which extends beyond even our greatest ideals, to include but not limited to fairytale endings and working-class savior figures.

In the meantime, however, we are left with Perry who *performs* Madea's character, whose habits of language, both discursive and non-discursive, are overdetermined by his piety and readings of the data of his experiences. Thus, we are faced with story lines that are anchored in mythology that reconstruct the biographies of the people and communities that Perry claims to re-present. However, his reconstruction turns the richness of lived experiences and authentic expressions into "knock-off" versions of the real, thus ignoring the intricate details that make human identities uniquely what they are. Nevertheless, knock-offs, however they are read, just as long as they are close, still have currency. Sometimes imitation, even if suspect, may be good enough.

Still, Perry's films present his audience with an array of talented black female cultural workers, whose amazing knack for dramatic and comedic display would be less visible, if visible at all, if it were not for Perry. Yet, they creatively present Perry's troubling representations: knock-offs from the real. However, his viewership has multiple complex critical consciousnesses, which read and respond to his representations for themselves. For many, his representations are tolerable for the time being—at least until "the real thing" is made accessible. Until then Perry's power will continue to soar. In the words of bell hooks, we need a revolution in cinema because movies not only make magic, they make culture. And as significant sites of knowledge production, movies can also lead to material fury. We can sit back and wait for Perry's Molotov cocktail to explode, or we can collectively seek new points of critical recognition, defiance, and power.

Notes

1. This chapter uses both "African American women" and "black women" interchangeably to note distinctions and gray areas between each, to highlight the dominaneering "Americanness" of Perry's representations of black womanhood as well as his particular appeal to African American women, and to underline the diasporic presences and influences within and beyond his productions and audience.
2. Tommy L. Lott's essay, "Black Vernacular Representation and Cultural Malpractice" articulates "cultural malpractice" as the deployment of stereotypical modes of expression, which appear to misrepresent black people. For more information see, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).
3. A critique of representational strategies dissects and reveals the politics by which ideas get *presented*, for example, it might explore the politics by which single black mothers often get re-encoded in film as "baby mommas,"

thus producing and hauling an array of messages that may or may not apply to the individual.

4. For more, see bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
5. A term coined by black feminist theorist and literary figure Hortense Spillers, pornotropic gazing refers to the "othering" of black women and girls' bodies that occurs through the reproduction and circulation of myths that have been superimposed through representations. These myths have at times become so inextricably entwined that the myth stands in for "reality." Moreover, this entanglement cultivates and transports a variety of messages through sequential linguistic and representational codes that produce structures of meaning that can lead to a sense of powerlessness over black women and girls' agency to explode the force of being signified by certain cultural markers (i.e., hypersexuality, bitchy, etc.).
6. *11* And, behold, there was a woman which had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself. *12* And when Jesus saw her, he called her to him, and said unto her, Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity (Luke chapter 13).
7. The narrator in Luke 13:11b KJV states that the woman was "bowed together" by a "spirit of infirmity." This highlights a physical condition. However, in Luke 13:16 KJV, Jesus describes her as being freed from a different kind of bondage. The text reads: *16* And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day? The words "set free" and "bound" reference Luke 4:18 KJV and 7:18–23 KJV, which reads: *18* "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." This highlights freedom from social bondage.
8. See T. D. Jakes, *Woman, Thou Art Loosed!* (Shippensburg, PN: Destiny Image Publishers, 1993) and *God's Leading Lady: Out of the Shadows and Into the Light* (New York: Berkeley Books, 2002).
9. For more, see Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, ed. *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002).
10. Although "Michelle" never marries in the film, marriage is the ultimate end for women according to Jakes.
11. Perry's theology is best understood against the backdrop of his father's abuse, Perry's subsequent journey to forgive him, and later success. For Perry, forgiveness, which according to Madea means being nice when one can be mean, is seminal to being "blessed."
12. With the exception of his film *The Family That Preys.*
13. This draws attention to the social-cultural benefits of being a daughter or wife (for African American women and girls) in a patriarchal society. Those who are not are often more vulnerable to violence. The operative word here is "often." Pornotropic gazing makes violence an ongoing possibility. For more information on the significance of being a daughter or wife for African American women and girls, see Hortense Spillers, "Mama's

Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

14. In our cultural context, marriage provides social and economic benefits for heterosexual married persons, for example, higher household incomes, life insurance benefits and tax breaks.
15. Perry recently turned Angela's story line into a television series called "For Better or for Worse," which premiered on TBS in November 2011.
16. This chapter was written before the release of *Madea's Big Happy Family*. Perry reproduces this trope through multiple characters in that film.
17. Meaning, she is no longer bossy, stuck up, or controlling. Monty puts her in her place.
18. *Daddy's Little Girls*, directed by Tyler Perry, Lionsgate, 2007.
19. Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 1975), 63.
20. The phrase heroic genius denotes the reductive and totalizing tendency to reify African American identity in the romantic notion of genius, which always heroically overcomes adversity, as a way of subverting racial stereotypes that depict the opposite.
21. Micheaux's biography reveals that his character, "Reverend Isaiah T. Jenkins," was inspired by his reading of his former father-in-law: a crooked country preacher.

