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32. http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Celebrities/2009/09/Tyler-Perry-Interview.aspx?p=7. Accessed January, 2012.
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4

Screening God

Andrea C. White

Tyler Perry's films propagate two dangerous myths by virtue of their success—the myth that his works celebrate black identity in general and black female identity in particular by foregrounding black women in his story lines, and the myth that his films function as a forum for prophetic discourse with theological messages of Christian redemption. Needless to say, a black film producer with a black-owned entertainment empire, who hires and directs an all-black cast, writes story lines with black female protagonists, reaches a black female audience, inscribes Christian messages in his narratives with a black church evangelical drive, does not a womanist theologian make. The two myths are integrally related because of the way in which Perry's theology functions to perpetuate controlling images of black women. Indeed the black church is used to support and undergird the moral lessons he has for women. "His projects, arguably like the black church itself, are steeped in a narrow, Christian moralism that idealizes benevolent male leadership."[1] Perry's works are heuristic for demonstrating why race, class, gender, and sexuality are particularly theological problems. Perry's own identity politics are so fundamental to his theology of forgiveness and redemption that his politics ultimately eclipse the intended theological underpinnings and yield instead a masculinist logic and anthropocentric ideology.

Viewed through the lens of womanist theology, an account of how these myths operate, are sustained, or emerged in the first place would inevitably fall in line with the multitude of film critics—and for the few who take notice, social critics and cultural theorists—who launch attacks on Perry's works. Common refrains include the charge that Perry preserves old stereotypes by means of the minstrel-show-like features in his films. His characters are caricatures. His films are formulaic and predictable.

They are clichés of love and loss, inevitable redemption, and moralizing Christianity reduced to inspirational life-coach messages of self-empowerment. Filled with melodrama, they are lacking in nuance and subtlety. Their multiple subplots lack coherence. "Heartstrings-yanking drama bumps square up against buffoonish comedy, with little attempt to unite the two."[2] Enmeshed in all these narrative shortcomings is the gender problem. Domestic chaos is attributed to the emasculating evils of powerful women from the "mandatory megabitches in the Tyler Perry oeuvre."[3] There is also the class problem. According to a repeated narrative subtext, the conflicts are particular to black bourgeois existence and a stunted spiritual development that inevitably accompanies it. "A large part of the problem is in the conception: the characters are walking clichés of buppie success and stability achieved at the cost of the soul."[4]

Critic-Proof and Counterwomanist

As one critic puts it, Tyler Perry has been "led out to critical slaughter so many times, it might seem a wonder that he continues to make movies."[5] Critics are all too aware of the striking dissonance between the "ferociously hostile reviews" and the immense popularity of his films. "Reviewing a Tyler Perry movie is a bit like reviewing the weather report. People who want to watch it are going to do so, regardless of what anyone says about it."[6] Audiences are invulnerable to the critics' reports that his films are melodramatic and emotionally manipulative, among other things. In fact, the support of his fan base renders his films critic-proof. "Perry doesn't need critical acclaim—he's the most successful black filmmaker of all time, with an audience that shows up no matter what—..."[7]

Perhaps devotion from Perry's fan base comes not in spite of "ferociously hostile reviews from mostly white critics," but precisely because of them.[8] More than one film critic has explained the discrepancy between the critical response and the audience's on racialized experiential grounds. "Black people love him and white people don't get him."[9] Likewise, one could say, as evidenced by ticket sales, the black mainstream celebrates his works as icons of black popular culture and black feminists and womanists "don't get him." The dissonance itself is noteworthy, not only as a sociological question but as a fascinating phenomenon for cultural studies regarding critical and uncritical spectatorship.

Or the explanation may be rather simple. We may attribute the dissonance to the dearth of African American bodies on screen, which leads the spectator either to be uncritical of representations or to fail to recognize misrepresentations altogether because their mere presence is deemed sufficient.[10] Fully exploiting the absence of black bodies on film, Perry's films are self-contained. "He's creating a self-functioning black universe

(with few white characters) whose joys and frustrations have little to do with where or whether they situate themselves in the continuum of white judgment."[11] But the presumption of self-sufficiency is precisely the problem, not because it implies a certain hubris, but because his films entirely disregard any social, systemic, or structural dimension to the black experience of racialized identity, which is to say, in theological terms, his films overlook the notion of social sin. As M. Shawn Copeland insists, the resurrection of Christ is God's indictment against the social and political systems that executed him.[12] This divine indictment implicates all systemic forms of evil thus exposing race, class, gender, and sex oppression as theological problems.

