

STRONGER THAN FICTION: LITERARY AND CULTURAL MERIT OF  
CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN FICTION

By

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

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**Shewanda LaRue Riley, PhD**

**The University of Texas at Arlington, 2020**

**Supervising Professor: Cedrick May**

My primary goals with this dissertation are to take a close look at how contemporary African American Christian fiction performs important literary and cultural functions and explore how these works reinforce or subvert perceptions of the contemporary African American Christian woman. The specific texts that I analyze are chosen from 1997-2007, the earliest time period of publication of contemporary African American Christian fiction as they set the tone for African American Christian fiction literary works that have been published since that time. The primary research question driving this project is whether contemporary African American Christian fiction has literary and cultural merit. Moreover, this dissertation explores how the complicated depictions of the African American woman in contemporary African American Christian fiction intersect and disrupt the boundaries between race, gender and religion. The overall focus is how, in doing so, these literary works reinforce what some could label a problematic contemporary African American Christian feminist ethos. I examine historical and

cultural forces that led to the creation of this literature and how this literature reflects and, in a greater sense, reacts to those forces.

My argument is that despite the best of intentions of the primarily female authors, in some instances, fall victim to patriarchal hegemonic forces in their depictions of contemporary African American Christian women. Though intended to be positive and empowering, the characterizations and themes of contemporary African American Christian fiction undermine the original intent of the literature to inspire contemporary African American Christian women.

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## Dedication

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## Chapter 1

### The Cultural and Historical Moment

#### Introduction

*“We are living (Hey), Single (Ooh), And in a nineties kind of world, I'm glad I got my girls, Keep your head up, what? Keep your head up, that's right. Whenever this life gets tough, you gotta fight. With my homegirls standing to my left and my right. True blue, it's tight like glue”*

These lyrics from the theme song from the Emmy Award winning mid 1990's television show *Living Single* provide a unique snapshot into the worldview and perceptions that framed African American women's experiences in that decade. The situation comedy, which was the most popular in African American households when it aired from 1993-1998, showed a close-knit group of single friends living in Brooklyn, New York and starred rapper turned actress Queen Latifah (as Khadijah James), former child star Kim Fields (as Regine Hunter), comedian Kim Coles (as Synclaire James) and former *Cosby* kid Erika Alexander (as Maxine Shaw). Each of the primary female characters was a professional woman with a successful career: Khadijah James was a magazine publisher, Maxine Shaw was a lawyer, Synclaire James was an administrative assistant/aspiring actress and Regine Hunter was a buyer for a boutique as well as an event planner.

More significantly, these lyrics allude to the elements that typified the African American woman's experience that included a focus on marital status (“living single”), using resilience to overcome challenges (“Whenever this life get tough, you gotta fight”) and the importance of authentic sisterhood (“With my homegirls standing to my left and my right True blue, it's tight

like glue”). Even though some labeled *Living Single* a “Black” version of similar women-centered television shows *Designing Women* and *Golden Girls*, what distinguished the show was how it effectively challenged popular misperceptions about African American women. Some of these perceptions lingered from the damaging rhetoric and media representations of what President Ronald Reagan derisively called “welfare queens” from the 1980s, chiefly that most African American women were low income single mothers living on welfare or hypersexualized like the video vixens featured in popular music videos.

The fact that the show featured four African American female characters navigating personal and professional challenges with savvy wit as well as thought-provoking solutions was unique. In fact, the show’s creator Yvette Bowser was intentional about positive depictions of the contemporary African American woman on the show. In a June 2019 *Madame Noire* article, Bowser recalls how challenging this was when she was asked to remove Maxine Shaw, the character who eventually became one of its most popular, from the show because

she was unapologetically Black and female and fierce, and all of the things that, if I wasn’t at that time, I wanted to be ultimately. And I knew that that would be a powerful force in the world ’cause I know that our art is, you know, our art is our activism, and I knew that that voice had been missing.

Despite the possibility of losing the show, Bowser refused to make the change. As a result, through Shaw and the other characters, viewers saw dynamic and complex African American female characters.

In *The Root* article, “*Living Single* Cast and Creator Reflect on Legacy 20 Years After Series Finale,” Bowser shares how the show was created to fill a void left after the end of the television show *A Different World* in the early 1990s. She states how it impacted her and that she

was disturbed because “There was no longer a platform for strong black female voices. Suddenly, I didn’t see myself.” The same article credits *Living Single* with having a long-term impact that remains including having paved the way “for shows like *Insecure*, and still reigns as a beloved fixture of black entertainment and pop culture.” Naturally, relationships were a centerpiece of the show’s narrative and dramatic conflicts. However, the show also addressed issues that had previously received little attention in television shows like African American cultural identity in the workplace as well as depression among African American women. By the time the show ended its run in January 1998, it was credited with illustrating that heading into the new millennium there was a new African American woman who strived for authenticity, transparency and emotional wholeness.

Coupled with the success of the television show *Living Single* were movies made about African American women during the same time. Despite being on the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of their characterization of contemporary life for African American women, movies like *Waiting to Exhale* and *Set It Off* were lauded for equally compelling depictions of life for African American women in the mid-1990s. *Waiting to Exhale* portrayed a close-knit group of single professional African American female friends and was based on the best-selling 1995 novel of the same name by author Terri McMillian. On the other hand, *Set It Off*, released a year later in 1996, provided a much grittier portrayal of working class African American women striving to overcome their financial circumstances by creating a bank robbery ring. Though very different, both movies were extremely successful with *Waiting to Exhale* grossing \$81 million worldwide and *Set It Off* grossing \$41 million worldwide according to the Internet Movie Database indicating that interest in the experiences of contemporary African American women was not just limited to the domestic African American movie audience. Professor Tamika Carey

refers to the excitement that these films created in her book *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood* and notes that “the market for films focusing on Black women as subjects- not objects- moving from a state of disempowerment to empowerment or navigating obstacles in their interpersonal relationships and careers, flourished in the mid-nineties” (120). The women in these cultural productions were different from what audiences had previously seen. According to Carey, in these films “Black women appear as dynamic protagonists dealing with real-life dilemmas and exercising forms of agency forecasted in the literature of Black women writers decades earlier” (120). These images also countered previous narratives of an indomitable “strong black woman” as they showed the weaknesses and complications of the sometimes fragile ethos of the contemporary African American woman.

Even though both movies were directed by men, F. Gary Gray and Forest Whitaker respectively, they dealt with the same core issue of how shifting values of contemporary African American woman impacted their personal and professional lives. As presented in these movies, there was a complicated depiction of the contemporary African American woman’s ethos featuring traits like resilience, strength, independence, relational interdependence, and hopefulness. Relationships were more complicated as the women in both movies were shown as struggling with emotional dysfunctions, low self-esteem and stinging disappointments.

At the same time, this empowered, full realized black woman appeared in African American women’s Christian fiction too. Seemingly in response to the cultural moment that led to the creation of these movies, contemporary African American Christian fiction authors crafted depictions of the contemporary African American Christian woman that showed similar struggles but framed within a Christian worldview. This desire to provide contemporary Christian solutions to secular problems led to the development of contemporary African

American Christian literary works in the mid-1990s. Ironically, however, the creation of the literature led to additional problematic depictions of African American Christian women battling issues of equality and identity within African American Christian fiction.

#### Statement of Research Focus

As a first-time attendee of the Christian Book Lover's Retreat (CBLR) held October 24 and 27, 2019 in Charlotte, North Carolina, I was amazed how the energy and the buzz that filled the atrium of the Marriott Hotel set the stage for intentional connection between readers and authors of contemporary African American Christian fiction. Accessible authors mingled seamlessly with over 400 eager book club members from across the United States. The predominantly African American authors and readers were unified by their love of contemporary African American Christian fiction. For starters, there was a welcome reception, book fair with over 50 authors, morning worship services, writing workshops, pajama praise party and, most importantly, book club discussions. There was even a workshop to help first-time attendees like myself to best navigate the full days of activities.

"Strongholds vs a Strong God" was the catchy and insightful theme for the fourth annual retreat which included over 450 attendees, including established and new authors, book clubs, readers and independent scholars. We participated in a number of sessions that seemed designed to solidify relationships between readers and creators of contemporary African American Christian fiction. Established in 2016 by best-selling author Vanessa Miller Pierce, the conference brought all of the stakeholders in the world of contemporary African American Christian fiction together. Promoted as a life-changing 3-day weekend designed with "fun, faith and fellowship," it did not disappoint.



Specific workshop topics included “From Reader to Writer: Take Baby Steps in the Writing Life,” “Why Book Reviews Matter,” “Your Chosen Path to Forgiveness,” and “Get Your Money Honey Movement.” Using these topics as a barometer, it was clear that the retreat organizers wanted to provide a broad and holistic approach to meeting the needs of its attendees. Even though writing was a focus, the retreat organizers also offered the primarily female attendees practical information about health, personal relationships, spiritual growth and finances. The reason I share this story is because being at this retreat helped me sharpen the focus of this project. For years, I’ve pondered about the literary merit of African American Christian fiction. This retreat made me realize that the power of this literature also had much to do with its cultural significance. African American Christian fiction is not just a sub-genre of popular fiction. It is also a growing community that is active that makes its readers feel “seen” and empowered. And more importantly, the literature engages its consumers and creators of such content on a deeper level that is intriguing.

For these reasons and being mindful of the impact of pop cultural influences on literature, the two primary goals for my dissertation are to analyze the literary merit of contemporary African American Christian fiction and explore the cultural forces that led to its creation. The primary research question driving this project is: Does contemporary African American Christian fiction have literary and cultural merit? I assert that the literature’s depiction of female characters subverts, reinforce and redefine perceptions regarding the role and place of contemporary African American Christian women. As a result, though seen by many as books of encouragement and empowerment, these literary works actually reinforce what some could label a problematic contemporary African American Christian woman’s ethos. The tension that is

created by this has existed from the earliest days of the publication of this literature in the late 1990s.

Because of the historical and cultural contexts of African American Christian fiction, my argument is that despite the best of intentions of the primarily female authors, they unknowingly fell victim to greater hegemonic forces of the patriarchal society in general and black institutional church specifically in their depictions of contemporary African American Christian women. These depictions include stereotypical portrayals of strong, emotionally unyielding women as well as unrealistically nurturing men. Though intended to be positive and empowering, the characterizations of female characters and themes of contemporary African American Christian fiction subvert the original intent of the literature to inspire African American Christian women. I found myself intrigued by this discovery as it directly challenged my initial assumption that books written by African American women would automatically support ideals of equality in gender roles and responsibilities. However, deeper analysis of the books showed that rather than support these traditional ideals, these authors were challenging and, in some cases, undermining, those long-established beliefs. This turn actually surprised me and made me want to explore why this tension existed and what was its impact. Because of the extensive marketing of the books to women-centric book clubs and church-based women's groups, it could be assumed that empowering women was a goal of the first wave of contemporary African American Christian fiction. Even though the jobs the characters had were middle or upper middle class like business owners, lawyers and executives, these literary works amplify an unspoken tension regarding ambitious empowerment and expected submission that African American Christian women deal with in their families as well as the institutional church. Rather than empowering, these works create a tension between the expectation that women

should be ambitious while also remaining submissive to her relationship partner. This pattern is evident in two of the most popular works of contemporary African American Christian fiction, *Temptation* by Victoria Christopher Murray and *Passing by Samaria* by Sharon Ewell Foster. *Temptation* features a woman who yearns to return to the workplace and *Passing by Samaria* features a young woman excited about starting her career as a writer. Yet, in both works, each female protagonist actively struggles against the oppressive ideologies from their respective family members that demand submission.

#### Project Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Because of the diverse issues of religion, gender and race found in contemporary African American Christian fiction, the theoretical framework for this project is multi-disciplinary and includes theorists from Gender Studies as well African American literary studies. In unpacking questions about the perceptions of the behavior of African American women in contemporary African American Christian fiction and studying the historical as well as cultural forces that led to the production and consumption of African American Christian fictional literary works, my project uses a number of contemporary theorists including Professor Tamika Carey's 2016 book *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood* who boldly asserts that for African American women, literature has been "some of the most potent textual spaces for Black women's self-empowerment" (16). Carey's premise provides a good foundational statement for what contemporary African American Christian fiction writers have created. Within the words of the texts, authors of these literary works open spaces for captivating dialogues about the place, position and potential for African American Christian women whether in church, the traditional home or in the professional world. Another Gender Studies

perspective that I include comes from Professor Beauty Bragg whose 2015 work *Reading Contemporary African American Literature: Black Women's Popular Fiction, Post-Civil Rights Experience, and the African American Canon* offers a provocative perspective on how contemporary African American popular fiction should be considered worthy of academic examination because of their literary as well as cultural contributions. Professor Aneeka Ayana Henderson's 2020 book *Veil and Vow Marriage Matters in Contemporary African American Culture* offers invaluable insights regarding heteropatriarchy that informed my thoughts on how contemporary marriage is depicted in African American Christian fiction. Professor Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant's 2009 publication *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* was a foundational text for my look at strength as part of the ethos of contemporary African American Christian women. Each one of these scholars help me sharpen the focus of my study to look at aspects of the African American Christian woman's experience that is relatable and accessible to their reading audience.

For the purposes of this study, I define African American Christian fiction as literary texts that employ traditional fictional elements like plot, narration and setting while taking an overtly evangelistic approach of promoting Christian ideals like salvation, redemption and spiritual transformation. As a subgenre of contemporary African American literature, contemporary African American Christian fiction comes from an explicitly African American cultural perspective. Regarding definitions of terms used in this study, I define the African American Christian church as Christian institutions of mainline Protestant religious denominations like Baptists and Methodists. This also includes charismatic and Pentecostal churches like the Church of God in Christ as well as newer evangelical, nondenominational and megachurches. Moreover, I use the term heteronormativity to describe behaviors and attitudes

that privileges heterosexual relationships as the norm. By the same token, I define Christian heteropatriarchy as perspectives, attitudes and practices that advocate for the domination of women by men using Biblical principles and practices. Later in this project, I discuss the 21<sup>st</sup> century African American Christian woman's ethos which I define as a specific set of morals, guiding beliefs, characteristics and attitudes that are deeply influenced by their religious beliefs, upbringing and current religious practices. Additionally, I define the three primary characteristics of this ethos as persistence, agency and strength. Persistence can be determined as having the resilience and determination to face obstacles and challenges. Agency is exercising the ability and right to make decisions independently. Strength is displaying emotional, spiritual, mental and physical fortitude that allows the person to withstand stress.

The contemporary African American Christian fiction texts analyzed in this project are specifically chosen from 1997-2007, the first decade of publication of the literature. Authors featured in this project include some of the most successful of the earliest contemporary African American Christian fiction writers. The authors and their works by their chronological publication date are *Temptation* (1997) by Victoria Christopher Murray, *Passing by Samaria* (2000) by Sharon Ewell Foster, *Divas of Damascus Road* (2006) by Michelle Stimpson, and *Rain Storm* (2007) by Vanessa Miller. These books were published by both independent and mainstream publishers and were mass marketed readers. In addition, the authors and their books feature some of the most commonly used tropes of African American Christian fiction and established the template that subsequent African American Christian fiction authors have followed.

The research questions for each chapter of my study are centered around an exploration of the perceptions of contemporary African American Christian women as reflected in the

novels. In chapter two, the emphasis is what led to the creation of contemporary African American Christian fiction and what larger cultural forces are they responding to. Was this a reflection of and response to specific cultural and historical moments for African American women? What are the books doing and undoing, constructing and deconstructing as well as reinforcing?

The focus of chapter three is on the form and structure of the literature. In this chapter I examine a pivotal question for my dissertation: Do the novels possess literary merit and authority? What are the writing patterns and fictional elements in the genre? What are the typical themes/topics in the texts? How are these themes/topics a reflection of the culture or perceptions about contemporary African American Christian women?

Chapter four delves into what comprises the ethos of African American Christian women as reflected in the works of literature. Persistence, agency and strength are the three most significant traits that comprise the contemporary African American Christian woman's ethos. How is the complex nature of the ethos of contemporary African American Christian women reflected in contemporary African American Christian fiction? Do these literary works unwittingly send a mixed message regarding persistence, agency and strength to contemporary African American women about how they should navigate their place in the African American Christian community?

## History and Traits of African American Christian Fiction

To put these works in a larger historical context, contemporary African American Christian fiction was first mass produced in 1997. The development of this very popular literature genre is due to the persistence and talent of the overwhelmingly female African American authors. Much like previous African American female authors, they use their works to focus on a particular set of thematic issues including solidifying traditional family relationships, maintaining spiritual integrity and achieving professional success. However, there is also a notable preoccupation with the heteronormative view of marriage and fulfilling traditional gender role expectations found in the novels. The authors analyzed in this project represent the first wave of contemporary African American Christian fiction writers.

As stated in their biographical materials, some of the most popular and prolific authors of the first wave of these literary works reflected a strong biblical influence. Often, their stories were based on semiautobiographical conversion experiences or were modern day adaptations of biblical stories like Hosea, the Old Testament prophet who married a prostitute in an attempt to redeem her. Often, these books were set in churches, characters in the books were active members of churches, or shown as attending church regularly. Christian rituals and concepts like prayer as well as themes of redemption, salvation and forgiveness were also featured prominently in these literary works. Subgenres of African American Christian fiction include young adult as well as detective fiction, thrillers and romances. Elements of supernatural encounters like appearances of demons and angels have also appeared in these literary works.

Because of factors like market interest, the first 10 years of the publication of African American Christian fiction included the publication of diverse titles and topics. One reason for this is so many of the authors that were publishing were initially self-published authors. Once the

publishing industry realized the popularity of the works and the fact that they could profit from these literary works, there was a shift in having more uniform stories and characters. To solidify the status of the literature, publishers developed strictly followed formulas that potential authors had to follow if they were to secure publishing contracts as well as much valued space on bookstore shelves. One of formulas forbade sexual activity without spiritual consequences (guilt, shame, pregnancy) along with no profanity. Moreover, the authors of these earlier works that my study focuses on are representative of the kinds of literary works that were published during that time period. Those novels are:

- *Temptation* (1997) by Victoria Christopher Murray - This is considered the first contemporary African American fiction novel. Set in Los Angeles, this novel depicts the seemingly perfect relationship of a doctor and his stay at home wife.
- *Sunday Brunch* (1998, 2004) Norma Jarrett - This was published initially as part of the very first wave of contemporary African American fiction novels then was later republished. It tells the story of a set of four mid-twenty-year-old friends as they navigate love and relationships in Houston, Texas
- *Passing by Samaria* (2000) Sharon Ewell Foster – This historical fiction novel was the first contemporary African American Christian fiction novel to be published by a mainstream publisher. This historical novel was set in Mississippi and Chicago. It details the journey of a young woman who is passionate about social and racial justice in 1919.



- *Church Folk* (2001) Michelle Andrea Bowen – This novel was part of the earliest novels that were published and was one of the first to include the setting of the institutional church as a significant part of the plot.
- *Divas of Damascus Road* (2006) Michelle Stimpson – Set in fictional Dentonville, Texas, this novel details the relationships of three generations of a family.
- *Redemption* (2007) Jacquelin Thomas - This novel details the highs and lows of the relationship of a well-known minister and his celebrity wife.
- *Rain Storm* (2007) Vanessa Miller – This novel distinguishes itself for its use of explicit charismatic elements like spiritual warfare and angels in telling the story of a man and his reluctant ex-prostitute wife.

The following chart lists additional traits of some of the earliest and most popular African American Christian fiction, their publication dates and authors:

Table 1 - Traits of African American Christian Fiction

<b>Elements of Fiction</b>	<b>Temptation 1997</b>	<b>Sunday Brunch 1998, 2004</b>	<b>Passing Through Samaria - 2000</b>	<b>Church Folk 2001</b>	<b>Divas of Damascus Road 2006</b>	<b>Redemption 2007</b>	<b>Rain Storm 2007</b>
<b>Authors</b>	Murray	Jarrett	Ewell Foster	Bowen	Stimpson	Thomas	Miller
<b>Themes</b>							
Marriage – Goal of characters or /Ending of Novel	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Desire for Spiritual Growth	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Forgiveness	X		X		X	X	X
Doubt	X	X		X	X	X	X
<b>Conflict</b>							
Mother/Daughter Conflict			X (w parents)		X – Joyce Ann/Dianne		X
Family Secrets			X		X		X
Struggle with addiction or substance abuse		X – Addiction to Shopping	X - Pearl	X – Sex addiction	X - Drugs		X – Drugs/Sex
<b>Characters</b>							
Wise Older Mentor (Family member/Friend/Co-Worker)	X – Mother Carrington	X – Pastor’s Wife	X – Aunt Patrice	X - Bishop	X – Aunt Toe		X – Ms. Dobbs
Heteronormative Relationships	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Traits of Christian Fiction

Traits of Christian Fiction							
Elements of Fiction	Temptation 1997	Sunday Brunch 1998, 2004	Passing Through Samaria - 2000	Church Folk 2001	Divas of Damascus Road 2006	Redemption 2007	Rain Storm 2007
Professional/Career for African American women	X - Kyla	X	X – Desire to be a writer		X	X - Marin	
Creativity (music, poetry, jewelry design)		X	X - Writer	X - Sewing	X - Poetry	X - Acting	
Good but lonely, unattached single woman	X	X	X – Aunt Patrice	X – Precious and Saphronia		X - Geneva	X - Janet
Men as spiritual leaders/stronger spiritually	X		X	X	X		X
<b>Plot</b>							
Marriage as the solution	X	X	X	X			X
Use of Prayer	X – to restore	X – Lexi, Angel	X	X			x
Direct Conversations with God	X	X	X		X	X	X
Church membership or activity	X	X	X – Alena and Parents	X	X – Bible Study	X	X
Traits of Christian Fiction							

<b>Elements of Fiction</b>	<b>Temptation 1997</b>	<b>Sunday Brunch 1998, 2004</b>	<b>Passing Through Samaria - 2000</b>	<b>Church Folk 2001</b>	<b>Divas of Damascus Road 2006</b>	<b>Redemption 2007</b>	<b>Rain Storm 2007</b>
Restoration of Family Relationships	X – Blake’s Marriage				X – Father/Joyce Ann	X - Marriage	
Charismatic Rituals (laying on of hands, prophetic)		X – Angel (Health)		X			X - Hosea
Direct Bible lesson/story		X - Tithing	X - Preaching			X - Hosea	
Escape from Something/ Return to something	X – Jasmine to Pensacola	X - Capri	X – Alena going to and returning from Chicago		X = Dianne (Dentonville )	X – Marin; Leaving o New York	X – Death of Spooky
Scenes of Catharsis		X	X – Questions for God	X – Funeral Home Brothel	X – Death of Joyce Ann	X – Death of Marin	X - Revival
Pathos (Fear, Regret, Shame)		X - Shame	X		X - Regret	X – Shame (Marin)	
<b>Language</b>							X -
Christianese Language (prayer closet, Belong to ...church, the enemy)	X – Attack of the enemy	X – Intercessory prayer		X – Church Conference		X - Witnessing	
<b>Setting</b>							X
Urban Areas	Los Angeles	Houston	Chicago	X – Memphis	X – Dentonville (Texas)	X – Los Angeles	X
<b>Miscellaneous</b>							
Study guide	X	X		X		X	X

As the genre grew in popularity in the mid-2000s, mainstream and independent publishers developed imprints specifically for what they called initially the urban Christian market. Some of the most popular publishing imprints included Walk Worthy Press, BET's New Spirit, and Urban Christian Fiction. Eventually larger publishing houses like Random House (Waterbrook Press), HarperCollins (Zondervan), Multnomah Press and Simon and Shuster also published their own African American Christian fiction. Other publishers include Moody Publishers (Lift Every Voice imprint), Kimani Press (New Spirit imprint), and Urban Books (Urban Christian imprint). According to publishing industry statistics in the early 2000s, 75% of African American book buyers were also Christian readers ("Making Books"). Proof of the success of some of the earliest published authors like Jacquelin Thomas and Victoria Christopher Murray was the fact that they had printings of 20,000 each for their debut novels.

Regarding the exact number of African American Christian fiction authors, it is quite difficult to determine how many authors as well as how many books have been published since 1997 as so many of the books have been self-published, published by independent publishers as well as vanity presses. The best estimate is that between 1997-2008, there were over 300 authors who published more than 700 books of African American Christian fiction. According to the African American Literature Book Club website, an online portal and resource for African American literature of all genres, as of June 2019 there are at least 275 books placed in eleven categories of African American Christian fiction including Adult and juvenile literature. In addition, a search on Amazon.com for African American Christian fiction lists over 4,000 books with that genre label. Consequently, the discrepancy with the range of books available is problematic.

Sales of African American Christian fiction literary works have been consistently strong for over two decades and affirm that next to erotica, it remains one of the most popular genres for African American female readers. However, the irony of its popularity with its primarily African American women readers appear predicated on contemporary African American Christian fiction's focus on an explicitly heteronormative and conservative perspective. One of the primary goals of the fiction was to share transformative religious experiences, convert non-believers and encourage believers into spiritual maturity as found in the motto for Walk Worthy Press, one of most successful earliest publishers of contemporary African American Christian fiction - "Real Believers. Real Life. Real Answers in the Living God." However, in doing so, the first wave of contemporary African American Christian fiction authors also featured a complication that showed that the goals of the female authors of African American Christian fiction could be perceived as running counter to resulting impact of the fiction specifically in how it dealt with issues of gender equality. Based on the conflicts presented and how they were revolved, the novels seemed to say that Christian patriarchy and gender equality could be at odds with each other. Considering the historic oppression African American faced in the African American church, the inclusion of this issue in the novels is not surprising.

One of the most successful publishers of the earlier wave of contemporary African American Christian literary works was literary agent Denise Stinson who established her own publishing company Walk Worthy Press in 1997. At one time, she was considered the number one publisher of African American Christian fiction novels with her clients including authors Victoria Christopher Murray and Bishop T.D. Jakes. In a March 2001 interview in the *New York Times*, Stinson noted that there was a difference between inspirational and Christian fiction by stating "Christian fiction makes you feel good about God; inspirational fiction just makes you

feel good." Likewise, in a 2003 interview Stinson reiterated that "Our success is judged solely by whether our books bring readers closer to God." Both of Stinson's comments indicate that one of the early goals for the literature was to provide an outlet for Christians who wanted to read literature that included compelling narratives and conflicts that also forced them to evaluate the state of their personal spiritual relationship with God. By doing so, this literature would inspire as well as reinforce messages about the lessons of truth, love, forgiveness, and redemption found in the Bible or taught in Christian churches. For Stinson and other early publishers, these overtly Christian books were not available anywhere else and filled a void in the publishing market.

Similarly, in a December 2004 *Publisher's Weekly* article, "Let the Readers Say Amen," associate publisher of *Black Issues Book Review* Adrienne Ingram explained that she noticed more books by "openly Christian authors, in which the characters' Christian faith plays a part in the story." Yet what Ingram found most compelling was that the books seemed focused on "drawing a mainstream reader into a book that will make them think about the Christian faith." Ingram's words echo those of bookstore owner Rudy Davis Wheeler who noted in the same article how the Christian faith of the characters being applied to life situations was what distinguished these literary works from others. Wheeler explained how the books show "relationships with our family, relationships with men and women, even relationships within the church. .... the decisions that the characters make end up being morally right, not decisions that will have a negative impact on their life. As Christians, that's what we look for." In addition, some of the novels can be characterized as pre-conversion narratives as well as stories that show the realistic difficulty in maintaining a spiritually authentic and balanced life.

