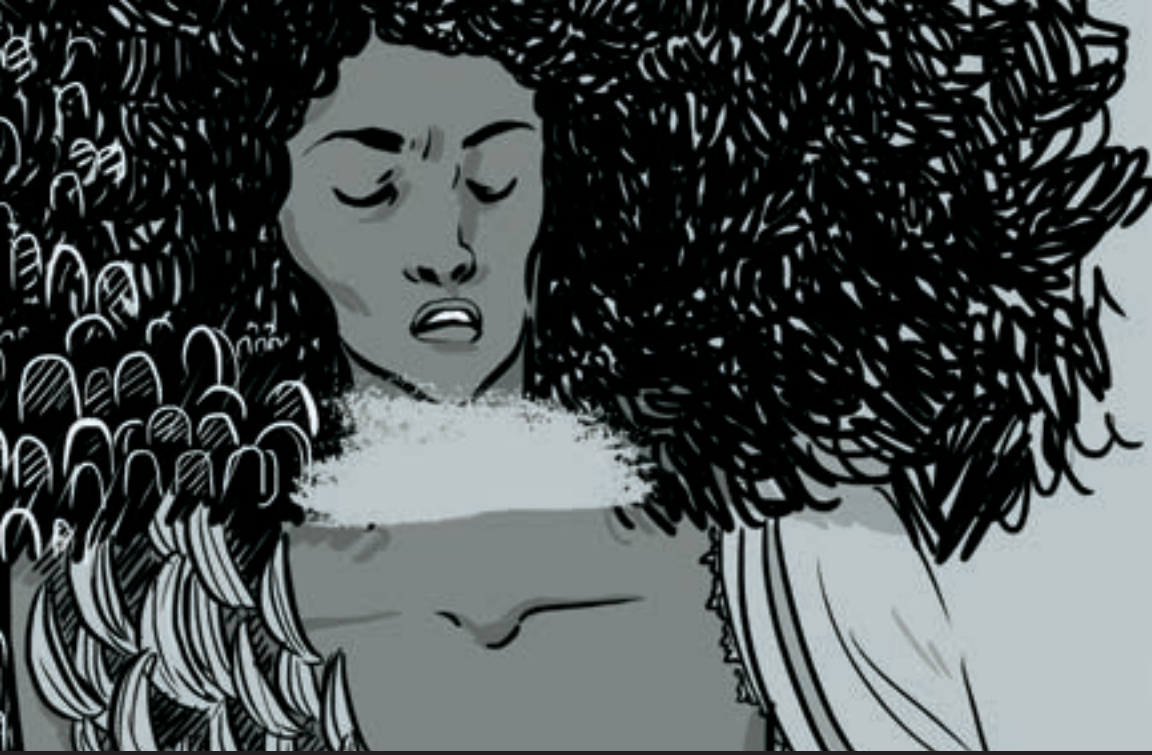
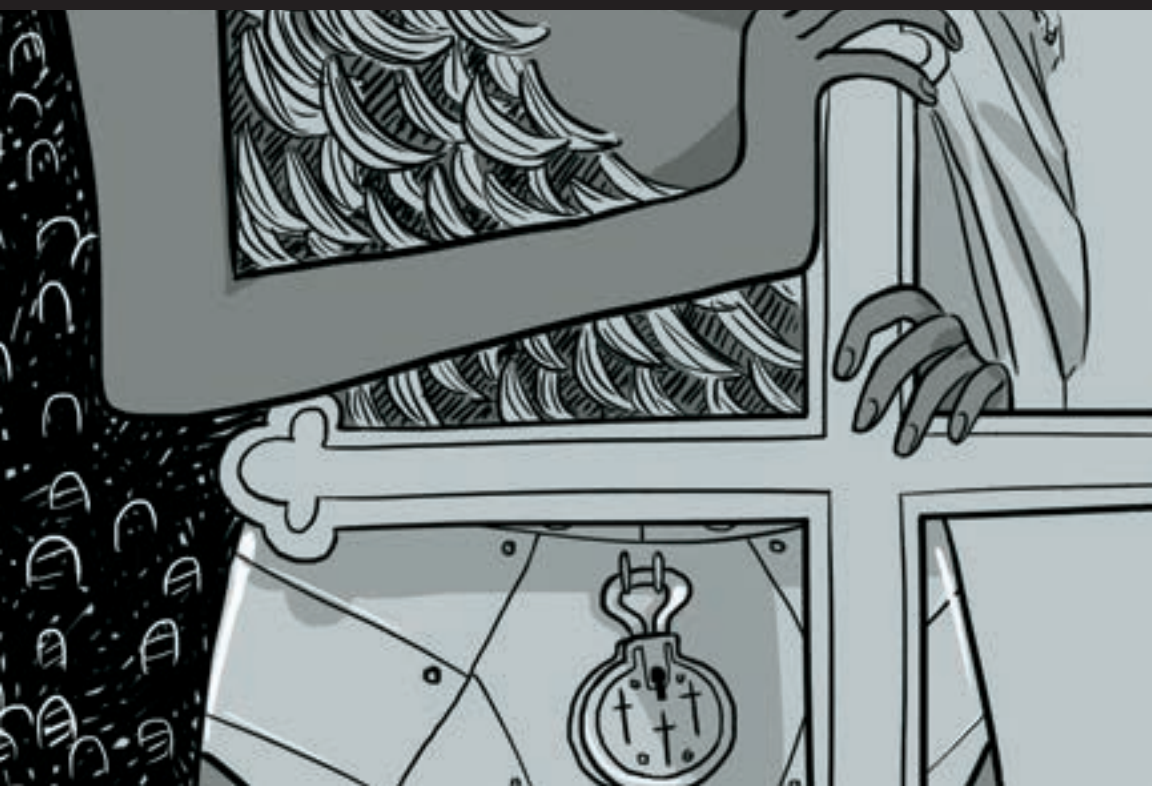


PASSIONATE AND PIOUS

Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality

MONIQUE MOULTRIE



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To my grandmother MILDRED CREWS CARTER,
whose spirit of perseverance and generosity is a guide.

To my life partner, EUGENE JAMES SE'BREE,
who shows me daily the Divine's tangible presence in my life.
I'm glad you chose to share your life with me.

And to the memory of my mother, TOMMIE CREWS,
a soul who lived and loved freely.
Thank you for always being proud of me.

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This manuscript started off as an ode to Bynum and slowly morphed into something more as I realized the successors to Bynum's movement were more salient in contemporary black women's sexual decision making. Along the way my research was greatly enriched by women who shared their stories with me. I am deeply indebted to the women who joined my focus groups in Nashville; Chatham, Virginia; and Boston. I spent years as a participant observer in the Pinky Promise Movement and Wives in Waiting groups, and I hope these women can see how seriously I took their stories. Whether or not your narrative made it into the final manuscript, know that your lives have inspired this project in tangible ways, and I hope the work reflects the deep questions of faith you shared with me.