But the question remains. How is it that the productions of a black filmmaker casting black women in leading roles, with an all-black cast, with explicit efforts to reach a black church demographic by including ubiquitous scenes of the black church with choirs singing and preachers preaching, efforts that are wildly successful with (everyday) black audiences—how is it that such a corpus could also be read as a quintessential expression of a counterwomanist production? Womanist's methodological grounding in everyday experience shows the dissonance to be all the more curious. Perry's critic-proof films seem to embody the principle of self-contradiction.

By definition black popular culture is contradictory space where black bodies are represented in inauthentic forms and yet the representations manifest the experiences that generate them. Referring to dominant white culture and black bodies, cultural theorist Stuart Hall remarks, "think of how these cultures have used the body—as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had."[13] He contends that popular culture is the "scene, *par excellence*, of commodification," but he resists cynicism toward cultural hegemony, which can too quickly become defeatist and suffocate discourse altogether.[14] Hall acknowledges the sometimes necessary maneuver of replacing invisibility with "segregated visibility," much like strategic essentialism that risks totalization and the strictures of ontological blackness in discourse, just so an unveiling of hegemony may begin.

A Failed Justice Crusade and the Politics of Representation

Arguably, the attacks against Perry's work are injudicious, and the criticisms misguided. Perry, after all, is in the entertainment business and is not a social critic or activist. And yet, the very issues he raises in his works leave him open to womanist critique. Perry is held accountable for how media expressions propagate attitudes toward social justice precisely because he introduces such issues into his films. Homelessness, domestic

violence, poverty, drug addiction, single parenting, joblessness, and struggles of the working class are all prominently featured in his narratives. Such issues are so often sidestepped or whitewashed, if not entirely silenced in media culture. That Perry brings to the fore issues of such social and political significance, especially those particular to black women, only to reinscribe masculinist ideology is tragic. Philosophy of religion scholar Andre Willis writes, "Perry could very easily address issues of a living wage, health care or black-on-black violence by examining the structural conditions that undergird these features of daily life...this would be a justice crusade in the most Christian sense. Given his track record, however, the chances for this true leap of faith seem slim."[15]

A mark of Perry's project as counterwomanist is the way the relationship between race, class, gender, and sexuality is construed. Perry cannot launch a successful justice crusade in the name of black women's experience if he fails to recognize the womanist understanding of the intersectionality of identities that lies at the heart of its methodological approach. The recognition that race and gender, to begin with, cannot be compartmentalized in black women's bodies is precisely what gave birth to the project of womanist theology.[16]

In a quasi-defense of Perry, one author identifies a "complex dialectical relationship between Perry's activist goals and his oppressive tendencies."[17] But the relation between his self-proclaimed goals and actual tendencies would be better described as antithetical. The so-called activist goals concerning issues of gender and sexuality for black women are undermined by misogynist gender norms and heteronormative sexuality. The same author makes this very point when he discusses the domesticated drag show in the mammy character of Madea, who is Tyler Perry in disguise. As confidante for black women and their struggles, Madea appears to work in their best interest, but Perry interjects himself in what otherwise would be safe space for black women, and "in the disguise of Madea, he dominates, regulates, and controls the space."[18] A space that is meant to be free of surveillance by the male gaze is compromised. Black women are rendered voiceless in the space that was initially a ground for cultivating womanist agency. "In the disguise of a *trusted participant*, Perry subsumes the space, directs the discourse, and proffers masculinist, oppressive messages that absorb the power that could come from forming a collective, symbiotic sisterhood...[He] pollutes the safe spaces with counterproductive strategies that promote obedience and dependency rather than independence and female self-sufficiency. What was once a safe site...becomes a site infected by a patriarchal rhetoric that is often packaged and disguised as feminist resistance."[19] The drag act has the potential to be politically subversive by unveiling the constructed nature of gender scripts, but its mimetic function in the Madea character instead becomes a tool to reinscribe normative logics, reducing it to a domesticated drag act. Instead of representing the politically transgressive, Madea represents the female grotesque and a carnivalesque presence, as film studies scholar Mia Mask argues. As a caricature of a "cantankerous fat black woman," Madea is literally and figuratively an abject figure because of her transgendered masquerade and because she is coded as sexually marginal to mainstream sexual economy.[20]

