Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place, Citizenship, and Imagination

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Terrance Leonardo Wooten

Graduate Program in African American and African Studies

The Ohio State University

2011

Master's Examination Committee:

Simone Drake, Advisor

Rebecca Wanzo

James Upton

Abstract

Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place, Citizenship and Imagination is a project dedicated to examining the ways in which race, geography, and politics intersect to create a sovereign space in visual art and popular media for African Americans to imagine full citizenship. By examining black politics and black nation building through these various lenses, I argue that African Americans use popular media and visual art as channels to acquire access to citizenship rights. With the disappearance of a visible black political movement, black Americans have innovatively used these channels to create an alternative space to deploy Black Nationalism and construct a black nation. I call this space the New Black Nation. Particularly, this project focuses on the viability of the Imagined South, a U.S. South that is dehistoricized, southernized, and recreated as a perfect melding of rural and urban culture, as a home for the New Black Nation. *Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place, Citizenship and Imagination* interrogates black gender politics and the performance of black male sexuality in this New Black Nation located in the Imagined South. In order to engage this New Black Nation, *Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place,Citizenship and Imagination* weaves together a discursive reading of Tyler Perry's *Why Did I Get Married,* the work of Tom Joyner of the nationally syndicated program, the *Tom Joyner Morning Show*, and various representations of black nonheteronormative bodies that exist (though not wholly) within the black nation.

Dedication

This document is dedicated to those who fought to develop the discipline of African

American Studies, to those who continually have to explain what it is that we do, and to

the countless number of black bodies who fight to claim their rights as American citizens.

We will be seen. We will be heard.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor, Dr. Simone Drake, for being the greatest mentor any person could ever wish to have. I would not be the scholar I am today had it not been for the guidance you have given me. And, literally, I would not have decided to take this path in life were it not for you. More than just a mentor, though, you have been a friend. You welcomed me into your home and into your family, and I am certain no one paragraph of words could ever do justice to the amount of gratitude and appreciation I have for you. To Dr. Rebecca Wanzo, thank you for all of your feedback, for pushing me to think more critically, and for your honesty. I have a deep appreciation for you and your work.

I would be remiss to leave out Dawn Miles, Liseli Fitzpatrick, Faouzie Alchahal, Gisell Jeter, Robert Bennett III, Aaron Thomas, Tamara Butler, and Nevin Heard for all the support you have given me. Each one of you has touched my life and left me better for it. This project would not be what it is had it not been for you; I would not be who I am had it not been for each of you. And, remember, if another recession comes, I WILL be calling one of you to sleep on your couch.

Lastly, to my alma mater, The Ohio State University has been my home for the past six years. The lessons I have learned, the people I have met, and the relationships I

have made will be forever carried with me as I continue through life. I owe a great deal of my growth to the opportunities this institution has given me. Time and change will surely show, how firm thy friendship…O-HI-O.

Vita

2005..Webster County High School

2009..B.A. Political Science, The Ohio State

University

2011..M.A. African American and African

Studies, The Ohio State University

2009 - 2010 ....Graduate Fellow, African American and

African Studies, The Ohio State University

2010 – 2011...Graduate Teaching Associate, African

American and African Studies, The Ohio

State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: African American and African Studies

vi

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Earlier this summer, I was listening to the *Tom Joyner Morning Show,* and Joyner

was advertising the 2010 Allstate Tom Joyner Family Reunion. This is a "For Us By Us"

event geared at bringing black people together to build and celebrate the black family and

community. As he listed the various performances scheduled to take place (the line up

ranged from old school hip-hop to new black gospel) and the available empowerment

seminars, I immediately thought of racial uplift. Indeed, Joyner's emphasis on the

bringing together of over 12,000 families set to the tune of "We Are Family" certainly

invoked the residual aura of Black Nationalism during the 1960s and 1970s. Likewise,

there has been notable and increasing popularity of films produced by Tyler Perry.

Having watched a majority of Perry's films, many of which I first saw in theatre, I have

begun to notice a similar ethics rooted in building the black community. Perry and Joyner

are using popular media as both a mouth piece for Black Nationalist rhetoric and a space

for black nation building to occur. Thinking about these relationships, I began to wonder

what Black Nationalism, and even a black nation for that matter, would look like in a

moment where the current U.S. President, Barack Obama, is Black. Further, given that

we are purportedly living in a "post-race" period, I began to think about how the high

levels of spectatorship around the racially motivated mediums that Perry and Joyner

provide disrupt "post-racial" discourse. Put simply, if we live in a "post-racial" moment,

why are so many (Black) people consuming rhetoric that speaks back to racism and

1

embraces nationalism? It is in trying to grapple with this contradiction as well as trying to place popular media and visual art within a political framework that *Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place, Citizenship, and Imagination* was born.

Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place, Citizenship, and Imagination is an interdisciplinary project that seeks to uncover and mete out the complex constructions of the black nation that have been offered in contemporary popular media and visual art, focusing on Tyler Perry films and the *Tom Joyner Morning Show* as initial points of access into this construction. I chose these two sources primarily because of their mass appeal and reception. While Joyner has had public notoriety for quite some time, Tyler Perry's career as film director, writer, actor, and overall black entrepreneur has skyrocketed him to fame and fortune within the last decade. His films and plays, all of which feature a predominantly black cast and deal with issues pertinent to black life, have highly lucrative productions. When Tyler Perry unveiled his new studio in fall of 2009, it was a historic moment for Hollywood and for black America. His 200,000-square-foot facility, with five sound stages that sits on 30 acres of land in Atlanta, is the first major studio owned by a black American[1].

The opening of Tyler Perry Studios was also a milestone for Perry, a New Orleans native who just a decade ago was popular on the urban theatre circuit but barely known anywhere else. His 2009 hit movie *Madea Goes to Jail* has raked in over $90 million to

---

[1] I use the term "black American" to draw out the juxtaposition of race and nationality in order to critically challenge what it means to be both black and American, to be a black citizen. For sake of space, and cutting out repetition, I sometimes reduce "black American" to simply "black." This is not, however, intended to take the meaning out of the term. Rather, "black" operates as a signifier of "black American." I first encountered this term through the work of Wahneema Lubiano, and its complexity seems highly appropriate for my project.

date and was one of the top ten grossing films in the U.S. in 2009, beating the *Hannah Montana* movie and grossing over four times as much as the much-anticipated *Jonas Brothers 3-D* concert, both of which cater to a predominantly white audience. That feat, in itself, speaks to the peculiar nature of Perry's works. His first film, 2005's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* had domestic box-office receipts of over $50 million, about 10 times the film's $5.5 million budget.[2] His nine plays have grossed millions and played to sold-out audiences. His first book debuted at No. 1 on *The New York Times* hardcover nonfiction bestseller list. Since making his film debut with Lionsgate in 2005, his average movie grosses nearly $50 million, and the combined net sales of his DVDs total more than 25 million units. More than 10 million of those units are DVD versions of his plays.[3] These sales are unprecedented for any black filmmaker, let alone for one whose primary subject matter is black life.

Thus, where Joyner has his Black Family Reunion, a more explicit example of black nation building and racial uplift, Perry has the cinema, which he transforms into a space for nation building to occur. By using the cinema, Perry can reach a broader audience – both class based and racially based. Joyner's Black Family Reunion is simply that: black. The cinema, on the contrary, is open to any racial demography. In doing so, Perry provides the blueprints of the New Black Nation, a space in which race, geography, and politics intersect to create a sovereign space in visual art and popular media for black Americans to imagine full citizenship, to black spectators, assumed to be potential

[2] "Tyler Perry's Madea's Family Reunion (2006)." *Box Office Mojo*. Web. 12 May 2011. <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=madeasfamilyreunion.htm>.
[3] Parekh, Rupal. "How Tyler Perry's house of hits was built." *Advertising Age* 80.18 (2009): 24. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 12 May 2011.

members of the nation, as well as to non-black spectators. Both black and non-black

spectators of varying class statuses are cued to recognize the boundaries of the New

Black Nation. Allowing non-black to see and access the New Black Nation is more than

just teaching "them" where "their" boundaries are in relation to the black nation. Rather,

it also serves to assert a sense of autonomy and sovereignty; it is an act of defiance. Non-

black spectators are being told that the New Black Nation is: 1) off limits to their racist

imagination; and 2) a space that black Americans are claiming as their own and not one

that is being allotted to them. Black Americans are *taking* their forty acres and opting out

of the mule.

By interrogating how Perry presents location, gender, and sexuality, I will be

getting to the heart of what makes the New Black Nation both problematic and

unattainable for black Americans. I chose to focus on these three areas because they have

historically been areas of weakness when it comes to black nationalism. Black

nationalists have seldom been able to articulate a *viable* location on U.S. soil for the

black nation; they have often either erased black women from the nation altogether or

incorporated them as aliment for the black nation, using the fruits of their labor to sustain

the nation; or they have failed to recognize nonheteronormative black bodies as members

of the black nation. My focus, then, is to determine how the New Black Nation either

reifies these same practices or destabilizes them. My work draws from a geneology of

black feminist and post-nationalist interventions that both gender and de-essentialize the

construction of black identity produced through black nationalism.

One of the most influential texts to historicize Black Nationalist ideology is Sterling Stuckey's seminal treatise, *The Ideological Origins of Black Nationalism.* Written a little over two decades before Kevin Gaines' influential text, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Stuckey documents the ideological seeds of what we now know as Black Nationalism. Equally as useful a historical text, and more contemporary than Stuckey is William Van Deburg's *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan*, which is less interested in charting the ideological development of Black Nationalism as it is in mapping out the function of the ideology in black discourse. "Whereas Stuckey's focus is on establishing the origins of the ideology of Black Nationalism, my focus is on the development and functioning of this ideology. My interest in is identifying how blacks constructed this ideology in their discourse and then how this discourse functioned ideologically to advance the black cause" (Van Deburg 9).

The ideology that Van Deburg connects to Black Nationalism pre-dates Gaines' construction of Black Nationalism, which ultimately becomes foundational to understanding Black Nationalism – a point I will address later. The historical roots of Black Nationalism can be traced back to nineteenth-century black leaders such as Martin Delany, who promoted the emigration of free blacks to Africa where they would settle and aid Africans in building an African nation. According to Delany, such development would uplift the status and condition of black Americans who remained "a nation within

a nation … really a broken people."[4] Twentieth-century Black Nationalism was further

influenced by Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant to the United States who founded

the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914. In ''The Future as I See

It,'' Garvey argued that the UNIA was "organized for the absolute purpose of bettering

our condition, industrially, commercially, socially, religiously and politically."[5] Garvey

and the UNIA, like Delany, advocated black emigration to Africa as a program of

"national independence, an independence so strong as to enable us to rout others if they

attempt to interfere with us."[6] Social, economic, and political uplift of blacks was central

to notions of Black Nationalism, and uplift continued throughout the twentieth-century.

The largest problem, with uplift, however, regarded *who* was being uplifted and *who* was

doing the uplifting as a result of Black Nationalism's construction of black identity.

Many scholars have written about the problematic nature of Black Nationalism.

Theorists like Anthony Appiah and Paul Gilroy have challenged the continuing

prevalence and presence of these racialist ideas through efforts to repudiate Black

Nationalism. They have critiqued Black Nationalism for its pragmatic, conceptual, and

moral flaws on the basis of its rootedness in essentialism.[7] Similarly, Houston Baker's

recent book *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Ideals of the Civil*

Rights Era (2008), offers an apology for the Black Nationalist model to which he earlier

---

[4] Nell Irwin Painter, ''Martin R. Delany: Elitism and Black Nationalism,'' in *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century,* eds. Litwack and Meier, 1991.

[5] Garvey, ''The Future as I See It,'' in *Look for Me All Around You*, ed. Louis J. Parascandola, 2005.

[6] ''Speech by Marcus Garvey,'' 7 September 1921, in *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers,* Vol. 4, ed. Hill, Tolbert, and Forczek,1985.

[7] See Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992); Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture* beyond the Color Line (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Also, Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, by K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

ascribed. Scholar Robert Reid-Pharr's *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* (2007) is equally as captious of the shortcomings of Black Nationalism and the legacy it has left.

Most of these critiques are not nearly as critical of Black Nationalism's role in constructing gender identity as the burgeoning black feminist scholars of the 1960s and 1970s. Michelle Wallace's controversial *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* exposed sexism in the Black community and presented a fearsome critique of the gender politics of Black Power ideology. Wallace focused on debunking the twin stereotypes, heralded through Black Nationalist discourse, of the black male and female. The black male was presented the ideal freedom fighter. The black female was presented as a superwoman, impervious to the marauding of white racism. Along the same lines as Wallace, African American women writers such as Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Toni Cade Bambara problematized notions of black unity and community by arguing that nation building could not occur without discussing the relationships between black men and women.[8] Additionally, they pushed for the inclusion of the everyday reality of black women's experiences in constituting the idealized black nation. These black feminist critiques served as responses to Black Nationalism's inability to recognize the lived experiences of black women as being central to nation building, dating back to the writings of Anna Julia Cooper. In 1892, Cooper professed to black clergymen about the central role that African American women played in their communities, asserting: "Only

---

[8] See Rigney, Barbara Hill, 1938-. "Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic, and: Mythatypes: Signatures and Signs of African Diaspora and Black Goddesses (review)." <u>Research in African Literatures</u> 32.4 (2001): 202-204; hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA.: South End, 1981; and Bambara, Toni Cade. *Black Woman, An Anthology*. New York: New American Library, 1970.

the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole . . . race enters with me."[9]

Along with adding onto a legacy of black feminist criticism of Black Nationalism's inability to imagine a nation that incorporated the concerns of black women, black feminists of the 1980s and 1990s were likewise concerned with rethinking black womanhood. Black Nationalism continually positioned black women so they had to choose between their race and their gender – as if the two were separable identities. Black feminist scholars have since critiqued this notion, including Barbara Smith, Kimberle Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins. Smith examined black women's identity as interlocking factors, one black and the other female. Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, which looks at black women's identity as existing in the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Collins furthered this idea in 1990 with the introduction of the matrix of domination, a system that oppresses and marginalizes black women as an interconnected identity of race, gender, and class.

Drawing from black feminist critiques of the reduction of black womanhood into separable categories, Trey Ellis offers a post-nationalist critique of essentialist notions of blackness. Ellis's "The New Black Aesthetic" posits a shift in the aesthetics of black identity writ large. (It is important to note that Ellis's essay is working in contention with Gayle Addison's *The Black Aesthetic,* a compilation of essays that supported cultural

---

[9] Cooper, Anna Julia. 1892. A voice from the South. In *The voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including* A voice from the South *and other important essays, papers, and letters*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 51-187.

nationalism and argued that the fundamental goal of the African American artist was to attend to and improve the social and political conditions of African Americans.) According to Ellis, newer artists are less concerned with racial authenticity, a primary undertone of Black Nationalism. Further, he asserts that these artists are no longer interested in black cultural traditions. He writes, "Just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his white grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world" (235). The emergence of the cultural mulatto complicates the ways in which modern Black Nationalism attracts the newer generations. Contemporary work by Patricia Hill Collins has also attempted to make sense of the cultural residue of Black Nationalism in pop cultural performance, interrogating gender politics in hip hop culture. In *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism* (2006), Collins critiques the essentializing role of black nationalist feminism while also allowing for the possibility that identity politics can be an organizing mechanism for change.

Adding to critiques of Black Nationalism is a body of scholars who are interested in deconstructing the black masculinity and black male sexuality presented through Black Nationalist discourse. As scholar Amy Ongiri articulates in "We Are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination,"

> Black gay discourse often trades openly in Black nationalist notions and configurations of nation, family, brotherhood and the state. However, though Black gay cultural politics can seem as dependent on Black nationalist discourse as a Black nationalist discourse is dependent on its homophobia, the actual fit between a Black nationalist discourse and a Black gay cultural politics is often imperfect at best (286).

9

Also, scholar Herman Gray's article "Black Masculinity and Visual Art" maps out the relationship of contemporary visual representations of black masculinity and Black Nationalism. Gray writes,

> In contemporary reconfigurations of the black nation, especially its most visible and aggressive guise-Afrocentricity (Leonard Jeffries), the Nation of Islam (Kalid Mohammed, Minister Louis Farakhan), nationalist-based hip-hop-it is the ideal of the strong uncompromising black man, the new black man, the authentic black man, which anchors the oppositional (and within a nationalist discourse) affirmative representation of black masculinity (404).

In "'This Immoral Practice': The Prehistory of Homophobia in Black Nationalist Thought," Martin Summers elucidates a similar relationship gay black men have with Black Nationalism, uncovering the ways in which homophobia in black nation building obfuscates gay black men as members of the nation.[10]

Obviously, there seems to be a prevailing problem with Black Nationalism and black nation building that fails to account for gender and sexuality. While these scholars have certainly explored and attempted to fill in holes, the emergence of the New Black Nation calls for a further examination that also incorporates space, place, and class— intersectionally. Perry's queering of the New Black Nation through his performance of Madea while simultaneously erasing gay black bodies seems to constitute a different construction of gender and sexuality that has yet to be explored.