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INTRODUCTION

FOR ALL THE SINGLE LADIES

Black Women's Stories of Faith and Sexuality

Only the Black Woman can say "when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me." —ANNA JULIA COOPER, *A Voice from the South*

Sexual stories about black women are all around us, but they almost always rely on key myths, while few stories told by black women about their own sexual lives are available. —TRICIA ROSE, *Longing to Tell*

When I was seventeen, two of my teenage female friends were brought before the church to "repent" of their sin of getting pregnant. I remember watching their tears flowing as they stood before the entire congregation with their parents, two sets of highly regarded church members. As if it were yesterday, I watched as our male chairman of the deacon board made their sins known publicly (neither was visibly pregnant at the time of disclosure) to the audience, who then voted to strip these young women of their privileges as members, removing them from youth choir, for example. I watched in horror and confusion as no one dared speak on their behalf or at least bring the sexually responsible fathers-to-be up with them to share

in this public shaming. Although we attended separate high schools, we all saw each other often at the numerous church events extending beyond our Sunday worship together. I could not fathom these young women's plight, nor could I stomach the audacity of a religious community asking them to apologize to God and to our church. On that Sunday my decision to be a questioning Christian was bolstered.

When I got home I asked my grandmother, the woman who raised me in that particular Baptist church and who was also an esteemed leader in the church, why these young women had been singled out when we both knew, deacons, ministers, and others in that same church had children outside of their marriages. I had never witnessed these men brought before the church, not even when the church gossip ran high. She stared at me with confusion and said, "Of course not, they are all men!" Her response, while still true today, was jolting to my sensibilities as she reminded me of the patriarchal double standard with which I would live if I chose to remain a black churchwoman. This book's major questions started on that day as I pondered how a church that gave me absolutely no direction on sexuality except to abstain from intercourse until marriage could then have any stake in any of my future sexual decisions. I learned that day that many black churches are willing to pay attention to sexuality as long as it is to impugn black women's sexuality as an evil that needs to be controlled. Before I learned what sexism, womanism, and patriarchy mean, I learned that day that the God of my tradition did not expect men to accept responsibility for their sexual conduct or even sexual sin. Yet I was not defeated by this new reality; I was encouraged to ask more questions, to challenge what did not seem godly, and to think critically about a God and a tradition that was worthy of my devotion.

In this work I continue to ask questions and rebel against the sexual messages given to black women by religious communities. Black women are given a variety of messages about their sexuality, and I explore their sexual beliefs and how they make sexual decisions. Whether black women are viewed as hypersexualized and in need of restraint or asexual and too holy for sex, there are plentiful conversations about sexuality, but few are informed by black women's actual lives. By highlighting how black and white feminists have responded to these pervasive stereotypes I propose that womanism, the discipline interrogating the multilayered oppression of women of color, is the best means for probing how single black church-

women make meaning from their varied history, lived experiences, and faith perspectives.[1]

Investigating religious messages directed at black churchwomen is a topic of great import given their influence through the recent increase in faith-based sexuality ministries. These ministries include Christian televangelists, Christian women's and singles conferences, and Christian media (e.g., videos, audiotapes, and live streaming on the Internet). It is rare to see analysis of these media in any discipline, but such a discerning analysis is required particularly as these ministries have become a "multi-million dollar industry—with books, classes, internet and gospel radio dating services . . . and conferences," all ostensibly to help black churchwomen navigate their sexuality and spiritual walk with God.[2] Recent scholarship on televangelism focuses on prosperity gospel advocates and typically ignores the other messages, yet faith-based sexuality ministries are often as lucrative—and therefore as influential—as those that promote prosperity.

These messages and ministries also beg to be examined because of their collective effect on women's lives; as the anthropologist Marla Frederick astutely notes, black women are making decisions about their sexual practices based at least in part on their adherence to televised messages.[3] Often these messages correspond to those they receive in church (especially since many church leaders are seeking to emulate the formula of televangelism). What is different is that these alternative religious spaces offer an abundance of ways to market that same message. A pastor's sermon may be forgotten after Sunday service, but televangelists, e-vangelists, and faith-based sexuality leaders are in constant communication with a supporter via emails, text messages, journals, meditations, and even messages throughout the day via Instagram, Facebook, and other social media. This mass communication provides a vast market to interrogate.

Exploring the faith-based sexuality market reveals a new phenomenon in the modernization of sexuality. If Foucault is correct and sexuality is a constantly evolving modern invention, then new categories are created by contemporary discourses.[4] Notably, Foucault is discussing the invention of the homosexual, but his larger argument reflects the steady progression of discourse that is bolstered by power structures to create seemingly stable categories like homosexuality or in the case of this project black Christian sexuality. Philosopher Ludger Vieflhues-Bailey analyzes the predominantly white evangelical group Focus on the Family as evidence of the proliferation of

Christian sex products, and he argues that these products create a "Christian heterosexuality."[5] However, the Christian heterosexuality he speaks of is specific to the lived experiences of white married Christians. The faith-based sexuality ministries familiar to single black Christian women do not share this same history; thus Prophetess Juanita Bynum creates a genre that gives single black Christian women a space to talk about their sexuality and spirituality. This space allows them to ferret out which sexual messages to follow, modify, or ignore. Using womanist ethnography to explore the category of black Christian sexuality, I provide a womanist sexual ethics for contemporary times that is focused on agency, desire, and responsible sexual decision making.

Black Christian Sexuality

The category of black Christian sexuality is distinctive in many ways from the Christian sexuality that Vieflhues-Bailey presents. While there is an emphasis on sex the way God intended (typically construed in white evangelical literature as heterosexual, married, with the wife submissive to husband), black faith-based sexuality ministries construct black Christian sexuality as a sexual identity and category that place these standards in line with black female lived experience. Despite their conservative theological views, black evangelicals entering the faith-based sexuality ministry market adjust the white-dominant message to reflect a history wherein a woman's purity is not automatically considered the property of her father, a woman's purity can be denied because of stereotypes of her being sexually available, sexual pleasure can be discussed, and a woman's path to a God-given marriage is not guaranteed.

Perhaps this difference in starting points also reflects a distinction in the evangelicalism experienced by participants in faith-based sexuality ministries. The overall industry of evangelical sex products typically targets whites, evident in the cover art, illustrations, and, more important, life experiences discussed. Sadly even scholars of American evangelicalism tend to use *evangelical* as a universal category that excludes black and Hispanic Protestants. While there is much in common among evangelicals, such as belief in the inerrancy of scripture, spiritual rebirth as a criterion for entering heaven, and an expectation of certain types of behavior, there are different denominational histories, theological perspectives, and class and political differences.[6] Historian A. G. Miller notes that while it may be dif-

ficult to determine exactly how many blacks identify as evangelical, black evangelicals are certainly most visible in religious media, which is also true of faith-based sexuality ministries.[7] Black evangelical ministries also must deal with the reality that more of their membership is single, and thus their ministries cater to these audiences.

