

Free

Freeing Black Girls Tamura Lomax

Black



Girls

A Black Feminist
Bible on Racism
and Revolutionary
Mothering

Freeing Black Girls



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BIBLE ON RACISM AND
REVOLUTIONARY MOTHERING

Tamura Lomax

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For Alexa, Chela, Kacey, Ky, Jasmine, and Black girls everywhere

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Author's Note

Consider those cringeworthy reality television shows where parents drag their kids into scenes for a storyline. Now couple that with antiblack vigilante violence and discrimination against Black folks for merely breathing, let alone talking back to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Before I'm anything, I'm a fierce protector of those I love. More, the aims of this book require a different path. That said, *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys*¹ don't use names, with the exception of public figures and on occasion in storytelling. In that case I change names. I highlight relationships or roles instead—for example, my former “pastor,” “spouse,” “sister,” “brother,” “momma,” “daddy,” and so on. And because I have two sons, I've changed their names altogether. This is especially significant in *Loving Black Boys*. When I began this project, they were in middle school. I wrote about them often and didn't think to request their consent. I remedied this misstep some years ago, however, and they both gave me their blessings and trust. Somewhere between their trust and the threat to Black men's and boys' lives and livelihood, I endeavored to find a way to honor them and the truth of the story in these perilous times. Not a single day passes without me engaging racialized and gendered angst about their lives and lack of access to safety. And while some may read this as antifeminist, my sons' welfare comes before my politics. Moreover, this book is written by a Black woman and mother in deep relationship with Black men, not estrangement. That said, “self-protective disinformation” is in order, especially for them. Truthfully, I sometimes wondered if I should include my own name. Writing about white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy and aspirational black patriarchy as a black feminist is no easy task. Apart from writing and research, such work demands a range of very real prediscourses on safety measures between my household, community, press, university, and otherwise.

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Additionally, some feminists may wince at my deployment of the word *husband* throughout this text and especially in *Loving Black Boys*. I'm well aware of the history of the term and how it relates to household management, control of resources, labor, breadwinning, and the institutionalization of heteropatriarchy in the home, community, law, and otherwise. I'm also cognizant of how Black men didn't historically get to be husbands and fathers during slavery, within the welfare state, in media, and beyond, and aren't always respected as such. Naming those who are, unequivocally, in a positive light matters. Deletion, even when political, is debilitating for reasons beyond whatever the white heteropatriarchal familial structure means to America and empire. As Audre Lorde states, Black folks never had access to that dream, anyway. Further, two things can be true at once. My husband is my partner, and this book resists heteropatriarchal masculinity. That said, I sometimes interchange the word *husband* with *spouse*, *life partner*, or *partner*, though in life beyond these pages I predominantly utilize *husband*. On a similar note, an early trusted reader of the manuscript struggled with my referring to my father as "Daddy" in print. They thought it "felt disempowering." I appreciate this feedback because *Freeing Black Girls* will make us feel a lot of things, especially discomfort. That is the intention. Critical personal and political black feminist storytelling is meant to be felt. And not all will feel good. Life is complicated. So is lived black feminism. So is this book. But please rest assured, I use the term as an empowered Black woman. "Daddy" and "Momma" are what I call my parents. And so it shall be in these pages.

Finally, I prefer *Black* over *African American*. Blackness includes the African Diaspora and refers to a diverse yet shared history in the African continent, contact/conquest, dispersal, trade, freedom, and social movement. Thus, this book deploys a capital *B* when referring to Black people, specifically, women, girls, men, boys, mothers, fathers, children, family, enslaved people, and folks.² Consequentially, liberties have been taken to change *b* to *B* in citations. Additionally, I maintain the disciplinary capitalization of the Black Church. Concurrently, *white* and *whiteness* are lowercased not to suggest a hierarchical racial reversal but to resist how the *W* has historically and contemporarily stood for manufactured supremacy as well as realized structural, institutional, social, political, and other oppressions. Generally, I use *w* to refuse racial dominance, terror, and genocide—namely, as the *W* moves between ideology and practice, for example, when it's deployed by white supremacist activists and politicians, using three fingers similar to the "OK" sign, to express "white power," thus evoking violence. Conversely, the *B* or *Black* in *Black folks*, though raveled with our own intracommunal and intraracial oppressions, has never been an invocation for global violence, domination, or collective

supremacy. Quests for supremacy and the fight for freedom from that supremacy are oppositional. These moves should come as no surprise in a book centered on Black folks in general and Black girls specifically and our collective survival against white supremacist and patriarchal violence. Still, discerning between *B* and *b* was difficult. This book doesn't capitalize *b* when referring to ideas, concepts, things, places, and so on—for example, blackness; antiblackness; or black humanity, body, male body, female body, motherhood, mothering, manhood, personhood, femininity, masculinity, gender ideals, communities, institutions, identity, experiences, endangerment, feminine-*ism*, feminine theology, feminism, gender ideology, “nuclear” family, genocide, death, captivity, oppression, bravado, life, love, music, culture, joy, freedom, thriving, consciousness, patriarchy, monster, sexism, and so on. My intention is to affirm Black people while fiercely critiquing oppression, whether deploying a *b* or a *B*.

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Acknowledgments

Sometimes the ugliness of life propels us to something wonderful. Not because we need trauma to get to the good, a notion I vehemently resist, but because many of us refuse to accept the bad and/or despair. *Freeing Black Girls* presses through a lot of ugly. That said, I never planned to write this book, nor did I want to. I needed to. I am especially thankful for the many reviewers for both *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys* and to Duke University Press for pushing me there, to an incredibly uncomfortable and vulnerable space of storytelling. *Freeing Black Girls* came alive because of your critical and incisive generosity. I only hope it does the work you imagined.

I thank my institution for time away to finish “the book.” That book was *Loving Black Boys*. Notwithstanding, “giving me back my time” provided necessary space for me to write myself into clarity. Who knew I’d write two books in the process. It’s amazing what one can do with good health, research, and dedicated time and resources. Thank you for supporting my need for creative space. Additionally, I offer special thanksgiving for the feminist mentorship and camaraderie of Kristie Dotson and Zillah Eisenstein. I’ve learned and gained enough from Dotson to last a lifetime. Thank you for guiding, seeing, challenging, and inspiring me. Thank you for your black feminist brilliance, movement, example, and power. And thank you for curating a politics of insistence. I’m better because of you. This book is—because of you. I’m also forever thankful for my sister-comrade, Z. Nobody has nudged me “to get it done” with love and conviction as you have. I jostled through fear, sadness, fire, imposter syndrome, and stress because of you. You consistently drive me toward radical love and power in ways that are invaluable. But it was your words and demand, “Don’t give a fuck about the academy while writing. . . . Get back to your creativity,” that got me all the way together. I lifted it from our text stream

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and posted it to the top of my computer. That creativity continues to activate me forward.

To Momma and Daddy, thank you for giving me life, love, and a fierceness that only comes about with parents like you. Some of these pages will be hard to read. Many others will make you smile. The bottom line is that my voice is foremost because of you. To my nieces—Alexa, Chela, Kacey, Ky, and Jasmine—every day that I wrote about Black girls and freedom, I wrote with pictures of you in my mind. I insist on a better world for you than I had as a Black girl and for you to own your power better than I ever did. Finally, to my love, our beautiful sons, and Maxx and Jesse, I awake in the dark and light thankful for you. To B, without you there are no books. You saw my future long ago, spoke that vision, and hurried me here, kicking and screaming. You knew my potential better than I did. And you welcomed the journey and evolution with grace and coalition. To my sons, I “never knew love like this before.” You energized my fighting spirit and made me think I could and must dream new worlds. Thank you for your unmatched support, understanding, patience, and love. “The book” is finally here.

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Introduction: Toxic Literacies

*Good Black Mothers, Endangered Black Boys,
and Invisible Black Girls*

I wrestled Lee and Seth from the tub and began the ritual of dressing them in their Sunday best. In just two short years I'd mastered the art of getting ready for church with two toddlers. Typically, my spouse and I would double-team the duo, or he'd take the lead because it takes me much longer to prepare. Let him tell it, my morning cup of coffee along with hair, makeup, and fashion decision-making takes at minimum two hours, particularly for fancy outings. Truthfully, it's more like one hour—pushed to the very limits of the final second. In any case, Sunday mornings were left to me. And preparing the three of us for the public was nothing short of artistry. Just before we left, the home phone rang. It was my husband, saying, "Hey, babe. I know it's Mother's Day, but don't come to church today." He was in leadership at the church and heard the sermon at an earlier service. However, as a new mother born and raised in the Black Church, I'd come to anticipate the complex doting that happens on Mother's Day. The Black Church is in no way perfect. Frankly, it can be quite savage toward Black mothers. Still, the oppugnant love experienced there is at least better than the vulgar vociferation from the rest of the world. As the

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elders would say, “Sometimes in life you have to take a little salt with your sugar.” So I thought.

The Black Church is complicated. It’s a black world within a world that proudly cavorts in antiblackness, a weekly anchorage away from unrepentant racial bias and schadenfreude, a source for critical black information, and though not the sole social center, it remains a significant communal, political, and cultural site where Black folks assemble. The service was full and sublime. Smiling brown faces and glistening chocolate flesh, donning resplendent pastels and seersucker, filled the vestibule and sanctuary. All kinds of mothering and othermothering joys, sacrifices, and pains were acknowledged through jubilating songs and spoken words that day.¹ If I had a magic wand, I would’ve paused the gorgeous gathering of Black folks there, because though the service was blissful, the sermonic moment was catastrophic. Listening intently, I sat in the pew with eyes so piercing you would think they were fistfighting the dais. Refusing to extend a single “amen,” wave of the hand, or even that forgiving smile folks offer to make others feel comfortable when things go awry, I raged by unloading a fiercely intentional unapologetic oppositional gaze.² More, I purposefully locked eyes with the pastor to ensure he bore witness to my unreserved defiance. To say it’s unnerving to speak from a podium under a steady and unequivocal disagreeable peer within a context that historically centers ecstatic call-and-response is an understatement.³

Deploying 1 Kings 3:16–28 KJV, the pastor preached about “two hos” “fighting over a baby boy.”⁴ He placed emphasis not on biblical exegesis but rather on contemporary stereotypes of morally corrupt, hypersexual, aggressive, irresponsible, lying, and cheating “baby mommas,” as a way of distinguishing between “good” and “bad” Black mothers and articulating the state of endangered Black boys in America. To drive home the point about diabolical black mothering and certain unmarried women being hos and temptresses, he jokingly chided Black girls for too easily “giving it up to brothers for a coke and a smile” and Black women for baring too much skin in the church house, therefore distracting the men and boys from the spiritual experience.⁵ He preached, “Sisters, I know it’s getting hot outside but please help the brothers out!” Congregants laughed out loud and eagerly said “Amen.” As I’ve written elsewhere, the hypersexualization of Black women and girls in the Black Church is met with spirited approval across genders more often than not because it both resonates with internalized misogynoir and differentiates among Black women and girls.⁶ Meaning, zealously shouting “Amen!” at the idea that sundresses and bare arms are so innately powerful that they somehow entice Black cisgender heterosexual men and boys away from a spiritual reckoning makes it clear one isn’t *that* kind of woman or girl.