In order to interrogate Perry and Joyner's work as Black Nationalist, I draw on the work of Wahneema Lubiano. In her essay "Black Nationalism and Black Common

---

[10] Sumers, Martin. "'This Immoral Practice': The Prehistory of Homophobia in Black Nationalist Thought," in Toni Lester, ed., *Gender Nonconformity, Race, and Sexuality* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002)

Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others." Lubiano argues that we should understand "black nationalism as black American common sense—as everyday ideology," where she uses cultural theorist James Kavanagh's definition of ideology as being a rich system of representations that help mold individuals into social subjects (Lubiano 1998: 232). She goes on to explain that "common sense" refers to "ideology lived and articulated in everyday understandings of the world and one's place in it" (Lubiano 1998: 232). Understanding black nationalism as both everyday and as an "activation of a narrative of identity and interests" (232) is a distinct departure from previous conceptualizations of black nationalism, which have been more in alignment with the work of Kevin Gaines. In his highly influential, foundational text, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Gaines writes, "Although usually understood as a political discourse, black nationalism, like dominant Anglo-American nationalism, was intensely concerned with gender issues and illustrates the affinity between black and white societies surrounding racial purity, intermarriage, paternity, and the reproductive sexuality of black and white women" (xvii). This construction of black nationalism is predicated on the relationship between black and white conceptualizations of racial purity and political discourse and less on identity and interests, which is Lubiano's focus. Such a distinction is important because the shift from "political discourse" to a "narrative of identity" allows everyday experiences that influence one's narrative of identity to be intimately tied to black nationalism and to unofficial political discourse.

Melissa Harris-Lacewell furthers the work of Lubiano by connecting the development of political worldviews and political discourse among African Americans to

11

the nature of ideology. She "examines how black people use their interactions with one another in the black counterpublic to develop collective understandings of their political interests. These interests constitute ideological stances" (Harris-Lacewell xxii).By connecting the "everyday talk" (narrative of identity) to ideological stances (interest), Harris-Lacewell provides a useful model for understanding black productions, both visual and pop cultural, as constituting black ideology, understood as black nationalism. Refering back to Lubianao, "commonsense black nationalism's work as counternarrative is aestheticized in popular culture" (237). In this sense, Perry's film as popular culture can be read as providing a commonsense black nationalism, especially given the "post-racial" moment we are in and how his films elucidate the ways in which race still functions as a tool for discrimination, hence the need for a New Black Nation and the maintenance of a new patriarch to protect the nation.

As art, Perry's work becomes as an imaginative and political tool used to socialize spectators into the commonsense black nationalism he provides. Where Harris-Lacewell and Lubiano provide a fruitful discussion of pop culture, the power of art as a medium through which political thought can be disseminated gets less attention. Martha Nussbaum has claimed that art directs our attention to particular individuals in particular situations and thus gets us to enter imaginatively into the subjectivity of the individuals whose condition we have presented to us in the work. In this sense, the viewer imagines him/herself as subjects of the art, which allows him/her to receive

some type of moral education from the art.[11] Nussbaum's assertion about art allows me to interrogate Perry's films as sites where nation building is occurring. These films are more than just an allegory of the black nation; they aim to in fact build a nation of which viewers can become a part. It is in this space, through art, where Perry constructs the New Black Nation, the imagined black community of racial solidarity.

My entire framing of Perry and Joyner as building a black nation is predicated on my understanding of what, exactly, constitutes a black nation. In order to understand the black nation, I heavily rely on Benedict Anderson's theories regarding the relationship between nations, community and the imagination to ground my conceptualization of black nationhood. In his oft-cited analysis of nationalism presented in his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson writes that the nation is a imagined because "members . . . will never know most of their fellow members . . . yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). That is, the tenure of citizenship in a nation permits and promotes the individual to imagine the boundaries of a nation, even if those boundaries do not physically exist. Additionally, it is limited because "even the largest of them . . . has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations" (7). The fact that nationalists are able to imagine boundaries implies that they recognize the existence of division by culture, race. ethnicity, and other social constructions that group and define people. Furthermore, the nation is sovereign because "the concept was born in an age

---

[11] Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; *Poetic Justice*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press. 1996.

Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm . . . nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so" (7). The sovereign state is emblematic of freedom from religious structure. It provides the sense of organization needed for an orderly society without relying on religious hierarchy. Finally, the nation is a **c**ommunity because it is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (7). The imagined allegiance among people of the same imagined nation is so strong that citizens are willing to make nationalistic sacrifices for the security of the nation, even if inequalities exist in that nation.

Nation, as imagined communities, can exist both physically and theoretically. That is, they can exist as a *place* or in *space.* My interrogation of the New Black Nation is predicated on a distinction between place and space. his chapter on "Spatial Stories," Michel de Certeau connects narratives to movement and spatial practice. For de Certeau, "space is a practiced place."[12] His analysis of space articulates that the labor of stories transforms places into spaces. Places are physical locations with which bodies interact. It is the interaction of bodies and places that leads to the transformation of place into space. The narratives constructed in places produce spaces. In the New Black Nation, then, place refers to *location* whereas space refers to the practice of bodies moving and interacting with physical locations. Thus, space plays out in the abstract. Imagined communities represent both space and place. "Communities" have physical locations, but communal connections and narratives happen on and in relation to those locations provide the "imagined" element that connects the communities. The product is an

---

[12] Certeau, Michel De. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California, 1984. 117.

imagined community. For this project, "place" is the South and "space" is that which is imagined in and about the South—imaginings about gender, race, sexuality, class, and citizenship.

Chapter One, "Spacing the *Imagined* South in a *Real* Place: Tom Joyner and the Cultural Production of Geography," focuses on the location of the New Black Nation, and that location is the U.S. South. This chapter investigates the viability of a black nation being built in the South by focusing on the socioeconomic lives of blacks in the South and comparing it to the *Imagined* South offered by Tom Joyner through his annual Black Family Reunion. "Spacing the *Imagined* South in the *Real"* is foundational in that it uncovers the material realities of southern blacks as a way to interrogate contemporary issues that inform the commonsense narrative and interests of black Americans. Likewise it charts out the connections between Joyner's commonsense black nationalism, rhetorically, and the material ways in which that commonsense black nationalism manifests geographically.

Chapter Two, "Perry, Paradise, and the Policing of Black Women's Bodies" offers a comparative analysis of Perry's *Why Did I Get Married?* and Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. In this unlikely wedding, I use Morrison as a way to speak back to Perry's formation of the New Black Nation, which is predicated on the maintenance of rigid female gender codes of conduct. In this chapter, I examine how enforcement of gender codes of conduct serve to keep the nation together but can also serve to break the nation when those codes are not conducive to black women's autonomy.

In Chapter Three, "What Happens When the Nation Stops Being Heterosexist and Starts Getting Quare?" seeks to complicate the relationship of nonheteronormative black bodies and black nationalism. In this chapter, I weave together the narratives of Reverend Carl Kenney, Bishop Eddie Long, and Tyler Perry's fictional character Madea. The purpose of doing so is to examine how nonheteronormative bodies exist *within* the black nation, despite the black church's— and subsequently black nationalists'—demand that they not be. I ultimately find that their bodies are not fully included into the construction of the black nation, but that there are moments where their presence is very real.

Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place, Citizenship, and Imagination provides a way to situate visual art and popular media as spaces where black viewers can enter into nation building. That viewers keep coming back to the New Black Nation points to a re-emergence of Black Nationalism that is dissimilar to the Black Power Movement and Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, this movement is more conceptual, both imagined and imaginary. My project serves to afford a discursive read of this new form of black nation building, the new black nation being built, and what that means for the black men and women whose narratives are not realized in the process. Hopefully, this will offer a new, critically conscious way for black spectators to engage in visual art, nation building, and Black Nationalism. Lastly, I seek to add to the slowly budding academic discourse of Perry's work, not just focusing on the cinematography or script writing; but, rather, I aim to present a more holistic conceptualization that gets to the heart of what Perry is doing and why it is important.

CHAPTER 1: "Spacing the *Imagined* South in a *Real* Place: Tom Joyner and the Cultural Production of Geography"

> On some days, for some people, memory of the South could run something like this: home of my ancestors, site of my blood and shame, focus of my birthright, still to be redeemed.
> At other times the memory is milder: garden of my childhood, home of love's embrace, clear skies, lost sanctuary.
> Both remembrances collide in people's voices, and either or both can stir the romantic and the idealist. But as people make the journey home, remembrance also collides with, and eventually falls witness to, experience.
> Home is a hard fact, not just a souvenir of restless memory, and for the people I know who made the journey away and back, home is in a hard land—hard to explain, hard to make a living in, hard to swallow.
> - Carol Stack, *Call to Home*

The history of black Americans and the U.S. South is not an all too unfamiliar narrative. The South's geography and fertile soil presented a viable location for the growing of cash crops such as cotton, tobacco, sugar, and coffee. These crops fueled the economy of the new American colonies as well as the economies of various European countries with whom Americans and the British did trade. Thus, there was an indelible need for free, slave labor to work the plantations in order to drive down the cost of production and maximize profits. This need led to the extrication of Africans from their homeland and their transplantation into the United States. This process, known as the transatlantic slave trade, incited the relationship between blacks in the U.S. and the U.S. South. According to the 1860 U.S. census, nearly four million slaves were held in the 15 states in which slavery was legal, and ninety-five percent of black people lived in the

South, comprising one-third of the population there. Only 2% of the black population lived the North[13]. The South became second home to enslaved Africans and has since become first home to generations of blacks following the abolition of the slavery in 1865. That is, former slaves who remained in the United States following the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment whether by choice or lack of other viable options began to see themselves as citizens of the United States. The ratifications of the Fourteenth Amendment during the Reconstruction Era ushered in a space for black Americans to actually realize themselves as citizens, with the "Citizenship Clause" overturning the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision that had previously reduced blacks down to property.

With this newfound sense of citizenry, and with the black population in the U.S. having reached 8.8 million by 1900, blacks were well on their way to viewing U.S. soil as their *home* soil. In 1910, about 90 percent of black Americans lived in the South[14], but large numbers began migrating north looking for better job opportunities, living conditions, and to escape Jim Crow and racial violence that accompanied southern life. From 1916 through the 1960s, more than 6 million black people moved north. But in the 1970s and 1980s, that trend reversed, with more blacks moving south to the Sunbelt than leaving it. In fact, black Americans have been moving back to the South in increasing numbers in recent decades, a social movement commonly identified as ''return migration''.[15] By 1990, the black population reached about 30 million and represented 12 percent of the population, roughly the same proportion as in 1900. However, of black

---

[13] Clack, George, Mildred Sola. Neely, and Alonzo L. Hamby. *Outline of U.S. History*. New York: Nova Science, 2009.
[14] ibid
[15] Stack, Carol B. *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South*. New York: Basic, 1996.

returnees, 39 percent settled in a southern state that was different from their birth. [16] They were returning *home,* to the South, but not to their birthplaces. Rather, the *home* to which they returned was the same new *home* they sought out to find: a place for opportunities and where it seemed a better life might be possible.[17] Much to their dismay, the home they originally sought out to find was not in the North. In fact, many black Americans discovered that Jim Crow was not merely confined to the South. Rather, it manifested as a color line that transcended geographical location. Black Americans were denied full citizenship no matter where they were. That is, the citizenship that was supposed to be awaiting black Americans when they entered the North and once removed from repressive Jim Crow was an illusion. Displaced from their houses, their families, and their comfort zones, black Americans returned to the South to reclaim what was theirs.

As the Great Migration and subsequent "return migration" or New Great Migration elucidate, black Americans have had a contentious relationship with the South, negotiating issues of citizenship, property, community, and white terror. With all of this social baggage, though, they are returning to the South to reclaim their home, to reclaim their heritage, and to build a sanctuary for black people. Contemporary popular media and visual art are performing the same role of *The Defender*. *The Defender* was used to dazzle black Southerners with images of recreational opportunities, playgrounds, baseball games, and nightlife in the Promised Land that was the North; contemporary popular media and visual art are likewise dazzling black spectators to offer them images of a

---

[16] Gregory, James N. *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005.323.
[1717] ibid

Promised Land that is located in the South: the New Black Nation. As James N. Gregory argues, *The Defender* was building portraits of something new in the American experience: a space where black Americans controlled their social space, a city within a city, a black metropolis.[18] It is my assertion that the rhetoric and community building efforts of Tom Joyner offer a similar portrait, one that positions the black metropolis in what I refer to as the "Imagined South."

In order to understand the South represented through the work of Tom Joyner as "imagined" I draw on Edward Said's notion of "imagined geography" and combine it with Elizabeth Alexander's conceptualization of a "black interior." In *Orientalism,* Said develops the concept of "imagined geography" as a way to capture the complex set of ideas and images through which geographic entities such as the "Orient" and the "Occident" get historically produced. Said posits that through "imaginative geography" meaning becomes consigned to the space "out there," beyond one's own territory. According to Said, "All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crown the unfamiliar space outside one's own."[19] "Imaginative geography" has been used to refer to both the ways in which geography is culturally constructed and to the function discourse plays in creating particular geographic knowledge. Derek Gregory considers "imaginative geography" to be the product of an assortment of representation including literary, pictorial, cartographic, and photographic representations working together.[20] Relying on Gaston Bachelard, Said uses the metaphor of the inside of a house to elucidate

---

[18] Ibid, 52.
[19] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978. 54.
[20] Gregory, Derek. *Geographical Imaginations*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994.

how objective spaces acquire a sense of intimacy and security due to experiences that

seem appropriate to it. Said goes on to state that the objective space of a house is far less

important than the "poetics of space." Through these poetics, the literal dimensions or

walls of a house are ascribed an imaginative value from cultural meanings.

> The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard once wrote an analysis of what
> he called the poetics of space. The inside of a house, he said, acquires a
> sense of intimacy, secrecy, security, real or imaginary, because of the
> experiences that come to seem appropriate for it. The objective space of a
> house—its corners, corridors, cellar rooms—is far less important than what
> poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an
> imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel: thus, a house may be
> haunted or homelike, or prisonlike, or magical. So space acquires
> emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the
> vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us
> here….*For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help
> the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and
> difference between what is close to it and what is far away.*[21]

Derek Gregory, in *The Colonial Present,* reworks Said's understanding of distance and

difference by proposing that we consider imaginative geographies as performative, in that

they "combine something 'fictionalized' and 'something made real' because they are

imaginations given substance."[22] In this sense, space is less about the house; rather, it is

about production, about the 'doing' that enables the house to exist. In Gregory's

understanding, space is produced through its performance.

 Whereas Said places emphasis on the how insiders define the outside, thinking of

imagined geographies as performative spaces allows me to take a critical look *inward* to

understand how insiders define the *inside,* the interior. Said's metaphor of the house as an

---

[21] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978. 55.
[22] Gregory, Derek. *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004.17.

imagined geography directly relates to Elizabeth Alexander's construction of the black interior as also being an imagined space that is ascribed cultural value through the performance of the space. In *The Black Interior*, Elizabeth Alexander posits a "dream space," a "black interior," where black Americans oppose the incapacitating and delimiting effects of "mainstream constructions of our 'real.'"[23] Alexander describes the "black interior" as "black life and creativity behind the public face of stereotype and limited imagination" (Alexander 2004: x). She asserts that the "black interior" is most powerfully expressed in black living rooms, the literal black interiors of the homes in which blacks live. She ultimately attempts to understand what the cultural artifacts found inside the homes of black Americans say about Black American thought and how black Americans are understood. "Black American people are seen, imagined, and 'known' through sociological and fantasy discourses, but the troves of our culture offer enlightening angles of vision."[24] By placing these two ideas together – the "dream space" and "imagined geographies"— one can find, or rather *imagine,* the home many black Americans are looking for when they migrate south or when they envision a space where they can assert their citizenship rights as well as build a black community. For Joyner, it is the home of the New Black Nation. And, that home is located in the Imagined *South*.

In 1945, St. Claire Drake posited that the American social system operates in a way to deprive blacks of a chance to share in the more desirable material and nonmaterial productions of a society that is dependant, in part, upon their labor and loyalty. Blacks, as

---

[23] Alexander, Elizabeth. *The Black Interior*. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2004. 5.
[24] Ibid

Drake argued, have not had the same degree of "know-how."[25] It is my intent, then, to examine both the *real* South, as a geopolitical region, and the Imagined South, as an imagined space, in order to fully represent the type of location necessary to house a black nation. By focusing on the socioeconomic life of black Americans in both of these Souths, I will interrogate the viability of these two spaces converging to offer a fixed location on U.S. terrain that would serve as a site for the New Black Nation. Further, I will examine what exactly it is that Joyner offers black Americans in the Imagined South as a way to understand the state of blacks in contemporary America. Ultimately, my reading of this location serves to explicate how the newly configured American social system of the Imagined South functions to reconstitute the status of blacks and provide them with the "know-how" they have been denied in years past in this same geographical region.

---

[25] Drake, St Clair. Black *Metropolis; a Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and, 1945.722.

Understanding the *real* South

As a result of recent migration to the South, Carol Stack argues that the black American population has become less *Northern* and less *urban*. They are instead reclaiming their southern roots, dispelling any cosmopolitan or urban identity that was purportedly accessible to blacks in the North. Stack infers, then, that the black American population is becoming more *Southern* and more *rural*, which raises the possibility that those moving South are reclaiming a new land of promise and/or are returning ''home''[26]. However, among twenty five big U.S. metro areas with the largest growth in black Americans population between 2000 and 2009, sixteen were in the South—including Atlanta and Dallas—according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey. The metro area with the greatest increase was Atlanta, an attraction for black professionals. Atlanta increased its Black American population by about 500,000 between the 2000 and 2009 period[27]. This gain was more than twice the next-largest numeric gainer, Dallas, according to an analysis of Census data by William H. Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. The economic atmosphere of the South, then, is critical to interpreting both motivations for returning and staying as well as the feasibility of economically sustaining a black nation located in the South.