Among all U.S. women, black women make up the smallest population of married women. If the predominant religious message they are hearing and seeing is that sex is for marriage only, then there would seem to be some angst among black women. How do they make sense of the church's teachings in light of their ongoing singleness? In what ways do they account for the dissonance? I expected to discover many women, who after embracing their singleness, discovered that their sexual desires had not abated. Aware of heterosexual female ministers' and religious leaders' narratives of sexual temptation and frustration, I anticipated that their followers would be the masses of single black churchwomen who were happily married to the Holy Spirit while disappointingly sleeping alone.

This research focuses on heterosexual relationships as a means of weighing in on the secular "marriage debate" that seems entirely dedicated to heterosexual black women. One question in this debate is *Why aren't more black women married?* Heterosexual black women are also signaled because the majority of discussions around sexuality in black churches are focused on homosexuality. Heterosexuality goes unnamed, unchallenged, and often underdeveloped as a concept of both theological and practical concern. This focus on black female heterosexuality is an effort to shine scholarly attention on an area that has been understudied in religious studies. I concur with the religious historian Amy DeRogatis that evangelical attention to sexuality has overemphasized same-sex desire as a problem while carrying on simultaneous discussions about the "proper practice of heterosexuality."[8] Equally my decision to study black female televangelists and e-vangelists corrects the gap in scholarship on American religious broadcasting, which has tended to focus primarily on white men. In those rare instances when scholars do diversify the field, they typically expand it only enough to include the voices of black men.[9] Even the recent scholarly interest on singles ministries has focused on white male religious leadership. Thus, for the community of self-identified single black women on the margins of the margin, investigating the experiences of female leaders in their movement is a necessary balancing move.

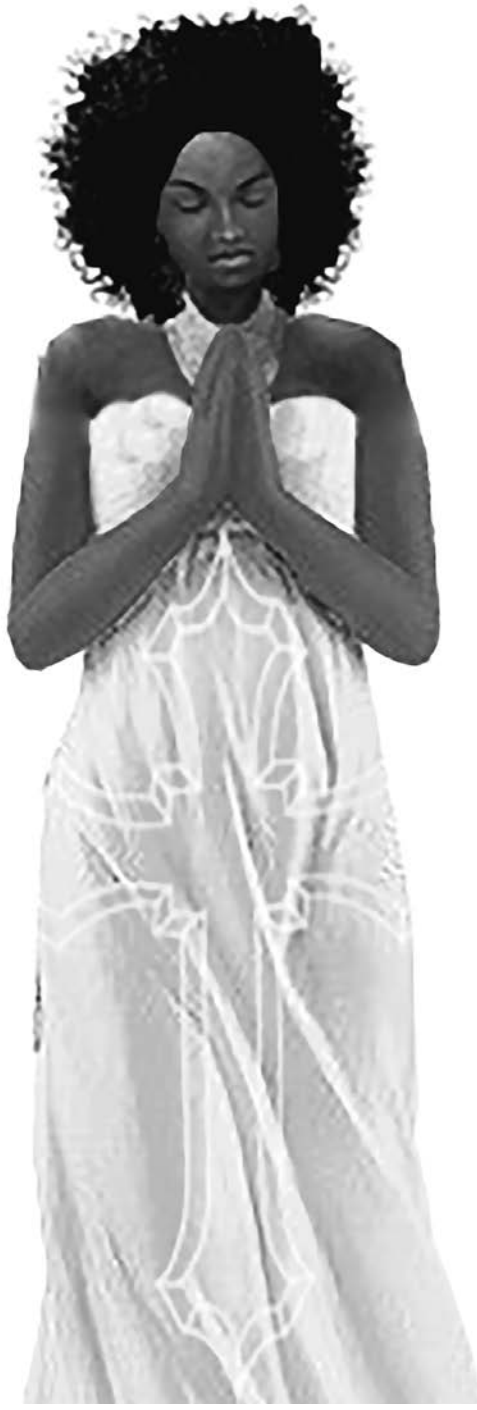

FIGURE INTRO.1. *Hands of Praise*, by Frederick Moultrie Jr. Used by permission.

The black feminist scientist Evelynn Hammonds postulates that black women create whole worlds of sexual signs that must be interpreted by their specific cultural contexts.[10] For black churchwomen this decoding means hearing through the silences and expectations of sexual virtue that certain readings of Christianity impose. By listening through the silence, it is possible to learn of an entirely parallel culture that suspends expectations for a new and more complicated reality. The black historian Darlene Clark Hine was one of the first theorists to discuss black female sexual silence in terms of culture. She refers to silent women's participation in a "culture of dissemblance," a culture created to protect black women by seeming to disclose only what they wanted to disclose of their sexual selves, thus allowing women space to utilize their own resources of resistance against tropes that castigated their sexuality.[11] This seemingly silent culture was not actually silent about sexuality. In fact there was a great deal of discussion of sexuality going on as women refigured their images and created empowered definitions of themselves.

Many critics of this culture of dissemblance suggest that it merely reaffirms the Victorian notions of morality present in the dominant culture that was Christian-centered and heteronormative, but perhaps there was more was going on than just colluding with a dominant historical pattern. The philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler argues that agency is always located within structures of power, which means that actions and subversions often participate in the very same oppressive structures.[12] This challenges feminists from classifying as agency only what seems to be resisting domination. When applied to this study, a discussion of agency highlights how black churchwomen were and are refiguring heteronormativity to fit their unique circumstances. Thus while some view as hypocritical black churchwomen's open castigation of premarital sex yet jubilant celebration when a child is born from this contemptuous union, this can also be read as an understandable response to the complexity of relationships within black women's groups.

The structures of power that black women are navigating also include historical stereotypes that manifest in public policy and public opinion. The two main stereotypes of black women, as Jezebel and as Mammy, are represented in these women's everyday experiences of the Christian madonna-whore binary. Of these the image of black women as Jezebel, the evil seductress known for her excessive, unbridled sexuality,[13] has historically trapped some black women in sexual exploitation because they were

not deemed "women" who required protection, as did white ladies. Yet slavocracy mandated that another myth of black female sexuality emerge because the slave system could not have functioned if all black women were sexually licentious. The Mammy stereotype was created to explain how black moral degeneracy did not influence white women and children in their care. According to this stereotype, "Mammy" was generally considered asexual; she had learned to quell her uncontrollable sexual desires so that she could attend to the needs of her surrogate white family. The Mammy image served as the cornerstone of the "cult of true womanhood," and black women who desired societal respectability often donned this persona. The black women's club movements and black churches in particular adopted and adapted this persona through a "politics of respectability" that downplayed black women's sexual expressions.[14] Black church members became experts at disciplining the body by teaching that respectable behavior was evident in following biblical restrictions on premarital and same-gender sexual relationships.