A less sexist and pornotropic hermeneutic might've read the passage as an example of Solomon's superior impartial, unprecedented wisdom and thus fulfillment of divine promise.⁷ Others interpret the text as an illustration of a good mother and her unrivaled love for her child. A more subversive womanist or black feminist reading would've likely explored the ethnicity and culture of the two women and the relationship between them; social designations and industry opportunities for widows and/or impoverished single mothers; Old and New World laws and oppressions related to women and girls, marriage, consent, patronymics, and inheritances; and correlations between capitalism, gender, race, labor, and sex work.⁸ Such a critical stance might argue that the bellicose patriarchal rules and norms of the state make being a girl and/or an unmarried woman difficult and mothering from the margins nearly impossible. Perhaps it would also conceive how patriarchy insists on violence, damages relationships, leads to untoward survival mechanisms, and may enable dead children. Ultimately, this was a terrible textual choice for Mother's Day, however spun, as well as a missed opportunity.

To create space for thoughtful yet incisive interrogation and agency and to dis-identify with the vile sermonic representations, I waited and emailed the pastor later that week. This was 2003 and before social media and iPhones. I couldn't post a video or crowdsource support. While those mechanisms may do good work, I'm not sure they would've been the most productive in this scenario. It depends on the goal and whether it's embarrassment, freedom, thwarting behavior, deepened conversation, something else, or all of the above. To be blunt, I'm not above any of these outcomes as I've participated in all of them. And sometimes public humiliation is exactly what's needed. Nevertheless, I opted for one-on-one email conversation. In addition to calling out the misnaming of Black girls, women, and mothers and discussing the racialized gendering of the term *ho*, I suggested the pastor spend some time on the history of women, widows, and sex work should he preach that text or one like it in the future.⁹ The mothers in 1 Kings 3:16–28 weren't inherently pathological. They were surviving the patriarchy and the state.¹⁰ This isn't to say bad mothers don't exist or that harmful decisions aren't sometimes made by desperate mothers. It's to note that sociopolitical and sociocultural contexts often shape both options and choices.

More, we'd do well to consider the thorny conditions of black mothering in America, specifically. Categorically perverting all Black women, mothers, and girls, thus reducing them to historical racial tropes, let alone on Mother's Day, is playing with white supremacy.¹¹ I should pause and note I wasn't always this person. I'm a recovering semiconservative Christian who once maintained hegemonic black sexual politics and black gender ideologies.¹² And though

I questioned sex and gender power dynamics early on, I was no feminist. I might've previously joined the chorus in shouting, "Amen!" However, my husband and I were both new divinity students at this time. We were learning to question and resist harmful embedded theologies from our youth. And we were growing our family and our sociopolitical view of the world, together. Specifically, my passage toward radical black feminism, a politics and movement against sexism and patriarchy, was just beginning and as it happens is ongoing. This was a pivotal moment in my journey from black traditionalist womanhood and toxic femininity—draconian and exclusive adherence to heteropatriarchal gender ideals and performances—to brazen black feminist rebellion.¹³

It was the first time I had language to name and resist theological misogyny, foundational to the making of America, American Christianity, and the Black Church.¹⁴ Thus, this was the first time I directly attacked and deconstructed the heteropatriarchal antagonisms toward Black women and girls that occur from the pulpit. And though I'm a "preacher's kid," it was my first time having access to a pastor who had an openness to critical dialogue on sex, gender, and sexuality. He was on the front end of fighting for Black men's gay rights in the Black Church. And though male-centric, the pastor's commitment to preaching love and acceptance over homophobia against Black cisgender gay men and boys created space for me to pursue a theology of justice and eventually black feminist politics in my graduate studies. To the pastor's credit, he listened and engaged back and forth with me over the course of the week through a string of lengthy emails. The exchange wasn't pretty. We disagreed, pushed back, tumbled forward, and expressed anger. And though he loved and supported our family and promoted me and my husband to leadership positions in the church, the heated dialogue was risky.

My spouse had recently left corporate America to work full-time at the church while in graduate school, and I'd left corporate America to be a stay-at-home mom turned graduate student. The church was our sole source of income. Additionally, it was a budding Baptist megachurch in the early 2000s, a type of church commonly structured like mini-autocracies where the traditionally male pastor executed absolute authority. We'd seen other ministers get fired for disagreeing with the pastor. Further, many congregants were like family to us, offering support and childcare for our two toddlers that was unmatched. Still, neither the pastor nor I held back. A fresh sense of fearlessness took me over and some would say has never left. In the end, we found middle ground on some things and agreed to disagree on others. The debate didn't hinder our relationship as far as I could tell. I became the first woman deacon in the history of the church shortly after. Nevertheless, my spouse and I discontinued

our membership and his employment later that year. The church's movement toward a more emancipatory sexual theology failed to translate into a critique of sexism and patriarchy; undoing the autarchical organizational structure; or addressing how leadership treated cisgender, transgender, gender-neutral, nonbinary, genderqueer, bisexual, or questioning women and girls.

Several years after I left the church, graduated from divinity school, and subsequently moved away and completed my PhD studies, which explored injurious representations of Black women and girls in the Black Church and black popular culture, my divinity school invited me back to honor my work as co-founder of *The Feminist Wire*, one of the first online publications committed to intersectional feminist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist sociopolitical critique and activism. I saw the pastor in the audience and thanked him. We clashed on many things politically, theologically, and organizationally, and his views on women and girls were repressive. Yet, he was part of the reason I was there. The pastor wrote my recommendation letter to attend divinity school and was willing to engage my critiques, thus igniting my course of parrhesia in the public sphere. After the ceremony we embraced and caught up on life. He was astonished to see that the two little baby boys he visited in the hospital maternity wing just after birth and once held to the sky in the palms of his hands during their baby dedications were now teenage high schoolers. We laughed at how I was using my doctorate in religion to mass-mediate black feminist politics to millions of readers online with the intention of normalizing equity.

The pastor shared that our emails "changed" his theology and how he preached about Black women, girls, and mothers. Although I missed the transformation, I was glad to hear it. However, I'd learned some things, too. While patriarchy and misogynoir are ubiquitous and vicious, the struggle against them is possible, powerful, and dynamic. We don't have to submit to or be held hostage to second-classness or vitriolic misogynoirist theologies or ideologies just because they're wrapped in religious or otherwise palatable dogma.¹⁵ Inter- and intraracial structures of dominance, including the religious, cause harm and must be resisted.¹⁶ And call-and-response can be a form of radical engagement when speaking truth to power. However, this requires audaciously, collectively, and directly talking back. *Freeing Black Girls: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering* does exactly that. It's an insurgent black feminist love letter to myself, Black girls, women, mothers, and othermothers, which offers a critique of ideology, religion, and culture through a collection of personal stories about my journey from black girlhood to black feminist motherhood. This in mind, it's about calling out and responding to the devastating consequences of inter- and intraracial systemic misogynoirist toxicity and

misrecognition; the righteous saving grace of black feminist politics; and the power of looking and talking back.

Thus, it's not only a radical dream for black feminist futures or a spell book for black freedom but also a revolutionary quest for calling forth relations, communities, and ways of seeing, thinking, and being that value and nourish whole persons. Such a venture notes Black girls, women, mothers, othermothers, and black feminist mothering as essential to the black freedom project, and religio-cultural tropes, misogynoir, sexism, patriarchy, and discourses on black female and maternal insufficiency as toxic. Going forward, this introduction situates the backdrop against which the stories will unfold. First, it discusses the pursuit of defining "good" black mothering in black religion and culture after North American slavery, why this definition was needed, and why we need new literacies. Second, it puts forth a theory of collective endangerment across genders. Third, it engages what this book hopes to undo. Fourth, it states why I've called it a bible.

Mining the Religio-Cultural and Political Landscape on "Good" Black Motherhood

Mother's Day 2003 was neither the first nor the last sermon or commentary I'd hear on reckless and immoral black mothering, or how Black girls and unmarried Black women and mothers are especially promiscuous and threatening to Black endangered boys.¹⁷ We're served a leitmotif on how negligent and/or licentious (particularly "single") Black mothers harm Black boys from a range of cultural sources.¹⁸ The Black Church, with its political and theological commitments to black heteropatriarchal normativity and respectability, is one of many. To be clear, as the Mother's Day sermon indicates, there are dueling anxieties here: the desire to establish what a "good" Black mother is or isn't and a yearning to vocalize, cease, and/or limit black male endangerment. These schemas exist in tension across history, politics, religion, culture, and otherwise. They're misguided dog whistles for engaging black precarity intraracially, requiring rethinking. The general idea is that better Black mothers will make life more advantageous and/or safer for Black boys. I'll deal with Black mothers first and return to endangerment later.

The Black Church's obsession with Black women's and girls' bodies, sexual lives, wombs, and achievement of "proper" womanhood, which includes cis-gender heterosexual marriage and motherhood, is forceful and in a class of its own, whether or not one is Christian and/or attends church.¹⁹ Of course, not all Black women are mothers or othermothers or want to mother. And not all Black folks are raised with mothers as caregivers.²⁰ Yet, the presupposition that

Black cisgender girls one day marry and mother is persistent and persuasive, namely, as the black “nuclear” project, which requires a cisgender mother, is equated to black progress, freedom, and strength.²¹ The belief is that strong black cisgender “nuclear” families equal strong communities and maybe one day a powerful diaspora. In tandem, becoming a Black wife and mother is pertinent to becoming a “real” woman.²² Here, I mean to highlight the Black Church and cultural notion that only “real” women have uteri, breasts, vaginas, and the “natural” ability to birth children, as well as the idea that “real” Black women marry Black men and have babies. Thus, childless, unmarried, queer, and transgender women may not be seen as “real” by some.