One significant thing that these literary works shows is that despite historical and cultural advances, perceptions of African American Christian women within the African American

community remain entrenched in traditional heteropatriarchal beliefs. Often these women are forced to have a Duboisian “double-consciousness” divided between personal assertiveness and spiritual subservience while in the African American Christian church. African American women in the contemporary Black Christian church navigate within a system that has deep roots in the American male dominated system of racial and gender oppression. According to Daphne Wiggins and her book *Righteous Content: Black Women Perspectives of Church and Faith*, the African American Christian church can simultaneously be a place of safety and danger for African American Christian women. She hints at this when she writes about “the widespread perception that church has been a preserve of women but also the perception that it should not be” (31). In response to this mixed message, contemporary African American Christian fiction authors often write about the awkwardness of this duality not just in the institution of the church but in other areas of their lives in these literary works. For example, in these works as women question their roles as traditional stay at home wives and mothers (which we will look at later in our discussion of Murray’s *Temptation* and Miller’s *Rain Storm*), they also critique the limitations in fully expressing their identities and asserting agency. Speaking about the problematic nature of African American Christian women when they remain loyal to an institution that continues to oppress them, Wiggins writes:

However, all portrayals do not depict the relationship among religion, church and black women as healthy ones. ...They are persons who have a profound sense of connection with divine presence and power and a deep commitment to the church, and both are regarded as sources of psychological and spiritual empowerment. The consequences of that connection for the well-being of the community are the subject of ongoing deliberation. (87)



Wiggins point is that the tenuous relationship between African American women and the Christian church will continue to be a potential issue for debate leading into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Part of the reason for this is because of how the African American Christian church deals with suffering and its impact on African American Christian women. And it is the problematic nature of this relationship that contemporary African American Christian fiction authors seem to grapple with in the pages of their literary works.

Moreover, even though other Christian women receive the message that suffering is important to the development of a mature Christian walk, this message has a different impact on African Americans who have been manipulated to believe that suffering was both an expected part of their lives as American citizens as well as was something to be celebrated. This is reminiscent of the biblical truth found 2 Timothy 2:12 "If we suffer, we shall also reign with him..." Furthermore, as a way to maintain their obedience, slaves were often told that suffering was part of their "lot in life." This idea morphed into a more ingrained view that suffering, though a cruel part of the slavery experience, could be turned around for good. This teaching has the long-term historical impact of scripture being used to oppress African Americans. Taken one step further, for African American Christian women, the result was the promotion of an ideology that to endure suffering was a necessary part of their Christian maturity process. This was a subversive way to ensuring that women wouldn't question or rebel against the gendered oppression of the African American Christian church.

Furthermore, Jacqueline Grant outlined the far-reaching effects of this heteropatriarchal system in her seminal text, "Black Theology and the Black Woman." In discussing the limitations of the Black theology movement, Grant stated that what undermines relations between black men and black women in the church is the fact that the interactions "arise out a

male-dominated culture which restricts women to certain areas of the society. In such a culture, men are given the warrant to speak for women on all matters of significance” (833). One way this manifests is men occupy most positions of power within the African American Christian church in terms of leadership of boards and ministries while women are relegated to positions of minimal authority. In doing so, women, no matter their level of professional or personal achievements outside the church, risk being dehumanized and demoralized because of the lack of opportunities within the institution of the black church, a space that supposedly offers spiritual and emotional freedom.

Grant continues that as a result of economic and political progress like voter enfranchisement of African American men after the end of slavery in 1865, black men “gradually increased their power and participation in male-dominated society, while Black females ...continued to endure the stereotypes and oppressions of an earlier period” (834). Consequently, African American women were then limited not just by the larger society but also by the African American men they came to rely on for support and protection. Perhaps because of their yearning to support African American men, African American women acquiesced and, in turn, tacitly agreed to this behavior by not openly protesting this script of gendered oppression. Moreover, Grant argues that African American men, “accepted without question the patriarchal structures of the White society as normative for the Black community” (834). I argue that this oppressive ideology was also most likely influenced by widely accepted Christian biblical teachings that women were responsible for the fall of man. In turn, African American Christian women modified their behaviors in several ways including coopting the ideology of the cult of true womanhood perhaps attempting to ameliorate what Grant notes is the ‘detrimental effect’ being named the cause of the evil in the world (835). This connection to the more respected

standard of white womanhood via the cult of true womanhood was in many ways the female equivalent of the black male embracing of white heteropatriarchy as a way to earn equality.

Grant also pointed out how “concepts of self-love, self-control, self-reliance and political participation” impacted African American women since they were indoctrinated with the belief that “by virtue of their sex, they had to be completely dependent on men” even as “the powerlessness of Black men made it necessary for them to seek those values for themselves” (836). In other words, although African American women were encouraged to submit to the authority of both white and African American male, historical economic and sociopolitical circumstances actually forced them to be more independent in seeking work outside of the home to support their families while African American men were either absent by choice or by circumstance. This belief that women should let men assertively lead and that women should passively support them also permeated the African American church where Grant stated that women were considered the “backbone of the church” but what it really meant was that women should remain in the “background” (837). This peculiar double message sent to African American women is that they should be responsible for all the work in the church but not expect any benefit of holding positions of responsibility and authority.

One way these longstanding cultural perceptions of dominant men and weakened women are reflected in the earliest contemporary African American Christian fiction is men are often centered in these novels as the more spiritually and emotionally mature characters. For example, in the novel *Rain Storm* by Vanessa Miller, the male protagonist Keith Williams has strong Christian convictions about God leading him to marry Cynda, a woman who has spent her adult life as a prostitute. Though he struggles with the decision, his strong belief that it is a God ordained decision leads to both a spiritual and emotional breakthrough for himself and his

eventual wife Cynda. Miller writes in a way that makes it clear that the decision to be married is between him and God; Cynda has no choice in the matter. “They walked hand in hand toward his car, the prostitute and the man of God, for God told him to take this woman to be his wife and to love her...” (20). Patterned after the biblical story of Hosea who was also told by God to marry a prostitute, this novel reinforces stereotypes about the oppressive state of women outside of a marital relationship. Prior to marrying Keith, Cynda’s life is chaotic and unstable. She is oppressed because of her economically and spiritually impoverished status. In addition, this novel also shows how men taking the lead in the relationship exercise a transformative spiritual and emotional authority. However, once she marries and chooses to submit to his authority as her husband and spiritual covering, the woman’s life was positively transformed. This novel promotes the often-seen script in African American Christian fiction that the female protagonist is confused about her spirituality or in a state of seeking a closer relationship with Christ. This conflict is often resolved once she submits to the love or authority of a man. Admittedly, this reinforces the overall heteronormative ideologies that permeate perceptions of African American Christian women as being fragile, weak outside of marriage and in need of rescuing.

These messages seem harmless on the surface but reinforce scripts of passivity and dependency that Grant referred to. As he is characterized in the novel, Williams does not abuse her physically, emotionally or spiritually. However, the mere fact that he (along with God) makes the sole decision for marriage could be a reflection about the power that women ultimately do not have. Simply put, *Rain Storm* and other early contemporary African American Christian fiction works show women as lacking the spiritual depth and emotional maturity to make those kinds of important life changing decisions. Those kinds of decisions are best left up

to men. This is just one example that this project explores regarding the reinforcing of oppressive gendered scripts that appear in contemporary African American Christian fiction novels.

The initial publication of the first wave of contemporary African American Christian literature appeared to robustly tackle these issues of perception when the works began being published between the hopeful days of *The Cosby Show* in the mid-1990s and the hope-filled days of the Obama presidency in 2008. When *The Cosby Show* ended in 1992, its historical run of eight years included groundbreaking depictions of an upper class African American New York family. Embedded within this portrayal was the even more intriguing depiction of the African American woman in the form of family matriarch Clair Huxtable. She was a loyal and compassionate mother to her five children. As played by actress Phylicia Rashad, she was also fiercely independent and a respected equal partner in her marital relationship with her husband, Cliff played by actor Bill Cosby. The highly educated Clair contrasted with previous depictions of Black mothers like the uneducated and poverty-stricken Florida Evans from the 1970s CBS television comedy show *Good Times*. Buoyed by this presentation, many African American women made it a goal to be a “Clair Huxtable” who effectively balanced both the challenges of their personal and professional lives.

Even so, this idealized view of womanhood served to influence the depictions of African American women in the earliest novels of contemporary African American Christian fiction. Many of the female protagonists were professional women who strived to have successful marriages and romantic relationships. These depictions appeared to be a response to decades of seeing images of African American women struggling in poverty or as single parents. Clair Huxtable became the standard bearer and showed that African American women could also achieve the “American” dream of a beautiful house, a functional family and successful career.

2008 saw the real-life manifestation of this fictional ideal in the form of First Lady Michelle Obama who showed how to successfully navigate the world as a wife, mother and professional woman while displaying core values of resilience and strength. Considering that this view was aspirational, these depictions harkened back to previous robust discussions regarding the impact of fictional African American women on the lives of actual African American women.

Hazel Carby addresses the awkward place that African American women occupied when it came to the perceptions of African American women in her ground-breaking 1987 text *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. She contends that novels written by African American women should not be misperceived as “passive representations of history but as active influence within history” (95). Situated at a time in the history of the African American woman of shifting towards a multi-faceted definition, these novelists seem to be pushing up against previously accepted notions of the ideal woman. Carby maintains that the literary works produced by earlier African American female novelists “did not just reflect or ‘mirror’ a society; they attempted to changed it” (95). The same could be said about contemporary African American Christian novelists who were challenging some of these previously held perceptions of African American Christian women.

In particular, the ideas of the cult of true womanhood and how they applied to the African American woman is a continuation of perception issues with African American women and this white patriarchal ideal. Carby uses the example of Anna Julia Cooper challenging racist and sexist notions while asserting that “the issue of black womanhood was central to Cooper’s demand for the right of self-determination for all black people” (99). What was key for Cooper was the ability of African American women to pursue education without being labeled as “less desirable” and more challenging to deal with. Cooper also fought against the idea of merely

conforming to the standard of being raised to be a suitable marriage partner and discouraged from what Carby calls “intellectual distinction” (101). Through the ideals of ideal womanhood, women were elevated to positions of protection and, for white women, superiority, within the dominant European patriarchy. In contrast, Carby writes how African American women were not afforded the luxury of focusing merely on their womanhood because “her womanhood was so consistently denied authenticity that it could not be used to gain social position or social influence” (104). This was a stark difference from the white woman who used the idea of true womanhood to elevate herself to a position of moral authority. Referring to the difference that the cult of true womanhood had on the African American woman, Carby writes how they could not disappear into the “abstraction of womanhood disassociated from the oppression of their whole people” (104).

It is in a cultural milieu of revisiting these ideals that contemporary African American Christian fiction authors published literary works that appeared focused on responding to the questions of what had historically defined and what could be a new definition of the African American Christian women. Much like authors of the past, contemporary African American Christian fiction authors focused on showcasing positive, spiritually based traits including sexual purity, interdependence, and spiritual maturity. These literary works continue a literary tradition that began in the 1800s as African American women worked to undue the negative stereotypes that persisted during and after slavery about their supposed lack of respectability and morality. As previously stated, African American Christian women embraced Victorian ideals of “true womanhood,” the oppressive belief that maintaining high moral values was the key to a respectable reputation as a woman.

Melissa Harris Lacewell (Perry) explains how these ideas impacted African American women while citing Shirley Carlson in her article, "No Place to Rest: African American Political Attitudes and the Myth of Black Women's Strength," when she states "free, middle-class, black women of the 19th century were held both to a standard of moral behavior associated with white Victorian consciousness and to a standard of racial uplift imposed by burgeoning African American movements for freedom and citizenship" (4). With its emphasis on purity and sexual morality, this high standard was one that African American women seemed to willingly adopt. I believe that this is in response to their knowledge of the lingering impact of the negative stereotypes of sexual and animalistic lasciviousness that had persisted about African American women since slavery. Contemporary African American Christian fiction authors depicted female protagonists who were willing to do the same by focusing on issues like spiritual growth and sexual purity in their novels, points that we will look at more closely when we examine the novels later in my dissertation.

#### Significance of this Research Study

The issue of how contemporary African American Christian fiction literary works dealt with cultural perceptions in the African American Christian community regarding women is a crucial question in my study that has yet to be addressed in scholarly research. As some of these novels show African American women as stereotypically manipulative or controlling with chaotic emotional lives, the question arises whether these books were deliberately depicting African American women in a negative light. This leads to a further exploration of whether these works, by doing so, were reinforcing negative stereotypes of women that existed in the African American Christian community. The pattern of negative portrayals of African American



women emerges when looking at the development of characters as well as internal conflict resolution in these novels. For example, in the novel *Divas of Damascus Road*, published in 2006 by Michelle Stimpson, each of the female characters is flawed with deep seated emotional and spiritual issues that initially negatively impact their relationships with others and require spiritual transformation. Other novels published at around the same time like *Rain Storm* by Vanessa Miller (2007) and *Redemption* by Jacquelin Thomas (2007) show similar female characters who are emotionally traumatized and, as a result, spiritually impotent but yearning for transformation.

Yet, each of these three novels depict men as the ones leading the women from these depressing states of spiritual brokenness to places of emotional and spiritual wholeness. Perhaps it is coincidental that these three authors use similar characterizations, but it also indicates a pattern that was rooted not just in writing styles but also in cultural perception. In addition, in each of these stories, the protagonists find themselves within the African American Christian church and, in some way, hindered by the expectation that they should strive for submission and docility. Looking at this specific aspect indicates that these primarily female authors are critiquing traditionally accepted views of gender roles for African American women by presenting women who experience negative consequences when they exert agency. Often in these works, it is not until they submit their will/agency to a male romantic interest that these female characters find peace and achieve spiritual maturity. Even more so, these female characters reinforce the widely accepted heteronormative view of relationships of men taking the lead found in the contemporary African American Christian church. Consequently, the emotional and spiritual needs of women appear to be silenced as they reinforce the hegemonic attitudes regarding their behavior towards men. One result of this was as Tamika Carey noted in her book *Rhetorical Healings: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*:

When faced with hegemonic discourses, patriarchal policies or wounding traumas, many Black women have not decided to leave the church en masse. Instead, they have resisted by creating new spaces within the existing structure that transformed the conditions where they worship or by going beyond the walls of the church and critiquing it publicly. (89)

Ironically, African American Christian fiction novelists write within these tensions between the expectations of accepting heteronormativity all while questioning some of its more restrictive ideologies like conforming to male submission. One of the consequences of this is that readers of the fiction may feel confused, frustrated or unsettled by the apparent mixed messages that these novels send. Evelyn Higginbotham also refers to conformity to patriarchal ideologies in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Woman's Movement in the Black Baptist Church*, when she notes how the assimilationist views of Black Baptist women “led to their insistence upon blacks’ conformity to the dominant society’s norms of manners and morals. Thus, the discourse of respectability disclosed class and status differentiation” (187).

Moreover, Higginbotham writes how these women boldly “asserted agency in the construction and representation of themselves as new subjectivities – as Americans as well as blacks and women....and rejected white American’s depiction of black women as immoral, childlike and unworthy of respect or protection” (186). By doing so, these women challenged the increasing popularity of heteropatriarchy within the African American community. Not surprisingly, these attitudes about heteropatriarchy linger in the African American Christian community and present a challenge for contemporary African American Christian fiction authors who write positive portrayals of submissive women in their novels but also appear to challenge this ideology by showing the negative impact of submission on their female characters.

As of this writing, the only resource that explores contemporary Christian fiction is Anita Gandolfo's *Faith and Fiction: Christian Literature in America Today*. What is the most disappointing about this book is that although it was published in 2007, ten years after the first African American Christian novel was published, it does not mention any African American Christian fiction author or literary work. Her book is written with white Christian fiction as the norm. In fact, Gandolfo's preface mentions how her book is intended to analyze, "the current moment in contemporary American fiction as it reflects the religious tensions in American society" (X). Though her goal is admirable, it is questionable how she can write a book length analysis of those tensions and seemingly deliberately exclude contemporary African American Christian fiction. She also clarifies that she hopes to "highlight the current cultural moment by examining imaginative texts that are significant documents of that moment" (X). Once again, her exclusion of texts written by African American Christian female authors at a time when Christian fiction was one of the top selling forms of literature for African Americans is questionable.

Gandolfo further states how her book is designed to "to place the distinct publishing phenomenon of 'Christian fiction' in a context that explains both its incredible sales and its significant in reflecting contemporary American culture" (XI). Though she qualifies that she was unable to include more novelists in her study, the fact she includes none by African American writers is disappointing. She focuses a great deal on evangelical Christians and their influence on contemporary culture but misses an opportunity to discuss the equally influential African American mega church movement of late 1990s and early 2000s. Initially, Gandolfo's omission is quite striking as it seems to erase the African American Christian experience from her analysis of Christian fiction. However, her conclusions about the importance of Christian fiction and the political influence of white evangelicals on the literature provides an interesting angle regarding

the relationship between literature, religion and culture. Her focus is not simply on the literary value of the literature solely but more importantly on the cultural value of the literature. This analytic framework also serves a template that I use in my study of the cultural significance contemporary African American Christian fiction.

When I initially began my research project, I was looking for previously produced scholarship about contemporary African American Christian fiction. Finding Gandolfo's book was exciting and I initially dismissed it because of her focus on Christian fiction and her complete omission of African American Christian fiction. However, her careful look at the cultural context that led to the creation of Christian fiction and the factors that continue to sustain its popularity was compelling and helpful. I reexamined her book and realize that I could use a similar focus as I construct part of my theoretical framework. Gandolfo also correctly asserts that because of history of our nation, there is an intertwining of literature and religion (2). My contention is that this connection is also evident for contemporary African American Christian fiction as it reflects aspects of the African American historical and cultural experiences. A future project that delves more into the influences of politics on contemporary African American Christian fiction would find her points meaningful.

Much like Gandolfo mentioned that these Christian works reflect a very specific politically, culturally and socially conservative world view, writers of African American Christian fiction also reflect the worldview of contemporary African American Christianity at the intersections of race, gender and religion. Gandolfo's focus on the seductive political influence of evangelical Christianity ignores how African American Christianity is a similarly influential political ideology because of its history of traversing troubling waters of social and racial injustice. For all of the good that her book offers in terms of developing my theoretical framework,

Gandolfo's exclusion of contemporary African American fiction leaves a glaring research gap that this project will address.

Cultural Studies theorist Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* helps answer questions about the literary legitimacy of African American Christian fiction as she offers a template on how to apply a rigorous scholarly framework to the study of a form of popular literature. She notes how "similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes that they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter" (8). Her theory about the connection between the writers of the text as well as the readers of the text are important to my analysis of the fictional elements of African American Christian fiction. Furthermore, the theoretical work of Mary Helen Washington helps situate contemporary African American Christian fiction within the broader African American literary canon. Washington's belief that African American female authors, "have chosen to tell their stories and to use language in certain ways, and in doing so have produced art, writerly designs which constitute a unique literary tradition" (6). African American Christian fiction writers have created a dynamic literary tradition in their treatment of their complex women characters with a wide range of emotional and spiritual responses.

Jacqueline Bobo's influential text *Black Women as Cultural Readers* offers a fascinating analysis of how Black women "as cultural producers, critics, and members of an audience the women are positioned to intervene strategically in the imaginative construction, critical interpretation and social condition of black women" (27). Here Bobo's belief is that the cultural works produced are political acts of transformation. Even though Bobo's analysis was focused on the impact of 1980's movies *The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust*, her points can easily be applied to contemporary African American Christian fiction novels. In terms of African

American Christian fiction, these books introduce and ultimately interrogate questions about the complex identity of contemporary African American women through the lens of the Christian worldview.

Likewise, Katherine Clay Bassard's *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* shows the complex relationship between religion, gender and literature. Bassard's keen insights into how early African American women's literature was both a project of "cultural production and community building" is a much-needed historical framing of the same kind of effect that contemporary African American Christian fiction authors have on their respective cultures and communities (13). When looking at the development of the genre of African American Christian fiction as a popular form of literature, Bassard's insights prove valuable in response to the questions of whether novels possess literary merit and authority as cultural productions.

From African American literary studies, the theories of Barbara Christian, Toni Cade Bambara, and Hazel Carby are vital as they established the critical tradition of literary analysis of African American women novelists. Christian's analysis of how the intersectional identities of the authors directly impact the works that they create applies uniquely to contemporary African American Christian fiction. In her work, *Defining Black Feminist Criticism*, Christian writes how that there was a "kind of homelessness" for critical works on black women or other third world women writers. Implied in this statement is that biases of predominantly male and white female literary scholars and their lack of familiarity with African American texts led to an erasure, silencing and exclusion of African American literature. This same kind of exclusion has happened in academic studies for African American Christian fiction. However, traditional academia has not formally studied these works for the valuable cultural statements they make

about the emotional, spiritual, and intellectual states of 21<sup>st</sup> century African American Christian women.

Toni Cade Bambara mentioned in *The Black Woman: An Anthology* the inherent powerlessness of the Black woman despite proclamations of strength. Bambara notes how Black women are often described using terms of empowerment like “‘strong,’ ‘domineering,’ ‘matriarchal’ and ‘emasculating.’” Contemporary African American Christian fiction authors seemingly struggle with what Bambara calls “the roles while we are intended to play” (108). Hazel Carby noted in her work *Womanhood* that Barbara Smith pushed for the establishment of “a verifiable literary tradition because of the common experience of the writers and the shared use of a black female language” (8). Taking this idea one step further and applying it to the works of African American Christian fiction, these works are an extension of the long-standing literary tradition of African American female writers as these writers share the common experiences of women from the Christian worldview. The language these novelists use is, at times, exclusive to those in the African American Christian church but is also periodically universal to women’s experiences.

Trudier Harris-Lopez’s 1995 article “This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character” and her 2001 book *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* are important to my analysis regarding the African American women’s ethos and strength. I specifically choose Harris-Lopez’s theoretical works to examine the strong Black woman in African American Christian fiction. Harris-Lopez provides a clear strategy for applying the complexities of the label of strength to African American female protagonists in contemporary African American Christian fiction. In looking at how Christianity impacts what she refers to as a pathological

disorder of strength Harris Lopez writes how “along with the symptoms of suprahumanity, introspection, and keeping one’s own counsel, there are a variety of other manifestations of the disease of strength. Christian virtue (especially in the earlier literary portraits) and self-denial are prominent among them” (Harris 111). Here, Harris-Lopez intimates that there is a connection between the long-standing concept of the strong African American woman and Christianity. For African American Christian women, the ideology of strength and its long-standing connection with Christianity is reinforced by the culture. For example, within African American Christian fiction, characters like the silent but strong woman who endures trauma and suffering is a common trope.

Moreover, these literary works either reinforce and, in some cases, recreate a distinctly Christian view of strength as exemplified in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” Often, the Christian idealization of strength is influenced by various interpretations of this specific scripture as it seems to predicate spiritual growth on experiencing suffering and tragedy. For example, in the 2015 movie *War Room*, the protagonist Elizabeth Jordan (played by bestselling Christian author Priscilla Shirer) is shown enduring multiple episodes of mental and emotional abuse from her husband. Nevertheless, once she actively implements the advice of an older woman to fervently pray for her husband instead of confronting him, her life and marriage are positively transformed. The implication is that the suffering in her marriage was necessary for her embrace the blessings of her marital reconciliation. This movie follows a similar thematic pattern of contemporary African American Christian fiction novels that romanticize suffering as a vital part of the development of strength of African American women. In her book *Jezebel Unhinged*:



*Loosing the Black Female Body*, Tamara Lomax addresses the significance of suffering for the African American woman when she writes how certain cultural artifacts like movies “locates black women’s experiences in suffering, resistance and survival” (79).

Contemporary African American Christian fiction continues to serve as a unique space to document the African American Christian culture. In the end, the goal is that this study affirms how literature impacts perceptions of the value of the African American Christian woman’s experiences as women who are often the heartbeat of the African American family and the backbone of the African American community. This includes being wives, mothers, aunts, sisters, co-workers, and community leaders. Moreover, this research project fills in the obvious gaps left by the exclusion of African American Christian fiction from previous academic studies as well as provide a viable and engaging theoretical framework from which to look at these contemporary literary works.

## Chapter 2

### Praying to Exhale

#### Introduction

“Damn, Damn, Damn!” When Florida Evans yelled these words on the television sitcom *Good Times* September 29, 1976, it seemed like the entire world took note of the depth of her anguish and pain that resulted from the unexpected death of her longtime husband James. Even though she was a television character, her agony was so palpable that this scene became one of the most memorable moments in television history. In this well-known episode, the family is still reeling from the emotional shock of the sudden death of their patriarch James Evans, Jr from an automobile accident while working in Mississippi. As the family participates in funeral services for him concerned about their financial future, the teenaged children are also very concerned because they feel like their mother Florida is suppressing her feelings. More specifically, they note that she did not shed tears during the funeral service. Because her character had been comfortable sharing her emotions in previous episodes, what is implied in these observations is how unusual it was that Florida did not have the expected public response of pain and grief.

A spinoff from television producer Norman Lear’s popular *Maude* comedy, *Good Times* aired between 1974-1979 and was one of the first successful television sitcoms to feature a two parent African American household. Even though in *Maude* she was one of the housekeepers, in *Good Times*, Florida Evans was a stay at home mother who occasionally worked part time jobs. Seen as the strong and always capable woman, Florida exemplified the traits from the cult of true womanhood, the Victorian notion of what constituted a valuable woman. She was a God-fearing

woman who displayed high morals and urged her children, husband and close friends to do the same. Perhaps hoping to show Florida as opposite of the stereotype of the overly emotional complaining African American wife, the writers of the television show were careful to show her even-tempered and in control of her emotions. Barbara W. Welter explores the far-reaching impact of the cult of true womanhood in her influential article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860.” In this article, Welter examines how Victorian ideals of purity standards of behavior were imposed on women. She asserts that these ideals reinforced that “no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them, she was promised happiness and power” (152). As a result of this perception, women, both white and African American, clung to those ideals because of their promise of power. Grasping onto those ideals became more challenging for African American women who often were not viewed as real women and had to often ask much like Sojourner Truth, “ar’nt I a woman?” The depiction of Florida Evans in *Good Times*, reintroduced these ideals of respectability to a modern generation of African American women.

It is not until the family is cleaning up after the guests have left the home after the funeral repast that Florida finally has her dramatic moment of emotional release. While cleaning the kitchen, she famously throws down an empty glass punch bowl, cries out “Damn, Damn, Damn,” and explodes in a torrent of tears. This scene was pivotal because it was one of the few times where modern television depicted the kind of deep-seated emotional pain that contemporary African American women’s literature had featured. This kind of internalized trauma of African American women was rarely seen on television and most definitely not in a television comedy. However, contemporary African American women’s literature had quickly distinguished itself for its well-crafted stories, poems and short stories. For example, authors

like Toni Morrison and her 1970 *The Bluest Eye* release had received critical acclaim and achieved success with the publication of their literary works. Often these works featured African American women and delved into topics relating to emotional, physical and sexual trauma. With this *Good Times* episode, it appeared that popular television shows were now willing to explore the same groundbreaking topics.