8

(Re)Mediating Black Womanhood: Tyler Perry, Black Feminist Cultural Criticism, and the Politics of Legitimation

Whitney Peoples

Best known for his stage and screen portrayal of Madea, the large and tough-talking grandmother central to his work, filmmaker and playwright Tyler Perry has crafted a successful brand and business of producing contemporary African American culture. Perry's rise to fame, however, has not necessarily been meteoric. His work as both a writer and actor began in the theater on what is often called the neo-chitlin' circuit: named as such because its majority black casts and audiences conjure memories of the network of African American clubs and theaters that provided welcome spaces for African American performers and audiences during US segregation. Before he found success in the film industry, Perry built a strong audience foundation on the black stage play circuit, where he has written and produced 18 plays in the last 15 years.

Drawing on the core audience he developed in the theater, Perry produced his first feature-length film in 2005 with an adaptation of his play *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. The audience that helped move Perry into feature film success and helps to keep him there overwhelmingly comprises African American women. That black women support Perry is not surprising since his plays and films primarily address issues associated with womanhood in general and black womanhood more specifically. Issues of marriage, in/fidelity, motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, and religion are just a few of the topics consistently addressed in Perry's work. Deborah Barker argues that, Perry "has been able to do what second-wave feminism, postfeminism and the southern chick flick have not: he has put black women's concerns center stage and has

attracted a Christian, working- and middle-class African American audience of both men and women."[1]

In addition to Barker, other cultural critics and film theorists have acknowledged the supposed privileged place black women occupy in Perry's repertoire. As film historian Donald Bogle explains, "Tyler Perry understands that much of his audience is African-American women—the most ignored group in Hollywood—so he's doing movies that speak to them."[2] If Bogle and Barker are correct and Perry is making movies about and for black women, then feminist theory's definition of the woman's film as articulated by theorist Mary Ann Doane is a fitting characterization of his work:

> A genre of Hollywood films produced from the silent era through the 1950s and 60s but most heavily concentrated and most popular in the 1930s and 40s. The films deal with a female protagonist and often appear to allow her significant access to point of view structures and the enunciative level of the filmic discourse. They treat problems defined as "female" (problems revolving around domestic life, the family, children, self-sacrifice and the relationship between women and production vs. that between women and reproduction), and, most crucially are directed toward a female audience.[3]

Cultural critic Kimberly Springer has also likened Perry's films, and others like them, to the genre of the woman's film but with important racial nuances, arguing that they "can be characterized as black women's films, an updating of the 1930s and 1940s woman's film genre."[4] Doane and other theorists' treatments of the woman's film have focused heavily on female subjectivity and spectatorship and are useful here for classification purposes. This chapter is decidedly different because it is not a venture into film theory's vast canon on spectatorship, film and especially psychoanalysis. Rather, my use of the definition of the woman's film anchors my reading of Perry through the lens of black feminist cultural criticism by establishing the centrality of black women voices, bodies, and stories to his work.

Black feminist cultural criticism is a more fitting approach for the examination of Perry's work given the important racial and cultural nuances that prevent his films from being exact translations of the historical "woman's" film. Unlike the original women's films of the 1930s and 1940s, Tyler Perry's films are directed primarily toward African American women, and his stories revolve almost exclusively around the lives of black women. Perry's overt use of Christian rhetoric rooted in the black American Southern Protestant tradition represents another significant difference between his films and the traditional woman's film. Black feminist cultural criticism is distinctly equipped to address Perry's films

because it offers an attention to the politics of gender without losing sight of other politics of marginalization and exclusion such as racism and classism. Black feminist cultural criticism maintains a commitment to bridging the divide between art and life, consistently maintaining the important relationship between black women's lived experiences and cultural representations and productions both by and about black women.

Drawing on the work of feminist cultural critics and theorists such as Kimberly Springer and Jacqueline Bobo, this chapter examines Perry's work in terms of its treatment of African American women, both as subject matter and audience. Jacqueline Bobo has argued for the importance of black women as cultural producers to black women's empowerment and progress more generally. Given Bobo's argument, a key question must be raised: What is at stake when the most popular producer of contemporary cultural products aimed at and written about black women is a black man? This chapter attempts to answer this question in two parts. The first argues that there is a distinct African American women's culture that Perry appropriates as a way to establish himself as a legitimate voice on matters relating to black American womanhood. Once established, through an analysis of three of his films, I secondly argue that Perry uses that cultural currency to ultimately punish his female characters for their transgressions against patriarchy and moves to re-establish masculine order and rule by the film's end.