---

[26] Stack, Carol B. *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South*. New York: Basic, 1996.
[27] William H. Frey."The New Great Migration: black Americans' Return to the South, 1965-2000." Brookings Census 2000 Series. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy (May 2004).

Broadly, the South has experienced a huge increase in economic growth and has had faster employment growth than the United States as a whole during the 1985-1995 time period[28]. The rural South also experienced relatively rapid growth in manufacturing. While nationally over the 1985-1995 time period employment declined by 972,000 or 5 percent in manufacturing, within the rural South it expanded by over 240,000 jobs, an increase of 12.6 percent. Additionally, employment grew by 6.7 million jobs in the metro South , while expanding by 1.4 million jobs in the rural South.[29] Over the 1985-1995 time period the *rural* South gained in its concentration of two of the fastest growing sectors in the nation economy: health services and producer services. Between 1997 and 2008, black Americans in the South steadily saw an increase in employment numbers, with 7,885,000 employed in 1997 and 8,997,000 employed in 2008. However, between 2001 and 2004, there was a gradual 2% decrease in black American employment in the South.
[30]

Between 1997 and 2002, black Americans consistently held more jobs in technical, sales, and administrative support, second to which were operators, fabricators, and laborers (up until 2000); the third occupation that garnered the highest population of black Americans in the South were service occupations (up until 2000, when the numbers enlisted in these occupations surpassed, and has ever since, operators, fabricators, and laborers). One of the largest growing sectors, and in fact the largest sector employing black Americans since 2004, has been management, professional, and related

---

[28] Gregory, James N. *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005. 3.
[29] Ibid, 4.
[30] Ibid, 18.

occupations. In 2004, 25.4 percent of black Americans employed in the South held these

positions; and of that 25.4 percent, 16.1 percent were performing professional

occupations.[31] By 2008, the total percentage of black Americans with professional

occupations in the South had risen 1.3 percent. With roughly 19.7 million Black

American living in the South in 2000 and that number jumping to 21.6 million in 2008, a

9.6 percent population increase, the total number of unemployed blacks rose from

658,000 to 900,000, a 36.77 percent increase in unemployment[32]. Conversely, black

unemployment in the South constitutes the highest unemployment level amongst all

regions of the U.S. That is, while black Americans have continually held working class,

blue collar jobs within the South. However, there has been a gradual increase in

professional jobs, but that does not overshadow the rapidly growing unemployment rates.

In that sense, "returning home" for work is not all too viable of an option for those

seeking employment in blue collar sectors. Instead, middle class blacks seem to have

better employment opportunity incentives for migration, and that becomes evident when

one looks at household incomes for blacks in the South.

Between 1995 and 2002, the median household income for Blacks in the South

maintained a steady increase, going from $16,923 (in 2009 dollars) to $21,905 (in 2009

dollars)[33]. However, in 2003, the median household income began to drop – so much to

the point where in 2009, Blacks earned fewer dollars than in 1999, when the median

[31]*2008 American Community Survey Data (by Region)*. Issued 2008. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau

[32] 2000 *American Community Survey Data (by Region)*. Issued 2000. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau

[3333] 1995-2002 *American Community Survey Data Summary (by Region)*. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau

household income was $21,905. In 2009, the median household income for Blacks in the

South was $21, 244; whereas, in 2008, it was $21,840. While this is not a statistically

significant decrease in income, this decrease is startling compared to the median

household income of the region. The South, as a region, saw an increase of .4 percent

from $45,417 to $43,611 from 2008 to 2009. [34]

In 2007, the number in poverty in the South, regardless of race, increased to 15.5

million, up from 14.9 million in 2006, while the poverty rate remained statistically

unchanged at 14.2 percent in 2007. Of the seventeen states that make up the South, as

defined by the U.S. Census, only one state—Maryland—had a poverty rate for black

Americans that was below the regional rate. Black Americans in Maryland were at a 12.9

percent poverty rate in 2007, which is below the 14.2 percent rate for the South. Almost

half of the remaining states had a poverty rate for black Americans that was at least

double that of the regional rate, with Mississippi ushering in an overwhelming 35.2

percent[35].

Homeownership rates for blacks in the South, on the other hand, do not align with

the abovementioned poverty rates. In fact in Mississippi and South Carolina, both states

with alarmingly high poverty rates for black Americans, the homeownership rate in 2000

was at roughly 61 percent. Though slightly below the national homeownership rate,

which was 66 percent, this figure is still impressive. Surprisingly, most states in the South

have Black homeownership rates above 50 percent. Kentucky, Oklahoma, and the

---

[34] 2008-2009 *American Community Survey Data Summary (by Region)*. U.S. Department of Commerce:
Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau
[35] 2007-2008 *American Community Survey Data Summary (by State)*. U.S. Department of Commerce:
Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau

District of Columbia are the only locations in the South where black homeownership was below 50% in 2000. While this number has likely changed in the last decade, especially given the tragedy in New Orleans in 2005, it is highly significant because no other geographical region boasted such numbers[36].

Since black Americans during the Return Migration needed a physical domicile to return to, homeownership is important because it not only helps illustrate the economic livelihood of black Americans in the South, but it also helps one get a sense of where black Americans are going once they return. As previously mentioned, many blacks are not going to rural areas; instead, they are going to metropolitan ones. In the past, Jim Crow separated Blacks from whites in terms of where they could own property, where they could reside, and where their children could go to school. These residential boundaries of segregation helped make more clear the "color line" W.E.B. Du Bois invoked when he argued that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of color line."[37] With the Return Migration, however, it is becoming clearer and clearer that the "color line" is becoming less prevalent, though still real.

A recent analysis of residential segregation of blacks from 1980 to 2000 shows that, over all, residential segregation has decreased in metropolitan areas:

> There were 220 metropolitan areas (of the 330 total) with 3 percent
> or 20,000 or more Blacks in 1980. All five measures of segregation
> indicate a reduction in the residential segregation of Blacks
> between 1980 and 1990, and a further reduction between 1990 and

[36] 2000-2006 *American Community Survey Data Summary (by State)*. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau
[37] Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: New American Library, Inc, 1903. 19.

2000. The two decade reduction ranges from 4 percent (absolute centralization and spatial proximity) to 12 percent (dissimilarity).[38]

In 2000, the West region had the lowest level of residential segregation for three of the five indexes, and the South was lowest for the remaining two. All but one of the least segregated large metropolitan areas were in the West and South, where metropolitan areas have tended to gain population. Moreover, the ten least segregated areas were all in the South except for Orange County and Hamilton-Middletown. However, at the same time, the seven metropolitan areas showing the greatest increases in residential segregation were all in the South region; but this does not represent the general trend of residential segregation across the region. [39]

---

[38] Iceland, John, Weinber, Daniel H., and Steinmetz, Erika. "Racial and Ethnic Residential Segregation in the United States: 1980-2000." U.S. Census Bureau. Presented at the annual meetings of Population Association of America, Atlanta, GA. May 9-11, 2002. 10.
[39] Ibid

Mapping the *Imagined* South

The South presented through the community building efforts of Tom Joyner serves as a departure from the *real* South. Instead, the South that is presented is an Imagined South. It is a south that exists in and outside the physical manifestations of space and is forged through the imagination and performance of a black interior that allows black Americans to exist beyond the boundaries of racism and mainstream constructions of the real. In this Imagined South, race, class, and education are intersections around which the black community—and black nation—is formed. In this space, black Americans are not plagued by the residual and lasting effects of Jim Crow. Rather, they can (re)claim a space, a home, which has been purged of its contentious history. To understand Joyner's Imagined South as the home of the New Black Nation, I will first show how he offers a common sense black nationalism through his radio show, *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*. From there, I will map out the Imagined South by focusing on the cultural productions and performances that define the Tom Joyner Family Reunion, which is physically located in the *real* South, as a way to understand the imaginative geography he provides. In doing so, I offer insight into the type of space necessary to house the New Black Nation as a critique of the limitations the current American social system has when it comes to incorporating the needs of black Americans.

North Carolina-born disk jockey, Tom Joyner, the self-proclaimed "hardest working man in radio," has become a virtually household name within Black American communities, operating both as a performer and station owner.[40] He earned the nickname "Fly Jock" in the early 1990s when he managed to work simultaneously as a DJ in Dallas and Chicago by flying between the two cities three days a week (Williams 1998: 133). His Dallas-based program, syndicated since 1985 by ABC Radio[41], is one of the first nationally syndicated radio programs hosted and produced by a black American and distributed by a non-Black network. The *TJMS* has won the Billboard Syndicated Program of the Year Award several times, and Joyner was the first black American to be elected to the National Association of Broadcasters Hall of Fame[42]. The program targets older, more affluent Black American audiences for local and national advertisers. On Monday through Friday from 6:00 to 10:00 a.m. EST, the Tom Joyner Morning Show presents music, news and information, guest from politics and entertainment, and an assortment of entertainment segments that include open telephone lines, humorous advice, and commentaries by comedian J Anthony Brown. The show gained a base rapidly, with an audience of five million in 1998 to over seven million in 2001, and up to eight million by 2004 (Smith 1998, Themba 2001, Anderson Forest 2004). Joyner sums up the strategic goal of his show in simple terms: "First we get people to listen, second

---

[40] Joyner, Tom. *Clearing the Air: The Making of a Radio Personality.* Self-published. 1995.
[41] Ibid
[42] "Radio Host Tom Joyner Among Seven Inducted Into the Radio Hall of Fame." *Jet Magazine.* November 9, 1998. Pp 53-55

we get 'em laughing, and then we get them involved. If I can reach people, then they begin to think, and that's when they start making a difference in their communities."[43]

The *TJMS* was owned by and syndicated through ABC Radio Network until Joyner bought it through his Reach Media Company in 2003. In 2004, Joyner signed a collaboration agreement with one of the 25 largest radio groups in America, Radio One, a company started by Black American broadcaster Cathy Hughes. As a group owner, Hughes was successful in moving the *TJMS* from minority, single-station owned Howard University's WHUR-FM in Washington, D.C., to her Radio One station, WMMJ-FM in suburban Maryland. The deal included an agreement to add the *TJMS* to Radio One stations in two major markets: Houston and Boston.[44] (Williams 2004, Ahrens 2000, "Radio One" 2000). That one of these markets is in the South and that the *TJMS* was transferred to a southern station is important, as it illustrates Joyner's need to establish connections with a more Southern base. These connections ensure the largest audience, because so many black Americans live in the South. Also, it ensures a level of authenticity for Joyner. He is a man *of the people*, talking *to the people*. This is later important when considering where he chooses to locate the New Black Nation.

The *TJMS* uses "webcasting," which streams broadcast signals over the internet for individual reception on mobile devices, computers, laptops, and other advanced hardware that gives users access to the internet. Webcasting allows Joyner to reach black Americans in markets where the show is unavailable. The *TJMS*'s website permits

[43] Brooks, Dwight E. and Daniel, George L. "The Tom Joyner Morning Show: Activist Radio in an Age of Consolidation." *Journal of Radio Studies.* Vol. 9, No. 1. Pp. 8-32.
[44] Williams, Gilbert A. *Legendary Pioneers of Black Radio*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger. 1998.

visitors to download segments of previous shows so they can stay connected in the event

they either miss the initial airing due to whatever reason or if they want to go back and

recapture a moment or story that was previously aired. The website also provides general

news and information, Sky Show information[45], voter registration, and census data. In

providing this wide array of services, Joyner attempts to fulfill his ultimate marketing

strategy: "I put this show together as a national show that sounded like it was local. When

you're trying to play music and do bits and then do drops that make your show sound

local, there's a little more work to it."[46] This strategy allows viewers to feel connected to

Joyner, to feel as if his interior is their interior. And, in the most literal of senses, live web

streaming allows viewers to bring the *TJMS* to their own black interiors, to their homes,

their ipods, and to their office spaces. Webcasting additionally perpetuates the *TJMS* as

what political scientists Melissa Harris-Lacewell has called the "single most recognizable

forum of black talk in black America today." [47] Harris-Lacewell's positioning of the

TJMS as a "forum of black talk" is important, as it situates it as a space to educate,

socialize, and politicize black Americans. Joyner embraces his position and uses it as a

way to construct cultural linkages to the role of black radio stations historically: "Nothing

we do is innovative. We are simply doing what radio used to do—personality things,

---

[45] "Sky Shows" provide a local element by bringing the entire morning program to various cities several times a year. These shows resemble the morning show broadcast, except they include live guests and musical performances by popular recording artists
[46] Farber, E. (2000, April 7). Publisher's profile: Tom Joyner. *Radio & Records***,** p. 136
[47] Harris-Lacewell, Melissa. *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2004. 237.

community things, motivational things, entertaining things…That's what Black radio has done through the years."[48]

Joyner's referencing of Black radio's responsibility and role in the black community underscores a connection between the dissemination of black political ideology and former black-owned radio stations in the 1970s. The connection is most noticeable when considering the juxtaposition of "Quiet Storm" programming to the *TJMS*. "Quiet Storm" programming was labeled after Smokey Robinson's popular solo ballad and was invented by Howard University's WHUR disk jockey Melvin Lindsay. Linsday forged "popular black love ballads with mellow instrumental jazz."[49] Quiet Storm was associated with the collapse of radical political radio into commercialized, uncontroversial radio (di Leonardo 1998: 112-34). The depoliticazation of black radio is exactly what Joyner vies against. By atavistically invoking black radio prior to the 'Storm,' Joyner taps into a tradition of black political discourse and ideology that emerged during a black nationalist moment.

It is no surprise that in his attempt to invoke the traditional responsibility of black radio that he uses community building and outreach to disseminate his political ideologies, rooted in common sense black nationalism predicated on racial uplift. An example of the show's involvement in the Black public sphere is Joyner's foundation. The Tom Joyner Foundation raises money for students and their parents who attend Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs). Each month, a different HBCU is

---

[48] Farber, E. (2000, April 7). Publisher's profile: Tom Joyner. *Radio & Records*, p. 136
[49] Barlow, William. "Commerical and Noncommercial." In *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media*. Eds. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow. Washington, DC: Howard University Press. 1990. 230; Neal, Mark Anthony. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. New York: Routledge. 1999. 128-129.

chosen and students from that school receive scholarships raised by the foundation. Contributions increased from $25,000 each month during the foundation's first year in 1997 to $270,000 in 2000.[50] Joyner gives out daily cash awards to single mothers, fathers, and hardworking people. According to Joyner, he does this to "recognize ordinary people doing extraordinary things. We hope we're encouraging men to be better fathers and men. We encourage male students to attend Black colleges. The demographic of our audience is [56] percent women, so we recognize single moms."[51] While the act of providing scholarship support is not inherently political, Joyner's insistence on doing "community things" combined with the fact that he is contributing to Historically Black Colleges and Universities allows for his contributions to be read as political and *patriarchal*—he encourages *men* to go to college, focusing of his educational efforts on them even though the plurality of his listeners are women. Joyner racializes and genders his capital in order to invest in community, to build the intellectual stock of community that is black (male) and educated. The performance that shapes the imaginative geography of the Imagined *South* is thus both racialized (male) and classed. By investing in black education, Joyner ensures that the "troves of [black] culture" Alexander seeks to uncover in the black interior are treasures not only in the most literal, economic sense but also in terms of the riches education provides. Additionally, it is worth noting that racial uplift ideology went into the creation HBCUs, which only further connects Joyner to a black nationalist project.

---

[50] Ahrens, F. (2000, August 7). "Tom Joyner is Radio One's latest catch." *The Washington Post.* Barker, D.C. (1998). p. A01.
[51] Joiner, Lonnie. (Spring 2008). "Tom Joyner Gives Back While Entertaining." *The Crisis*. Vol. 115. 28.

His biggest event, though, that draws black bodies to a material space in the South is the Tom Joyner Family Reunion. The inaugural Reunion was held from August 28 to September 1, 2003 at Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida. In a press release for Walt Disney World Magic's website, Joyner described the Reunion as a "one-of-a-kind event and the first of its kind at Disney World…We've got the hottest comedy, R&B, hip-hop and gospel artists -- and the best part is that it's all geared toward families." The event was based at Disney's Coronado Springs Resort, and reunion participants had the opportunity to enjoy Disney with special events Joyner had scheduled to make it a unique experience, including:

> (1) Opening night on Downtown Disney Pleasure Island featuring the humor of Cedric the Entertainer and Mike Epps, who starred in Next Friday and Friday After Next.
> (2) An "after party" session with the Gap Band.
> (3) Tom Joyner Day at Magic Kingdom and Disney's Animal Kingdom -- during which families can catch Tom in daily parades and participate in other specially planned activities.
> (4) The Funky Family Throwdown at Disney-MGM Studios with performances by Beyonce Knowles and Kelly Rowland of Destiny's Child, LL Cool J, Lil' Romeo, Maze featuring Frankie Beverly, Betty Wright and many others.
> (5) A Sunday morning concert with performances by Michelle Williams, Kurt Carr and pioneering gospel group Mighty Clouds of Joy (WDWM 2003).