The question of Perry's apparently activist goals is in a sense a question of authorial intention, but it also involves the politics of representation. Just as we should not read bodies of color as exotic simply because of a difference from that which is considered normative, neither should we assume that the signifier "black" in black filmmaker guarantees or even implies progressive politics and progressive theological practice. Both gestures are essentializing. Hall writes, "we are tempted to use 'black' as sufficient in itself to guarantee the progressive character of the politics we fight under the banner—as if we don't have any other politics to argue about except whether something's black or not."[21] There is the expectation that creators of African American cultural productions have a responsibility to speak politically and to perform certain duties as an act of resistance against power structures. "Blacks are expected to be transgressive."[22] This expectation to perform a political function presumes that black identity is always already embattled and further presumes that absolute representation is even possible. If indeed it were possible, mere representation, even when it renders visible that which is otherwise invisible, is not sufficient for counterhegemonic discourse, as evidenced by Perry's treatment of domestic violence, which stops short of breaking the silence when it takes the meaning of victimization to entail lack of agency.

The pressure to "represent" is grounded on the erroneous assumption of monolithic group identity, which has the undesired effect of disqualifying representations that disrupt the normative gaze. In other words, "the availability of different strategies of representation is foreclosed by the pressure many African Americans place on any artist to 'speak for the community.'"[23] If one assumes the idea of absolute representation, African American cultural production or producers can be either deified or demonized to the extent that they do or do not meet the criteria for what is presumed to adequately represent black identity.[24] "Moreover, we tend to privilege experience itself, as if black life is lived experience outside of representation." Hall contends, "There is no escape from the politics of representation."[25] Experience and representation are mutually entangled such that neither one is anterior to the other.

Nevertheless, and in spite of his subject matter, even if we remove from Perry's corpus the burden to be subversive, it is still productive to consider the theological implications of the myths that arise from his

cinematic works. What Wahneema Lubiano says of Spike Lee could just as easily apply to Tyler Perry: his "discourse and his production offer a site for examining possibilities of oppositional, resistant, or subversive cultural production as well as the problems of productions that are *considered* oppositional, resistant, or subversive without accompanying analysis sustaining such evaluation."[26]

Domesticating Black Bodies

Let us consider then, Perry's work as a site for examining the problem of productions "considered" transgressive. That Perry is perceived as improving media representations of black identity and that the very presence of the black body on film is thought to be an act of resistance to racial stratification is problematic if these representations are not seen through the lens of critical spectatorship. No doubt his success may be attributed, as already noted, to a bold exploitation of the absence of black bodies on film. But there are considerable challenges to this apparently subversive act insofar as he is perpetuating, if not creating, new controlling images of black identity.

Consider, for example, the resonance between E. Franklin Frazier's thesis of black middle-class disdain for working and lower-class counterparts and Perry's depiction of middle-class blacks in his films.[27] Frazier and Perry share the view that an increase in socioeconomic status entails a loss of rootedness in the black community and a diminished sense of self. We see this played out in both male and female protagonists throughout Perry's corpus, beginning with the film *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) and sustained at least until *Good Deeds* (2012), to name a few, where the suggestion is that upward mobility is corruptive. "The consistent message: while middle-class Blacks may be successful in White mainstream society, they have nevertheless lost their way and thus need their working- and lower-class counterparts to serve as their emotional and ethical compass."[28] Middle-class blacks are not fully capable of integration in white mainstream society. A preoccupation with upward mobility and striving for acceptance by white mainstream society makes middle-class blacks willing to sacrifice moral dignity in professional and personal relationships. Using the black brute image, for example, in *Why Did I Get Married?* (2007), "Perry suggests that middle-class Blacks only know how to solve their marital problems through infidelity, silence, dishonesty and violence."[29]

So while Perry seems to promote the black image in media representations by the mere inclusion of narratives about black middle-class life, he is, in fact, reinscribing the myth that there exists a link between black identity and moral deficiency, which renders blacks unsuitable for fully functioning in dominant white society. Members of the black middle class

are depicted as "morally bankrupt buffoons obsessed with the requisite trappings of success and ignorant of the value of familial and romantic relationship."[30]

If this interpretive lens is correct, then Perry's work is complicit with the domestication strategies of dominant cinematic discourse. When the black body fails at "playing white," the overriding consequence is not shame, but domestication of the black body that is then contained and put back in its proper "black" (inferior) place. Cultural theorist Manthia Diawara contends that "black male characters in contemporary Hollywood films are made less threatening to Whites either by White domestication of black customs and culture—a process of deracination and isolation—or by stories in which Blacks are depicted playing by the rules of White society and losing."[31] Perry's depiction of the morally deficient black middle class, rather than raising the image of blacks in dominant culture, domesticates and diminishes the threat of the black body's very presence.