"Legitimating" Women's Culture

In her 1995 book *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, Bobo argues that within black women's cultural production there is an "instant intimacy" between the reader and the speaker of black women's texts. Bobo claims that "the reader knows that the one who is imparting the information is speaking from the inside and knows something that others don't; the reader also knows that the one who is speaking is being generous with privileged information."[5] Yet, this "instant intimacy" is not exactly immediate as it rests on generations of black women's cultural formations as shared among and between generations of African American communities. It is a culture built, among other things, on informal modes of knowledge production and dissemination and operated in marginal spaces like kitchen tables, beauty salons, and churches.[6] In the case of Tyler Perry, his filmic appropriations draw upon and simultaneously speak from three insider positions to thus establish himself as a legitimate voice of African American womanhood: (1) the inside of black womanhood, culture, and its products (including plays, quilts, fables, movies, novels, and paintings) as accessed through the character of Madea; (2) the inside of black female religiosity, noted most apparently by Perry's employment

of popular, neo-Christian rhetoric and tropes familiar to black communities broadly and black religious women more specifically; and (3) the inside of a black manhood that seeks to educate black women about how to be good mates for their black male counterparts. Perry operates from all of these positions and thus establishes himself as a legitimate voice by co-opting the cultural currency of African American women's cultural products and mythology. Yet, his appropriation of these cultural forms remains incomplete as they are consistently emptied of their sense of dissent, resistance, and political value.

Perry's use of black women's culture as a kind of legitimating currency can first be seen in his film's consistent references to other black cultural texts by, about, and for black women. More specifically, Perry's predictable and consistent invocations of two texts in particular, *What's Love Got to Do with It* (1993)[7] and *The Color Purple* (1985),[8] demonstrate his specific use of black women's cultural products. Perry often has characters recite well-known, near-iconic lines from these movies in his own films, often as a kind of comic relief.[9] As Bobo argues, these texts bring to light difficult and thorny issues affecting black women that have long been silenced in both the mainstream American community and in black communities more specifically. Both films address black women's victimization at the hands of intimate partner violence acted out by their black male partners. Additionally, each film acknowledges that the abuse of the film's main characters was known in their communities, yet little was done to help either character escape her situation. These films are well known and often quoted in black popular culture and each ultimately offers a narrative of empowerment. Moreover, because the main characters escape their oppressive situations and find success elsewhere, they are particularly poignant for black women viewers. Bobo explains the significance of *The Color Purple* for black women as follows:

> Consequently, although the film was highly contentious and extremely problematic, black women made productive use of its appearance. Collectively, they carved out a space for their causes and their concerns. This was a spontaneous, unorchestrated reaction, which united a significant number of women in a fight for something that was meaningful to them.[10]

Perry draws on the significance of these films for black women's empowerment while emptying their intertextual references in his films of their original radical critiques of black women's personal and systemic locations.

In addition to using intertextual references to black women's cultural texts as a marker of legitimacy, Perry also appropriates the black female body as way to validate himself as knowledgeable and authentic. Perry's signature character is an older black woman named Mabel Simmons, more popularly known as Madea. It is the character of Madea that brought Perry recognition both in and outside of African American communities. Drawing on the African American cultural mythology of grandmothers, grannies, ma'dears, and big mamas, Perry dons a fat suit, glasses, a purse, and a curly gray wig, transforming himself into a mélange of stereotypes of black American womanhood.

Patricia Hill-Collins writes about the networks of care and accountability among black women as caretakers of one another and each other's children in her concept of the "othermother."[11] Collins defines othermothers as "women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mother responsibilities."[12] This mother work is part of a larger pattern of communal care and concern that black women display for one another and for black men. Perry's Madea functions in this way, opening her home to black women abused by husbands, abandoned by parents, or ravaged by drug addiction. Taking on the figure of the culturally revered and recognizable black matriarch helps Perry assume the respect that comes with that location. As journalist Ruth La Ferla notes,

> As Madea, whose melon-sized breasts flop energetically over her waist, Mr. Perry ladles out wit and indignation as potentially scathing as the grits on his stove...They are the zingers that, out of costume, Mr. Perry, 38, is loath to speak. "I hate all the makeup and the wigs that come with the character," [Perry] said last week at his studio in Atlanta. "But the freedom to be able to say whatever I want, that's pretty cool."[13]

Perry's words demonstrate his own recognition of his use of Madea as a kind of creative license.

