression of the Black female body on social media, I turn to Hurston's work to acknowledge, affirm and pay homage to *Mules and Men* as the first, original ethnographical study of oppression to Black women's bodies.

### *Historical Timeline and Key Themes of Virtual Ethnography*

Crafting a historical timeline of the invention of Virtual Ethnography has its challenges. While there are some primary key figures and themes, it must also be acknowledged that the virtual ethnography field has a wide compass. This is primarily because virtual ethnography is not confined to a particular physical space, thus studying online anthropology can be easier and thus, has a large variety of contributors to the field.<sup>14</sup> In addition, digital ethnographers can make somewhat third party observations and be nonintrusive to online subjects so that the field is ever evolving because researchers cannot easily, readily identify who's all conducting online research at any given time –anonymity is high.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, digital ethnographers are primarily identified and acknowledged only after she/he is able to publish their findings.<sup>16</sup> Those not fortunate enough to have ethnographical work published fall into an abyss unrecognized.<sup>17</sup> Thus, I acknowledge that the historical timeline and key themes highlighted in this paper are considered the “major” contributors and themes. The “minor” contributors and themes would be too exhaustive to name in this paper.

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<sup>14</sup> Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>16</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>17</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

### *Physical Setting & Location*

Virtual Ethnography was most notably popularized by Christine Hine, who is deemed the Mother of Virtual or digital ethnography.<sup>18</sup> In the 1990's, Hine was the first ethnographer to examine how persons function in relationship over internet waves.<sup>19</sup> Hine made three pivotal founding discoveries. First, Hine highlighted how in virtual ethnography, there is not a specific "physical setting" for observation and study.<sup>20</sup> Virtual ethnography assumes the physical setting can be anywhere around the globe that persons are "logging on" to the internet.<sup>21</sup> Second, Hine pointed out that there is no human-to-human or face-to-face interaction for one to study because participants online never meet physically face-to-face.<sup>22</sup> In the virtual or digital world, Hine suggests a reinterpreting of how human-to-human or face-to-face interaction is defined in that two bodies communicating and relating with one another digitally over the internet is a face-to-face encounter as defined in the virtual world.<sup>23</sup> Third, Hine suggests understanding the blurred line between primary data and secondary data that occurs virtually.<sup>24</sup> In some sense, all virtual data could be considered secondary data in a "normal" ethnographical study, however since the virtual world prefaces online interaction, virtual data could be considered all primary data by some perceptions.<sup>25</sup> Last but not least, Hine highlights

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<sup>18</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>19</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>20</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>21</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>22</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>23</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>24</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>25</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

how virtual ethnography is impacted by the ethnographer's own adeptness of technology to begin with along with the ethnographer's own beliefs and values of technology.<sup>26</sup> Hine published these primary findings in 2000 in what is considered the first book on virtual ethnography, entitled *Virtual Ethnography*, (Sage, 2000).

### *Community and Objectivity in Observing Community*

Anne Beaulieu follows Hines work in 2004 with "Mediating ethnography: objectivity and the makings of ethnographies on the Internet." Beaulieu highlights the criticism of virtual ethnography raised by Hine (lack of physical setting, lack of human-to-human interaction, lack of distinct boundaries between primary data and secondary data and lack of a universal technological skill set among all internet users). In addition, Beaulieu draws attention to additional criticisms of virtual ethnography. For example, it's impossible to study community on the internet because internet community is an illusion: "The notion of community, an all-important unit for anthropological understanding, has been claimed to be actually illusory when enacted on the internet, as para-social rather than real phenomena."<sup>27</sup> Beaulieu points out that critics have also claimed, "There is indeed a largish body of work that shows how 'computermediated communication' is actually not rich enough as a mode of interaction to sustain meaningful social relations."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*.

<sup>27</sup> Anne Beaulieu, "Mediating Ethnography: Objectivity and the Making of Ethnographies of the Internet," *Social Epistemology* 18, no. 2–3 (2004): 139–163

<sup>28</sup> Beaulieu, "Mediating ethnography," 139-163.

Beaulieu makes contributions to the field of virtual ethnography by suggesting that first, virtual ethnographers maintain better objectivity in study conducted online: “The Internet does greatly facilitate ‘casing the scene’ prior to creating a strategy for entering into active participation. It is much easier to lurk on the Internet in most cases than to unobtrusively hang out in an Amazon village (Thomsen, Straubhaar et al. 1998, online)”.<sup>29</sup> Second, Beaulieu suggests that virtual ethnography “disciplines” the ethnographer in that “mechanical objectivity directs movements and interactions with the field, bringing ‘order’ to what is seen by some researchers as the ad hoc nature of field relations.”<sup>30</sup> Third, Beaulieu highlights the intersubjectivity of virtual ethnography in which interviewing interactions are occurring via email, blogging or engagement of web developers via websites and finally, what is “captured” or written and documented is already in a written transcript form.<sup>31</sup>

### *Intimacy and Personhood*

In 2008, Tom Boellstorff pushes the envelope of virtual ethnography a bit further. Boellstorff published Coming of Age in Second Life, conducting a virtual ethnography study in which he created a “Second Life”, an online virtual world, then enlisted online participants, such as avatars, to participate in the virtual world. Boellstorff studied four dynamics in the virtual world he created: Place and Time, Personhood, Intimacy,

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<sup>29</sup> Beaulieu, “Mediating ethnography,” 139-163.

<sup>30</sup> Beaulieu, “Mediating ethnography,” 139-163.

<sup>31</sup> Beaulieu, “Mediating ethnography,” 139-163.

Community, and Political Economy.<sup>32</sup> Boellstorff made similar contributions to the virtual ethnography as Hine and Beaulieu. Boellstorff's unique contribution is in area of intimacy and personhood.<sup>33</sup> Boellstorff highlights how relationship bonding (intimacy) occurs faster and more intense in online virtual worlds because there is a unique intentionality around building trust and connection in a digital forum compared to human-to-human, face-to-face interactions that may be more slower, subtle and casual.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps Boellstorff's most provocative addition to the virtual ethnography field is in the area of personhood. Boellstorff asserts that humans are intrinsically "virtual"<sup>35</sup>:

"It is not only that virtual worlds borrow assumptions from real life; virtual worlds show us how, under our very noses, our 'real' lives have been 'virtual' all along. It is in being virtual that we are human: since it is human 'nature' to experience life through the prism of culture, human being has always been virtual being. Culture is our 'killer app': we are virtually human. "<sup>36</sup>

*Typology of Online Social Experiences, Networks and "Networked Individuals":*

More recently, in 2010, Robert Kozinets develops key ingredients to the study of virtual ethnography, suggesting that online participants use social media for the purpose of four reasons: mingling (casual connections), bonding (intentional relationship building), sharing (disseminating of feelings, information and education) and organizing

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008)

<sup>33</sup> Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*.

<sup>34</sup> Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*.

<sup>35</sup> Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*.

<sup>36</sup> Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life*, 5.

(action and work in the physical world).<sup>37</sup> Kozinets terms the following “networks” or groups that all persons online belong to:<sup>38</sup>

1. Audience and Customer Support Networks
2. Topical and Polarized Issue Networks
3. Tight Social Networks and Interest Group Alliances

Kozinets is instrumental to the field of virtual ethnography in further drawing attention to the original research of Barry Wellman and Lee Rainie, suggesting that highly functional online users, termed “networked individuals”<sup>39</sup>, have the following characteristics in common:

1. Networked individuals increasingly meet social, emotional and economic needs by tapping into dispersed networks of diverse associates instead of relying on more intimate connections with a relatively small number of core associates.
2. Networked individuals maintain partial membership in many networks or social groups and rely less on permanent membership in established groups.
3. Technology is accelerating the trend toward networked individualism by accelerating the growth, accessibility and diversification of these kinds of networks.
4. The Internet is the new neighborhood, increasingly containing some of the networked individual’s most important social contacts.
5. Networked individuals are empowered by the Internet to project their vision and voice to extended audiences, and invite them to become a part of their social world.
6. The lines between communication, information and action have become increasingly blurred as networked individuals use the Internet, mobile phones and social networks to instantly get information and act upon it.

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<sup>37</sup> Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: The Essential Guide to Qualitative Social Media Research*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019) 34-35.

<sup>38</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography*, 34-35.

<sup>39</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography*, 34-35.

7. Networked individuals move easily between relationships and social settings to construct their own complex identities, depending on their passion, beliefs, lifestyles, professional associations, work interests, hobbies, media habits, subcultural inclinations and other personal characteristics.
8. Less formal, more fluctuating and more specialized peer-to-peer relationships are more easily sustained at work, and the benefits of hierarchical boss-subordinate relationships are less obvious.
9. Home and work are far more intertwined than in the past.
10. The public and private spheres of life are far more intertwined than in the past.
11. New expectations and realities are emerging regarding the transparency, availability and privacy of people.
12. In this new era of less hierarchy, more information and looser relationships, there is greater uncertainty than ever before about which information sources to believe and who to trust.<sup>40</sup>

### *Webcams and Visual Videos in Virtual Ethnography*

Michael Wesch and E. Ardévol take a hard look at the impact of webcams and visual videos on virtual ethnography. Wesch contributes to the field of virtual ethnography in 2009.<sup>41</sup> Wesch analyzes the experiences of self-awareness generated by creating, viewing, and responding to deeply personal, unaddressed vlogs on YouTube.<sup>42</sup> Wesch argues that webcams “create a context for sharing profound moments of self-reflection and for creating connections that are experienced as profoundly deep yet remain ephemeral and loose.”<sup>43</sup> Ardévol proves that visual ethnography encompasses a unique gift to communicate feelings, meanings and messages without words but through

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<sup>40</sup> Kozinets, *Netnography*, 48.

<sup>41</sup> MichaelcWesch, “YouTube and You: Experiences of Self-Awareness in the Context Collapse of the Recording Webcam,” *Explorations in Media Ecology* 8, no. 2 (2009): 19–34, <https://krex.k-state.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/bec4f4a7-11a4-45e4-bfd5-15d2183f5f16/content>.

<sup>42</sup> Wesch, “YouTube and You.”