Yet, for all of its emotional power, one thing this scene shows is how African American women's public pain could be considered problematic. The bigger question was whether her children were concerned about her not expressing pain publicly or were really concerned that she had not expressed pain at all. Perhaps it was the universality of the connection to African American pain and how her cries reflected long buried emotions of African American women that made it one of the most memorable moments in modern television history.

Florida's cry is guttural as the emotions overwhelm her and frighten her children. Even though she was not on the slave auction block, the tension in the scene prior to her eruption of emotion was reminiscent of the tension that undoubtedly hung in the air prior to the sale of enslaved African American children and the permanent separation of families. Her depiction of pain mirrored scenes of African American writers like Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange from the early 1970's who detailed emotional traumas of African American women. What this scene as well as books written during this time led to was an increased interest and willingness to publicly discuss African American women's pain. Over the years, this interest led to Oprah Winfrey's popular daytime television show that promoted healing resolutions for her pain as well as that of others. Eventually, this developed into the Christianized profiting of female pain in the late 1990's by Bishop T.D. Jakes who placed pain, along with its causes and effects, within the contemporary African American Christian framework of "loosed" seemingly formerly

traumatized women. Each one of these cultural moments influenced the creation of the genre of contemporary African American Christian fiction which often centers on the emotional, spiritual and mental pain of its characters.

#### Statement of Problem

This chapter takes a look at the cultural moments that inspired the creation of contemporary African American Christian Fiction. In particular, this chapter focuses on how the historical legacy of depictions of the emotional behavior of African American women impacted the creation of this genre of literature that is typified by intense scenes of African American Christian women's suffering and emotions. Even though there is no formal history of the African American Christian fiction, the creation of this literature can be more likely connected in part to a much longer trajectory of depictions of African American women traumas in pop culture including African American women's literature. What is noteworthy is that contemporary African American Christian fiction seems to center the pain within the framework of Christianity, historically one of the most influential aspects of African American life. Questions that this chapter explore include what led to the creation of contemporary African American Christian fiction in the mid-1990s and whether it was a reflection of and response to specific cultural and historical moments for African American women. In addition, I will examine what larger cultural forces contemporary African American Christian fiction authors are responding to. My argument in this chapter is that significant moments like the "Damn, Damn, Damn" scene from *Good Times* was part of a crucial cultural trajectory that includes the idealized African American woman Clair Huxtable, the commodified hyper transparency of Oprah Winfrey and the profitable pain of T.D. Jakes. Each one of these cultural markers was

responding to the cultural moments that preceded it. I contend that African American Christian fiction complicates this pattern as it responds to the commodification of the pain of African American Christian women by placing it in the Christian framework. Beauty Bragg notes in her book *Reading Contemporary African American Fiction* that “trends of attitude and perception, may seem to arise organically but are in fact institutionally constituted through the participation of artists, intellectuals, and critics; all of whom play an important role in conferring legitimacy, prestige, and recognition on the products which constitute black commercial culture.” Applying this theory, the focus on pain and the commodification of the suffering was part of a multi-faceted process that contemporary African American Christian fiction authors undoubtedly sought to explore within their literary works.

Rooted in the legacy of Florida Evans and other similar fictional characters, contemporary African American Christian fiction authors often focus on the traumas experienced by their female characters. In her book *Rhetorical Healings: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*, Tamika Carey notes that there are valid concerns raised in pop cultural moments regarding the African American woman and how she deals with trauma and pain. Carey states that like others who are profiting off the pain of African American women that there are pop cultural influences that are “directed predominantly towards women in states of disease over past emotional, physical or mental traumas and to women in states of discontent over the status of their spiritual, romantic and professional lives...” (5). Her book focuses on the creative works of Iyanla Vanzant and Tyler Perry for good reason. However, I contend that predictably, African American Christian fiction authors are also doing similar things like Carey notes and focusing on the pain of African American women. By doing so, they seek to convince their audience that “redressing or preventing a crisis requires them to follow

the steps to ideological, communicative or behavioral transformation the writer considers essential to wellness” (6). These writers do so when they center sexual, spiritual, physical, emotional and relational traumas of African American Christian women in their literary works.

Ironically, contemporary African American Christian fiction also unwittingly sends subversive messages about African American women, in particular their response to trauma, and the belief that pain should be a badge of spiritual and emotional maturity. There is an additional complication that comes by placing suffering within the framework of Judeo-Christianity that seems to glorify pain as a step to emotional and spiritual maturity. Pain was often a centerpiece of the African American woman’s experiences and key component of depictions of African American women in literature and popular culture in the 1970’s. Florida Evans was an accessible television version of the women African American female authors like Morrison and Walker wrote about. What made Florida’s role all the more intriguing was the fact that she was a poor black woman and often poor women were assumed to have low morals.

Imani Perry aptly describes how the constraints of the expectations of the ideal woman are tied to the economic status of woman when she asserts in her book, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* how “the structure of patriarchy included women for whom this ideal was inaccessible as a result of class and racialization.” Using this perspective, women are relegated to the domestic arena by the hegemonic forces of the male dominated society in which she lives. Even more so, her class and race also provide additional limitations. Florida was the ideal African American woman because she was a fictional representation of the legacy of pain that the American patriarchy had cosigned the African American woman. When *Good Times* first aired on American network television in the early 1970s, the fact that the show’s central character Florida Evans was poor made her a sympathetic character. Unlike the irresponsible

single mothers described in the controversial Moynihan Report that were mercilessly given the blame for failings of the African American community of the African American mother, she was responsible and an exemplary mother, despite her family's perennial poverty-stricken status. Part of what made Florida ideal was her remaining out of the public sphere and in the private domestic sphere. It could be said that Florida was also a response to the slow building influence of contemporary neoconservatism. Perry writes how the impact of that political movement is a return to patriarchy and "much of it effectively oriented toward limiting the participation of women in the body politic (restoring them to domesticity) and undoing mechanisms to bring people of color into the middle classes" (105).

Perhaps more significantly, Florida was the ideal African American woman who was experiencing, had just experienced or was about to experience pain. The show featured multiple episodes where Evans skillfully navigated the roller coaster ride of emotions of living in poverty with an underemployed husband, dealing with his unexpected death that forced her into the workforce while managing her duties as a widow and single mother. Interestingly, ratings for the show decreased significantly in seasons 1977-1979 of the show which were coincidentally the seasons that followed the death of the family patriarch James. This decline could be attributed to the exit of actor John Amos who played James, but it could also be attributed to the fact that Florida, now a working widow, was no longer the ideal woman since she was no longer exclusively in the domestic sphere.

Just as audiences watched *Good Times* and connected with Florida, a wide range of African American literature was published featuring African American women's stories of emotional and inner healing. This cultural moment of a spotlight on this emotional purging and



emotional nakedness lead permeated African American women's fictional portrayals in the 1970s and impacted contemporary African American Christian fiction writers in the 1990s.

### Cultural Forces and Shifting Gazes

The cultural forces that led to the focus on inner healing found in contemporary African American Christian fiction has its roots in this Black Women's literary renaissance from the 1970s. Authors like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Ntozake Shange published well-written and deeply moving literary works about the lives of African American women. In many ways, literary works like novels *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *The Bluest Eye* and the choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, offered a peak into the rarely seen interiority of African American women. Unlike previous novels that focused on social justice and racial discrimination issues of the broader African American community, these works distinguished themselves for their singular focus on the emotional lives of African American women.

Morrison was adamant that her subject and audience was African American and referred to this in Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's 2015 New York Times Magazine interview, "What Toni Morrison Saw" when she remarked:

What I'm interested in is writing without the gaze, without the white gaze. ... In so many earlier books by African-American writers, particularly the men, I felt that they were not writing to me. But what interested me was the African-American experience throughout whichever time I spoke of. It was always about African-American culture and people — good, bad, indifferent, whatever — but that was, for me, the universe.

Morrison pinpointing the gaze indicates a significant shift was occurring regarding African American women as the subject. The shifting gaze meant that when African American women authors wrote the story, the potential was that the African American woman went from being the object being controlled by the gaze to the being the subject who now controlled the gaze. This shift impacted the kinds of topics discussed in these books. No longer was the primary focus on themes of social justice and interracial conflict; authors like Morrison and Walker placed their stories in primarily predominant African American settings where the focus could then shift to intraracial conflicts like emotional, spiritual and physical abuse that occurred between African Americans. This shift continues over 20 years later in contemporary African American Christian fiction that are set in either exclusively African American or African American Christian communities.

Moreover, according to Katherine Clay Bassard and her book *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender and Community in Early African American Women's Writing*, the African American woman writer is a vital part of diversifying the documentation of the experiences of African Americans. She notes how, "African American women's early literature emerges, then, as a part of a larger project of African American cultural production and community building in which black women played an active and vital role as co-creators in the community's artistic and intellectual life" (Bassard 13). This same focus was found in African American female authors in the 1970s who, with a passionate literary diligence, took on the daunting task of fictionalizing the legacy of centuries of trauma in the lives of African American women. These writers continued the tradition from earlier African American female authors who sought to contextualize the African American experience by adding particular insight from the perspective

of African American women. What these writers did was show that in many respects the African American community was created by and sustained by the response to emotional, physical and spiritual pain and trauma.

As revealed by Carey in her book *Rhetorical Healings: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*, these authors focused on the often-problematic process of healing that many African American women experienced as a result of trauma and pain. Carey noted:

Through their characterization of Black women moving from states of being wounded to wellness, their insights into the specific sources of these traumas and their critiques of the institutional and individual complicity in their hurt, these writers called out the contradictions in their relationships with themselves and others (21).

Applying Carey's argument about the focus on healing, these earlier literary works showed the challenges as well as complications that arose from these contradictions. Ironically, it even appeared as though authors like Walker and Morrison seemed to be at their literary best when they showed how these complications affected not just the individual but also the communities in which they lived. For example, in Alice Walker's widely anthologized 1973 short story "Everyday Use," the character of Dee (Wangero) is a walking contradiction as the daughter who was once ashamed of her impoverished Southern roots yet after a trip to Africa, returns to visit her family with a new perspective on heritage. The complication is that her new view discounts the heritage that had the most significant impact on her life: that of her immediate African American family and not the romanticized adopted African family. Even though she has traveled to the "Motherland" of Africa, Dee's failure to recognize her African American family causes

undue pain to mother and sister. Even when Dee/Wangero admonishes her mother and sister for not realizing that “it’s a new day for us,” and that they don’t appreciate their heritage, there is a thread of emotional trauma in her words. Though Dee/Wangero may not recognize it, she is the one in turmoil and bondage.

Consequently, what was said about African American writers in the first wave of womanist theoretical critiques in the 1970s also applies to African American Christian fiction authors as producers of culture as well as those who react to culture. In her book *Black Women Novelists*, Barbara Christian made reference to how African American women novelists represented their communities when she wrote how “their novels are the literary counterparts of their communities’ oral traditions, which in the Americas have become more and more the domain of women” (239). The reference to the historically vibrant oral tradition of storytelling successfully linked the past traditions to the present literary practices. In contemporary African American Christian fiction, there is a similar linking to the traditions of the past, in this case, the specific traditions of the resilient African American Christian community. Literacy as a way to establish agency also appears as a significant value as characters are often depicted as reading, writing or a combination of the two as they process through difficult emotions. After all, it was the Christian community that provided a refuge from the systemic forms of oppression despite its continued gendered oppression.

Additionally, Christian notes how earlier African American writers, were not just “critical of the individual” but also of society as they developed a “particular value system” (239). Christian’s point about the nature of African American literature to have a broad appeal even as it may have focused on specific narrow topics is what distinguished it from other

literature. For African American Christian fiction writers, the value system includes elements of the contemporary African American Christian experience and a particular focus on heteronormative practices like marriage.

In addition, Christian succinctly states the importance of the work of these black women writers as they were “challenging the very definition of woman and [are] beginning to project their own definitions of themselves as a means of transforming the content of their own communities’ views on the nature of women and therefore on the nature of life” (252). As African American Christian fiction literary works were released in the significant cultural and historical moments of post -civil rights and feminist movements in the mid-1990s, these women redefined themselves as Christians at the same time that society was redefining what it meant to African American and female. Similarly, contemporary African American Christian authors found themselves at a cultural crossroads in the mid-1990s when the literature was first mass produced and published. They were at the intersections of independence and submission as more books were being published advocating for the African American Christian woman to adopt distinctly conservative and heteronormative values as exemplified by the popularity of authors like Michelle McKinney Hammond. McKinney Hammond promoted a decidedly conservative view of womanhood with best-selling books like her 1999 release, *The Power of Femininity: Rediscovering the Art of Being a Woman* which advocated for women to be more submissive than independent when she writes, “Submission is not only a test our love for Him, it is a test of our strength. Sometimes it is hard to submit, but submit we must...Because it is always in our best interest to do so regardless of...how much we think we know” (177). For African American Christian authors, their books were a response to rhetoric like Hammond’s and cultural

developments which, turn, featured women who were unpacking what concepts like submission looked like in their contemporary lives.

Hammond's writings were one end of the spectrum of the contemporary African American woman's Christian's response to the shift towards more traditional and patriarchal roles of men in the evangelical church. In fact, in one passage of her book, Hammond writes "the vicious cycle of men abdicating, women rising up, men fleeing, and women becoming embittered, hardened and hopeless has tainted society and caused wonderment in the heavens" (14). This reinforces the ideology of Christian male empowerment movements like Promisekeepers and Every Man's Battle which placed men at the center of contemporary philosophical and theological issues. Seemingly in response to this attempted erasure of women and their needs, authors like the earliest innovators of contemporary African American Christian returned women to the center by creating literature that made women, their desires, fears triumphs and struggles the focus. Even though Hammond's brand was to promote the empowerment of Christian women, her writings, in similar fashion to that of African American Christian authors, on deeper analysis, send a message that reinforces the sublimation of women.

In their introduction for their book *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, editors Joanne M. Braxton and Andree' Nicola McLaughlin argue that African American female writers," interpret their experience as they read the metaphors and symbols of the dominant and oftentimes oppressive culture that they rise within and against" (xxvi). The gendered oppression within the African American Christian church for women also manifested with African American male leaders in the church limiting opportunities for women regarding leadership. I contend that the primarily female contemporary African American Christian fiction authors use their literature as a way to subvert these

limitations as writing, as an act of agency, brings literary, creative and cultural freedom. Being ignored or oppressed by the male leadership naturally led to women exploring other ways they could not only express themselves but also impact other African American Christian women. What the earliest African American Christian fiction authors did was to create a space in their literature where emotional traumas were explored within a Christian framework. Literature, with its ability to connect women and provide places where universal stories of empowerment, was the perfect place for this to occur. It's an interesting to note that as men's empowerment movements like Promisekeepers became popular in the mid and late 1990s, there was a sharp increase in the production of contemporary African American Christian fiction with themes of freedom and empowerment.

Theorist bell hooks also asserts that there is a long-standing pattern of the “devaluation of Black womanhood” when she contends in her book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* how African American women worked hard to reverse the damage of years of this public exploitation of their image by adopting external traits of a respectable woman. Theorist hooks writes that there was opposition to this as “a black woman dressed tidy and clean, carrying herself in a dignified manner, was usually the object of mud-slinging by white men who ridiculed and mocked her self-improvement efforts” (55). Once again, regardless of the efforts of African American women, the issue of the public space being used to control the behavior of African American women continued. It wasn't just the pain but the public expression of the pain that people sought to control.

The subsequent policing of the behavior and emotions of African American women in popular culture seem tied to the legacy of slavery where the public display of the pain of African American women was a visceral part the slave economic system. There are countless stories,

descriptions and even artistic renderings of the moments when African American women were humiliated and stripped naked publicly, whipped viciously and had their children forcibly separated from them. As a result of this repeated public humiliation, African American women became accustomed to a troubling duality of being forced to show their emotions but also being criticized for being so emotional.

This attitude towards policing and controlling the behavior of African American women undoubtedly influenced the depiction of African American women on television in the 1980s and 1990s. Up to that point, so much of what typified the African American woman was limited to that of the long-suffering Mammy, hypersexual Jezebel and overbearing Sapphire. These newer television images sought to redefine the African American woman not just in terms of the white gaze but in terms of the African American female gaze. Shows like *Good Times* reinforced this view that the primary influence on the emotional capacity of the African American family was the African American woman. In a negative way, the Black woman's struggle within these "social systems is constructed as a preventable virus that infects the African American community at large" (Carey 67). Revisiting the scene at James' funeral, seemingly the reluctance of Florida to succumb to her emotions was considered such a negative that the entire family was impacted before her outburst. Her children physically circle her in a touching embrace as the show then ends and the screen fades to black. This scene shows visually how the emotions of the African American woman is the center of the African American family as well as in a larger sense the African American community.

Furthermore, this idea of the public being entitled to witnessing displays of African American women's emotions might have been a contributing factor to the depiction of another well-known African American television mother a few years later on *The Cosby Show*. Clair



Huxtable was considered the quintessential television mom on the mid 1980s: she was beautiful, smart, professional and a perfect balance to her husband Cliff, played by comedian Bill Cosby. Unlike previous African American mothers, Clair was neither poverty stricken like Florida Evans in *Good Times*, grossly overweight like Mabel “Mama” Thomas in *What’s Happening* or uncomfortable with her upper-class economic status like Louise Jefferson in *The Jeffersons*. Clair was shown as being confident in her abilities as a woman to provide support for her family as well as succeed in her profession as a lawyer.

Yet, when we initially meet her in the first episode of *The Cosby Show*, which aired in September of 1984, she is shown as occupying the traditional domestic space of the kitchen as she makes breakfast for the children on the first day of school. With the exception of a brief mention of her career in conversation that son Theo has with his father, there is no detailed description of her job as an attorney. In fact, for the majority of the first episode she is shown wearing an apron and serving food. She is overly emotional and shown as being frustrated with the children fussing at them about not eating their breakfast, fighting during dinner and complaining about the children’s behavior to Cliff when he comes home. It was this introduction that showed Clair’s emotions that was integral to the show’s success. Eventually, as the show progressed through the years, Clair’s characterization softened with humor being used to lighten some of her more serious emotions like anger and frustration.

Her emotions seem to be on full display throughout the premiere episode and the warning she gives Theo about “waiting until your father comes home” to address his poor grades appears to fall in line with a traditional view of male and female roles in a marital relationship. Though she is not expressing emotions like the pain of grief, her emotions and the display of them in the private domestic space of the home appear similar to that of Florida Evans. She is

sure of how things will set themselves back in order once her husband makes it home. Even though she was a professional woman, her depiction suggests that Clair was a modern example of the respectable African American woman possessing traits from the cult of true womanhood and respectability.

In her book, *Righteous Discontent*, Evelyn Higgenbotham argues about the significance of this perception when she contends that “Respectability demanded that every individual in the black community assume responsibility for behavioral self-regulation and self-improvement along moral, educational and economic lines” (198). I assert that this is the template for Clair Huxtable. Though she was often depicted as frustrated with the children and her husband, her upper middle-class economic status along with her professional status as partner in a law firm elevated her to a position of being well-respected. By these standards, Clair was the ideal African American woman because of her economic, sexual and educational statuses and quite a significant change from that of the uneducated, impoverished but respectable Florida Evans in the 1970s.

Curiously, at the same time that Clair Huxtable was fascinating television audiences, a different kind of African American woman was just beginning to lay the foundation for her revolutionary daytime television. Oprah Winfrey, a little-known television talk show host from Chicago, had a hard to pronounce name, didn’t fit the model thin trend of television broadcasters yet had exuded a confidence that was magnetic. Winfrey’s emergence coincided with the publication of some of the most influential works by African American women authors including Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Carey rightly contends that one of the impacts of the Black Woman’s literary renaissance of the 1970’s persisted when writes “Since the end of the period scholars call Black Women’s Literary

Renaissance – a moment that happens to parallel the ascent of The Oprah Winfrey Show- a lucrative market of African American self-help books, inspirational literature and film has emerged “(5).

Winfrey had a significant impact on the lives of her viewers in the 25 years her daytime talk show aired nationally. According to the website Oprah.com, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was the “number one talk show for 24 consecutive seasons,” winning its time slot in the important sweeps ratings period since it debuted in 1986.” In addition, it was “syndicated to 215 domestic stations by CBS Television Distribution and to 145 countries by CBS Studios International.” (Oprah.com). With that kind of impact, her depiction of an intelligent, funny and emotional vulnerable African American woman was ground-breaking and global.

Even though Winfrey’s show periodically focused on racial issues, like the famous episode in 1987 where she went to the all-white county of Forsyth County, Georgia, as her show progressed, it focused more on issues related to emotional healing for women including rebuilding self-esteem as well as issues of emotional trauma. Whether it was intentional on her part, the result was that the normal gaze of others onto the pain of African American women shifted. Her show illustrated how shifting the gaze from the one who experiences the pain to the one who now controls the gaze was an important contribution to the perceptions of contemporary African American women. No longer were African American women unable to control the gaze; Oprah showed that African American women had full authority and agency to maintain control as well as control the narrative about the pain. This is key to how agency later shows up in contemporary African American fiction.

Perhaps even more importantly, Winfrey redefined the gaze as an act of agency for African American women. Winfrey was not only being peered at but she was also now doing the

looking. In addition, Winfrey seemed to relish her pain and her ability to control who saw the effects of it. Even more significantly, she seemed to transcend race but did not transcend her pain. In one image from her Life Class series from 2012, her redefinition of “pain is - pay attention inward now” (Carey 2). By creating this new definition of pain, Winfrey cemented her position of authority for millions of her followers. According to Carey, Winfrey “routinely divulged her own painful, personal experiences as a confessional mechanism at key moments and, in doing so, endeared herself to her viewers and other fans. The host has always been a work in progress” (9). Once again, by using her platform to share her own traumas, Oprah took control of the gaze as it related to emotional trauma and redirected it. It’s not really significant where it was redirected; the fact is that she used agency to redirect the pain. Ironically, she turned to the gaze that her idol Toni Morrison talked about previously. Not every woman wanted their own tv show but perhaps each wanted to exercise agency the way Winfrey did.

The irony is that despite Winfrey’s show being the most successful daytime talk show in television history, she inadvertently followed a long-standing tradition of profiting off the pain of African American women even as she sought to empower them. This focus obviously impacted the stories featured and the topics she covered on her show. This led some to ask whether her show was the modern-day slave block as it depicted shameful displays of emotions as well as manipulated the pain and traumas of others for her personal financial gain. One thing that Winfrey was quite open about was how she viewed her show as a vehicle to explore little seen traumas of the African American female experience. She was adamant about featuring books by African American female authors like Maya Angelou because of how she felt they depicted her life in their books. In a December 2000 editorial in O Magazine, Winfrey explains, “Meeting Maya on those pages was like meeting myself in full. For the first time, as a young black girl, my

experience was validated.” Undoubtedly, this connection also influenced how she used her television show to provide practical steps on how to process trauma of both herself and her very loyal viewers. Some valid early criticisms of Winfrey focused on how often the show focused on superficial issues like weight without giving the same amount of depth and attention to more serious issues like racial and sexual discrimination. Ironically, this critique seemingly foreshadowed the lack of attention given these same issues in contemporary African American Christian fiction.

Seemingly in response to the secular and pseudospiritualized framework of Winfrey’s inner healing focus, evangelist Bishop T.D. Jakes took a much more explicitly Christian approach to addressing and resolving some of the same issues relating to African American women’s trauma. When Jakes ascended to international acclaim in the late 1990s, he was considered one of the top Christian evangelical speakers. His church in Dallas, Texas was one of the fastest growing churches in the country with nearly 30,000 members after only 3 years of existence. Yet for all of his accolades of progressing the idea of inner healing for women, he was actually continuing a long tradition in the African American church of the male dominated leadership exercising control over its female members. In his case, he was trying to free them emotionally so they could better take control over their lives as stated often in his *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* women’s empowerment conferences. When Jakes began *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (WTAL) as a Sunday school class, ideas of emotional and spiritual healing that formed the heart of the *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* curriculum propelled the formerly West Virginia based pastor to international prominence. What was key to his success was not his manipulation of women’s unmet emotional and spiritual needs but his capitalizing and commodifying the cultural moment of African American women seeking spiritual and emotional healing. However, despite all of

the good that WTAL and Jakes offered to contemporary African American Christian women, his message of self-empowerment, mixed with the self-centered nature of the prosperity gospel sent a confusing message to African American Christian women about her value as fully agential members of the African American Christian church. Even though his use of Luke 13:12 as its title, “Woman, Thou Art loosed” implies that someone else is controlling the freedom and agency of women as if someone else, and not the women, is doing the “loosing.” According to Tamika Carey, “Jakes relies on problematic constructions of Black womanhood, the rhetoric of transformation he employs to move Black women towards healing also carries forth some of the more problematic issues within the Black church” (91).

Tamura Lomax refers to complexity in her 2018 release *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* where she dissects what she describes as the problematic ideology of Jakes. Lomax contends that part of the success of Jakes was because “for many, Jakes was possibly that first man to ever acknowledge their trauma and moreover to prophesy their triumph” (131). For this reason, Jakes was able to capture and capitalize on the emotional needs of contemporary African American Christian women. Yet, his works also place an undue burden for transformation onto the contemporary African American woman. It’s as if African American Christian women were told to expect to be loosed by God (presumably) but at the same time were also being told to take control of their transformation. Lomax contends that in Jakes’ world “transformation replaces the desire for revenge with the responsibilities that come with healing and membership within a Christian community. Transformation can keep women from stepping out of line” (110). In response to this powerful and constricting message, contemporary African American Christian fiction authors wrote fiction that showed their characters grappling with achieving the apex of emotional and spiritual wholeness while fighting

through the challenges of seeking retribution. Undeniably, Jake's message sent mixed messages about submission and exerting agency.

Lomax argues that Jakes' ideology:

produces feminine ideology and technology that on the surface empowers women to heal from previous injuries caused by the memorialization of unresolved emotional, physical, sexual and psychological trauma, embrace self-sufficiency through creativity and industry; and prepare themselves for their knight in shining armor (131).

According to Lomax, despite his claims of promoting emotional freedom, in actuality Jakes was guilty of manipulating African American women in their historical place of refuge. Ironically, Daphne Wiggins notes in her book *Righteous Content* how the African American church served as a refuge for African American women. She writes, "in spite of its limitations and fallibility, the church was the place from which these women drew spiritual sustenance for handling personal and societal challenges such as marital strife, racism, infertility and health concerns."