Perry appropriates the body of black women and the cultural mythology that surrounds that body as yet another mechanism to legitimize his ability to speak to and about black women. However, this appropriation of the black female body and black women's networks of mother work is rendered more caricature than homage. As La Ferla notes, Madea features large breasts and an equally large behind that are constantly the butt of many jokes in both the films and plays. Donald Bogle has argued that Madea harkens back to the mammy stereotypes.[14] Moreover, Perry's claim that appropriating the black female body gives him the freedom to speak without censure ignores the sexism, racism, and structural marginalization that often drown out the voices of black women in favor of those of black men, and white women and men. The irony of Perry's words become clear when we consider important examples like Anita Hill or the immediate evidence of contemporary popular culture where black men such as Steve Harvey, Chris Rock, and Perry himself have

emerged as the most popularly legitimate and profitable sources of black women's stories.

While Perry finds freedom to speak and act as a black woman through Madea, black women in his films are not given such license. Madea is often the only female character to question or strongly challenge black masculinity in Perry's films. While that challenge is at least marginally present via Madea's character, it is unattainable for the other women in the film, and thus in the audience, precisely because it comes from a character who has already been presented as violating the bounds of acceptable femininity. As seen through Ruth LaFerla's colorful description, Madea's large body and brash talk already trouble the boundaries of proper feminine comportment and behavior. In addition, the fact that Madea is not "really" a woman but Perry in drag is not a point to be missed. While the characters in the film are unaware that Madea is in drag, audience members are keenly aware of this fact, making her presence and her critique both comedically possible and tolerable.[15]

In *Diary of Mad Black Woman*, Madea's chainsaw revenge for the abusive ex-husband of the film's protagonist, Helen, sits in stark contrast to the mild, quiet, and ultimately forgiving character, Helen's mother, Myrtle. As played by Cicely Tyson, Myrtle represents "real" womanhood while Madea literally and figuratively represents its false twin. Madea's is a womanhood that can afford to be loud, angry, and violent toward black men's mistreatment of black women precisely because it is not womanhood at all. Perry's choice to relegate the voice of dissent to Madea, who is already firmly outside of the bounds of desirable black femininity, renders that dissent out of reach for black women who wish to be desired by their black male counterparts. This is clearly demonstrated in *Diary of Mad Black Woman* when Helen must decide whether to care for her ex-husband after he is paralyzed or to take her revenge. Not surprisingly, it is the religious infused advice of her long-suffering mother, and not Madea, that she ultimately follows, choosing to forgive and nurse her ex-husband back to health.

The religious-based advice that Helen's mother offers is characteristic of the neo-Christian rhetoric that marks a second way Perry attempts to establish legitimacy within and, thus, access to black women's cultural spaces. Paraphrasing cultural critic Nelson George, Svetkey et al. write that Perry's movies are "made for churchgoing, working-class black women."[16] In a screening and discussion session of Perry's *Why Did I Get Married*? organized for an article in the local Atlanta news magazine *Creative Loafing*, a session participant remarked that the films are "for avid church-goers."[17] The participant went on to say "He's [Perry] brought church-goers into the mainstream, where they have movies and plays to go to where they feel safe."[18] Perry's heavy use of neo-Christian

rhetoric emerges, understandably, in the contemporary popularity of African American conservative evangelical preachers such as T. D. Jakes, Juanita Bynum, and Eddie Long. The contemporary black evangelical movement focuses heavily on economic gain as Christian blessing and on re-establishing the rule of the father, or patriarchy, within black families and communities.

Beyond the current popularity of black evangelical culture, the black church tradition becomes important in relation to black women's culture because the black church has long been the province of African American women. While men have always held the leadership positions in black churches, it was black women who populated the pews on Sunday and often provided the day-to-day clerical and other miscellaneous support required to keep the doors open.[19] Michael Eric Dyson and other scholars have acknowledged this division of black church life, naming it "ecclesiastical apartheid."[20] Perry's privileging of black church culture, given black women's pivotal role within that culture, functions as another means of establishing himself as an insider in black women's lives and communities. However, his use of black women's church culture ignores many black women's radical use of that culture to agitate for social and communal change. Instead Perry opts to highlight more patriarchal versions of black Christianity that advocate absolute male leadership and female submission.

A third and final way in which Perry works to gain access to black women's confidence and trust is through the black female voice, which he uses to construct and disseminate a kind of cultural pedagogy that aims to instruct his black women characters and audience members on how to be good mates for black men. Though Perry literally takes on the black female form in his portrayals of Madea, he also figuratively appropriates black female voice through the dialogue of his female characters. Like Tyson's character in *Diary*, the other female characters in Perry's films often dispense advice to one another, encouraging, rather than resisting compliance with, the celebration of patriarchal relationships. As the audience recognizes Perry as both writer and director, he is able to simultaneously draw on notions of sisterhood and friendship as the women in his films not only advise each other but also tap in to the long-standing tradition of men as privileged dispensers of dating and love advice to heterosexual women. After all, so the logic goes, who better to tell black women how to be good mates than the very objects of their affections, that is, black men.