The line up seems particularly peculiar when thinking about the fact that many of these artists (Lil' Romeo, Mazie, LL Cool J) would normally not even be aired on the *TJMS*. It is clear, then, that Joyner is attempting to reach a broad-range audience that his radio show might not target. This functions both as a mechanism to broaden his listening base and as a way to incorporate more members into the community he is building through his reunion. One of the clearest of messages about Joyner's Reunion, though, is that the black nation he is building is one predicated on class. In 2003, the Reunion package cost

a family of four $2,500. That included "a three-night hotel stay, theme park admission, access to exclusive Tom Joyner Family Reunion parties that feature live entertainment at Pleasure Island and Disney-MGM Studios, and entrance to seminars and workshops provided during the event" (WDWM 2003). As previously examined, $2,500 is over one-tenth of the median household income of a black family in the South, of which the majority of those workers were in service industry jobs. The Family Reunion is obviously an affair for middle class families, which makes sense considering they are the ones who would have the means and leisure to listen to his show either on their way to work or via webcasting.

Visiting Joyner's website, Blackamericaweb.com, video advertisements for the 2011 AllState (Allstate has sponsored the Reunion for the past seven years) Tom Joyner Family Reunion give more insight into the type of performances that go into transforming the location of the Reunion into a home for the New Black Nation. The longest video, which runs 4 minutes and 44 seconds long, opens with a bus full of black people greeting the camera with "Hello Family." This cues the viewer, presumably black, to recognize him/herself as part of the family, as an insider who gets to participate in the construction of the experience and indeed of the space. And, if the viewer is not immediately sold, a voice-over of Joyner asserts that there "ain't no family reunion like a Tom Joyner Family Reunion." Joyner's voice is segued into Sister Sledges' 1979 hit *We Are Family*. The video then takes the viewer through a virtual tour of the Reunion, highlighting key performances, seminars, and forums in order to clearly send the message that this event is about community building, fun, and education. On several instances, Reunion

37

participants are seen dancing, most notably doing the line dance, which signifies a black cultural performance that occurs at many *real* family reunions. Intermittently, viewers get glimpses of the various seminars and workshops that are held, which lets them know that this is about uplift and bettering themselves. A few of the workshops include: "Mc Donald's 365 Black: Black History Challenge with Roland Martin," "Allstate Effective Resume Seminar," "Allstate Entrepreneur Seminar," "Jason Richardson's Man Up Forum," "Teen Summit: Teens Talk, Parents Listen," and "All State Interviewing Seminar." These forums and events serve to re-center the nuclear family as integral to the structure of the black nation. By drawing in a host of acts that he would not otherwise air on his show, he is able to attract a younger crowd, coupled with the fact that the event happens at Disney World. The forums, then, engage these youth on a level that allows them to talk about issues that keep them from staying in the home and instead lead them to separate themselves from the family. This separation and lack of communication deteriorates the black nuclear family. By teaching black men how to be black men and how to gain job skills, black men are more equipped to get jobs that keeps them off the streets and repositions them as providers for their family. The Moynihan Report's claim about the disintegration of the black family due to the black matriarch becomes a dispelled myth in the Imagined South. By grounding the nation in the nuclear family, Joyner reconfigures the role of patriarchy as the stabilizing force for black national unity.

It is therefore in the Imagined South, at the Reunion, that blacks can reconstruct their interior and imagine a space where they can have these types of "For Us By Us" talks and productions that are not contaminated by the white racist imagination. The

legacy of Jim Crow that has historically encroached upon the ability to have a space that is uniquely theirs, free of discrimination where *fun* replaces *fear* can take place in the South through the Reunion. In this moment, black Americans can realize access to education, cultural productions, and self-reflexive inquiry that actually reflect their needs. However, once the weekend ends, they are incorporated back into an American social system that denies them this very space and opportunity. And, many leave the Imagined South because the reality of the *real* South sets in: rising unemployment, the residual of strained race relations, and the impinging abject poverty that defines a lot of the black experience within the South that gets erased by the Reunion.

CHAPTER 2: "Perry, *Paradise,* and the Policing of Black Women's Conduct"

In spring of 2007 director Tyler Perry released *Why Did I Get Married?,* a film about four couples, who are also best friends, who go on a ritualistic week-long retreat to a cabin in Colorado to sort out their marital problems. The first couple, Diane [Sharon Leal] and Terry [Tyler Perry], drives up together and argues most of the way because of Diane's commitment to her law firm, often getting calls when Terry thinks she should be paying attention to him. More than that, though, this couple's biggest problems come from the fact that Terry wants another child and Diane has secretly gotten her tubes tied. She wants to have mobility within the workplace that she thinks pregnancy will not allow. The other couple Angela [Tasha Smith] and Marcus [Michael Jai White] takes the train, and Angela argues with Marcus about his lack of employment and baby mama the whole way—and throughout the entire movie.. Sheila [Jill Scott] starts the trip with her husband Mike [Richard T. Jones] but is forced to remove herself from the plane due to her weight. Instead of Mike going with her, he chooses to stay on the plane with her friend, Trina, and tells her to drive the car the entire way from Atlanta. At the heart of their marital quarrels is Mike's infidelity and disloyalty and Sheila's low self-esteem as a result of Mike's antagonistic, hurtful comments. The final couple, Patricia [Janet Jackson] and Gavin [Malik Yoba] arrive by way of limo cab. While their journey is not documented, Gavin is seen picking up Patricia from a lecture she was delivering at a nearby insitutution of higher education. Her lecture was about the book she had recently authored, which is based on the retreats she takes with the other three couples each year.

Gavin and Patricia are presumably the happiest couple—both of them are often seen giving advice. However, by the end of the film it becomes clear that their relationship has been rocky ever since Patricia wrecked and killed their only child, who she forgot to strap in.

While the movie never actually answered the title question, it made a strong case that marriage is central to the maintenance of a black community but keeping marriages afloat is no easy task. More importantly, though, *Why Did I Get Married?* represents the possibilities of an all-black community existing; or, to draw on Benedict Anderson's understanding of nations as imagined communities, the film represents the possibilities of an all-black nation existing. While the film focuses on the lives of eight black characters, which hardly constitutes an entire community, it is the space both inside and outside the frame that creates a communal atmosphere. As producer Reuben Cannon articulates about the film in the "reflections on getting 'married'" portion of the DVD's Special Features, "I think as a black man, and as a man who has been married…it is indeed a look at marriage, among black American couples, at a certain socioeconomic level that we've never seen before. We rarely see successful black professionals, in films, dealing with the intimate sides of their lives." The caveat to Cannon's observation is that Tyler Perry frequently offers a look into the lives of black people, particularly those who are professional, in almost all of his productions. According to Roger Moore, writer for the *Orlando Sentinel*, in his 2007 review of the film, "Perry always creates lovely, all-black worlds where black people relate to one another without outside (white, racial) influences on their lives." Indeed, all

of Perry's films have focused on the black community, have featured an all-black or predominantly all-black cast, and have dealt with "black issues." Additionally almost all of his films—*Why Did I Get Married?* being no exception—were originally plays. These plays have often been scrutinized as being part of what *Ebony* magazine refers to as the "urban theatre circuit." In a January 2004 interview with Perry, *Ebony* characterized his theatrical productions as "a new chapter in the urban theater circuit as a whole—a genre that has been dogged by criticism from some Blacks in the traditional theater. Perry, as the most visibly recognized player in the circuit, has felt the brunt of this criticism." The interview goes on to include Perry rebutting arguments that his plays are part of the "chitlin circuit."[52] While the criticism certainly does not constitute the project, it is very clear that people read Perry—and that Perry reads himself—as providing insight into the black community, as offering depictions of black life. Thus, the four black couples in *Why Did I Get Married?* are not simply four black couples. Rather, they are a stand-ins for the black community. From them, viewers extrapolate the realities of black life. In the context, then, of a present-day "post-racial" society, Perry's film provides insight to the maintenance of a black nation in a post-racial world, answering the question: "What does it take to keep the black nation together?" Or, to ask the question that Toni Morrison sought to answer

---

[52] The "Chitlin' Circuit" was the collective name given to the string of performance venues throughout the eastern and southern United States that were safe and acceptable for black American musicians, comedians, and other entertainers to perform during the age of racial segregation in the United States

over a decade ago in her novel *Paradise*, "What does it take to maintain the 'house that race built'?"

In *Paradise,* author Toni Morrison tells the story of Ruby, Oklahoma, an all-black community founded in 1949 by a small group of veterans who drove West with their families to form a new paradise, in light of the loss of their former one: Haven, Oklahoma. Haven was founded in 1890 by a group of freemen who traveled north from Mississippi and Louisiana, the grandparents of Ruby residents. Through the construction of this imagined location, Morrison's story illustrates how complicated black American life is, underscoring the desire to be set apart while simultaneously being a part of the whole and how the strength of internal and external forces have kept utopia from happening. More than that, though, Morrison interrogates the ideas of paradise, of utopia, within the black nationalist paradigm. By centering Ruby as the bastion of racial purity and the propagated beloved community of the 1960s and 70s, Morrison questions the intersections of race, gender, and class within the boundaries of that community, asking: Why are our conceptions of "paradise" based on separation and exclusion, and who do we ultimately end up separating and excluding if none other than ourselves?

The violence that starts the novel, the raid on the Convent by nine men, is a result of years of distrust between the male leaders of Ruby and the Convent women who live off the sale of produce and herbs in the nearly dilapidated mansion, formerly the Christ the King School for Native Girls. These black leaders see these women as anarchic, being able to support themselves without the help of a man. This becomes a problem because the men begin to worry their own women will follow in the footsteps of Convent women,

undermining their hold on the black community in Ruby. The Convent women have escaped patriarchy, which is a direct threat to the place and space for black women within a black nationalist paradigm. Black women are supposed to support their black men, not abandon them. Moreover, black women who break from the male-dominated black community are supposed to fail, not thrive, as elucidated by the 1965 Moynihan Report. Morrison thus complicates the places and spaces both that black women occupy and that black women are expected to occupy. This is best highlighted by her second chapter, "Mavis", which tells the story of a black mother fleeing from home to the Convent, away from her husband and two children (she had two others, but they died from the heat while sitting in the car as she went inside to buy dinner for her husband). Mavis leaves because she thinks her husband and children are plotting her death. If nothing else, this is critical commentary on the role black women are supposed to occupy within the black family, even at the extent of sucking their lives out of them. After all, as Mavis is interviewed by a local reporter about the incident, she is simultaneously looking after the kids while her husband is sitting alone in the bathroom drinking alcohol.

More than just examining the role of gender and race, Morrison engages class as well. She situates the Convent women in opposition to an established black, middle class community. The black male leaders of Ruby, specifically the Morgan twins, are able to exert their power relatively independent of the white world. Given their wealth, respectable wives, respectable homes, and their respectable religion, they constitute a patriarchal society that black women would do well to escape, since black women do not have access to any of these mechanisms of power within Ruby, leaving them outside of

the black middle class, the center of black nationalism and uplift. What is important about Morrison's narrative is that the women escaping Ruby are average women, almost all of whom are poor. Instead of striving to be a part of the middle class and adopt patriarchal, middle class ideologies, Morrison offers the negotiation of space as a means through which self-power can be actuated.

By introducing the narratives of drifting black women, Morrison thoroughly interrogates the problems of the "beloved community" of the 1960s. The paradise envisioned, in fact, was more a prison to some than a haven. She critiques the nature of authenticity that has permeated conceptions of blackness within and outside of the black community. She provides an intervention on behalf of gender that disrupts popular black nationalist discourse about solidarity, community, and equality. Furthermore, Morrison complicates the ways in which space and place become conflated and destabilized. For Morrison, paradise is not a geographic location; rather, it is a spatial dimension that exists within the self and is exerted onto place. The Convent, itself, is not what allows these women to find themselves and love themselves; it is the space they carve within the Convent and within themselves that does this. For Morrison, a house truly never is a home.

When placed in juxtaposition to Perry's work, though, it becomes quite clear that both Morrison and Perry are making claims about the enforcement of gendered codes of conduct as foundational to maintaining the black nation. On the one hand, Perry polices and enforces particular images of black women in order to whip them into their correct codes of conduct. Morrison, on the other hand, destabilizes those

very codes. For the purposes of this chapter, I will examine one image that exists throughout *Why Did I Get Married?*, the Matriarch, and show how she is policed by Perry in order to maintain the "home" that is the New Black Nation. I will then use *Paradise* to problematize this very policing. In doing so, I ultimately seek to uncover the role that gender plays in black nation building.

I chose to put Morrison in conversation with Perry because Morrison's critique of black nationalism provides a useful way to engage the limitations of black nation building, specifically in relation to black women's roles in that process. Likewise, my reading of *Paradise* suggests that Morrison and Perry have the same project—creating a home for the black nation, but the two have very different conclusions. One of the "cautionary tales" of *Paradise* is that "blackness" is not a uniform experience among black Americans. "Being black," the text insists, is not a monolithic experience, and black Americans should not fall into the reductive thinking of whites who constituted black stereotypes as a way to define themselves. Morrison goes further to note that "it's important not to have a totalizing view. In American literature [black Americans] have been so totalized – as though there is only one version. [black Americans] are not one indistinguishable block of people who always behave the same way."[53] Morrison thus provides critical insight into the complexities of black life through *Paradise.* While Judylyn S. Ryan argues that *Tar Baby,* one of Morrison's previous works¸ "restores a critical understanding of the ways in which class conflicts undermine and contaminate relationships between women and men, and of the extent

---

[53] Morrison, quoted in Nancy J. Peterson, "'Say Make Me, Remake Me.': Toni Morrison and the Reconstruction of African-American history," in Peterson, ed., p.219.

to which the resolution of gender conflicts in the Black community is intimately connected to the struggle against cultural imperialism and the materialist vision it inculcates,"[54] the same can very much be said about *Paradise.* Through Ruby and the entangled class, race, and gender issues therein, Morrison attempts to tease out as well as weave together a complex narrative about the black American experience within and outside the dynamics of a black community. In the process, she seeks to address the "dilemma of at once representing a powerful utopian desire and at the same time representing a thoroughgoing skepticism concerning the possibility of its fulfillment."[55] The utopian desire—the desire to find a home for the black nation—is complicated by examining the ways in which Black Nationalism, and indeed, a black nation—Ruby—can never provide a home where the job of "unmattering race" is a manageable human activity, especially when that home is built on the subjugation and/or erasure of black women. As she argued in her oft-cited piece "Home" in the edited collection *The House That Race Built*, "'Home' seems a suitable term because, first, it lets me make a radical distinction between the metaphor of house and the metaphor of home and helps me clarify my thoughts on racial construction. Second, the term domesticates the racial project, moves the job of unmattering race away from pathetic yearning[56]...to a manageable, doable, modern human activity." The 'pathetic yearning' and 'utopian desire' are made realities through *Paradise* and *Why Did I Get Married*? by means of a commonsense black nationalism. That is, the

---

[54] Judylyn S. Ryan, in Peterson, ed., p.82
[55] Dekoven, in Peterson, p. 113. Peterson, Nancy J., ed. *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Baltimore, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997.
[56] Here, I take her usage of 'pathetic' to reflect the Oxford English Dictionary's definition, meaning "producing an effect upon the emotions; moving, stirring, affecting."

impetus to construct a 'home' where black Americans can realize access to full citizenship is a deployment of commonsense black nationalism. Unlike Perry's model, however, Morrison's model of commonsense black nationalism provides significant interventions on behalf of gendering the black nation, as she uses a black feminist hermeneutic in her construction. Therefore, her framework is useful to engage Perry on a level that is capable of doing a gendered analysis of black nation building, one that is necessary in order to understand Perry's project.

In order to understand how gender operates in both Perry's and Morrison's home, in both their black nations, it is important to first understand gendered codes of conduct as a controlling mechanism. According to Karla Holloway, the encounter of *ethics* and *ethnicity* produces "a narrative coherence that articulates the way moral imaginations construct behaviors that are intimate with and close to our community's identity as well as to its social, political, and economic histories" (Holloway 7). Further she argues that there is a relationship between culture and conduct, which is the very stuff of our national identity. In that sense, the black national identity is the convergence of ethics and ethnicity, of culture and conduct. When public admonitions of black women's conduct dissolve the public displays of their bodies (Holloway 53), the black woman's body becomes both mutable and consumable. In this process, she becomes the ghost in the machine that produces the necessary conduct codes to sustain a black national identity and, conversely, a black nation. Perry's admonishment of Tasha Smith's character, Angela, serves as a corrective to her behavior, to her code of conduct. Angela is characterized as a domineering, castrating

48

bitch. By extension of her characterization and the corrective approach Perry takes toward her, Perry attempts to tame the Matriach. This sends a clear message to black women: Matriachs need not apply to the black nation; they are not welcome in the construction of a black national identity.

The Matriach is a sexual script that emerged in the mid-1960s. Effectively, this image was the birth child of then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a New York Democrat. Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, stated that the black American experience suffered as a result of a family structure that was under the control of black women. The report argued that black female headed households do not provide black men with the psychological or emotional models necessary to become productive members of society. Black women were represented as having all the power within the family unit as a result of their control and domination within and outside the home through their sexuality. The Matriarch image positions black women as castrating bitches who emasculate black men, usurping their power. As critics of Black Nationalism, and most nationalisms for that matter, have pointed out, patriarchy is often central to creating a national identity. The Matriarch is therefore a threat to the maintenance of a black nation. By casting Angela as Matriarch, Perry both reinforces the image of black women as Matriarchs and provides a blueprint for how to correct her emasculating nature in order to reconfigure and reclaim male power as central.