Hence, I was called a “real” woman for the first time when I announced my pregnancy with my eldest son. The second time was when a male deacon at church asked if I had a C-section like his wife. When I said “No,” he responded, “Oh, you’re a ‘real’ woman!” To which another woman chimed in saying, “I had mine natural!” Corroborating birth stories about our vaginas, levels of “realness,” and the efficacy of epidurals with a male deacon wasn’t on my bingo cards. The rabbit hole for who is or isn’t “real” is incessant and insatiable. Being a “real” woman is a virtue in the Black Church and black culture. More recently, social media serves as a site for embracing and mediating “real” womanhood among Black cisgender heterosexual women, as a response to transgender and non-Black women dating and marrying Black cisgender men. Simultaneously, online platforms have been widely used by Black cisgender heterosexual men and boys to articulate a desire for more traditional Black women and girls. To some, marriage and motherhood are “the” only and/or ultimate goals for punctilious passage from black girlhood to virtuous black womanhood.

These ideas aren’t original. I discuss them at length in *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (2018). General views on Christian motherhood are shaped by beliefs about natural hierarchy between men and women and gender roles, which often interchange womanhood and motherhood because cisgender women and girls are expected to marry and populate the earth. As I write in *Jezebel Unhinged*,

Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals* (350 B.C.), which pioneered ideas about sex division and natural hierarchy, . . . metaphysically constructs all females as deviations from the male “norm.” While males realized their full potential because they had penises and could ejaculate, females were interpreted as imperfect, mutilated, and weak unrealized males. No penis and menstruation served as proof, confining women to a lower place in society based on “natural hierarchy.” In *The Body and Society: Men, Women,*

and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity (1988), historian Peter Brown notes an appropriation of these ideas among second-century Christians in Rome. He argues that ideas about womanhood, couched in Christian and political beliefs about natural hierarchy and motherhood, shaped relationships between men and women and the Roman aristocracy and the enslaved. Brown posits that these ideas placed significant pressure on women and girls to populate the Roman Empire for fear of their world coming to an end due to a lack of (male) citizens. It was believed that girls as young as fourteen-years-old should move from puberty to child-bearing with “little interruption,” becoming “bedfellows of men.”²³

Specifically, women’s and girls’ utility lies in service, pleasure, and parturition. This viewpoint can also be found in early colonial white America. However, neo/coloniality imagined motherhood as a sacred duty and vocation for white cisgender heterosexual women, on one hand, and Black cisgender girls, women, and mothers as unfit and unscrupulous jezebels, sapphires, mummies, welfare queens, baby mommas, and otherwise, on the other.

That is to say, the human and sexual trafficking, assault, rape, and forced breeding of African bondswomen and girls in North America reread them not as virtuous or dutiful but as bio-baby-factories for mass-producing commodified units of labor for populating and serving the slave economy.²⁴ To justify these conditions the bondswomen and girls were reinterpreted as inherently and categorically pathological and thus victim blamed for their treatment.²⁵ Those that failed to produce children were discarded and/or used for other sexual purposes. And though African bondswomen sometimes married, they and their children were properties of the state, which ignored sacred bonds, oaths, and marital unions in the same way it disregarded African tribal connections, autonomy, rituals, languages, communal structuring/s, kinships, spiritual beliefs, and more. In slavery, the black female body, married or unmarried, was reread as the site of gross national product, not nobility. The quest to define “real,” “good,” and virtuous womanhood emerges against that context.

The shift from African bondswoman to freed Black woman caused moral panic as the state and race tried to make sense of Black cisgender women’s and girls’ bodies, sex, and wombs in the new context. Freed Black cisgender women and girls had more choices in terms of what to do or not to do with their bodies and could aspire to respectability as wives and mothers (rather than slaves, work oxen, jezebels, and breeders) if they so desired.²⁶ Concurrently, freed men and women wanted Black cisgender women and girls to be more appropriately recognized so that they might receive better sociopolitical, sociocultural, and

socioeconomic treatment. However, restoring black cisgender heterosexual girlhood, womanhood, and motherhood from the desecrations of slavery also led to more policing of bodies, identities, and sexualities, and therefore, to further misrecognition. For example, the Black Church necessarily countered colonial narratives on innate unscrupulousness, while often drawing on Victorian notions of femininity and virtue—nurture, purity, piety, submission, and domesticity. This led to a treacherous circular romp with racialized gendered stereotypes as well as unfair and unrealistic expectations of Black mothers.

Angst around proving that respectable Black women and mothers exist sometimes merged Victorian ideals with biblical figures, such as the “virtuous woman” of Proverbs 31 or Mary, the mother of Jesus, over and against stereotypes about “bad” Black girls, unmarried women, and/or mothers. Examples include tropes about illicit sex; aggressive, domineering, and castrating matriarchs who emasculate Black men and boys or who refuse to marry and/or have children altogether; “bad” mothers who neglect their children, husbands, and/or household duties; and so on. I’ve personally heard numerous sermons juxtaposing the virtuous woman in Proverbs and Mary, the mother of Jesus, against Jezebel, Bathsheba, and, of course, Mary Magdalene as a binary for cataloging Black women and girls.²⁷ A few years ago, I saw a Black Church flyer online advertising a sermon titled “Mary, the Mother of Jesus, not Mary Magdalene!” It was likely for Mother’s Day or a special Women’s Day service. The surfeit of religio-cultural production defining what Black women and girls should or shouldn’t aspire to is cogent. Even if well-intentioned, countering white supremacist stereotypes with new ones in blackface isn’t effective.

I refer to this tragic binary as black feminine-ism and black feminine theology, each of which is ardently positioned against black feminism.²⁸ The latter not only critiques sexism and patriarchy but supports women’s right not to marry or have children—while still having sexually fulfilling and love-filled lives. Black feminine-ism is rooted in binary ideas about natural hierarchy, heteronormative patriarchy, hypermoralism, black gender ideology, toxic femininity, and the black “nuclear” project, which anticipates childbearing. It places emphasis on feminine utility and ideals, such as submission, respectability, conventional beauty, and sexual purity. Further, it undergirds a black feminine theology in the Black Church, invested in contrasting “good” and “bad” black girlhood, womanhood, and motherhood, and more, “proper” and “improper” ways of being and knowing. Black feminine theology counters “jezebelian/ho theology.”²⁹ This reduces Black women and girls who have sex to either hos or wives.³⁰ And so-called hos, along with other tropes of “bad” womanhood and girlhood, especially as the biblical character Jezebel is seen as

particularly scandalous and domineering, are blamed for reproducing pathology in black communities, families, and children.³¹ Synchronously, wives (aka “real” women) are charged with helping to uplift the race through “proper” femininity, docility, child-rearing, resourcefulness, industriousness, and spirituality.³² This is a heavy lift for Black women. It suggests they can fix or heal all that has been broken by racial dehumanization through their bodies and/or by contorting themselves to align with superficial gender ideologies and roles.

I don’t care how sexy, appealing, necessary, or natural black popular culture and religion try to make them appear; black feminine-ism and black feminine theologies are prisons. They mean to problematize Black women and girls who fail to submit to Black men and boys and cisgender heteropatriarchal gender ideals and norms; limit expression; justify violence against them; and disempower them. Unconsciously or not, they fortify what Melissa Harris-Perry refers to as a “crooked room.” As Black folks do in the Black Church, “Turn to your neighbor and say, ‘they’re not for our collective thriving, sis.’ They won’t make us better or save our children.” In *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (2011), Harris-Perry argues that racial and gendered stereotypes were central to nation building as well as constructing a crooked room wherein Black women and girls must navigate against consistent systematic misrecognition, which denies full and equal participation in the state and the ability to act as citizens.³³ Building on bell hooks’s oppositional theory of looking, Harris-Perry asserts looking—as a person of relative power and privilege defining a person or group of less power and privilege—is infused with power and thus is a political act. Therefore, proper recognition is a precondition for citizenship whereas misrecognition, the projection of stereotypical derogatory assumptions about character and identity, is the basis for dehumanization, violence, and denying equity, power, justice, resources, opportunities, and full and equal participation within the body politic.

Freeing Black Girls calls for an alternative and holds that the end game for Black girls, women, mothers, and othermothers must center autonomy, freedom, self-love, safety, power, self-definition, proper recognition of their complex humanity, black love, mutuality, equity, justice, opposition, survival, full and equal participation within the body politic, if they so choose, partnership, and more.³⁴ Additionally, it asserts that Black women and girls are emphatically not defective, second-class, or immanent nurturers. More, raising autonomous, productive, and empowered Black children in America is our collective responsibility across genders. Yet, good black mothering is, among many things, black feminist—because good mothering requires explicit rebellion against racist, heterosexist, heteropatriarchal, classist, and imperialist oppression. It has nothing

to do with how one expresses their gender or sexuality, nor does it require a cape. That said, *Freeing Black Girls* emphasizes mothering not due to destiny or duty but because it was mothering my Black sons that inspired me to rethink the political role of specifically black mothering, which is the starting point for this book and my black feminism.

I began this project writing about mothering Black boys after the tragic shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. Focusing on Black boys felt urgent to me. I was sitting with sociopolitical fears around raising Black boys to men amid the multiple intersecting layers of endangerment they faced due to white supremacy, such as racism, militarized policing, violence, joblessness, poverty, school-to-prison pipelining, twenty-first-century public lynching by white vigilantes, and so on. I was also concerned with the religio-cultural effeminophobic, homophobic, transphobic panic around gender identity, representation, and sexuality, which was blaming Black mothers for raising troubled and/or “soft” boys and therefore leaning further into heteropatriarchal ideals.³⁵ More, I wanted to dispel the viewpoint that Black mothers can’t successfully raise Black boys to men or are the cause for their demise. I longed to make it clear that being a “real man” doesn’t have to be synonymous with patriarchy, birthing children, heterosexism, transphobia, or achieving “nuclear” status. As I was raising my sons to understand, black critical consciousness for collective freedom; lived commitments to race, sex, sexual, and gender equity; undivided political power; allied sexual subjectivity; and intracommunal love and healing were superior aspirations. I hoped to establish that surviving America necessitated building black feminist kinships rather than alienating Black mothers, women, and girls.

