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Beyond the Pulpit:
Lay Perspectives on Black Laywomen Performing Religious Authority

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Courtney V. Buggs
M.Div, Emory University, 2014

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An abstract of
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Abstract

Beyond the Pulpit:
Lay Perspectives on Black Laywomen Performing Religious Authority

By Courtney V. Buggs

The purpose of this research is to analyze the ways in which 21st century laypersons perceive the performance of religious authority by African American women. In the context of black church culture, religious authority is located within the realm of the cleric, a realm that has historically been rendered inaccessible, or minimally accessible, to black women. This study highlights how laypersons have dislocated religious authority from the pulpit, and thus, recognize a range of activities as performance of religious authority. By decentralizing religious authority, laypersons disrupt institutional understandings of authority that function as gatekeepers.

Few studies show how laywomen understand themselves to exert religious authority without clergy status, particularly black laywomen. This study presents spiritual narratives of lay women and men who resist institutional understandings of religious authority and therefore, experience the richness of black women's leadership despite cultural, traditional, and scriptural hindrances. It attends to the lived realities of laypersons and how they interpret the actions of black laywomen through the lens' of local church history; personal history; and cultural history. The affirming perceptions of the study participants reflect an embraced border crossing for black laywomen, a crossing that more accurately portrays their contributions within black religious spaces.

Grounded in womanist theory and methodology, this qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews to examine: what perceptions about black women performing religious authority prevail in the 21st century laity; whether or not laywomen subvert traditional structures of authority in the black church; and if stereotypical images of black women impact how listeners perceive black clergywomen or laywomen. Five dominant themes emerged in this study: 1) laypersons understand religious authority as the authority of all believers; 2) laypersons increasingly affirm black women performing religious authority, both as clergywomen and laywomen; 3) culture, tradition, and scriptural interpretations contribute to hindering black women, particularly in the performance of preaching; 4) laypersons perceive black women performing religious authority as 'normal' within the black community and the performance is evident in a myriad of practices, and 5) Media depictions of black women negatively impact how black laywomen are perceived in the performance of authority.

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Introduction

Background

Despite objections raised by male preachers, the Methodist movement began acknowledging women as preachers as early as the late eighteenth century. In 1787 Sarah Mallet was authorized to preach by John Wesley, as long as she "proclaimed the doctrines and adhered to the disciplines that all Methodist preachers were expected to accept."[1] Jarena Lee, a member of the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), expressed her call to preach and was later recognized as a traveling preacher by the denomination's first prelate, Bishop Richard Allen.[2] By mid-nineteenth century, Isabella Bomefree, later known as Sojourner Truth, a former enslaved black woman, co-founded Kingston Methodist Church, and began preaching. In 1904, Minnie Jackson Goins became the first African-American woman to be ordained elder in the United Brethren Church, a predecessor denomination to the later formed United Methodist Church.

Throughout the early 20th century, Methodist congregations wavered on women's licensing and ordination, generally rejecting full clergy rights for women. However, in 1956, Maud Keister Jensen became the first woman to receive such rights. In 1958, just two years after the General Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC) approved full clergy rights for women, Sally Crenshaw became the first African American woman to be ordained in the denomination.

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[1] "Timeline of Women in Methodism," UMC.org, n.d., http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/timeline-of-women-in-methodism.
[2] "Gallery of Women in UMC History," General Commission on the Status and Role of Women, n.d., http://www.gcsrw.org/MonitoringHistory/WomeninUMCHistory.aspx.

Twenty-six years later Leontine T.C. Kelly was elected as the denomination's first African American woman bishop. The UMC made denominational history in 2016 by electing seven women bishops, four of who are women of color, namely, Reverends Sharma Lewis, Tracy Smith Malone, Cynthia Moore Koikoi, and LaTrelle Miller Easterling.[3] Sixty years after women received full clergy rights, all but one Jurisdiction elected a woman to the episcopal office. On the surface this progression toward women's leadership is laudable. Yet, sixty-three years after full recognition, clerical appointments for black clergywomen remain sparse. Historically, women have been relegated to the domestic sphere, leaving public matters such as religious authority to the domain of men. In some denominations women were, and still are, prohibited from pastoral leadership. However, Methodism has an early history of encouraging women in ministry, and affirming their sacred call into apostolic succession.

Statistics that only reflect African American women appointed to the highest tiers of clerical leadership within the denomination obscure the ways in which African American laywomen perform religious authority in the local church.[4] The statistics also camouflage contemporary shifts in perceptions about women in religious leadership, and more specifically, black laywomen performing religious authority in the United Methodist Church in the 21st century. An assessment of women in senior clergy positions does not adequately portray the ways in which African American women perform religious authority in the UMC because it is a lay-driven organization. Within

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[3] http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/new-women-bishops-make-history

[2] The United Methodist Church's General Council on Finance and Administration provided this statistical information. The data reflects those persons who chose to provide ethnicity and gender information. Submission of this information is not required and all persons do not voluntarily provide it.

[4] I use a very broad understanding of religious authority, as in *the right, ability, or influence to impact how one makes meaning of life and the world through religious belief and practice*.

UMC polity, lay persons constitute the critical mass of local church leadership. Therefore, lay women actively participate in the leadership of the church, far beyond the structures of ordained ministry and pastorates. To focus solely on clergy women's leadership is to miss the contributions of laywomen's. This research diverges from statistical analysis of black women in formal positions of authority, for example, the bishopric or senior pastoral appointments, by questioning how laypersons perceive African American laywomen performing formal and informal religious authority in parish settings.

By assessing perceptions of the laity, this project seeks to reinterpret historical notions of the intersections of religious authority, gender, and race, and thereby, to show how the statistics discount the ways in which African American laywomen perform religious authority in contemporary religious spaces, with the endorsement of the laity. I expected to find that despite statistics that indicate a dearth of black women performing religious authority at the highest levels, the 21st century laity increasingly embraces black women's religious leadership on all levels. The overarching question is: What perceptions do laity hold concerning black laywomen performing religious authority?

E.C. Lehman's scholarship on laypersons' perceptions about women clergy is a helpful entry point to this research. Though based in Australia, Lehman's research interest parallels this research project in its interrogation of women and religious authority, or what is often referred to as 'the woman question.' In the 1980s and '90s Lehman published a series of articles that analyzed the reception or rejection of women clergy from an organizational viability standpoint. Considering churches as formal organizations of human invention, Lehman argues that understanding the goals of the

organization (church) is key to understanding how members think about the leadership roles of women. In a study of the American Baptist Churches (ABC), Lehman found that laypersons embraced the *idea* of women clergy, but were less accepting of implementation of the idea.[5] The research shows that hesitance to embrace women ministers is connected to concerns about organizational maintenance and congregational desire to avoid conflict. Whereas prior studies focused on male clergy perceptions of women clergy, Lehman shifted focus to the perspectives of laypersons.

The research showed that thriving congregations were less likely to consider women as pastoral candidates because of the potential disruption to organizational success. In contrast, congregations undergoing the threat of closure were inclined to accept a ""first rate" clergywoman instead of looking for a "second-rate man.""[6] Clergywomen often represent "organizational salvation," writes Lehman.[7] Thus, commitment to preserving the church facilitates both the rejection and reception of clergywomen.

Lehman's sociological approach offers a divergence from analysis of theological interpretations of sacred texts as the core reason for rejection of women's ordination. This approach is helpful to my research in that as an organization, the UMC endorses women in ministry at all levels, as evidenced both by practice and theological interpretation. However, sociological analysis moves beyond church polity to actual perceptions about the religious leadership of women, as experienced by the laity. A lay-level analysis reveals the views of organizational members, to use Lehman's terms.

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[5] E.C. Lehman, "Organizational Resistance to Women in Ministry," *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 42, no. 2 (1981): 101–18, https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/42.2.101.
[6] Lehman, 110.
[7] Lehman, 110.

This research differs from Lehman's in several ways, most significantly the inclusion of gender and race, in the United States context. While the core research poles – women and religious authority - mirror that of Lehman's study, this project shifts attention to laywomen, and more particularly black American laywomen in the UMC context. Scholarly preoccupation with women in ministry is skewed to issues of ordination and preaching, leaving underexamined the other ways in which women lead in ministry. Oversight of alternative ways of executing religious authority is particularly pertinent to black women, who are historically rendered invisible.

Histories of marginalization and dehumanization for black women may be traced to the enslavement of black persons and subsequent efforts by American colonists to craft a theological narrative of ontological superiority, based partly in early Jewish and Christian teachings on the curse of Ham.[8] Former enslaved women were subjected to descriptions of womanhood that defied their lived experiences. For example, while proper women were to be found attending to matters of the home, black women necessarily worked in the home and in the public sphere, as a matter of racial uplift and survival. The advocacy of black women for justice and equality led to formation of women's clubs and church organizations. Debates about women's ordination were preceded by debates about women in other leadership roles in the local church, such as

[8] David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham*, Studies of the Bible and Its Reception, volume 10 (Berlin; Boston: de Gruyter, 2017). Goldenberg details a genealogy of the curse of Ham and shows how dark skin became an external marker of servitude. This reading of blackness as a curse permeated American culture and undergirded justifications for enslavement and dehumanization.

stewardess.[9] Missionary Circles, Women's Departments, and the like emerged in black church settings, raising the question of religious authority for black women.