<sup>43</sup> Wesch, “YouTube and You.”

the use of visually recorded images that may be more helpful to visual online participants who find it harder to be reliant on interpreting meanings from typed words on a screen.<sup>44</sup>

*Social Activism & Social Media: Re-Thinking The #BlackLivesMatter Movement as a Contemporary Digital Ethnography*

Sarah Pink and John Postill were the first virtual ethnographers to study social media as its own unique mini virtual ethnography apart from other online entities.<sup>45</sup> They were also central in highlighting how social activism impacts the study of social media ethnography.<sup>46</sup> In 2012, Postill and Pink moved to Barcelona for a period of one year and observed the use of social media in various local and national protests.<sup>47</sup>

While Postill and Pink are acknowledged for publishing ethnographical work on social activism via social media, I propose viewing the #BlackLivesMatter Movement as the first ethnographical work on social activism via social media in the United States. The #BlackLivesMatter was initiated July 13, 2013 in response to the George Zimmerman verdict.<sup>48</sup> “George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch volunteer who fatally shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager, igniting a national debate on racial profiling

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<sup>44</sup> Elisenda Ardévol, “Virtual/Visual Ethnography: Methodological Crossroads at the Intersection of Visual and Internet Research,” in *Advances in Visual Methodology*, ed. Sarah Pink (London: SAGE Publications, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> John Postill and Sarah Pink, “Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web,” *Media International Australia*, no. 145 (2012).

<sup>46</sup> Postill and Pink, “Social Media Ethnography.”

<sup>47</sup> Postill and Pink, “Social Media Ethnography.”

<sup>48</sup> Lizette Alvarez and Cara Buckley, “Zimmerman Is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing, *The New York Times*, July 13, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/us/george-zimmerman-verdict-trayvon-martin.html>.

and civil rights, was found not guilty...of second-degree murder. He was also acquitted of manslaughter, a lesser charge.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore:

“Mr. Zimmerman said he shot Mr. Martin on Feb. 26, 2012, in self-defense after the teenager knocked him to the ground, punched him and slammed his head repeatedly against the sidewalk. In finding him not guilty of murder or manslaughter, the jury agreed that Mr. Zimmerman could have been justified in shooting Mr. Martin because he feared great bodily harm or death.

The jury, which had been sequestered since June 24, deliberated 16 hours and 20 minutes over two days. The six female jurors entered the quiet, tense courtroom, several looking exhausted, their faces drawn and grim. After the verdict was read, each assented, one by one, and quietly, their agreement with the verdict.

The case began in the small city of Sanford as a routine homicide but soon evolved into a civil rights cause examining racial profiling and its consequences — an issue barred from the courtroom — and setting off a broad discussion of race relations in America. Mr. Martin, with his gray hooded sweatshirt and his Skittles — the candy he was carrying — became its catalyst.

Even President Obama weighed in a month after the shooting, expressing sympathy for Mr. Martin’s family and urging a thorough investigation. ‘If I had a son,’ Mr. Obama said, ‘he’d look like Trayvon.’<sup>50</sup>

After the verdict was announced, “three radical Black organizers — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi — created a Black-centered political will and movement building project called #BlackLivesMatter.”<sup>51</sup> According to the founding story of Garza, Cullors and Tometi:

“The project is now a member-led global network of more than 40 chapters. Our members organize and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is

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<sup>49</sup> Alvarez and Buckley, “Zimmerman Is Acquitted.

<sup>50</sup> Alvarez and Buckley, “Zimmerman Is Acquitted.

<sup>51</sup> “Herstory,” Black Lives Matter.

an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”<sup>52</sup>

The #BlackLivesMatter Movement takes into consideration the intersectionality of oppression: “Black liberation movements in this country have created room, space, and leadership mostly for Black heterosexual, cisgender men — leaving women, queer and transgender people, and others either out of the movement or in the background to move the work forward with little or no recognition. As a network, we have always recognized the need to center the leadership of women and queer and trans people. To maximize our movement muscle, and to be intentional about not replicating harmful practices that excluded so many in past movements for liberation, we made a commitment to placing those at the margins closer to the center.”<sup>53</sup>

The #BlackLivesMatter Movement originally sparked as a popular hashtag on social media after the George Zimmer verdict.<sup>54</sup> The three founders began typing their feelings and frustrations about the verdict on the Twitter social media forum, called “tweeting”, followed by ending each of their tweets with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>55</sup> Eventually the hashtag went viral, meaning other online viewers joined in on this new virtual process of what I call “digitally lamenting” or “online grieving”. I suggest that the three founders made a unique ethnographical social media discovery in 2013: African Americans in particular find community in lamenting collectively online about the horrors of police brutality and the larger systemic issue of

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<sup>52</sup> “Herstory,” Black Lives Matter.

<sup>53</sup> “Herstory,” Black Lives Matter.

<sup>54</sup> “Herstory,” Black Lives Matter.

<sup>55</sup> “Herstory,” Black Lives Matter.

racism. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag became an empathic response of acknowledgement that police brutality and larger issues of racism genuinely exist. This is pivotal during a time period when high rates of acquittals continue happening for white police officers after killing unarmed Black teens. In some sense, the lack of justice in jurors convicting and sentencing these officers for first-degree or second-degree murder charges catered to an attempted psychological brainwashing that racism does not exist and therefore will not be held accountable, police brutality against African Americans is an illusion and therefore will not be held accountable. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag going viral created a communal psychological undergirding to remind African Americans that they are not crazy, racism is real and should lead to justice. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag going viral also sent a message to others that African Americans were not going to sit quietly and say nothing about police brutality. In 2014, Mike Brown was murdered by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson.<sup>56</sup> The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag then spun into a movement: It was a guttural response to be with our people, our family — in support of the brave and courageous community of Ferguson and St. Louis as they were being brutalized by law enforcement, criticized by media, tear gassed, and pepper sprayed night after night.<sup>57</sup> Darnell Moore and Patrisse Cullors organized a national ride during Labor Day weekend that year<sup>58</sup>:

“We called it the Black Life Matters Ride. In 15 days, we developed a plan of action to head to the occupied territory to support our brothers and sisters. Over 600 people gathered. We made two commitments: to support the team on the ground in St. Louis, and to go back home and do the work there. We understood Ferguson was not an aberration, but in fact, a clear

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<sup>56</sup> “Herstory,” Black Lives Matter.

<sup>57</sup> “Herstory,” Black Lives Matter.

<sup>58</sup> “Herstory,” Black Lives Matter.

point of reference for what was happening to Black communities everywhere. When it was time for us to leave, inspired by our friends in Ferguson, organizers from 18 different cities went back home and developed Black Lives Matter chapters in their communities and towns — broadening the political will and movement building reach catalyzed by the #BlackLivesMatter project and the work on the ground in Ferguson. It became clear that we needed to continue organizing and building Black power across the country. People were hungry to galvanize their communities to end state-sanctioned violence against Black people, the way Ferguson organizers and allies were doing. Soon we created the Black Lives Matter Global Network infrastructure. It is adaptive and decentralized, with a set of guiding principles. Our goal is to support the development of new Black leaders, as well as create a network where Black people feel empowered to determine our destinies in our communities. The Black Lives Matter Global Network would not be recognized worldwide if it weren't for the folks in St. Louis and Ferguson who put their bodies on the line day in and day out, and who continue to show up for Black lives.”<sup>59</sup>

### *Context*

The basis of my ethnographical research focused on observing two online social media groups on Facebook. The first group is named “Black Lives Matter Chicago”. I chose this group because I wondered how the group understands and examines oppression from an intersectional perspective. The group is familiar with fighting against racism, however do they also fight oppression related to gender and sexuality? This was my wonderment.

According to the group page, the description of the group is listed as the following: “BLACK LIVES MATTER is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an

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<sup>59</sup> “Herstory,” Black Lives Matter.

affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”<sup>60</sup> The group's contact information is listed as the following:

Web: [www.BlackLivesMatterChicago.com](http://www.BlackLivesMatterChicago.com)

Email: [BlackLivesMatterChicago@gmail.com](mailto:BlackLivesMatterChicago@gmail.com)

Phone: (872) 395-8048

Tumblr: [blacklivesmatterchicago.tumblr.com](http://blacklivesmatterchicago.tumblr.com)<sup>61</sup>

The group's description highlights the following statement:

“This group is one of \*many\* iterations of #BlackLivesMatter: a movement, a rebellion, an affirmation, an intervention... and so much more. Like so many, we have been activated to participate in the Freedom Rides and Calls to Action transmitted globally by the Ferguson community in the wake of the killing of Mike Brown. We are honored to be active with central organizers in Ferguson as participants in the national Action Team of Ferguson October.

Our priorities here are to amplify our collective knowledge and applied practices toward abolishing anti-Blackness, and to honor the organizing and mobilization put forth by various Chicago based organizations, collectives, projects and individuals within the expansive, intersectional Black Lives Matter network.

Please respect that this is a space and a resource voluntarily moderated by two human beings with lives, labor and responsibilities beyond what happens here. Specifically, we have little capacity to engage with irrelevant “trolling” or offer personal tutorials on Afro-Pessimism 101... nor do we name this as a safe space. Please keep all of this in mind - including your positionality and the privileges you carry here - regarding any content or comments you wish to post.

We are glad that you have showed up. Do you “belong” here? You are the only one that can determine your commitment to and engagement with the work ahead.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> “Black Lives Matter: Chicago,” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/BlackLivesMatterChicago/>.

<sup>61</sup> “Black Lives Matter: Chicago.”

<sup>62</sup> “Black Lives Matter: Chicago.”

As of November 9, 2019 at 5:45pm, the “Black Lives Matter Chicago” Facebook group page has 12,684 members and has been “liked” 31,024 times.<sup>63</sup> The group was created on October 8, 2014.<sup>64</sup> The Facebook group is listed as a “General” group which is “Public”, meaning “Anyone can see who's in the group and what they post.”<sup>65</sup> The Facebook group is listed as “Visible”, meaning “Anyone can find this group.”<sup>66</sup> As of November 15, 2019, the page has 15 persons listed as “administrators” and one person listed as “moderator”.<sup>67</sup>

The second facebook group I observed was “Black Women’s Roundtable”.<sup>68</sup> I chose this group because while the group is committed to addressing racialized sexism against Black women, I wondered how this group would address homophobia and transphobia, particularly in light of the high rates of Black trans murders occurring nationwide recently. The group page was created September 18, 2009.<sup>69</sup> As of December 7, 2019, at 8:45pm, the group has 1,623 members.<sup>70</sup> The group page is listed as “General” and is open to the “Public”.<sup>71</sup> The page’s “About” section states that the:

“The Black Women’s Roundtable (BWR) is an intergenerational civic engagement network of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation. At the forefront of championing just and equitable public policy on behalf of Black women, BWR promotes their health and

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<sup>63</sup> “Black Lives Matter: Chicago.”

<sup>64</sup> “Black Lives Matter: Chicago.”

<sup>65</sup> “Black Lives Matter: Chicago.”

<sup>66</sup> “Black Lives Matter: Chicago.”

<sup>67</sup> “Black Lives Matter: Chicago.”