(4). Jakes used this to his advantage when developing his international women's conference *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* in the mid-1990s the earliest conferences featuring large church style general sessions at large auditoriums like the Dallas Convention Center and Georgia Dome. Ministers like Jakes continued this tradition of the church being perceived as the place of peace and solace for African American women. Ironically, as healing conferences like *Woman Thou Art Loosed* became more popular, there was a corresponding rise in the popularity of men's empowerment conferences like *Man Power* and *Promisekeepers*. These conferences seemed historically connected to earlier ideas about conservatively redefining the role of and limiting the authority of African American women. Wiggins says that those earlier efforts, "reveal not only

the widespread perception that church has been a preserve of women but also the perception that it should not be. Thus, these initiatives become the rallying point for men to reclaim lost territory in the church and in their homes.” (31). What Jakes did was continue to push the belief that African American women should revisit prior messages from the church especially about their identity as African Americans and women. It may not have been intentional but Jakes profited from the confusion that arose from those mixed messages. Lomax further explains, that Jakes’s script “commoditizes black women’s problems and black women as problems, thus generating capital alongside crisis. (165)

Historically, one place where restrictions for African American women were most dominant and successful was the African American Christian church. Carey notes “For many African Americans, particularly those coming out of slavery in the South, building a church was the primary project on a list of structures and institutions they sought to create that would enable them to start creating their own social worlds” (84). Yet, women in male dominated traditional churches like Baptists were denied the chance to lead and were oppressed by gender specific and limiting church policies. Carey also notes the problematic example of “church leaders’ efforts to align themselves with presumed models of respectability at the expense of Black women members” (88).

Jakes’ focus on the inner healing of African American women seemed poised to address what Wiggins noted as “... the indoctrination of black women to self-sacrifice and emotional dependence at the expense of self-love and healthy self-esteem” (68). One result of years of this kind of teaching was a willingness among some segments of African American Christian women to avoid dealing with their emotional and spiritual needs as an indication of their strong commitment to the church and submission to male church leadership. This left many women



feeling invisible and dehumanized. Perhaps sensing this from his female congregants, Jakes sought to counter the detrimental effect of years of this constrictive teaching by promoting the idea that the ideal woman of the mid-1990s was no longer bound to those antiquated ideas. Carey argues that “Jakes’ efforts to make transformation seem urgent implies that Black women are the natural agents of such change because of their presumed selflessness as mothers and backbones of the community “(98). This idea of women sacrificing their needs at the behest of men continues to run as a thread in some contemporary African American Christian fiction literary works.

During the early years of *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* (1996-1999), Christian women became more self-reflective and introspective about issues of mental, emotional, spiritual, financial and physical importance in their lives as their economic status improved. The *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* movement shifted the focus for African American women from the exterior (outside of themselves...community, church, family) and to interior (inner healing and emotional transformation). In fact, this shift was right in line with what had been taking place within the larger evangelical movement and had started to slowly impact the African American Christian church. Jakes and other African American Christian leaders reinforced the individual as primary focus in their spiritual teaching with the title of the conference with the singular noun “woman.” Lomax argues that Jakes profited from the pain of women when she writes “‘Woman’ is a piece or merchandise, a material and symbolic concept – to be bought and sold- of what Jakes believes women are and why he intends for them not to be” (131). In addition, Carey argues how “Jakes’ books were a departure from community-based gospels that either ignored the realities of Black women, or exploited them for the purposes of admonishment and teaching” (81). They were not just powerfully inspirational but also timely.

The success of women focused conferences like Woman Thou Art Loosed indicated that women sought places for their emotional and spiritual needs to be met. The success of these conferences across denominational, racial and class lines also indicated that there was a deepening hunger among many Christian women for emotional healing and spiritual transformation but within a specifically feminine context. WTAL established itself as a community of support and fellowship for women and, in turn, provided women safe spaces for the exploration of their emotional vulnerabilities.

Maria Frederick notes in her book *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* that this new kind of spirituality was a change from that of the past for African Americans. The focus on the present better life of the individual rather than the future afterlife was because “this better life comes from the onset not only of public political confrontation but also personal affirmation and development over times.” (14) Here, Frederick’s point about the shift towards the individual hints at one of the biggest changes in the 1990s that impacted the African American church and the women of the church. Carey explains the shift as going from “Christocentric” preaching to the “me-centric” preaching. Most visible in sermons that focus on individuals getting their breakthroughs, entering their seasons, and walking into their destinies, me-centric preaching departs from social justice focused messages that all for holy living and from the community-driven sermons, which have historically characterized the messages within the Black church (Carey 83). One way this shift impacted African American Christian women and literature of African American Christian fiction was how were characters focused on getting their personal “breakthroughs” or moments of transformation.

Ironically, African American Christian fiction has become a part of this same conversation regarding spiritual selfishness. However, the literature’s questions are not limited to

sociopolitical issues but ones that are more focused on individual spiritual growth. Frederick refers to this focus on the individual when she writes that contemporary evangelical ideology “focuses primarily on how to progress within America’s social and economic system, not on how to oppose it” (141). Indirectly influenced by the “prosperity gospel,” adherents to its theology shied away from overt political issues with the exception of socially conservative issues like abortion. Consequently, for African American women in the church their looks inward also led to the production of literary materials that reflected this ideological shift. By the time the first African American Christian fiction literary works were published in the mid-1990s, this shift influenced how the characters were written and narrative structure of the novels. The focus became one of what the individual church member was experiencing, mirroring the changes in the larger African American Christian community.

Much like Oprah, Jakes repackaged women’s pain and trauma into a palatable and profitable Christian framework. Perhaps influenced by this important cultural moment of WTAL, African American Christian women began producing creative nonfiction and fiction stories to satisfy the growing need from women. Carey notes that there was a trend to “offer Christian consumers a form of therapeutic religion. (82). Eventually, this is what African American Christian fiction responded to. Lomax further notes that *Woman, Thou Art Loosed* was “...the first time for the production to be both black-led and woman-centered. Black women previously unrecognized in general and unrecognized as a significant audience worthy of acknowledgement, care and spiritual attention were ready for it” (140).

African American women readers wanted Christian resources but not necessarily the usual devotional and bible study workbooks. These new literary works were designed to meet this need and to provide encouragement from women who could sustain their paths of spiritual

growth. One specific need was to strengthen their Christian walk with the hope of improving their moral, financial and relationship statuses. Frederick contends that “this contemporary environment creates a multi-faceted worship experience that leads to constant reconstruction of their spiritual lives” (17). These books were a reflection of the process of restructuring lives. Like other genres of African American literature, these primarily female authors created literary works that reflected the Christian women ethos of commitment to religious institutions, commitment to family as well as secondary tenets of valuing sisterhood, public, oral confession of a private transformation, authentic vulnerability and community building/sustaining. Moreover, Beauty Bragg intimates in her book *Reading Contemporary African American Fiction* that “African American popular literature constitutes an important aspect of the black public sphere by addressing questions that are of wide - ranging significance to majorities of black people in a given historical moment.” The historical moment was situated between the shift away from mainline denominationalism and the unprecedented surge of the megachurch and mega ministry movement.

One hypothesis of how African American Christian fiction developed relates back to the increased need for education and ministry resources for women seeking to continue the spiritual transformations started during events like *Woman Thou Art Loosed*. In addition, Lomax contends that Jakes’ *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, offered “a historical marker for the cultural production of mass-mediated religio-cultural texts centering not only Black Christian women but also the discourse on black womanhood” (Lomax 204). Contemporary African American Christian fiction serves as one of the significant cultural productions.

## *Passing by Samaria* and Policing of Behavior

One novel that encapsulates the policing of behavior and emotional trauma of African American Christian women is *Passing by Samaria* by Sharon Ewell Foster. Considered the first mainstream African American fiction novel, Foster's historical novel depicts a number of things but most importantly the various ways that African American women respond to the policing of their responses to trauma. Through the conflicts that her protagonist experiences, Foster illustrates a redefinition and reimagining of who black women were and who they wanted to be. Her novel responded to these shifts of the previous 25 years of perceptions regarding pain, agency and strength of African American Christian women by showing a protagonist who struggles with placing her emotions into a traditional and socially oppressive framework. *Passing by Samaria* illustrates this with her depiction of a young woman who experiences trauma as the result of the emotional and physical control by men in her life who says that they love Her. More specifically, this novel reflects the doing and undoing of perceptions of African American women and the policing of behavior in regards to the control of the African American woman especially in public spaces.

Published in 2000, the novel tells the story of Alena, a young woman who was raised in Ellisville, Mississippi in the late 1910s who discovers the lynched and disfigured remains of J.C., one of her closest childhood friends. Shocked and traumatized by the experience, Alena is passionate about seeking justice for her friend's brutal death. However, considering the racism of the time and the dangers for African Americans who were outspoken, Alena's parents opt to send her to Chicago to stay with her Aunt Patrice as a way of protecting her. Alena is not happy with being forced to leave, especially when she feels that this is the time that she needs them the most.

Yet, she reluctantly complies with her parents' wishes. Her being forcibly relocated by her well-meaning parents is just one example of the policing of behavior found in the novel.

In *Passing by Samaria*, Alena's ability to have agency and control herself in private as well as public space is hindered by her parents. Soon after J.C.'s body is discovered, her parents have a conversation with her where they express their concerns about her safety. Her father initiates the talk about her leaving and it is clear that the mother supports his decision when she adds, "We know the right thing to do. You just can't tell this here, and your nature is not gone allow you to be quiet" (36). Feeling betrayed by both parents, she responds with a silent protest of what she perceives to be their oppression. Later in this scene Alena is still processing her emotions and experiences a wide range of negative emotions, "Outrage, anger, betrayal filled her heart and sat on the tip of her tongue, but they stayed there. In Alena's world, one did not talk back to parents with anger or disrespect. Her lungs heaved and her body shook with the effort it took to control her tongue" (36). These lines indicate that Alena's emotions seemed to have great influence over her. Once, again the use of the word control implies outside forces controlling her behavior and her lacking the freedom to assert agency. Perhaps unwittingly, Ewell Foster reinforces a belief that African American women are destined to be controlled by not only whites but also by blacks. In her book, *Shadow Bodies: Black Women, Ideology, Representation, and Politics*, Julia S. Jordan-Zachery refers to this when she writes, "Black women's positionality, via the body, is not only scripted relative to Whites, but also relative to Black men and other Black women. Black female identity is also a result of the construction of Black patriarchal norms and practices. (30). Alena's identity as a daughter is contingent on her being obedient to her parents even if it means that it is counter to her personal feelings and desire to exercise agency.

Ewell Foster writes “So, this was the solution. Ship her off to Chicago so everyone else could live safe and undisturbed. That was the only solution: ruin her life, make her pay for the sins of others. She would be the scapegoat. Hypocrites. Years of nothing but lies.” (37).

These lines also imply that she feels frustrated like she has no agency or control over her physical body. Ewell Foster also describes Alena’s frustration at feeling like she has lost control over her life:

No control over her circumstances, wronged and betrayed, she would use what small weapons were available to her. Her own parents had sent her, delivered her from Ellisville, Mississippi, to a train in Jackson that would take her to Chicago. Instead, she carefully painted her face with rejection, with indifference, and with the loss of her respect for them. (47)

The use of the word control in this passage implies a preoccupation with the idea of policing the young woman’s behavior.

Once she arrives in Chicago, Alena becomes active in her aunt’s soup kitchen ministry in one of the African American neighborhoods. Because of the unresolved feelings regarding her friend’s murder and her belief that the white sheriff of the town was responsible, Alena is openly hostile to the white volunteers. She is also resistant to the friendly overtures of James, another soup kitchen volunteer and a veteran of WWI who also runs a newspaper focused on exposing racial injustices in Chicago.

In the end, Alena and James fall in love. She returns to Ellisville and becomes the object of white Sheriff Bates’ ire as she is now labeled a northern agitator. Because of this label, she is targeted for kidnapping and sexual assault by Bates and other white men in the town.

However, Bates’ dies as a result of a freak accident when he attempts to sneak up on Alena late

one night. The novel ends with the traditional happy ending with Alena and James getting married.

The novel's depiction of Alena's emotional state and her spiritual growth hinges on her allowing herself to be controlled by others. Through the novel she is shown as having her behavior controlled by others. As expected of an independent woman, her response to the policing of her behavior is anger and she struggles with her agency being constrained. Her physical and emotional movements are restricted from the time she sees her friend's lynched body, to her parents sending her away to Chicago to her work in the soup kitchen close to the white people that she did not trust. Even though she submits to the treatment, she is initially resistant. In one fascinating passage, Ewell Foster describes a disconnection that occurs when Alena initially sees the body of J.C. hanging from a tree. "Alena heard a voice screaming. Maybe they know, she thought. Maybe the others see it, too. She wanted to add her own voice to the voice that screamed. The hand that grasped her collar moved to her mouth, and Alena realized the horrified voice was her own" (23). This passage shows that even in her pain and trauma, she is not in control of her actions. Also, Ewell Foster repeats the word "control" throughout specific passages regarding Alena that reinforce her struggle with having control or agency over her life. For example, in a scene early in the novel where Alena is talking to her father about J.C.'s death, her father is insistent that being quiet is the best course of action. "But Daddy, what about the truth?" The words seemed to pop from her mouth before she could control them" (30). In this case, the use of the word control implies that there is an expectation that her behavior will be restricted by someone else's expectations and not her own.

What Ewell Foster did in her historical fiction literary work is create a female protagonist who was an illustration of presumptions about women in the early 1920s while at the same time,



Alena also represented what perceptions were for the behavior of women in the late 1990s. Alena was, as Trudier Harris Lopez argues, that “African American female character(s) as constructed by African American writers of the twentieth century have been shaped in reaction to the larger society’s conceptions of what black women were or should be” (19). Applying Harris-Lopez’s theory to Foster’s novel shows that those perceptions include transforming from an impulsive and independent single woman to that of a more predictable submissive married woman. Ewell Foster describes the scene where it is clear that Alena and James have fallen in love. “There was Alena. The two stared at each other. The look Alena gave James seemed different, transformed. Her eyes seemed softer. Submitted eyes.” (220). Here, even they are not yet married, Alena seems to willingly acclimate to the traditional space as a potential wife that is submissive to her husband. This passage also implies that the ideal woman is one who submits to her husband, a willful choice in the traditional Christian sense that gives the husband a certain amount of control over the actions and behaviors of the traditional role of the compliant wife.

Ewell Foster’s historical novel is part of the historical tradition that shows the tensions that arise in the policing of behavior of African American Christian women. Whether in private or public spaces, as depicted in fictional television shows or reality-based talk shows, the desire to control African American women is an act of oppression with deep roots. Florida Evans was the fictional response to the trauma shown in African American women’s literature produced in the 1970s. Clair Huxtable was a response to the trauma of poverty that permeated African American communities in the 1970s. As an upper middle-class college educated African American woman, Claire exemplified the idealized African American women’s experience. Oprah Winfrey, on the other hand, was the real -life manifestation of the emotional healing from trauma depicted in those earlier fictionalized accounts. She validated the experiences of African

American female viewers much like writers like Angelou had validated hers through literature. It was not at all surprising that she established a book club as part of the healing work of her television talk show. Moreover, by commercializing the work of healing for African American women, she actually opened the door for people like Bishop T.D. Jakes who both commodified and Christianized the African American woman's experience. Jakes monetized trauma. A few of the earliest contemporary African American Christian fiction works, like *Passing by Samaria*, attempted to deconstruct acts of oppression against African American women. However, in the end, they reinforced heteronormative values that ultimately subverted the novel's anticipated goals of providing inspiration and empowerment to its primarily female readership.

A thoughtful interrogation of artifacts produced from the African American Christian experience confirms how trauma and oppression are two of the biggest influences on perceptions of African American women. Tamura Lomax writes:

Black women and girls navigate traumatic and oppressive constructs. However, they also move about beyond them. But this movement cannot be categorically defined by resistance and survival. What is needed is more complex readings of black women's and girls' encounters and how they make sense of them as well as how those moment shape how they may make sense of or read cultural texts. (79-80)

Here, Lomax incisively describes how trauma is often just the beginning of a journey of spiritual, emotional and physical maturity for African American women. Contemporary African American Christian fiction centers them in a decidedly African American and Christian framework.

*Passing by Samaria* by Sharon Ewell Foster uses the journey of her protagonist to illustrate how African American women make sense of trauma and the impact it has on their identities as African Americans and Christian women. In doing so, Ewell Fosters exemplifies how authors of

contemporary African American Christian fiction provide rarely seen portrayals of African American Christian women struggling to make meaning of their lives.

## Chapter 3

### Let the Readers Say Amen

“The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power.” -Toni Morrison

“We write for the same reason that we walk, talk, climb mountains or swim the oceans – because we can. We have some impulse within us that makes us want to explain ourselves to other human beings.” – Maya Angelou

#### Introduction

As mentioned in the introduction of this project, the 2019 Christian Book Lover’s Retreat helped me to formulate some of my research concepts. One key moment of the conference was the session “Story Time: You Finish the Story. “featuring best-selling authors Vanessa Riley, Jacquelin Thomas, Vanessa Miller and Pat Simmons. The one-hour session created the perfect place for attendees to connect with some of their favorite contemporary African American Contemporary Christian fiction authors. At this session, attendees were divided into small groups of five and given portions of the individual authors’ previously published books.

Working alongside specific authors, the small groups were tasked with rewriting the endings of the author’s books. What made this workshop session so fascinating is that the authors were asked to just listen and not provide feedback until after the groups finalized their new alternative fan fiction endings. Moreover, what seemed to energize both authors and readers in this session was the fact that the authors listened intently as readers explained their narrative choices. In turn, the authors then shared background information on what inspired their narrative decisions and

offered feedback on the new endings. More importantly, on a larger level, this session emphasized how the characters, conflicts and themes featured in the novels mirrored some of the attendees' personal experiences which affirmed them as complex multidimensional women fully capable of exercising agency.

#### Statement of Chapter Research Question

The main research question that this chapter explores is whether contemporary African American Christian fiction achieves literary merit and establishes cultural authority. My argument is that contemporary African American Christian fiction's earliest novels do have literary merit, in part, because they have developed a nuanced template with traditional fictional elements that appeal to their niche readers. More importantly, these novels promoted engaging themes that were relatable to its primarily female readers. However, I believe that another part of the long term and perhaps more significant literary impact of these novels is the promotion of a problematic view of African American Christian women through the lens of Christian heteropatriarchy. I argue that in doing so, these groundbreaking novels demonstrate cultural authority while they showcase tensions that arise when heteropatriarchy and heterosexual marriage is lauded as part of the cultural aesthetics of contemporary African American Christian culture. A deeper analysis of the earliest contemporary African American Christian novel illuminate how African American Christian women respond to this particular aspect of Christian heteropatriarchy. As a reminder, for the purposes of this study, I define Christian heteropatriarchy as an ideology that uses biblical justification to promote the domination of women by men as a way to maintain a sociopolitical or socioeconomic system that often enforces gender inequality.

Unlike previous stereotypical and cartoonish pop culture depictions of African American Christian women, these new iterations within contemporary African American Christian fiction were stylish as well as biblically astute without being heavy handed in their approach to Christianity. Surprisingly, though, these novels reflected what some would consider a troubling view of Christian heteropatriarchy. Some might find it peculiar that literature written primarily by women for a primarily female reading audience would promote an ideology that encouraged the male domination of women. However, considering the historical impact of heteropatriarchy on the African American Christian church, I would be surprised if there weren't traces of heteropatriarchy reflected in the novels. An added layer of complexity is the application of biblical scripture to justify the novels' tacit approval of Christian heteropatriarchy. Furthermore, it is understandable that one of the traditions valued as part of the cultural aesthetics of African American Christianity is heterosexual marriage.

In examining these issues, I focus on the novel *Temptation* by Victoria Christopher Murray which is widely believed to be African American Christian fiction's first widely published book. In addition, I look at how Vanessa Miller's *Rain Storm*, which followed 10 years later but clearly influenced by Murray, explored some of those same tensions regarding marriage for contemporary African American Christian women. Using this approach shows how these novels were a part of the foundation that established the genre as both literarily and culturally relevant. As such, this chapter looks at how Christian heteropatriarchy influences how African American Christian women, in particular, situate themselves within broader cultural discussions of race, gender and equality. An examination of the literary elements and cultural aesthetics of these novels provide insights into early 21<sup>st</sup> century African American Christian women, what this culture considers literary and how these works attain cultural authority.

My preliminary research indicates that contemporary African American Christian fiction created by primarily female writers with predominantly female protagonists complicated issues of gender equality as they promoted and at other times challenged Christian heteropatriarchy. The controversy surrounding patriarchy and the African American Christian church is not new. One recent source that has addressed it specifically is Professor Lawrence Ware who critiqued how patriarchy impacts the African American church in his 2018 *New York Times* opinion piece “It's on Men to End Sexism in the Black Church.” In this piece, Ware contends that “the black church would not exist without black women. However, for far too long, black men have forced them to be second-class citizens.” Here, Ware raises a sociopolitical issue that has plagued the African American Christian church since it was established: How do African American women flourish in an institution that endorses restrictive Eurocentric views of male dominance of women while at the same time promotes itself as a place that provides spiritual and emotional freedom for African American people? It seems as though the predominately female authors of African American fiction attempt to address this question in their novels. However, in the end, Christian heteropatriarchy, as it is depicted in African American Christian fiction, reinforces a problematic view of male domination of women even though they are written by mostly African American women. In fact, the earliest African American Christian fiction novels promote increasingly conservative evangelical values that emphasize the dominance of men while encouraging women to willingly give up their agency.

Often, this loss of agency is cloaked in the Christian language of submission to God that also means an unquestioned submission to the man in their romantic or spiritual lives. African American Christian women reading these books would find these themes familiar from sermons as well as Christian teachings in their churches. However, the question remains how

dissonant it is for professional women who make vital decisions in the workplace and yet be encouraged to assume a much more submissive role in their personal relationships?

Consequently, a close analysis of the earliest African American Christian fiction shows women characters in a bind as they navigate tensions between gender equality issues and larger expectations rooted in Christian heteropatriarchy.

### Theoretical Framework

The primary Gender Studies theorists who inform my analysis in this chapter are Beauty Bragg and Aneeka Ayana Henderson. Bragg argues for the acknowledgment of literary merit of contemporary African American popular fiction in her book *Reading Contemporary African American Literature* whereas Henderson discusses contemporary African American marriage as depicted in popular films and fiction in her book *Veil and Vow: Marriage Matters in Contemporary African American Culture*. Using Bragg's perspective as a theoretical starting point, in this chapter I analyze how African American Christian fiction should be considered compelling works with both literary and cultural value. Her ideas about the value of popular fiction extending beyond the more traditional literary aesthetics form the basis of my argument regarding the literary merit of African American Christian fiction. Bragg rightly contends that popular African American literature "has merit for not for its formalist signification but because of it seeking authority from outside the literary canon." I agree with her argument that the question of merit can't simply be answered using prior standards as these works. Because African American Christian fiction is categorized as popular fiction, the literature employs various literary devices that might not be recognized or even accepted by the traditional Eurocentric American literary cannon. A few of these devices include language, setting and



theme. For example, in the 2003 novel *Second Sunday* by Michelle Andrea Bowen, there is the theme of interracial passing that pops up near the end of the novel. Osceola Lyles, a minor character, is exposed for passing for white for decades. In response to this revelation, another Black character exclaims “We never even knew where to find you until we started seeing you on TV, up at that American Worship Center – and passing for white” (304). What follows is a pointed exchange between Osceola’s unsuspecting white pastor husband who repudiates her publicly despite her attempts to explain away her deception (304). Some may dismiss the importance of this issue in the Eurocentric canon despite it being a significant theme discussed frequently in the African American Literary canon going all the way back to the novel *Passing* by Nella Larsen. Crossing the color line and disappearing into another racial community could be seen as a serious betrayal of loyalty within the African American community.

In addition, the books make references to speaking in tongues, praying in the spirit, dancing in the spirit as part of the normal religious experience and not gimmicks used for comical effect. The use of this language to highlight these church rituals amplifies what distinguished the African American church from mainline white Protestant congregations. These practices were ways that the African American Christian church established a separate religious identity from their white Christian counterparts. This language includes phrases like “attack of the enemy” (*Temptation*), “intercessory prayer (*Sunday Brunch*), and “First Lady” (*Second Sunday*). Furthermore, the geographic setting of the novels in urban areas emphasizes that the city is a significant part of the life of the contemporary African American Christian. In the novels *Passing by Samaria*, *Church Folk* and *Temptation*, the characters make references to leaving the South and moving to urban areas like Chicago, St. Louis and Los Angeles. These three cities are

significant as destination for those who were a part of the Great Migration of African Americans from the Deep South in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

More particularly, in looking at how the cultural aesthetics of contemporary African American Christian woman is reflected through depictions of marriage of the literature, I also apply Aneka Ayanna Henderson's perspective on what she calls the "Black Bridal Ethos," a preoccupation with marriage by African American women. Henderson delves deep into the importance of marriage in contemporary African American culture in her book *Veil and Vow: Marriage Matters in Contemporary African American Culture*. In this book, Henderson notes how late 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural productions like film, movies and films reflect specific attitudes within the African American community about the significance of heteronormativity or the normalizing of heterosexual relationships. Using popular fiction novelist Terri McMillian's *Waiting to Exhale* and *Disappearing Acts* as examples of how these attitudes are reflected in literature, Henderson asserts that despite the sociopolitical and historical effects of family disruptions/separations that occurred during slavery, African Americans have maintained an affinity for heteronormative marriage. In fact, Henderson states "idealized Black patriarchal family figures prominently in conversations about ways to cure the many challenges in the African American community (7). Henderson's observation indicates that it is this aspirational ideal about marriage that has the potential to function negatively in the lives of African Americans, especially women. The focus on heteropatriarchal views of marriage figures so prominently in the ethos of African American Christianity and ostensibly one of its cultural productions, contemporary African American Christian fiction.

### *Temptation and Rain Storm: African American Christian Fiction Bookends*

The two novels that best exemplify Christian heteropatriarchy within African American Christian fiction that I use for my analysis are Victoria Christopher Murray's groundbreaking *Temptation* published in 1997 as well as *Rain Storm* by Vanessa Miller published in 2007. Though published 10 years apart, they serve as intriguing bookends for the first 10 years of publication of contemporary African American Christian fiction. Murray's novel was the first to be labeled African American Christian fiction and provides the template that subsequent authors followed. Miller's novel follows the template that Murray initiated and further extends it by including more supernatural elements as well as more Christian community specific charismatic references.

Much like African American romance fiction of the 1990's, Murray's *Temptation* presents an engaging story of a complex but relatable couple, in this case, married couple Kyla and Jefferson Blake from Los Angeles, California. They experience the challenges of rebuilding their marriage after the husband has a one-night stand with his wife's best friend. Murray's use of explicit Christian practices like intercessory prayer, bible study, and Christian counseling distinguishes it from other romantic novels produced at the time. There is also the inclusion of scripture by direct and indirect invocation within the text. Characters experience moving spiritual moments which then lead them to ask for forgiveness from others, offer forgiveness to others and restore their relationships. Murray also uses Christian concepts like redemption, conviction (guilt) and restoration as part of the narrative arc of one of the novel's characters. Setting a literary precedent, this novel integrates Christianity into all aspect of the lives of the characters. It also presupposes its readers have a basic knowledge of biblical concepts and familiarity with Christian ideology.