This research reexamines the question of religious authority performed by black laywomen, as perceived by lay persons. It does not visit debates on whether or not black women have religious authority; this is an assumption of the study. Rather, it reflects a contemporary determination of how laypersons think about black laywomen in religious leadership.

Research Questions

The following research questions inform this project:

RQ1: What perceptions about black women performing religious authority prevail in the 21st century laity?

Sub-question: How does the convergence of race, gender, class, tradition, and culture, influence congregants' views about religious authority at this religious location?

RQ2: Do laywomen subvert traditional structures of authority in the black church, and if so, how?

Sub-question: Are the categories of ministering authority and governing authority adequate in describing the types of religious authority women are granted?

RQ3: Do stereotypical images of black women impact how listeners perceive black clergywomen or laywomen?

Sub-question: Do perceptions about black women's bodies and religious power impact listeners?

RQ4: Does personal engagement with women as senior pastors impact one's perception about women performing religious authority?

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[9] Martha S. Jones, *All Bound up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830-1900*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

On one level, religious authority is the authority given by the institutional church through licensing and ordination. On a separate yet related level, religious authority is granted from the laity sans institutional endorsement. This research is concerned with the informal granting of religious authority to African American women via congregational legitimation. Specifically, I interrogate the ways in which contemporary perceptions about gender and religious authority influence congregants at a church in South Georgia. The research investigates the convergence of perceptions about race, gender, tradition, and culture, as impactful to black laywomen. I use this sample setting to consider how perceptions about black women in authority may surface during the ordination or pastoral appointment process, but begin much earlier during religious and identity formation.

Purpose and Significance of Research

The purpose of this research is to explore and assess perceptions about black laywomen with religious authority. Little or no recent scholarship exists to show lay perspectives about black women lay leadership in the 21st century. This project goes beyond statistical examination of black clergywomen in senior pastorate positions as an indicator of the progress of women in ministry. It delves into contemporary perceptions of the laity concerning laywomen performing other authoritative roles. I question how authority functions in contemporary church settings, and how persons come to that authority. Furthermore, I question how perceptions about black women impact their ability to lead in religious settings.

The research is significant because it gazes behind statistics about black clergywomen, to better understand opinions about black laywomen who form the cadre

of future clergywomen. This investigative view of how laypersons perceive religious authority offers insight into why that authority is granted or withheld from black laywomen. It illuminates the ways in which cultural and traditional shifts in perceptions about black women religious may be hidden by seemingly low clergy statistics. More specifically, this study reflects an unqualified support for black laywomen performing religious authority. It expands traditional notions of authority that are primarily located in the black male preacher of the black church. Furthermore, the study implies that low numbers of black women in clergy appointments are not necessarily linked to resistance and rejection by laity. Better understanding the ways in which laypersons make sense of religious leadership, race and gender makes possible increased opportunities for black women at all levels of religious spaces.

Organization of the Research

This research is divided into six chapters. Each chapter begins with a short participant profile as a means to introduce six of the participants. Chapter One introduces literature on the body--philosophically, theologically, and materially. It shows readers how notions about the body are not neutral; the material reality of raced-gendered-sexed bodies cannot be separated from the power dynamics in which bodies are made visible, or invisible. Chapter Two addresses black women and religious authority in the context of the black church. The literature reveals the active participation of black women historically, yet often in subordinate positions. The second part of Chapter Two introduces womanism as a lens through which to interrogate the positionality of black women in contemporary society. It also offers examples of stereotypes about black women that are rooted in what womanist ethicist

Emilie Townes refers to as the fantastic hegemonic imagination.[10] Chapter Three presents select strategies of resistance used by black women to combat stereotypes.

Chapter Four is the methodology, research design, and theoretical perspective. This research uses womanism as the theoretical framework. Chapter Five is the presentation of data. It identifies five emergent themes: 1) laypersons understand religious authority as the authority of all believers; 2) laypersons increasingly affirm black women performing religious authority, both as clergywomen and laywomen; 3) culture, tradition, and scriptural interpretations contribute to hindering black women, particularly in the performance of preaching; 4) laypersons perceive black women performing religious authority as 'normal' within the black community and the performance is evident in a myriad of practices, and 5) media depictions of black women negatively impact how black laywomen are perceived in the performance of authority. Chapter Six offers conclusions to the study and suggestions for future research.

[10] Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

~Participant Profile~

Laura is a lively senior of the church. She has been at this church for over 25 years and has served as a laywoman for all of that time. She is a life-long United Methodist. Laura does not recall a time when the leadership of laywomen was not accepted. In fact, she says that women always lead the charge in raising money for the church and in organizing new families into the church. "Wherever there is a need," she says, "we always help out." Laura observes a little extra "something" in women clergy, that enhances their ministry efforts.

Chapter One. Bodies and Black Feminine Embodiment

In this chapter I trace literature on the philosophical body, to the material body, to black women's bodies as subjects.[11] In Chapter 2, I summarize the positionality of black womanhood within the traditions of the black church. Chapter 3 presents the ways in which black women exert strategies of resistance against misidentification and dis-embodiment. These three chapters converge to show the ways in which black women were historically misidentified and misrecognized, and how womanist and black feminist scholars contemporarily re-present black women as epistemological subjects.

The literature shows that a complex of historical conditions in the United States created the environment in which denigrating stereotypes of black women and black women's bodies emerged. African American laywomen and clergywomen were not shielded from these disparaging images. Recent scholarship and media representations

[11] For the purposes of this research, I use the terms black and African American interchangeably. Generally, the term refers to persons of African descent who claim American nationality. When the term black is used to refer to persons of the African diaspora more broadly, appropriate footnoting will be included.

of black women show that these images endure in the 21st Century American imagination, yet not without counter-imagery. African American women employed and employ strategies of resistance to refute notions of black womanhood formed by the white patriarchal imagination, and to reconstruct black femininity based on the lived experiences of black women. This research attends to the particularities of African American laywomen in the performance of religious authority, and how they circumnavigate diminished societal expectations of their capabilities to lead.

The survey of literature provides the backdrop for the queries investigated in this study. As subsequent chapters show, I situate African American women in the context of a particular religious space, and interrogate viewpoints about their authoritative voices.

Philosophy and the Body

> "Is the body, the body which is ours, known by us in the same way as any other intentionality in the life of the ego, and must its being receive…the same status as the being of intentionality in general, as the being of ego? It means we take cognizance of the conditions which alone will permit us to take account of the existence of a body situated at the heart of human reality: *a body which is an 'I'."*[12]
>
> *- Michel Henry*

This research project begins with philosophical reflections on what it means to be a body and to have a body. German philosopher Edmund Husserl theorized a "phenomenological attitude" as essential to describing the body.[13] Bracketing cultural, social, and scientific assumptions about the body, Husserl sought to offer a discussion of

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[12] Michel Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, 1st ed, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 8.
[13] Luna Dolezal, *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 19.

the body as it is lived by the subject. He argued that beyond the physicality of the body, the body is itself experienced and experiencing, at once. "The body is something that we are, but also in an important sense, something that we have."[14] Husserl identifies four features of the body that distinguish it from physical objects.[15]

First, the body is sense-able. The body senses touch or temperature changes as a continuity of the body. Second, the body is an "organ of the will, the one and only object which, for the will of my pure Ego, is moveable immediately and spontaneously."[16] For Husserl, the freely movable body contrasts an "I can" to the "I think" of Cartesianism.[17] Third, the body is the zero point, spatially. It is the necessary center from which one refers spatially. The body is "a here which has no other here outside itself," Husserl writes.[18] One orients oneself spatially according to the positionality of the body. Fourth, the body is "the organ of perception," necessarily involved in how one experiences the external world.[19] Husserl's phenomenological description is helpful in interpreting the body as the site of meaningful existence and experience.[20]

French philosopher Merleau-Ponty extends Husserl's phenomenological project with his concept of motor intentionality. The consciousness of the body creates ongoing potential for engagement with the external world. For example, given a pencil, one does not consciously look for the hand or the fingers, as one looks to an external object. The action of the hand to grasp a pencil, or other object, is subconscious, or "pre-conscious

[14] Dolezal, 19.
[15] Dolezal, 20–21.
[16] Dolezal, 20.
[17] Dolezal, 20.
[18] Dolezal, 20.
[19] Dolezal, 20.
[20] Dolezal, 21.

knowledge ...."[21] Motor intentionality suggests that the body learns and knows and performs accordingly, without conscious initiation of each body part. In some sense, the physical body learns and behaves in particular ways, without prompting or prodding. The body subconsciously experiences the material world.