The relationships among Perry's female characters are only allowed to function as positive forces in the women's lives insofar as they encourage each character to ultimately comply with the demands of normative heterosexuality and marriage. The strong friendship among the female characters in Tyler Perry's *Why Did I Get Married?* and Tyler Perry's *Why*

Did I Get Married Too? is a good example of the limits of sisterhood in Perry's films. These friends do not encourage anger or outrage toward the relationship troubles each deals with, rather they encourage forgiveness, understanding, and submission. The notable exception being the character of Angela, but her dissent, like Madea's, is always already constructed as alcohol-fueled, misguided, and ignorant. Perry's cultural pedagogy of black heterosexual relationships works by demonstrating both good or desirable black femininity, as in Tyson's character in *Diary*, as well as bad or unwanted black womanhood, as in characters like Madea.

Tapping into black women's culture allows Perry to create stories that resonate with black women. Perry's fluency in many of the cultural codes of black womanhood acts as something akin to a Trojan Horse, initially offering black women a gift of images of themselves that are not confined to drug addicts, welfare queens, and prostitutes. Yet, this gift of representation and recognition comes at a price, a price that demands that black women strictly abide by the demands of a patriarchy that does not have their best interest in mind. Perry's female characters are only allowed success and their very own "happily ever after" if and when they submit to patriarchal family and social structures that position black men as the dominant force and prescribe black women a place of submission and silence.

Cultural Currency and the Re/Establishment of the Masculine Order

Perry's Trojan Horse, which re-establishes patriarchy as the appropriate framework for black women's heterosexuality, unfolds in distinctive ways in three of Perry's popular films: *Why Did I Get Married? The Family That Preys*, and *Why Did I Get Married Too?* In all of the films addressed here, Perry employs the cultural currency of black womanhood in order to animate his pedagogy of successful black heterosexuality through the lives of his female characters. Each film offers its own cautionary tale of black female heterosexual romantic success and failure by setting up static depictions of black women's lives and relationships, both with one another and with black men.

In 2007 Tyler Perry Productions released Tyler Perry's *Why Did I Get Married?* Though ostensibly a movie about black heterosexual couples, that is, women *and* men, the story line centers mainly on the female characters. As local Atlanta journalist Andisheh Nouraee writes of the movie, "the female characters are the emotional focus of *Why Did I Get Married?* and much better developed than the men, who are just two-dimensional eye candy."[21] Focusing on the lives of the female characters does not guarantee that this movie is written with a keen or sensitive

eye toward the lives of black women. On the contrary, the film's female characters are constructed as the problems in their marriages as a result of their unwillingness to assume their proper role in patriarchal family structures.

A preview for *Why Did I Get Married?* features vignettes of each couple preceded by bold writing summarizing the "issue" in each marriage: "Diane is overworked"; "Sheila is overweight"; "Angela is Over-the-top"; and, "Patricia is Overly-Perfect." These vignettes present the female characters as literal and figurative excess and, as such, the source of their marital problems. Diane's work commitments, for example, become the subject of a bitter argument and climactic scene between her and her husband, Terry. Most interesting about this pivotal scene are the weak invocations of feminism provided by Diane, who tells her husband that she is in support of developing solutions to their problems as long as they do not involve "stepping back into the 50s." When her husband characterizes her decision to have a tubal ligation without his knowledge as selfish, Diane counters by asserting, "Look, this is my body, ok! You don't have to carry a child, I do. You don't have to miss work, I do." Ignoring her sentiment, Terry simply responds "when you get married, you give up the 'I's for an 'Us.'" Terry's response renders Diane's protest futile and reduces her concerns to the self-centered ranting of a spoiled child.

Moreover, Diane's empty use of feminist rhetoric also silences feminism as a viable and important source of black women's dissent and resistance. Perry's characterization of feminist dissent follows media scholar Diane Negra's assessment of the way feminism is represented in a post-feminist popular culture. Negra argues that feminism is largely ignored in popular culture except for negative characterizations through which "the contemporary feminist appears as a narcissistic minority group member whose interests and actions threaten the family and a social consensus that underwrites powerful romanticizations of American community."[22] Here Perry uses feminism as an impediment to marital cooperation on the part of Diane. The audience is introduced to feminist claims like equality and bodily integrity only to see them as ultimately incompatible with the responsibilities and promises of marriage. Feminism is thus invoked as a prelude to its own dismissal.