Released ten years after *Temptation*, Miller's novel *Rain Storm* employs many of these same fictional and spiritual elements in her novel. However, her novel differs from Murray's in that she infuses more Christian charismatic spiritual concepts like supernatural angelic warfare and angelic visitations in her novel. In Miller's case, using these elements indicates a possible shift in contemporary African American Christian fiction towards showing a more diverse religious experience. Miller's novel is also set in an urban city, and features a protagonist who has experienced childhood physical abuse as well as sexual trauma. The story centers around the traumas that protagonist Cynda Stephens experiences as a child as well as an adulthood filled with sex work and drug abuse. Neglected by her mother and sexually exploited as a child, she continues the destructive cycle as an adult when she becomes a mother. What changes her life is the experience that she has with Keith Williams, a Godly man who believes that God has told him to marry her. Concerned about the decision since Cynda is not open to the suggestion nor is he comfortable with the idea of marrying a prostitute, tension builds in the story as both struggle with the idea of marrying each other. However, once they marry, they both mature spiritually and ultimately live happily ever after.

Both novels reinforce Christian heteropatriarchy on various levels. Murray's male characters are groomed by more spiritually mature women, to be leaders in the relationships. Once the men mature, the women shift, out of Godly wisdom, and allow the man to be the "God ordained" leader in the relationship. This characterization indirectly encourages women to be patient and work with a man even if he is not spiritually mature so that he will dominate her and develop into the man God desires for her. By contrast, in Miller's novel *Rain Storm*, the man is spiritually mature and it is the woman who has to develop spiritually. Miller's male protagonist Keith is decidedly more assertive in his approach to his place as the "leader" of the relationship.

Moreover, both novels indicate how the ethos of African American Christian women may have shifted slightly in the first ten years of the popular fiction novels being published. In Murray's novel, the female characters both struggle with how marriage changes their identities as women. Murray's Kyla appears unsatisfied in her role as a stay at home wife and mother after she has experienced fulfillment previously in her job outside the home. In the case of Miller's Cynda, she is initially hostile to the notion of being married and sees it as a transactional relationship very much like her experiences as a prostitute. She is willing to get married if it will keep her from going to jail. Cynda eventually acquiesces to the role of stay at home wife as Keith proves his ability to take care of her by giving her a wedding ring from Tiffany's and buying her a car. Seemingly, Cynda agrees with being married because of the financial stability it promises.

#### African American Christian Fiction and the Importance of Popular Fiction

Analyzing both novels using Bragg and Henderson's research provides valuable theoretical context as well as situates contemporary African American Christian Fiction as part of the broader scholarly conversation regarding the importance of African American popular fiction. Bragg and Henderson are part of a new generation of African American women literary scholars writing about the impact of African American women and popular fiction. Bragg and Henderson continue the work of well-known African American women literary scholars who wrote about the unique relationship African American writers have with their readers. Mary Helen Washington noted in her article, "Challenging Traditions" how African American writers are able to connect with their audiences uniquely because they "...try to name the nameless, to see the faces of those made faceless. It is the only way we shall ever to be able to hear our own

voices, make our own presence felt, name ourselves and see our own true, beautiful faces” (199-200). For contemporary African American Christian fiction authors, they write stories featuring new complex characters whose perspectives have rarely been written about and whose stories affirm African American Christian women. Moreover, Washington asserted how literature by African American women, “takes the trouble to record the thoughts, words, feelings and deeds of black women, experiences that make the realities of being black in America look very different from what men have written” (35). Much like Washington points out about other African American fiction writers, African American Christian fiction writers also are in a key position to share an explicitly Christian perspective as they write about familiar issues like marital relationships as well as mental and physical health.

Additionally, Jacqueline Bobo emphasized the significance of this type of cultural literary production when she wrote in her seminal text *Black Women as Cultural Reader* that “Black female creative artists bring a unique understanding of black women’s lives and culture, seeking to eradicate the harmful and pervasive images haunting their history” (5). For African American Christian fiction authors, this is especially relevant as they take on the additional duty of complicating perceptions about Christianity along with promoting a more multifaceted view of Black womanhood. Taking Bobo’s approach of analyzing the works as exemplary cultural productions extends the exploration of the merits of contemporary African American Christian fiction.

Because of the evangelistic nature of these works, the focus is not only to show the multiple layers of the lives of women but also the multiple layers of the contemporary Christian experience. Moreover, considering how historically literary works by African American women have been excluded from discussions of the literary canon, both Eurocentric and African

American, theorists like Bragg offer a necessary and accessible approach regarding cultural production that earlier theorists like Bobo advocated.

Furthermore, Bobo's groundbreaking work details the responsibility that African American women writers inherit as documenters of the African American female experience. In doing so, contemporary African American Christian fiction authors illustrate familiar elements of African American Christian women's ethos which are often steeped in personal responsibility, sustained Christian maturity, community building and heteronormative relationships. As products of the culture, these novels illustrate how these values create a historically affirming community. Another key point from Bobo is what she called "the instant intimacy" that permeates the writing of African American women (59). This intimacy within these works is perhaps the most important work of African American Christian fiction as it is a safe place where African American women can explore as well as resolve personal, spiritual, familial and professional tensions and histories. Bobo further explains that it is where African American women writers intersect within an interpretive framework as cultural producers, critics and audience members (59). For African American Christian fiction writers, this space is especially important as so much of what the African American Christian woman experiences in the traditional and evangelical church even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century can be restrictive to women. It is within the pages of their novels that contemporary African American Christian authors can express how these restrictions on agency impact their identities as women and as Christians. For example, in Victoria Christopher Murray's *Temptation*, the most challenging internal conflict for the protagonist Kyla is the pursuing her desire to return to work outside of the home knowing that this would cause a conflict with her husband. In a conversation with her husband, she argues, "This is something I have to do for me." (81). These words begin the

ferocious fight between she and her husband where he manipulates her into believing that her desire to return to work is about him. She insists that it is about her and her needs. In other words, her agency.

Taking Bobo's points about the value of the cultural production of African American writers one step further, Bragg asserts provocatively that popular fiction like African American Christian fiction cannot be adequately valued simply for its literary merits because the level of writing often is not comparable to other "highbrow" literary works. However, where these works excel is their use of compelling themes to highlight contemporary cultural issues like marriage facing African American Christian women. Bragg says that the contributions of these literary works is to provide vital understanding of the cultures that they represent and as a result their value increases. She contends that these works are "emotionally compelling and present unique opportunities to develop a richer understanding of a given period or theme in the literature." For African American Christian fiction, the cultural value highlights how shifts towards a more conservative theology as well as perspectives regarding the roles of women in marriage and the Christian church impacted African American women in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rather than blindly accepting these changes, the women in contemporary African American Christian fiction novels are seen vigorously questioning and, in a few cases, rebelling against the new conservative orthodoxy even if they ultimately acquiesce to Christian heteropatriarchy. One instance of this is found in Murray's *Temptation* as the external conflict of the wife and husband fighting over her desire to return to work. Another example would be Alena remaining vehemently opposed to being sent to Chicago but nonetheless obeying her parent's wishes in Ewell Foster's *Passing by Samaria*. In both instances, the female characters acknowledge the



importance of honoring their patriarch's (father or husband) desires but they also acknowledge how doing so limits their own agency.

Bobo's writings complement the notion of the Black woman as cultural reader to inform my discussion of the cultural politics at work in African American Christian Fiction. Bobo argues that "the stories told in black women's novels were a product of a conscious effort to portray multidimensional characters who attempted to attain some measure of control over their lives" (68). What Bobo emphasizes is that their deliberate acts are part of the writing process for African American women authors. As applied to contemporary African American Christian fiction, there is a concerted effort on the part of the authors to depict African American women in more complex ways beyond the loyal praying church mother, the judgmental reformed jezebel and hypocritical super saintly single woman (hiding her sexual promiscuity).

By applying both Bragg's and Henderson's theories about the importance of popular fiction, a new way of looking at how these works validate the African American Christian woman's identity emerges. What complicates this is the use of confusing messages about women being independent and strong found in African American Christian fiction. When they try to assert themselves, the female protagonist is often reminded about the importance of men being ultimately the ones that decide what is best for the relationship. For example, in the case of Cynda in Miller's *Rain Storm*, the decision to marry is made without her consent with Keith praying to God but not praying with Cynda about it. By presenting it this way, it appears as though the loss of agency, i.e. choice for the African American Christian woman, is normal and should be expected once they get into serious romantic relationships. This familiar experience of the threat of the loss of agency would be one that the female audience would easily identify with. Part of their appeal to readers is what Braggs describes as "realistic depictions of familiar

experiences which invite identification on the part of the audience” (166). Even if the experience is not a good one, the audience can still identify with it.

The question of whether contemporary African American Christian fiction possess literary merit can perhaps best be answered by looking at the previous arguments about the literary merits of popular fiction. Bragg expands the work of Professor Herman Beavers who was one of the first literary scholars to argue that popular fiction by African American women authors was worthy of academic study despite it not following traditional literary patterns. Beavers asserted that African American popular fiction authors, in particular, are deserving of serious academic study because of “their depiction of African American women’s experiences in the post-civil rights era, as a figuration of Black postmodernity” (272). African American Christian fiction, like other works of popular fiction, is one of the few public spaces that allow the diverse experiences of African American women to be depicted that challenges, albeit subtly at times, accepted views of gender roles. By connecting these works to broader sociopolitical issues, Beavers’ argument provides a plausible pathway for the interpretation of these works as they seeming counter increasingly troubling images of African American women in popular culture. More significantly, these works provide a deeper dive into how Christianity impacts the lives of contemporary African American women outside of the four walls of the church.

Another argument in support of the scholarly study of African American Christian fiction is the unique connection these works create with their readers. In fact, closely exploring the themes featured in the works provides additional insights into why readers are interested in reading African American Christian fiction texts. Bragg contends “popular writers are alternatively authorized through their relationships with audiences and their engagement of black identity politics through thematic rather than formal approaches” (179). Rather than being

explicitly political and interested in racial and social justice concerns, the earliest and most popular African American Christian fiction novels focused on the Christian identity of their characters within the context of marriage or romantic relationships. Early on, contemporary African American Christian fiction authors followed a clear template focused on Christian maturity and developing female protagonists who were relatable in their spiritual journeys as well as professional and personal careers.

One of the very first African American Christian fiction works to receive national acclaim was *Temptation* by Victoria Christopher Murray. Published in 1997, the novel explores the relationship of a seemingly happily married couple. The wife, Kyla Blake, is a college-educated former professional woman and current stay at home mother enjoying the financial benefits of being married to a successful medical doctor. As described by Murray, the couple appear to embody the financial, spiritual, and professional rewards that come from living a respectful life of integrity. However, the husband Jefferson succumbs in a moment of weakness to the sexual temptations of his wife's best friend. This one-night transgression nearly destroys the marriage. Ultimately, the breach of trust is healed as the couple endures a brief separation only to reconcile and rebuild their relationship by gaining strength in their relationship with God.

In reinforcing a theme of real-world Christianity, Murray uses language that refers to explicitly Christian rituals and practices like church attendance and prayer. For instance, when Kyla discovers her husband's affair, she confides in her best friend Alexis. Her friend allows her to vent but eventually redirects her focus to prayer by saying, "Stop. What with you just said, I know what's missing. Girl, we need to pray." Kyla resists and says, "Alexis...I don't want to right now." Alexis insists and tells Kyla "And that's just why we have to. This is clearly spiritual warfare...." (151). This very brief scene illustrates the practical nature of Christianity that the

novel promotes. Rather than show Kyla immediately seeking God and praying about her husband's affair, Murray allows the readers to empathize with the hesitancy and despair that influence Kyla's thoughts and behavior. Presumably, even those who may appear to have the strongest Christian faith still struggle in doing what they know is the "Christian" thing when faced with relationship problems like betrayal. Readers who more than likely faced similar situations in their personal lives would identify with her mixed emotions.

One fictional element that contemporary African American Christian fiction amplifies is the familiar trope of captivity and return. *Temptation's* Kyla feels as if she is being held captive in her marriage just as *Rain Storm's* Cynda does in what she initially feels is a forced marriage to Keith. As with the traditional structure of captivity narratives, there is a captivity that then leads to suffering as well as emotions like doubt, fear, shame, guilt, confusion and anger for the protagonist. Next, there is an escape or spiritual deliverance that leads to spiritual restoration and ultimately freedom. Contemporary African American Christian fiction depicts these characters exercising agency as they try to escape from their spiritual, physical or emotional captivity. Ultimately, the escape serves as a way for the character to find much needed spiritual enlightenment as they return to a place of insight

For example, in *Temptation*, two female characters "escape" to their respective parent's homes when in the midst of the most intense parts of their personal and spiritual crises. Kyla ponders the idea of escape after she comes home early from a trip hoping to surprise her husband. Instead, she is devastated when she walks in the bedroom and sees her best friend naked in her bed and the sounds of her husband showering. Her shock leads her to rush from the house but she is unsure of where to go. At this point, she does not want to drive to her parents'

house even though it is less than two hours away. She drives aimlessly for a while eventually ending up at her friend Alexis' home.

Kyla's escape is also punctuated by her impulsive emotional responses. Murray writes, "For the last hour, she'd been weaving through the city without a destination...She wasn't sure if she was going north or south. It really didn't matter" (108). It's clear that the escape is not simply impulsive but also an indication of the confusion in her state of mind. As she continues to drive, she still ponders where she is going. "Go somewhere, but where? To her parents? No, she wasn't ready to tell them yet? (109) ...As the sobs crawled up inside, she released them freely as her life crumbled to small pieces inside her heart. (110). The escape allowed her to release her pent-up emotions and brought her to a place of vulnerability and truth. In fact, this foreshadows Kyla's actual escape to her parent's house later in the novel where she has her emotional and spiritual epiphany.

Even though she has physically left her house and the pain of the affair, Kyla still desires escape saying "I wish I could just disappear for a little while and come back when all this is over." (176). This could be seen as her needing time for self-care to process everything. However, her friend Alexis reminds her that is not possible and that she must go through the process of forgiveness with Jefferson in order to heal her marriage. Alexis encourages her to "return" to her marriage in order to heal it aligns with the idea of the return, as well as Christian concepts of repentance, resurrection that are linked by the idea of going back in order to move forward.

Kyla's second escape takes place later in the novel as she is still struggling with reconciling her marriage and includes a drive to her parent's house in Santa Barbara. Yet, when she arrives to her parent's house, her mother and father put her in the problematic strength box.

Her father declares when she arrives emotionally drained from the long drive that “You are a strong, beautiful woman. But the most important thing is that you are a child of God and this ain’t nothing but the devil” (266). Her mother repeats similar phrasing later in the chapter as she reflects on her sleeping daughter,” She knew her daughter would make it as long as she stood strong in the Lord” (267). Both of these well-intended statements provide much needed encouragement to the character but also signals to the readers that part of the purpose of this escape is for Kyla to somehow return to her place of spiritual and emotional strength. Maybe at this point, it would have been better to state that it was okay for her to be weak at that moment of obvious emotional devastation.

Later on, Jasmine, the best friend who caused Kyla so much pain by having the affair with her husband, experiences a similar journey of escape and return. She visits her family in Florida hoping to escape the shame of the failed affair with Kyla’s husband. Jasmine is open about her disdain for how she terms her “country family” is evident in her conversation with her sister. “Jasmine looked her sister up and down. Polyester flowered dresses, church programs that lasted all day, lectures about family – Jasmine sighed. She needed to get on a plane bound for LA.” (311). Over a few short days, however, Jasmine admits that escaping to her father’s hometown was not such a bad idea. “She felt like she was suffocating in the small rooms, overflowing with family. Relief flooded her now as she finally had some peace.” (319). This foreshadows the emotional and spiritual peace that comes to her later in the novel. Ironically, the peace comes as a result of her exercising agency in making the decision to return home, the place that she thought she despised.

Jasmine is described as liking the town for “the feeling of community that she never felt in Los Angeles.... Maybe I should move here?” Then she quickly dismisses the idea “She did

feel like she was home” (322). As shown here, she recognizes that there is a connection between exercising agency, escape and return, family connections and healing. It also appears that exercising agency which lead to the escape and return of both Kyla and Jasmine, is a vital part of their growth as characters. Escape and return figures prominently in later contemporary African American Christian fiction releases as well.

It could be argued that heteropatriarchy is part of the reason unrealistic expectations have burdened African American women with being near perfect exemplars of respectability as part of their gender roles within the African American Christian church community. Yet part of the contemporary African American Christian cultural aesthetic is that marriage should be an aspirational goal for “respectable” African American women. This was shown in the depictions of marriage in the earliest African American Christian novels. Closely connected to Christian heteropatriarchy is respectability which is rooted in the Black women’s club movement. According to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, this idea of respect has its historical roots in the Black women’s movement in the early 1900s. This movement sought to counter negative images of African American women being sexually promiscuous and not worthy of the respect given to white women. Higginbotham notes in her book *Righteous Discontent* how “biblical teachings, the philosophy of racial self-help, Victorian ideology, and the democratic principles of the Constitution of the United States” (186) were key components of this ideology that was readily adopted by African American Christian women. In particular, women in the more conservative Baptist denomination established the clubs. Some of the ideals that the Baptist women promoted related to “equality, self-respect, professionalism, and American identity with their own intentions and interpretations” (186).

Moreover, this movement towards respectability led to the production of what Higginbotham calls “distinctive literature” that reflected these values (194). Contemporary African American Christian fiction appears to continue this practice of writing literature that promotes respectability. For contemporary African American Christian women, the new dimension of literacy is added. This is quite remarkable considering the historical challenges of obtaining literacy in the African American community. Readers sustain their respectability through achieving and maintaining literacy which includes reading and writing books. The connection between reader and writer is not just thematic but also connected to the power and authority that comes from literacy. Particularly, there is moral authority that comes from literacy and contemporary African American Christian fiction authors reinforce this in their books, reading clubs, author events and conferences. This authority extends to the culture by producing and reading literature as well as creating communities where the literature is discussed informally or formally.

Problematic, unspoken expectations of African American women primarily come from inside the African American Christian culture as pressure to present themselves as Godly, Christian women and is what Bragg refers to as “codes of behavior that emerge specifically from within black female culture” (229). For example, in Murray’s *Temptation*, the female protagonist Kyla experiences a personal crisis regarding her self-worth as a Christian wife and mother. One of the codes of black female culture is that having it all, like previously mentioned fictional character Clair Huxtable, is complex but attainable. Troubling this idea, Murray depicted Kyla as struggling with the more traditional role of a stay at home mother with financial security despite her husband’s belief that was her duty as a Godly wife. She expresses these feelings in a tense exchange with her husband. Kyla shares that she is having challenges with her



identity as a married woman and stay at home mother. By all accounts, she appears to be living the “American Dream” as the wife of a doctor. Yet, she feels like something is missing. In a moment of self-reflection, she laments, “I don’t feel like I’m growing in all parts of my life and I think I could put a part of me back if I went back to work.” (60) .... She continues, “I feel like I’m living in my husband’s shadow.... Everyone says that I have it all, but when it comes right down to it, what do I have?”(61). Here, Kyla echoes comments that women readers would have been able to connect with regarding how their identity changes once they become a wife.

The implication here is that marriage can be problematic even though it provides socioeconomic stability. Hinting at the idea that apparently, for African American women, the presumed financial stability of marriage does not compare to the challenges it may pose to portions of their identity. Ostensibly, part of this identity is incomplete and Kyla shares this concern, “You are for the mother and wife part of me. But what about my other side? What about my other needs? You could never give up your career for me” (82). In this moment, Kyla expresses what some might say is a common tension in the African American female identity: being a kept woman in the private space of domesticity seems antithetical to the public identity of an accomplished career woman. Moreover, the fact that she expresses these emotions to her husband is a courageous act of agency.

When Kyla restates her desire to go back to work as part of this argument, her husband Jefferson then pushes back when she laments that he would not have to quit his job because of her. “That’s a stupid thing to say. I have to take care of my family. That’s what a man is supposed to do. Most black women would get down on their knees and shout hallelujah if they were able to stay home, raise their children and be a wife” (82). This tense exchange between Jefferson and Kyla exposes some of the strains that will surface later in the novel. One

assessment is that she is ungrateful and insensitive to the needs of her husband. Furthermore, this is also an indication of the overarching influence of Christian heteropatriarchal ideals on contemporary African American Christianity. His words indicate that he believes women should be grateful for the domination and loss of agency that occurs when they become financial dependent on the husband via marriage. The fact that Kyla is struggling with the ideals could be an illustration of the tensions that African American women deal with trying to fit their lives into this traditional woman's gender role.

In addition, Kyla's challenges with being a stay at home mom could be considered one example of what Bragg contends is a "discourse on black female experience in the post – civil rights era that addresses those very specific anxieties around class and romance" (1134). After Jefferson claims that he does not want to keep his wife from being satisfied in her life, he then intones "But I don't want you to stop me from being me either. Why can't you get fulfillment taking care of Nicole and me?" (Murray 84). His perspective on her fulfillment comes from the heteropatriarchal lens where the woman should be satisfied by being a caretaker of men. Much like he points out earlier in that same exchange "to be a wife," the implication is that working outside of the home somehow takes the African American woman out of the respectable view of "womanhood" and places her in some ambiguous and potentially negative category of identity. His words imply that after all, a "real" woman would want to be a wife, implying that those who do otherwise are somehow not real women or lack femininity.

Kyla's struggling with this also indicates that her identity as a woman extends beyond that of wife and possibly that another part of her struggle is trying to rearrange that part of her identity to please her husband by adopting his view of ideal African American womanhood. Also implied in Jefferson's statement is the fact that he is trying to "rescue" her from the historical

shame of African American women having to work outside of the home because their husbands did not make enough to support the family. This ideology is a remnant of the heteropatriarchal view that men should be the sole financial support for the family and make major decisions. The fact that it is a point of contention that is brought up a few times in the novel indicates a possible inherent tension with Christian heteropatriarchy and African American women's identities.

In another passage where Jefferson and Kyla have a disagreement about her returning to work, Jefferson further explains how his wife working makes him feel inadequate as a man when he states "If you want to go back to work, then I've failed." (83). In response, Kyla states that it wasn't about him but about her. What this exchange shows is that Jefferson's identity as a man is connected to his success as a husband but it also is challenged by his wife's desire to construct another identity outside of his and the traditional view of women in marriage. Interestingly, it appears that despite her material stability, Kyla's identity is still not complete as a wife and for that her husband feels shame. Once again, this exchange includes elements of Christian heteropatriarchy that emphasize the God ordained responsibility of the man to dominate by taking financial care of his wife. He also manipulates her emotionally by turning her desire to work into an issue of his manhood as opposed to focusing on it as an issue of her identity. In addition, the fact that Kyla is struggling with this practice could be seen as a metaphor or illustration for the struggles that the Christian African American woman might have with the more traditional roles that they were expected to follow. It's almost as if one of the results of post-civil rights era activism was that there was a shift in focus in African American male/female relationships from the sociopolitical issues like racism and social justice to those of mimicking the patriarchy of the dominant society. Perhaps the conflicts that arise in many of these earlier

African American Christian novels are rooted in this Christian heteropatriarchal view of marriage as the ultimate sign of success and accomplishment for Christian women and men.

Additionally, a pivotal scene that amplifies the spiritual dominance of men and Christian heteropatriarchy occurs when Jefferson and Kyla have a home bible study shortly after their conflict about her role as a stay at home mother. As Jefferson prays and begins reading scriptures relating to wife's role, Kyla is described as having an experience that went beyond her simply understanding the scriptures. The way it is described, she has an intoxicating sensual experience listening to the bible study which is another example of her being spiritually dominated by her husband. "She closed her eyes, listening to the deep resonance of her husband's voice, feeling the scriptures, becoming a part of what Paul and Peter were saying.... Everything was released from her mind so that she could lose herself in the words and presence of the Lord" (90). This passage is in stark contrast to the earlier passage where Jefferson describes Kyla as influencing him to become a follower of Christ. Instead of her being the spiritual leader, he has now assumed the role as the spiritual leader in the relationship. The way this passage is written, she seems to relish in the experience of submitting to his voice, his biblical teachings and his authority as the husband. Here, readers are shown the familiar scene of a family praying together. Masterfully, Murray describes how the bible study has a sensual physiological impact on Kyla. Connecting the sensuality of the moment through the sacredness of the marital connection that is heightened by their spiritual connection, Murray taps into the cultural aesthetic as marriage being an aspirational social status and spiritual goal.

Murray's novel is a good example of why African American Christian fiction readers became interested in Christian spiritually transformative readings and literacy experiences. The novels provide a space where authors and readers can explore this argument about gender roles

within the marriage and the tensions between heteronormativity and Christian heteropatriarchal values that African American women are often forced to navigate. In a way, conflicts like Kyla and Jefferson's reaffirm important community and personal values about the importance of submission in marriage for African American Christian women. These conflicts also are a point of identification between the audience and author. Bragg notes "frequently audiences' identification with the content of the literature is augmented by a sense of identification with the authors who produce this literature" (485). As a result of Murray's novel, for the first time, African American Christian women readers saw themselves and their unique experiences reflected in quality literature that was also spiritually edifying and entertaining.

Similarly, Vanessa Miller's novel *Rain Storm*, published 10 years after *Temptation*, includes traditional literary elements while illustrating the long-term impact of the cultural aesthetics of marriage in contemporary African American Christian fiction. The characters in this novel show how men in African American Christian fiction exude masculinity that is rooted in their mature Christianity. Often these male characters are depicted as professional men with college degrees or entrepreneurs. This contrasts slightly with how Henderson describes the façade of masculinity as "a common cultural trope of Black heterosexual male characters depicted as working class, racially oppressed and possessing conservative sex and gender politics" (36). This type of masculinity is also present in African American Christian fiction and depicted through stock characters like the resilient Pastor, the mature boyfriend and spiritually strong man who withstands the temptations that women may throw at him. Despite the belief that all women are anxious to be married, ironically, it is the female protagonists who appear unsure about the value of marriage in these African American Christian fiction novels.

## *Rain Storm* and Marrying Up

Just like marriage is a key theme in Murray's novel, the idea of spiritually marrying up as part of the African American Christian woman's cultural aesthetic figures prominently in Miller's *Rain Storm*. One of the novel's primary characters, Keith Hosea Williams, struggles with the divine directive that he received from God while in prayer that he was to marry Cynda, a local prostitute. After praying but without speaking with Cynda, he reconciles that he must follow what he believes God is telling him. He then proceeds with an assertive plan to convince Cynda to marry him including allowing her to stay in his home despite her obvious continued activity as a prostitute. Eventually, she agrees to marry him. The novel's primary plot focuses on the transformation that occurs in the lives of Keith and Cynda once she agrees to be his wife. Cynda struggles with unforgiveness (of herself and others), bitterness, revenge, and low self-esteem as she leaves the sex trafficking lifestyle and attempts to acclimate to life as a Godly woman and wife. The theme of heteropatriarchal marriage is one that Miller continues from the tradition that Murray's novel *Temptation* introduced as a hallmark of African American Christian fiction. They both use this theme to show key traits of both the male and female characters, to resolve conflict but also to advance the plot of both novels.

Modeled after the biblical story of Hosea who is instructed by God to marry the unfaithful prostitute Gomer, the internal and external conflicts between Keith and Cynda appear designed to show readers the importance of being spiritually mature, being obedient to God and having an unshakable faith in the promises of God. Miller's book uses strong biblical allusions and serve as a unique backdrop to the new view of African American women via the framework of the African American Christian woman's response to Christian heteropatriarchy.