Whereas with Merleau-Ponty one's being, or ontological existence, is understood in terms of consciousness and intentionality in the world, Michel Henry's philosophy asserts that one's being is independent of this intentionality. Life itself is external of material being and thought. Henry rejects René Descartes', "*Ego cogito, ergo sum*," insisting rather, that one *is* without the thought or awareness that one *is*.[22] The body is the material of 'I', but it is not the force of 'I'. Henry argues that studies of the body should not begin with biology because biology presupposes ontology. Phenomenology of the body looks beyond the presuppositions of a body to the lived being. The human being is of its own kind, *sui generis*, distinguished from other life form, such as vegetation. Henry questions the constitution of ego prior to recognition or awareness of ego-self. He posits that life *is* without thought.

Drawing on Foucault, sociologist Bryan Turner offers four Western views of the body in modern social theory.[23] German and French philosophical traditions focus on the idea of a living body, and "to have a body involves body-work," asserts Turner, "because the body needs constant attention."[24] Turner suggests the body must be understood in terms of dominant power arrangements, and the ways in which those in

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[21] Dolezal, 22.
[22] English translation of Latin phrase: I think, therefore I am. From René Descartes', *Discourse on the Method* translated.
[23] Brian S. Turner, "The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and Its Perspectives," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley, 1. paperback ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 15.
[24] Turner, 19.

power construct knowledge. The body is not neutral. Furthermore, the body is a symbolic system, "producing a set of metaphors by which power is conceptualized."[25] That is, the body has meaning and is generative of meanings. Third, the body is historical and constitutive of changes in human society across time and space. Fourth, the body is understood in the context of the lived experience of everyday life, or "being-in-body."[26] Turner resists abstract discussions of the body that isolate body and being. A derivative of Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body, the latter view stresses the inseparable relationship of body and personhood. By highlighting these and other views of the body, Turner makes visible the problematic nature of one-dimensional historical views of the body.

Further, Turner highlights several cultural themes in the relationship between the body and religion. The need to control the body and emphasis on self-mastery are themes rooted in Greek society.[27] Turner relates body regulation to "ethical world mastery" and modernity's privileging of reason over social relations.[28] However, social analysis of the body must attend to the system of patriarchy that facilitated the ways in which women's bodies were socially constructed from dominant male views. Economic shifts in society, capitalism, and consumerism informed the dynamic social context in which women transitioned from domesticity to being participants in the local economy. The admittance of women into the public sphere was still guided by a patriarchal structure and ideology. Turner's article is most useful as a concise overview of the social analysis of the body across time, and it provides a social context in which to assess the

[25] Turner, "The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and Its Perspectives," 15.
[26] Turner, 16.
[27] Turner, 20.
[28] Turner, 22.

positionalities of gendered-raced-sexed-classed bodies. The ethic of control of the body is particularly relevant to laywomen and clergywomen exerting religious authority as embodied beings in religious spaces.

Feminist philosopher Luna Dolezal shows how phenomenological views of the body allow the material body to recede from view, to become invisible or transparent. The pre-conscious continuity of the body enables it to flow with the external world in a present-absent state. However, disruption to the flow of the body, for instance, caused by pain, results in visibility or awareness of the body. Extrapolating from the work of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, Dolezal focuses on the philosophy of embodiment and argues that visibility of the body creates the potential for body shame.[29] This shame potential is increased for black women because of stereotypes discussed in Chapter Three.

The binary composition of 'normal-abnormal' modes of appearance reinforces body shame as a probable condition for those who deviate from social expectations of embodiment. "What is considered normal is actually based on illusory ideals that are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve," writes Dolezal.[30] Black women are particularly at risk of body shame due to stereotypes and historical notions of womanhood. If white Anglo-Saxon protestant women represent the *zero point* of femininity, black women's bodies are subject to shame and "dys-appearance" as a result of their supposed distance from feminine proper.[31] As social norms are animated in the

[29] Dolezal, *The Body and Shame*.
[30] Dolezal, *The Body and Shame*.
[31] Dolezal, *The Body and Shame*, 28.

shaming of black women's bodies through dehumanizing rhetoric and stereotypical images, black women enact strategies of resistance and practices of self-preservation.

Philosophical and phenomenological approaches to the body are insufficient when analyzing black women's embodiment because they fail to account for the influence of power in body validation. The social capital assigned to bodies, particularly raced-gendered-classed bodies in the United States, is such that black bodies have been ontologically questioned rather than taken for granted. Stated differently, because black bodies were historically not viewed as human, philosophical approaches leave black women's bodies invisible and incapable of epistemological experiences. While philosophical traditions may be a useful starting point, theological approaches to the body offer more helpful tools for engaging black women and black women's embodiment in religious spaces.

Theology and the Body

Theologian Ian McFarland moves beyond notions of isolated bodies and offers a theological response to the question of who or what constitutes personhood.[32] In *Difference and Identity: A Theological Anthropology*, McFarland uses a Trinitarian framework, arguing that personhood is derived from relationship with a triune God. Resisting anthropological essentialism, McFarland locates personhood in God's initiation toward humankind in Jesus Christ. McFarland contends that "relationship is not the expression of selfhood; it is it's essential presupposition."[33] One's personhood is only made visible in the person of Jesus Christ, and others are seen, or made visible, in

[32] Ian A. McFarland, *Difference & Identity: A Theological Anthropology* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 4.
[33] McFarland, 67.

Christ. "To live as persons is to live a life oriented to the other," McFarland asserts, "but we are persons by virtue of God's action toward us in Christ quite apart from our assuming such orientation."[34] McFarland offers three symptoms of humanity, based on analysis of Genesis 1 and 2: dominion over all creation, sexual difference, and fruitfulness.[35]

While McFarland's theological project affirms the personhood of all in Christ, it steers clear of embodied personhood, that is, the materiality of living bodies. Notwithstanding his insistence that difference is essential in one's existence as a person in Christ, McFarland dislocates personhood from the body politic. This theological anthropology is problematic for raced, gendered bodies, particularly black women's bodies, which have been categorically dislocated across time and space. On the one hand, locating the essence of personhood in God's initiation toward humankind underscores the sacredness of all human life. On the other hand, it allows personhood to remain abstract, removed from concrete embodied expression, and thus, removed from lived experience. This is problematic for black women.

McFarland's omission reflects Anthony Pinn's critique of black theology, that is, "it is materially empty…a theology of no-body."[36] "Our bodies are cultural production and material," Pinn claims, "with existential content and terrestrial weight."[37] A constructive theologian, Pinn seeks to foreground the material body, particularly black bodies, while rejecting blackness as the consummate characteristic of black embodiment. Committed to humanism, Pinn attends to the socially constructed nature

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[34] McFarland, 72.
[35] McFarland, 149–57.
[36] Anthony B. Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 3–4.
[37] Pinn, 8.

of raced, gendered bodies as he resists oppression as essential to blackness.[38] Pinn finds black theology's reliance upon ontological blackness problematic in that it presumes a totality of black life and black experience.[39]

In addressing the lived realities of embodiment, Pinn challenges traditional views held by black churches concerning the body. He critiques traditional doctrines of the Christian church that emphasize a "troubled relationship between soul and body" that leaves the body in peril and neglect.[40] For Pinn, the way to get at the way it is, is by taking the body as the point of departure for how one understands the world and the Divine. One cannot understand humankind in the world without the body.

Pinn expands black theological discussions to include the body as both discursive and material reality. The ways in which power impacts bodies is equally as important as the ways in which bodies experience the world. For instance, Pinn challenges liberation theologians to examine the ways in which black theology subsumes the experience of black women and renders it invisible, and thus, insignificant. "While black males can legitimately claim oppression in the United States," Pinn writes, "maleness has also entailed certain forms of privilege, including a limited ability to render the body invisible."[41] Reflecting on his own classroom presence, Pinn confesses that he embraced the male privilege of the right to occupy space in the classroom, in ways that are not available to black women.[42]

He critiques black theology for its complicity with theology as written traditionally by white men, in affirming the ontological and epistemological primacy of

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[38] Pinn, 50.
[39] Pinn, 44–45. Pinn builds upon the work of Victor Anderson in *Beyond Ontological Blackness,* 1995.
[40] Pinn, 137.
[41] Pinn, 60.
[42] Pinn, 61.

maleness. Pinn supports efforts to create "bodies that run contrary to the existing process of normalization by which significant bodies are understood as male, middle-class, and heterosexual."[43] His awakening to the gendered normativity within blackness, admittedly via womanist thought, resulted in deeper examination of the "existence of the male body as coded, as symbol of the social system, involving a type of theological double-talk."[44] The liberative freight levied by black theology is largely wielded by and for black males. Male black bodies are socialized by power discourse and media, which provides images that reinforce acceptable norms for black bodies, more precisely, heterosexual black male bodies. Many predominantly black churches maintain constructs that signify the importance of male bodies over female bodies, as demonstrated in church leadership and the prevalence of masculine interpretations of the Godhead and sacred texts.