Breaking the Back of the House that Race Built: Policing the Matriarch

Angela is first introduced to spectators aurally through a conversation that her friend Patricia is having with students about the book she recently published, *Why Did I Get Married?* One of the students, a young black female, makes a statement to Patricia that establishes a characterization of Angela, upon which the film eventually builds and to which spectators are continually exposed: "It's hard to believe that a woman as educated as you are could have a friend like Angela." The ominous foreshadowing of Angela cues spectators to be apprehensive and suspicious of her character. Patricia's response provides a substantive shift, failing to clearly articulate a counter position that would serve to disrupt the accusatory tone of her student. She rebuts by telling the student that one of the "great things about going to a historically black college is that you get to meet very interesting people; and Angela, she's incredibly intelligent. She studied Chemistry, and when she couldn't get a job in corporate America, she took another route. She created her own hair care line, Lady Angie." Patricia never actually addresses what makes her friendship with Angela less surprising. Rather, instead, she talks about Angela's accomplishments. Assuming the student read the book, which the student's line of inquiry invites this suggestion, the students knows Angela's accomplishments. A friend *like her* is an interrogation of conduct, not accolades. Patricia's inability to come to her friend's defense, to address

50

what makes her friendship with Angela seem surprising, creates another layer of suspicion not previously provided by the original line of inquiry.

It is with this framing that spectators encounter Angela on a train as her and her husband, Marcus, are on their way to the cabin to, as she states, "save a damn marriage." Marcus and Angela are arguing about Marcus's baby mama, Keisha, who regularly interferes with their relationship. The tone in Angela's voice suggests that this is not the first time they have had this conversation. It is in this scene that spectators get a glimpse—albeit an overwhelming one—of Angela's emasculating nature. The sound of the train blends perfectly into Angela's loud voice, as she informs Marcus that she's "sick of dealing with [his] ghetto baby mama." Her raised decibels disturb the white, gay couple behind her. "Do you mind?" asks the first perturbed white gay male. Angela's response represents her assertion of power and how the subsequent control and domination that come with her power, in true Matriarch fashion, extends to those around her. Her interaction with the gay white male patron on the train speaks to the real threat that Matriarchs pose to the maintenance of the black nation. Her behavior elicits the first, and only, racist discourse throughout either of the two films, making "race matter." "What the hell are you talkin' about, 'do you mind?' Ya'll ain't never seen black people on a train. You ain't never heard of the Underground Railroad?" shouts Angela, who at this point has turned around and is directly addressing the couple. The second gay male, who had not spoken up until Angela's outburst, makes the first racially-charged retort, which then spirals into a series of racially insensitive discourse that exposes how race

51

matters. Looks like we've got a ghetto Harriet Tubman," the unnamed patron says.

His friend, interpreted as partner, responds with, "Ooh, 'let my people go,' you *heard me?*" The banter between the white men continues, ending with one suggesting that Angela has been drinking a forty ounce, "probably malt liquor." The blatant invocation of racial stereotypes as a mechanism to challenge the Matriarch is obvious. That these slurs are coming from two gay white men, who have less privilege within the white patriarchal structure, suggests that the Matriarch can cause even the most marginalized white bodies to identify with white male patriarchy. This, in turn, undermines the "post-racial" project and poses a real problem for the ontological security of the black nation. The black nation's survival is determined not only by intracommunity stability but also by intercommunity non-hostility. That is, members of the black nation must have some level of harmony amongst one another and amongst outsiders. By antagonizing and usurping the power of black *AND* white men, Angela undermines male dominance, writ large, which destabilizes intra and intercommunity harmony.

Angela's domineering presence also challenges the inclusion of other members to the community, with them having to go through her to gain access since she is the head of the household, of the black nation. Having arrived at the cabin and brought up the fact that Marcus does not make enough money multiple times, Angela and the rest of the couples wait on their last two friends: Sheila and Mike. What they do not know, however, is that due to Sheila's size she is forced to get off the plane and instead drives. Mike does not offer to ride with her; and in fact, he insists that she drive,

giving her money for gas. Likewise, the couples do not know that Mike is bringing

Sheila's friend, Trina, who he insists should stay on the plane. When Mike arrives

with Trina, Angela jumps back into Matriarch mode. Aesthetically, through her

positioning, it is clear that she heads not only her immediate household but is also

supposed to represent the heading of the females as well. She is standing out front,

with the two other women behind her on her left and right. The triangular formation

positions Angela as the definitive head of the pack, with the leader out front and two

followers on standby. The presentation, alone, does not speak to Angela's authority as

Matriarch. Rather, it is the way she exerts her power by nullifying the stance of her

two counterparts that speaks to her authority. When Mike asks if it is ok that Trina

stay on the trip, given the extra room and invite from Sheila, Patricia and Diane (the

two women behind Angela) say it is fine. Angela, on the other hand, objects, waving

her finger to display her disapproval. Not leaving the conversation up for negotiation,

she states, "No. She's gonna have to come up with some money on this trip or

something." Although there is a vacant room and the group would not incur additional

charges from Trina's presence alone, Angela's objection leads Trina to agree, clearly

not willing to challenge the Matriarch. Even then, Angela is not satisfied. As she lists

Trina's qualities, which include her being pretty and single, she tells Patricia and

Diane to "get her ass out of here." Her declarations of almost matter of fact marshal

law highlights how the Matriarch, when untamed, assumes a domineering role in all

spheres of public discourse. And, in the words of Mike, her sense of authority depicts

her as the "bitter one," a classic descriptor of the Matriarch.

These are not the only examples of Angela's invasive, domineering nature.

Throughout the film Angela can be seen calling into question Marcus's manhood, challenging his ability to provide for his family, and overall making Marcus feel inadequate about himself. Prior to Trina and Mike's arrival, Marcus confesses to Terry, who is a pediatrician, that he has been "burning for three days" and needs Terry to administer him a shot of penicillin. Marcus hints at his infidelity and subsequently his fear of telling Angela due to her potential reaction. What is even more telling of the Matriarch's domination, sexually, is the fact that, as Marcus articulates, "Angela's not the type to ask for it; she takes it." When Terry suggests he tell his wife, Marcus responds, "see now you trying to get me killed." Angela's ability to produce fear in Marcus speaks to reversal of sexual domination that inherently challenges the patriarch and is therefore unacceptable and therefore must be corrected. As the film progresses, Marcus remains silent about his infection and makes excuses to Angela about why he does not want to have sex with her. While abstinence on the trip might ensure that she does not contract it, it does nothing to address the fact that she might already be—and likely already is—infected. In this case, Angela's health is compromised due to her power. This is one way to whip black women into their proper role as submissive as well as for Marcus to, momentarily, assert his manhood. Because, it is not simply the act of her aggression that castrates him, but it is the implication of that aggression that further calls into question his manhood. After all, if behind every strong black man stands a strong black woman, Angela's position as standing *in front of* instead of behind provides a

54

constant reminder to Marcus that he is weak, even when his wife and friends are not

providing constant reminders.

With the progression of the narrative, though, Marcus's momentary assertion

of manhood is, again, undermined by the Matriarch. One night at dinner, Angela

antagonizes Mike, who insists that Trina does not go out with the single sheriff, Troy,

because Mike and Trina are having an affair. Angela's persistent antagonizing of

Mike, evening going as far as to tell Sheila about Mike's infidelity when he would not

fess up to it himself, leads to Mike exploding and airing all the "dirty laundry" of the

group, including the fact that Marcus has venereal disease. Marcus's clear discomfort

is indicative of his fear of Angela, of the Matriarch. Yet again, the idea of the

Matriarch as dominating and emasculating is reinstantiated. And, she uses

domineering discourse to belittle Marcus, calling into question his fidelity and

gesturing toward calling into question his sexuality. When asked if it was Keisha who

gave him VD, Marcus nods. Angela's response, however, robs Marcus of any

opportunity to get temporary reprise from asserting his power over Angela by not

disclosing information about her health. She proudly affirms, "No, you didn't get it

from her; you got it from Walter." Marcus immediately processes the comment as a

shot at his sexuality, which seems natural given the way Angela is portrayed as

constantly challenging his masculinity. "What are you talking about? I ain't gay" he

quickly replies. In a display of braggadocio, Angela reclaims her authority and halts

any inroads Marcus may have made, or assumed to have made, prior by letting

everyone know that she slept with Walter and that she "got a shot [and] was just waiting for [Marcus] to say somethin'. BOOM!"

Marcus's response—choking Angela—is given as an appropriate affective response, teaching the male viewer how to handle his wife and teaching the female viewer how to keep her mouth shut, literally. In fact, Mike can be heard in the background egging Marcus on; "I hope he breaks your vocal cord." This is Perry's first foray into actually correcting Angela's behavior. Thus begins the process of correcting the Matriarch's behavior. And, this correction appears legally irreprehensible. Sheriff Troy is seen helping pull Marcus off, but no handcuffs are drawn; no Miranda rights are read; and no arrest is made. Instead, Marcus is taken away to cool off, but not before declaring that Angela is "so damn *EVIL*," despite the fact that he was the one who put his hands on her. The lack of reprimand against Marcus by the other men or by the law points to Marcus's actions as acceptable and Angela's as culpable. Similarly, the women—her *friends*—do not take action. Besides a few questioning glances, and slightly above average decibel-raising objection, the women sit there. This suggests that they are not only complicit in the correction but that they understand Angela to be a threat to the nation. In her article "Black Women and Black Power: The Case of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee" in the edited collection *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power* Movement, Cynthia Fleming argues that "one of the distinctive tenets of Black Power philosophy was the belief in black male dominance" (207). Black nationalism's emphasis on male

dominance inevitably means that black women participating in and propagating black nationalism had "views [that] were filtered through the prism of male chauvinism that accompanied the rise of [black nationalism]" (207). In not doing anything, Sheila, Patricia, and Diane adopt the same chauvinistic prism in order to maintain the black nation, even if it is at the expense of their close friend.

The events at the dinner table ultimately cause everyone to leave the trip early. After the couples leave, Angela and Marcus are still fighting, especially when Keisha, Marcus's baby mama, shows up at Angela's salon. Much like Trina's appearance, Keisha's is a threat to the Matriarch. Except, this time, the threat is brought to her own establishment by a person who has continually been the point of contention between her and her husband. While Angela sees this as an opportunity to set the record straight and to finally handle the situation, her mission is thrown off by Marcus, the now re-empowered black male figure. Marcus stands between Angela and Keisha as both protector and peace maker; though, it is unclear who, exactly, needs the protecting. The Matriarch's power slips in this moment. Here, an outsider comes to her place of employment, which is also where she employs her husband—a constant reminder that she has the economic power over him—but he interferes with her process of domination. And, instead, she has to direct her frustration toward her other employees, screaming, "Who you all lookin at? Ya'll know I kick ass up in here, every Tuesday. You know who you work for. Ya'll *know* who you work for." While it is never clear how Marcus deals with the issue or why Keisha showed up in the first place, it is clear that Marcus is beginning to reclaim his masculinity,

57

particularly in relation to Angela. His reclamation is made evident when he and Angela are later going to Keisha's to pick up his children. Angela is, once again, reminding Marcus of her economic power and her position as Matriarch. When he threatens to leave her, she dismisses him, telling him that he "ain't going nowhere" because he needs *her money*.

In a last-stitch effort to claim his masculinity, Marcus drags Angela out of the car. His short monologue that follows is the first time he clearly articulates himself in a counter-forceful manner, taking back the power that she is seen as having usurped:

> It was my money that started the damn business. Now, you think I'm with you for the money? I'm with you because I love you, but you too damn stupid to see it. I was with you when you didn't have a dime, and I've always been there for you, not afraid to let you shine. It's a damn shame you women are so used to losin' you don't realize when you've won.

By sticking up for himself, Marcus asserts his masculinity, taking his "rightful" place as head of the relationship and of the household. Angela quickly falls into place, shown appropriately mothering the children. Her correction is even more so apparent in one of the final scenes, where she is shown having cooked for Marcus, an obviously rare occasion based on his suspicion. He goes as far as to ask her if she poisoned the food. It is in this scene that they make amends, with Marcus deciding that Angela is going to stop drinking, stop riding his case about his money, and effectively let him be a man. Angela agrees, even getting permission to chug the last bit of wine in her wine glass. The Matriarch has been tamed.

The film eventually ends with all the relationships being "mended," at least momentarily. This mending, read as reconciliation, only happens because of the changes the women make in their lives. Diane, a successful lawyer who is married to pediatrician Terry was adamant throughout the film about not wanting additional children, so she withholds sex from Terry. In withholding sex, she steps outside of her wifely duty, and Terry tells her that part of being a wife is offering sex on a regular basis. Earlier in the film, when Mike is airing everyone's dirty laundry, the fact that Diane had her tubes tied, a fact hidden from her husband, is exposed. Because she takes control of her own body both sexually and reproductively and because she invests heavily in her legal career, Diane is ridiculed and chastised by Terry for not properly performing her role as wife, a role that black women should presumably understand. In defiance to these gender roles, Diane agrees that she would compromise if he was not asking her to "step back into the 50s." Her rejection of particular codes of conduct (non-rebellion, being sexually available, prioritizing procreation) causes Terry to leave, to prove that he does not "have to be there." That is, black men can give up their husbandly duties at any times because they do not *have* to be there; however, black women *have* to conform to certain codes of conduct if a man *is* going to be there. And, as Perry (as director) aptly displays in the film, black women *need* men to be there. When Terry moves out, Diane—never mind the fact that she is highly educated, has a full-time job, and can self-sustain—seems to be utterly lost without him. She seems incapable of having an identity without him. The solution? Compromise. Except, compromise requires her to recognize how her actions

59

were wrong and to offer to work through an affair Terry claims to be having with his secretary. Though the affair is not true, that Diane was willing to put up with it is a complete shift from her previous position of not stepping back into the 50s. By displaying Diane as broken and crawling back to Perry, Perry reinscribes the notion of black women's dependence on men and that exploiting black women's needs and desires to have a functioning family and relationship is one way to change her code of conduct.

These Codes Are Not for Us: Black Women Find Comfort in Paradise

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* provides an alternative narrative on gendered codes of conduct and how the enforcement of such codes can lead to resistance, thus destabilizing the initial image as well as the black nation. The novel starts in July 1976 in Ruby, Oklahoma to Ruby's male citizens heading out to murder five women who effectively ex-communicated themselves from "the nation" and established a safe haven in an abandoned Convent outside of the town. The first line, "They shoot the white girl first," cues the reader to understand two things: first, that race and gender matters, and secondly, that these women are expendable. This formulation establishes the Convent as a house that threatens the one that race built, a house that threatens Ruby and the members in it. Because of this, the men take to violence to literally kill the threat as well as to send a message to the townspeople of Ruby about what is and is not acceptable conduct. The women in the Convent do not exhibit suitable gender codes of conduct.

The narrative then shifts to the telling of Ruby's founding in the 1890s, when the town's founding families, or the "eight-rock," move from Louisiana and Mississippi to settle in Fairly, Oklahoma, an all-black town. Following the end of the Civil War, black families were searching for a place to rest, a place where they could

61

become and live as full citizens of the United States. However, black free veterans

had few locations carved out for them where they could envision such incorporation

into the American identity. Hopes of finding a home were quickly and continually

thwarted. "On the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma,

the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcome on each grain of soil from

Yazoo to Fort Smith…by rich Choctaw and poor whites…they were nevertheless

unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns

already being built "(13). The already established black towns required a level of self-

sufficiency that the freedmen who would later found Ruby lacked. "They were too

poor, to bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were

soliciting Negro homesteaders" (14). It was out of this need to find a home, combined

with the rejection from both the American nation and the existing black towns that

they decided to establish their own all-black town in Haven, Oklahoma. "In 1910

there were two churches in Haven and the All-Citizens Bank, four rooms in the

schoolhouse, five stores selling dry goods, feed and foodstuffs" (15). The prosperity

of Haven only lasted roughly twenty-five years, when it started to see a decline and

families began to evacuate. "Even in 1934 when everything else about the town was

dying; when it was clear as daylight that talk of electricity would remain talk and

when gas lines and sewers were Tulsa marvels, the Oven stayed alive" (15). In 1949,

Haven residents began to leave to go "Out There," beyond the safety and solitude of

the black nation. "So, like ex-slaves who knew what came first, the ex-soldiers broke

up the Oven and loaded it into two trucks…[and] headed…deeper into Oklahoma." It

was from this journey that Ruby was founded by eight patriarch-headed families; and, with Ruby came the Oven that once fed the families of Haven.

That the Oven was the center of town, around which citizens would gather "for talk, for society and the comfort of hot game" is no surprise. The Oven is symbolic of the domestic sphere, a historically female gendered space. Placing the Oven is outside suggests that the split between private and public arenas is blurred and that gender is in fact at the heart of maintaining any all-black town. Moreover, that the "breaking up" of the Oven established the end of Haven directly alludes to the role of gender codes of conduct in maintaining "home." And, it is with this construction in mind that the novel shifts to the first character, Mavis Albright, whose narrative gives insight into not only how gendered codes of conduct operate to police black women's bodies but also how destabilizing those codes can break the back of the race house.