This filmic misrepresentation of feminism is important because of what it makes possible and what it precludes. Perry's narrow representation of feminism serves to demonstrate Diane's selfish career ambitions. The audience is unable to link Diane's argument for bodily autonomy to the larger history of women's struggles to protect and control their own bodies. Diane's decision to have a tubal ligation becomes a questionable retelling of the history of black women and sterilization in the United States. Historically, it was not black women who chose and kept

the secret of sterilization, rather they, along with Latino women, and the mentally ill, were kept from the knowledge of their own sterilization.[23] In *Why Did I Get Married?* however, Perry offers a new reality without even the faintest nod to history: tainted by the ills of a selfish and individualistic feminism, it is black men who are hoodwinked and left in the dark and not at the hands of a racist and eugenics-oriented State but by their black wives and female partners. This re-presentation of feminist reproductive and body politics clearly ignores how women of color collectively organized and brought forced sterilizations to the attention of the public and US lawmakers.

Finally, the framing of the pivotal scene between Diane and Terry helps to communicate the authority of Terry's character. Terry often fills up the entire frame including several close-ups, leaving Diane's character literally pushed to the margins of the frame. Moreover, there are very few shot-reverse-shot sequences in this pivotal scene, which results in much of Diane's dialogue being heard as the audience watches the back of her head but with a full view of Terry's face. In contrast, Terry never speaks without a full view of his face. These minor but important production decisions work, in conjunction with the scene's dialogue, to establish each character's subjectivity—or lack thereof—and their credibility. As is the case with her dialogue, Diane's character is marginalized and minimized within the framing of the scene.

Despite her initial protests, the film's end finds Diane in search of Terry and eager to reconcile. Diane apologizes and begs Terry to return home. Terry responds by revealing that he has had an affair and his mistress is pregnant with twins, he then asks Diane whether they can still work it out. Diane demonstrates her new willingness to mold herself around the needs and desires of her husband by assuring him that their marriage can be saved. Momentarily, the audience finds out that Terry's story is not true, but a test he made up to "get back at her."

While Diane has apparently violated marital rules of trust by making decisions about her reproductive health care without consulting her husband, the possibility of her husband's infidelity is completely ignored, rendered irrelevant, even, as she offers a response to prove her commitment to their marriage. Moreover, when Terry initially learns of the tubal ligation, Diane is also informed that when their daughter was born her husband ordered a paternity test without her knowledge. Unlike Diane's transgression, Terry is never held accountable nor does he ever apologize for his violations, actual and fabricated, of their marital trust.

By the film's sequel, *Why Did I Get Married Too?* Diane has not only reconciled with Terry but has provided the ultimate peace offering and expression of devotion: a son. As Diane explains to a friend "No, no. After the surgery and untying my tubes I'm just happy he has his son, you know? He's happy. I'm happy... when things fall into place you just gotta be grateful to God, you know." This is a critical moment in reconciling the tensions of the first film as Diane has "untied her tubes" in order to fulfill her husband's wish to not only have another child, but a son. Undergoing surgery to reverse a tubal ligation in order to have more children at your husband's request is not an example of things "falling into place." It is the exact opposite and demonstrates management of the female body in order to properly act out a particular heteronormative notion of the devoted wife and mother. Diane's explanation to her friend depicts her happiness as being inextricably linked to that of her husband. This link, however, is not dialogical, rather it seems to be a one-way relationship where his happiness and unhappiness dictates her own. In other words, in Tyler Perry's approach to marriage, when you get married you do not really give up the I for *us*, you give up the I for *him*.

Though Diane's work relations are generally presented as the root of her marital discord, her career ambition in the first film and a workplace romance in the second, we rarely see her in the professional setting. Her work context is totally absent from the first film and only briefly introduced in the sequel. When the audience finally sees Diane in the work setting it is as Patricia's divorce lawyer. Yet even here, the domestic dominates as Patricia and Gavin's marital issues are the central focus of the scene. The omission of the professional space also facilitates the omission of other relevant matters in the saga of Diane's marriage; chiefly, the realities of racism and sexism that might just complicate what it means for Diane's character to be a successful attorney working in a major firm. How do structures of marginalization work to make black women's professional achievements more difficult to attain? Could it be that as a black woman working in a corporate firm, she must work longer hours or take on more cases to be recognized through the web of sexism and racism that often structure the experiences of women of color in the United States? The fact that these kinds of considerations are missing makes Perry's claims to the truth and authenticity of black women's stories questionable, at best, and, at worst, sinister.

Though at least three of the film's four main female characters are professionals, they are rarely shown in professional settings. They are read almost exclusively in the domestic sphere. A notable exception to this elision is the character of Patricia, played by Janet Jackson, as she is seen at least twice giving lectures about her publications in University settings. Yet as we see in the inclusion of Diane's work context, the inclusion of Patricia's work environment is also firmly entrenched in the domestic given that her lectures are based on her work as a marriage therapist. The portrayal of Diane and Patricia's work contexts is important because it signals that, for Perry, women's public lives are

only visible insofar as they continue to be linked to the private space of the home and family. The limited representation and flat-out absence of the professional space demonstrates Perry's investment in the domestic sphere as the privileged site for telling black women's stories, a choice that obscures the ways in which black women must engage with and negotiate the larger world.