<sup>68</sup> “Black Women’s Roundtable,” Facebook, [https://www.facebook.com/groups/134119639334/?hoisted\\_section\\_header\\_type=recently\\_seen&multi\\_permalink=10161323448204335](https://www.facebook.com/groups/134119639334/?hoisted_section_header_type=recently_seen&multi_permalink=10161323448204335).

<sup>69</sup> “Black Women’s Roundtable.”

<sup>70</sup> “Black Women’s Roundtable.”

<sup>71</sup> “Black Women’s Roundtable.”

wellness, economic security, education and global empowerment as key elements for success.

BWR comprises a diverse group of Black women civic leaders of international, national, regional and state-based organizations and institutions. Together, the BWR membership represents the issues and concerns of millions of Americans and families who live across the United States and around the world.

For more information visit: [www.ncbcp.org](http://www.ncbcp.org) or [unitycampaign.org](http://unitycampaign.org),<sup>72</sup>

The page lists four Black women as administrators and one Black woman as moderator.<sup>73</sup>

### *My Project Observations*

*(\*from October 15, 2019 – December 15, 2019)*

### *People Look to Social Media To Receive and Give Empathy*

My observations proved to be very surprising for me. First, I discovered that persons look to social media for connection. Persons, in the particular Facebook groups that I observed, would specifically look to online partners and participants for affirmation of celebratory life events. For example, if it was someone's birthday, one participant would say "Happy Birthday" to themselves or post a birthday message of some sort informing the group of the participant's special day in a status update posted in the group's Facebook page thereby soliciting fellow online partners to respond in the comments section with "Happy Birthday". If someone was celebrating a wedding

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<sup>72</sup> "Black Women's Roundtable."

<sup>73</sup> "Black Women's Roundtable."

anniversary, landing a new job, the birth of a new child or even purchasing a new home or some other type of celebratory life event, I noticed that online participants a part of the Facebook group would without any hesitation respond with an affirming, empathic congratulatory remark. I found this dynamic to be extremely fascinating. What I found fascinating was this notion that these particular online respondents had never physically met before, but these persons had no hesitation or resistance to providing a “Happy Birthday” to someone unknown outside the digital world. Connection and community would be created when online viewers would say “Happy Birthday” or a congratulatory remark to the person making the initial post.

I also learned that persons not only look to social media for connection regarding celebratory moments in their life but persons also look to social media for connection when persons are experiencing feelings of anxiety, scare or sadness. For example I noticed one online participant in the Facebook group recently lamented the anniversary of the death of her mother. Within minutes, I noticed respondents would immediately state such encouraging words as “Praying for you”, “Please stay encouraged” or “I support you”. I found this dynamic fascinating as well in that persons who are complete strangers in the outside world are capable of exhibiting and demonstrating security, comfort and support in the digital world. I found it riveting that the online viewer seeking care would then receive the care given digitally and be deeply appreciative of it.

These two dynamics highlight a myth. Often times we believe that care can only be demonstrated through physical presence and touch. This ethnographic case studied demonstrated to me how empathic and empowering words, either during celebrations or crisis, have a strong, positive impact even if those words are not stated in a face-to-face

encounter. Human connection can happen over digital airwaves. It is also important to highlight that online body can also demonstrate empathy and empowerment. The method however is different in digital space. If two persons were physically face-to-face to one another, empathy could be demonstrated through body language –a smile, an open stance presence, a warm facial expression, and direct eye contact. I observed empathy being demonstrated digitally by online participants instead typing and naming body language behaviors. For example, one respondent to an online post soliciting support for a family member’s death simply stated the word “\*tears” with an asterisk. The asterisk symbolized that this behavior (while typed digitally) was meant to be a physical act which would have been acted out in a face-to-face encounter.

*People Look to Social Media To Receive and Give Education & Empowerment About Oppression: The Case Study of “Alicia Watson” and “Michal Matson”*

Every 30 seconds. This is the estimated rotating time that an abusive statement is tweeted on Twitter.<sup>74</sup> An abusive tweet, according to Wired, promotes “violence against or threats to people based on their identification with a group, like race or gender, which violates Twitter’s [Terms of Service].” Problematic tweets contain hurtful or hostile content that does not necessarily meet the threshold of abuse.<sup>75</sup>

Amnesty International recently classified online abuse against women as a human rights issue.<sup>76</sup> This is in light of recent reports of racialized sexism against Black women

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<sup>74</sup> Ayana Byrd, “New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter,” Colorlines, <https://colorlines.com/article/new-study-confirms-black-women-are-most-abused-group-twitter/>.

<sup>75</sup> Byrd, “New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter.”

<sup>76</sup> Byrd, “New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter.”

online users. Even the current president of the United States is guilty as he's had a history of tweeting that a Black woman has "an extraordinarily low IQ" or is "a loser".<sup>77</sup>

In December of 2018, Amnesty International launched an interactive website that provides the results of a crowdsourced study on how frequently women in the United States and United Kingdom are targeted on Twitter.<sup>78</sup> "We have built the world's largest crowdsourced data set about online abuse against women," Milena Marin, senior adviser for tactical research at Amnesty International, said in a statement. "We have the data to back up what women have long been telling us—that Twitter is a place where racism, misogyny and homophobia are allowed to flourish basically unchecked."<sup>79</sup> According to the study, the results shows that:

"Black women were 84 percent more likely than White women to be disproportionately targeted. One in ten tweets mentioning Black women was abusive or problematic, compared to one in 15 for White women. Women of color were 34 percent more likely to be targeted."<sup>80</sup>

Women of other ethnic cultures and traditions are also impacted. "While Black women received more abusive tweets compared to White women, Latinx women are more likely to get threats of physical [violence]; Asian women faced more ethnic, racial and religious slurs; and mixed race women faced abuse across all categories including sexism, racism, physical and sexual threats, the study found."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Byrd, "New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter."

<sup>78</sup> Byrd, "New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter."

<sup>79</sup> Byrd, "New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter."

<sup>80</sup> Byrd, "New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter."

<sup>81</sup> Byrd, "New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter."

Amnesty has asked Twitter to publish findings of the study but as of December, 2018 Twitter has refused.<sup>82</sup> According to Marin, “Twitter’s failure to crack down on this problem means it is contributing to the silencing of already marginalized voices.”<sup>83</sup>

I assert that this abuse of violence not only exists on Twitter but Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat and other forms of social media. I completed a recent query of incidents of Facebook abuse in particular to Black women. I learned about these cases:

- August 2, 2019, African American woman Facebook user Ijeoma Oluo published an article entitled, “Facebook’s Complicity In Silencing Black Women”, outlining an incident in which she experienced massive online harassment from white male facebook users after she posted her initial fear of entering a Crackle Barrel restaurant for a meal in a predominately white community.<sup>84</sup> Facebook subsequently failed to respond to attempts of reporting the harassing users, choosing to suspend her account instead for inappropriate/abusive postings when Oluo decided to screenshot and post the harassing statements to her own page in the hopes of alerting the general public, along with Facebook’s administrators, and receiving justice by suspending the accounts of each of the online harassers.
- Carolyn Wysinger, an African American teacher and social activist in Richmond, California, explained to a journalist from *USA Today* in April, 2019 how Facebook suspended her account for 72 hours because of a status she posted about police brutality against African Americans, citing that her status was deemed “hate speech” by Facebook administrators.<sup>85</sup>
- African American psychologist Mary Canty Merrill was angry about racist incidents in America coming to light recently so she turned to Facebook on April 4, 2017 and posted: “Dear White People: You are so accustomed to defining racism as people of color being the problem that you want to fix us, patronize us, save us and heal us. You rarely perceive yourselves as the problem (which is where its root lies). Thus, your interventions are most often ill-informed, misdirected and yield

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<sup>82</sup> Byrd, “New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter.”

<sup>83</sup> Byrd, “New Study Confirms That Black Women Are Most Abused Group on Twitter.”

<sup>84</sup> Ijeoma Oluo, “Facebook’s Complicity in the Silencing of Black Women,” Medium, <https://medium.com/@IjeomaOluo/facebooks-complicity-in-the-silencing-of-black-women-e60c34434181>.

<sup>85</sup> Jessica Guynn, “Facebook racism? Black users say racism convos blocked as hate speech,” *USA Today*, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2019/04/24/facebook-while-black-zucked-users-say-they-get-blocked-racism-discussion/2859593002/>.

no meaningful or sustainable results.”<sup>86</sup> According to the Center for Investigative Reporting, “She logged in the next day to find her post removed and profile suspended for a week. A number of her older posts, which also used the “Dear white people” formulation, had been similarly erased.”<sup>87</sup>

- January 25, 2018, *Daily Beast* published an article on how “Facebook removed a quote from a book from a black [woman] blogger’s personal page for allegedly violating their community standards”, later Facebook administrators would apologize saying the removal was a mistake.<sup>88</sup>
- November, 2019 Black Facebook women and men employees even cited internal racism problems within the social media organization, writing an open letter to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg highlighting numerous macro and micro aggressions against Black workers inciting the notion that Black employees “don’t belong here.”<sup>89</sup>

What was most compelling to me about my query was that these aforementioned cases were all the cases that populated when I simply queried the phrase “Black women and Facebook” on Google.com. This said to me that abuse and oppression of Black women is so common on Facebook that simply querying two words, “Black women”, paired with one word, “Facebook”, would automatically populate several stories of oppression to Black women on Facebook.

Conducting a query of “Black women” paired with “Facebook” also highlighted another learning for me. Many Black women social activists turn to Facebook to receive and give education and empowerment about oppression. In the above-mentioned cases I

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<sup>86</sup> Aaron Sankin, “How Activists Of Color Lose Battles Against Facebook’s Moderator Army,” Reveal, August 17, 2017, <https://revealnews.org/article/how-activists-of-color-lose-battles-against-facebooks-moderator-army/>.

<sup>87</sup> Sankin, “How Activists Of Color Lose Battles.”

<sup>88</sup> Mandy Velez, “Facebook Apologizes for Banning Paragraph From Black Woman’s Book,” *Daily Beast*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/facebook-banning-paragraph-from-black-womans-book-was-a-mistake/>.

<sup>89</sup> Anne Branigin, “Black Facebook Workers Denounce Hostile Work Environment in Open Letter About Company,” *The Root*, November 11, 2019, <https://www.theroot.com/black-facebook-workers-write-open-letter-to-company-we-1839776402>.

highlighted, the Black women activists turned to Facebook to highlight the oppression of racism, primarily through police brutality against African Americans, along with racialized sexism towards Black women. Another example of this point can be seen in what I term the “Alicia Watson”<sup>90</sup> and “Michal Matson”<sup>91</sup> case study.