Mavis Albright is a mother of three who has recently lost two of her children—Pearle and Merle—to a tragic heat suffocation. As the story goes, Mavis went into the store to get some weenies for her alcoholic husband, Jim, and left the two kids in the Cadillac while inside—without the windows down. The "babies suffocated…in a hot car with the windows closed. No air." At the chapter's beginning, Mavis is being interviewed by a local journalist about the incident. Throughout the interview, Mavis is all but emotionally aphasic, not even able to acknowledge the pain of her daughter, Sal, pinching her, "diving for blood." When the journalist interrogates Mavis about supposedly having only left the children in the

car for five minutes, instead of getting upset about the line of interrogation or emotionally flustered by having to recall a hard memory, Mavis is unable to register pain. Many times, she gets sidetracked by the thought of the Cadillac. For her, it represents escape, escape from her children, one who is literally drawing the life (blood) out of her, and from her husband, who hides in the bathroom throughout the entire interview. Mavis is bound by the constraints of gender. In performing her "wifely duties"—making the weenies her husband wants instead of the Spam she had—she lost two of her children. And, she is forced to relive the tale without the support of her husband. Because, after all, *support* is the role of the woman. It is not surprising, then, when Mavis leaves her husband and children behind, takes the Cadillac, and drives off, pit stopping at her mother's house. Mavis's tale speaks to the debilitating effects of gender codes of conduct. As she tells her mother, "I'm saying they are going to kill me" (31). In the immediate sense, Mavis is referring to her family. However, it is not the fact that it is family, simply, that makes them a threat. Rather, it is the duty that comes with them that scares Mavis. This is most evident when she tells her mom that her daughter Sal had a razor and was trying to kill her while at the dinner table. Sal's threat (imagined or otherwise) is very real to Mavis. Performing her gendered duties is sure to lead to her demise, and that's why she fled. In doing so, she is able to rescue herself—eventually arriving outside of Ruby at the women's Convent—but simultaneously breaks the back of the patriarchal house she left behind. It is assumed that her drunkard husband would have no ability to—or interests in—social reproduction.

64

It is in the domestic sphere that women's codes of conduct are so brutally policed that they become reduced to fodder. It is no surprise then that it is at the Oven where the secret meeting of the nine male townsfolk took place to determine what to do with the Convent women. "Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons…and the one thing that connected all these catastrophes as in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women" (11). The Convent women are likewise blamed for (re)interpretation of the town's founding motto. Instead of needing to "Beware the furrow of God's brow," the youth interpret the saying as to *be* the furrow of God's brow. The Convent women represent, for the men in Ruby, a sense of resistance that is unacceptable for both women and children. At the heart of what defines the contempt these men have for the Convent is the women that reside their and the ways in which they fuel the breakdown of gender codes of conduct. Because of the Convent, daughters rebel, brides take flight, and women are not properly giving birth to functional members of society, which undermines their duty as reproducers. Thus, the men decide the women must die. To kill the women is to kill that which poses a threat to Ruby by providing alternative possibilities for the roles of women in stabilizing society. In the Convent, a female gendered space, gender is both the center and the periphery of what defines relations in this space. The women, because of their gendered experiences, create solidarity and

solitude amongst one another that is driven by their desires for autonomy and reconciliation.

The Convent is a place to heal from the wounds that places like Ruby, with all its Black Nationalist foregrounding, inflict on black women's bodies. In killing the women, public displays of black women's bodies outside of what is deemed ethically acceptable are dissolved. Their deaths serve as a reminder to the members of Ruby what it means to be an insider and the codes that bind insider conduct to the continual functioning of a black nation. After murdering the women, Billie Delia ponders when they will reappear to "rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town" going on to refer to Ruby as a "backward noplace ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who had seen in lively, free unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so go rid of them" (308). Billie Delia's inquiry foreshadows the inevitable decline of Ruby, tainted by the blood of these women and fractured by the unabated resilience their spirit of redefining gender codes of conduct entail. The depiction of the women at the end of the first chapter exemplifies the irony of the men's action: "Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary. They are like panicked does leaping toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of fame. God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (18).

While Morrison insists the recognition of alternative gender codes of conduct and narratives of black women are necessary for any all-black space or nation to adequately and responsibly function, Tyler Perry provides a counter-construction of

the black nation that maintains otherwise. In Perry's black nation, women are whipped back into their place before they destabilize the race house. They are not given a place of healing outside of the black male sphere. And, in fact, he insists that healing must occur *through* black men. In the black nation, beside every black man stands a great black woman; and that is because she is attached at his hip, unable to break the bond that binds them together for fear of breaking the bond that binds the walls of the race house. It is my contention, then, that using gender codes of conduct as a framework to interrogate all-black spaces as nations or nations-in-the-making provides a useful rubric to understand the possibilities and implications of their existence. Otherwise, there is a great risk of (re)producing an always already instable location for black women's bodies.

CHAPTER 3: "What Happens When the Nation Stops Being Heterosexist and Starts Getting Quare?"

In 1989, Marlon Riggs' film *Tongues Untied* revitalized black gay cultural politics by declaring that "black men loving black men is the revolutionary act of our times." This statement locates power in its telling of the complicated intersections of representations of black male sexuality that is present in post-1950s Black nationalism.[57] Additionally, it highlights how gay liberation borrows from the discourse and tactics of various black liberation movements and discourses, including black nationalism. However, black nationalism and black gay cultural politics have not historically worked in tandem. As black nationalist Eldridge Cleaver articulated, "black homosexuality" is the "extreme embodiment" of a "racial death-wish," collapsing homosexual desire with the actual desire for whiteness.

> The white man has deprived him of his masculinity, castrated him in the center of his burning skull, and when he submits to the change and takes the white man for his lover as well as Big Daddy, he focuses on "whiteness" all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against "blackness"—upon himself, what he is, and all those who look like him, remind him of himself. He may even hate the darkness of night.[58]

In Cleaver's *Soul on Ice,* he further argues that desire represents actions that are both individualistic, and self-profiting performances of power. These acts, therefore, threaten individual black bodies as well as disintegrate the bonds of the imagined nation. In this

---

[57] Ongiri, Amy Abugo. "We Are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination." *College Literature.* Vol. 24, No. 1, Queer Utilities: Textual Studies, Theory, Pedagogy, Praxis (Feb., 1997), pp. 280-294
[58] Cleaver, Eldridge 1968 Soul on Ice. New York: Delta. 103.

sense, the homosexual black body desires whiteness, which literally dissolves its

blackness; and this dissolution then leads to the fragmentation of the black nation, which

is predicated on a black identity. Black bodies that perform desire, particularly

homosexuality as whiteness, are then the ultimate threat to the stability of the black

nation.

In his influential work *Afrocentricity*, Molefi Asante blames the disintegration of

the Black nuclear family, and subsequently the black community, on an "outburst of

homosexuality among black men, fed by the prison breeding system."[59] Dr. Frances

Cress Welsing continued this same line of anti-homosexual rhetoric in *Isis Papers*,

arguing that the disintegration of the black community is due to "Black male passivity,

effeminization, bisexuality and Homosexuality" (81). At the First National Plenary

Conference on Self-Determination in 1981, which was dubbed the "historic meeting of

the Black Liberation Movement," pamphlets were left on every seat that rearticulated

Welsing's and Molefi's discourse and reservations regarding black homosexuality:

> Revolutionary nationalists and genuine communities cannot uphold
> homosexuality in the leadership of the Black Liberation Front nor
> uphold it as a correct practice. Homosexuality is a genocide
> practice…Homosexuality cannot be upheld as a correct or
> revolutionary practice…[it] is an accelerating threat to our survival
> as a people and as a nation.[60]

Thus, homophobia and heterosexism has time and time again been the lens through which

black nationalism's discourse on black male sexuality has been understood. This

examination has almost always been placed in conversation with the role of the black

---

[59] Asante, Molefi K. *Afrocentricity*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1988. 57.
[60] Nelson, Emmanuel. "Critical Deviance: Homophobia and the Reception of James Baldwin's Fiction."
Journal of American Culture 14.3 (1991): 92.

church as both a place to propagate anti-gay messages as well as the congregating

location for black activists and ideologues. In this configuration, the black church is

integral to black politics and to the maintenance of the heterosexist discourse and

ideology of black nationalists. However, by focusing on the recent "sex scandal" of

Bishop Eddie Long and the discourse it has generated, the activism of Reverend Carl

Kenney, and configurations of black masculinity that reoccur in the filmic oeuvre of

Tyler Perry through lead character Madea, I aim to complicate the relationship between

contemporary black nationalism and black male heteronormativity. Expressly, this

chapter serves to offer alternative readings of the black nation, via the black church, as

always already heterosexist and homophobic and therefore foreclosing to quare[61] bodies.

Instead, I gesture toward ways to locate quare bodies *within* black nationalism instead of

always outside, even if that insertion does not fully incorporate those bodies. In doing so,

I implore readers to think about the complex ways in which quare bodies constitute their

relationship to the black nation through—and as a part of—the black church.

---

[61] I invoke E. Patrick Johnson's notion of "quare," which serves to racialize queer bodies in a way that queer theory and queer studies often resists. However, in my configuration of "quare", I consider all nonheteronormative black bodies to be quare. Whereas, Johnson distinctly refers to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered black bodies.

70

Dismissed but Not Displaced: Reverend Carl Kenney's Progressive Politics and the Orange Grove Missionary Baptist Church

In August of 2002, Reverend Carl Kenney was dismissed from his duties as pastor of Orange Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina. Reverend Kenney took a three-week leave from his duties, like he did each August. When he returned, he was notified by the Deacon board that before he could return to his pastoral duties he would have to answer for a set of incidents that occurred over the previous twelve months. The incidents to which the church referred were his second divorce, a decision that did damage to his reputation among many clergy and laypersons in Orange County, and his progressive positions on sexuality. Throughout the year, Reverend Kenney embarked on a campaign to address the issue of homophobia in the black church in part by using the *Herald-Sun*. In his column, Kenney called black Christians out on their bigotry, loathing, and hypocrisy regarding homosexuality[62]. As a result, the church asked him to remove "Orange Grove Missionary Baptist Church" from his byline. Instead, he refused and later articulated that he "would not apologize for [his] stance on homosexuality, and [he] would not apologize for the ordination. Those things were right."[63] For Kenney, the phone call and subsequent meeting were a surprise. For the

---

[62] Harris-Lacewell, Melissa. *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2004. 286-287.
[63] Ibid, 288.

Deacons, though, it was a long overdue intervention that was needed in order to reposition the politics of the church.

Within forty-eight hours of the meeting, the church leaders called a forum of the congregation. Without a majority of the church membership present, and in a controversial vote separated by only a handful of ballots, Reverend Kenney was dismissed as pastor. On his dismal, Harris-Lacewell comments, "Reverend Kenney's dismissal is informative about the ideological constraints that continue to shape black religious life in the South, but it is also a story of the surprising success of extraordinary appeals in the context of African American everyday talk." [64] In spite of his dismissal, Reverend Kenney's narrative both disrupts notions of the black church as homophobic and heterosexist and reaffirms those notions. The reaffirmation is a result of his dismissal. By being forced to step down, the church was able to reestablish their homophobic and heterosexist ideologies. However, as a black pastor who attempted to push the conversation of homophobia, Reverend Kenney registers as an anomaly within the discourse of sexuality and the black church. His anomalous characterization is furthered by the fact that he has since established a new church, Compassion Ministries of Durham, with the help of two hundred black men and women who understand and support his politics. And, he has since continued his progressive politics in and outside of the church. Upon the passage of Proposition 8, a piece of California legislation which denied same-sex couples the right to marriage, Reverend Kenney gave a speech at a

---

[64] Here, I take her understanding of "African American everyday talk" to reflect a political talk that is characteristic of commonsense black nationalism.

protest rally in Raleigh, NC. In his speech, he continued to invoke the same progressive

politics that got him fired from Orange Grove:

> I stand in front of you today as straight, African
> American…African American…uhh…Baptist pastor. I shouldn't
> be here. I shouldn't be here, but I'm here because I'm not
> scared…I'm not scared that what I believe faith wise would be
> altered…keep hope alive, a better day is coming, and this too will
> pass.

Reverend Kenney's assertion that he "shouldn't be here" is a critique of both the black

church and the black community as heterosexist and homophobic. However, his self-

identification as both African American and Baptist speaks to the ways in which his own

identity complicates those very configurations. He therefore redefines what it means to be

a black male Christian (and minister) through the espousal of political rhetoric as well as

his physical embodiment of self within the black church. Reverend Kenney takes this task

further through his online blog, Rev-elution.blogspot.com, where he discusses issues

pertaining to the black community, issues in Durham, NC, and religious matters.

On September 27, 2010, he made a blog post entitled "Lessons from Gay Pride."

In this post, he discussed how hard it had been in the past for him to attend Gay Pride,

how hypocritical it was of him to not have done so, and what his experience of attending

the Durham Gay Pride Festival was like. On a purely reflexive level, Reverend Kenney's

post serves as a tool to interrogate how his own personal life contradicts and sometimes

complicates that which he teaches. For example, he writes about the fact the he was

afraid people would assume he was gay by going to Pride. These fears were amplified

when asked to write an article for *Independent Weekly* about his transformation while

serving as the pastor of Orange Grove Missionary Baptist Church. He ran a few versions

of the article by the editor, only for her to continue to push him on his "personal change." It was later that he discovered she had assumed he was gay and wanted to know how coming out of the closet affected his personal and professional life. It was this realization that moved him to attend Pride, writing: "I was more concerned with what people thought of me than I was of my need to stand in solidarity with those who endured much more than the scandal of a rumor."

By standing in solidarity through his blog posts as well as his attendance at the Durham Gay Pride, he does the job that womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas argues is necessary of the black church. According to Douglas, black Christianity is saturated with ideas that sexuality, particularly homosexuality, is sinful and that the exploitation of black sexuality is integral to white racial hegemony. It is such a dynamic that has led to the silencing of sexuality within black Christianity. Due to the implications of this silencing (feeding into white racial hegemony), Douglass argues that, "the Black church and community have a theological mandate to engage in a Black sexual discourse of resistance whenever possible."[65] Reverend Kenney "engages" on three levels. First, he engages through his establishment of and ministering at a black church that was founded on anti-homophobic principles, providing a safe space for quare bodies to engage in religion. Second, he engages through his speeches, such as the one that he gave at the rally, and his columns that continually challenge the persuasive nature of heterosexism in the black church. Lastly, he engages through his identity, disavowing the notion that heterosexist, homophobic black bodies are the only ones that constitute the black church.

---

[65] Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Sexuality and the Black Church: a Womanist Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999. 130.

This last level of engagement is especially important because he is the minister—and therefore leader—of the black church. Kenney's model suggests, then, that quare bodies *can* access—and contribute to—the black nation through participation in the black church, that their bodies are also integral to the formation of a black community. While Reverend Kenney was opening possibilities for quare bodies, almost six and a half hours South of Durham, another leader of a black church, Bishop Eddie Long of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church was also forcing the black church to engage in sexual discourse that affected quare bodies. Except, the discourse that Long generated was one of heterosexism and homophobia. Throughout all the rhetoric, though, Long also offers his own complication of the relationship between the black church and quare bodies, which serves as a site to insert quare bodies into the black nation.

Disidentifying as Inclusion: Quaring Bishop Eddie Long

On September 21 and 22, 2010, Maurice Robinson, Anthony Flagg, and Jamal

Parris filed separate lawsuits in DeKalb County Superior Court alleging that Bishop Long

used his pastoral influence to coerce them into a sexual relationship. The plaintiffs stated

that Long placed them on the church's payroll, bought them cars and other gifts, and took

them separately on trips to various destinations, including Kenya, South Africa, Turks

and Caicos Islands, Trinidad, Honduras, New Zealand, and New York City.[66] Long's

accusers never allegedly worked for him in any official capacity, and if sexual activity

did take place, it is acknowledged that the young men were past the legal age of consent

in Georgia when it happened. On September 24, Spencer LeGrande, a member of a New

Birth satellite church in Charlotte, North Carolina, filed a similar suit, making him the

fourth man to file a lawsuit claiming sexual misconduct by Long. According to the

lawsuits, at least one of Long's accusers was employed by the church as a "Spiritual

Son."[67] He began spending time with the pastor between 2004 and 2005. During this time

when the alleged abuse took place, Long would encourage the teen to call him "Daddy."

The lawsuits read "Long would discuss the Holy Scripture to justify and support the

---

[66] Martinez, Edecio. "Bishop Eddie Long Scandal: He Wanted Sex in Church, Says Accuser Jamal Parris - Crimesider - CBS News." *Breaking News Headlines: Business, Entertainment & World News - CBS News.* Web. 12 May 2011. <http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-20018237-504083.html>.
[67] Bagby, Dyana. "Bishop Eddie Long Sex Scandal to Be Settled Soon?" *The GA Voice | LGBT News.* Web. 12 May 2011. <http://www.thegavoice.com/index.php/news/atlanta-news-menu/2494-bishop-eddie-long-sex-gay-sex-scandal-to-be-settled-soon>.

sexual activity." Part of this discussion took place through Long's Longfellows Youth Academy, a place where young black men could be "trained to love, live and lead," with Long and others acting as "spiritual parents." Though they appear to have taken down the website, it had included testimonials such as: "My real journey to Manhood didn't start until I joined Longfellows." Another testimonial powerpoint outlined how the Ishman masculine journey and Bishop Long's teachings about the bloodline stated that their "bloodlines should not be destroyed" and that "we have to take care of our bloodline because if we don't, we are not doing our jobs as men." Through the Academy as well as New Birth, black men were being taught how to be good members of the black nation. The "bloodline" is both literal and fictive. Black men were taught how to be fathers to their children as well as leaders within the black community, to subscribe to racial uplift ideology. "Our own" has a double meaning. These men learn how to take care of their own [children] as well as their own [people].