Redemption

Perry's productions are considered oppositional for their female-centric narratives. "No working movie director has committed himself so completely to the emotional lives of women."[32] Indeed female characters are foregrounded, but only to be rebuked. Women are to be strong, but not too strong: let a man be a man. More than one narrative displays suspicion of powerful women as exemplars of black bourgeois corruptibility willing to sacrifice their children and their husbands for the sake of their careers and professional identity.

With or without wealth and status, women's identity is determined by the character of the man beside her, even and especially when the male partner is violent. Perry's female characters are often complicit with acts of violence that are used as tools of patriarchal forms of domination by confusing control with protection.[33] The notorious opening scene of domestic violence in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* exploits our culture's fascination with violence without ever addressing it in any responsible way, which casts Perry's treatment of violence against women as apolitical. The abused woman is merely a passive dupe. She is granted self-respect and saved when the violent partner is not merely removed but replaced. One male figure substitutes for another as the rescue operation focuses on the piety of the knight in shining armor. Redemption is not for her, only for the abuser. "[T]he male characters' violent impulses are condemned in theory, but when acted on, seem to be implicitly excused, or at least overlooked. Over all, it's the men who always wind up the victims—misunderstood, shut out, sick, dead. They're the ones who bear the cross of marriage."[34]

Time and again the male savior motif is played out. *Diary of a Mad Black Woman, Madea's Family Reunion* (2006), *Why Did I Get Married?* (2007), *Meet the Browns* (2008), *I Can Do Bad All by Myself* (2009), *Good Deeds*—in each of these films, the man returns the woman to herself. Salvation means existential fulfillment through a man. Without the hope of another man breaking in to redeem female dysfunction in its multifarious forms, chaos ensues. For all his female-centric narratives, Perry's films are distinctly counterwomanist in their performances of protecting black women from themselves: "they have inspired distinctive forms of counter[womanism] that deny black women's power [by] promoting their dependency." Womanist readings of Tyler Perry's cultural productions must counter "protector narratives that mask black sexism."[35]

It would be difficult not to infer a theology analogous to his construal of gender relations. The savior motif so pervasive in his plots is inevitably suggestive of theological undertones, if not a thoroughgoing projection of Perry's soteriology. In Tyler Perry, you get the God you need, which is to say, his theology is driven by his depiction of female characters that need to be redeemed by a male dominant figure because they are passive, voiceless, and incapable of self-determination. (The exception is the desexualized mammy figure in the character of Madea, the only female character with a strong voice, since black women who speak out can only be fat and ugly). When a woman falls victim to an abusive male, another man is the conduit by which she must gain self-respect. The redeemer usurps the agency of the redeemed. The theological analog is that there is no room in Perry's narratives for a noncompetitive relation between divine and human agency, for they are related in inverse proportion. Divine agency happens at the expense of human agency. If this gendered redemption motif is any indication of Perry's theology of redemption, then the analogy reveals several problematic issues for a doctrine of God and of the human person in addition to the problematic competition for agency. What looks like redemption (e.g., the female protagonist in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*) is actually conquest.

Forgiveness

There are two shortcomings to note in the so-called forgiveness motif in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. First, the abused wife's healing and transformation seem only to come after she has thrown her husband's paralyzed body from his wheelchair and into a bathtub where she watches and waits for his near drowning. In the end her healing results from revenge rather than forgiveness, a "carnivalesque vengeance," as Mia Mask puts it.[36] Justice triumphs and the woman is apparently liberated, but the justice at work here is retributive justice, which does not belong to a theology

of forgiveness that includes transformation. Secondly, the movie's climax, the altar call of the final church scene where the abusive husband dramatically walks the aisle to receive spiritual healing and acceptance from the faith community, transfers the transformative event from the victim of abuse to the abuser. Thus the enactment of forgiveness actually removes the sinned-against from the equation on two counts. The victim's lack of participation in the act of forgiveness is a double-absence. Transformation and healing for her come not from forgiveness, but from revenge, and when the abuser himself experiences transformation through his own expression of self-forgiveness, the victim is completely removed. Retributive justice on the one hand and then forgiveness without justice on the other conflates forgiveness with acceptance of violence and injustice. Perry's rendition compels us to ask what a more robust notion of forgiveness with restorative justice might look like.