Additionally, as more Black boys lay slain in the streets and white and white-adjacent antiblack vigilantes became younger and more organized and ballsy, questions about mothering unfairly became louder: “Where are the mothers?!” I wanted to write something that resisted further burdening Black mothers for the social ills in society and instead focused on the radical possibilities of our work. And though I began the first book, initially titled *Parenting against the Patriarchy: Raising Non-toxic Sons in White Supremacist America*, with a spirit of immense and grossly naive hopefulness, it didn’t last. The long game of normalizing fascism, ultranationalism, white Christian militia, and white supremacist governance, at the highest levels and ungraspable speeds, happened. More, a global pandemic happened. Each of these disproportionately killed Black folks. By the time I circled back around to finishing the book on Black boys, I was in a deep state of sadness and thinking a lot about death. Writing about my sons after 2020 made me weep. I was trying to explain and call forth what felt like an impossibility. The ancestors remind us that resisting oppression

requires a kind of openness to violence and/or death. Notwithstanding, I refused to center death in my analyses on black life and leaned into survival for Lee and Seth. However, the project came to a standstill as I faced the fact that mothering Black boys with black feminist politics didn't happen in a vacuum.

How could I dream of their survival without first confronting mine? The narrative on black male endangerment expresses cultural fear around white oppression; "bad" mothering; absent fathers; cisgender heterosexual expression, emasculation, and castration; lynching; stereotypes about the black male monster and/or rapist; incarceration; law and order; preschool-to-prison pipelining; underemployment; and otherwise. However, it censors my experiences as a Black girl and woman, and as also endangered. As Black Church sex and gender politics and the Mother's Day sermon reveal, Black men and boys can be a danger intracommunally, too. That is, Black women and girls are threatened both by what bell hooks refers to as white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal masculinity and by aspirational black patriarchy.³⁶ I needed to explore who I hoped Lee and Seth would be, their experiences, and very real anxieties—as well as my exposure to racism, sexism, misogynoir, and heteropatriarchy. More, I had to look at and talk back to the Black boys and men I encountered while growing up. How could I center what Lee and Seth needed from me as their Black mother and not examine what I needed as a Black girl and woman, given the dangers and pleasures I experienced? Yes, Black boys are endangered, but what about Black girls?³⁷

Freeing Black Girls resists the religio-cultural propensity to view Black cisgender heterosexual men and boys as endangered and needing power, capital, and protections while predominantly engaging Black women and girls in terms of problems, respectability, and/or whether or not they "properly" fit into the black "nuclear" project. It asks the following questions: What do Black girls need to powerfully thrive? What makes a "good" Black girl, woman, and/or mother in the current political context? How might we shift from sociopolitical, historical, cultural, and theological literacies that imagine Black girls, women, and mothers as second-class, demonic, insufficient, immoral, and/or inhumanely respectable and heroic in terms of proximity to patriarchy? How can we cultivate contexts for black love for all Black people rather than those in response to fear of black endangerment and dehumanization?³⁸ And how do we encourage autonomous Black girl revolutionaries, agitators, militants, and freedom fighters? This book energetically presents black feminist mothering against the patriarchy as my starting point.

To this end, *Freeing Black Girls* considers how we might parent in general, and mother specifically, Black girls to women so that their humanity, endangerment, delights, goals, and need for safety and sociopolitical power are centered over and against cisgender feminine ideals, respectability, or even imaginary black

princess-damsels-in-distress tropes.³⁹ More, it explores what we can learn from Black girls, how these lessons might make us better, and what parents need to know. Most important, it calls forth a future where our contexts for how we arrive at certain places and/or decisions matter; where neither Black cisgender boys or girls nor nonbinary nor transgender nor genderqueer nor questioning children are misrecognized, invisible, hyperlegible, bound by scripts, or prey; where all Black children matter; where Black folks materialize emancipatory identities, goals, relations, communities, theologies, politics, and encounters; where Black cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary girls turned women have a chance to thrive without violence; where the black maternal is no longer synonymous with pathology and/or death but instead with warrior strength, political possibility, and power; and where Black folks aren't intracommunally endangered.⁴⁰

After completing *Freeing Black Girls*, I turned back to what is now titled *Loving Black Boys: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering*. The books are thematically linked using motherhood, and more specifically black feminist mothering, as a bridge. However, whereas *Freeing Black Girls* is about my journey from conventional black girlhood to revolutionary black feminist motherhood, *Loving Black Boys* is about the challenges of mothering, loving, and empowering Lee and Seth while collectively surviving white supremacist capitalist patriarchy; the black feminist politics and lessons I tried to teach them; and how I sought to help them realize a freer future. The books talk back to each other; take black precarity seriously; appreciate our need for healing and one another; and understand black feminist mothering as an imperfect and earnest ambition. While I'm no longer naive enough to think I can change the world (or maybe I am), I still project the possibilities of a black living hope that is irreducible to the immediacy and/or force of black suffering, recognizes the ancestors' delicate balance between terrorizing absurdity and the practice and anticipation of freedom, and dares to take old problems and engage them in new ways that may make a difference.

The Collective Endangerment of White Supremacist Capitalist Heteropatriarchy

If there was ever any doubt, the last ten years laid American toxicity bare and left the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy endangering us all completely naked. Undoing toxic literacies and encounters and imagining a different kind of future requires honestly facing the source of illness and working our way back. Aimé Césaire asserts, "A nation which colonizes . . . is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly, progressing

from one consequence to another, one denial to another, calls for its Hitler, I mean its punishment.”⁴¹ Black people survive against an expanse of toxins. And by toxicity, I mean to name the social, political, institutional, structural, cultural, ideological, and interpersonal moral bankruptcy flowing through America’s veins. I mean to pinpoint the stink of lethal settler and neocolonial domination and contamination that keeps Black people from living and experiencing joy without the threat of white gazing, regulation, disbandment, retribution, disciplining, dehumanization, or death. Some see this as manifest destiny.⁴² Others more rightly call it white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal masculinity, the preeminent threat to black life and progress. And namely, as it not only holds us captive but also maintains and produces a host of other prisons.

The political battle for white Christian heteropatriarchal masculine dominance is presently on full display. Florida governor Ron DeSantis signed a bill into law prohibiting teaching general education courses “based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, or privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States.”⁴³ More, the culture war to silence words like *racism*, *misogyny*, *sexism*, *discrimination*, *antiblackness*, and *gay*, which serve to increase bigotry, violence, hate, heteropatriarchy, confusion, fear, and white power, is winning. From state to state we see emboldened white deputization; increased police brutality and racial profiling; the dismantling of the First Amendment; a flagrant and defiant merging between white Christianity and state; parents and politicians preaching hate while banning schoolbooks that lean toward equity; religious and sexual intolerance; normalization of racial and sexual violence; the collapse of civil rights and affirmative action; the co-opting of Black Lives Matter and “woke” ideology as treason; the razing of health care; the gutting of women’s and abortion rights; unbridled gun violence with no hope for gun control; undisguised systemic sociopolitical disinvestments in predominantly black communities; climate change denial; housing and labor insecurity; vitalized antiblack alienation; a barefaced conservative court structure; a lack of safety and opportunity for Black folks; and more.

We’re witnessing white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal power hysterically, violently, and legally protect itself and maintain power, wealth, and privilege with a renewed vengeance. Racial, gender, class, and sexual equity stand in opposition to that, producing competing pandemics for Black folks and keeping anxieties high between Black people and particularly Black cisgender heterosexual men and everyone else.⁴⁴ We’re all screaming “danger!” because we’re all one decision away from not being able to breathe, yet we’re not pausing long enough to look at why this is and how our collective experiences both overlap and differ. Unresolved and unspoken slave beginnings and

historical tensions around Black women's and girls' bodies, sexual encounters, and mothering provide a clue for interpreting and healing contemporary agitations passed from generation to generation, etched in our psyches and flesh. We need to discuss the patronymic, how it was an empty category for African bondsmen, and how, though slave mothers couldn't claim their children, their status as slaves, freed, or free foretold the child's status and identity. That the child inherited slavery or freedom from their mother, not the father, made some interpret the Black/African slave mother as a site of resentment and thus blameworthy for keeping the slave economy going and limiting Black men's possibilities for participating in patriarchy.

I discuss this more closely in *Loving Black Boys* but imagine the complexity of cisgender heterosexual masculinity being limited to providing, protecting, labor, land, legacy, leadership, wealth, inheritance, offspring, and otherwise, and having no inherent collective legal access to it, let alone a right to freedom and autonomy. One response to righting the empty patronymic was establishing "real" black manhood as a political priority, thus enabling certain performances of black masculinity within families, communities, and liberation efforts. That is, though North American slavery produced a ledger system that equated all Black/African slaves to animals and criminalization, the free black male body registered its own logic in race and patriarchy. Meaning that if Black captive mothers bequeathed bondage to their children and Black captive fathers were legally banished in name and body from all aspects of childbirth and paternity, then claiming patriarchy, even if aspirational, for Black fathers in freedom would be a priority for establishing black freedom and humanity. In the essay "Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo)Slave Narrative" (2016), Zakiyyah Iman Jackson writes, "Slavery is a technology for producing a *kind* of human," "the black body is an essential index for the calculation of degree of humanity and the measure of human progress."⁴⁵ Specifically, slavery created language, ideas, and laws to inscribe "Otherness" and false logics of second-classness on all Black folks.

However, as Ta-Nehisi Coates notes in *Between the World and Me* (2015), white men attempting to solidify their social status argued there were two classes of people in America, divided not by socioeconomics (the rich and the destitute) but by race: whites and Blacks, or really, white men (and eventually women) and Black men.⁴⁶ Regardless of class, many white men (and women) believed they were inherently superior to Black men. While divesting all Black folks of humanity and rereading the collective as nonessential, the complete erasure of Black women and girls leaves an opening for potential patriarchal aspirations. And though historians rightly argue African bondsmen were absolutely not

seen as men, as the institution reimagined them as animals, mules, criminals, monsters, and breeders, the underlying ideology hierarchizing men in particular presents possibilities for free Black men and boys to engage patriarchy, even if within a supposed second class. Simultaneously, Black cisgender men and boys were seen as a different *kind* of male body—a lesser yet competitive male body—and therefore a threat, physically, sexually, and otherwise, to be hunted and tamed. The political and theological project of establishing “real” black manhood occurs against this backdrop.