Pinn's intention is not to destroy gender as a category of theological analysis; rather, the goal is to "expose how gender, in collaboration with other identity markers, frames our sense of the world and experience of the world."[45] Through gendered embodiment one experiences the world and the world's responses; that is, while phenomenological thought emphasizes the essence of the body, the body cannot be bracketed from the constructs within which it enters and interacts with the world. Pinn borrows the lyrics of Tupac and Snoop Dogg (*the way it is*) to broaden the landscape of sources of authority for theological discourse in liberation theologies. The way it really is involves the body in relation to the world, that is, *others*. Rather than experiencing

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[43] Pinn, 62.
[44] Pinn, 62.
[45] Pinn, 65.

religious conversion as a spiritual escape that leaves one in the world but not of the world, he relocates the conversion experience as one that situates the body, as a counterstatement to the world. One does not move away from the world, but rather, enters the world more deeply. Religious conversion, then, involves living the counternarrative in the body, which is at once, in the world *and* against the world. One might call it *be-ing* the liberation that constitutes black theology.

Pinn situates theology in the public square, in the market place, in the *bodies* of unlikely theologians. This is not a new practice. At its inception, womanist theology unapologetically intended to privilege the experiences of black women as the historically unrecognized source of theology, with careful attention given to the black female body. Although Pinn's examples of unlikely theologians further underscore the black male body as the source for expanded discourse and knowledge, his research urges scholars and practitioners to engage the material body in ways that reflect its capacity in the earth.

Similarly, in *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant*, womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas engages black theological thought and practice through the lens of the blues. Douglas uses the positionality of black women blues singers as a framework to analyze the historical narrative of black experience. Blues singing women are lifted as embodying life in the crossroads, and thus, their way of being in the crossroads renders them as a source of knowledge and self-empowerment. She introduces crossroads theology as that which: 1) recognizes the crossroads as a space of definite possibility; 2) sees the crossroads as a stable and definite space that reflects the

fullness of divine and human existence; and 3) affirms the energy found in the intersecting strands.[46]

The starting point for crossroads theology is the multiple identities that are inscribed on the blues body.[47] Embracing the black-sexed-Christian-blues singing woman complicates normative notions of womanhood, black church Christianity, and homoeroticism, to name a few. When the blue signing woman gazes back at the white gaze, by singing the blues, her lived experience serves as a concrete image of the power located in the crossroads. As disruptive discourse, crossroads theology resists oppositional binaries, and reimagines that which has been seen as disparate as connected. Crossroads theology challenges black church traditions to hold in tension the perfections and imperfections of lived experience, disallowing language that reinforces the sacred and secular divide. It is a vector toward the institutional and structural strands of oppression that are overlooked when one attends only to particular behaviors, for instance, the acts of the woman caught in adultery, while overlooking the man with whom she was caught. I assert that black laywomen function at the crossroads of gender, race, religious authority, and religious tradition. Each positional identifier impacts how black laywomen function in religious spaces, and at the same time offers possibilities for exemplary performances of religious authority – in the crossroads.

For Douglas, wellness is living into one's full self, and celebrating the complexity of one's body. "Resurrection is about real bodies being restored to life again in the face

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[46] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant*, First Palgrave MacMillan paperback edition, Black Religion/Womanist Thought/Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 124.
[47] Douglas, 125.

of conditions that would portend their death," writes Douglas.[48] Privileging the body, she writes, "…the hope of resurrection is not disembodied…salvation is not a disembodied reality."[49] The bodies of women and persons of LGBTQ orientation and those of non-gender conformance, are welcome in the body of Jesus. Arguably, Douglas would extend this list to include all other bodies that have been traditionally excluded, such as differently-abled bodies.

In *The Disabled God,* Nancy Eiesland imagines the "emancipatory presence of the disabled God."[50] She problematizes normative viewpoints about theology and 'normal' bodies by naming the ways in which persons with disabilities are perceived theologically. She highlights three themes: sin and disability conflation, virtuous suffering, and segregationist charity.[51] Eiesland argues that classical theologies concerning nonconventional bodies are insufficient in describing how those bodies are created in the image of God. While notions of *specialness* seem harmless, they create false assumptions about the uniqueness of disability, and in some ways minimize the real challenges of persons with differently-abled bodies. Moreover, the tendency to highlight persons' disabilities often results in their inclusion as topics of discussion rather than subjects with vital contributions. Eiesland's work makes space for persons who live with bodies that defy normative definitions of wholeness. This is particularly relevant for black churches that neglect attention to physical access requirements in religious spaces. Additionally, it provokes thoughtful reflection on ways to interpret different-ableness theologically.

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[48] Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, 159.
[49] Douglas, 159.
[50] Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994).
[51] Eiesland.

M. Shaun Copeland's *Enfleshing Freedom* is a womanist theological anthropology that illuminates the materiality of black women's bodies as "visible black bodies in pain."[52] Grounding her work in the conviction that all humankind is created in the Imago Dei, Copeland argues that slavery renders a deformed Imago Dei by redefining the ontology of enslaved persons.[53] Using the narratives of emancipated women, Copeland shows how slavery reduced black women's bodies to objects of property, of reproduction, and of sexual violence.[54] Analyzing the particular social space of black women's bodies, Copeland extracts embodied epistemologies that have been ignored in modern and postmodern theory. Knowing and loving their bodies are two of the ways in which black women "fleshed out autonomy, self-determination, decision, and action."[55]

Despite historical social and political marking of black women's bodies, divine (re)marking by Jesus is experienced through Eucharist and the life of Christ. The material and corporeal body of Christ is marked by race, gender, sex, sexuality, culture and religion. Thus, Copeland writes, "The only body capable of taking us all in as we are with all our different body marks…is the body of Christ…This taking us in…is akin to sublation, not erasure…"[56] Simply stated, Christ's marking trumps all other body markings. Further, it is Jesus' body that compels us to place other bodies as the subjects of theological anthropology. "The crucified body is a condition for theological

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[52] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, Innovations (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 3.
[53] Copeland, 24.
[54] Copeland, 29.
[55] Copeland, 50.
[56] Copeland, 83.

anthropology that grasps the sacramentality of the body in the concrete as an expression of the freedom of the human subject."[57] Jesus of Nazareth is freedom enfleshed.

Imbedded in Copeland's work is a rhetorical drive that re-positions black women as a *new* anthropological subject.[58] Copeland's progression of language – from black people to black women to poor black women to poor red, brown, yellow, white, and black women, to women of color - reflects a commitment to centering epistemologies that have been historically marginalized.

Pastor and theologian Marcia Mount Shoop looks at the body from a worshiping congregational perspective, and critiques disembodiment within mainline Protestant worship, particularly Presbyterian worship. Similar to Copeland, Mount Shoop draws connections between the physical body and ecclesia, but Mount Shoop uses trauma, relationship, and ambiguity to discuss the embodied experiences of humankind. These experiences of the body more accurately depict ecclesia than do practices of intellectualism without feeling. Mount Shoop argues that the body is silenced and controlled in worship, and that the ritual of the Lord's Supper "dis-members, rather than re-members, the body."[59]

Mount Shoop intentionally uses women's experiences to make theological claims about the broader body politic. For example, she reinterprets the embodied experience of pregnancy to create an embodied theology that re-members the body. She explores the relational level of pregnancy and suggests that people are relationally intertwined much like mother and unborn child. The feelings associated with rape, pregnancy, and

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[57] Copeland, 130.
[58] Copeland, 105.
[59] Marcia W. Mount Shoop, *Let the Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ*, 1st ed, Emerging Theology Initiative (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 3.

motherhood underscore how the body feels and is felt. Therefore, Mount Shoop contends, theology must be such that it re-members and re-orients embodied experiences. This theological anthropology is useful in its centering of everyday women's bodies for theological reflection, but it neglects to engage the implications of rape, pregnancy, and motherhood in the context of gender, and race and class. It is helpful to this research project in that it offers a pathway of redemption for black women who may find themselves at risk of reduced fellowship within the black church due to rape, pre-marital pregnancy, and motherhood outside of marriage. While this research is not particularly focused on trauma, Mount Shoop's work stresses the criticality of relationships within the Christian church, to the gospel message. Interpersonal relationships with black laywomen influence how they are received as authoritative figures.