The irony of the scandal is that Bishop Long has led several anti-gay rallies and is well-known throughout the Atlanta area for his homophobic rhetoric. On Dec. 11, 2004, Long led a march of almost 10,000 people through the streets of Atlanta to support the state constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage. The march, titled "Reigniting the Legacy," also focused on three other issues: "wealth creation," including home ownership for minorities and small business support; "education reform" addressing charter schools and how to lessen drop-out rates; and "health care," to bring awareness that higher disease and mortality statistics are higher in minority communities. That it took place in Atlanta is very important because Atlanta boasts, at least anecdotally, the

nation's largest black gay population. (The city is roughly 55 percent black, and according to *The Advocate*, the gayest city in America.) Popular culture and news sources have increasingly located Atlanta as a gay haven and more applicably a "Black Gay Mecca."[68] Other anecdotal sources have also claimed Atlanta to be a Black gay enclave, using Atlanta's Black Pride Celebration (the largest in the country) as catalyst to their claims, reporting that thousands come to this pride celebration in early September and hundreds never leave

A reductive reading of Bishop Long would suggest that his subject position as a black bishop within a black mega church in the South, who leads marches against gay rights but allegedly sleeps with young black men, makes him a hypocrite. Further, his rejection of allegations about his sexuality could be read as being a reification of heteronormativity and a blanket erasure of any quare identity. That is, by insisting that he is straight, Long simultaneously rejects and nullifies the possibility of being nonheteronormative in order to reproduce the very heterosexist and homophobic politics that occur within his church—and many black churches. However, a more productive way to understand Bishop Long is to think about the transgressive ways he performs black masculinity as a negotiation of space. Long, as someone who seeks sexual gratification in another black male body, is clearly not heteronormative. While Long has never once come out as being anything other than straight, much of the rhetoric around him has been about him being gay or, at the very least, bisexual. As a leader of a black

---

[68] According to the 2010 Brookings Institute report "The State of Metropolitan America," the city of Atlanta has one of the highest Black populations in the United States, second only to New York City. Though Atlanta's Black population is steadily growing, the city has been known as a "Black Mecca" since the 1990s

mega church that has a history of heterosexism and homophobia, Long's sexual identity in many ways defines his existence within the church. A "misperformance of masculinity," to coin a term from E. Patrick Johnson, would delimit his access to the very space he helped create. Any identity that is other than heterosexual would discredit and disavow Long from New Birth Missionary Baptist Church. Thus, Long's performance of black masculinity as heterosexual and anti-gay is a mechanism of disidentification.

According to José Muñoz, "disidentification" is a way for marginalized bodies to work against and within dominant ideology as a process to effect or garner change. Identity performance is both a site and assertion of agency for marginalized bodies, where particular attention is paid to the *self*. Centering the self is a way to interrogate internal processes of identification rather than focusing solely on how external processes mark the body. The focus is on how individuals and groups identify rather than how they are identified by others, because a performance of self for the self "has a potential to transform one's view of self in relation to the world."[69] By centering the individual, disidentification constrasts the black nationalism's demonization of individualism. On "disidentification" Muñoz argues:

> Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant
> ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure
> nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that
> works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under
> the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or
> attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere
> (counteridentification, utopianism), this "working on and against"
> is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within,
> always laboring to enact permanent structured change while at the

---

[69] Johnson, Patrick. ""Quare" Studies, or (almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21.1 (2001): 11.

same time valuing the importance of local everyday struggles of resistance.[70]

Long's rejection of identity categories that implicate him as quare resonate less with self-hate and more with disidentification. Or, rather, understanding Long as disidentifying allows for a more thorough investigation of the role space plays in identity formation and "misperformance" of identity. The black church's historic promotion of hypermasculinity and homophobia, which serves to marginalize gay black men, complicates Long's location within the church. While there is not wholesale elision, in that he still has a physical presence, he disidentifies with his nonheteronormative self as a public identity. His quare black body still exists behind the pulpit, but it is not read as quare—except for by the handful of young black men who know about his secret life. In doing so, Long exemplifies the same subject position of gay black church goers Marlon Riggs captures in his documentary *Black is…Black Ain't*.

Black Is...Black Ain't is a 1995 documentary that examines racism, sexism, and homophobia within the black community. By incorporating personal narratives, interviews, performance, history, and music, Riggs focuses on the markers that serve to separate and divide black people and limit community unity. He challenges black people to "reconcile themselves to each other" by confronting the construction of blackness as a hypermasculinity that emerges from the 1960s Black Power movement, the black church, and the Civil Rights movement. The documentary seeks to uncover and assert "a cure for what ails us as a people, and that is for us to talk to each other. We've got to start talking about the ways in which we hurt each other ... because nobody can unload the pain or the

---

[70] Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999. 11-12.

shame or the guilt by not speaking." Riggs offers speaking as a method for unloading

pain or guilt within the first scenes of the film. The film opens to a call and response of

black people "preaching" what black is. "Black is…and black ain't. Black is…and black

ain't. Black is *blue*. Black is *red*. Black is *tan*..." Each descriptor is articulated with a

level of affective projection. The tension, frustration, pride, and pain that resonate in the

narrators' voices reflect the very unloading through speaking that Riggs asserts as a cure

to the divisions amongst blacks. As E. Patrick Johnson has argued, this scene also makes

explicit references to the black church as a "political and social force in the struggle for

the racial freedom of its constituents."[71]   He continues on to argue that the black church,

however, "has also, to a large extent, occluded sexual freedom for many of its

practitioners, namely gay blacks." He concludes his analysis of the opening scene by

arguing that Riggs signifies on the double standard found within the black church by

"exemplifying how blackness can 'build you up, or bring you down,' hold you in high

esteem or hold you in contempt" (Johnson 16). In another work, Johnson argues that "the

black church has been the cornerstone of black thought, politics, spirituality, and morality

in America." (Johnson 182). In focusing on the black church, then, Riggs gets to the heart

of not only commonsense black nationalist constructions of black masculinity and

blackness but also the ways in which traditional understandings of the black church as

wholly exclusionary when it comes to alternative performances of sexuality are defunct.

In fact, Riggs features a black gay and lesbian church service, which functions to

destabilize essentialist notions of the black church—and by extension commonsense

---

[71] Johnson, Patrick. ""Quare" Studies, or (almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21.1 (2001): 16.

black nationalist constructions of blackness as always already heterosexist and homophobic. Rather, the focus on nonheteronormative bodies within the black church allows for an understanding of inclusion through disidentificaiton. That is, "these black gay and lesbians are employing disidentificaiton insofar as they value the cultural rituals of the black worship service yet resist the fundamentalism of it message."[72]

While Bishop Long certainly serves as a mouthpiece for the fundamentalist message that gay black church goers resist, it would be a disservice to locate him outside of this model for negotiating identity vis-à-vis space. Long's resistance is underscored by the fact that he is a black male who engages in the very activities he denounces from a location that fundamentally denies his existence speaks to his resistance. Certainly, I would not suggest that he is resisting in the same way that gay liberation activists resist (protesting, agenda setting, reform initiatives, etc) or necessarily even the same way that black bodies, read as nonheternormative, who still maintain their presence in the church resist, because they are subject to public scrutiny in ways that disidentification mitigates. Rather, his insistence on inclusion through disidentification suggests that quare black bodies *can* find a space in the black church and subsequently the black nation. They just cannot *perform* that nonheteronormativity. By pushing the boundaries of black masculinity within and outside the structure of the black church, which tightly frames black masculinity as heterosexual, Bishop Long's presence and power in the church constitutes a shift in constructions of the black nation that position nonheteronormative bodies as always already outside of the nation. Additionally, that he is the site through

---

[72] Ibid

82

which access to the church is negotiated, since he is the bishop, only serves to trouble notions of *ipso facto* exclusion and rather complicate the ways in which quare bodies *do* exist within the space. It is not every day one comes to know a heterosexist and homophobic church by means of a black male body that is quared (insofar as either the accusations of his sexual activity are true or that he is read as gay by the public). Though not intentionally political to begin with, his physical presence in the church provides "potentials for resistance" insofar as the moment a reaction or response is drawn from the subject, the meaning of the act correspondingly transforms, which provides new possibilities—or potentials—for future struggle (Cresswell 1996: 23). Understanding Bishop Long as quare allows for the reimagination and reconfiguration of the black church in terms of how sexuality operates within it.

The power in Long's insistence on being included in the church, regardless of the fact that he is read as gay, has brought the conversation of homosexuality and the black church from an exercise of academic posturing and discourse into other arenas of conversation. Following the sex scandal, radio talk show host Tom Joyner devoted almost an entire week to commentary on Bishop Long's private life, the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, and to homosexuality and the black church. "See I want him to say, 'These ungrateful little boys I tried to help them,'" Joyner said, looking for a stronger statement from Bishop Long that would deny the scandal charges. Joyner further went on to remark that he wanted to hear more than "lawyer speak", like "…it's false, and we'll prove ourselves when we go to court…" Joyner continued, "I want him to get mad and say this is a lie." Joyner's investment in Long's innocence has two implications. First, it

suggests that Long's innocence has explicit connections to his sexuality. If he is innocent, that means he did not have sexual relations with the young black men. On the other hand, Joyner's focus on the "scandal charges" redirects attention from Long's sexuality and more so reflects the legal reality of Long's situation. Even if found innocent, Long will have to increase his level of disidentification in order to maintain his authority and legitimacy within the church. It is no longer enough for Long to deny the allegations, especially since his initial plea came by way of a statement his attorney read on the *Tom Joyner Morning Show.* In the statement Long brought forth the exact declaration Tom Joyner wanted. Read by his attorney, he stated, "Let me be clear — the charges against me and New Birth are false. I have devoted my life to helping others and these false allegations hurt me deeply. But my faith is strong and the truth will emerge." He went on to plea for patience and prayers. "All I ask is for your patience as we continue to categorically deny each and every one of these ugly charges. Finally, as I have done for thousands of others over my decades of preaching, I ask for your prayers for me, my family and our church." By bringing up his family and the church, Long reasserts his heterosexuality. The implicit message is that a man of the church and a man with a family cannot be anything other than heterosexual and would therefore not give into the homosexual desire that would produce the allegations against him.

Long's disidentification is not without justification. Long has experienced great scrutiny from black clergy members across the country. At an Eddie Long protest at the George State capital on September 31, 2010, Reuben Armstrong, a native of Dallas, Texas, talkshow host of the self-entitled *Reuben Armstrong Talkshow,* and author of

Snakes in the Pulpit argued that "somehow Bishop Long has teamed up with the devil to steal, kill, and destroy God's people." The purpose of the protest was to call for Long's immediate resignation. Or, as Armstrong told the crowd: "We're here today to stand against homosexuality that has triggered into our churches today. I'm here to advocate for our children and victims who have been molested." The crowd, in classic call and response fashion, responded with disdained projections of "Jesus, Jesus," and "God forbid!" Armstrong's address never once assumes Long's innocence. Rather, he implicates Long as both guilty and gay, going as far as to say that Long does not try to attract women and instead likes sperm. "Walk in the church with his tight muscle shirt on…he's not trying to get no women; he's trying to get him some *fresh sperm*." Armstrong has since pushed the envelope even further by demanding that Long be tested for HIV. Armstrong's rhetoric has strategically placed sexuality at the forefront of the discourse on Bishop Long and moved the allegations to the backburner, because as Armstrong—and his consortium of followers—believe, there are no allegations. Rather, the allegations stand in as fact. By connecting, then, these "facts" to "molestation" of "children" and "HIV," Armstrong makes a rhetorical move that serves to demonize Long and by extension all quare bodies. The real fact, however, is that none of the men were "children" under the law when it happened – Georgia law recognizes sixteen as the age of consent. And, further, none of the men "were molested." Rather, they were *allegedly* molested. By making these distinctions real, Armstrong forces Long to further disidentify, because being nonheteronormative means that he is gay (not bisexual or simply sexually curious), guilty, a child molester, and potentially HIV-positive.

85

While Long has certainly experienced a similar backlash as Kennedy—albeit for entirely different reasons—the difference is in the outcome. Whereas Kennedy was fired, Long continues to serve as the Bishop of New Birth. New Birth's website still has him on the front page and dedicates an entire section to him. The church continues to praise Long's accomplishments, giving much of the credit for its success to Long. In the "History" section of the website, the church acknowledges that "In 1997. Bishop Long's tenth anniversary year, brought a growth in membership to over 18,000." It also credits its entrance into the new millennium with over 25,000 members, a 50 million dollar complex that seats 10,000 people and "contains administrative offices, a library, a 1700-square foot book store, a computer lab, a kitchen, audio and visual studios, a nursery, and more" to the fiduciary planning of Bishop Long. While some members have spoken out against Long, his first sermon following the initial allegations found Long entering onto the stage to a standing ovation. Unlike the outspoken crowd of dissenters that were amongst Armstrong's rally, these members could not contain their applause and overwhelming support for Long. Two whole minutes passed before Long actually addressed the church, opening with "Good morning New Birth. Good morning to all our other guests. And, I would be remiss to not say good morning to the rest of the world" to which he received many round of applause. Specifically, when he left the "other guests" know that he would be "here next week," a cadre of applause and shouts were made. Though implicated as gay and as a child molester, New Birth members stand in solidarity with Long. This response suggests that either they do not read him as gay (or quare) or they embrace him, and not his gay (or quare) identity. The latter configuration represents

what Jewelle Gomez articulates in "Black Lesbians: Passing, Stereotypes and Transformation," "For some African-Americans, I can be a lesbian in what they imagine as my 'dark, secret world' but when I'm in 'the community.' the message to me is: don't bring 'that mess.'"[73]To be a member of the New Birth community, the black church, quare bodies can exist so long as they do not speak or perform quareness. That is, as vessels of flesh, quare bodies can occupy a space within the black church; however, they cannot make their quareness known.

---

[73] Gomez, Jewell. "Black lesbians: Passing, stereotypes and transformation." In E. Brandt (Ed.), *Dangerous liaisons: Blacks, gays and the struggle for equality*. New York: New Press. 1999. 163.

Quare Bodies' Quare Entry: Accessing the Nation through Tyler Perry's Madea

If Long's model of existence extrapolates to the black nation, which I think it does, this means that quare bodies can *be* quare, they just cannot *perform* quare. Or, as mentioned before, they cannot "misperform" blackness as quareness. Outside of the black church, this design for inclusion into the black nation can be seen playing out through the complex existence of Tyler Perry's lead character, Madea, in his highly popularized series of films such as *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (her debut)*, Madea's Family Reunion, Meet the Browns, Madea Goes to Jail, I Can Do Bad All By Myself,* and most recently*, Madea's Big Happy Family.* Mabel Simmons, better known as Madea, is a 6'6", overweight, older woman who carries a gun and is anything but soft spoken. She was born in Miami, Florida, on November 10, 1935, according to her book (penned by Perry), *Don't Make a Black Woman Take Off Her Earrings: Madea's Uninhibited Commentaries on Love and Life*; though according to *Madea Goes to Jail,* she was reportedly born on April 26, 1942. She has at least two full brothers and an illegitimate brother named Willie Humphrey, to whom she was briefly married. When she was 16, Madea's family moved to Atlanta, Georgia, into a shotgun house. There, Madea attended Booker T. Washington High School where she was a cheerleader. She mentions in *Don't Make a Black Woman Take Off Her Earrings* that her parents would not let her go out until she was seventeen or eighteen, adhering strictly to a more conservative model of upbringing.

88

In *Madea Goes to Jail,* it is revealed that Madea supported her children by stripping, pole dancing, and professional wrestling, The film also indicates that Madea has an almost lifelong criminal record, beginning at age 9 with a charge of petty theft and progressing to illegal gambling at age 18, check fraud, identity theft, insurance fraud, assault, attempted murder, illegally taking license plates from other vehicles, and a host of other things. *Madea Goes to Jail* also reveals that Madea has not had a driver's license for 38 years, yet she is seen driving everywhere. She has little to no respect for the law, even though her nephew is a lawyer and is often seen defending her in court. More importantly, though, Madea is actually portrayed by Tyler Perry. That is, Madea is a fictional *drag* character. To add to her complexity, Madea is a fictional drag character who is often heard (mis)quoting the Bible and teaching life lessons through scripture. Madea is a Southern Baptist.