Additionally, Miller's novel includes scenes of angels and demons fighting in the novel to reinforce the theological stance that Christians lives are influenced by external spiritual influences like "spiritual warfare" and "demonic attacks" that are very much beyond their control and authority. Miller writes of nine-year-old Cynda's initial encounter with the supernatural being on the day of her mother's funeral in the first chapter of the novel:

At first all she saw was a glow. No, more like a big burst of light. When Cynda's eyes readjust and sees that it is a large man, she remains scared. Hoping to put her at ease, the "man" tells her that "The Good Shepherd sent me." The being then repeats this statement and adds "He sent me here to bring you safely home..." (3)

By including this in her novel, Miller promotes a belief that was gaining popularity in the African American church in early 2000s that even bad decisions or choices may not completely Christian's fault because of their being overwhelmed by external factors. This approach also makes the audience more sympathetic toward the consequences the characters' experience as their lives spiral out of control.

Henderson points out the redefinition of the "narrow cultural and political imagination for what constitutes love and happiness" (53). In one pivotal scene from Miller's *Rain Storm*, Cynda expresses that her biggest fear is that the change won't be sustainable when asking Keith repeatedly in a conversation that takes place after they get married "What if I can't change?" and "Do you think I can change?" Her lamenting the inability to change could also be seen as her wondering about her ability to transition to married life as a wife and her ability to submit to her husband. The fear of rejection based on her not being "perfect" as a wife or Christian looms large over her. Like Murray's Kyla 10 years earlier, Miller's Cynda expresses concerns about marriage changing her. However, her concerns appear centered around how it may not be enough

to sustain her spiritual growth. Cynda's identity is focused on her being a mature "redeemed" Christian. By contrast, Kyla's focus is on maintaining her identity as a woman within her marriage and the subtle message is that Christianity brings change like her new role as a married woman

In contemporary African American Christian fiction, spiritually "marrying up" for the benefits of having a spiritual prayer covering appears as a theme. The submission that comes from the female protagonists ultimately accepting this relationship dynamic shows up often in earlier African American Christian fiction novels. Miller writes in an scene with Keith and Cynda that "They walked hand in hand toward his car, the prostitute and the man of God, for God told him to take this women to be his wife and to love her so that he might know the magnitude of God's love for a world that continually whored after other gods" (20). This scene is a telling illustration of what Henderson calls "a striking counternarrative to prevailing sentiments about "domineering" Black women..." The romantic hierarchy of marrying up allows the male suitor to finally assume the enviable role of leader and head of household" (65).

As an issue that is promoted by Christianity and contemporary African American Christian fiction, marriage figures prominently as a cultural aesthetic. Perhaps because it was legally denied during times of slavery, many formerly enslaved African Americans eagerly sought to codify their personal romantic relationships once emancipated. As a result, marriage has been seen as a highly sought-after state that conferred respectability in the African American community. In fact, marriage was seen as something to embrace as a normal part of the African American experience. However, marriage rates for African American men and women have dropped since they reached a peak in the early 1960s with some blaming the drop on changes in governmental policies like welfare.



Henderson contends that much of contemporary popular fiction written by African American women in the 1990s focused on marriage most often as a way to economically uplift the novel's female protagonist. She terms this focus on marriage as "Marriageocracy" and clarifies how "the idea that it can be obtained with the cogent but misleading trinity of individual hard work, resilience and moxie" (8). However, Miller troubles this concept by depicting Cynda as being hostile to the idea of marriage when shortly after she agrees to marriage to Keith, she laments, "No matter which way you looked at it, God was just cruel. She could be dead, all her troubles over, but instead she was on house arrest and married to Keith the do-gooder. (101). The reference to house arrest implies that she has lost agency as a result of her marriage: her physical body is being controlled along with her behavior. This preoccupation with marriage is what Henderson calls "a "widespread presumption that Black women desperately hunger for and require heteropatriarchal marriage...." (10). This belief is depicted in many of the earlier contemporary African American Christian fiction where the single woman protagonist is conflicted about various questions regarding marriage. Some of these include who she should marry, whether she will get married, whether she will marry the person who she wants, and whether the one she wants to marry is part of God's plan for her life.

Within contemporary African American Christian fiction, marriage is not only the relationship ideal, it is also the spiritual ideal. It is often depicted as the place where spiritual maturity and development occur. Often, men are depicted as the more spiritually mature guiding wayward or less spiritually mature women toward marriage as well as a new level of spiritual gifting and discernment. The not so subtle message in a few cases being that not only does a woman need to marry up for financial gain she must also do so for spiritual gain as well. The spiritual gain is that she has the coveted covering that provides spiritual protection of prayer. In

these novels, even if the female protagonists are spiritual, it is often the male characters who end up being more spiritually insightful, wise or mature. This is exemplified in the men often being described as being prompted before the woman he is in relationship with to be obedient to hearing God's voice, following through on an action or responding to a spiritual crisis.

When these novels were first introduced in the mid-1990s, there had been a recent increase in research produced about the viability of marriage in the African American community. Part of the reason for this was the lingering criticism that *The Cosby Show* was not a realistic portrayal of the typical African American family in general and marriage specifically. As a result of this frequent criticism of the show, there was a flurry of research that followed in the late 1980s and mid-1990s about the state of marriage in the African American community. It is not surprising that with the academic world and pop cultural world being focused on African American marriage that ideas about marriage would influence these early contemporary African American Christian fiction writers. These works appear to reflect the belief that their needed to be counter argument to those who claimed that marriage was not a realistic goal for members of the African American community.

Miller's novel also provides a compelling approach to the mother daughter conflict often seen in the earlier contemporary African American Christian fiction. Miller provocatively opens the novel with, "Cynda was nine when she decided to hate her mother. .... I hate you for leaving, for loving that man more than me" (1). Spoken by the 9-year-old Cynda, these lines clearly define for readers what the expectations are for one of the novel's central conflicts. Moreover, beginning the novel with this strong of a statement about mothering from the perspective of a child allows Miller the opportunity to problematize other mothering dynamics including the absent mother, distracted mother, and the unfulfilled mother. For the audience reading this novel,

Miller's novel touches on nearly all aspects of the mother/child relationship and in a sense becomes a much more relatable novel as more readers will be able to identify with this common real-life experience. In addition, this brief passage indicates that agency is important to the identity of African American women even from early childhood.

Later in that same scene, Miller gives the readers additional insight into the chaotic mind of the girlchild who was trying to manage burdensome adult emotions. She writes "Cynda admitted the one thing she refused to accept since they told her that her mother was dead. She was afraid. Afraid to grow up without her mommy. Afraid to be lost" (3). Even though fear is described in this passage, it is the root of the pain that Cynda experiences as an adult that complicates her relationship with her daughter as well as her relationship with her future husband. Fear, borne out of what she perceives is abandonment by her mother, is at the core of the emotions that influences her pain and trauma later in her life.

Situated alongside the female centric literary renaissance that featured authors like Terri McMillan and Bebe Moore Campbell in the 1980s and 1990s, contemporary African American Christian fiction focused on the increased interest in fiction that addressed issues like romance and spiritual growth. Though the majority of consumers of this literature would consider themselves Christian, being a Christian is not necessarily a prerequisite to like the fiction. However, a familiarity with Christianity's tenets and rituals was assumed based on the novels mentioning Christian rituals like baptism, church attendance and prayer without in-depth explanations of the importance of the rituals.

Returning to Beavers, writers of popular fiction promote " ... dominant ideological formation" in their quest to maintain the connection with their readers. Beavers point is that rather than trying to win over to other writing markets, these writers

recognize and honor their responsibility to their most loyal and devoted audience. According to Beavers, these writers do so by writing about issues and themes that are most important to their readers as opposed to changing their message to appeal to a more diverse readership (265). This is one of the benefits of the focus of the authors. They have an unshakeable commitment to meeting the needs of their niche audience. The Christian Book Lover's Retreat exemplified this with the number of sessions that were devoted to book club discussions between readers and authors that were more like intimate conversations between close friends. This is a connection that Henderson describes when she writes that popular fiction provides "an occasion for Black women experiencing isolation in their work environments and neighborhoods to build community and form chosen family" (169).

Another unique way African American Christian fiction authors try to connect with readers is by including discussion questions and reading guides in each novel. Discussion questions at the end of many of the earliest novels are designed to build a community of intellectually curious readers seeking to delve deeper into the novels while also creating a deeper connection with readers and with fellow authors. The discussion questions initiated conversation about the book between multiple readers which, in turn, stirred up and maintained interest in the works. Bragg notes how popular fiction is unique in how "these texts integrate audiences into the narrative in ways which more traditional literature does not." The reading guide at the backs of these novels could be seen as an example of this integration. First, the reading guide provided prepared questions for book club discussion groups, the strongest supporters of the genre, to use during the monthly or bi-monthly book discussions. Moreover, these guides provided these book clubs and study groups with readymade discussion questions. In many ways, these guides made the literature more accessible to the non-Christian and Christian reader. No longer would they

have to be familiar with formal literary analysis for the reader to have a dynamic discussion about the literary works with other readers. They could share their insights with other women which was another way to build community.

One critique of the earliest works of contemporary African American Christian fiction is the lack of focus of political issues like social and racial justice issues. Drug addiction has been presented as a spiritual weakness for characters in novels (*Rain Storm*) without much context given to larger social and political forces that may have led to or perpetuated the addiction. Beavers argues that this lack of a sociopolitical focus may be one of the reasons why as a form of popular fiction, it is not considered with greater literary heft or authority. Beavers contends that “the ambivalence surrounding the reception of popular fiction is because, as a manifestation of what is deemed mass culture, it seems to lack a political critique of those forces that continue to plague the black community” (263). As a result of this missing element, contemporary African American Christian fiction is not considered worthy of canonical status or literary merit.

For African American Christian fiction, the issue of cultural credibility is all the more complicated because legitimate criticism of the literature is that it lacks a focus on the traditional issues of racial, social, political or economic justice found in other genres of African American literature. Beavers writes that one criterion for determining the literary merit of the fictional works is that it should be judged on whether it can “be taken seriously as an instrument that furthers the project of liberation” (264). In addition, Beavers point is well noted considering the fact that so few of the earlier African American fiction novels dealt with explicitly social justice or political issues.

Whether the women live highly respectable or degenerate lives, in contemporary African American Christian fiction, the female characters’ lives are upended and put back together by the

“sovereign” hand of God through their romantic relationships with more spiritually astute and mature men. Contemporary African American Christian fiction adds another layer of making this the end goal with the infusion of conservative Christian principles about the aspirational traditional state of the African American marriage. These authors introduce the submissive woman as the reinvented ideal for the African American Christian women and, in doing so, introduce a part of the ethos of African American Christian women in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It could be assumed that contemporary African American Christian fiction novels explored conflicting feelings in their works as part of the female their exercising agency. According to Henderson, “Fiction had become an important late twentieth-century space for Black women to negotiate their subjectivity.” (11). African American Christian fiction is the perfect space where African American Christian women deal with the various tensions that arise in their lives as women especially regarding the controlling nature of African American Christianity. It is in the fiction that the women explore topics and establish/reestablish the precarious boundaries that existed between their public and private lives as well as their Christian identities.

## Chapter 4

### Strength for the Journey

“The strong Black woman trope, is, a cement necklace.” – Michelle Norris

“In essence, she has developed an extraordinary capacity for “*walking with broken feet*,” often unaware that she is in pain. - Chanequa Walker-Barnes

#### Introduction

“... *Our motto is: when they go low, we go high.*” When Michelle Obama made these remarks in her speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, she was lauded by many who interpreted her words as a gracious and wise strategy to handle bullies. However, a closer examination of her words actually reveals a more complex reality as a 21<sup>st</sup> Century representation of the emotional constrictions placed on the strong black woman. Within her statement “*when they go low, we go high*” is the implication that African American women show strength under the most emotionally traumatizing conditions. Embedded in the power of the inspirational exhortation to “go high” is the reality that for some African American women, going high is the only option when confronted with challenging emotional and spiritual situations.

Yet, perhaps unintentionally, Obama’s words reinforce the widely accepted idea of the contemporary African American woman relying on strength as the defining characteristic and consequently eschewing emotional and mental balance. It could be because of her position as First Lady of the United States that Mrs. Obama did not feel it was appropriate to share publicly the impact that the relentless withering personal attacks had on her. To her credit, in an interview at Women’s Foundation of Colorado’s 30th anniversary event in Denver, Colorado one year later

in July 2017, Obama did share more pointed thoughts on the personal and racist attacks noting that, “The shards that cut me the deepest were the ones that intended to cut. Knowing that after eight years of working really hard for this country, there are still people who won’t see me for what I am because of my skin color.” Though she appears to be more introspective in the later statement, Obama’s comments indicate a complicated internal struggle with the public response to the attacks. More recently, Obama has been more candid about her own issues with strength in her autobiography *Becoming*. More recently, she enthusiastically agreed with her August 5, 2020 podcast guest journalist Michele Norris that the burden of strength was “a cement necklace.”

Ironically, Obama’s oft-repeated words could be categorized as similar to the thoughts of writer Jill Nelson who stated in her 1995 *Heart and Soul* magazine article “Beyond the Myth of the Strong Black Woman” that she felt “trapped between warring personas, neither of which reflected or took into account how I actually feel.” Nelson continues in the article that there is often a reluctant acceptance of these complex feelings as “our lot as Strong Black Woman--an inescapable part of life--and live with them.” Though separated by over 20 years in terms of the publication of their remarks, both Nelson and Obama’s words point to the problematic nature that is at the core of mythology of the strong African American woman and more specifically the African American Christian woman.

#### Statement of Research Question

This chapter explores the complicated depictions of the strong African American woman in contemporary African American Christian fiction and how strength figures as a part of the ethos of contemporary African American Christian women. The overall focus is how, in doing so, these literary works represent an ethos for African American Christian women that is



puzzling as well as progressive. My primary research questions for this chapter are: How does the genre reflect the ethos of the African American Christian woman and how does this ethos reflect the complexities of the lives of contemporary African American Christian women? Even more specifically, to what degree does this genre shape the African American Christian female community and its view of womanhood/femininity? Does the fact that they are Christian women lead to a more positive or negative perception of the attribute of strength in personal, spiritual and professional relationships?

Ethos is defined as fundamental values, customs and beliefs of a culture or society. For contemporary African American Christian women, this ethos intersects race, gender, religion and class. There are three particularly compelling elements of the African American Christian woman's ethos reflected in contemporary African American Christian fiction. These are a fierce commitment to respectability, an unyielding strength, and agency that is often rooted in sacrificial procrastination that justifies delaying dreams in order to take care of the needs of others. What distinguishes these elements from those of traditional Christian ethos or traditional African American ethos is that the values and guiding cultural principles appear to be influenced by the post racial and post-feminist ideals of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are also directly connected to those historical ideals of the cult of true womanhood. It is this tension that often is featured in the earliest published contemporary African American Christian fiction.

### Theoretical Framework

For the purposes of this chapter, I define strength using the list detailed by Cheryl L. Woods-Giscombé in her article, "Superwoman Schema: African American Women's Views on Stress, Strength, and Health." Woods-Giscombé declares that there are specific characteristics of

the strong superwoman as it relates to the African American woman. These are an “obligation to manifest strength, obligation to suppress emotion, resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, determination to succeed despite limited resources, and obligation to help others” (672-674). In addition, there are sociological theorists that offer additional perspectives regarding strength. The one I found most helpful for my dissertation was Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s 2009 book *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance*. Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s book offers significant contemporary anecdotal evidence about what she calls a detrimental performance of feminine strength by African American women. By sharing data gathered in interviews she conducted with African American women, Beauboeuf-Lafontant states in her book that “the defining quality of Black womanhood is strength. As a reference to tireless, deeply caring and seemingly invulnerable women, the claim of strength forwards a compelling story of perseverance” (2).

However, a result of this performance of resilience is that African American women are mistakenly seen as having a higher tolerance for emotionally and mentally traumatic experiences. Beauboeuf-Lafontant argues that “strength advances a virtuous claim about any Black woman whose efforts and emotional responses defy common beliefs about what is humanly possible amidst adversity” (2). Moreover, Beauboeuf-Lafontant contends that the use of strength to describe African American women in actuality can “defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring Black women’s experiences of suffering, acts and desperation and anger” (2). Her claims and examples that she provides in the book point out startling evidence that strength is actually not a positive trait for African American women as it stifles emotional growth and hinders emotional authenticity.

In addition to the work of Beauboeuf-Lafontant, my approach to the connection between strength and African American Christian literature is influenced by Sharide Davis's "Strong Black Women Collective" which argues that the concept of the strong black woman dangerously distorts the experiences of Black woman. Davis agrees that this mythology of strength "distorts the experience of Black American women's daily existence at the bottom of two hierarchical structures of gender and race" (23). Likewise, Davis also rightly points out the problematic idea of the concept of strength when she states that strength is problematic in that, "for those who embrace the ideal to enact behaviors that are difficult to accomplish concurrently (e.g., a woman remains emotionally invulnerable while persevering through life strains" (24). This perspective of strength is helpful as it provides a framework that allows for a more complex analysis of the tensions regarding strength and its impact on contemporary African American Christian fiction.

Another influential theoretical work for this chapter is author Trudier Harris-Lopez's 1995 article "This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character" and her 2001 book *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*. I specifically choose Harris-Lopez's theoretical works because she examines the trope of the strong Black woman in African American literature. She notes that African American women, "formed the pillars that supported the black churches that in turn demanded a tremendous strength from them... Black women were the spiritual as well as the physical healers, putting hearth, home, and family back together... (109). In other places in the article, Harris-Lopez how Christianity impacts what she refers to as a pathological disorder of strength. She writes how "along with the symptoms of suprahumanity, introspection, and keeping one's own counsel, there are a variety of other manifestations of the disease of strength. Christian virtue... and self-denial are prominent among them" (Harris-Lopez 111). Here, Harris-Lopez

intimates that there is a connection between the long-standing concept of the strong African American woman being an emotionally balanced hyper-Christian. This point is integral to the explorations of contemporary African American Christian fiction's use of strength.

Historical movements like the Black women's club movement that emphasized virtuous behavior for African American women heavily influenced the development of this ethos. Professor Chanequa Walker Barnes discusses this influence on African American women when she writes in her book *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and Burden of Strength*, that "like clubwomen, Black Christian women undertook a campaign to advance a politics of responsibility that was heavily influenced by the middle-class ideals of the leadership of the women's convention movement" (103). The emphasis was on creating an image of the ideal woman. The ethos of contemporary African American Christian women includes elements of this historical movement as it places much emphasis on being the virtuous idealized biblical Proverbs 31 woman who is the epitome of grace, wisdom and strength.

It is in her 2001 book *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* that Harris-Lopez delves deeper into the representations of strong African American women in African American fiction. In this book, she investigates the problematic nature of strength when she writes how "the landscape of African American literature is peopled with black female characters who are almost too strong for their own good...Unquestionably, strength was frequently the only virtue available to black women (11). This statement provides the basis for her scholarly interrogation of classic works of African American literature. Her premise is that deconstructing strength in these literary works can lead to a more nuanced approach to understanding them. Additionally, when Harris-Lopez writes, "these traits might seem more like virtues than problems, until we consider the price the characters paid spiritually and emotionally

... it was equally if not more harmful to others (11) she opens a provocative space for additional analysis of how African American literature depicts strong female characters.

### *Divas of Damascus Road* and The Dangers of Strength

The literary text that this chapter closely examines is author Michelle Stimpson's 2006 release *Divas of Damascus Road* which illustrates various aspects of the strong African American woman dynamic. As shown in Stimpson's novel, strength is a complex family inheritance for African American Christian women. The novel details how the lives of three generations of a Texas family are impacted by a traumatizing family tragedy. In the female centered family that Stimpson features in her novel, strength is what keeps the family together but also often makes emotional vulnerability a burdensome impossibility for a few of the novel's female characters. Nearly all of the female characters in the novel appear to struggle emotionally as a result of the false narrative of strength in their lives. The main internal conflicts in the novel are whether characters should remove their masks of strength and allow their true identities to emerge.

Set in the fictional town of Dentonville, Texas in the early 2000's, Stimpson's novel explores how family secrets and unresolved trauma impact each generations of women, the conflicts that arise within their familial relationships and the lingering effects of these unresolved family issues on their personal, spiritual and professional relationships. The novel starts with a haunting childhood memory that traumatized Dianne, the daughter of a severely drug addicted mother Joyce Ann. Left alone to take care of a sick younger sister, Dianne mistakenly gives the wrong dosage of medicine that tragically kills her younger sister. After this tragedy which occurred when she was 5 years old, Dianne is raised as a part of the family of her mother's sister

Gloria and Gloria's two daughters, Regina and Yolanda. Acting as the grand matriarch of the family is Great Aunt Toe who regularly quotes scriptures along with Christian platitudes as the humorously endearing pillar of strength for the family. Joyce Ann, Dianne's mother and Gloria's sister, is emotional unstable, remains drug addicted and in need of constant rescue. Yet, she speaks a powerful truth about her family later in the novel that dramatically alters the family. In addition, the mother Gloria's main focus has been to raise her daughters in a Christian home as "strong" African American women.

In this novel's woman-dominated narrative, each female protagonist is depicted as strong while at the same time struggling with varying degrees of emotional connection and identity development. As a result, their relationships with each other can be tense and exhibit varying degrees of external conflict. There are also significant instances of internal conflict for these characters. Aunt Toe struggles with the fact that despite her years of prayer and modeling what she believes is the ideal Christian woman's life, her nieces and grandnieces appear to be weak and less committed to their Christian faith. Her persistence in advocating Christian principles proves key to the plot later in the novel. Not surprisingly and with a nod to Christian heteronormativity, male characters are depicted exclusively as spouses or potential romantic relationship partners. Even though the men are not the primary characters, they are important as they serve as foils to the female characters who struggle emotionally and spiritually as more family secrets are revealed. The female characters responses to these family secrets reveal the fragility of the mythology of strength that has kept the family together over the last few decades.

In addition, Gloria struggles with transitioning to the life of married woman after decades of sacrificial singleness. Regina, her youngest daughter, is torn as her identities as a professional woman, wife and new mother collide. The intersection of these identities leaves her with a

frightening sense of the loss of control. In response, she resumes a life long battle with eating disorders. Yolanda, the youngest daughter, is an ideal single woman who uses her professional accomplishments and church work to mask the deep wounds regarding intimacy issues and her identity as a perennially single woman. One of the more sympathetic characters, Joyce Ann, is broken by guilt from poor choices that negatively impacted her relationship with her children and her immediate family. Dianne, her daughter, initially appears to continue this cycle of generational trauma until she has a life-altering transformational experience. By the end of the novel, Stimpson has applied a formidable amount of Christian principles of faith and love to illustrate that behind the masks of strength, African American Christian women strive to have authentic identities and Christian experiences.

Harris-Lopez indicates that the portrayals of strength in African American Christian fiction literary works are highly problematic when she argues that “African American female characters as constructed by African American writers of the twentieth century have been shaped in reaction to the larger society’s conceptions of what black women were or should be” (19). It might be because of her academic background in English Literature that Harris-Lopez’s definition of strength differs significantly from that of Beauboeuf-Lafontant who sees African American female strength as a socially constructed performance tied into emotional survival. Harris-Lopez writes somewhat awkwardly “I define strong black women characters as sinning against their families and their communities when their motives are more self-absorbed and selfishly individualistic, in spite of claims to the contrary” (19). Her definition appears to presuppose a Christian worldview without adequately explaining the elements of that worldview.

Harris- Lopez and Beauboeuf-Lafontant continue the work regarding strength that Toni Cade Bambara previously mentioned in her groundbreaking *The Black Woman: An Anthology* as

the inherent powerlessness of the strong Black woman. Bambara writes how Black women are often described using terms of empowerment like, “‘strong,’ ‘domineering,’ ‘matrichal’ and ‘emasculating.’” “The challenge with these labels being placed on African American women is that it is based on a performance that often damages those women as they are labeled strong though they suffer oppression at significantly higher rates than other demographic groups. Authors of these contemporary African American Christian literary works, whether aware of the emotional and mental costs of this performance, show vulnerable female characters in an attempt to reshape the negative connotations with the hope of redefining perceptions of contemporary African American woman. Their protagonists are often professionally successful and educated African American women who struggle with identity and esteem despite self-describing as strong. These authors have seemingly responded to what Bambara calls controlling definitions and qualities from others to more accurately reflect the lives of the woman and not “the roles while we are intended to play” (108). Moreover, in her article “This Disease Called Strength” Trudier Harris argues that strength has a negative impact on the depictions of African American literary families when she writes:

Strength frequently perpetuates dysfunction in literary families, where the strong characters and actions of black women become malignant growths upon the lives of their relatives. Unaltered and uncontained, the virus of strength becomes its own reason for being for these women, and no matter how compelling the reason, the illness still dominates their lives.

Even though Harris focused her statement on African American literature, it could also be easily applied to contemporary African American Christian fiction. The dysfunction is rooted in the behavior of “strong” black women, often family matriarchs, who appear incapable of truly



seeing the impact that their actions have on others. What makes it such a troublesome issue is the fact that strength is a trait that has the potential for both positive and negative consequences. It is this duality of the trait that makes strength problematic, especially for African American female characters in contemporary African American Christian fiction. These women often have the additional burden of navigating expectations based on a constricting Christian worldview.

Pastor and womanist Dr. Renita Weems-Espinoza noted in her 2004 *Essence* magazine article “Sanctified and Suffering” that suffering is a significant part of the ethos of African American women and ultimately leads to unrealistic expectations placed on African American Christian women. She writes how “deeply embedded in the Christian teaching most of us grew up on is the idea that a good woman is a self-sacrificing woman.” Weems-Espinoza draws the connection between this suffering and what she calls “self-punishment” and Christ’s suffering. “They experience a sense of power from feeling a greater proximity to God. But there’s a difference between being selfless and having no self at all” notes Weems-Espinoza. As admirable as this connection with earthly suffering may appear, in actuality, it sets up African American women to foolishly wear suffering as a badge of honor and pain. Implied is the idea that suffering leads to greater spiritual gain.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant echoes the misunderstood belief that suffering and strength are good for African American women in the introduction for her book *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman* when she writes that “strength advances a virtuous claim about any Black woman whose efforts and emotional responses defy common beliefs about what is humanly possible amidst adversity” (2). In this statement, Beauboeuf-Lafontant, hints at the bold premise of her book that strength has some significant short and long-term detrimental effects on the Black woman, despite how the virtue is presented as a positive quality.

Moreover, Beauboeuf-Lafontant states the dilemma more clearly later in the book when she writes that the black woman:

cannot be both strong and have needs of her own; she cannot share what is going on 'deep-down inside' and retain the esteem of those around her, and she cannot take care of others and expect reciprocation. Such is the dilemma of strength to choose appearances and remain unknown to other people, or to choose truth and risk being disregarded by them. (5)

The tensions that exist in the realm of being a strong black woman and yet being honest about the various emotional vulnerabilities of black woman are delineated in Beauboeuf-Lafontant's insights. Using Stimpson's novel *Divas of Damascus Road* as an example, there is a striking generational inheritance of strength with unspoken but immensely powerful expectations on the impact of strength. As a result, the family legacy of strength impacts each family member in different ways but with similar consequences of emotional or spiritual conflict. Each African American woman character in the novel appears to struggle emotionally as a result of the false narrative of strength in their lives. It appears as though the main conflicts in the novel are whether characters should remove their masks of strength and deal with the impact of the removal of the masks.