On September 6, 2019, “Alicia Watson”, an administrator to the Chicago #BlackLivesMatter Facebook group page, posted a picture of Black trans actress Indya Moore wearing earrings honoring all the Black trans women murdered this year at the Daily Front Row Awards. “Alicia Watson” attempted to raise education and empowerment about the high rate of Black trans murders occurring in the United States recently which has gained little to no media attention and/or national outcry particularly from the African American community compared to the large national attention and major outcry from the African American community concerning young Black males killed as a result of police brutality.

In 12 months, from October 1, 2017 to September 30, 2018, approximately 369 trans, non-binary and gender-variant people were murdered.<sup>92</sup> Worse yet, 28 of the trans murder victims were reported to be teenagers, with some as young as 16.<sup>93</sup> In total, there were five beheadings, nine people were stoned to death and the majority of the people killed were trans women of color, often gunned down or beaten to death.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, Brazil, with 167 murders, and Mexico, with 71, once again, lead the list of the most reported killings of trans women and men, while the United States has

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<sup>90</sup> Person’s name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

<sup>91</sup> Person’s name has been changed to protect confidentiality.

<sup>92</sup> Rojas and Swales, “18 Transgender Killings.”

<sup>93</sup> Rojas and Swales, “18 Transgender Killings.”

<sup>94</sup> Rojas and Swales, “18 Transgender Killings.”

seen 28 trans people killed, (an increase from last year's 25) –in addition, other killings have been reported around the globe including Pakistan, Colombia, France and the the UK.<sup>95</sup>

In the United States, Black female trans murders have hit an all-time high.

According to the Human Rights Campaign:

In 2017, advocates tracked at least 29 deaths of transgender people in the United States due to fatal violence, the most ever recorded. These victims were killed by acquaintances, partners and strangers, some of whom have been arrested and charged, while others have yet to be identified. Some of these cases involve clear anti-transgender bias. In others, the victim's transgender status may have put them at risk in other ways, such as forcing them into homelessness. While the details of these cases differ, it is clear that fatal violence disproportionately affects transgender women of color, and that the intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia conspire to deprive them of employment, housing, healthcare and other necessities, barriers that make them vulnerable.<sup>96</sup>

According to David J. Johns, who serves as the executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition, the nation's leading civil rights organization dedicated to the empowerment of Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and same gender loving (LGBTQ/SGL) people, including people living with HIV/AIDS, "in 2017 there were 52 reported anti-LGBTQ/SGL homicides, the highest death rate of these types of murders on record, according to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP). Nearly half of these tragic deaths (22) were Black transgender women, a community that continues to experience a disproportionate share of anti-LGBTQ/SGL violence."<sup>97</sup> The most notable cases in 2018 have occurred in Jacksonville, Florida: "Since the beginning

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<sup>95</sup> Rojas and Swales, "18 Transgender Killings."

<sup>96</sup> HRC Foundation, "Fatal Violence."

<sup>97</sup> Johns, "Why All Black People Should Care."

of this year, Celine Walker, 36, was found shot to death inside a hotel room on February 4; Antash'a English, 38, was found wounded between two abandoned houses on June 1 and later died at a hospital; and Cathalina Christina James, 24, was found shot to death at a hotel on June 24.”<sup>98</sup> As of July 2019, approximately 12 Black trans women have been killed, according to the Human Rights campaign.<sup>99</sup> Despite these high numbers, where is the media's outcry?

When “Alicia Watson”, who is also a Black trans femme, posted the picture of Black trans actress Indya Moore, the picture received empathy and empowerment-type comments directed back to “Alicia”. However, over the course of the next week, one online viewer in particular, “Michal Matson”, an African woman, spewed transphobic comments in response to “Alicia's” post. On “Alicia's” post, “Michal” specifically posted about 5 videos from YouTube showcasing the health challenges of trans surgeries. One of the YouTube videos was an interview of a Black trans femme expressing regrets after having surgery. On “Alicia's” post, “Michal” expressed her desire and commitment to educate and empower the Chicago #BlackLivesMatter group about what she believed was the unethical, unhealthy and sinful process of trans surgeries and subsequently trans identities.

What I found interesting was that the beliefs and actions of both “Alicia” and “Michal” highlighted for me the notion that persons turn to Facebook to give education and empowerment. Ironically, both “Alicia” and “Michal”, although having different

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<sup>98</sup> Johns, “Why All Black People Should Care.”

<sup>99</sup> HRC Foundation, “Fatal Violence.”

ideologies which oppose each other, have a deep passion and commitment to educate and empower the online community about their particularly belief system.

The videos and comments of “Michal” remained online on “Alicia’s” post for about two weeks, until September 17, 2019, when the Chicago #BlackLivesMatter administrators decided to delete the transphobic verbal comments made by “Michal”. For two weeks, various members of the Chicago #BlackLivesMatter Facebook group pleaded with the group administrators to delete the posts and block, meaning ban, “Michal” from the group. I found it alarming that administrators allowed the transphobic posts to remain online on “Alicia’s” post for two weeks. From what I have observed, the administrators are very active on the page, making posts on an average of once a day to twice a day. Also, administrators receive mobile alerts whenever persons make any comments on the page, meaning I am able to deduct through logical reasoning that administrators were aware of the pleas of several online commentators within the group to remove “Michal’s” transphobic comments from “Alicia’s” post. I wondered why even “Alicia”, as an administrator herself, refused to simply delete the comments on her own since she has that power as an administrator. As of October 25, 2019, nearly two months later, while administrators deleted the verbal transphobic comments made by “Michal”, the YouTube videos remained. This was surprising to me. Why not delete the videos as well?

On November 15, 2019, I observed the public post feature turned off on the page. In other words, the administrators have now restricted members of the group from posting on the page. Only administrators are allowed to post on the page. I was devastated about this response from administrators. Up until this point, whenever a transphobic comment was posted on the page I would respond with an empowering,

affirming quote from my theological conversation partners: Toni Morrison, Malcolm X and Katie Cannon. My digital anthropological theory asserts that digital pastoral care entails inviting online viewers to self-differentiate a new digital identity in light of experiencing digital racialized sexism, transphobia and Islamophobia. I highlight Toni Morrison, Malcolm X and Katie Cannon in particular because these three theological scholars invite persons to create new identities grounded in self-affirmation in the midst of experiencing oppression.

I assert that “Alicia” and the other page administrators’ inability to delete the transphobic comments in less than two weeks, along with their inability to delete the transphobic YouTube videos nearly two months later, and eventually restrict any posts from non-administrators of the group speaks to the trauma possibly suffered by “Alicia” and the other page administrators. According to Judith Herman, when persons experience trauma, persons become “paralyzed” and “fixated” to the trauma and subsequently the trauma causes them to freeze because it “intrudes” their normal functioning and lessens their “fight” back reflex.<sup>100</sup> This type of digital trauma also occurred to popular “Saturday Night Live” comedienne and actress Leslie Jones, an African American dark complicated statuesque woman. When news surfaced that Jones would play one of the lead actresses in a remake to “Ghostbusters”, racialized sexism reared its ugly head on Twitter in July of 2016 with racist online viewers raising criticism against the movie utilizing a woman of color in the remake in contrast to the original cast which featured no persons of color.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 37.

<sup>101</sup> Janet Burns,

“Black Women Are Besieged On Social Media, And White Apathy Damns Us All,” Forbes, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/janetwburns/2017/12/27/black-women-are-besieged-on-social-media-and-white-apathy-damns-us-all/#6be36038423e>.

Racist online viewers immediately took to twitter, harassing Jones virtually with verbal insults and pictures comparing Jones to a monkey or gorilla.<sup>102</sup>

I assert that Jones' response was indicative of one being traumatized. According to Judith Herman, a victim's first response to trauma and terror is to become "permanently alert" or experience "hyperarousal"<sup>103</sup>:

"[Abram] Kardiner proposed that 'the nucleus of the [traumatic] neurosis is a *physioneurosis*. He believed that many of the symptoms observed in combat veterans of the First World War -startle reactions, hyperalertness, vigilance for the return of danger, nightmares, and psychosomatic complaints -could be understood as resulting from chronic arousal of the autonomic nervous system."<sup>104</sup>

While for six weeks, Jones had been attacked on Twitter<sup>105</sup>, I assert that Jones became "permanently alert", presented with a "fight or flight" dilemma and choosing to fight, by taking the time to respond to individual attacks and even retweet them in the hopes of looking to Twitter's leadership to intervene for help but to no avail.<sup>106</sup>

I suggest the online attacks on Jones became a psychological "intrusion" in her life. According to Herman, victims of trauma "cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts."<sup>107</sup> Jones was not able to proceed forward with her life, because the online attacks kept surfacing. She eventually signs off Twitter and

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<sup>102</sup> Burns,  
"Black Women Are Besieged On Social Media."

<sup>103</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 37.

<sup>104</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 35.

<sup>105</sup> Victoria M. Massie, "Why #IStandWithLeslie is the beginning (not the end) of protecting Leslie Jones," Vox, <https://www.vox.com/2016/8/25/12643772/leslie-jones-website-hack-racist>.

<sup>106</sup> Ellen McGirt, 'Ghostbusters' Leslie Jones Calls Out Twitter for Racist Abuse," Fortune, <https://fortune.com/2016/07/19/ghostbusters-leslie-jones-racist-twitter/>.

<sup>107</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 37.

later would close her account, saying: “I leave Twitter tonight with tears and a very sad heart. All this cause I did a movie. You can hate the movie but the shit I got today...wrong.”<sup>108</sup>

After surrendering to racist Twitter trolls and deleting her Twitter account, near the end of August, 2016 Jones would experience her website being hacked by an anonymous racist hacker who would replace her link, “Career Success”, with personal information, intimate photos, and a video of Harambe, the slain Cincinnati Zoo gorilla.<sup>109</sup> Like her Twitter account, eventually Jones’ website would have to be suspended as well. Jones unfortunately succumbs to what Herman would describe as “constriction” or a state of surrender, collapse, defeat and withdraw:<sup>110</sup>

“The system of self defense shuts down entirely. The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness. Analogous states are observed in animals, who sometimes “freeze” when they are attacked. These are the responses of captured prey to her experience of this state of surrender...”<sup>111</sup>

I assert that the trauma and terror Leslie Jones faces online is because of her Black female body. Writer Rachel Charlene Lewis supports this claim:

“The violence Leslie faces is a form of misogynoir, a term coined by queer black feminist scholar Moya Bailey and popularized by Trudy Hamilton, creator of Gradient Lair. Misogynoir discusses the way that black women are discriminated against because of the combination of racism, sexism, and anti-blackness they face. And this happens regularly. From black girls in school being over-disciplined to the wage gap between black women and white women, black girls face specific discrimination and abuse. Even

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<sup>108</sup> McGirt, “‘Ghostbusters’ Leslie Jones.”