While women's professional lives are mostly absent in Perry films, *The Family That Preys* is an important exception. Though the film addresses the family dynamic of multiple and interconnected families, its main focus is the relationship between Andrea and her husband, Chris, and its undoing at the hands of her ruthless and vengeful ambition. Since Andrea's naked ambition is offered as the cause of her marital and other familial problems, the professional space becomes particularly important in illustrating the lengths to which she will go to achieve success.

As the film escalates, it is revealed that Andrea has been stashing a large sum of money in a separate bank account, previously unknown to her husband. After Chris is fired for his entrepreneurial aspirations, he withdraws the money from his wife's account without her knowledge in order to bankroll his small business dreams. The film's climax occurs when Chris tells Andrea he has taken her money to start his own business. Furious, Andrea launches into a tirade about his inability to be William Cartwright, her white, wealthy boss and lover. She lands the final blow by revealing that their son is actually William's child. Enraged at Andrea's bold confession, her husband slaps her, knocking her backward over the counter of her mother's diner. Perry so tightly structures the development of Andrea's character as domineering and greedy that it is difficult to feel anything but satisfaction about her physical, and later emotional, punishment at the hands of her husband.

Moya Bailey has argued that violence against black women in Perry's films "is made normal, comic, and necessary for the attainment of a positive black masculinity, making intra-racial violence against black women off-screen tolerable."[24] Audience members at Perry's films often cheer at the moment when black women are literally, often physically "put back in their place" at the hands of the black male character whose masculinity they have tested. *New York Times* staff writer John Eligon attests to this as he recounts the spontaneous outbursts of the mostly black female audience at similar scenes in *Why Did I get Married?*—outbursts which included "slap her" and "you better take that man."[25]

Perry's treatment of domestic violence marks yet another area where his work fails to live up to the standards set by previous generations of black women's cultural production and works counter to black women's liberation. Using *The Women of Brewster Place* as an example,

Jacqueline Bobo and Ellen Seiter argue that a critique of gender violence is a characteristic of black women's cultural production:

> A second feature *The Women of Brewster Place* shares with the work of other writers in its tradition is a scrutiny of sexism and of violence against black women by black men... Although there is an attempt to put sexism in the context of the continual humiliation of black men by white people and the desperation caused by the massive denial of economic opportunities, there is at the same time a vehement rejection of violence.[26]

This "vehement rejection of violence" is noticeably absent in Perry's films. Andrea's mother and sister are present during the scene where she is assaulted, yet neither responds with the kind of protective vigor that Seiter and Bobo describe in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*,

> Mattie's mother (Mary Alice) a mild woman and devoted wife, picks up the rifle, points it at her husband and says: "So help me Jesus, Sam, hit my child again and I'll meet your soul in hell!" Thus, while feelings of rage and frustration are acknowledged—in this case, a father's disappointment that his dreams for his daughter's future are ruined—the violence is uncompromisingly condemned.[27]

Condemnation of violence against women in Perry's films is limited to comic cultural myths about black women finding justice with heavy gauge cast-iron skillets and hot grits à la *Madea's Family Reunion*. Of course, even these trivial acknowledgments are dispensed with if the woman in question is seen as deserving it, as is the case with character of Andrea.

Andrea and Chris's thorny relationship is resolved in a montage that depicts Chris at the opening of his new construction firm and returning the money to Andrea. When her, now presumably, ex-husband walks into Andrea's meager apartment, he hands her money, looks at her with pity, and somewhat painfully and reluctantly kisses her son on the head. Unlike Diane of *Why Did I Get Married?* who is confronted with the possibility of caring for children produced as a result of her husband's infidelity, Chris is apparently not expected to reconcile with his wife nor continue to parent a son not biologically his own. This scene explicitly communicates that it is Andrea who lost her job and the favor of both William and Chris, and it is she who has erred and is suffering the consequences of her actions. Andrea has transgressed against patriarchy as a result of her sense of ambition, which exceeds the possibility of fulfillment through her husband. Moreover, Andrea's character specifically resists African American manifestations of patriarchy by looking, both

professionally and sexually, to white masculinity to fulfill her needs. Andrea is punished for these transgressions and while other characters in the film are offered opportunities for redemption and progress, Andrea is left in a dingy apartment reaching for a past that eludes her, a past that, according to the narrative of the film, she could have easily had and kept had she stayed in her "place."

The reading of the films presented here demonstrates how Perry's female characters are tragically positioned in regards to patriarchy. While I acknowledge that Perry certainly privileges certain aspects of black women's lives, I have tried to complicate that privileging by examining how, in the process, Perry often distorts or revises it to fit within the confines of a male-dominated approach to black domestic life. Though his films are created for and about black women, the images of black women he offers are often not empowering and adhere to long-standing stereotypes that depict black women as loud, overbearing emasculators. Perry draws on a long tradition of troublesome tropes of black female identity including Sapphires, Mammies, and long-suffering mothers and wives.