A womanist theological approach would insist, at the very least, on justice not vengeance, and agency, not victimization of the abused. Seeking vengeance only perpetuates cycles of violence, yet the injunction to love one's enemies should never trivialize the experience of those who have been victimized. Forgiveness does not preclude anger and lament. Sin and evil must be taken seriously. Forgiveness is not vengeance, but neither is it passive acquiescence or repressed anger and hatred.[37] Justice may be made manifest in divine wrath, but there is a distinction between righteous anger as moral protest and anger as an expression of hatred—retributive justice often takes this latter form.

Perry's trajectory for forgiveness places too much soteriological weight on the act of forgiveness or the act of loving one's enemy, as if there are moral criteria to meet in order to secure one's salvation. This is not to diminish the theological significance of forgiveness, but rather to reveal a misguided notion that we are motivated toward acts of forgiveness in an economy of exchange where we trade in such acts for soteriological reward, which in this case strips the act of forgiveness of all its theological significance. Theologically considered, the ethical and political concerns of forgiveness, such as love for one's enemy and justice, are not causally linked to one's status as a "saved" person.

God as Cinematic Implicature

Perry is a liberationist to the extent that he is interested in liberation from the bondage of self-hatred. Such liberation is necessary but not sufficient for womanist theology for it lacks the social dimension of liberation from oppression as well as the more nuanced concern with survival and quality of life as forms of resistance. For Perry, divine favor, if not divine presence, is determined and measured by the condition of personal

well-being. It is critical for a womanist doctrine of divine providence, however, to demonstrate that the struggle for survival does not signify divine absence or a limit to God's providential care, but instead that God participates in the everyday struggle for survival, as womanist theologian Delores Williams so famously argues.[38] Unlike Williams, Perry conveys the message that only happiness and success signify liberation and divine favor. His doctrine of grace is reliant on divine favoritism and works of righteousness. There is a causal relation between stronger faith, more fervent prayer, morally pure behavior, and a better life. The measure of a good life is heterosexual love and marriage, financial and emotional stability. Stability and prosperity are simply a matter of faith. Faith here is not necessarily faith in God, but an optimistic trust in positive outcomes that are born of right conduct and good deeds. This represents a naïve theological understanding that precludes the radical nature of grace and reduces the divine-human relationship to a system of reward.

The quick and easy moral resolutions of his films sentimentalize the issues they raise and direct the audience away from critical and more complex theological reflection. Thus Perry's films sidestep the more difficult questions of divine justice, and by emphasizing hope and faith as human dispositions rather than theological concepts, he places the onus on the human person and human agency, rendering God redundant. Referring to Perry's fit within black Christianity, Willis refers to his work as a "retrograde spirituality."[39] His nonpolitical individualism demonstrates, in the final analysis, that Perry is a humanist. Pulitzer prize winning film critic Wesley Morris puts it pointedly: "Tyler Perry is ultimately a brutal humanist."[40]

Perry's is a classic form of the humanistic project of self-cultivation. Ideals of the humanist agenda include affirmation of autonomy, esteem for the self who is held responsible for its actions, self-empowerment aimed at happiness, all of which are part of the human experience of aspiration for well-being. The foremost ideal is not human flourishing but personal well-being. The black church ecclesiastical equivalent is the uplift ideology of the prosperity gospel, which likewise places an emphasis on self-help.[41] As representative of this tradition, T. D. Jakes is concerned with personal and familial prosperity. According to political scientist Melissa Harris-Lacewell, the prosperity gospel characterizes Christ as an investment strategy and a personal life coach.[42] As opposed to black theology's aim for liberation from oppression, the prosperity gospel emphasizes liberation from dependency and toward self-reliance. For the prosperity gospel, faith in Christ is a means to access more blessings. In a *Time* magazine article, after recounting Perry's difficult childhood, T. D. Jakes writes, "Personally, he inspires me because I know that there are many more Tyler Perrys somewhere—in Watts, in Queens or in Harlem—who are awaiting their break. Truly nothing is impossible to those who believe."[43] Jakes credits Perry's work for joining "felt needs and faith-filled hope." It is telling that Perry receives endorsement from this particular preacher, a proponent of a theology of self-empowerment.[44]

If downtrodden individuals want improved circumstances, it is a matter of personal responsibility. Progress is a consequence of self-improvement, not combating systems of injustice. Thus the emphasis on moral responsibility and human agency presumes adequate resources are in place to adjust and improve conditions. It comes with a great deal of optimism about the capacity for individual transformation. Transcendence is a necessarily human project, as is cultivation of human capacities and flourishing of the self. This is not a theological humanism, for the longing for self-empowerment is not an eschatological hope but an optimistic outlook and a trust in the benevolence of life is a consequence of good living.