This discipline is perpetuated even now, through the policing of female bodies and the silencing of black female sexuality, as reflected in my content analysis of various faith-based sexuality ministries. Unlike televangelist culture, which seldom refers to sin or hell and instead gets consumers to focus on becoming their best self, faith-based sexuality ministries believe in speaking on these unspeakable topics. They approach black women's sexuality with a religious fervor and quite openly insist that God cares whether you are living a sexually pure life (e.g., avoiding biblically proscribed acts of sexual immorality). Typically a ministry's discussion equates personal sin with sexual sin. This fits well in the logic of televangelism and growing e-vangelistic enterprises that focus on individualistic faith and personal values.[15] Despite this emphasis on personal sin, a large number of my focus group participants did not seem to adopt the rigid conservative values and customs of previous generations. They tended to reject public shaming of persons in sexual sin and instead promoted an ethic of loving reproach in which they privately chastised persons to follow God's will. Yet a new culture of dissemblance occurs when women attend singles conferences and ministries and openly discuss their sexual desires and demands for pleasure. Within these spaces they are articulating their own conceptions of sexuality, even if they seem only to reiterate the dominant messages. Thus I examine three dominant messages about black Christian sexuality: that sexuality is sacred; that sex is reserved for marriage and is always be-

tween a man and a woman; and that there should be no sex among singles, forcing Christian single women to control their sexual desires while being depicted as asexual—all messages that are the foundation of faith-based sexuality ministry's rhetoric.

I discuss these dominant messages about sexuality using the frame of womanist sexual ethics. Arguably the leading womanist authority on sexuality is the theologian Kelly Brown Douglas.[16] In her groundbreaking *Sexuality and the Black Church*, published in 1999, she notes that although Christianity historically saw sexuality as negative due to the influence of Platonic thought, which sees flesh and spirit as distinct, one corruptible and the other pristine, the incarnation of Jesus Christ suggests a very different interpretation of the body and, ultimately, of human sexuality. Douglas states that the fact that Christ was embodied calls for an appreciation of the whole human body as a gift from God. She also highlights the African religious heritage that views human sexuality as divine and offers from the womanist tradition the notion of loving our bodies (completely) as a way of reflecting God's love. Rejecting the dualistic demonization of body/soul requires black churchwomen to acknowledge sexuality as a sacred act.

This dualism is clearly present in not just the sacrality of sexual relationships but in the assumption that proper sex occurs within a heterosexual marriage. While Protestants tend not to have a universal opinion about any particular church doctrine that rivals the canonical nature of Catholic Church teachings, an exemption to this lack of universal consensus is evident when considering the pronouncement that sex should occur within a marital bond. When pressed for a rationale for this particular hierarchy, many in religious leadership point to biblical instructions on marriage, yet upon examination of the messages it is rare to get clarity about why a particular brand of biblical marriage is being promoted over others. For example, the Bible clearly indicates the prevalence of polygamous marriages, marriages between family members, nonconsensual marriages, and marriages conducted as financial transactions, so an advocate of biblical marriage, which is contemporarily coded as a union of one man and one woman, requires being selective about biblical marriage.[17] Yet this stance is common to all the faith-based sexuality ministries. Each ministry promotes sex within marriage as the one and only way, but this message is as old as the Protestant Reformation. Subsumed within this "one" way is in fact the variety of ways the Bible discusses marriage, especially in the New Testament, where Paul is the orchestrator of a grand scheme to get persons

married before they burn with sexual passions. If Paul highlights celibacy as the ultimate gift and suggests marriage be avoided so that one can focus on the work of God, why then do our contemporary religious messages reverse this notion and make marriage the example of spiritual maturity? More important, why do black religious spaces embrace this one biblical interpretation but challenge so many other scriptures?

Douglas's work is helpful to understanding the sway of marriage for post-emancipation black churches. She contends that churches prescribed their members' sexual behaviors, especially those of black women, whose pre-nuptial sexual freedom was replaced by marital fidelity.[18] Enslaved women were often denied the right to marry and to control their sexuality, so when they entered churches after slavery many were no longer sexually "pure." By emphasizing marital fidelity and strictly sanctioning all premarital and extramarital activities, religious leaders also reinforced a gendered bias that actively restrained black female sexuality while merely recommending restraint for black males. Church commandments that sanctioned sex only in marriage often excused the male offender because it was thought that his "sin is individual," whereas the woman's sins were deemed to be larger as she "sins against the family and race."[19]

This double standard continues to the present day as focus group interviewee "Audrey Rae" echoed this same sentiment. Audrey Rae is a twenty-eight-year-old, lower-middle-class, religiously eclectic graduate student who claims a "fluid or bi-sexual" identity. Her family desired a committed marital relationship for her and intimated that she needed to exercise sexual restraint until that relationship was established. She was taught, "I am always the one who was in control of other people's sexual desires around me. My boobs, my hips, my behind: I needed to control my body so that I don't cause anybody else to fall." This gendered message, that women are to control themselves or be controlled by others, fits well in a patriarchal hierarchy of secular and religious society, but it is also the modern day reincarnation of the Mammy stereotype whereby black women are expected to control their desires to the point of asexuality. Indeed every one of my focus group interviewees reported being similarly warned and instructed that sex was permissible only in marriage and that it was the woman's duty to ensure this.

Both black and white evangelical sexuality literature teaches that God created men and women to enjoy themselves sexually in the sanctity of marriage, and this logic is marketed in both Christian media and churches.[20]

Simultaneously black evangelicals are bombarded with messages about the unavailability of marriage partners. The social ethicist Robert M. Franklin summarizes the vast literature on black families, finding that after emancipation, although African Americans initially embraced marriage, the number of black marriages has decreased significantly since the 1950s, which can be attributed to declining job prospects, female independence, increased education leading to delays in marriage, and changing social, cultural, and moral codes.[21] Franklin concludes that the black church should take up the challenge to encourage black marriage, but this privileging of marriage can be read as isolating the already marginalized singles population or as encouraging men to join the marriage ranks. While Franklin's charge is for the black church at large, he is really sending a gendered message from men to other men. The women following faith-based sexuality ministries do not need to be convinced of the value of marriage; they are not a skeptical audience. They believe that marriage is God's best plan for their lives, and they are actively pursuing that goal. Women in my focus groups and followers of these ministries seemed universally to adopt the messages restricting their sexuality to marital relationships, and it was almost heresy to challenge the basis of this assumption. Despite mentally accepting a life of sexual restraint, almost every woman I interviewed had transgressed this agreement. The conundrum of wrestling with the expectation of no sex until marriage while having no foreseeable marriage partner is at the heart of this book. I also foreground the fact that all of these faith-based sexuality ministries share the "No marriage, no sex" assumption as a God-ordained fact. One of my contributions is to muddy those waters and dare to question what seems to be an inviolate assumption.