Admittedly, it’s easier to preach that there’s something wrong with Black women, mothers, and girls and how they need to get it together to ensure better outcomes for Black children and communities in general and Black boys specifically than to do the difficult work of traveling through these traumatic lines of thought. hooks writes the following in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), “It is not just society’s investment in patriarchal masculinity that demands that Black boys be socialized away from feeling and action; they must also bear the weight of a psychohistory that represents Black males as castrated, ineffectual, irresponsible, and not real men. It is as if Black parents, cross-class, believe they can right the wrongs of history by imposing onto Black boys a more brutal indoctrination into patriarchal thinking.”⁴⁷ As I assert in *Loving Black Boys*, Black folks are necessarily invested in Black cisgender heterosexual men and boys being free, autonomous, safe, and whole. Subverting black male-centered animality and monster narratives is mandatory. Yet, “real” black manhood, often synonymous with intraracial cisgender heteropatriarchal male dominance, enables intracommunal toxicities. In *New Black Man* (2015), Mark Anthony Neal asserts that social consciousnesses in Black men and boys often center a remixed version of black nationalism and/or Afrocentrism, which have histories of sexism, homophobia, misogynoir, and transantagonism.⁴⁸ We need to find another and more collectively emancipatory way forward.

A few years ago, I saw a social media post that included a picture of a lone Black boy sitting atop a soccer ball on a grass field intently looking ahead. The caption read: “‘Toxic Masculinity’ 43% of boys are raised by single mothers. 78% of teachers are female. So, close to 50% of boys have 100% feminine influence at home and 80% feminine influence at school. Toxic masculinity isn’t the problem. The lack of masculinity is.” Questionable math and statistics aside, and while it’s true, society needs more men teachers, the establishment of “real” black manhood against femininity and black womanhood, and in this case Black mothers, underlines a primary tenet of heteropatriarchy: that women and girls are deficient and/or problems. More testosterone in the classroom or at home will not make “real” men. This in no way negates the importance of

Black fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, or male partners, friends, mentors, leadership, teachers, or strength, however.⁴⁹ It's to say patriarchal masculinity is a product of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy and therefore a colonizing prison that defines "realness" through hierarchies and oppressions rather than commitments to love of self and others and communal accountability. It's also to say, though I get the need to imagine a hypermasculine heteropatriarchal black cisgender ideal as a magical binary counter to white supremacy, what's broken and counterfeit can make one neither whole nor *real*.⁵⁰

More, a pro-black consciousness rooted in heteropatriarchy, resentment, domination, and erasure is antiblackness camouflaged. And antiblackness from any angle is both illiberal and a danger. This includes the Black Church, black culture, and aspirational black patriarchy. None of this has enfranchised Black folks, stopped white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal violence, kept us safe, or healed the wounds we collectively face from previous and/or current human and sexual trafficking; sexual violence; biocapitalism; shame; broken kinships; theft of bodies, families, language, land, cultures, tribes, traditions, spiritualities, histories, and otherwise; forced surrogacy; sociopolitical regulation; and death-dealing uncertainty. None of it will recover what was lost. Ignoring these archives and tensions will impede progress and resistance efforts and cause Black folks to implode, however.

Undoing Toxicities and Dreaming Up the World We Want

I often wonder what led the pastor to preach that Mother's Day sermon outside of sexism. Were we scapegoats for hostilities toward his mother, other-mother, or some other Black woman or girl? Was there something he needed or wanted from his mother or some other woman? Was he sublimating frustrations with white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy (or perchance his father) with Black mothers? Did he feel unsafe, unseen, misrecognized, disempowered, or misunderstood as a Black man in America? Was it the negative dividends of aspirational black patriarchy or maybe angst over promises of an "American Dream"? I can never claim to know. I find this 1984 dialogue for *Essence* magazine, titled "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin," particularly useful in thinking about the possible motivation for the pastor's theory/theology. Baldwin posits,

One of the dangers of being a Black American is being schizophrenic, and I mean "schizophrenic" in the most literal sense. To be a Black American

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is in some ways to be born with the desire to be white. It's a part of the price you pay for being born here, and it affects every Black person. We can go back to Vietnam, we can go back to Korea. We can go back for that matter to the First World War. We can go back to W. E. B. Du Bois—an honorable and beautiful man—who campaigned to persuade Black people to fight in the First World War, saying that if we fight in this war to save this country, our right to citizenship can never, never again be questioned—and who can blame him? He really meant it, and if I'd been there at that moment I would have said so too perhaps. Du Bois believed in the American dream. So did Martin. So did Malcolm. So do I. So do you. That's why we're sitting here.⁵¹

To which Lorde responds,

I don't, honey. I'm sorry, I just can't let that go past. Deep, deep, deep down I know that dream was never mine. . . . I was Black. I was female. And I was out—out—by any construct wherever the power lay. So if I had to claw myself insane, if I lived I was going to have to do it alone. Nobody was dreaming about me. Nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out. . . . Even worse than the nightmare is the blank. And Black women are the blank. I don't want to break all this down, then have to stop at the wall of male/female division. When we admit and deal with difference; when we deal with the deep bitterness; when we deal with the horror of even our different nightmares; when we turn them and look at them, it's like looking at death: hard but possible. If you look at it directly without embracing it, then there is much less that you can ever be made to fear.⁵²

Black liberative and humanizing ethics begin not with America's dreams, definitions, limitations, oppressions, and toxicities but instead with the innate autonomous right to self-define and activate that meaning in the community and the world; to collectively imagine and create the communities of care we want; to insist on what feels like impossibility; and to talk back to and undo that which doesn't serve us.

Hope based on access to America's dream, which requires heteropatriarchy as a theoretical framework and, for some, deploying stereotypes as a methodology, causes dissonance at best. Put it another way: aspirational black heteropatriarchy, which needs both misogynoir and stereotypes about Black women, mothers, and girls to work, won't provide access to the dream because the dream, its politics, rules, and grammars on race, sex, gender, sexuality, and class were never meant for our survival. We need a motivation, theory, and

method that seeks freedom and quality of life for all Black people. That said, the inspiration for *Freeing Black Girls* is knowing the dream isn't ours. Thus, the work ahead includes undoing its literacies and oppressions, rethinking what's good for us and how we might better survive, getting at what's really ailing us, reimagining the role of black mothering, and exploring "the blank" by foregrounding Black girls' everyday experiences.

The theoretical framework guiding this book is black feminism, and the methodology is "the personal is political." *Freeing Black Girls* notes that the personal, psychological, and emotional experiences of Black girls, women, mothers, and othermothers are inherently political. As the Combahee River Collective asserts, the most profound and radical politics come directly out of our own identities. Or, as Patricia Hill Collins posits, critical meaning, and thus the origins of feminist theory, emerges from our experiences. In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2004), hooks argues that though feminists have done the work of critiquing patriarchy, they've been reluctant to speak about men and boys and specifically our deep connections as daughters, sisters, mothers, aunts, lovers, sex objects, and so on.⁵³ She asserts, however, our struggle to end sexist domination must begin where we live, and not solely with critiques but with explorations of our opaque connections as daughters, sisters, aunties, friends, nieces, and mothers. *Freeing Black Girls* begins at home.

Drawing from research, history, and my experiences as a Black girl, mother, wife, daughter, niece, sister, and black feminist, it represents *my* journey and struggle through black girlhood to motherhood. Concurrently, it serves as an offering to Black mothers, daughters, fathers, sons, and all Black children navigating a world filled with both incessant trauma and unrelenting possibility. This is not a claim on universalism or black gender essentialism. The personal narrative, which is political, recounts experiences while informing a universal story of living, surviving girlhood, and growing into mothering while Black in America. This collective history is indispensable for combating structural oppressions. In chorus, *Freeing Black Girls* recognizes my coming of age moves between socioeconomic struggle and privilege. It posits that white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy and aspirational black patriarchy ignore black mobility and means because misogynoir has no sex, race, sexuality, class, or gender. Regardless, it explores whether black identity and experiences with white supremacy, white nationalism, and black sexism differ due to class and whether progressive black feminist mothering is class based. The reader will have the last word. I only ask that you at least thumb through *Loving Black Boys* first, where it comes to the fore—as does my class positionality.

In full transparency, I struggled with critical honesty, imposter syndrome, and imagining radical possibilities in view of this. You can't discuss white supremacy, the slave trade, neocoloniality, or even aspirational black patriarchy without engaging in a critique of capitalism and imperialism, which for some of us feels implicating. The rise of Western capitalism required black occupation, ownership, dehumanization, and suffering. It hinges on a built-in underclass, sexual division of labor, and the world's resources being hoarded and controlled by few. However, black survivalist accumulation and white supremacist capitalist accumulation aren't the same. No one is poor or alienated from resources needed to survive because they are white. More, Black transgender, nonbinary, queer, and cisgender women, girls, mothers, and othermothers, whatever their limited participation in the capitalist structure, function at the bottom of this paradigm, with the poor, disabled, undocumented—*plus* beneath that. This makes for distinct experiences and inequities within the collective story.