<sup>109</sup> Rachel Charlene Lewis,

“The Leslie Jones Hack Is Proof Black Women Are Targets for Violence,” *Teen Vogue*, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/leslie-jones-website-hack-black-women-violence-racism-misogyny>.

<sup>110</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 42.

<sup>111</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 42.

First Lady Michelle Obama isn't immune. And this is exactly what's happened to Leslie Jones.

Leslie is not being targeted because she's a woman. She's being targeted because she's a black woman, a dark-skinned black woman more specifically, and when we strip this issue of its specifics, we broaden out the issue in a way that makes it harder to target. While women as a whole deal with the bulk of harassment on social media platforms like Twitter, not all women are impacted in the same way. According to a recent Pew research study 25% of women have been sexually harassed online and 26% have been cyberstalked. When it comes to more intense forms of violence like doxxing and threats, women are the targets. Still, queer women, trans women, non-binary femmes, and women of color face additional targeting because of their identities, and that identity expands beyond womanhood or femininity to encompass race, gender, and sexuality.”<sup>112</sup>

What I also experienced as fascinating is that “Michal” is an African woman who finds no problem in attacking an African American trans woman. I observe this encounter as laced in what I would call “internalized oppression” because an African woman finds no concern in challenging another decedent after Africa. This observation reaffirmed an age old cultural adage that some African persons find themselves as separate, different or disconnected from African American persons. There is an anger, jealousy or enviousness among some African persons that African Americans are deemed more privileged being born in and currently living in the United States.

I found it compelling that the “Black Women’s Roundtable” Facebook Group only posted articles and comments concerning Black women and politics. The group members and administrators primarily posted about Black women politicians and aspiring politicians running for office during various nationwide elections. The group members and administrators also made a few posts concerning economics, specifically how Black women could facilitate their own business development. I found it strange that this group

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<sup>112</sup> Lewis, “The Leslie Jones Hack.”

never highlighted any article on racism, police brutality or transphobia. I would say the group remains safe and on the surface with what I classify as upper-class/middle-class topics in the group's online discussions. This group doesn't engage in direct, on-the-ground activism. The group doesn't engage in conversations that impact lower income African American women and men. This made me wonder what role does classism play in conversations about oppression. Is fighting against racism and transphobia a part of a particular lower economic class structure? Thus, my most compelling learning in comparing the discussions of these two distinct and different Facebook groups over the course of four months is that the intersectionality of oppression is limited in both of these digital worlds.

### *A Digital Theological Anthropology*

I assert that the basic premise of anthropology is the study of humanity and, in particular, how humanity functions in society and I lean towards the African American-centered anthropological studies of W.E.B. Dubois<sup>113</sup> and Zora Neale Hurston<sup>114</sup>. There are numerous types of specific anthropological perspectives; one being theological anthropology. While basic anthropology focuses on human-to-human relationships, theological anthropology focuses on how a human's relationship with the Divine impacts a human's relationship with other humans – a perspective that I hold dear from my most beloved theological anthropologist and Womanist scholar Katie Cannon<sup>115</sup>. I acknowledge the Divine by the name 'God'. Theological anthropology suggests that how

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<sup>113</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

<sup>114</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Amistad, 2006).

<sup>115</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*.

human beings relate/interact with other humanity is primarily as a result of human beings relationship with God.<sup>116</sup> For example, if one believes that God is, more than anything else, one of judgement and condemnation, then one will be, more than anything else, judgmental and condemning towards self and fellow humanity. On the other hand, if one believes that God is mainly one of grace, mercy and compassion then one will mainly exude grace, mercy and compassion towards self and others. In other words, one's theology will impact one's psychology and one's psychology will impact one's anthropology.<sup>117</sup> How one perceives the Divine will impact how one perceives self and how one perceives self will impact how one perceives other people.

A straightforward theological construct highlights a particular premise or understanding of God and how this understanding further influences explanations of key dynamics: creation, humanity, sin and evil, spirit, Jesus, grace and mercy, eschatology and ecclesiology. Theological anthropology specifically highlights human-to-human relationships and functioning, therefore, I assert the premise that, in addition to persons' individual relationship with God, persons function in human-to-human relationships also based on observations and perceptions of external differences such as skin tone, genitalia, sexuality, age, social status, religious affiliation and ableism. Thus, in order to discuss theological anthropology, one must also take into deep consideration the impact of racism, genderism/sexism, homophobia, ageism, classism, ableism and religious intolerance.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*.

<sup>117</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*.

<sup>118</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*.

I also hold firm to the notion that not only does one's relationship with the Divine as well as "-isms" impact human-to-human relationships but one's family system (i.e. birth order and family role) also influences human-to-human relationships. I assert that maternal and paternal relationships significantly influence persons' development and functioning.<sup>119</sup> As a result, offspring spend a considerable amount of time throughout their adult life developing their own identity or self.<sup>120</sup> This process is symbolic of a voyage. Persons embark on a journey to gain self-knowledge.<sup>121</sup> In order for one to journey to self-knowledge, I contend that persons need care. If persons experience care (through empathy, education and empowerment; which will be discussed later in this paper), they are more likely to gain self-knowledge. Gaining self-knowledge does not inhibit offsprings' maternal and paternal relationships. The mission and purpose of one's life is to acquire self-knowledge and, at the same time, maintain healthy parental, immediate and extended family relationships; this dynamic is what Na'im Akbar refers to as the "extended self".<sup>122</sup>

As a proud African-American, I value theories that are specific to the African-American culture. Therefore, an African worldview and African-centered psychology informs both my theories of theological anthropology and personality/human development. An African worldview speaks to the behaviors, attitudes, and values of African/African-American persons.<sup>123</sup> The African worldview is based on seven Afro-centric norms: emotional vitality, interdependence, collective survival, the oral tradition,

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<sup>119</sup> Nancy Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy: Understanding the African American Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2006).

<sup>120</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>121</sup> Akbar, Na'im, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>122</sup> Akbar, Na'im, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>123</sup> Akbar, Na'im, *Akbar's Papers in African Psychology*.

perception of time, harmonious blending and the role of the elderly.<sup>124</sup> The foundation for the African worldview is that individual differences exist, however, more commonalities than differences exist.<sup>125</sup> An African-centered worldview informs African-centered psychology, which is the study of the transphysical and physical or spirit and matter.<sup>126</sup> The intersect of the transphysical and physical create a rhythm or harmony or oneness.<sup>127</sup> The axiology or highest value of the African lies within the human relationship and, therefore, forms reciprocity.<sup>128</sup> Persons cannot exist void of relationships with others. There is no emphasis on “individual”. The lens through which one sees the world is as a whole and not in its parts. The African worldview embraces “both/and” and resists “either/or”.<sup>129</sup> Thus, logic is not dichotomous (opposites/competition) but diunital (union of opposites/complementary).<sup>130</sup> Therefore, my embrace of an African worldview and psychology focuses on a premise that children develop the personality of their family as a result of children’s human relationships with influential family members. Na’im Akbar undergirds my belief and goes a step forward by saying that children develop the personality of their family for the survival of the community.<sup>131</sup> Children duplicate this personality through the expression of their behaviors, attitudes and feelings.

I believe that as children mature, they have the capacity to develop their own innate personality or what Akbar refers to as an internal self-inspired by the Divine

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<sup>124</sup> Akbar, *Akbar’s Papers in African Psychology*.

<sup>125</sup> Akbar, *Akbar’s Papers in African Psychology*.

<sup>126</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>127</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>128</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>129</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>130</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>131</sup> Akbar, *Akbar’s Papers in African Psychology*.

(God).<sup>132</sup> At the same time, in the course of developing self-knowledge, I contend that it is possible for persons to remain in community with family. It is unhealthy for persons to develop an emotional distance from their family unit. Therefore, persons become accountable for their own thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions, and at the same time, maintain healthy relationships with family. Akbar understands this concept as the “extended self”.<sup>133</sup> The phrase “extended self” means that persons reject a dichotomous split of either embracing their own personality or carrying on the personality given by influential family members.<sup>134</sup> Rather, persons develop self and, at the same time, extend self to remain relational with family.<sup>135</sup> My primary theological anthropological construct is that God desires that persons develop their individuality and, at the same time, remain in community and attempt to reconcile familiar issues (only when possible; not at the risk of an individual’s self care).<sup>136</sup> This point in my theological anthropology can be further explained through an examination of Joseph and his relationship with his brothers highlighted in Genesis 37 and Genesis 45.

At an early age, Joseph is influenced by negative messages instilled in him by his brothers. The primary messages given to Joseph by his brothers included denying Joseph’s life, mission and purpose. Joseph’s brothers physically assault Joseph then sell him into enslavement. After escaping enslavement, Joseph’s theological anthropology shifts. Joseph’s spirituality and relationship with God becomes united. Then, Joseph

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<sup>132</sup> Akbar, *Akbar’s Papers in African Psychology*.

<sup>133</sup> Akbar, *Akbar’s Papers in African Psychology*.

<sup>134</sup> Akbar, *Akbar’s Papers in African Psychology*.

<sup>135</sup> Akbar, *Akbar’s Papers in African Psychology*.

<sup>136</sup> In Genesis 44 and 45, God guides Joseph to reconciliation with his brothers who sold Joseph into slavery several years prior. It is important to note that this reconciliation took place only after Joseph had developed his own identity and self-esteem after experiencing such tragic turmoil.

begins the psychologically reflective task of self differentiating his life's meaning and purpose (otherwise known as identity) and more importantly his dignity. He lands a career as a government official. He would eventually meet his brothers again, and, instead of remaining emotionally cutoff from his siblings, Joseph's connection with God impacts his decision to reconnect with his brothers while, at the same time, maintaining his unique voice, demonstrating the "extended self" mantra.

I have personally witnessed the importance of developing self-knowledge, while, at the same time, staying in relationship or community with one's own family. "Do what I say," was a popular phrase spoken by adults to children in my family. The adults believed that if children went against their parents' teachings, the children were being disrespectful towards the adults. Respect was synonymous with obedience, causing poor self-knowledge among children in our family. As a result, I became aware that children found it difficult to develop self-confidence or children acted controlling and manipulative of others later in life because children grew into adults who lacked trust of self and others.