Finally, it is important to note that in concert with womanist theological interpretations, womanist biblical scholarship provides a means to re-read the biblical text for liberation. This scholarship serves as authorizing discourse in the context of black women's liberation in the black church. Contemporary womanist biblical scholars such as Nyasha Junior,[60] Kimberly D. Russaw,[61] and Wilda C. Gafney[62] emphasize the necessity of attentively listening to the text through the lens of characters that are in the background, in the side view, silenced, and traditionally overlooked. While Junior attends to womanist biblical interpretation broadly, Russaw and Gafney investigate the daughters of the text and women of the Torah, respectively. Womanist biblical

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[60] Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, First edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).
[61] Kimberly D. Russaw, *Daughters in the Hebrew Bible* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).
[62] Wilda Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, First edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017).

scholarship examines the language used in the text, and the ways in which biblical stories have been written and interpreted through patriarchal hegemonic lenses, which frame narratives in ways that fracture the witness of less-desirable biblical characters. For example, Hagar and Mary Magdalene are viewed as crucial to the gospel narrative, when given a re-read that privileges their experiences with the Divine as opposed to the descriptive labels traditionally assigned to each woman. Participants in this study acknowledged biblical interpretation as a primary source in their views about biblical authority, religious authority, and gender roles.

Mythologizing Women's Bodies: Cult of True Womanhood

Reinterpreting the work of sociologist Beth Ritchie, Stephanie Mitchem identifies gender entrapment as embedded in the process of growing up as a black girl/woman.[63] "Gender entrapment happens," Mitchem writes, "because women are lured by a desire to fit into a mistakenly perceived role of real and good women in American societies."[64] The literature shows that historically, the categories of 'real women' and 'good women' excluded black women.

Barbara Welter's 1966 publication *The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860* is insightful for understanding the consciousness of white women and notions about women in the nineteenth century. Welter shows how white men and women of the period perpetuated particular understandings of 'true womanhood.' Piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity characterized authentic femininity.[65] Religion was most

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[63] Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002), 7.
[64] Mitchem, 7.
[65] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 152.

appropriate for women, acting as a "tranquilizer for the many undefined longings…about which it was better to pray than to think."[66] Piety was directly linked to femininity and beauty.[67] Women were advised to participate in formal education only to the extent that it helped them embrace their divine call to piety and purity. They were admonished to resist the natural sensual proclivities of men, lest they be "left in sadness to bewail your credulity, imbecility, duplicity, and premature prostitution."[68] Women who lacked the discipline to remain sexually pure were considered "unnatural and unfeminine."[69]

The subordinate role of women flowed naturally from religious interpretations of Divine order. "Man was woman's superior by God's appointment," writes Welter, "if not in intellect, at least by official decree."[70] True women felt, even embraced, their dependency and accepted their position of inferiority. Welter summarized true womanhood in this way: "True feminine genius is ever timid, doubtful, and clingingly dependent; a perpetual childhood."[71] Piety, purity, and submissiveness were best lived out away from the pressures of society, in the home.

True womanhood involved donning the cloak of domesticity. While men engaged in matters of society and commerce in the public sphere, the mission of a true woman was to "not look away from her own little family circle for the means of producing moral and social reforms, but begin at home."[72] From housekeeping to rearing patriotic children to nursing the sick, true womanhood was constituted of those activities that

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[66] Welter, 153.
[67] Welter, 154.
[68] Welter, 155.
[69] Welter, 154.
[70] Welter, 159.
[71] Welter, 160.
[72] Welter, 163.

relegated women to the private sphere. Their public presence was constructed as delicate caregivers – caring for others, yet wholly dependent upon men and in need of protection. Welter notes that social reforms, the Civil War, industrialism, and missionary activities placed the aforementioned standards of true womanhood at risk. Women's literature and other discourse attempted to convince women that a stable ordered society depended upon their preserving the status quo.[73] "To that end," concludes Welter, "she [true woman] was identified with everything that was beautiful and holy."[74]

The true womanhood written about by Welter is based upon nineteenth century Victorian notions of womanhood, that is, white womanhood. The criteria of womanhood – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity – presumed whiteness as a precondition. By inscribing these criteria of womanhood upon American consciousness, white society located the non-woman, the unfeminine, in the body of the black woman. Dismissive of the conditions in which enslaved and freed black women struggled for existence, white women's literature created a myth of true womanhood that functioned to discount black women as women. Extreme field labor, non-existent gynecological care, exploitation of black women's reproductive capacity, and rape, are just a few of the ways in which the conditions of slavery allowed white women to craft a feminine narrative that excluded black women. Nevertheless, nineteenth century black women offered counterdiscourse and counternarratives to the myth of womanhood so ingrained in white consciousness.

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[73] Welter, 174.
[74] Welter, 174.

Materializing Women's Bodies: Black Womanhood

Even as white communities perpetuated 'true womanhood' in ways that excluded black women, black women scholars and religious women, known as Club Women, responded to this marginalizing ideology with counternarratives. Historian Frances White shows how black feminist scholarship interrupts the ways in which dominant discourse mis-portrays the historical black experience, particularly the identity formation of black women. White, a black feminist, points out how the myth of white womanhood served to justify the control of black bodies through enslavement, disenfranchisement and lynching. "The image of black men as savage beasts with an uncontrollable urge to rape white women resonated so deeply in the white psyche…"[75] As a result, white women were elevated to a "symbolic pedestal" characterized by the myth of fragile innocence.[76]

In effect, the myth of white womanhood both obscured the subordination of white women to white men, and positioned black women as the antithesis of womanhood. "To be positioned outside the protection of womanhood," writes White, "was to be labeled unrespectable."[77] The politics of respectability is one of the ways in which black elites endeavored to diffuse notions of black male savagery and black women's sexual immorality. The black Women's Club movement mobilized black women to uplift the race and to "have black women reclassified as *good* women."[78]

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[75] E. Frances White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability*, Mapping Racisms (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 32.
[76] White, 32.
[77] White, 33.
[78] White, 35.

The Women's Club Movement employed a two-pronged strategy of attack on the denigrating depictions of black women. While black women intellectuals presented lectures on black respectability, black churchwomen constructed standards of presentation and performance for black religious women. Black churchwomen used religion, particularly conformance to Christian standards, as a means to comport black women and present them as acceptable to a racist society. To resist the myth of hypersexuality, normal expressions of sexuality became cloaked in "pristine asexuality or narrowly defined respectable married identity."[79] For black churchwomen and clubwomen, transgression of the white imagination was essential for the survival of black women, and for progress of the black race.

Citing Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent,* White asserts that the politics of respectability were used as discourse of white resistance and discourse within the black community.[80] Whereas respectable white women were constrained to domesticity in the private sphere, respectable black women were necessarily politically active. "Respectable black women," White writes, "spoke outwardly against racist discourse but also inwardly to build the kind of black community in which they wanted to live."[81]

Clubwoman Nannie Helen Burroughs encouraged black women to work at respectable domestic employment, with training, as opposed to lazy free loading. "By becoming exponents of the blessed principles of honesty, cleanliness, and industry," Burroughs urged, "Negro women can bring dignity to service life; respect and trust to

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[79] Melissa V Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 61.
[80] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 - 1920*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 7.
[81] White, *Dark Continent of Our Bodies*, 37.

themselves; and honor to the race."[82] Similarly, Addie Waites Hunton noted the ongoing progress of black women. In "Negro Womanhood Defended" she writes,

> *"…she* [the negro woman] *has staggered up through the ages ladened with the double burden of excessive maternal care and physical toil…while climbing, has thrown off much of the dross and become more chastened and purified, conforming herself as fast as possible to the demand for upright Christian living. To all who are fair-minded and unprejudiced, it must be certain that nothing can stay the tide of her progress in its onward flow."*[83]

Anna Julia Cooper and Mary Church Terrell also stressed the personhood of black women, and the distinct role black women played in racial uplift. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Cooper affirmed the role of women as the moral compass of society, and conserver of those "deeper moral forces that make for the happiness of homes and the righteousness of the country."[84] Yet, moral compass is not the only role for which black women are suited. "No plan for renovating society, no scheme for purifying politics, no reform in church or state, no moral, social, or economic question, no movement on the human plane, is lost on her,"[85] wrote Cooper. She recognized the complexities of gender and race in America, and yet, affirmed the unique heritage of black women in America.[86]

Terrell's assessment of the state of black women in the early nineteenth century mirrors Cooper's assessment: "Not only are colored women with ambition and aspiration handicapped on account of their race, but they are almost everywhere baffled

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[82] Marcia Riggs, ed., *Can I Get a Witness?: Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997), 90.
[83] Riggs, 153.
[84] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995), 45.
[85] Guy-Sheftall, 49.
[86] Guy-Sheftall, 49.

and mocked because of their race."[87] Terrell, like her black women contemporaries, is hopeful and praises the progress of black women, despite malicious representation and the "fateful heritage of slavery."[88] She presents a litany of some of the accomplishments of black women, working in church societies, clubs, and other organizations, educating, employing, and enhancing the black race. The far-reaching influence of Cooper, Terrell, and their prophetic contemporaries on black women's intellectual discourse should not be understated. Their contributions may be characterized by these words:

> *"Lifting as they climb, onward and upward they go, struggling and striving and hoping that the buds and blossoms of their desires may burst into glorious fruition ere long. Seeking no favors because of their color nor charity because of their needs, they knock at the door of Justice and ask for an equal chance."*[89]

In the 21st Century, black femininity and womanhood has far expanded beyond the visions expressed by Cooper, Terrell, and their contemporaries. Womanism accounts for the black women who claim femininity, even as they defy conformance to socially constructed standards of feminine embodiment. As discussed earlier, black women live at the crossroads of life, that is, crossroads of gender, race, class, economic status, and other marginalizing markers such as sexuality. I include a brief discussion on sexuality because heteronormativity remains pervasive in the black church context, leaving one to question – what about those black laywomen who live outside gender binaries and heteronormativity? To be "black.female.queer", is to live at the crossroads of which Douglas writes.[90]

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[87] Guy-Sheftall, 64.
[88] Guy-Sheftall, 65.
[89] Guy-Sheftall, 68.
[90] Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012). "Black.female.queer" syntax maintained as used by the author.