Why does Perry's humanism run against the womanist theological project? As Harris-Lacewell argues, the political implications of the prosperity gospel demonstrate a narrative shift from a history of black social action to the narrative of personal achievement. "There is no moral imperative for social action" because the theological grounds for collective political action are absent.[45] God's presence is manifest in health, happiness, and wealth, with the implication that the experience of struggle is a manifestation of God's absence, which is only a consequence of weak faith. The prosperity gospel of Perry's films disqualifies it as prophetic theological discourse, for it does not provide theological grounding for black political action since it fails to articulate race, class, gender, and sexual oppression in theological terms and idolatrous forms of overhumanization are removed from the purview of theological discourse. Emphasis on personal fulfillment to the exclusion of social salvation is theologically shortsighted.[46]

Perry's message is about a particular way of approaching the world when the harsh realities of life come upon you. The faithful response is to gird up your loins—a necessary posture for conquest. There is no lament here. It is a particularly gendered theology, as if theology may be reduced to epistemology and ways of knowing proffered by men who presumably act with women's best interests at heart, but is actually driven by the masculinist logic of male superiority and female dependency, subordination, and passivity.

In this interpretation of humanism, self-cultivation is too narrowly and individually defined and the self develops without moral formation. More importantly, as theological ethicist William Schweiker points out, this type of humanism does not take into account the massive differences in access to and uses of structures of power. The human dilemma is manifest in not only the vulnerability but also the predatory impulses

of human power.[47] So this form of humanism faces a double bind. On the one hand, Perry does not "deploy theological resources to give an account of what suffuses but always escapes the reach of human power."[48] On the other hand, it is unclear how and under what principle a Perry-styled humanism would limit the extension of human power. A theological humanism insists contrariwise that the dilemma of power cannot be answered with human power. Perry does not rest easily in the ambiguity of human power or the vulnerability of human capacity. Vulnerabilities are overcome and ambiguity is conquered with definitive happy ending resolutions. Defeat entails shame unless it is temporary and on the road to some future victory, a passing moment on the journey of redemptive suffering that can only have pedagogical aims. God is never capricious. Personal suffering is never meaningless.

Perry's humanism is at best what Anthony Pinn, scholar of African American humanist theology, refers to as "weak (theistic) humanism," characterized by a robust anthropology, but still leaving room for formulations of the divine. Yet Perry's humanism is ultimately disqualified on the grounds that even weak humanism, according to Pinn, involves "a communal concern with transformation over against...radical individualism."[49] Thus Perry parts ways from a theological humanism in another significant way. According to Schweiker, "A theological humanist insists on the historical and social embeddedness of all thought and conviction."[50] Perry's films sidestep dimensions of communal identity and experience. The shift from the macroscopic and societal to the microscopic and individual level is what Robert Patterson calls "the hermeneutical error that pervades Perry's corpus of works."[51] His humanism is characterized by a nonpolitical individualism as his racially unencumbered characters perpetuate the myth of postrace existence for African Americans. The narratives of almost exclusive black communities are presented in isolation from the issues of racism, as if by partitioning them off, members of the black community are able to transcend such issues. The positive consequence is that Perry's isolated black community avoids the reductionist move of identifying black identity solely and exhaustively with the experience of oppression. To be sure, womanist theology must be more than a theodicy, but it must at the very least treat oppression and specifically oppressions of race and class, sex and gender, if it is going to take dimensions of the black experience seriously. "A theology adequate for African Americans must acknowledge and explain how oppression is experienced on the basis of race and ethnicity."[52] An otherwise individualistic framework has significant soteriological ramifications. In her womanist soteriology, Monica Coleman writes, "Because evil occurs in a relational world and sin is understood as social and systemic (as well as personal), salvation must respond to evil in an explicitly communal context."[53] Or to put it more pointedly, "there is no salvation unless the entire community is saved."[54]