The process of self-knowledge can be long.<sup>137</sup> Human development is a life-long breaking away from the dependent bonds of early childhood to the adult stages of mutuality and exchange.<sup>138</sup> In other words, persons spend much of their lives attempting to break out of the limitations of dependency to reach the autonomy of adulthood. This is because persons have spent so much time receiving gratifications and desires from influential family members that it becomes very difficult to separate self from the psychological and emotional impact of others. African and African-American-centered

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<sup>137</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>138</sup> Gerald Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, 10th ed. (Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2016).

psychology refers to this as resistance.<sup>139</sup> Thus, I assert that the journey to “know thy self” may be long and arduous, simply not happening overnight.

FBF. This is the acronym for Facebook Family. I suggest that online social media, Facebook in particular, has become the new family for many online viewers. One’s Facebook family, parallels one’s real life family. Thus, influential messages, instilled by one’s Facebook family, then foster one’s identity. Unfortunately, a growing issue on social media today is high rates of PTSD, anxiety and poor eating habits particularly among African American online viewers.<sup>140</sup> This is as a result of many African American online viewers continually watching and being exposed to viral violence in the forms of racism, sexism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia. As children grow and develop their individual identity (while also remaining in community with their family), I argue that a similar pattern occurs with persons’ online identities. Online identities must begin to “digitally differentiate” (as I label it) new, more meaningful identities. As Akbar invites African/African-American bodies to journey to “know thy self”<sup>141</sup>, I invite African/American online bodies to journey to “know thy social media self”. Thus, these new “digitally differentiated” identities will not fall victim to PTSD, anxiety and poor eating habits.

My theological anthropology for this issue is grounded in the Christian biblical mantra that invites persons to be “transformed through the renewing of one’s mind.”<sup>142</sup> I

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<sup>139</sup> Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy*.

<sup>140</sup> Jennifer Park, Jada Hallman, Xun S. Liu, and Jeff Hancock, “Black Representation in Social Media Well-being Research: A Scoping Review of Social Media Experience and Psychological Well-being among Black Users in the United States,” *New Media & Society*, (2024).

<sup>141</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>142</sup> Romans 12:2.

assert that online social media transformation can occur via care that one receives from the healthy, “digitally differentiated” online community. I believe most persons desire or long for care, meaning most persons desire that their voice be heard.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, most persons want to receive care or support from others whom they share community with who, most times, are outside the biological, immediate family. For example, African and African-American-centered psychology says that extended relatives and/or non-biological members of one’s community provide a network or support system to help person’s learn.<sup>144</sup> Support systems foster safe space and environments where persons can grow. In the social media world of Facebook, for example, the support systems that can foster care outside of the Facebook Family may be “friends of friends” or “public” spectators who may “follow” an individual but may not be official “friends” with the person on Facebook. Support systems may also be persons who are officially “friends” of a person, however the person may not have acknowledged, valued or been aware that this “friend” is or could be a meaningful part of the person’s Facebook Family who potentially could or has previously contributed to the person’s digital differentiation.

Demonstrating care by creating a safe environment fosters persons’ trust and, more important, their expectation. Irvin Yalom reiterates my point by stating that building a sense of expectancy, or instillation of hope, is key.<sup>145</sup> After trust and expectation is established, I contend that the “digitally differentiated” community can continue to demonstrate care through an empathic presence. African and African-American centered psychology understands an empathic presence as a respectful, noncondemning and

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<sup>143</sup> Cari Jackson, *The Gift to Listen, the Courage to Hear* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2003).

<sup>144</sup> Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy*.

<sup>145</sup> Irvin D. Yalom and Molyn Leszcz, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, 5th ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2005).

noncondescending attitude which values the other person.<sup>146</sup> The digitally differentiated community can provide a noncondemning, respectful presence with persons as persons share stories from their personal history through status updates, photo image postings and responses to other persons' statuses or photo stories. It is especially important to provide an empathic listening ear when persons share difficult life experiences. In biblical history, Jesus showed empathy in his ministry to the oppressed as outlined in numerous gospel stories of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Next, I assert that "digital differentiation" occurs through education. I believe that most persons want to be educated so that they can grow. Na'im Akbar undergirds my belief by highlighting that most persons develop goals that they try to achieve over the course of their lifetime.<sup>147</sup> What exactly is the "education" that online social media viewers are to receive? I assert that social media online viewers experience education as the creation of a new self differentiated social media identity that does not fall victim to PTSD, anxiety and/or poor eating habits after viewing viral videos of racism, sexism, homophobia and Islamophobia. I assert that online viewers must "remythologize" unhealthy social media messages instilled via violence-ridden viral videos. This term, "remythologize", was created by womanist theologian, ethicist, and social critic Katie G. Cannon.<sup>148</sup> Cannon's thought is in response to how white Christian slave masters used the Bible as a method to justify Black inferiority and promote African and African American enslavement. According to Cannon, the ideological myth needing to be "remythologized" was the notion that slavery was God's divine will and therefore African/African American

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<sup>146</sup> Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy*.

<sup>147</sup> Akbar, *Akbar's Papers In African Psychology*.

<sup>148</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*.

persons were merely property that could be brought and sold as a commodity on the Auction Block.<sup>149</sup> This myth caused enslaved African and African Americans to understand God as outside or away from their experience, meaning on the side of white Christian slave masters. Thus, enslaved African and African Americans internalized the value of their humanity as less than that of white persons. In light of this myth, Cannon argued that the most helpful method of demonstrating care to enslaved African and African Americans was to help them remythologize their understanding of divine will by reinterpreting oppressive biblical passage –thus, causing enslaved Africans and African Americans to experience the presence of God as being “Emmanuel” or “with” them instead of against them.<sup>150</sup>

### *Restoring A Digitally Damaged Dignity*

I assert that when one “remythologizes” unhealthy influential messages, a restoration of one’s dignity occurs. When persons experience violence and trauma, their dignity is damaged. According to psychiatrist Judith Herman<sup>151</sup>:

“Traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity. The body is invaded, injured, defiled. Control over bodily functions is often lost; in the folklore of combat and rape, this loss of control is often recounted as the most humiliating aspect of the trauma.

Furthermore, at the moment of trauma, almost by definition, the

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<sup>149</sup> Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*.

<sup>150</sup> Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*.

<sup>151</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 53.

individual's point of view counts for nothing. In rape, for example, the purpose of the attack is precisely to demonstrate contempt for the victim's autonomy and dignity. The traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others."<sup>152</sup>

Pastoral theologian and psychotherapist Lee Butler draws attention to how African and African American enslaved persons were challenged with the task of maintaining dignity in the face of systematic oppression, particularly African enslavement.<sup>153</sup> I carry this theory a step forward suggesting that in the face of viral violence, African American online viewers must restore their "digital dignity" or learn to "differentiate digital dignity."

Education occurs with empathy at the same time. The method of how one employs empathy and education is like a sandwich. Empathy is synonymous with the bread, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles and onions of the sandwich and education is the meat of the sandwich. In most sandwiches, the meat is most fulfilling and causes the most nourishment. However, the meat or education can be difficult to chew and swallow all by itself. Therefore, the bread, mayonnaise, lettuce, tomatoes, pickles and onions or care offers another flavor to offset the meat and make it easier to consume.

Last, but not least, human beings desire empowerment, meaning persons want their gifts, skills and talents acknowledged which is why African and African-American centered psychology speaks to my point by highlighting that persons need continuous

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<sup>152</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 53.

<sup>153</sup> Lee H. Butler Jr., *A Loving Home: Spirituality, Sexuality, and Healing Black Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

affirmation to combat life stressors.<sup>154</sup> Continuous encouragement also helps persons maintain emotional and psychological healthiness, deterring persons away from developing and retaining psychopathic tendencies. This speaks to one of my theological anthropological constructs: God empowers humanity.<sup>155</sup> On social media, it is important for the “digitally differentiated” community to continuously offer encouragement along with affirmation of one’s gifts, skills and talents in order for persons to continue their journey to social media self differentiation. After much reflection, I believe this desire for empowerment, encouragement and affirmation of one’s gifts, skills and talents is the most important desire for people, Black people in particular. This empowerment, encouragement and affirmation could be summed up in one word: celebration. After much reflection, I believe persons in my social media study genuinely desired celebration more than any other desire. My primary conversation partner: Dr. Na’im Akbar suggests receiving celebration breaks the psychological chains of slavery.<sup>156</sup> I contend that celebration is what Black women desire and need most on social media. Celebration is a spiritual care practice in digital space.

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<sup>154</sup> Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy*.

<sup>155</sup> In the gospel of John 4, Jesus, the revealed image of God, empowered a woman with a history of sexual promiscuity to become the first female preacher in biblical history.

<sup>156</sup> Akbar, *Breaking The Chains of Psychological Slavery*.

## CHAPTER 7.

### FREEING A CAPTIVE (DIGITAL) MIND:

#### Individual and Communal Celebration As A Spiritual Care Practice In Digital Space

Social media has emerged as the contemporary public square, a vital space where individuals gather to share ideas, seek support, and engage in communal discourse.

Recognizing the importance of pastoral and spiritual care in this digital environment is essential, as it mirrors the traditional roles of community and connection found in physical spaces. To fully grasp the significance of social media today, we must delve into its history—a narrative that unfolds over several decades and has been shaped by rapid technological advancements and shifts in communication styles.

Key milestones in the development of social media highlight its transformative journey:

- **The Emergence of Online Communities:** In the late 1970s and early 1980s, online communities began with bulletin board systems which established a foundation for online interaction between people. These early platforms allowed users to post messages and share information, creating a basic form of community.
- **The Invention of Social Networking Sites:** The early 2000s saw the rise of platforms such as Friendster and MySpace, which changed how people connected online. These were primarily entertainment sites for friendly conversations, fun encounters, and mindless activities to decompress. These sites introduced features that encouraged users to build personal profiles, share content, and nurture relationships.
- **The Introduction and Dominance of Facebook:** In 2004, Mark Zuckerberg stole a nifty creative social media idea from his college friends, creating Facebook. It rapidly became the dominant social networking platform, making social media an integral part of daily life. It enabled users to connect with friends and family, share life events, and engage with various communities, significantly transforming communication dynamics.

- **Microblogging and Instant Communication:** The invention of Twitter in 2006 introduced a new communication style defined by short statements, brevity and immediacy. This platform allowed users to share thoughts, news, and updates in real-time, further enhancing global conversations.
- **The Visual Shift:** The emergence of platforms like Instagram (founded in 2010) and TikTok (launched in 2016) shifted the emphasis toward visual content, enabling users to express themselves creatively. This trend has highlighted the significance of storytelling and visual engagement in social interactions.
- **The Integration of Social Media into Daily Life:** Today, social media extends beyond personal connections; it has become a vital tool for businesses, advocacy, and social movements. These platforms play an essential role in sharing information, mobilizing communities, and tackling social issues on a global scale.