As Foucault posited, public silencing surrounding sexuality ultimately had the opposite effect because the subject that was deemed taboo was also the topic of public concern. While my focus group participants may not have received the specific information and counsel they were seeking regarding how to exercise their sexuality, there are a vast number of faith-based sexuality ministries that complicate a trope of sexual silence. These ministries operate in a way that influences black female sexual agency; thus my examination of faith-based sexuality ministries reflects my ongoing scholarly and communal commitments to moral decision making and my quest to fill a gap in the research on black women's sexuality. As much as this is a book that brings academic discussion to faith-based sexuality ministries, it is also a womanist envisioning of a sexual ethics for

contemporary times.[22] The content analysis of these ministries is essential to investigating their impact on black churchwomen's everyday lives. In fact a womanist sexual ethics is a crucial contextual and methodological framework to interpret black churchwomen's spiritual and sexual concerns.

A primary concern of this womanist sexual ethics is how women become sexual agents through various experiences. On a basic level, sexual agency expresses how women make sexual decisions; this includes the decision not to engage in sexual relations. Yet contemporary womanist sexual agency ties these expressions and choices to an understanding of sexual rights. The notion of sexual rights is part of the human rights discourse that encourages women to demand the right to sexual pleasure, self-expression, intimacy, and freedom from sexual abuse.[23] Advocating for sexual rights must be a part of a womanist sexual ethics because these rights assure that these women's sexual decisions occur in a respectful environment. Thus womanist sexual agency does not determine which responsible actions a person should be allowed to participate in, nor does it foreclose participating in any sexual activities as long as parties are able to give consent. Sexual agency merely states that there is liberty to take any action one chooses with an understanding that this action may ultimately be harmful to one's psyche or body. However, the intent of a contemporary womanist sexual ethics is to equip women in such a way that their choices are made within a guiding frame that advocates for their own sexual rights.

Womanist analysis of sexuality has tended to stay at the descriptive level, pointing to sexual abuse and unhealthy relationships at the expense of a normative analysis of sexual agency. This book instead utilizes womanist ethnography as its main methodology to analyze the impact of religious media on black churchwomen's sexual agency, demanding an interrogation of sexual politics that occur outside of traditional "black church" settings. The women participating in these ministries do so as negotiated readers who take what is useful for their understanding of faith and sexuality and jettison anything contradictory to their moral agency.

Methodology

I expected an analysis of faith-based sexuality ministries to reveal women with complicated sexual realities living out Matthew 26:41, whose "spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." This was certainly the case with the main leaders who promoted the ministries, so why should the consumers be

any different from their models? Thus the book begins with an analysis of Prophetess Juanita Bynum's ministry as an example of the black Christian sexuality genre that provides messages to black single women. I followed Bynum's ministry first as a consumer and true believer in her message of celibacy and waiting for God's man to arrive in God's time. Then I followed Bynum as a participant observer and academic studying her ministry, going to her conferences and buying hundreds of dollars' worth of her materials. Bynum is the progenitor of a movement that disseminates Christian messages of abstinence to single black women, but she is just one in a long line of such messengers. This analysis of her ministry sets the tone for interpreting her successors. But my interest in the movement Bynum built was exceeded only by my interest in how these messages were received by scores of black women participating in these ministries.

To gain insight into these experiences, I solicited qualitative responses from single black Christian women ages twenty-one to eighty-five. I broadly targeted women over twenty-one because adult women's decisions tend to reflect how religion has influenced their sexual decision making and how they adhere to these religious messages; that is, they are not just following their parents' rules. I included a specific emphasis on black women over the age of fifty because this demographic is experiencing a sharp increase in HIV infections, with AIDS being the fourth leading cause of death for black women in that age group. I was particularly interested in their narratives because they reframe faith-based sexuality ministries' discussions on celibacy until marriage given that they tend to seek companionship rather than marriage.

My primary methodology was womanist ethnography, with the goal of studying black women as subjects, not objects, of inquiry. Womanist ethnography involves talking with people and using their voices as sources for research. A particular gift of this technique is that it privileges the thick description of a few black women without seeking to universalize their stories or homogenize their voices. The womanist anthropologist Linda Thomas asserts that womanist ethnography involves entering the communities of black women and learning from and living among them to utilize their life experiences as primary sources, with the task of reflecting their polyvalent stories.[24] Just like womanists who use biomythographies, autobiographies, or historiographies, my emphasis is on creating space for the validity of black women's religious experiences.

In my ethnographic analysis I primarily conducted focus group interviews with semistructured and open-ended questions to solicit participants'

involvement in these ministries, their understanding of religious messages on sexuality, and their experiences as a single person. In total I interviewed thirty women over the course of thirteen months.[25] Despite soliciting a larger age range, my data came from focus group conversations with single black Christian women ranging in age from twenty-two to seventy-three. I conducted focus group interviews across the South, as well as two lengthy phone interviews with a participant in Atlanta and one in Chicago.[26] As a product of the South, I was perhaps oblivious in my interviews to the ways that living in the Bible Belt promulgates certain messages about black Christian sexuality. For instance, while being interviewed for a book on single women, the former MSNBC host and political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry stated that in her experience "marriage is an expectation and a desire of young adulthood for both men and women in the South."[27] She likened marriage to a sign of achieving adulthood, and in terms of black Christian sexuality it is certainly a sign of a mature Christian who wants to complete God's plan for her life. In an environment where blacks are expected to join a church, there is certainly pressure to participate in the norms of Bible Belt Christianity, which the sociologist Bernadette Barton classifies as the type of Christianity that permeates beyond religious institutions and is an influence on secular environments.[28] My interviewees reiterated that while growing up in churches in the South they were constantly told not to engage in premarital sex because it was displeasing to God. "Josephine" stated that in the South women are taught to "love your sons and raise your daughters," signaling different gender expectations for chastity. Simultaneously she thought Bible Belt dogma "thrives on people finding out that you did something" because there are numerous stated and unstated rules of propriety that women (especially) are expected to follow. Although the southern woman is culturally framed as a white woman, she is known by her dress, demeanor, language, and submissiveness to her parents, husband, spiritual authority, and God. [29] Research suggests that the standard of what an upright southern woman is expected to do is shared by whites and blacks.