In the woman centered family that Stimpson features in her novel, strength is the cornerstone of the ethos that guides African American Christian women and what keeps the family together through years of tragedy and turmoil. However, strength also often makes emotional vulnerability a burdensome impossibility for the novel's major characters. Even though thought-provoking research has surfaced in the last decade discussing the merits of strength for African American women, it is starting to be perceived more as a trait that has the

potential to damage the identities, esteem and emotional health of African American women. As shown in Stimpson's novel, the problematic nature of strength infuses the African American Christian woman's ethos.

It appears that a strong influence on the ethos of the contemporary African American Christian woman is the Victorian era ideal of the "true womanhood." According to Barbara Welter and her seminal article "The Cult of True Womanhood," there was extraordinary pressure for women to meet the expectations of the true womanhood ideology. Welter writes how "the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (152). As the African American Christian community developed post slavery and Reconstruction, these same ideals seemingly became the most entrenched in the increasingly conservative African American religious community of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Because of these ideological influences, these ideals are reflected in literature produced by contemporary African American Christian women writers. Welter notes that it is quite possibly the influence of religion on the cult of true womanhood that made it a more palatable since "it did not take a woman away from her 'proper sphere,' her home. Unlike participation in other societies or movements, church work would not make her less domestic or submissive, less a True Woman" (153). Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising that for the African American Christian community, the cult of true womanhood provided a captivating place of public and private influence for African American women.

Despite the overarching influence on African American Christian women, there were also some significant differences with the Eurocentric cult of true womanhood that Shirley J. Carlson points out in her article "Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era." Carlson

contends that educational achievements and intellect were also important for black women who aspired to the cult of true womanhood. These traits were often connected to the notion of the African American woman needing to be a part of the community's focus on racial progress. Carlson writes that for the African American woman, in addition to intelligence and being formally educated, there was also the expectation that she would be have "a strong community and racial consciousness, often revealed in her work-whether paid or unpaid-within the black community" (Carlson 62). Instead of being encouraged towards meekness and timidity like their white counterparts, being straightforward and resilient was considered a positive trait for African American women when connected to the African American community's push for racial equality. Furthermore, various public campaigns for social and racial justice often had women at the forefront like the anti-lynching campaign championed by Ida B. Wells.

For African American women, being accomplished in the private, domestic sphere was just as important as being accomplished in the public sphere of the professional marketplace as well as politics. Imani Perry touches on these ideals of the public and private spheres available to women in her book *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* when she writes how "in this ideal, the sphere of women's influence was imagined as private and domestic" (67). Because of this emphasis, within the African American community there was a deeper appreciation for women who were able to skillfully succeed in both, a belief that differed greatly from that of the larger Eurocentric culture that demanded a concentration in the domestic or private from white women. Carlson contends that because of the expectation that African American women would also be ambitious professionally there was a discernible difference in that for the African American women "the attainment of a formal education and the development of the intellect were paramount" (63).

These professional achievements connected to the idea of what Carlson refers to as “self-improvement, as well as community and racial "up lift" (63). This concept still remains embedded in contemporary African American Christian women’s ethos. This connection appears to be part of the broader emphasis on self-help and self-improvement so that women can be stronger mothers, wives, daughters and aunts as a means of creating a stronger community. Even though there are examples of a return to the domestic sphere of marriage in a number of the earlier contemporary African American Christian fiction novels, there is no credible encouragement towards racial uplift, as exemplified by a focus on specific social or racial justice issues.

Comparing the cult of true womanhood and the ideals of true black womanhood, there is certainly overlap marked by the focus on the separation between domesticity and the public sphere. However, the major difference comes in that African American women were encouraged to cross over the public/private divide as it would lead to an overall improvement of the African American community. However, there was the belief that part of the responsibility of the African American woman who did enter the public domain was so that she could join the social justice and political efforts to improve conditions for African Americans. As such, beauty, wit, intelligence and ambition were an acceptable part of the ideals of true black womanhood. It is not surprising that ideologies like this ultimately led to the social construct of the strong Black woman. Eventually, this phenomenon became a familiar trope in African American literature as well as pop culture. But there was a problem: the contemporary strong African American woman did not always necessarily focus on social/ racial justice or uplifting the race. Consequently, it seems that being direct and assertive ultimately became interpreted as being aggressive and a threat, especially to men. Sophia in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is the

perfect fictional example of this as illustrated in the scene in the town where she is assaulted and arrested for publicly refusing to be the mayor's wife's maid. Her refusal is considered both disrespectful to the public sphere, as well as a threat even as she is forced to unsuccessfully defend herself against the arrest. Though a fictional example, her biggest infraction was that Sophia asserted her agency and showed strength in the public sphere.

Reflecting this change in historical perceptions regarding the strong African American woman, and demonstrations of strength in the public sphere, the traits that had previously endeared the African American woman were labeled as excessive, overbearing and unnecessary. In fact, strength in African American women are now seen with suspicion and derision. Perhaps influenced by this shift but well aware of the implications of showing "weak" African American female characters, contemporary African American Christian fiction deconstructs strength but through the framework of Christianity. In turn, questions regarding the value of strength in the lives of African American women shows up as a complicated, often negative character trait in the female protagonists of contemporary African American Christian fiction novels. Julia Jordan Zachery discusses the impact of this perspective in her book *Shadow Bodies* when she contends that the "script" of the Strong Black Woman "has resulted in the muting and silencing of Black women" (42). Not only are women encouraged by adopting this mode of behavior to hide emotions, Zachery argues that "three (at least) subscripts that constitute this larger Strong Black Woman script: physical strength, sacrificial/nurturing and spiritual/supernatural" also have the potential to have negative impacts on the emotional and physical lives of African American women (31). Despite it being used as a common descriptor of African American women, the damage that this "script" has on African American Christian women, in particular, is pronounced in some of the earliest contemporary African American Christian fiction.

Not surprisingly, there are elements of the Strong Black Woman ideology found in the contemporary African American Christian woman's ethos. Professor Melissa Harris-Lacewell provides a model for the construction of this ethos in her article "No Place to Rest" when she states how the strong black woman could be perceived as:

built on a number of beliefs about the intrinsic, essential qualities of African American women and beliefs about the appropriate and authentic manifestations of those qualities in the way that black women think, speak, and act (25).

Furthermore, elements of the African American Christian woman's ethos are a key part of the character in the lives of most the female characters in Stimpson's novel. Unyielding spiritual strength is exemplified by Great Aunt Toe who repeatedly mentions prayer as a way to build strength as she strives to encourage nieces and great nieces to make better decisions in their lives. In one scene, she has incorporated the ritual of prayer into the family tradition of celebrating birthdays. Murray writes, "It was her tradition of call everyone she knew on their birthday, first thing in the morning, and pray for another good year" (214). In another scene, Great Aunt Toe insists on a time of family prayer with a focus on the wayward niece Joyce Ann. However, not all of the family members support this call to prayer. In response, Aunt Toe says, "If Joyce Ann wants to sit here and act a fool, that's on her. She can't stop us from praying for her and she is gonna get some help some kind of way" (274). Here, Aunt Toe reinforces her status not only as the matriarch of the family but also as its spiritual leader who takes seriously her responsibility to show spiritual strength.

One of the complexities of Aunt Toe's characterization is her great reliance on the development of spiritual strength and her insistence that her nieces (and great nieces) do the same. It can provide a dangerous idea that it only takes spirituality to withstand all the

challenges that happen in life. Trudier Harris mentions “so much of our conditioning has been to be the **strong** figure in the family--the backbone, the one who can take more weight than anyone--that it's hard to know when we're overloaded.” With the conflicts that occur within Aunt Toe's family, there is such a reliance on spirituality that the reality of an emotional overload occurs too late or, in some cases, not at all. The chaos in the lives of Joyce Ann and her daughter Dianne are prime examples of that.

Perhaps following Aunt Toe's example, the other family members view prayer as a practical tool to exemplify strength, shift unpleasant circumstances, change situations, and change responses to situations. In one scene, niece Dianne prays after hearing her deceased mother's voice on an old voice mail message:

Dianne's forehead hit the steering wheel and she prayed what she knew would either be the last prayer or first prayer depending. She knew then that this must have been what Joyce Ann felt....'God, it's me. I can't do it anymore. Lord, I just can't. There is nothing left but you and if You don't move in me, I can't go any further ...Please forgive me for not forgiving Joyce Ann and give me the strength and courage to know that I can live the rest of my life in peace, in love and in your will... (293-294).

By placing this scene near the end of the novel, readers can see how much Dianne has changed. Moreover, as she prays for strength, Dianne is able to empathize with the mother with whom she had a tense and rocky relationship when she was alive. This scene also shows that Great Aunt Toe's many years of showing strength and praying had been successful with at least one of the novel's characters.

In addition, these prayers that are featured throughout the novel illustrate what Jasmine Abrams et al reference in their article “Carrying the World with the Grace of a Lady and the Grit



of a Warrior: Deepening Our Understanding of the ‘Strong Black Woman’” how “honoring God and praying were believed to be essential to being able to endure difficulties associated with being an SBW. Religion . . . is her source of hope and allows her to garner strength” (512). Also, this scene shows how Dianne views the importance of implementing the Christian principle of forgiveness in her life as she longs to forgive her mother all the while realizing that forgiveness is impossible without the power of God. In addition, this passage highlights the presence of healthy vulnerability that Dianne was unable to show at the beginning of the novel when she was in the midst of her “performance” as a strong Black woman. No longer is she willing to hide behind a mask of strength. Dianne’s journey to emotional and spiritual wholeness was hindered by what Harris Lacewell describes as a:

titanic strength (that) does violence to the spirits of black women when it becomes an imperative for their own daily lives. When seeking help means showing unacceptable weakness, actual black women, unlike their mythical counterpart, face the ravages of depression, anxiety, and loneliness (24).

Dianne has taken the risk of being vulnerable with her friends, family and now God. As a result, she enjoys a sense of renewed peace as she “laid down her burden for the last time” (Stimpson 294). No longer is she hiding behind and burdened by her mask of the performance of strength.

Dianne exemplifies what Abrams et al state is being “comfortable in relying on a higher power, offering her a relationship in which she is readily dependent. Spirituality for an SBW becomes a solace of sorts and a break from the daily mantra of independence and self-sacrifice. (512). Modeling what her Great Toe had shown over the years, as Dianne moves closer to having a stronger relationship with God, she appears more comfortable in seeking and expressing her

reliance on God. Her prior self was distant from family members and as the strong black woman she chose to rely on her damaged self for support and encouragement. Her prayers later in the novel indicate that she has matured and realizes that true strength comes from having an authentic relationship with God and not a fake performance of strength masked by indifference.

As stated previously, there is a peculiar family inheritance of strength that the women characters possess. However, each woman displays a different aspect of this inheritance. The matriarch Great Aunt Toe is the spiritual anchor for the family. Her niece Gloria is the woman who does all for everyone with an admirable dedicated commitment to serving in her church. Despite the revelation of a devastating family secret involving her near the end of the novel, Gloria is portrayed as willingly sacrificing as a key part of her identity as a mother and Aunt. Her sister Joyce Ann, the troubled addict whose irresponsible behavior impacts so many of the family members directly and indirectly, does not epitomize strength. However, she does serve as a foil of unsophisticated vulnerability to the other characters who strive to appear strong. She is seemingly the weakest character in the novel regarding morality and life choices. However, she also appears to be the one who is the most authentic emotionally and spiritually.

The second generation of the family is greatly impacted by the choices of their female predecessors. Dianne, struggles with being authentic and feeling emotionally safe when she is not performing strength. As a result, she remains distant from her immediate family and lacks spiritual resilience until a transformative life experience occurs that forces her to seek counseling for emotional support. In the end, Dianne creates a safe space outside the mask of her performance of strength that involves emotional and spiritual maturity. Her cousin Regina is a newlywed with a young child who is visibly overwhelmed with adjusting to life as a lawyer, newlywed and new mom. In addition, Regina is vexed by a persistent weight problem that leads

her to take drastic measures that lead to life threatening consequences. In her attempt to remain strong for her husband and her family, Regina indulges in potentially life-threatening eating habits in an attempt to lose weight. Her sister Yolanda, a successful pharmacist, resists being vulnerable to those that are the closest to her. Her resistance to vulnerability is mirrored by her very disciplined spiritual life as an active member of a Christian church. It is ironic that she can be so open in her relationship with Christ but finds it difficult to be vulnerable with those whom she interacts with including a close male friend who wants a serious romantic relationship. The novel shows how the inheritance of strength for these women has morphed into various forms of physical, emotional, and spiritual dysfunction that impacts not only the individual women but those in their personal, professional spheres of influence.

Each of these characters show various degrees of the “Superwoman syndrome.” According to Cheryl L. Woods-Giscombé’s research on the impacts of perceptions of strength among African American woman which she detailed in her article “Superwoman Schema: African American Women’s Views on Stress, Strength, and Health,” the superwoman has five major “areas” that are of the greatest concern: “obligation to manifest strength, obligation to suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable or dependent, determination to succeed despite limited resources, and obligation to help others” (672). As just described, each of the major female characters in Stimpson’s novel exemplifies at least one of those areas. These literary characters affirm Woods-Giscombe’s research results as well as indicate that there is a universality regarding the experience of African American women and strength.

One provocative aspect of the universality of this experience that this novel raises is whether strength is a burden or a blessing. As shown through the lives of the women in this novel, strength is a complicated factor that positively and negatively impacts the women.

What further complicates Stimpson's novel is the inclusion of African American Christian ideological perspectives of strength. This ideology doesn't reject weakness but in fact embraces it as a part of the life of African American Christians. Out of the over 300 scriptures found in the Christian bible that reference strength, many encourage Christians to rely on the strength that comes from trusting in God's wisdom and protection while courageously enduring suffering. Keeping this in mind, it is no surprise that the characters drawn in contemporary African American Christian fiction tend to adopt this belief in the importance of trusting in God in the midst of emotionally painful circumstances. How this manifests in Stimpson's novel is a number of scenes where the characters show spiritual maturity and growth when they "give their burdens to God" and become stronger.

Even more so, Stimpson's novel illustrates some of the more complicated long-term consequences and scriptural justification for suffering. For example, the novel opens with the traumatic childhood of Dianne who is forced to take care of her younger sister while her drug addicted mother and stepfather are out on another drug binge. Even though she is a child of barely kindergarten age, she is responsible for her younger toddler sister Shannon who is also sick with fever. Believing she is doing the right thing, Dianne mistakenly gives Shannon the wrong medicine. The result was the accidental overdose death of her younger sister as well as the early imprint of guilt, shame and hyper responsibility. "It must be true, then. It is my fault, Dianne thought" (8) were her thoughts in the immediate chaotic aftermath of the EMS coming to the house to save her sister and her mother's deception covering up Shannon's death. Dianne exemplified how at an early age how African American women often, under the guise of strength, take on the emotional, physical and mental responsibilities for situations, circumstances and people that are clearly not their responsibility.

When she is further pressed by her mother to not say anything about the truth of what really happened. Dianne's "reply sounded more like a surrender. 'Yes, ma'am, okay, okay, Momma'" (8-9). The resignation described by the child chillingly serves as the foundation for a life of masking by strength, emotional deception and fragility for Dianne. As a result, Dianne learns from her mother that it is more important to perform strength in an attempt to exude an impenetrable emotional exterior than it is to be emotionally honest, vulnerable and authentic. As her story line progresses in the novel, her self-imposed distance from her cousins and aunts becomes one of the most stressful burdens in her life. Yet, by the end of the novel, she reverses her belief of keeping as much distance from her family and begins the healing process of reconnection with her family.

As detailed in the novel, Dianne's life of "strength" is an example of what Beubeouf-LaFontanant contends in her book's introduction is not an innate trait of African American women. Beubeouf-Fontanant argues that strength is a societal construct that is actually introduced to black women by other black women, often those that are the closest to them when she writes that "as a strategy of womanhood it is introduced to Black girls through their mothers and women kin..." (12). Furthermore, as a survival strategy, strength has stark negative consequences in the lives of African American women. Beubeouf- Lafontant notes how "both the expectations and strategy of strength envelope Black women in silence, stoicism and ongoing struggle, and how maintaining these processes impacts them body and mind" (12).

In the novel, Dianne is the character that best illustrates this as she has experienced the greatest amount of trauma. She is also the one character who seems to be least willing or able to completely unmask those most terrifying of emotions to others as well as to herself. It is not until she gets into counseling, uses poetry writing as a tool of emotional healing. More importantly,

she connects with a supportive group of friends where she is finally able to articulate and eventually heal from her painful past. Until she is ready to do so, she struggles with a long string of emotionally empty sexual experiences and failed romantic relationships as well as crippling periods of intense loneliness. Furthermore, these are all compounded by the lingering guilt she feels knowing the part she played in her younger sister's death. Yet, despite all of this, she is determined to mask all of this by a debilitating performance of strength.

More importantly, the fact that the novel begins with Dianne's compelling story foreshadows the importance of the performance of strength for the other female characters in the novel. It is as if Dianne illustrates what Walker-Barnes refers to in her book *Too Heavy a Yoke*, as a fear of being seen as unfaithful by others. Walker-Barnes writes how consequently, "the StrongBlackWoman invests considerable effort in maintaining the appearance of strength and suppresses all behaviors, emotions and thoughts that might contradict or threaten that image" (4). Readers are also given the adult version of the scared child Dianne as she is described as getting ready to come home to visit her Aunt Gloria and cousins. Still haunted by nightmares of her childhood, Dianne appears to have adopted the performance of strength as part of her survival strategy.

At the beginning of the novel, Dianne appears still very much traumatized by her childhood experiences as shown in how she handles her emotions. Stimpson describes her as taking detailed care with her outward appearance and focusing on "everything to give the impression of normality or better, even if she wasn't feeling it" (13). Here, Stimpson hints at Dianne's need for performing strength. In addition, this description alludes back to the similar performance of normalcy that she was forced to adopt even in the midst the continued chaotic victimization of her mother and by her stepfather. Unfortunately, she learned at a very young age

that one of the keys to survival for African American girls is the perception of unbothered normalcy, which could be seen as one of the goals of the performance of strength. It is this same message imprinted over years that leads to the burdensome performance of strength in African American women as adults.

Furthermore, Dianne is described in one of the novel's early chapters as suppressing her emotions. Yet, it is not simply her following this trait that makes Dianne a potential strong African American woman. It is also this trait coupled with the fact that she also eschews any external sign of vulnerability. According to Woods-Giscombe, other signs of the strong African American women include the "obligation to manifest strength, obligation to suppress emotions, resistance to being vulnerable or dependent." One of Dianne's false coping mechanisms is the external appearance that she is independent financially, emotionally, and mentally stable. Even though she pays the expenses for the male companion who accompanies her to her Aunt Gloria's wedding, she is actually struggling financially as illustrated by her using discount bus transportation to get to the wedding along with her using store credit cards to pay for her gifts for her family members. Moreover, Dianne is described as enjoying the emotional and physical distance that characterizes her relationship with her Aunt and cousins: "Dianne preferred the distance of Darson two hundred miles from the horrid memories" (22). Even though Dianne puts the blame on the memories that the visit back home would stir, it could also be said that her staying away allows her to be maintain her self-imposed façade of strength and emotional impenetrability.

Perhaps even more significant than its depiction of the problematic nature of strength in the lives of African American women, Stimpson's novel shows the impact of religion on the performance of strength. Great Aunt Toe is the traditional African American woman who sees

religion as the great “balm in Gilead,” a cure-all of sorts for anything that might trouble the growing or mature Christian. She exemplifies what Walker-Barnes says is a key aspect of the Strong Woman, “a religious identity which has a particular stronghold in the Black church” (39). Aunt Toe clearly has a good grasp of scripture and how to apply them at the most trying of times in the lives of her nieces and great nieces. Melissa Harris Perry states it even more specifically when she writes “although they may be reluctant to lean on friends, family or the state, black women have wholeheartedly embraced God as a partner in their struggles” (218). Great Aunt Toe appears to exemplify the truth of this statement as she is shown throughout the novel being one to quickly encourage prayer, read scripture and live an otherwise “holy” life. In one scene, Aunt Toe is shown praying and completely embracing her position as the spiritual matriarch of the family:

Aunt Toe was busy praying, knocking the devil off all his platforms in this spiritual battle for her family. Enough of this talk about psychiatrists and psychologists and counseling and support groups. There was harm in it, she knew. But there was no substitute for Dr. Jesus (263).

This passage shows that Aunt Toe represented the African American Christian belief that above all else, help for emotional and spiritual problems needed to come from Jesus. According to Harris Perry, this subtle critique of traditional psychology as a solution for problems speaks to an “inner conflict with their religious beliefs and what they have heard from the pulpit” (236). Aunt Toe’s solution to this conflict is the preference to rely on her Christian ideology. More specifically, there is a positive affirmation in Aunt Toe’s use of prayer to resolve her family’s crisis. According to Harris Perry, this kind of response could also be seen as “suggesting she



should be able to handle all that God (and life) gives her and then some, by herself as long as prayer was a part of the solution (236).

Perhaps as the recipient of a life full of spiritual teachings of her Aunt Toe, Gloria exemplifies the strong African American woman who uses religion as justification for lifelong sacrifices as part of her identity and identity development. She is, as Trudier Harris notes in her article “This Disease Called Strength,” a woman who manifests elements of the disease of strength: Christian virtue and self-denial. Throughout the novel, Gloria’s sacrifices for her daughters Regina and Yolanda in her personal life are brought up a few times. In one scene where Gloria explains more about her previous interactions with her new husband, her daughter Yolanda contemplates how these sacrifices impacted all of their lives. When Gloria first met her husband Richard years earlier, she rebuffed his advances because of fear. “...when God sent him, I was too afraid that my life would be torn apart again. So, I let him go” (128). These words indicate that Gloria made a conscious decision to deny herself the opportunity to love and be loved. The conflict between the prior stated expectations of strength and reality of strength manifests when she adds regarding this “I don’t have many regrets in my life, Yo-yo, but I do regret that I didn’t say yes to Richard that night at the revival” (128).

In response, Yolanda reflects how “her mother had held Richard in her heart all these years but denied her feelings in order to maintain balance for the girls” (128). What is left unsaid is that this kind self-denial is actually an indication that the mother is doing as all strong black women do: justify her personal sacrifices for the needs of others. Harris Lopez describes another literary character, a strong black woman who follows the much the same pattern of giving up “living her own life in order to help other people live theirs. She buries herself in church work and becomes the model helper” (120). Similarly, Gloria is one of the most dedicated workers at

her church who is often complimented for her active commitment to her church. Yet, despite what appeared to a strong Christian life, there often was negative consequence, perhaps unintentional: a life so focused on Christian service to others that men who were a part of her life felt unneeded and out of place.

In one scene later in the novel when Gloria receives word in the middle of the night that her married daughter Regina has had an accident and she needs to go to the hospital to check on her, she immediately springs to action without realizing how her response is affecting her new husband. “She didn’t bother to look up, or she would have seen the confusion written on Richard’s face” (158-59). She appears so focused on meeting the needs of her daughters, that she almost neglects the needs of her husband who desires to support her. It took “Super-Gloria” listening to her husband, “pausing and realizing Richard’s place in all of this” (159) that Gloria corrected the situation. Counter to how Gloria had operated much of her adult life as a single woman, she was now learning to use her strength differently.

Regina Hernandez, one of Gloria’s daughters, is a good illustration of what Beaubouf - LaFontanant refers to as one who has “embodied stress” of strength (111). Regina has all of the external appearances of success: a loving, supportive husband, a healthy baby, and a successful career as an attorney. Despite all of this success, she remains unhappy and struggles with a compulsive eating disorder. Beaubouf - LaFontanant contends that “the eating of food is particularly necessary for women who lack coping skills or supportive relationships through which to process the difficulties in their lives” (111). For Regina, her bingeing and purging are external manifestations of her internal disorder. In other words, because of her inability to manage stress, Regina’s desire to control manifests with a hypersensitive desire to control food. Binge eating, poor eating habits and lack of exercise are a few of the other signs of this kind of

physical stress. Not only is the damage done to the mind but there is often detrimental damage done to the human body as the woman deals with the additional stress of the physical complications of an eating disorder.

Regina's inability to deal with the work life balance, including the expectations of being a good mother, wife and lawyer, accumulate on top of her life-long struggle with weight issues. Apparently, her desire to control her weight stemmed from childhood and her mother's attempts to control her weight. Bullied as a child because of her weight, Regina found what she believed was a perfectly manageable solution by taking weight loss pills as encouraged by her college roommate. Initially very happy with the results, Regina developed a dangerous pattern of gaining weight and then using diet control pills as a way to lose weight. In spite of her mother's best efforts, Regina still managed to develop an unhealthy view of food and her ability to control its impact on her life. Her relationship with food is described as similar to that of an addiction, "The high was worth the low because the low wouldn't be much worse than how felt about herself for the other twenty-three hours in the day" (38). Here, Regina expresses the dual complication of controlling food but also being controlled by it. Not dealing with those issues of control left her frustrated. "The pain turned to anger and the anger built a wall. Regina decided since she couldn't be beautiful, she'd be big and bold" (38). Beaubouf-LaFontanant describes this as how eating as a viable activity that "enables Black women to register and attend to their needs without disrupting the fiction of their strength" (114). Regina believed that by being bold, snippy and rude with others, she was adopting an exterior of strength and resolve.

In actuality, her inner emotions were the opposite: an anxious and fearful little girl. However, instead of using food to attend to her needs, she frantically sought to control food. Yet the result was the same: food haunted her. Much like strong black women who overeat and

reach for what Beaubouf -LaFontanant says are “limited outlets for voicing a variety of emotions,” Regina binges and purges and remains obsessed with weight loss. Perhaps her extreme focus on the amount that she weighed was an attempt to cope with uncomfortable emotions. She is described as being emotionally wound up with issues regarding her weight. “life is different when you grow up fat, lose it all, and then become threatened with the fat again. Like being in prison, then having freedom, and then having someone refer to you by your number again” (41). This passage reflects the inner struggle that influenced all of Regina’s decisions, especially after she had a baby and struggled with losing the pregnancy weight.

Interestingly, another aspect of Regina’s weight struggle includes the African American Christian woman’s religious identity. At one point, she reluctantly considers praying for God to help her with the weight loss. “It occurred to her that she might need to take this whole weight thing to the Lord in prayer. That, she realized, would leave her at the mercy of God’s timing, and He’s got all the time in the world” (138). Though she does not appear to be convinced that praying would get her the results that she was looking for and in the time that she desires, her unwillingness to trust God as well as her seething anger about her weight challenges make Regina a toxic emotional cocktail. Beaubouf-LaFontanant states “anger is the most common emotion associated with Black women’s compulsive eating” (119). In Regina’s case, she displays this common emotional shows in her interactions with other family members. “Regina gave a grunt, but that was Regina. Everybody said she was mean, and Regina wore it like a badge” (43). Her anger serves as an emotional buffer between her and others much like her larger physical frame served as a physical barrier.