In the *Erotic Life of Racism*, Sharon P. Holland, professor of African and African American Studies, argues that critical race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory have not only lost touch with one another, they have lost touch with the black.female.queer.[91] This body, the black female queer body, is left without representation in the face of quotidian practices of racism. She addresses racism as significant in the seemingly benign instances of everyday encounters. Holland's work pointedly shows how even within the community of black womanhood, black.female.queer bodies are othered and marginalized, if not ignored. The implications of this claim are all the more significant for black religious queer women, who navigate marginalization within faith communities. Holland shows how blackness, womanhood, and queerness intersect to create complex life experiences. I question how blackness, womanhood, queerness, *and* black religiosity converge, often to the detriment of black women.

While the research questions in this study did not include sexuality, how the black church responds to black queer women is an additional avenue of study for the intersections of race, religion, gender, and sexuality. For this research, it is sufficient to note that those who might serve the local church are likely rejected in traditional black religious spaces, based on assumptions about sexuality. This research is committed to the wholeness, wellness, and spirituality of all persons, particularly black women and women of color, regardless of sexuality. It holds race, gender, class, sexuality, and faith as inseparable in everyday living.

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[91] Holland.

~Participant Profile~

June grew up with aunts and uncles who were clergy. She recalls the Baptist church of her youth as a family congregation where her aunt and uncle co-pastored, but her aunt did most of the preaching. Though she is used to black women with religious authority, she believes it is a cultural habit to place men in most places of leadership within the church. She hesitantly suggests that some positions are just better suited for men, and some for women, though she does not want to define those positions according to physical labor. June affirms black laywomen with religious authority and wants to see more enter ordained ministry.

Chapter Two. Religious Authority and Black Women's Positionality

Black Women and Religious Authority

> *"Whether in their roles as soloists, ushers, nurses, church mothers, Sunday school teachers, missionaries, pastor's aides, deaconesses, stewardesses, or prayer warriors, women are at the core of the black church, which could not exist without them. This reality is often eclipsed by the emphasis on the preaching and visionary tasks that define the pastoral office, which males have dominated."*[92]

The aforementioned quote captures the essence of the motivations for this research. I show that black women in the 21st century continue a legacy of carving out their own spaces of religious authority with or without institutional validation. Building upon the heritage of African foremothers who were "priestesses, queens, midwives, diviners, herbalists…female deities…and rulers,"[93] contemporary African American

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[92] Daphne C. Wiggins, *Righteous Content: Black Women's Perspectives of Church and Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2.
[93] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 276.

women claim and execute religious authority, with or without endorsement as preachers. The largely male leadership of mainline black denominations and other faith traditions might suggest a docile following of women; this is woefully incorrect. "The black churches would scarcely have survived without the active support of black women…,"[94] asserts Lincoln and Mamiya. Black women serve in a myriad of ministries across denominations, as monographs by Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, and Daphne C. Wiggins show. Furthermore, scholarship such as *Between Sundays*,[95] *Making a Way Out of No Way*,[96] *Unfinished Business*,[97] *Too Heavy a Yoke*,[98] and *When Momma Speaks*,[99] and *Ain't I A Womanist, Too?*[100] are but a sampling of recent womanist and black feminist writings that offer insight into the richness of black women's public and private lives. Each of these projects addresses particular aspects of black women's lives, including views into black women's religiosity. The religious lives of black women cannot be reduced to simplistic arguments over women's ordination; rather, they reflect a breadth of religious performances that decenter institutional religious authority. This research project is specifically connected to the scholarship of Daphne Wiggins, Marcia Riggs, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes.

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94 Lincoln and Mamiya, 275.
95 Marla Faye Frederick, *Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: Berkeley : University of California Press, 2003).
96 Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, Innovations : African American Religious Thought (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2008).
97 Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2012).
98 Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, Ore: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2014).
99 Stephanie R. Buckhanon Crowder, *When Momma Speaks: The Bible and Motherhood from a Womanist Perspective*, Nth edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).
100 Monica A. Coleman, ed., *Ain't I a Womanist, Too?: Third-Wave Womanist Religious Thought* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

In *Righteous Content: Black Women's Perspectives of Church and Faith,* Wiggins shows how African American women in two Baptist congregations understand their religious commitments and relationship with the black church. *Righteous Content* offers insight into the ways in which black women were an integral part of the social uplift of African Americans as well as in building the religious institutions that sustained black life in America at the turn of the 21st Century.[101] Wiggins particularly responds to the acclaimed *Righteous Discontent*, in which Higginbotham provides an analysis of black women in the Baptist church from 1880-1920, and how they navigated class and race, while working to alleviate poverty and other ills that plagued black communities. Whereas Higginbotham argues that "women were unsettled about the state of affairs in their denomination and churches," Wiggins "finds evidence of a different resolve."[102]

Wiggins interviewed thirty-eight black laywomen to gather real narratives of religious life that were often untold in the history of Protestantism. These stories reveal the complexities of authority and agency in black women's religious lives, beyond the oft touted women's ordination disputes. "To equate the official ordination of female clergy with female power," writes Wiggins, "obfuscates other manifestations of women's power and agency."[103] Furthermore, it renders insignificant the ways in which laywomen created alternative power bases in the community and in the church. This alternative agency is not without merit.

[101] Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 10.
[102] Wiggins, 11.
[103] Wiggins, 113.

"Our hope for transforming the moral life of the African American church must be built on the willingness of the community's members to sojourn together on a quest for sexual-gender justice."[104]

Riggs' *Plenty Good Room* describes the black church as a site of sexual-gender oppression.[105] The term 'site', writes Riggs, signifies the examination of the black church as "a particular context that shapes the encounters between African American men and women into practices that promote the subordination of women by men."[106] The social history of the African American church, as described by sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, provides the basis upon which sexual-gender inequity is perpetuated. Sexual-gender ethics refer to the "morality governing the relations between women and men who are biologically different beings (sexual) with socially constructed meanings of being female and male (gender) that they bring to both their private and public interactions."[107]

Despite an overt orientation toward justice and equity for humanity, the black church maintains a narrow view of gender justice. Heterosexist, patriarchal norms remain prevalent in the 21st century black church. Riggs questions why on the one hand the black church has been a cornerstone in the quest for social justice and equality, yet, on the other hand, has been less willing to examine internal gender injustice.[108] She asserts that "human agency is critical to moral and institutional transformation."[109] The injustice perpetuated by black men against black women in the context of the black

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[104] Marcia Riggs, *Plenty Good Room: Women versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 116.
[105] Riggs, 65.
[106] Riggs, 76.
[107] Riggs, 21.
[108] Riggs, 80.
[109] Riggs, 29.

church is an ongoing subject of study and critique by scholars. However, patriarchal practices have not left black religious women impotent. As Wiggins, Townsend Gilkes and others have shown, laywomen have created avenues of access and agency for themselves, in the face of rejection and resistance. In lieu of the ethical transformation proposed by Riggs, black laywomen assert themselves in the leadership and decisionmaking processes of the church.

Townsend Gilkes shows how overemphasis on the masculine pulpit of the black church situates African American women on the margins of black religious traditions, and thus, underrepresented in the upper echelons of traditional clerical authority. The association of certain religious roles with women, and other religious roles with men, also known as dual-sex politics, characterizes the ways in which African American churches "conformed to its counterpart in the dominant culture."[110] Whereas African women participated in religious leadership without hindrance, the adoption of western theological interpretations by former enslaved and African Diaspora clergymen caused shifts in the acceptable roles of women in the African American church.

By excluding African American women from recognition as clergy and other positions of religious authority, black clergymen at once narrowed the formally recognized positions of black women in religious spaces, and unintentionally created conditions in which laywomen performed religious authority outside the pulpit. As black clergymen sought to align themselves with the religious interpretations of their white counterparts, the role of black clergywomen and laywomen in formal church leadership shifted. Townsend Gilkes shows how African American women, particularly

[110] Cheryl Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women--: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2001).

in the Pentecostal traditions, emerged with prominent status as they built organizational structures for the 'women's work.' Formally referred to as The Women's Department, the women's arm of the black Pentecostal church was space created by women and for women, to exercise their callings to ministry and to uplift black church traditions as a whole. In this way black laywomen across faith traditions blur the lines of governing and ministering authority. When governing authority is dislocated from the pastorate, the prevalence of black women's leadership in religious spaces is made visible.