A Spell Book for Black Freedom

While Black Church attendance is decreasing among younger generations who are increasingly more interested in black spiritual alternatives, religious pluralism, democratic practices, and justice-centered theologies, especially after 2020, most Black folks in North America are still Christians, and thus the Christian Bible remains an essential form of literacy.⁵⁴ In *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (1978), Albert J. Raboteau asserts that many North American slaves who embraced Christianity were "Bible Christians" who used the Bible for literacy and to support and articulate their right to freedom.⁵⁵ It was a spell book for learning to read, naming, resisting, plotting, and a sacred object full of wise tales and sayings. Their interpretations of the text were irreducible and often oppositional to that of white missionaries, ministers, and slavers. In *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (2014), Eddie S. Glaude Jr. posits that black religion in North America emerges in the encounter between faith and all its complexity, white supremacy, and imperial ambition.⁵⁶ This convergence shapes the slaves' reading of the Bible and the historic Black Church. More, it redeems the profaned Christianity of the slavers and constructs a site for self-recreation and communal advancement.⁵⁷

Leaning into this, *Freeing Black Girls* reinterprets "bible" through a black feminist framework. Specifically, it deploys black feminist religious thought and black feminist religio-cultural criticism as lenses for reading phenomena and redeeming Black women and girls from profaned ideologies, theologies, and

representations. Black feminist religious thought and religio-cultural criticism explore how religious meanings show up and operate in our cultural encounters. The primary task is to illumine religious practices, medias, and/or ideas important to Black people and especially Black women and girls; intervene on taken-for-granted ideas; and unwind Black women and girls from misogynoirist metanarratives.⁵⁸ *Freeing Black Girls* holds that such an offering is both oppositional and sacred. Explicitly, *Freeing Black Girls* is a sacred form of literacy and collection of stories meant to articulate and support black self-re-creation, communal advancement, and freedom. What makes it sacred is its unyielding commitment to black love, liberation, thriving, and sovereignty, and its belief that all black lives—whatever their gender, class, or sexual identity—matter.⁵⁹ Sadly, this is a distinctive shift away from conservative Christianity and some profiles in the contemporary Black Church.⁶⁰ However, this book is in no way a final authority. It's meant to shift, change, grow, push, and pull. As with sacred literature, it allows the reader to enter the world of the author to make sense of history, theory, and theology as well as their own narrative—and in their own way.

The structuring of this book entails a big letter, mini-letters, and a collection of stories (chapters). And though the book begins with a love letter to me, each chapter starts with a mini-letter to me and Black girls. However, the primary audience is inclusive. The chapters/stories, which aren't in strict chronological order, are thematic, theoretical, and personal.⁶¹ Because of this, *Freeing Black Girls* makes use of “I,” “we,” and “us” in concert with the distant “they,” “them,” and “their.” In addition, it proudly utilizes Black Language throughout the text, but especially in the letters. To this end, and though a “no-no” in academic writing, the reader has likely already pinpointed the perhaps alarming deployment of contractions, which aid the flow of storytelling, voice, and moving in between the personal, political, academic, and otherwise. In *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity and Pedagogy* (2020), April Baker-Bell argues that Black Language is the mother tongue, which comes out of North American slave experiences, and which imparts knowledge, reflects knowing, and socializes Black folks to understand the world and survive.⁶² The academic tendency to suggest there's a standard way of writing or Standard English implies a racial linguistic hierarchy that is interconnected with the larger social ordering, which diminishes Black people, culture, life, and so on. This book doesn't just center Black people, stories, and language; it's meant to be both read and *felt*.

Chapter 1, “Black Girls Matter: Letter to My Fourteen-Year-Old Self,” is a story of my genesis, rebirth, and retrieval, equipped with “ten commandments” I wish I'd known previously and for every Black girl going forward. Chapter 2, “F*ck Y'all Feminism': Black Girls, P-Valley, Rape Culture, and Erotic Power,”

uses the television series *P-Valley* to explore the sexual vulnerabilities Black girls face regardless of class and how black- religion, patriarchy, and respectability work in tandem with and often reproduce white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, even as each intends to oppose it. Chapter 3, “‘Break My Soul’: Precarity and Resurrection in Evangelical Heteropatriarchal Antiblack America,” examines my coming of age in Northern California against the threat of white evangelical, *nice* white liberal, and black sexist infernos, and how I found sacred and life-changing power in black feminism. Chapter 4, “Emancipating Proverbs 31: Liberating Rough, Nasty, and Aggressive Black Girls to Women,” discusses the force of the “virtuous” woman and its emphasis on Black cisgender women’s wombs, desirability, marriageability, male approval, submission, domesticity, and purity. Chapter 5, “Ordinary or Insurgent? From Toxic Femininity to Revolutionary Mothering,” engages the US Supreme Court to explore the world we have and where it seems we’re headed and turns to revolutionary black mothering and othermothering to dream up something different. The coda, “Toward Sanctuary (and *Loving Black Boys*): Black Feminist Mothering, an Alternative Literacy, Philosophy, and Practice,” outlines foundational building blocks for realizing black communal refuge and points to *Loving Black Boys*.

The academic contribution of *Freeing Black Girls* is its exploration of black feminist girlhood, motherhood, and religion. My hope is that it challenges how we engage gender, Black women and girls, black femininity, black feminism, and black motherhood in the guild and beyond, while also changing lives. This is what makes this work valuable and, accordingly, scholarly. Given its interests in black, critical race, black cultural, and women and gender studies, and the black feminist study of religion, *Freeing Black Girls* is distinct. To my knowledge, there’s no book-length work that does this kind of black feminist religio-cultural personal-is-political study on Black girls and motherhood. And that there are so few texts on Black girls in religion and black motherhood in general isn’t happenstance. The black religious gaze emphasizes Black women. Some topics are difficult to engage out loud when centering Black girls, for example, sexual autonomy, subjectivity, and pleasure, which I explore in chapter 2. But more, some in the broader academe interpret scholarly works on black motherhood as lowbrow and/or unsophisticated. However, such readings are antiblack, sexist, and grounded in exclusionary practices in the production of knowledge, which have historically and systemically marginalized Black girls’ and women’s voices, experiences, and contributions. Simultaneously, they’re informed by the denigration of Black girls, women, and motherhood during and after slavery. The reification of Black girls, women, and mothers into racial stereotypes remains forceful, even in academia.

Finally, *Freeing Black Girls* is an invitation, not a blueprint. The journey ahead is neither easy nor neatly defined. Black feminism in no way means flawless. Further, my black feminism ain't always radical. Yet, my passage to mothering through a black feminist lens is intentional. Notwithstanding, I don't claim to have all the answers or speak to all experiences. I'm calling forth what feels impossible: a future where Black folks abandon toxic literacies, are properly recognized, and build emancipatory communities where we safely express the full range of our being, identities, feelings, and emotions. More, I'm insisting that we center Black girls while doing this work.

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Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE

- 1 I'll say more later. For now, *Freeing Black Girls: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering* and *Loving Black Boys: A Black Feminist Bible on Racism and Revolutionary Mothering* were written together and are meant to be engaged in conversation. *Loving Black Boys* is on the way!
- 2 For more on the *B* in *Black*, see "AP Changes Writing Style to Capitalize 'B' in Black," Associated Press, June 19, 2020, <https://apnews.com/71386b46dbff8190e-71493a763e8f45a>; Mike Laws, "Why We Capitalize 'Black' (and Not 'White')," *Columbia Journalism Review*, June 16, 2020, <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/capital-b-black-styleguide.php>.

INTRODUCTION

- 1 *Othermothering* refers to Black people who mother beyond gender and blood ties. See Patricia Hill Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships," *Sage* 4, no. 2 (Fall 1987): 3–5.
- 2 bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115–31.
- 3 In *The Souls of Black Folk*, originally published in 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois refers to the verbal and nonverbal enthusiasm in black churches in response to the sermon as "the frenzy," also a call-and-response between congregants and podium, a distinguishing marker of what makes the institution "black." W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1961).
- 4 I use the King James Version (KJV) throughout this text for consistency.

16 Then came there two women, that were harlots, unto the king, and stood before him. **17** And the one woman said, O my lord, I and this woman dwell in one house; and I was delivered of a child with her in the house. **18** And it came to pass the third day after that I was delivered, that this woman was delivered also: and we were together; there was no stranger with us in the

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house, save we two in the house. **19** And this woman's child died in the night; because she overlaid it. **20** And she arose at midnight, and took my son from beside me, while thine handmaid slept, and laid it in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom. **21** And when I rose in the morning to give my child suck, behold, it was dead: but when I had considered it in the morning, behold, it was not my son, which I did bear. **22** And the other woman said, Nay; but the living is my son, and the dead is thy son. And this said, No; but the dead is thy son, and the living is my son. Thus they spake before the king. **23** Then said the king, The one saith, This is my son that liveth, and thy son is the dead: and the other saith, Nay; but thy son is the dead, and my son is the living. **24** And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king. **25** And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other. **26** Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned [1] upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it. **27** Then the king answered and said, Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it: she is the mother thereof. **28** And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged; and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, [2] to do judgment.

For more, see “Solomon’s Wisdom and Prosperity,” Christianity.com, accessed July 2022, <https://www.christianity.com/bible/kjv/1-kings/3-16-28>.

- 5 I aspire to be inclusive. I say “aspire” because sometimes my unconscious bias as a Black cisgender heterosexual woman peeks through. Notwithstanding, when I use the words *women* or *girls*, this includes all self-identifying women and girls (cisgender, transgender, queer, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, gender-neutral, pangender, asexual, questioning, fluid, . . .). And while the word *woman* in particular is too often deployed reductively, it’s also a subversive political and organizing category used to articulate collective and nuanced experiences necessary for liberation. Both *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys* use gendered terms such as *girls*, *women*, *boys*, and *men*. Both will and will not use designations. When referring to history or social beliefs, I may add *cisgender* and/or *heterosexual* to drive the point home. When I want to further highlight inclusion, I may add *transgender* et al. For some readers, this may be confusing and/or off-putting. “Why not just write Black ‘girls, women, boys, and men’?” Because this may be the first text a reader encounters on race and gender, and I’d hope that meeting is radically inclusive. As a baseline I offer the following: *cisgender* describes those whose sense of personal and gender identities corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth. For example, I’m a cisgender woman. Janet Mock is a transgender woman. *Transantagonism* notes hostility toward transgender people just as *racism* notes hostility toward Black people. However, neither *cisgender* nor *transgender* names sexual identity (homo, hetero, bi, questioning, inter, undefined, nonconforming). For example, I am a cisgender heterosexual woman. Mock is a transgender heterosexual woman. We’re both women.
- 6 Misogynoir articulates a form of misogyny (contempt against all women) that overwhelmingly and intentionally impacts all Black women and girls. For more, see

Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2021). On differentiating among Black women and girls, see Tamura Lomax, "These Hos Ain't Loyal: White Perversions, Black Possessions," in *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

- 7 I define *pornotroping* or *pornotropic gazing* as a way of "seeing" with both the eyes and the psyche that is simultaneously "othering," and particularly sexualizing. It's a mapping of racial, gendered, and sexual stereotypes onto others, namely, Black women and girls. For more on pornotroping, see Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*. Additionally, the story presented here follows the account of Solomon's dream at Gibeon where God promises to give him unprecedented wisdom.
- 8 This brief interjection deserves a lengthy prediscussion as *Freeing Black Girls* is a decidedly black feminist text that (1) deploys a black feminist study of religion critical gaze and (2) converses with both black feminists and womanist theologians when discussing the Bible, religion, and theology. I examine distinctions and similarities between womanist theologians and black feminists and why I identify as a black feminist in *Jezebel Unhinged* (86–93). More, there are different kinds of womanism with different histories, beliefs, and so on. Thus, when asked, "Why black feminism and not womanism?" I always respond with "What kind of womanism?" Because the distinctions matter. *Jezebel Unhinged* lays those out and answers the question. Additionally, in my work/s, I'm specifically engaging womanist scholars within the study of theology and religion when I use the term. This isn't an either-or for me. As a black feminist scholar of religion, I'm indebted to womanist theologians, ethicists, and biblical scholars. In fact, womanist theology is my entry point to black feminism. My politics as a black feminist scholar, theorist, mother, and so on, is a matter of theoretical and methodological distinction. That said, I am and will always be in conversation with and inspired by womanism in religion. The idea that womanist theologians and black feminists are oppositions is the result of capitalism, which requires winners, prizes (jobs, departments, book deals, funding, etc.), and losers. Noting difference doesn't have to mean framing hostilities. At least it shouldn't. Each discourse is invested in cultivating wholeness for Black folks and is rooted in black struggles for freedom. This isn't a zero-sum game where Black women cannot coexist.