All of the faith-based sexuality ministries I followed were technically international in focus despite being geographically southern. They were also nondenominational. As parachurch organizations, these ministries downplayed denominational distinctions, choosing to emphasize "simple theology that they claim all true Christians hold."[30] Generally they were more apt to discuss broad Christian topics like salvation, evangelizing, or spiritual warfare than to deliberate on denominational theologies. Choosing

the broad frame of Christianity and purposely running nondenominational ministries provide mass appeal because the overarching message of crafting a black Christian sexuality can be achieved without a specific denominational viewpoint. The interviewees who participated in these ministries tended to be Baptist, but this reflects my method of reaching out to participants more than it does the overall constituencies of these ministries.

After requesting the pastors' permission to advertise my study, I recruited focus group members from my two family Baptist churches (one in Chatham, Virginia, and the other in Nashville). I repeated the process of seeking pastors' permission and participants by expanding my recruitment to other Baptist congregations in the South. Overwhelmingly participants reported being lifelong members of the same Baptist congregation, middle class, and college educated, and some had graduate degrees. These initial interviews included participants diverse in age, educational background, and marital status. For instance, these women were more likely to have been married and had children at some point in their lives. All of these women were now single (either never having married or divorced), with the exception of two who had been widowed. Though I was pleased with the initial interviews, my focus group interviews indicated these respondents were nominal believers in faith-based sexuality ministries: they were familiar with the ministries, and they had bought some of the materials, but they were not the hard-core adherents I was expecting. Faith-based sexuality ministries were only one source of religious messages these women were holding in tension; others were reality TV shows with a religious focus (such as *Preachers of LA*, which had a story about Dietrich Haddon being an unmarried minister and singer who was living with the mother of his child) and secular shows dealing with sexuality that had a religious influence, like *Iyanla Fix My Life*.[31]

Because my first focus groups did not yield participants who were heavy consumers of any one particular faith-based sexuality ministry, I expanded my data set to target women who were self-proclaimed followers of one of the female evangelists. This focus group also brought a younger, more educated population of interviewees than my previous focus groups. They tended not to have married and in general had a lower number of children (zero to two, the majority having no children). I solicited these participants from Facebook and through snowball sampling of faith-based sexuality ministry group members. I gained access to this subset through my research connections as a participant observer for three years in the online

communities of the Pinky Promise Movement.[32] I also gained interviews after having been a participant observer in the Wives in Waiting group for two years.[33] As a participant observer I attended their national conferences and local group meetings and interacted in their online communities by commenting on posts and posting my own discussion feeds. This aided my ability to get to know the women and solicit focus group interviews. It also greatly expanded my understanding of the language and cultural references of these two ministries.

Participating online was at times more difficult than my in-person observation with the groups. In a survey of white evangelical sexuality websites, the sociologist Kelsy Burke notes that digital resources are constantly being rewritten by ordinary believers, all the while shaping the idea of what Christian sex should be.[34] This constant and often anonymous updating makes the task of documenting and being in the field daunting. While I did not always have to travel to maintain my connection to the ministries' community members, my in-person group members got to know me and to trust my research intent. I was never sure I conveyed that to the online communities because of their great variety during any given post. For this reason I put in more time to make my Pinky Promise page representative of my research interests and my personality so that anyone who went to my page would feel welcomed.[35] Yet sometimes circumstances forced me out of the welcoming space I had created.

For instance, while reading through a forum denouncing women who wanted to leave their marriage, I was struck by the founder's seeming acceptance of marital abuse. (She recommended that if a woman was getting abused by her husband she should seek couples counseling but not a divorce since God can "heal a broken, battered, marriage.") Within the forum several women assented to this logic, including a woman who admitted that she had been planning to serve her husband with separation papers that morning because she could no longer stand his physical abuse. As a result of the forum's conversation this woman was now "convicted" and was not going to send her husband the separation papers. I hesitated for several hours trying to decide what to do. No one in the group was suggesting that she leave her abusive husband, yet I felt desperately that she was in danger given what she had posted about his prior physical abuse of her. I knew that if I recommended divorce I would "out" myself as not being a true believer in the community chat room. Unless they had been to my Pinky Promise page it would not be evident to participants that I was in the chat room as

a researcher because my rhetoric and responses to the group postings were typically similar to the other women's responses. Ultimately I decided that as a womanist ethicist I could not stand by and be silent while a woman's life was in danger, all to protect my "cover." Using the language of the group I submitted that it surely could not be God's plan that she be abused and that God did not need her husband to physically harm her in order to lead her. Though I followed the blog post for several additional weeks, no one else suggested that separation was necessary for her safety. There was no noticeable pushback to my response from group members, but I continued to walk a thin line between my role as a researcher and the perception that I was a community member.[36]

While situating myself as a former adherent to faith-based sexuality ministries, my identity as a womanist sexual ethicist spurred my decision to intervene while observing these communities online. Womanism was also prevalent in the types of questions I asked the focus group participants. I chose a qualitative approach to reflect on the group's experiences and interpretations of the variety of sexual messages that affected their sexual decision making.[37] Yet when I began coding their responses I discovered that my expectations of faith-based ministry adherents were largely biased by my own participation in these movements. I could speak the language of the various groups because once I too had found solace in sermons, books, and conferences as I struggled with my own celibacy path as a young, heterosexual black woman with deep faith commitments. This bias meant that the questions I selected for the focus group interviews were based on a preconceived understanding of how these women viewed sexuality (based on both historical stereotypes and Christian conservative tropes).

My deliberate use of womanist sexual ethics was in response to traditionally white feminist theological ethics, from which black women's experiences are often excluded, and black feminist cultural theory, in which black women's religious lives seem to be undervalued.[38] Since Christianity is so central to the culture of the black women I was studying, a discussion of their sexual agency required taking seriously their spiritual concerns.

Overview of the Book

This book begins with Prophetess Bynum as a model of a larger cultural phenomenon. I offer one of the first detailed discussions of her imprint on faith-based sexuality ministries and the creation of a black Christian

sexuality. While the book is ultimately concerned with the impact of black religious broadcasting on black churchwomen's sexuality, the marginalization of black female televangelism and religious media in scholarly literature is also emphasized. This text breaks new ground in crafting a womanist cultural analysis because it provides the first attempt to address religion, race, and sexuality with specific attention to black female sexual agency.

Chapter 1, "Sexual Purity as PR," describes the theological tenets of black Christian sexuality, providing a particular focus on how these concepts are gendered for evangelical women. I interrogate the theological foundation of many faith-based sexuality ministries by investigating the themes of sin, sexual restraint, submission, holiness, sanctified living, and evangelical purity culture. The chapter concludes by highlighting the allure of sexual redemption or sexual awakening testimonies for black Christian sexuality, positing Bynum as the forerunner in the genre.