Understanding this historical framework is crucial for appreciating social media's role as a contemporary public square. In this evolving environment, the need for pastoral and spiritual care becomes increasingly apparent, as individuals seek guidance, support, and a sense of belonging in an increasingly digital world. Today, Black women are the most abused group on social media, sparking a specific call for pastoral and spiritual care strategies for Black women online users. The question to contend with: how do we free a captive digital mind?

The wise griot Dr. Wade Nobles once said, “The definition of power is the ability to define reality and have other people accept your definition as their own.”<sup>1</sup> This year finds us living in a reality defined by other people. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism, Christian supremacy and a myriad of other oppressions enacted on the marginalized is the reality created and defined by a select few in a dominant society who own power. In the face of both systemic and systematic

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<sup>1</sup> “Dr. Wade W. Nobles,” <https://www.drwadenobles.com/>.

oppression, how do marginalized communities redefine their reality for themselves? In redefining their reality, they reclaim their power!

Since 1619, white racist slavemasters have attempted to redefine the reality of African and African Americans, specifically the African and African American woman. They redefined the realities of queens, business owners, healers, griots, weavers and truth seers as oversexualized Jezebels, happy-go-lucky pleasantly plump asexual Mammies, and smart-mouthed selfish emasculating Sapphires.<sup>2</sup> These powerful African and African American women had to reject these redefinitions of their reality and remember who they were and what they were called to do before 1619.<sup>3</sup> Remembering their gifts, skills and talents was the catalyst for them reclaiming their power. The act of them remembering their gifts, skills and talents was an act of self-care. The process of them providing care to themselves through the method of remembering their gifts, skills and talents was grounded in the African practice of individual and communal celebration.<sup>4</sup>

I contend that Black women today can resist the psychological affects of racialized sexism, islamophobia, and transphobia by embracing celebration as a spiritual care practice in digital space. In order to fully engage in the act of celebration, Na'im Akbar suggests African Americans become comfortable with celebrating themselves.<sup>5</sup> Many African Americans are not comfortable with celebrating themselves because of unhealthy theologies, birthed during African Enslavement, which promote humility and anti-arrogance. While many non-African Americans are affirmed when they walk in their authority and confidence, when African Americans attempt to do similar, they are usually

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<sup>2</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*.

<sup>3</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*.

<sup>4</sup> Akbar, *Breaking The Chains of Psychological Slavery*.

<sup>5</sup> Akbar, *Breaking The Chains of Psychological Slavery*.

met with demeaning language and terms of being too full of themselves, egotistical, overconfident and too proud. Negative theological meaning are then attached, weaponizing God by instilling messages such as, “God wants you to be humble or God hates a haughty spirit.” On the contrary, Akbar suggests “we must learn to unapologetically, sing the greatness of our accomplishments and special blessings to the world.”<sup>6</sup> When we can do this, we free our “captive” mind, according to Akbar.<sup>7</sup> I assert that when African American women celebrate their accomplishments in digital space, such as on social media, they free their captive digital mind from the shackles of myths about their identity that go viral on social media.

Self and communal celebration reminds African American women about their African/African American identity and helps them recommit to this identity in the face of oppression. To understand African/African American identity one must understand Black psychology. According to Wade Nobles, Black psychology is informed by Egyptian culture and ways of being and therefore, Egyptian culture functions as the primary source and norm of Black psychology.<sup>8</sup> Pivotal to Egyptian culture are the following elements that subsequently ground Black psychology:

- Time is a divine moment; ignoring linear understandings of time and embracing circular notions of time
- No dichotomous splits; embracing “both/and”
- Unity of all
- Embracing intergenerational relationships; no divisions between elders and youth
- Connection to the ancestral realm
- Connection to Spirit and Divine Presence<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Akbar, *Breaking The Chains of Psychological Slavery*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> Akbar, *Breaking The Chains of Psychological Slavery*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Wade W. Nobles, *African Psychology: Toward Its Reclamation, Reascension and Revitalization* (Oakland, CA: Institute for the Advanced Study of Black Family Life and Culture, 1986).

<sup>9</sup> Akbar, *Akbar's Papers in African Psychology*.

With these elements in mind, Black psychology's goal is to help Black persons understand and live into their Identity through an African-centered lens.<sup>10</sup> Identity is defined as Spirit or Soul.<sup>11</sup> The Spirit or Soul is comprised of these entities:

- Mind / Mental
- Body / Physical
- Relational Connection to Others
- Ancestral Connection to Those who have physically died<sup>12</sup>

I contend that spiritual care in digital space is the act of celebrating Black women's mind (how they think), Black women's body (how they act/what they do), Black women's relational connection to others, and Black women's ancestral connection to those who have physically died. While multiple social media applications exist today, I will focus on caring strategies that can be specifically utilized on Facebook and Instagram.

### *Honoring the Multifaceted Brilliance of Black Women on Social Media: A Guide to Celebration*

Celebrating the rich and intricate tapestry of a Black woman's mind, body, relationships, and ancestral heritage on platforms like Facebook and Instagram can be both a transformative and deeply empowering act. Social media offers a powerful space to affirm her lived experiences, highlight her achievements, and uplift her voice in ways that reverberate far beyond the digital realm. Below are practical strategies to meaningfully honor and celebrate her across four vital dimensions of her life:

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<sup>10</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>11</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

<sup>12</sup> Akbar, *Know Thy Self*.

## 1. Celebrate Her Mind: Elevate Her Intellectual Legacy

A Black woman's intellect is often the foundation of innovation, activism, and community healing. Use your platforms to spotlight her brilliance:

- Amplify her social justice work, whether she's launched community programs, led advocacy campaigns, or educated others on systemic inequality.
- Honor her academic impact by highlighting theories or frameworks she's introduced, and celebrate her scholarly contributions through publications, lectures, or panel discussions.
- Promote her creative writing—screenplays, poetry, blogs, or plays—that give voice to powerful narratives often left untold.
- Recognize her courage to grow, especially when she embraces new mindsets, ideologies, or healing practices like therapy or mindfulness.
- Celebrate her educational milestones, such as returning to school after years of internal doubt, earning a degree, or achieving a certification despite life's obstacles.
- Engage your audience by tagging her work, reposting her content, or even hosting a Facebook or Instagram Live session where she can share her journey in her own words.

## 2. Celebrate Her Body: Uplift Her Journey Toward Healing and Empowerment

The body of a Black woman carries generations of resilience, and honoring it means affirming her right to rest, rejuvenate, and reclaim her space:

- Celebrate her wellness journey, whether it involves going to therapy, embracing fitness, or choosing rest as resistance.
- Affirm her boundaries, especially when she courageously uses “no” to protect her energy in both personal and professional spaces.
- Honor her healing process—after surgery, childbirth, trauma, or abuse—and the strength it takes to nurture her body and spirit.
- Celebrate her beauty without conditions, affirming that she is worthy and radiant regardless of societal expectations or norms.
- Make space for gratitude, using posts to publicly acknowledge how she is choosing herself and modeling liberation for others.

### 3. Celebrate Her Relationships: Acknowledge Her Deep Connections and Intentional Community-Building

Black women are often the emotional anchors in their communities. Recognize the ways she nurtures others while also caring for herself:

- Shout out her involvement in meaningful groups—be it a sorority, professional collective, or spiritual circle—that allow her to thrive.
- Acknowledge her family dynamics, especially when she is setting boundaries, navigating caregiving roles, or mothering with intention.
- Celebrate her friendships and chosen family who reflect her values, hold her accountable, and pour into her joy.
- Recognize her romantic or platonic partnerships that are built on respect, reciprocity, and mutual growth.

- Use captions and stories to highlight the beauty of her relational world, where love, support, and cultural legacy coexist.

#### 4. Celebrate Her Ancestral Heritage: Root Her in Her Lineage

A Black woman's strength often springs from the love, sacrifices, and wisdom of those who came before her. Help keep those roots visible and sacred:

- Offer gentle support during seasons of grief, especially on anniversaries or holidays that evoke the loss of a parent, grandparent, or cultural elder.
- Share tributes to her ancestors in your comments or captions, invoking their names with reverence and reminding her she is never alone.
- Connect her present to her past, especially when she achieves something her ancestors dreamed of but couldn't experience in their lifetime.
- Celebrate her cultural practices, traditions, or rituals that keep her lineage alive—whether it's through food, art, language, or spiritual observance.

In every post, tag her with intention, speak her name with pride, and let your celebration be a mirror that reflects her full, radiant humanity. Social media can be more than a highlight reel—it can be a sacred space to honor the everyday magic of a Black woman's life.

One of the key criticisms of the theory of celebration is that it can unintentionally enable what's often called "affirmation addiction." This term isn't clinical, but it's

commonly used to describe a deep emotional or psychological reliance on external validation—things like praise, compliments, or positive reinforcement—as a way to feel worthy, secure, or emotionally balanced.

People caught in this pattern often find themselves constantly seeking affirmation just to feel okay. They may become anxious, disconnected, or even demotivated if they're not regularly told they're doing well, that they matter, or that they're enough. And when that external validation does come, it tends to offer only fleeting relief. The sense of security it brings fades quickly, and they're left chasing the next fix—whether that's from a partner, friends, coworkers, or increasingly, social media.

This dynamic is especially noticeable today, when likes, comments, and reposts can easily mimic genuine affirmation, delivering little dopamine hits that feel meaningful in the moment but often deepen the underlying void. At its core, this cycle is often rooted in low self-esteem, early life experiences marked by inconsistent love or support, or unhealed emotional wounds. Without a strong foundation of internal self-worth, external praise becomes not just nice to have, but seemingly essential for emotional survival. So while the theory of celebration has value—it promotes gratitude and acknowledging the good—it can also have a darker edge if it encourages people to depend on others to feel validated, rather than cultivating that affirmation from within.

To this critique I respond that celebration or affirmation and empowerment is a rich, meaningful and necessary component of African American life. In his book, *They Like To Never Quit Praising God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, Thomas argues that celebration is not just emotional hype, but it's a theologically grounded, purposeful, and structured part of sermon delivery, especially in the African American church

tradition. Thomas suggests that the preached word catapults a problem, builds tensions, causes people to feel the weight of the world and experience human brokenness. After a resolution to the problem is discovered, people's normal reaction is to celebrate the release of tension, the joyful acknowledgment of God's power, presence, and promises. In this same vein, I propose that celebration is not only helpful in the preaching moment but in the pastoral care moment as well. Black women face catastrophic problems and injustices, especially in digital spaces such as Facebook and Instagram, that build tension and cause Black women to feel the weight of the world and sometimes experience human brokenness. Receiving online celebration as a pastoral care practice releases tension, and causes the Black woman to experience a joyful acknowledgement of the Divine's power, presence and promises. Thus, celebration is not simply entertainment, but it's a spiritual affirmation that energizes and empowers the Black woman to live holistically in the world.