As Patricia Hill Collins stated on a 2020 womanism/feminism "verzus" panel that we were on together, "There is plenty of room and space for differences that don't have to be framed in verzus. . . . Black people are New World black populations, not a continuum of African populations because we have many African populations within us. We have been involved in the freedom struggle from captivity. But this struggle for freedom is not something we experience the same way. . . . [This is the foundation to] specialization for a freedom struggle where we can look at various aspects of that." For example, gender, sex, class, sexuality, community, and religion. Collins continues:

[This is the] foundation for building community—intellectual, ethical, political community—that can deal with captivity. . . . These are the origins of what we are calling black feminism and womanism. . . . Black feminism

doesn't come from a feminism that is derived from white women. . . . It comes from the fusion of blackness and women that said we need a political response to this in the secular sphere. . . . Many early Black women thinkers were theologians or leaders of their churches. They were cultivating communities to push the freedom struggle forward. However, the freedom struggle was never disconnected from the mind and the depth of thinking about freedom and politics against racism, sexism, classism, or heterosexism (Ida Wells Barnett talks about sexuality though never identifies as feminist or womanist).

Collins posits, the naming and framing, black feminist and womanist, “comes from not only 1950s and '60s social movement but the move to specialization. . . . Black women politicized and became politically active . . . [in] social change and dealing with body politics.” This included, for example, reproduction, families, economic conditions, and access to the vote. All of this was a part of Black women's empowerment. According to Collins, “What we see in the '70s and '80s is more specialization and how we continue to work for those things. . . . Something as broad as the freedom struggle and Black women's empowerment requires us to think more expansively.” Heterogeneity is unhelpful here. We need both critical lenses. Simultaneously, Collins cautions:

We can't look too closely at any one group of women to the exclusion of other women. . . . It is not enough to say that women in the church are somehow accessing a southern womanist tradition that is sort of grounding the entire enterprise. There are many, many, many Black women in this country who did not grow up in the South . . . who do not have access to that tradition. . . . At the same time, black feminists cannot say there is a litmus test for black feminism. There's a problem for both discourses and its boundaries and how it's going to differentially serve the needs of Black women. . . . Pay attention to the external politics and the times that we are in. . . . We have to look back and forward . . . we need to also attend to the fight from the far right . . . and in many terrains. . . . Womanist claims of ethics and Black women's humanity is essential for dealing with religious fundamentalism and oppression in our sacred institutions. . . . Black feminism and womanism can be inhabited in the same body. To think about these as identity categories is limiting. . . . The verzus framework aggravates the ability to form coalitions and alliances to do this work.

“Verzus Panel: Womanism v. Black Feminism,” Union Presbyterian Seminary Center for Womanist Leadership spring conference (virtual), April 9, 2021. In view of Collins's analysis, *Freeing Black Girls* is a form of specialization with emphasis on Black girls, mothers, and religion in the movement to empower Black women, girls, and folks.

- 9 I explain the historical racializing and gendering of the term *ho* in *Jezebel Unhinged*.
- 10 One can say the same for Black men and boys. All minoritized people are surviving the patriarchy and the state, however differently. *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys* hope to get at some of these differences.

- 11 On the reduction to historical racial tropes, see Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*.

- 12 *Semi* means to distinguish between my girlhood heteronormativity and sex and gender biases taught in the Black Church and conservative white Christianity, which usually includes antiblackness, sexism, transantagonism, homophobia, classism, and more.
- 13 I'll say more about traditional womanhood in later chapters. For now, heteropatriarchal-centered womanhood moves across racial and ethnic lines.
- 14 Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*.
- 15 Misogynoir wrapped in religion, blackness, political consciousness, art, humor, the arms of a knight in shining armor, and/or whatever else is still misogynoir. It's just a more succulent form of toxicity.
- 16 The distinction between *inter* and *intra* is significant. While *interracial* denotes interactions between different racial and ethnic bodies, *intraracial* highlights engagements within a racial body. I deploy it to engage happenings within and among Black folks, sometimes interchanging it with *intracommunal*. This isn't meant to absolve what happens interracially due to white racism and white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, however. Simultaneously, this book deploys *black community* and *intracommunal* not in terms of a monolith or singular entity but instead as a range of spaces where Black folks gather. They're communities within communities where Black people live, connect, work, build, encounter each other, and make meaning and sense of their lives. While *community* and *communal* can be about a certain district, zone, or four-block radius, it's much more than that. More, it's both tangible and imagined.
- 17 See Lomax, "These Hos Ain't Loyal."
- 18 *Single Black mothers* is often used as a trope to blame pathology on unmarried Black women and girls. However, one can be unmarried and not be single. Moreover, Black women and girls aren't the root or face of black pathology. Further, blackness isn't innately pathological.
- 19 In *Jezebel Unhinged*, in the chapter "The Black Church, the Black Lady, and Jezebel: The Cultural Production of Feminine-ism," I write about the religio-cultural preoccupation with distinguishing between "hos" and "housewives." Underlining this binary is the directive for girls and women to be "good"/"proper" so that they're chosen for marriage. Ironically, whereas "proper" femininity and being a "good" woman or girl centers heteronormative gender ideology and sexual respectability for women and girls, being a "good" Black man or boy oftentimes means the assertion of heteropatriarchal dominance and regular things like taking care of offspring or paying personal bills.
- 20 Not all families include a mother for a range of reasons—for example, divorce, death, abandonment, sexuality, or gender identity.
- 21 Establishing "the" Black (heteropatriarchal) family became a political and religious campaign after slavery not solely for the sake of reuniting with lost loves or formally establishing bonds between the newly freed, but also for countering stereotypes, establishing a moral order and respectability, rebuking other kinds of familial makeup and identities, and configuring black aspirational politics. Lomax, "The Black Church, the Black Lady and Jezebel." I write the following in *Jezebel Unhinged*:

I use (black) "progress" and "racial uplift" interchangeably throughout this text. Both articulate the plight, passage, and hopeful advancement of Black Americans after slavery. "Racial uplift" is the Du Boisian ideology that an

educated “talented tenth” was responsible for the progress of most the race. The best (men) of the race were accountable for guiding the worse to a better state. Similarly, “black progress” is the idea that improvement for those categorically cut off from opportunity due to race, comes by way of civil and political rights accessible through classical education, which produces not merely workers of trade and bread winning but knowledge, culture and character. Those who did not have this training remained in the underclass and on the underside of the veil of blackness. Du Bois’s “talented tenth” has been critiqued for sexism, elitism, paternalism, and exceptionalism. He later changed his thinking, noting that progress and uplift could arise from many efforts to include and exceed higher education. Nevertheless, Du Bois’s idea continues to thrive. An unintended consequence is how the advancement of knowledge, culture and character, and distinctions between the “tenth” and the rest and the best and the worst, simultaneously hinge upon the performance of “proper” bodies, sexualities, sexual liaisons, and relations. The discourse on black womanhood, which requires a highly regimented body along with a role in the black “nuclear” family, has been significant for establishing the latter. (219)

- 22 The word *real* has cultural meaning. The angst around establishing “real” black womanhood or manhood arises out of the history of North American slavery, which defined the Black/African slaves as cattle, partially human, and undeserving of legal and political rights. “Real” black manhood typically articulates a quest for humanity, power, citizenship, patriarchal rights, and political power. “Real” black womanhood often notes the “proper” performance of femininity in relation to Black men. “Real” is distinct from “true,” however. As I posit in later chapters and in *Loving Black Boys*, “true” manhood, akin to “true” womanhood, refers to white manhood and white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys* radically critique the terms *real* and *true*. There’s no singular authentic way to express race, sex, gender, or sexuality just as there’s no one group of people who are more human than others.
- 23 “Natural hierarchy” informs the patriarchy. “The” patriarchy isn’t new or particular to North America. It’s been operative for several thousand years all around the world. Especially significant is its role in the “nuclear” family and thus society. Patriarchy is in essence the rule of the father. Meaning that if you’re a man, you should have dominion over the household—and in society. If you’re a woman, you should be subject to the dominion of the man—within and outside of the home. For more on my framing of race, religion, and “natural hierarchy,” see Tamura Lomax, “Black Venus and Jezebel Sluts: Writing Race, Sex, and Gender,” in *Jezebel Unhinged*, 13–33.
- 24 I deploy *African* rather than *Black* in this sentence because blackness as a racial category and identity is primarily a twentieth-century conception. W. E. B. Du Bois writes about the interpretive shift from *African* to *Negro* to *Black* in *The Souls of Black Folk*. However, some slave sources use *negro*. Some also deploy *nigger*. It’s not hard to imagine some slaves felt less African over time. Slave sources speak to that as well. I use *African* when referring to slaves for consistency. However, in some instances, I deploy *Black/African* to highlight the line and/or continuum between African slaves, Black folks, and black thought, ideas, and indignities.