It takes a moment of crisis with her weight for Regina to uncharacteristically reach out to her husband Orlando for help. In one exchange with her husband, she finally shows her

vulnerability, “‘I don’t know what to do,’ she cried. For as long as he had known Regina, Orlando had never heard these words from his wife...Be it reasonable or wacky, she never found without an answer or an explanation” (246). So, her desire to control or at least appear to be in control of everything was impacting her life. Ironically, even after this moment of emotional intimacy with her husband, her out of control emotions lead to harsh words and a fight that forces Orlando out of the house. In response to this emotional crisis, she reverts back to her destructive eating habits. “Then she went to the pantry, pulling out a bag of oatmeal cookies and devouring them two at a time. The food was an instant salve, calming her nerves for the moment” (250). Once again, as Beubeouf - LaFontanant contends, “although eating is socially safe, it is ultimately a flawed outlet for growing wells of frustration” (114). Regina’s frustration with her weight and perceived lack of support from her husband lead to the cookie binge eating scene. Eventually, this break led to Regina taking more drastic measures and her realization that she was not in control of her weight or her life:

Regina wondered if this was how the rest of her life would be. *Will I always have to be thin and in control in order to have happiness?* Certainly, the events of the past several months had taken her weight and her entire life out of her control. It was a sad understanding, that her life wasn’t in her control. Never had been, she realized how. No, she hadn’t taken the time to call a time-out in her life. So, evidently, God had. (311-312)

Later in the same scene, Regina admits to her shortcomings and how she is impacting other people when her husband asks her whether she is okay. “I mean, I’m not okay. Something is wrong with me and I don’t know what it is, but I don’t want to keep belittling everyone around me because I can’t cope with life on God’s terms” (312). Here, she admits her weakness and

makes a rare show of vulnerability to her husband. This statement also shows her reconnecting to her religious identity as a Christian.

Part of Regina's spiritual inheritance from her mother Gloria and great Aunt Toe is the move towards Christianity during times of crisis. In the article "Carrying the World with Grace," Abrams et al note how "women receive 'strength-promoting' religious messages via religious texts, religious leaders, or in their places of worship and subsequently transmit that information to their daughters—promoting the essentiality of strength for the next generation of SBW" (514). It appears as the messages Regina learned from her mother Gloria and Great Aunt Toe about the importance of prayer and submitting to God's will have finally taken root. Though she struggles with completely embracing some aspects of Christianity, these lines indicate that she has finally resolved some of her earlier issues of submitting to God's will and following his purpose for her life.

Professor Melissa Harris Lacewell refers to the generational inheritance of strength in her article "No Place to Rest" when she notes how "the centrality of strength to African American women's self-concept is further reflected in the lessons that black women pass on to black girls" (6). In one scene, Stimpson depicts this as an actual history lesson where Great Aunt Toe describes the tenuous relationship between African American women and men. In providing this lesson, Aunt Toe reinforces the dangers of independence that are key to strength for African American women in her brief history lesson. Aunt Toe does her best to explain how African American women came to their positions of authority in the African American family as a result of the racial violence and oppression perpetuated on their communities especially African American men. She states "then here come the black woman, we just took on both roles in the family since we couldn't count on them being there" (205). Aunt Toe further explains how this

impacts the relationship of African American women to each other. “The women struck together and raised each other’s kids, nursed for one another even. Hundred years of so of that, and I guess some of us starting thinking ‘What we need these men for?’” (205). Implied in her question and tone is that the independence of African American women is problematic with definite negative consequences.

Stimpson uses Yolanda, the great niece who is the student to this particular Aunt Toe history lesson, to make a fairly astute assessment about African American women in a sexist and racist society:

If generations of African Americans had grown up under the same pretense that she and Regina grew up under – that women were self-sufficient islands who never needed or desired a man’s help – it was no wonder that so many sisters were doing it for themselves and flat-out kickin’ brothers to the curb. Up until now though, Yolanda hadn’t seen this as one of the endless ramifications of slavery in America. (206)

Here, the complexities of being strong enough to sustain a household in the absence of a stable man or husband in the house contradicts the lesson of the benefit of being strong. By circumstance, African American women were often forced to be strong to stabilize the fragile African American families of the slavery era and post slavery. However, after generations of strength being passed down to African American women, there appears to be hostile backlash to women who embrace this part of their heritage. Is this backlash related to the complexities of sexist patriarchy adopted by African American men or is rooted in the increasing popularity of traditional Christian teachings about men being the authority in the home based on scriptures like Ephesians 5:23: “For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his

body, of which he is the Savior?" What results is a seemingly mixed message about the role that African American women should occupy in the modern home and ultimately in society.

The complication manifests at the intersection of Christian heteropatriarchy, religiously institutionalized sexism and the reality of the lives of contemporary African American Christian women. According to Trudier Harris, encouraging African American girls to be strong wasn't just about denigrating African American men. It was more about preparing them to have an "an adaptive response to the nexus of power relations in which Black daughters are located—a form of maternal protection for daughters' self-esteem against the ravages of sexism and racism" (59). Seemingly, this adaptive response would give them the necessary coping skills to be able to withstand and respond effectively to any forms of sexual as well as racial oppression that they may encounter. According to Aunt Toe, despite the good intentions of this historical precedent, in its modern form, it had actually done more damage to African American men and women relationships than racism itself.

In contrast to her cousin and sister, Yolanda represents an entirely different aspect of the strong Black woman. As a single, professional woman, Yolanda appears to be the epitome of the words of Chaka Khan's "I'm Every Woman." She has a successful career, a solid Christian walk which includes regular church attendance and a close relationship with her family, especially her mother and sister. The "missing" piece for her includes a romantic relationship. As shown in the novel, Yolanda neither appears willing or even interested in having a serious romantic relationship, which is problematic for certain members of her family, especially the traditional Aunt Toe. When she is first introduced in the novel, Yolanda appears to be the responsible one, albeit, slightly fastidious daughter who strives for order, structure and perfection in her life. Her house is immaculate and she pays special attention to even the smallest details like angles of



throw pillows and towel placement in the bathroom. It is perhaps what some could characterize as an overzealous attention to detail that has led her to the place she is in her life. In addition, she has a tense exchange with her cousin Dianne's boyfriend when he puts his feet on her living room table without asking permission. From this scene, readers learn that Yolanda believes in and demands respect from others.

However, underneath this exterior of perfection is a woman who longs for deeper connections in romantic relationships. As she enjoys her mother Gloria's wedding reception, she wonders about her own personal life and about her status as the last single woman in her immediate family:

Romantic love had always been an enigma for Yolanda, catch-22. She was raised by a strong, single black woman of God. Gloria taught her that God was to always come first in her life. Yolanda learned very early that she did not need a man to survive and that while marriage was a wonderful institution ordained by God, she wasn't any less of a woman because she was single. (56)

In this brief passage, much about Yolanda's character is revealed. Readers learn that she desires a romantic relationship even though she feels as if it is something that eludes her. She also has willingly adopted the mask of the strong black woman, more specifically the traits of independence and self-sufficiency. In addition, she has a great deal of self-confidence that allows her to not settle for less than what she believes she's worth and what she believes she is entitled.

At an early point in the novel, Yolanda appears to be the daughter who has most internalized the ideals of the strong black woman that have been modeled by her mother Gloria and Aunt Toe. She is stable, independent and grounded in her Christian faith. But, in spite of all these good things going in her life, there still is something missing in her life. Yolanda also

appears to be a subtle critique of the power that single professional women in the African American community possess.

Yolanda's biggest struggle within the novel relates to her developing intimate romantic relationships. The ironic part is that hers is the character that appears to be the most stable in the novel. After her mother's wedding, she watches the newlyweds with a tinge of envy because "truth is, she wanted to look in someone else's eyes and smile like that someday. The stirring in her heart scared her, made her uneasy in her own skin" (58). Here, the anticipated feelings of intimacy are what appears to make her uncomfortable. Perhaps it is because with those anticipated feelings of intimacy come vulnerability and transparency. In other words, it's not the romance itself that scares her; it is the emotional responsibility that comes with the intimacy in romance that makes her uncomfortable. Like the myth of the strong Black woman, being vulnerable with others is the most challenging thing that Yolanda has to deal with in the novel. Regina Romero discusses this aspect of the myth of the strong Black woman in her groundbreaking essay "Icon of the Strong Black Woman" when she writes how "as much as it may give her the illusion of control, it keeps her from identifying what she needs and reaching out for help" (225). Although Yolanda wishes to maintain the façade of a perfect life and one that she is in control of, she struggles with verbalizing her needs and seeking help for what she desires the most.

There are places in Stimpson's novel where, despite her helping people outside of her job as a pharmacist with questions about prescriptions, Yolanda wonders if there is more to life than just helping others. "Most of the time, Yolanda felt she had it together through the power of God. But sometimes she just had the feeling that she was as somehow falling behind or falling short – she wasn't sure which one" (92). The complex feelings that she has and her struggle to process

them make their way into her personal relationships as well. Her continual struggle is trying to neatly manage the feelings as she is able to do with other areas of her life.

This struggle to maintain control is most obvious in Yolanda's friendship and budding relationship with Kelan, a young man from her church ministry study group. From her initial encounter with him, to his persistent pursuit of her, Yolanda is cautious but also drawn to Kelan. Though she fights them, she finds herself developing strong feelings with this man that she says was not her type. At a particular bible study session, Yolanda is coincidentally placed in a small group with him and is "forced" to reflect on her unspoken questions regarding her current life circumstances. She asks "What else am I supposed to be doing for God? Is what I'm doing enough? And now to hear that it never will be enough isn't helping the situation any more. I need some help here" (95). This is all a part of an inner monologue that she has going on as a result of her interaction with Kelan during the bible study. However, she would never actually state those emotionally and spiritual thoughts to others. It would make her too vulnerable.

As they develop a close friendship while becoming more involved in ministry work at the church, Yolanda and Kelan have to decide what is the next level for their relationship. She bristles when he confronts her about her indecisiveness and accuses her of running every time she feels she can't control the situation. But rather be vulnerable, she plays it safe and reverts back to the "Let me pray about it" delay tactics. Later in the novel, they reconcile when she admits that her biggest problem is feeling weak around him because she grew up around strong black women. "...It's weird. It makes me feel weak. It makes me feel like I have to depend on you and I don't like it" (280). As awkward as that moment of vulnerability is, it is because of her transparency that she and Kelan then experience a moment of intimate emotional connection and their romantic relationship gains momentum.

As shown in Stimpson's novel, the contemporary African American Christian woman strives to successfully navigate the tensions between expectations and consequences of strength all while embracing the cultural values of their 21<sup>st</sup> century ethos. Harris Perry argues about the importance of strong Black woman but adds cautiously at the end how "The strong black woman serves as a constructive role model because black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles...When black women are expected to be super strong, they cannot be simply human." (184-185).

Within Harris Perry's powerful statement is the truth of just how problematic the mythology of strength can be for contemporary African American Christian women. As a societal construct, strength is difficult for African American Christian women to avoid as a label and even more difficult to avoid adopting as a survival strategy. The question remains of how strength as a societal construct intersects with the Christian identities so many African American women willingly embrace. Considering our nation's history regarding African Americans and Christianity, it would be safe to conclude that the application of scriptural principles includes women being treated as the weaker vessel (I Peter 3:7) or that strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). As depicted in Stimpson's novel, it seems at this intersection that the most confusing messages of strength vs weakness play out because it is where tensions between expectations and responsibilities remain the highest.

## Conclusion

### Summary of Research Focus and Expectations

I went into this research study with the goal of answering the specific question about the literary merit of contemporary African American Christian fiction. As part of this study, I also looked at whether the literature was an effective place for African American Christian women to construct a view of womanhood strongly influenced by Christian heteropatriarchy. Moreover, I was planning on exploring how the institutionalized oppression of the church influenced the construction of this ethos. One of my goals in completing this dissertation was for it to open up avenues for the academic analysis of this top selling popular fiction. Much like Ann DuCille contends in her article “Occult of True Womanhood,” my goal was to show how “the texts of black women must be readable as maps, indexes to someone else’s experience, subject to a seemingly endless process of translation and transference” (623). The goal was to show how these literary works were misunderstood but rich texts that illustrated the dynamic nature of the contemporary African American Christian woman’s experience. More recent literary scholarship had sought to undue the previous pattern of decentering the African American woman. I anticipated that this project would be a part of this movement. My hope was that by studying the works from a literary as well as a cultural perspective would show the impact of these works on the culture and, by the same token, the impact of the culture on these works.

It was originally designed to be a formalist approach to the literature focusing on fictional elements like plot, character, setting and theme. Having been a fan of contemporary African American Christian fiction from its earliest years of publication in the late 1990s, I was looking forward to doing a substantive analysis of some of the more popular authors and books

within the genre. Despite years of research, I had not seen much written from a scholarly perspective about the literature and I was hoping to provide evidence that contemporary African American Christian fiction had significant literary merit that warranted it being worthy of academic study. More importantly, my initial goal was to find significant patterns in the literature that aligned the literature with similar sub genres of popular fiction.

However, early on my research revealed that even though the authors and their use of fictional elements in their works was similar to other authors in other popular fiction subgenres, it was not the most significant aspect of the literature. What my study uncovered was that the cultural influences and social impact of the literature were its most valuable contribution to the study of contemporary African American women's culture. Despite being written with highly dramatic and passionate stories of spiritual and salvific transformation, some of the books could not be seen as "highbrow" literature. As a result, academia may have overlooked the value these works possess as reflections of the contemporary African American culture and contemporary African American Christian women.

Moreover, one interesting point I discovered was that contemporary African American Christian fiction distinguished itself with the connection that its authors made and sustained with its readers. After closely reading some of the subgenre's best-selling works from its inception in 1997 to 2007, my ultimate conclusion is that the cultural significance of the literature outweighed the literary significance. This cultural significance in some of African American Christian fiction challenges ethos, the roles and responsibilities of the contemporary African American Christian woman.

## Research Findings

In answering questions of literary and cultural merit, I applied a cultural studies approach to the literature looking at contemporary African American Christian fiction's history, cultural antecedents, fictional elements and ethos.

No formal history of the literature existed so I opted to create a trajectory of significant historic and cultural moments that preceded its creation. These contemporary cultural moments were influenced by and reflected in the creation of two polarizing African American television families: The Evans family of *Good Times* and The Huxtables of *The Cosby Show*. Both of these television shows were celebrated and rated among the most popular when they aired in the mid-1970s and 1980s respectively. Yet, both shows also were critiqued for not having realistic depictions of the African American family and the African American experience. This historical trajectory situated the creation of contemporary African American Christian fiction between the post-integration days of *The Cosby Show* and the “post-racial” Obama presidency. In drawing this historical line, Oprah Winfrey also figured prominently as she challenged long held negative perceptions of African American women, specifically the public displays of African American women's trauma. Through her show, Winfrey redirected the gaze from African American women as the objects of pain. Initially, I was hesitant to include Winfrey but her influence on the perceptions of African American women in the 1980s and 1990s extended to all aspects of popular culture include literature production.

Additionally, the question of the influence of Bishop TD Jakes was a focus for this chapter. I initially thought that Jakes would figure as a significant icon because of his influence on African American religion. However, what I discovered is that Jakes became internationally

known for his ability to profit off the pain of African American women in addition to his ability to heal the pain of African American Christian women.

Trauma and the policing of African American women and their pain was revealed as the thread that connected African American Christian fiction to these larger cultural moments.

One answer to the question of how these works knowingly or unknowingly engage in policing behavior of women was quite a surprise. The initial thought that since the books were written by primarily African American women and they would display women who were more independent, perhaps of a reflection of some of their personal lived experiences. However, looking at the female characters in the specific literary works showed that there was a policing of the behavior using the framework rooted in Christian heteropatriarchal values. This included showing women as being open and needing submission to a dominant man.

The main research questions for chapter three related to issues of literary merit and whether the novels possessed literary and cultural merit. In looking at this topic, I looked at the fictional elements that were evident in the texts. My study falls into what Julia Jordan Zachery's book *Shadow Bodies*, intones is "Research that centers nontraditional political participation of Black women address, in part, how Black women use their voices and words to critique, challenge, and offer alternatives to their inequitable social position" (20). My goal was to determine whether there were writing patterns and specific fictional elements in the genre that reinforced by my belief was that there would be the standard primarily female characters and men as secondary characters. Surprisingly, even though women were the novels' protagonists, it seemed as though men exercised substantial influences on the behavior and choices of the female characters. This development surprised me because I assumed that the books written by primarily women would have primarily female protagonists who drove the action of the novels. Ironically,



it appeared that the men were the ones that were the most spiritually mature whose goal was to spiritually influence or dominate the women in the books.

Furthermore, my original intent was to provide a catalog of sorts that detailed the literary elements found in the novels. However, I soon realized that a list like that would not necessarily answer the question of whether these works had literary merit. My initial plan to focus on 12 of the top selling earliest published books. However, after closely analyzing each book, it became clear that focusing on a narrower list of novels would provide a more representative look at the themes, characters and conflicts within African American Christian fiction. And much as I anticipated, the narrower list made clear what some of the patterns that indicated literary synergies among the authors but also indicated some points of cultural convergence. Interestingly, these included a presumption of biblical knowledge as well as a proficiency in biblical understanding. What this means is that the authors often did not explain concepts like “catching the spirit” as they were described as part of the plot points in the novels. External familial conflicts like the mother/daughter Conflict were also prominent in the earliest African American Christian fiction novels.

I ran into a little challenge when looking at the literary elements. What I thought I’d find were themes related to spiritual transformation and Christian maturity similar to those of captivity narratives of early American literature. I did find this when I looked at the trope of escape and return found in a few of the novels. However, my study also discovered that much of the earliest African American Christian fiction was focused on illustrating challenges in contemporary relationships. Tamika Carey’s book *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood* argues that African American Christian fiction is part of a concerted effort by African American Christian fiction authors to subtly challenge the oppressive

structures of the African American church, “Instead, they have resisted by creating new spaces within the existing structure that transformed the conditions where they worship or by going beyond the walls of the church and critiquing it publicly” (89). Perhaps feeling hindered by the gendered oppression of the contemporary African American Christian church, these authors seemed to critique the restrictive boxes that Christian heteropatriarchy put them in.

In addition, when looking at the typical themes/topics in the texts I expected to find explicitly religious themes regarding spiritual maturity. However, the novels *Temptation* by Victoria Christopher Murray and *Rain Storm* by Vanessa Miller featured themes that also related to the complex roles and responsibilities that African American Christian women shoulder at intersections of class and gender. The primary internal conflict that the female protagonists struggled with was how to maintain their identities within their romantic relationships. Both novels’ female protagonists fiercely held onto their agency as loyal and committed relationship partners. Marriage and not spirituality seemed to be the greater focus when it came to showing how the full expression of agency impacted the women. Marriage, being married and staying married is a large part of the identity of contemporary African American Christian women so I was not surprised to see it within the novels. However, what intrigued me was how these women in the novels seemed to struggle with the changes that marriage had to their identities as women when it changed their economic status. So, in a peculiar way, it seemed that issues of spirituality at times became less important than the issues of marriage within the novels.

This discovery was problematic but made sense as I realized that so much of the cultural influence on the lives of the authors was rooted in Christian heteropatriarchy and I believe that this perspective put ambitious contemporary African American women at odds with the Christian belief in ideals like stay at home motherhood and submission.

Chapter four looked at the complex nature of the ethos of contemporary African American women, more specifically Christian women, reflected in contemporary African American Christian fiction. Going into the study, my primary concern was how these works reflected strength as an important trait for African American women. My belief was that African American female protagonists reflected specific cultural and spiritual attitudes about strength in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. African American Christian fiction authors often portray strength as an essential trait for emotional and spiritual growth as well as an integral element of the 21<sup>st</sup> century African American female Christian ethos. Considering the fact these novels are strongly influenced by and reflective of the Christian idea of strength, my contention was that these works send a decidedly mixed and ultimately dangerous signal to contemporary African American women about the importance of strength.

However, after doing more research on the historical and cultural contexts of strength in relation to the African American woman's experience, my research shows that strength is still problematic. However, there are much deeper historical reasons for it going back to the ideology of the cult of true womanhood. As a result, these literary works do unwittingly send a mixed message regarding strength to contemporary African American women about how they should navigate their place in the African American community as well as within the often oppressive and gendered institution of the church. The most difficult part for this chapter was to clearly define the African American Christian Women ethos along with determining its primary components/characteristics. Based on how they are depicted in the novels, persistence, agency and strength are the most significant. My preliminary thought was that strength would be the predominant trait but agency appeared to be equally important. Because of lingering stereotypes

about African American Christian women, there was an intentionality in creating, building and maintaining relationships.

After nearly 25 years of active publication, the popular fiction sub-genre of contemporary African American Christian fiction has distinguished itself as a dynamic cultural space that socially constructs a complex and compelling identity for contemporary African American Christian women. The question of whether it is an effective space to construct the ethos and womanhood is challenging to answer. Like most cultural artifacts, I feel that the literature would be better categorized as reflecting the identity as opposed to playing a large part in the construction of those contemporary identities. This identity in many ways serves as an alternative view of womanhood that includes tradition elements of the ethos of the cult of true black womanhood. However, unlike the past where African American Christian women served the community by being active in issues of social and racial justice, as illustrated in the literature, contemporary African American Christian women meet the needs of the community by creating strong family units which appear to be at the expense of historically important social and racial justice concerns.

Moreover, how these authors confront Christian heteropatriarchy is by showing women striving to enter or reenter the public space while eschewing the seeming comforts of the private and domestic sphere. So, even if these authors were not specifically addressing concerns about social and racial justice, they still used their novels to confront the complex relationship between African American women, the domestic/public binary and the African American Christian church. These authors did this by crafting literary works that showed the complex relationship that these women had with navigating the stated and unstated gender and class oppressions within the African American church as well as those supported by the African American church.

Perhaps on a broader level, these women exercised agency by writing their novels and, in turn, write characters who also expressed agency as well. But they also seem to support these oppressions by not directly confronting social, sexual and racial justice issues in their novels. Literature is where these women are publicly critiquing the restrictive boxes that Christian heteropatriarchy put them in.

### Limitations and Questions for Future Consideration

Not surprisingly, my study revealed some limitations that additional scholarship could address. One very obvious limitation of my study was the difficulty in narrowing down the number of books to study. Normally, having a wide variety of books to study might be perceived as good. This means that there will be plenty of material to analyze. However, in the case of African American Christian fiction, this actually served to hinder certain aspects of my original intent as there was scant background information on the genre available. I felt that as a scholarly introduction to the sub-genre I had to refocus one of my chapters on the historical and cultural contexts of the literature. Because I had to do a much broader approach than originally anticipated, I was not able to focus on more specifics of the books. I initially felt that this limited the depth of the analysis of my study. However, now that historical and cultural contexts of the literature have been addressed, it actually leaves options for future research into more specific analysis of specific books and authors. I felt like I needed to give a broader overview as a way to introduce the literature to academic audiences which I felt limited my analysis due to the scope of my dissertation.

There are a number of issues that this research project was unable to address due to its limited focus. Because the focus of this project was on the identity and ethos of the African

American Christian woman, I was unable to delve further into the impact of and the influence of African American Christian men. Because men were often pivotal characters in the spiritual and personal development of women characters within the earliest published African American Christian fiction, an exploration of the impact of having men figure so prominently in books written primarily for and by African American Christian women would have provided additional cultural context and a fascinating approach to the impact of the male gaze. Instead of readers getting the male perspective, it would be a woman's version of what the male gaze is within the literature. Considering the fact that there are so many of the novels with men as significant characters, studying the role and identities of men in contemporary African American fiction would provide additional scholarly insight. Moreover, looking at the differences that occur in African American Christian fiction when it is written by or focused on African American men could open up pathways to further study how African American Christian men perceive themselves.

Another issue that studying the literature raised that I wished I'd been able to devote more space to was the influence of book clubs in the overall acceptance of and marketing of the literature. Other topics regarding African American Christian fiction that needs to be studied include the connection between the popularity of the literature and tv shows like *Greenleaf*, movies like *War Room* and the appeal of neo Christian cultural producers like Tyler Perry. The literature is well into its second decade of publication and cultural producers like Perry and others have seemingly followed their example and made the African American Christian woman's experiences a centerpiece of his work.

Moreover, another question that this project raised that could be a topic for additional research is the overall impact of Christian heteropatriarchy on the perceptions of readers after

the first 20 years of African American Christian fiction's publication. In the formative years of the literature, Christian heteropatriarchy appeared to have a significant impact on thematic elements within the literary works. It would be interesting to study some of those same authors to see if Christian heteropatriarchy continued to significantly influence their later works. Also, it would also be interesting to see if Christian heteropatriarchy remains part of the structure of African American Christian fiction published by other authors.

#### Implications and Recommendations for future Research

My research project showed that the depictions of African American Christian women, though problematic, reflects the state and experiences of African American Christian women in the African American Christian community and church. Even though it is focused on literature, this study can be used to open up new methods of studying the African American woman. This study can also close the gap of literary analysis research by providing reasonable methods that can be applied to future study of African American Christian fiction. This could easily transfer to other academic fields including women and gender studies, African American studies, religious studies and popular culture. More specifically, research that could come from my findings could include how agency impacts the African American Christian woman's experience. There could also be studies done regarding how marital status, a problematic issue for African American Christian women, is depicted in the literature and how that impacts the relationships that women have with each other. Often within the contemporary African American Christian church, married and single women are placed in an adversarial relationship. Does this same attitude appear in the literature? This issue is an unspoken tension in terms of African American Christian women relationship dynamic. This tension can be attributed the influence of Christian

heteropatriarchy and its belief that women are best when dominated by men. For the single woman who is perceived as more independent, she is often seen as suspicious and a threat within the mainstream African American Christian church.

I think my study has created the much-needed theoretical framework for future study of these very important literary works. In fact, I feel that my study adds another aspect to more recent studies of the contemporary African American women experience by Professor Beauty Bragg's *Reading Contemporary African American Literature: Black Women's Popular Fiction, Post-Civil Rights Experience, and the African American Canon*. Professor Monique Moultrie's, *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality*, Professor Aneeka Ayanna Henderson's *Veil and Vow: Marriage Matters in Contemporary African American Culture*, and Tamika Carey's *Rhetorical Healing: The Reeducation of Contemporary Black Womanhood*. My study's more explicit focus is on the Christian experience, which is such an important part of the African American woman's experience.

#### Final Thoughts

My hope is that this research project begins a robust discussion about the significance of literacy works produced by the vast number of contemporary African American Christian fiction authors. Much like literature produced during prior times of noteworthy political, social and cultural shifts that served as important resources regarding attitudes about race, religion and gender roles, my belief is that studying these works shows that they have been mistakenly categorized as lacking in literary and academic significance and their value understated. Ultimately, these are stories of women' empowerment, specific to the African American



Christian woman's experience, an experience that is often diminished, mocked and ridiculed by mainstream culture, media and even academia.

My purpose in looking at African American Christian fiction was that it ultimately leads to these books serving as culturally rich artifacts. These books are creative and artistic works that serve as a representation of the culture and provide valuable information/insights about the culture. One result of this analysis is a new understanding of how these works perform an important task in redefining the historical and contemporary African American woman's experience. In the end, my hope is that this study affirms as well as redefines the value of the African American Christian experience at the intersections of race, gender and religion.

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