Chapter 2, "Reading 'Our' Bynum as Text," deconstructs Prophetess Bynum as a cultural text and representative of a black Christian sexual identity focused on females. I offer a close reading of Bynum's "No More Sheets" sermon because this moment births a genre of black faith-based sexuality ministries. Through womanist ethnography I present the experiences of black Christian women who admit to being as frustrated at Bynum as they try to live their single lives before God, all the while experiencing sexual desire. The focus groups revealed these audiences are negotiated readers of Bynum's messages, persons who choose to follow some but not all of her directives. In my analysis of Bynum as text, her messages are deemed descriptive and prescriptive, ultimately not affirming for a diversity of expressions for black women's sexual agency.

Despite this assessment of her messages for black women cultural readers, Bynum maintains a position of importance for those bequeathed her legacy of black Christian sexuality. The third chapter, "Beyond Bynum," examines why Bynum's movement matters by investigating the various models that followed her. Despite the diversity of media, there remains a similar message of submissiveness and celibacy. The contemporary faith-based sexuality ministries are tech-savvy and move far beyond the medium of television to disseminate their messages. I investigate four faith-based sexuality ministries, namely, the Wives in Waiting group, the Pinky Promise Movement, Michelle McKinney Hammond's Heartwing Ministries, and the *Soul Mate* documentary, by highlighting how these messages have expanded beyond Bynum's neo-Pentecostal beginnings. I interpret celibacy

messages that are crafted for black women by black women, ultimately positing the need for a womanist model of celibacy that nuances celibacy as a sexual choice.

The fourth chapter, "'Why I Gotta Be Gay?,'" discusses same-sex-desiring single black women who participate in faith-based sexuality ministries while maintaining allegiance to the category of black Christian sexuality that demands their celibacy and participation in heterosexuality. By interrogating what celibacy means for a woman who believes that her same-sex desire is contrary to God's will, I deconstruct messages from a popular black female e-vangelist, Ty Adams, who shares a sexual redemption story that includes her overcoming same-sex attraction. The chapter provides a womanist sexual ethics intervention in the form of sexual hospitality that accepts a full range of sexual expressions and identities as a push against passing as heterosexual in religious communities.

Chapter 5, "The Lord Still Has Work for Me to Do," analyzes the participation of senior women in faith-based sexuality ministries by investigating what it means to be sexual agents as older black women. This chapter focuses on the ethical dilemma placed before elderly women whose church standing might be questioned if it were known that they were engaging in sexual activity, especially after being widowed or divorced. Using data from focus groups, I concentrate on single Christian women who are seeking nonmarital companionship or engaging in sexual activity, which conflicts with the black Christian sexuality tropes of celibacy and marriage. Elderly churchwomen as gatekeepers of sexual silence is a function of the performance of this black Christian sexual identity. Womanist sexual ethics provides the concept of sexual generosity as a corrective to these discussions of celibacy until marriage, instead offering respect for the multiple types of relationships that senior black churchwomen can experience.

"Horny and Holy," the sixth chapter, begins the constructive task of ferreting out discussions of black female sexual desire and pleasure from faith-based sexuality ministries. Part of the mass appeal of these ministries is the candid discussions of black churchwomen's sexual urges. For those participating in the values of black Christian sexuality, there is profound interest in sexual pleasure within proper constraints. Even though these women agree that sexual pleasure is best achieved in marriage, there is still a great deal of negotiating that takes place around masturbation and other sexual taboos. Explorations of women who are passionately pursuing pleasure is a contribution of this work, as is the crafting of a womanist erotic

justice that celebrates the black female body, discusses oral and anal sex, and responds to hook-up culture or nonmonogamous, nonmarital sexual activity by emphasizing pleasure and responsibility as equal moral goods to monogamy.

The book's conclusion, "Living Sexually before God," provides the benefits of a constructive womanist sexual ethics for contemporary times by calling for black churchwomen to experience life-enhancing sex. Highlighting valuable lessons from faith-based sexuality ministries such as accountability, applicability, and accessibility, this womanist sexual ethics responds to the complicated realities that many black women experience by offering concrete tools for embracing sexual agency, pleasure, and healthy relationships. Throughout this text black women are sexual agents who negotiate their sexuality within myriad messages and decisions. This dynamic sheds light on a constructive womanist sexual ethics that encourages sexual intimacy with oneself and responsible intimacy with others. This book provides a means for black women to examine their own sexual values and truths and to give themselves concrete tools to live sexually and morally free.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 In this book the black church is defined as a predominantly black Protestant Christian body of believers. While discussions of the historical black church generally reference the seven major denominations, this study is not specific to any particular denomination, although the women I interviewed were predominantly Baptist. I adopt the womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas's assertion that while this discussion of the black church focuses more on the church's sexual silence and flaws, it "implicitly acknowledges that there are various black churches with more equitable views and practices" (*What's Faith Got to Do with It?*, 189). The term *black churchwomen* is used in scholarly discussions of black women, faith, and sexuality that seek not to homogenize women's voices but to amplify the diversity of experiences in black churches.

2 Kimberly Davis, "Sex and the Spirit : SOS for Single Christian Sisters," *Ebony*, January 2005, 108.

3 Frederick, "'But It's Bible,'" 283.

4 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 43.

5 Viefhues-Bailey, "Holiness Sex," 14. In this book I am particularly concerned with black evangelicals, so unless I want to distinguish between whites and blacks, the term *evangelicals* refers to blacks.

6 According to the historian Randall Balmer, *evangelical* refers broadly to conservative Protestants, including fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and charismatics (*Mine Eyes Have Seen the* Glory, xv–xvi).

7 Miller, "The Rise of African-American Evangelicalism in American Culture."

8 DeRogatis, *Saving* Sex, 8. Throughout the text the term *black Christian sexuality* is inclusive of both heterosexuality and same-sex desire. When it is relevant to the discussion, I note if the perspective is about heterosexuality specifically.

9 A notable exception is Marla Frederick's *Colored Television*.

10 Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,"138.

11 Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 915.

12 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15. When the anthropologist Saba Mahmood explores the concept of agency to apply it to women's pietistic participation in Egyptian

mosques, she concurs that agency must be discussed in the "grammar of concepts within which it resides" while not being too preoccupied with finding resisters or certain types of resistance (*Politics of Piety*, 34).

13 Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 36; Rose, *Longing to Tell*, 391. As pernicious today as it was in the nineteenth century, Jezebel is now represented by the image of the welfare queen, the sexually reproducing black woman whose redemption comes through state-sanctioned marriage to her children's father.

14 Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, 196.

15 Quentin Schultze posits that American televangelists are more American than Christian, with their emphasis on personal experiences over collective faith expressions (*Televangelism and American Culture*, 132).

16 Sadly the field of womanist sexual ethics is still quite new, and there are not many competing discussions of black female sexuality going on in womanist scholarship. This is why Douglas's work remains so influential. Hers is the most in-depth study, but there is also promising work by the womanists Marcia Riggs, Katie Cannon, Karen Baker-Fletcher, Pamela Lightsey, Thelathia Nikki Young, and others.