Conclusion

The dissonance between the critical response and the reception by the black mainstream, which celebrates Perry's works as icons of black popular culture, calls into question the myths that contribute to Perry's success. Rather than promote positive images of black identity, Perry is complicit with the domestication strategies of dominant cinematic discourse that views the very presence of black bodies on film as threatening. Rather than celebrate black female identity, his narratives portray either powerful women as exemplars of black bourgeois corruptibility or victimized women in need of redemption relying on a too-frequently-repeated male savior motif. Rather than proclaim a message of Christian redemption, his preoccupation with the male savior motif is suggestive of Perry's soteriology by which the redeemer usurps the agency of the redeemed—what looks like redemption is actually conquest. His theology of forgiveness is retributive justice at best, if not wholesale vengeance. Perry's theology of self-empowerment is in the final analysis a humanistic project of self-cultivation based on a nonpolitical individualism. His very failure to recognize the social embeddedness of human life is what deems his project not only a nontheological humanism, but also counterwomanist. Without more critical attention to power structures and systemic issues of oppression, his project is rendered irrelevant, if not dangerous for understanding African American women's religious experience. His racially unencumbered characters perpetuate the myth of postrace existence for African Americans. His films do not provide the theological grounding necessary for black political action because they fail to identify race, class, gender, and sexual oppression as theological matters.

Perry's films include suggestive overtures toward the black religious experience, but God is ultimately veiled by the overriding concern for self-cultivation, necessary but not sufficient to meet womanist ideals. God is a cinematic implicature, but God is ultimately screened, which is to say, partially sifted, if not entirely concealed by an individualistic preoccupation with the self. In the end, Perry's theological project is only apparently so. His project is humanistic, possibly reflective of religious humanism, but certainly not a theological humanism. Perry speaks to audiences "hungry for a theater of the spirit."[55] His corpus is "an expansive collection of homilies preaching compassion, self-reliance, forgiveness and revenge."[56] Yet, in spite of any implied or expressed desire to create a forum for the revelation of God, finally it is only the black male gaze that is revealed. Theologically considered, Tyler Perry's films are achievements in screening God.

Notes

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5. Manohla Dargis, "A Powerful Chorus Harmonizing 'Dark Phrases of Womanhood,'" *The New York Times*, November 4, 2010.
6. Mark Feeney, "Tyler Perry Strikes Again with a Madea Misadventure," *The Boston Globe*, June 30, 2012.
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8. Dargis, "A Powerful Chorus Harmonizing 'Dark Phrases of Womanhood.'"
9. Ibid.
10. See Wahneema Lubiano, "But Compared to What? Reading Realism, Representation and Essentialism in *School Daze, Do the Right Thing*, and the Spike Lee Discourse," in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 97–122, 107.
11. Wesley Morris, "The Year of Tyler Perry, Seriously: America's Most Important Black Filmmaker," *Film Comment* (January-February 2011): 59–61, 61.
12. See M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).
13. Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video*, ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 123–133, 128.
14. Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" 127.
15. Andre C. Willis, "Tyler Perry's Conservative Tent Revival," *The Root*, March 25, 2008.
16. The emergence of womanist theology as a discipline is partially a response to feminist theology, which attends to issues of gender and not race, and to black theology, which attends to issues of race and not gender. Womanist theology is distinctive for attending to issues of both race and gender, in addition to additional issues such as class and, more recently, sexuality.
17. Timothy Lyle, "'Check With Yo' Man First; Check with Yo' Man': Tyler Perry Appropriates Drag as a Tool to Re-Circulate Patriarchal Ideology," *Callaloo*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (2011): 943–958, 951.
18. Lyle, "'Check With Yo' Man First; Check with Yo' Man,'" 951.
19. Ibid. 952 (emphasis in original).
20. Mia Mask, "Who's Behind That Fat Suit?: Momma, Madea, Rasputia and the Politics of Cross-Dressing," in *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*, ed. Mia Mask (New York: Routledge, 2012), 155–174, 160, 169. See also LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, "Fat Spirit: Obesity, Religion, and Sapphmammibel in Contemporary Black Film," *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, Vol. 2, No.1 (Spring 2013): 56–69.
21. Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" 130.
22. Lubiano, "But Compared to What?" 111, citing John Akomfrah in Coco Fusco, "An Interview with Black Audio Film Collective: John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Lina Gopaul and Avril Johnson," in *Young, British and Black: the Work of Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective* (Buffalo, NY: Hallwalls/Contemporary Arts Center, 1988), 41–60, 55.
23. Lubiano, "But Compared to What?" 99.
24. See Lubiano, "But Compared to What?" 107.
25. Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" 131.
26. Lubiano, "But Compared to What?" 98 (emphasis in original).
27. Robert Patterson draws a comparison between Perry and Frazier in passing in "Woman, Thou Art Bound: Critical Spectatorship, Black Masculine Gazes, and Gender Problems in Tyler Perry's Moves," *Black Camera*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2011): 9–30, 15; see Cherise A. Harris and Keisha Edwards Tassie, "The Cinematic Incarnation of Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie: Tyler Perry's Black Middle Class," *Journal of African American Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2012): 321–344 for a fuller treatment and a compelling case for Perry's rendition of black middle-class disdain for lower classes.
28. Harris and Edwards Tassie, "The Cinematic Incarnation of Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie," 336.
29. Ibid., 333.
30. Ibid., 340.
31. Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara (New York: Routledge, 1993), 211–220, 215.
32. Morris, "The Year of Tyler Perry, Seriously," 60.
33. See Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, *Misbegotten Anguish: A Theology and Ethics of Violence* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 119ff. for a womanist treatment of the intersection between gender roles and sexual and domestic violence.
34. Hale, "At Couples' Reunion, Laughs, Then Grief."
35. See Joy James, "Depoliticizing Representation: Sexual-Racial Stereotypes," in *Shadowboxing: Representation of Black Feminist Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 149.
36. Mask, "Who's Behind That Fat Suit?: Momma, Madea, Rasputia and the Politics of Cross-Dressing," 169.
37. For further discussion of justice in a theology of forgiveness and how anger and hatred may function as signs of Christian love, see L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 243ff.
38. See Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).
39. Willis, "Tyler Perry's Conservative Tent Revival," *The Root*, March 25, 200
40. Morris, "The Year of Tyler Perry, Seriously," 59.