In order to first understand Madea is nonheterornomative and therefore quare, I draw on Judith Butler's notion of the drag performative. On expressions of the drag performative, Butler writes that these expressions provide, "regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence," and hide the discontinuties "in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and . . . sexuality . . . does not seem to follow from gender."[74] Rather, she argues that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."[75] Butler is not claiming that gender is a performance. Rather, she

---

[74] Butler, Judith (1990; Anniversary edition 1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge. 25.
[75] Ibid

distinguishes between performance and performativity. In a1993 interview, she

emphasizes the importance of this distinction, arguing "whereas performance

presupposes a preexisting subject, performativity contests the very notion of the

subject."[76] With this understanding, then, Madea as Tyler Perry in drag performative is

neither an *a priori* female or male subject. On the contrary, Madea is the *a posteriori*

expression of an incoherent heterosexual gender. Conceiving Madea as neither expressly

male nor female, as destabilized heterosexuality allows for a quare reading of her

character. Through the blurring of these boundaries, Perry breaks the binds that constitute

a rigorous investment in heterosexism and homophobia within the black community and

within the black church. Never offering a homosexual character in his cinematic works,

Perry's Madea is the sole representation of the quare body. And, ironically, Madea

functions as the gatekeeper to the imaginative black nation Perry creates.

  As the "Southern Matriarch," according to the sleeve of *Madea's Family Reunion*,

everyone and everything has to be approved of by Madea in order to gain access into the

black community. For example, in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (Madea's cinematic

debut) , housewife Helen [Kimberly Elise] gets kicked out of her house after her wealthy

attorney husband Charles [Steve Harris] decides to divorce her and marry a younger,

lighter skinned woman. Left without a home, money, or a way to sustain herself, she is

forced to move in with her aunt Madea [Tyler Perry]. Throughout her stay, Helen learns

valuable "life lessons" from Madea, often delivered in a comedic form. When Helen tells

Madea that she signed a prenuptial agreement—or what Madea refers to as a "renup"—

---

[76] Butler, Judith. (1994) "Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler," *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy* 67 (Summer): 33.

and therefore has no rights to her home or the property therein, Madea immediately jumps into leadership role. Whipping out her calculator, "she[77]" asks Helen a series of questions regarding social reproduction and unenthused sex to determine what Helen is owed. When Madea calculates what Charles owes Helen, which is an unintelligible number (64 billion, 283 million, 974 trillion, 5 thousand, and 20 dollars and 82 cents), "she" tells Helen that Helen needs to collect what is owed. "You can get it one of two ways. You can get it from his checking account voluntarily, or his insurance policy. Involuntary manslaughter. Which one is it gon' be?" Madea's assertion resonates with black nationalist Malcolm X's "by whatever means necessary" motto. "By whatever means necessary" was a slogan used to charge black Americans to take whatever risks necessary to meet nationalist demands of full citizenship, racial sovereignty, and autonomy. It is later, though, that Madea's advice also resonates with religion insofar as Madea understands religious rhetoric operating within her life. On the Bible, Madea says, "Every time I try to read the Bible... and Jesus... the one with all the words in red... I open my Bible to that New Testimony and see all that red and I just give up. Jesus was talkin' way too much." The problem that Madea has with the Bible, with Jesus, is that he was *talking* too much, and not *doing*. Madea's solution for Helen is an act of *doing*. "God takes too long sometimes for me, I got to get got then," "she" quips. Madea's understanding of religion requires some level of action, not just rhetoric. In this sense, then, Madea sees the church as functioning the same way that Brian D. Mackenzie

---

[77] From here out, I refer to Madea as "she" to connote the fact that Madea's subjectivity is neither male nor female, as the drag performative suggests. I use the feminine pronoun because Madea is referred to as a woman throughout all of Perry's works.

91

characterizes the interactions of black churches to political activity. In his article "Religious Social Networks, Indirect Mobilization, and African-American Political Participation," Mackenzie argues that interactions in black churches promote political activity through clergy organizational networks, political messages from the pulpit, the recruitment and mobilization efforts of fellow congregants, by stimulating political consciousness among church attendees, and providing political information to congregants.(Mackenzie 629). While in *Madea's Family Reunion* Madea asserts that "she" "only go[es] to church for two reasons: weddings and funerals…," "she" is seen going to church at least once in all her films. Further, she frequently encourages people to "read the Bible." In doing so, Madea makes it clear that Christianity, and the black church, are at the center of how "she" understands her values, particularly those rooted in uplift. In *Madea Goes to Jail*, Madea finds herself in front of a judge for fleeing the police. "She" immediately invokes the Lord's name in order to get off, telling the judge that "she" is "living for the Lord" and that "she" feels him "down in [her] spirit."

Madea's ability to identify with religion and the black church while being able to tease out the messages that do not suit her life, as was the case with gay black church goers in *Black Is…Black Ain't*, suggests that quare black bodies can and must do the same. The black church does not stop her from being a member of the community or from participating in the racial uplift that is intrinsic to black nationalism. Madea's commonsense black nationalism, though, suggests that a person's relationship to the nation is not based on what they are but what they do. In *Madea's Family Reunion,* Madea is forced to take in an unruly foster child, Nikki [Kiki Palmer]. Whenn Nikki is

92

afraid to get on the bus because of what people call her, Madea champions this same conception of *doing* as integral to *being.* "Folk gon' talk about you 'til the day you die. Ain't nothin' you can do about it. But it ain't what people call you; it's what you answer to." Madea later adds, "it's not where you're coming from; it's where you're going that's important." The "answering" and "going" are both actions that are predicated on agency. A person *chooses* to answer and to go. The ability to make these choices, to assert one's agency, relate to the same demands that black nationalist have historically made for heterosexual black (male) bodies. That Madea, in drag performative, is instructing this to a young black woman is noteworthy because it opens a space for quare and female bodies to assert the same agency accessible to members of the black nation.

By occupying a space on the stage that is never truly challenged (Madea always causes people to back down), viewers are presented with an alternative model of representations of citizenship within the black nation. Even if viewers choose not to read her as 'in drag' (and, I think this to be very much the case), it does not erase or elide the fact that "she" is really Tyler Perry. There are moments in almost all of the productions where this is directly alluded to, especially through the banter between brother Joe and Madea as well as Mr. Brown and Madea. The inability to register Madea as quare, though, speaks to the unwillingness of black nationalism to fully incorporate black bodies. Much like "choir sissies" are incorporated into the black church to the extent that their quareness is displaced by their "sissiness" to somehow ignore their sexual identity, so too becomes Madea's identity. The message this sends to quare bodies is: within the black nation, you might be (mis)seen, but you will not be heard. Though this is not the

93

most quintessential arrangement and certainly has its own sets of limitations and problematic politics, it simultaneously disrupts ideas that the black church, and subsequently the black nation, are wholly off limits to quare bodies. Redemptively embodied in the spirit of Madea, quare bodies are given some hope. What is not given to them, they can demand. Like the young men who have brought Bishop Long to task through the legal system, like Reverend Kennedy took the black church to task by starting a new church and through online media, and how Madea "keeps peace" with her "piece of steel", quare bodies will have to aggressively assert themselves into the nation if they want full incorporation. Because, it will not be given to them.

CONCLUSION

Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place, Citizenship, and Imagination is a project dedicated to examining the ways in which race, geography, and politics intersect to create a sovereign space in visual art and popular media for black Americans to imagine full citizenship. By interrogating commonsense black nationalist politics and black nation building through the works of Tyler Perry, the rhetoric of Tom Joyner, the public discourse surrounding Bishop Eddie Long and a few other critical productions, I have argued that black Americans use popular media and visual art as channels to acquire access to citizenship rights. With the disappearance of a visible black political movement, black Americans have innovatively used these channels to create an alternative space to deploy black nationalism and construct a black nation. I have called this space the New Black Nation.

Particularly, I have focused on the viability of the Imagined South, a U.S. South that is dehistoricized, southernized, and recreated as a middle class black place that exists outside the boundaries of racial oppression and abject poverty, as a home for the New Black Nation. In order to enter this space, I looked at the annual Black Family Reunion that is hosted by radio talk show host Tom Joyner. What I found is that the conditions of the *real* South compared to those that Joyner presents in the *imagined* South are starkly different. In fact, black Americans are largely falling prey to abject poverty in the *real*

South. The South is therefore no more likely a place to call home for black Americans than any other region in the United States, when focusing on the economic and material benefits that this location could provide black Americans. Though, that black people are engaging in an Imagined South suggests that they are rejecting the realities of the *real* South as well as speaking to the ways in which the American nation fails to fully incorporate them. The Imagined South serves, then, as both a place of escape and a critique of post-racial discourse that situates black Americans as already fully incorporated into the American nation.

I also interrogated black gender politics within the New Black Nation through Tyler Perry's *Why Did I Get Married?*. The purpose of doing this was to understand how black women are figured into the construction of the black nation, as they have often been used solely as fodder for the black nation. To understand women's roles, I focused on gender codes of conduct that Perry maps out, almost as a blueprint for how to control black women. Ultimately, I determined that the New Black Nation is no more inviting of a space for black women than past manifestations of black nationalism. Rather, black women are actually seen as a threat to the New Black Nation and are therefore constantly policed in fear that they might dismantle the nation. Policing black women, however, does not render them incapable of resisting. Having to constantly and consistently police black women suggests that they—though not all of them, as I have shown how some are complicit in the oppression of other black women—are as constantly and consistently resistant.

Following the coattails of gender politics, I examined how black male sexuality develops in the New Black Nation by looking at the discourse surrounding Reverend Carl Kenney and Bishop Eddie Long, coupled with the characterization of Tyler Perry's Madea. Black nationalism's connection to the black church as a space to mobilize black bodies and disseminate black political ideologies that is saturated in homophobia and heterosexism often—and historically—has disallowed the inclusion of quare bodies. The church's investment in patriarchy specifically disallows the inclusion of male quare bodies, as they are not seen as "misperforming" blackness. I have offered a reading of the New Black Nation, however, that suggests that quare bodies *can* be include—though not fully—but they have to be rigorous about inserting themselves into the nation. That is, they will not have *ipso facto* inclusion like heteronormative black bodies will, which is a departure from classic models of black nationalism.

In the end, *Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place, Citizenship, and Imagination* is most interested in providing a way to situate visual art and popular media within the discourse of black nationalism by drawing on the concept of commonsense black nationalism. The importance of this project lays in the fact that visual art and popular media are often overlooked as viable sources for nation building. Instead, they have been read as providing allegories of the nation. My intervention, then, is to position these sources—and similar sources—as alternative spaces to deploy commonsense black nationalism and to construct a black nation. Likewise, *Towards a New Black Nation: Space, Place, Citizenship, and Imagination* aims to afford a discursive read of this new form of black nation building, the new black nation being built, and what that means for

97

the black men and women whose narratives are not realized in the process. My intent is to offer scholars as well as viewers a more critical way to theorize and engage in, respectively, black spectatorship. If Martha Nussbaum's claim is correct—that art directs our attention to particular individuals in particular situations and thus gets us to enter imaginatively into the subjectivity of the individuals whose condition we have presented to us in the work[78]--there is a lot at stake for black spectators. For black spectators, the New Black Nation provides a way to imagine citizenship, to imagine home. When the New Black Nation starts being imagined and starts being real, some black spectators will have much to worry about, particularly women and quare bodies. If there is anything redemptive about the New Black Nation it is that it provides a way to start discussing the material realities of black spectators by interrogating the reality to which they escape. Ultimately, it rips open the seams that keep post-racial discourse so tightly knitted and exposes all the fallacies in it rhetoric. More than that, though, it reminds black spectators of the power of the imagination. Or, in the words of cultural historian Robin D. G. Kelley, it reminds black Americans that the "map to a new world is the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us."[79]

---

[78] Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; *Poetic Justice*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press. 1996.
[79] Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon, 2002. 2.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Tyler Perry's Madea's Family Reunion (2006)." *Box Office Mojo*. Web. 12 May 2011. <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=madeasfamilyreunion.htm>.

"Radio Host Tom Joyner Among Seven Inducted Into the Radio Hall of Fame." *Jet Magazine.* November 9, 1998. Pp 53-55.

1995-2002 *American Community Survey Data Summary (by Region)*. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau.

2000 *American Community Survey Data (by Region)*. Issued 2000. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau.

2000-2006 *American Community Survey Data Summary (by State)*. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau.

2007-2008 *American Community Survey Data Summary (by State)*. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau.

2008 American Community Survey Data (by Region). Issued 2008. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau.

2008-2009 *American Community Survey Data Summary (by Region)*. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration. U.S. Census Bureau.

Ahrens, F. (2000, August 7). "Tom Joyner is Radio One's latest catch." *The Washington Post.* Barker, D.C. (1998). p. A01.

Alexander, Elizabeth. *The Black Interior*. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2004. 5.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, by K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Asante, Molefi K. *Afrocentricity*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1988. 57.

Bagby, Dyana. "Bishop Eddie Long Sex Scandal to Be Settled Soon?" *The GA Voice | LGBT News*. Web. 12 May 2011. <http://www.thegavoice.com/index.php/news/atlanta-news-menu/2494-bishop-eddie-long-sex-gay-sex-scandal-to-be-settled-soon>.

Bambara, Toni Cade. *Black Woman, An Anthology*. New York: New American Library, 1970.

Barlow, William. "Commerical and Noncommercial." In *Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media.* Eds. Jannette L. Dates and William Barlow. Washington, DC: Howard University Press. 1990.

Brooks, Dwight E. and Daniel, George L. "The Tom Joyner Morning Show: Activist Radio in an Age of Consolidation." *Journal of Radio Studies.* Vol. 9, No. 1. Pp. 8-32.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge. 1990.

Butler, Judith. (1994) "Gender as Performance: An Interview with Judith Butler," *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy* 67 (Summer): 33.

Certeau, Michel De. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California, 1984.

Clack, George, Mildred Sola. Neely, and Alonzo L. Hamby. *Outline of U.S. History*. New York: Nova Science, 2009.

Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. New York: Delta, 1968.

Cooper, Anna Julia. 1892. A voice from the South. In *The voice of Anna Julia Cooper: Including A voice from the South and other important essays, papers, and letters*, ed. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 51-187.

Douglas, Kelly Brown. *Sexuality and the Black Church: a Womanist Perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999.

Drake, St Clair. Black *Metropolis; a Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and, 1945.722.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: New American Library, Inc, 1903.

Farber, E. (2000, April 7). Publisher's profile: Tom Joyner. *Radio & Records*, p. 136

Gomez, Jewell. "Black lesbians: Passing, stereotypes and transformation." In E. Brandt (Ed.), *Dangerous liaisons: Blacks, gays and the struggle for equality*. New York: New Press. 1999.

Gregory, Derek. *Geographical Imaginations*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994.

Gregory, Derek. *The Colonial Present: Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004.

Gregory, James N. *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005.

Harris-Lacewell, Melissa. *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought.* Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2004.

hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Boston, MA.: South End, 1981

Iceland, John, Weinber, Daniel H., and Steinmetz, Erika. "Racial and Ethnic Residential Segregation in the United States: 1980-2000." U.S. Census Bureau. Presented at the annual meetings of Population Association of America, Atlanta, GA. May 9-11, 2002. 10.

Johnson, Patrick. ""Quare" Studies, or (almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21.1 (2001): 11.

Joiner, Lonnie. (Spring 2008). "Tom Joyner Gives Back While Entertaining." *The Crisis*. Vol. 115. 28.

Joyner, Tom. *Clearing the Air: The Making of a Radio Personality.* Self-published. 1995.

Garvey, ''The Future as I See It,'' in *Look for Me All Around You*, ed. Louis J. Parascandola, 2005.

Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: the Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon, 2002.

Martinez, Edecio. "Bishop Eddie Long Scandal: He Wanted Sex in Church, Says Accuser Jamal Parris - Crimesider - CBS News." *Breaking News Headlines: Business, Entertainment & World News - CBS News*. Web. 12 May 2011. <http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-20018237-504083.html>.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999.

Neal, Mark Anthony. *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*. New York: Routledge. 1999.

Nell Irwin Painter, ''Martin R. Delany: Elitism and Black Nationalism,'' in *Black Leaders of the Nineteenth Century,* eds. Litwack and Meier, 1991.

Nelson, Emmanuel. "Critical Deviance: Homophobia and the Reception of James Baldwin's Fiction." Journal of American Culture 14.3 (1991): 92.

Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; *Poetic Justice*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press. 1996.

Ongiri, Amy Abugo. "We Are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination." *College Literature.* Vol. 24, No. 1, Queer Utilities: Textual Studies, Theory, Pedagogy, Praxis (Feb., 1997), pp. 280-294.

Parekh, Rupal. "How Tyler Perry's house of hits was built." *Advertising Age* 80.18 (2009): 24. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 12 May 2011.

Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture* beyond the Color Line. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Perry, Tyler. *Don't Make a Black Woman Take off Her Earrings: Madea's Uninhibited Commentaries on Love and Life*. New York: Riverhead, 2006.

Peterson, Nancy J., ed. *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Baltimore, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Rigney, Barbara Hill. "Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic, and: Mythatypes: Signatures and Signs of African Diaspora and Black Goddesses (review)." Research in African Literatures 32.4 (2001)

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

Stack, Carol B. *Call to Home: African Americans Reclaim the Rural South*. New York: Basic, 1996.

Sumers, Martin. "'This Immoral Practice': The Prehistory of Homophobia in Black Nationalist Thought," in Toni Lester, ed., *Gender Nonconformity, Race, and Sexuality*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

Why Did I Get Married? Dir. Tyler Perry. Lionsgate, 2007. DVD.

William H. Frey."The New Great Migration: black Americans' Return to the South, 1965-2000. "Brookings Census 2000 Series. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Center on Urban & Metropolitan Policy (May 2004).

Williams, Gilbert A. *Legendary Pioneers of Black Radio*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger. 1998.