- 25 Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*.
- 26 There's much political and academic discussion around whether or not to use *slave* or *enslaved*. *Enslaved* means to humanize and note the dehumanizing structure of slavery, particularly as Black/African bondpeople weren't seen as human. I've worked with many ancestral accounts in which they refer to themselves as "slaves," not because they were unsure of their humanity but because they were clear about it as well as the system they were attempting to survive. I lean toward their deployment.
- 27 Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*.
- 28 Lomax, "The Black Church, the Black Lady and Jezebel."
- 29 I argue in *Jezebel Unhinged* how slave women and girls were called "jezebels" (I reserve the lower case *j* for stereotyping and the uppercase for the biblical figure of the same name) to distinguish them from free white women and how this relates to calling contemporary Black women and girls "hos" and/or sexualizing them as the pastor did in the Mother's Day sermon.
- 30 Some may read this as me creating a binary. However, while there's always nuance and though Black women and girls refuse totalization in reductive binaries, the construction and the saying "you can't turn a ho into a housewife" are still deployed in religion and culture.
- 31 In the Bible and religious culture, Jezebel is blamed for the demise of her husband and children. It's argued that her alleged pathology (worshipping other deities and wielding power over men) led to corruption in her son in particular and to his being killed by the state. As I discuss in *Loving Black Boys*, Black mothers are also often blamed when their sons are killed by the state. More, as I posit in later chapters, Black mothers are generally blamed when Black children don't live up to certain expectations.
- 32 Patricia Hill Collins argues, "The cult of true womanhood, with its emphasis on motherhood as women's highest calling, has long held a special place in gender symbolism of white Americans. From this perspective, women's activities should be confined to the care of children, the nurturing of a husband, and the maintenance of a household. By managing this separate domestic sphere, women gain social influence through their role as mothers, transmitters of culture and parents for the next generation." See Collins, "Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture,"
3. Simultaneously, ministers like Bishop T. D. Jakes have argued cisgender heterosexual mothers are the safeguards of morality and virtue. Namely, virtuous mothers raise children of virtue because it's their job to pray for the children and steer them away from trouble. However, Black women have historically and predominantly been laborers, particularly since North American slavery, thus constructing gender identities within and beyond the home.
- 33 Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).
- 34 In both *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys*, I lean into survival for reasons explained throughout both texts. As Audre Lorde once said, survival isn't theory. It's lived work. It's enough by itself. However, I also deploy *thriving* because, as Maya Angelou once stated, her "mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor and some style." See "Maya Angelou: In Her Own Words," *BBC*, May 28, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news>

/world-us-canada-27610770. Black surviving and thriving in this text both name access to living, full humanity, recognition, freedom, liberation, love, restoration, community, accountability, equity, justice, spirit, joy, safety, resources, bloom, creativity, imagination, wellness, healing, nourishment, balance, empowerment, self-articulation, autonomy, radical sociopolitical and communal transformation, flourishing, and so on.

- 35 *Effeminophobia* is fear of the feminine, womanliness, and/or the behaviors, gestures, presentations, and otherwise associated with women and/or femininity.
- 36 White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal masculinity is a critique of white imperialist settler masculinity, which stands against any form of race, gender, labor, sexual, sex, or class equity. For more, see Democracy Now, “Remembering bell hooks & Her Critique of ‘Imperialist White Supremacist Heteropatriarchy,’” YouTube, accessed June 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkJKJZU7xXU>. Additionally, if “the” patriarchy is the rule of the father within and outside of the home and equates to power, empire, and dominance, race makes *black* patriarchy at best aspirational (some would say oxymoronic) because Black men don’t collectively hold dominion in American society. *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys* argue that though patriarchy has different points of access and rewards, aspirational black patriarchy is no less material intracommunally. Its impact is still operative and felt.
- 37 The word *girls* is inclusive. Simultaneously, *Loving Black Girls* is a collection of stories about my journey from girlhood to motherhood as a cisgender heterosexual Black woman.
- 38 I deploy *love* throughout this text to refer to romantic partnerships, family, friends, and more, but also to engage a love ethic rooted in justice, which requires rebellion or, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would say, direct confrontation with the status quo. This demands seeing the inherent dignity, value, and “somebodiness” in others, and specifically in Black folks.
- 39 I’m emphasizing motherhood not because this work isn’t for fathers but because I’m writing out of experience, which is personal and political, not ontological.
- 40 This book is about building emancipatory communities among Black folks to help us be, live, thrive, survive, and fight oppression better. It’s disinterested in appealing to white folks to see our humanity. The 2016 and 2020 elections say plenty about why that’s not a useful strategy for black survival. White people will need to face their own music and do their own work to stop white supremacist capitalist patriarchal oppression.
- 41 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 39.
- 42 The spiritual and political right to expansion and empire.
- 43 Megan Zahneis and Beckie Supiano, “Fear and Confusion in the Classroom,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/fear-and-confusion-in-the-classroom>. See also Eva Surovell, “Diversity Spending Is Banned in Florida’s Public Colleges,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 15, 2023, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/diversity-spending-is-banned-in-floridas-public-colleges>.
- 44 *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys* aren’t about increasing agitations. These works are interested in facing intracommunal differences and violences in an effort to build bridges and sanctuaries.

- 45 Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Losing Manhood: Animality and Plasticity in the (Neo) Slave Narrative," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 25, no. 1–2 (2016): 95–136, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/quiparle.25.1-2.0095.
- 46 Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015).
- 47 bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 88.
- 48 Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man* (New York: Routledge, 2015). While not all Black men interpreted Black women's rights as secondary to their own or assumed racial rights were synonymous with Black men's rights, the centrality of cisgender heterosexual men's rights in black liberative efforts is well documented. Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Ella Baker, Michele Wallace, Elaine Brown, Audre Lorde, and others articulate this reality.
- 49 It's important for me to note the specialness and particularity of Black fathers, especially in terms of affirmation, experiences, and identity. *Freeing Black Girls* and *Loving Black Boys* both take this very seriously.
- 50 James Baldwin, "On Being White . . . and Other Lies," *Essence*, April 1984, Anti-Racism Digital Library, <https://sacred.omeka.net/items/show/238>.
- 51 Audre Lorde and James Baldwin, "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin," *Mosaic Literary Magazine*, no. 39 (Fall 2016): 43–44, ProQuest.
- 52 Lorde and Baldwin, "Revolutionary Hope," 43–44.
- 53 bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004).
- 54 Luis Andres Henao, "Black Protestant Church Still Vital Despite Attendance Drop," *AP News*, May 1, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/black-protestant-church-attendance-youth-covid-pandemic-5d854b4db73e118cb22767220573455f>.
- 55 Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- 56 Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- 57 Glaude, *African American Religion*.
- 58 Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*.
- 59 Black sovereignty for me has to do with building more emancipatory love- and justice-centered communities and relations among Black folks while also collectively and individually surviving and resisting the white supremacist capitalist patriarchal state. I say more about that in the essay "The Black Church Movement Profile Is Dead: The Audacious Absurdity of Transgressive Imagination between 'The American Dream' and the Nightmare," in *Moved by the Spirit: Religion and the Movement for Black Lives*, ed. Christophe D. Ringer, Teresa L. Smallwood, and Emilie M. Townes (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 117–34.
- 60 Raboteau's *Slave Religion* reveals North American Black Christians have always had progressive and regressive profiles. The Black Church has historically been a source of both freedom and oppression. As a source of freedom, it serves as a critique of white supremacy and thus redeems the profaned faith of the slavers. As a tool of oppression, it maintains many of the ideologies, representations, and theologies of the imperial project. For more, see Lomax, "Black Church Movement Profile Is Dead."

- 61 When writing this book, I likened it to a course on black feminism and black girlhood and often queried what that might look like if I were teaching it as a Black feminist scholar of religion. Specifically, what categories of analysis would (must) I include? Foremost, race, sex, class, gender, and sexuality, and because of my research in black religion and black popular culture, I'd also necessarily incorporate that. Truthfully, any study on Black girls and how they interface with the world, and how the world in turn shapes them, requires these additions. Anyway, each chapter attempts to weave all of this together, sometimes presenting a "big" category of analysis over others. For example, chapter 2 emphasizes sexuality and the body by way of *P-Valley*, history, theory, and personal narrative, whereas chapter 3 centers race and heteropatriarchy. Additionally, the stories aren't rigidly chronological. For example, I begin at the time I was fourteen years old in chapter 1, then move to a story that happened at age twelve in chapter 2. Chapter 3 moves through time, from age fourteen to adulthood. Finally, the chapters have distinguishing tones. This is intentional as each chapter came alive in distinct historical moments. The flow and mood of the writing mirror that.
- 62 April Baker-Bell, *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

1. BLACK GIRLS MATTER

- 1 I use *Black Girl* in this letter and subsequent mini-letters to speak to my younger self because that is how I refer to me in my early years. Simultaneously, I dedicate these words, letters, and chapters to my very special nieces: Alexa, Chela, Kacey, Ky, and Jasmine. When writing this book, I thought about the world that I wish I had when growing up, as well as the one I want for them and all Black girls more generally. This in mind, "Dear Black Girl" is also an address to all Black people who identify as a girl, presently, past, in the future, et cetera. And though I'm a full-grown woman today, I'm still a "Black girl," as in the colloquial way Black women and girls inscribe it when we truly love you, have something juicy and/or ridiculous to share, and feel completely at home. When we enter this space, it's often "girrrrrrrll." This isn't for non-Black folks to try. A white woman married to a Black man once referred to me in this way and it stopped me in my tracks. "Please don't," I responded, and as a sharp boundary I requested that she refer to me as "Tamura" or "Dr. Lomax" going forward. I don't like "Ms." or "Mrs." And typically only my students refer to me with my academic title. However, I needed to make the distance between her and me and the use of Black Language such as "girrrrrrrll" clear and firm. I know this is a nonissue for some. In the words of Bobby Brown, "It's my prerogative."
- 2 This and the following italicized messages are my "ten commandments" to myself and all Black women and girls.
- 3 Like "love bombing," "pretty bombing" is when someone manipulatively overwhelms a person with faux compliments only to get something in return, typically sex or some other goal. For example, when boys catcall, in person, digitally, or otherwise, saying how "fine" a person is, sometimes it's a genuine compliment. Other times, it's a means to an end. If the end is sex or something sexual, I refer to