41. A theological humanist is typically nonecclesiocentric in its truth claims, whereas the black church in its generic form and represented rather monolithically is the center of Perry's theology.
42. Melissa Harris-Lacewell, "From Liberation to Mutual Fund: Political Consequences of Differing Conceptions of Christ in the African American Church," in *From Pews to Polling Places: Faith and Politics in The American Religious Mosaic*, ed., J. Matthew Wilson (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 131–160, 143.
43. T. D. Jakes, "Tyler Perry," *Time*, April 30, 2009.
44. Notice the logical contradiction and theological inconsistency between Perry's distorted notion of redemption that renders the redeemed without agency and his theology of self-empowerment that places so much emphasis on individual responsibility. The inconsistency only makes stronger the case that Perry's theology is intrinsically gendered. Depending on the particular doctrine being espoused, it is contingent upon the binary of the dominant (male capable of self-empowerment) and dominated (female in need of redemption).
45. Harris-Lacewell, "From Liberation to Mutual Fund," 149. *N.B.*: Based on a social scientific analysis of data from the 1994 National Black Politics Study (NBPS), Harris-Lacewell concludes that black liberation theology has a greater impact on black political action: "Those who perceive Christ as the Black Messiah are significantly more likely to participate politically. Conversely, those who see God more instrumentally, asserting that black oppression is a reason for perceiving God as absent, are less likely to be politically engaged. Both the black Christ of Black Liberation theology and the instrumental Christ of the prosperity gospel thus have a discernable (though opposite) impact on black political action" (156).
46. For a womanist discussion of social salvation see Delores S. Williams, "Straight Talk, Plain Talk: Womanist Words about Salvation in a Social Context," in *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 97–121.
47. William Schweiker, "The Ethics of Responsibility and the Question of Humanism," *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2004): 251–270, 267.
48. Ibid., 268.
49. Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 142.
50. Schweiker, "The Ethics of Responsibility and the Question of Humanism," 254.
51. Patterson, "Woman, Thou Art Bound," 20.
52. Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 80.
53. Ibid., 86.
54. Ibid., 97.
55. Jeannette Catsoulis, "Four Couples Gather to Ask One Question: Can't We All Just Get Along?," *New York Times*, October 13, 2007.
56. A. O. Scott, "Plus-Size Matriarch's Stretch in the Slammer," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2009.

Part III

Theorizing Intersecting Identities and (Re)Envisioning Black Womanhood

This section explores Perry's representations of black womanhood and reimagines Perry's representations in light of black women's very real complexities and contradictions. Chapters within this section respond to the following questions: What assumptions about gender, race, color, and class shape Tyler Perry's works? How might these assumptions appeal (or not) to Perry's audiences? What specific historical tropes of black womanhood does Perry employ, how does his use of these tropes impact viewer interpretations of what it means to be a black woman, and how might these ideas be positively re-appropriated by black women, if at all?