The popularity and influence of Perry's work allow it to function as an informal and popular curriculum for particular kinds of black heterosexual relationships. Yet, in a Perry-based pedagogy, we learn nothing of black women's survival outside of and in spite of narrow notions of heterosexual desire and family structures. Nor are we educated about the varied history of black women's participation in communities that crossed racial, sexual, and class lines, participation that often fulfilled them beyond and in concert with the roles of wife and mother. Perry's films lack the political and social commitments necessary to black women's survival and growth. If Jacqueline Bobo is correct in arguing that "the works [of black women artists] provide a coping mechanism, enabling black women to recognize the array of forces controlling their lives" then Perry's work fails miserably in service to black women beyond providing them unattainable modern Christian fairytales.[28]

Yet, in a media climate that is more than ready to inform black women why they have not, will not, and apparently cannot succeed at establishing safe, stable, and lasting intraracial heterosexual romance, Perry's fairytales can be quite seductive. Additionally, their ability to offer images that reinforce African American middle-class and Christian respectability politics also makes them particularly compelling given popular media's privileging of black deviance. Given the larger cultural context of Perry's work, its failure to thoroughly respond to black women's varied experiences is further significant, particularly, in the contemporary moment, when there are few, if any, other black filmmakers with the kind of reach and influence of Tyler Perry. Perry's work emerges as the brightest beacon of representations of African American life, not because of its content but because of sheer numbers. That there are few other popular representations of African Americans to contest or trouble Perry's idea of black American life is reason enough to critically examine and engage his work as we consume it. Black popular culture needs a more nuanced approach to black gender and sexual politics, an approach that Perry and his body of work are sorely unable to provide given his investment in a conservative and patriarchal Christianity as the guiding framework for black progress.

Notes

1. Deborah Barker, "The Southern-Fried Chick Flick: Postfeminism Goes to the Movies," in *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2008), 113.
2. Benjamin Svetkey, Margeaux Watson, and Alynda Wheat, "How Do You *Solve* a Problem Like *Madea*?" *Entertainment Weekly*, March 20, 2009, 31.
3. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.
4. Kimberly Springer, "Divas, Evil Black Bitches and Bitter Black Women: African-American Women in Postfeminist and Post-Civil Rights Popular Culture," in *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 272.
5. Jacqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 59.
6. Patricia Hill-Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2000).
7. *What's Love Got to Do with It*, directed by Brian Gibson (Burbank, CA: Touchstone Pictures, 1993) Film.
8. *The Color Purple*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 1985) Film.
9. Though a black woman directs neither of these films, I identify them as black women's texts because they are both based on books written by black women.
10. Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, 4.
11. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.
12. Ibid., 178.
13. Ruth La Ferla. "Sometimes Piety Isn't Squeaky Clean," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2007. Accessed May 5, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/14/fashion/14tyler.html
14. Svetkey et al., "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Madea," 28.
15. See Mia Mask, "Who's Behind That Fat Suit?' Momma, Madea, Rasputia and the Politics of Cross-Dessing" in *Contemporary Black American Cinema: Race, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (New York: Routledge,

2012), 155–174, and LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, "Fat Spirit: Obesity, Religion, and Sapphmammibel in Contemporary Black Film" in *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, Vol., 2, no 1 (Spring 2013): 56–69.

16. Ibid., 31.
17. Andisheh Nouraee, "Andisheh Nouraee's Diary of a Confused Beige Man: One Man's Attempt to Understand Tyler Perry." *Creative Loafing*, March 19, 2008. Accessed May 4, 2009. http://atlanta.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase/andisheh_nouraee_s_diary_of_a_confused_beige_man/Content?oid=432368.
18. Ibid.
19. Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Marla F. Frederick, Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *"If It Wasn't for the Women": Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church. 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Daphne C. Wiggins, *Righteous Content: Black Women's Perspectives of Church and Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
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21. Nouraee, "Andisheh Nouraee's Diary of a Confused Beige Man."
22. Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 2.
23. Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).
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25. John Eligon. "A New Movie Brings Out Throngs of Black Women." *The New York Times*, October 13, 2007. Accessed May 5, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/13/nyregion/13movie.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&oref=slogin.
26. Jacqueline Bobo and Ellen Seiter, "Black Feminism and Media Criticism: *The Women of Brewster Place*," in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 176.
27. Ibid., 177.
28. Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, 6.

Part IV

The Politics of Performance

This section explores Perry's performance techniques and responds to the question: How do Perry's performative strategies—as exemplified through his use of drag and/or the incorporation of themes such as homoeroticism, hypersexualism, and gangsterism—inform how viewers interpret black sexuality, black masculinity, and black femininity?