17 Cornwall, *Theology and Sexuality*, 78–79.

18 Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 66.

19 Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow*, 41.

20 DeRogatis, *Saving Sex*, 52.

21 Franklin, "Generative Approaches to Modernity, Discrimination, and Black Families," 112–13.

22 There is slim academic attention paid to the growing population of singles, and the discipline of Christian sexual ethics is woefully behind in discussing the sacred and sexual needs of singles. The ethicist Karen Lebacqz is a notable exception, as she counters the celibacy-in-singleness model by articulating that the moral norm in relationships should be appropriate vulnerability, not marriage. She contends that sexuality demands openness to another, which makes space for one to feel vulnerable; however, her theorizing does not provide a description of how to achieve this goal. See Lebacqz, "Appropriate Vulnerability," 132.

23 Silliman, *Undivided Rights*, 290.

24 Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode*, 92.

25 Thomas, "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm," 491–92. Thomas advises using focus groups and lengthy ethnographic study of the community, which I accomplished through virtual research and physical attendance in the communities. Relying on the tools of womanist ethnography to analyze these encounters, I did not mean these experiences to represent all black women in black churches. Instead they are used as examples that "point to the reality of all" by making black women's reality understandable. See Isasi-Díaz, *En La Lucha—In the Struggle*, 81.

26 Three of my focus group interviews were conducted in a library; one was conducted in a hair salon; and one was done in an otherwise empty Starbucks. We talked for around ninety minutes in each group, but women were free to stay and

speak with me after the group dispersed. Some did, and their recorded conversations with me were about thirty minutes each.

27 Melissa Harris-Perry quoted in Rebecca Traister, *All the Single Ladies*, 78.

28 Bernadette Barton has classified Bible Belt Christianity as it influences gays and lesbians, but my research concurred with the totalizing impact that religion had on the sociocultural lives of my interviewees. Barton's Bible Belt references both a region and a hegemonic religious ideology (*Pray the Gay Away*, 9–14). Regarding southern blacks being expected to find a church and facing sanctions for nonparticipation, see Ellison and Sherkat, "The Semi-Involuntary Institution Revisited."

29 While there are numerous southern stereotypes that counter this southern woman, it is typically the chaste southern female that is privileged in evangelical discourse. Juanita Bynum and Pinky Promise founder Heather Lindsey both maintain their ministries in Atlanta, Georgia. Wives in Waiting has more Sister Circles in the South than in any other region. These ministries reiterate the expectations of the southern woman described. See Lynxwiler and Wilson, "The Code of the New Southern Belle,"13.

30 Griffith, *God's Daughters*, 59. Similar to the women in Griffith's study, the women participating in these ministries decried the divisions within Christianity and saw the ministries as a way to bring about Christian unity.

31 While I expected them to participate entirely in a conservative evangelical world, many participants were deliberately engaging in religious messages from a variety of sources. For example, there has been a recent interest in depicting attitudes to religion and sexuality in reality TV shows that target black female audiences. *Mary Mary* ended season 4 with Tina Campbell rebuilding her marriage after her husband's infidelity; sex toys and STDs were highlighted on the now canceled *Sisterhood*, about pastors' wives; and in the 2014–15 season of the *Match Made in Heaven* reality TV series there was an emphasis on pastoral matchmaking.

32 First Lady Heather Lindsey founded the Pinky Promise Movement in 2012. This organization promotes abstinence in singleness and submission and fidelity in marriage. See chapter 3 for a more extensive discussion.

33 Rev. Chante Truscott founded the Wives in Waiting group in 2012. Her mission is to train women in their first marriage, the one they have with God in anticipation of their earthly nuptials. See chapter 3 for a more extensive discussion.

34 Burke, *Christians under Covers*, 3. Her work highlights scholars of digital and virtual ethnography, which validates the reliability of this research method.

35 I also made sure to use screen capture as website archiving to validate my data from the online ministries. While all of the ministries maintained publicly accessible websites, Pinky Promise also had a membership option where conversations were not public. Although my personal private page presented me as a researcher, the book only discusses in generalities data that came from my access to membership conversations out of respect for the members who may have been unaware that I was there solely as a researcher. I have changed names and not given demographic data to protect members' privacy.

36 In the field of Internet research ethics there has been attention to how researchers should determine when or if to intervene in a situation online. Because persons can post with pseudonyms or even provide less than accurate information, it can be difficult to gauge an appropriate action. There are recommendations available from the Association of Internet Researchers as well as books on ethics in virtual ethnography.

37 This methodology also created a larger buy-in from group participants, as they were able to choose their own pseudonyms and had the opportunity to approve their narratives for this book.

38 As examples of this white feminist theological model, I am influenced by the work of Beverly Harrison, Carter Heyward, Mary Hunt, Marvin Ellison, and Karen Lebacqz. These are exemplars because they represent the common themes of relational sexual ethics (e.g., privileging women's bodies, seeking interrelatedness and mutuality in sexual relationships, promoting intimacy and sexual expression). In the discipline of black feminist theory, this work is shaped by Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Evelynn Hammonds, Michelle Wallace, and Tricia Rose. Two notable black feminist theorists who are exceptions in paying attention to religious experiences are bell hooks and Hortense Spillers. I made a deliberate effort to utilize scholars of color, feminists, and womanists as my main interlocutors to amplify the emphasis on black sexuality and black religion.

1 · SEXUAL PURITY AS PR

1 Megan McDonough, "On Love: Brelyn Freeman and Timothy Bowman Jr.," *Washington Post,* November 20, 2015. Timothy Bowman also attested that he was a virgin until their wedding night, yet most of the stories have followed his wife's presentation of her virginity. Their story was publicized on *Good Morning America* and in *USA Today, Essence*, *People*, *Christianity Today,* and elsewhere.

2 Viefhues-Bailey, "Holiness Sex," 7.

3 The historian Mark Jordan concurs and posits that evangelical discussions of sexual sins have included every erotic or quasi-erotic activity performed by humans (*The Ethics of Sex,* 78). Chapter 3 describes in greater detail specific ministries' discussions of sin.

4 Soul ties are not directly described in the Bible, but evangelicals infer that godly soul ties are referenced in 1 Samuel 18, where the soul of David was knit to Jonathan, as well as Genesis 2:24, when a married couple is believed to become one flesh. Ungodly soul ties are described in 1 Corinthians 6:16.

5 Bynum, *No More Sheets Devotional*, 65. Evangelical manuals suggest placing duct tape, which represents one's heart or soul, on an individual and then removing the tape and sticking it on another individual, typically demonstrating the bonding or soul tie that occurs during sex. The object lesson is that the tape will not stick by the time you meet your "soul mate" and is dirty from previous encounters.

6 Bynum, *No More Sheets Devotional*, 13.