*Caring For The Most Disrespected Person In (Online) America:*

*Celebration Shows Who Black Women Are Not!*

Famed justice fighter Malcolm X once highlighted in the 1960s how the most disrespected person in America was the Black woman. Years later, his thought-provoking statement still remains true today. However, I contend that physical, emotional and spiritual attacks towards the Black woman today occur as a result of the never-ending keyboard courage of so many pundits around the country. Social media is weaponized now to oppress Black women online users in particular. Thus, I modify Malcolm X's

statement to highlight that the most disrespected person in *Online America* is the Black woman. Celebrating Black women's identity, specifically Black women's mind (how they think), Black women's body (how they act/what they do), Black women's relational connection to others, and Black women's ancestral connection to those who have physically died is a method to providing spiritual care in digital space. This method has several positive outcomes.

First, celebration of the Black woman in online America or digital space is a political act of resistance. Since the beginnings of African Enslavement, white society sought to define Black women's identity has oversexualized Jezebels.<sup>13</sup> Celebration provides a barrier to this stereotype because it affirms that Black women are more than their sexual identity, sexuality and/or sexual activity. Black women are not limited to definitions only by way of their sexual identity, sexuality and/or sexual activity.<sup>14</sup> Black women represent more than just being a sexual symbol of white men's lust.<sup>15</sup> Black women are not theologically sinful or evil.<sup>16</sup> Their sexual identity, sexuality and sexual activity is not sinful or evil.

Celebration reminds oppressors that in the face of racialized sexism and transphobia, Black women are not fat, unhealthy, primarily Christian, happy-go-lucky Mammies. Celebration helps those that seek to stir violence against Black women learn that they are healthy, eat appropriately, exercise, practice self-care and embrace the fullness of their feelings. They are not simply happy-go-lucky, but they embrace a wide range of feelings such as scare and anger and that's perfectly fine because many have no

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<sup>13</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>14</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>15</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>16</sup> Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

fear of embracing their full humanity. Celebration reiterates that not all Black women are Christian, some are Muslim, Jewish, Humanists, Athiests, etc.

Celebration of Black women in digital space asserts that Black women are not smart-mouthed Sapphires who are unsupportive of Black men contrary to Daniel Moynihan's reporting.<sup>17</sup> Celebration of Black women teaches the larger society that Black women are loving, empathic, compassionate, sensitive, warm, friendly and caring. Black women are soft. Black women should be handled with ease. Black women are not who Daniel Moynihan<sup>18</sup> described years ago. Black women love Black men and are not seeking to emasculate Black men, usurp the authority of Black men or destroy the Black family.

Celebration of Black women especially in digital space restores the dignity of Black women by teaching Black women that they don't have to internalize negative stereotypical myths given since 1619. Black women don't have to unconsciously become Jezebels, Mammies and Sapphires. Black women don't have to unknowingly embody these racist, sexist caricatures. Celebration of Black Muslim sisters echoes that White supremacy Christianity does not have the final word but religious diversity and pluralism reigns now. Celebration of Black trans women contends that Black trans lives matter and that Black trans women have a God given right to justice and equal rights. Black women, Black Muslim women and Black trans women can take off the unhealthy identities that a racist, sexist, patriarchy and evangelical Christian have tried to place on them for the past hundreds of years. It's time for Black women to "unbecome".

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<sup>17</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*.

<sup>18</sup> Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy A Yoke*.

Recently, former First Lady Michelle Obama wrote a book entitled, “Becoming”. Obama’s assertion is that one’s mission and purpose in life is to create an identity that speaks to one’s true heart and passion.<sup>19</sup> I reject this notion and contend that life is really about “unbecoming”. America puts so many harmful messages on the psyche of the Black women. Maybe life isn’t so much about becoming, but rather unbecoming everything that a larger oppressive community has tried to dictate. Akbar’s challenge to “know thy self”<sup>20</sup> I believe is ultimately about taking off everything that is not intrinsically you so that you can embrace your “ikigai”<sup>21</sup> (a Japanese term meaning “reason for being”). Celebration as a spiritual care practice in digital space affirms for Black women online users that it is their calling to unbecome and find peace in the midst of a disrespectful America. Celebration reminds Black women, in the words of poet-griot Nikki Giovanni, maybe there is a reason why “ego tripping”<sup>22</sup> is just fine.

*Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)*

By Nikki Giovanni (1968)

I was born in the congo  
I walked to the fertile crescent and built  
the sphinx  
I designed a pyramid so tough that a star  
that only glows every one hundred years falls  
into the center giving divine perfect light  
I am bad  
I sat on the throne drinking nectar with allah  
I got hot and sent an ice age to europe  
to cool my thirst  
My oldest daughter is nefertiti  
the tears from my birth pains

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<sup>19</sup> Michelle Obama, *Becoming* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2018)

<sup>20</sup> Akbar, *Know Thyself*.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Gaines, “The Philosophy of Ikigai: 3 Examples About Finding Purpose,” <https://positivepsychology.com/ikigai/>

<sup>22</sup> Nikki Giovanni, “Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People,” illustrated by George Ford (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993).

created the Nile  
 I am a beautiful woman  
 I gazed on the forest and burned  
 out the Sahara desert  
 with a packet of goat's meat  
 and a change of clothes  
 I crossed it in two hours  
 I am a gazelle so swift  
 so swift you can't catch me  
 For a birthday present when he was three  
 I gave my son Hannibal an elephant  
 He gave me Rome for Mother's Day  
 My strength flows ever on  
 My son Noah built new/ark and  
 I stood proudly at the helm  
 as we sailed on a soft summer day  
 I turned myself into myself and was  
 Jesus  
 men intone my loving name  
 All praises All praises  
 I am the one who would save  
 I sowed diamonds in my back yard  
 My bowels deliver uranium  
 the filings from my fingernails are  
 semi-precious jewels  
 On a trip north  
 I caught a cold and blew  
 My nose giving oil to the Arab world  
 I am so hip even my errors are correct  
 I sailed west to reach east and had to round off  
 the earth as I went  
 The hair from my head thinned and gold was laid  
 across three continents  
 I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal  
 I cannot be comprehended  
 except by my permission  
 I mean . . . I . . . can fly  
 like a bird in the sky . . .<sup>23</sup>

### *Future Considerations*

For future considerations, I invite readers to reflect on these following ideas that deserve further discussions:

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<sup>23</sup> Giovanni, "Ego-Tripping."

### *1. Reimagining Digital Spiritual Care for Black Women*

Digital spiritual care for Black women must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and instead center cultural competency, trauma-informed practices, and contextual sensitivity. This care should affirm the lived experiences of Black women, especially those who are Muslim or transgender, by addressing the intersecting oppressions of patriarchy, Islamophobia, heteronormativity, and anti-Blackness. By creating inclusive rituals and safe digital spaces, spiritual care becomes a sacred act of recognition and restoration.

### *2. Measuring the Impact of Digital Spiritual Care*

Unlike traditional digital engagement metrics, the true impact of spiritual care lies in its intangible effects—emotional resonance, personal transformation, and moments of deep connection. These are not always publicly visible but are often felt profoundly in private exchanges, testimonials, and a sense of renewed identity. The transformative nature of this work emerges in the quiet but powerful moments of healing and empowerment.

### *3. Emotional Integration Through Digital Practices*

Digital spaces can be a refuge where Black women process complex emotions like grief, anger, joy, and peace simultaneously. Tools like guided meditations, storytelling spaces, affirmations, and ritual circles help support emotional integration and holistic well-being. In such environments, healing becomes multifaceted, addressing both personal and collective wounds through intentional, spiritually grounded practices.

### *4. Affirming Identity Through Online Presence*

Digital self-expression becomes a form of spiritual resistance and affirmation. By reclaiming their narratives through usernames, hashtags, bios, and naming conventions, Black women assert their visibility in spaces that often marginalize them. When nurtured in inclusive and supportive environments, these expressions of self become powerful mechanisms of emotional resilience and community-building.

### *5. Sisterhood as Coalitional Care*

Sisterhood must evolve from a narrow concept of sameness to a broader ethic of coalitional care. True sisterhood is forged in mutual respect, solidarity, and commitment to shared survival—especially across differences in religion, culture, and lived experiences. This model of relationship challenges performative allyship and emphasizes deep accountability and love as foundations for transformative community.

### *6. Liberatory Roles of Spiritual Caregivers*

Spiritual caregivers play a pivotal role in helping Black women reclaim their faith traditions through liberatory theology, ancestral wisdom, and womanist frameworks. These approaches enable critical reflection on harmful religious teachings without requiring a total rejection of spiritual heritage. By offering emotional support and guiding

liberative interpretations of sacred texts, caregivers help dismantle oppressive theology while preserving spiritual nourishment.

### *7. Challenging Patriarchal Structures in Faith Spaces*

Many traditional Black religious communities are steeped in patriarchal norms that limit women's leadership. However, digital platforms subvert these structures by amplifying marginalized voices and creating space for alternative models of authority. Online communities—ranging from womanist theology groups to trans-affirming ministries—serve as powerful venues for healing, dialogue, and spiritual transformation.

### *8. Addressing Intra-Community Oppression and Exclusivism*

Exclusivist attitudes within some Black Christian communities often contribute to anti-Muslim and anti-trans sentiments. Digital theology and interfaith dialogue can challenge these views, fostering inclusive narratives that embrace spiritual diversity. Addressing internalized oppression requires confronting the misuse of religious privilege and committing to collective liberation that uplifts all members of the community.

### *9. Accountability in Africana Spiritual Traditions*

While Africana spiritual practices offer deep wisdom and communal power, they must be approached critically. These traditions are not beyond reproach, and when they perpetuate harm or authoritarian control, they must be challenged. True reverence for ancestral heritage includes accountability, ensuring that present-day practices uphold justice, consent, and ethical leadership.

### *10. Embracing Joy and Rest as Acts of Resistance*

The work of confronting misogynoir and transphobia is spiritually and emotionally taxing, underscoring the need for care rooted not just in resistance but in joy and rest. Activists, caregivers, and spiritual leaders must prioritize self-preservation through celebration, intentional rest, and community care. Joy itself becomes a radical act—an assertion of worth and vitality in the face of oppression.

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