Lisa Stephenson's "Prophesying Women and Ruling Men: Women's Religious Authority in North American Pentecostalism" offers a counterargument to this claim.[111] She argues that despite the increase of women in religious positions within the Pentecostal tradition, governing authority is both historically and contemporarily withheld from women. Biblical interpretations that insist on men as the 'head' undergird the resistance to women attaining the highest levels of religious office. This study connects to Stephenson's by interrogating religious authority in a United Methodist Church through the lens of the laity. Do the categories of governing and ministering authority adequately describe the practices of black laywomen? Furthermore, I am interested in how culture, gender, religious experience, and other formative elements, influence one's perception of who is rightly afforded religious authority and what constitutes that authority.

In contrast to the aforementioned examples, anthropologist Hans Baer argues that black women left mainline denominations in the US, and migrated to Spiritualist churches to exercise leadership and authority. Whereas mainline black denominations

[111] Lisa P. Stephenson, "Prophesying Women and Ruling Men: Women's Religious Authority in North American Pentecostalism," *Religions* 2, no. 3 (2011): 410–26, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel2030410.

marginalized women, 19th Century Spiritualist churches empowered women at the highest levels of the organizations. Acceptance of women as chosen by God for religious leadership was prevalent. However, Baer's research shows that personal empowerment does not equate to structural empowerment. He identifies three models within the tradition: the royal kingdom; the male-pastor/female-assistant pastor team; and the male pastor as figurehead. Each model reinforces the male dominated hierarchy of the institutional black church, as evidenced in the Spiritualist tradition. Instances wherein women possessed spiritual authority, such as mediums in seances, have often been replaced by male figures who "came to preside over large meetings and addressed in a conscious state, whereas women did so often in a state of trance."[112]

With the church as one of the main avenues for upward social mobility of African Americans, males tended to restrict leadership to themselves, across denominational lines. Baer links the ceiling placed on women to the racism experienced by black men, and the subsequent quest for validation and authority. As black men sought power and recognition in religious settings, black women were relegated to supportive roles. Whereas Baer asserts that black women sought religious authority outside of the mainline black churches by embracing the Spiritualist movement, Wiggins, Riggs, and Townsend Gilkes show that black laywomen redefined religious authority within the mainline traditions of the black church. Notwithstanding patriarchy and discriminatory practices within the community of faith, black laywomen embrace and expand their place in the history of the black church. Regardless.

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[112] Hans A. Baer, "The Limited Empowerment of Women in Black Spiritual Churches: An Alternative Vehicle to Religious Leadership," *Sociology of Religion* 54, no. 1 (March 1993): 14, http://vlex.com/vid/empowerment-spiritual-churches-vehicle-53351617.

Black Feminine Positionality

A Subject in Jeopardy

The institution of slavery positioned black women such that they were required to fulfill capitalist demands through labor, and thus, excluded black women from the purported feminine class. Double jeopardy refers to the predicament of being black and being woman in an imperialist patriarchal culture.[113] Black women are dehumanized based on a social construction of blackness, and at the same time, historical descriptions of the female gender exclude black women. Beal's attention to race and gender aptly describes the social conditions in which the misrecognition of black women is embedded.

Sociologist Deborah King asserts that the phrase "multiple jeopardy" is a more useful metaphor to describe the intersecting (as opposed to additive) nature of oppressions experienced by black women.[114] Deviating from the race-sex dichotomy of dominant oppressions, King argues that the modifier 'multiple' refers to the multiplicative relationships that converge in opposition to black women. "The importance of any one factor in explaining black women's circumstances varies depending on the particular aspect of our lives under consideration…"[115] King does not place valuation on oppressions, but intentionally particularizes black women's experience as unique. Black women are expected to privilege their race (racial solidarity and race liberation) *or* their sex, but, King contends, it is the interstices of race and sex and class and sexuality, and other forms of oppression, that distinguish black women's

[113] Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, 296.
[114] Guy-Sheftall, 297.
[115] Guy-Sheftall, 297.

experiences. Womanism is an analytical framework and methodology which makes space for the intersubjectivity of black women. As counterpoints to Welter's white womanhood, womanists hold central black feminine embodiment, and all the ways in which black women impact the world.

Reimaging Black Womanhood Theologically: Womanist Theology

> *"What characterizes womanist discourse is that black women are engaged in the process of knowledge production that is most necessary for their own flourishing rather than being exploited for the enlightenment and entertainment of white psyches and male egos."*[116]

Womanist theology emerged as a theological enterprise by black women to express God-talk from their vantage point, rather than through the lenses of theologies that ignore black feminine embodiment. In *Introducing Womanist Theology*, Stephanie Mitchem introduces the reader to religious discourse that privileges the lived experience of black women. Mitchem presents the contours of womanist theology, its originating scholars, and the social conditions in which the interpretive method emerged. Noting as foundational the texts of Alice Walker,[117] Delores Williams,[118] Katie Cannon,[119] Audre Lorde,[120] and Jacquelyn Grant,[121] Mitchem shows how the scholarly writings converged as a theological enterprise. "Womanist theology is the systematic,

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[116] Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 2.
[117] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, A Harvest Book (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004).
[118] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Nachdr. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993).
[119] Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, no. 60 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988).
[120] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, c2007, n.d.).
[121] Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, no. 64 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).

faith-based exploration of the many facets of African American women's religiosity…based on the complex realities of black women's lives,"[122] writes Mitchem. By valuing the ontology and epistemologies of black women, and women of color, womanist theology reimages black women as real beings, rather than stereotypical caricatures of the white imagination. Womanist theology seeks to reclaim the marginalized epistemologies of black women and their lived experiences.

Womanist theologians employ a hermeneutic of suspicion in re-reading religious histories, reclaiming the lives of black women as historically valuable rather than extinguishable, inconsequential or disposable. Womanists are committed to naming and disrupting the proposed contradictions of being black and female, and constructing discourse that neutralizes those contradictions. As such womanist work resists the limiting structures that confine black women to certain jobs, class status, education, ways of knowing and ways of being.

Womanist interpretation examines sacred texts, considering the lived experience of black women. It deconstructs Eurocentric patriarchal theologies that silence black women. Womanist theologians refuse to allow the histories of black women to be subsumed by a totalizing black experience. Rather, womanists critique themselves, their communities, and society, for the ways in which black women are marginalized. Moreover, womanists deconstruct hegemonic practices and structures that maintain and perpetuate the cultural production of evil against black women's bodies.[123] Considering the centrality of faith and spirituality to many black women, womanist

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[122] Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology*, ix.
[123] Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

theology interrogates the faith community, particularly the black church, concerning traditional church doctrines that restrict, control, and silence black women under the guise of Divine mandate.

More recently, womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas edited *Deeper Shades of Purple*, an anthology of womanist writings in religion and society. The collection of writings allows first/second/third generation womanist scholars and allies to share their journey as womanists, as well as their critique for future refinement of the discipline. Organized around Alice Walker's seminal definition of womanism, the edited volume explicates the definition, and at the same time, defies the boundaries of the definition to show the malleability of the discipline. It makes normal the practices of black women who craft and create adaptive possibilities in everyday life; possibilities that were ignored or trivialized in discourse by white men. The volume maintains the four tenets of womanism derived from Walker's definition – radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement, and adds the tenet of appropriation and reciprocity. See Table 1.

Radical Subjectivity	*A process that emerges as black females in the nascent phase of their identity development come to understand agency as the ability to defy a forced naiveté in an effort to influence the choices made in one's life and how conscientization incites resistance against marginality*
Traditional Communalism	*The affirmation of the loving connections and relational bonds formed by black women—including familial, maternal, platonic, religious, sexual, and spiritual ties. Black women's ability to create, re-member, nurture, protect, sustain, and liberate communities which are marked and measured…by the acts of inclusivity, mutuality, reciprocity, and self-care practices within*
Redemptive Self-Love	*An assertion of the humanity, customs, and aesthetic value in contradistinction to the commonly held stereotypes characteristic of white solipsism. The admiration and celebration of the distinctive and identifiable beauty of black women*
Critical Engagement	*The epistemological privilege of black women born of their totalistic experience with the forces of interlocking systems of oppression and strategic options they devised to undermine them*
Appropriation and Reciprocity	*The intentional and concomitant effort of others to participate in solidarity with and on behalf of black women who have made available, shared, and translated their wisdom, strategies, and methods for the universal task of liberating the oppressed and speaking truth to power*

Table 1 Womanist Tenets[124]

The latter category, writes Floyd-Thomas, "analyzes the ongoing critical dialogue among womanist and nonwomanist scholars regarding theories and practices of justice in religion and society…."[125] The volume shows the multivocality of womanist work, and the intentionality with which womanists assert epistemological privilege, both in the realm of academia and everyday life. Womanism and its sister discipline, black feminism, are central to this research project, as the lens' through which I analyze the everyday lived experiences of black laywomen.

Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness* is a definitive text in womanist theological scholarship. Williams uses the life of the biblical Hagar as a prism through

[124] Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*. Excerpts selected from each section Introduction.
[125] Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 7.

which to demonstrate the operative motif of survival and quality of life for black women.[126] The project deviates from black theology in its insistence on survival of black women, rather than liberation from all oppressive structures. Hagar personifies the ability to endure and thrive against and in spite of the odds, an enduring characteristic that typifies the experience of enslaved and emancipated black women.

Noting the various forms of surrogacy imposed upon black women historically, Williams proposes a Christology that is not dependent upon Jesus' surrogacy for redemption. She locates redemption in the life of Christ, as opposed to the bloody cross. Williams urges womanist theologians against the orthodox substitutionary role of Jesus as a necessity for redemption. Rather, "redemption had to do with God," and God's vision for humankind manifested in Jesus Christ.[127] Jesus' *ministerial* vision of life is one that resists domination, marginalization, and oppression. Womanist theologians, according to Williams, appropriate the life of Christ as an ethical imperative. Second and third wave womanist theologians continue to expand on the ethical ways in which sacred texts are reinterpreted, not only for black women, but for all persons who find themselves on the edges of society.

Refuting Stereotypical Images

Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes argues that the fantastic hegemonic imagination creates stereotypical images of black womanhood that result in false narratives, commodification of black identity, and questioning of black isness. [128] In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes deconstructs the myths

[126] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 6.
[127] Williams, 165.
[128] Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

of black women as *Mammy*, *Sapphire*, *Black Matriarch* and *Topsy,* and contends that these images are mythical portrayals of black women that serve to reinforce white hegemony, patriarchy, and dominance in discourse.

Utilizing the interplay of memory and history, Townes shows "how a stereotype is shaped into truth in memory and in history."[129] Her counternarrative disrupts the denigrating 'truths' perpetuated about black enslaved women and free women under the gaze of racism. For instance, the mythical Mammy is unraveled as an image produced by the white psyche to refute accusations that white slave owners raped black enslaved women. "Mammy is constructed as an ugly antidote to such charges," Townes writes. "After all, who would abuse a desexualized, fat, old Black woman when the only other morally viable alternative was the idealized white woman?"[130] The Mammy image "confuses and distracts from the living proof of miscegenation."[131]

At the core of Townes' project is her ethical commitment to humankind, in general, and black women and women of color, in particular. Townes envisions the use of microhistories and countermemory as means to dismantle evil productions of black women. Echoing George Lipsitz, Townes writes, "Countermemory is that which seeks to disrupt ignorance and invisibility. It is a way of "remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal.""[132] Countermemory is a reconstitution of history.[133] The local histories of black women, told by black women, are

[129] Townes, 3.
[130] Townes, 31.
[131] Townes, 32.
[132] Townes, 22.
[133] Townes, 24.

"microhistories…ignored or forgotten or discounted histories of real people…."[134] Microhistories allow history to be told another way.

Chanequa Walker-Barnes tackles another image, the myth of the StrongBlackWoman (SBW).[135] Unlike the aforementioned images, Walker-Barnes locates the origins of the SBW in the racial uplift movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Black Club women and church women crafted "politics of responsibility" as counterdiscourse to denigrating images birthed in the white racist imagination. [136] The counter-model of black womanhood was characterized by industriousness, personal achievement, independence, self-reliance, strength, morality, etiquette, good home-keeping skills, and "effortless perfection."[137] In contrast to the piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity of white womanhood,[138] the SBW image emerged as true womanhood intertwined with black genius.[139]

"African Americans," Walker-Barnes writes, "were encouraged to construct public identities that would refute the negative images of white racial ideology and prove blacks as worthy of respect."[140] Black women faced the double bind of not only proving themselves as worthy human beings, but also as women. The SBW model of black womanhood was intentionally disseminated in black communities to disprove white

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[134] Townes, 15.
[135] Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, Ore: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2014). StrongBlackWoman syntax maintained as used by the author.
[136] Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 95. Walker-Barnes uses politics of responsibility rather than politics of respectability.
[137] Walker-Barnes, 101.
[138] Walker-Barnes, 91.
[139] Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*. Barnes describes the cult of black genius as a mirror to the cult of European genius. Likened to Victor Anderson's "ontological blackness," it is counterdiscourse aimed at disproving White racist notions of black identity. The cult of black genius: rejected categorical racism and its depiction of blacks; argued for historical explanations of black moral failures, rather than categorical; regarded black racial identity as commensurate with civic republican humanism; and called for racial uplift as evidence of black cultural genius and civilization.
[140] Walker-Barnes, 96.

assumptions about black women's identity and be-ing in the world. The impression management efforts of Club and churchwomen yielded the SBW, a myth that "embodies a tension between submission and resistance towards racist and sexist images of African American women," Walker-Barnes argues.[141]

The SBW image constrains black women to yet another mis-identity crafted in response to the white gaze. Though framed as an affirmation of black womanhood, it risks obscuring the political, economic, and social inequities that continually shape daily life for black women. "While she [strong black woman] creates a standard for self-improvement and racial empowerment," writes political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry, "she also encourages silence in the face of structural barriers."[142] As a psychologist and pastoral care-giver, Walker-Barnes grounds her project in genuine concern for the holistic care and well-being of black women. To that end, she offers a SBW recovery approach that mimics a 12-step recovery program.[143]

The literature also indicates that visual images themselves generate disparate perceptions about black women. In an article published in *Media Psychology*, researchers show how mediated portrayals of black women influence judgments about black women.[144] Participant groups, who were exposed to Mammy and Jezebel images prior to viewing black women in social situations, were more likely to assess the women as aggressive and angry. In contrast, respondents who were not exposed to the images were more likely to assess the same women as sincere and gentle. The study indicates

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[141] Walker-Barnes, 97.
[142] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 216.
[143] Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 186.
[144] Sonja M. Brown Givens and Jennifer L. Monahan, "Priming Mammies, Jezebels, and Other Controlling Images: An Examination of the Influence of Mediated Stereotypes on Perceptions of an African American Woman.," *Media Psychology* 7, no. 1 (February 2005): 87–106.

that the proliferation of stereotypical images of black women reinforces a subconscious social bias against black women that is rooted in racist ideology.

(Mis)Recognition

Tracing a lineage of the strong black woman, Harris-Perry shows how the intersection of segregation, patriarchy, and racism created specific conditions for the democratic citizenship of black women. The strong black woman emerged as a "racial and citizenship imperative," writes Harris-Perry.[145] She argues that the internal, psychological, emotional and personal experiences of black women are political because black women have always had to resist against derogatory assumptions about their character and identity.[146]

Using 'crooked room' research, Harris-Perry describes the ways in which black women contort and accommodate themselves to align in the United States political economy.[147] Participants in the study were "placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically." [148] The research shows that while some of the participants perceived themselves as situated straight, in the crooked room, others adjusted themselves upright, despite their crooked surroundings.[149] Harris-Perry contends that black women in America are standing in a crooked room. Analogous to the shifting described by researchers Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, "some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion" created by racial and gender stereotypes.[150] Harris-Perry extends Jones' and Shorter-Gooden's analysis by

[145] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 21.
[146] Harris-Perry, 5.
[147] Harris-Perry, 29.
[148] Harris-Perry, 29.
[149] Harris-Perry, 80.
[150] Harris-Perry, 29.

suggesting that negative assumptions about black women "influences how they understand themselves as citizens, and what they believe is possible in their relationship with the state."[151]

Harris-Perry characterizes the struggle of African American women as a problem of recognition. In Hegelian philosophy *anerkennung* refers to the "mutually affirming recognition that allows citizens to operate as equals within the confines of the social contract."[152] For Hegel, "rights remain mere possibilities unless they become actual in the [ethical] medium of recognition."[153] Hegel proposes three levels or dimensions of recognition: the interpersonal dimension, characterized by love and marriage; the impersonal formal dimension, characterized by property ownership, contracts, and relationships between individuals and institutions; and state recognition, characterized by national ethical standards for persons, similar to that of family relations.[154] It is Hegel's third dimension of recognition – state recognition – that informs Harris-Perry's argument for the misrecognition of black women in America.

Citing political scientist Patchen Markell, Harris-Perry writes, "Recognition is not a thing of which one has more or less, rather [it is] a social interaction that can go well or poorly in various ways."[155] The misrecognition of black women is informed by controlling images that place black women on the margins of American society and complicate democratic citizenship. For example, equitable distribution of political and economic goods to the American citizenry is related to the visibility of all citizens. The

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[151] Harris-Perry, 35.
[152] Harris-Perry, 36.
[153] Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: Berkeley : University of California Press, 1997).
[154] Williams., 3.
[155] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 41.

"interplay of recognition and redistribution" disproportionately affects black women because of the ways in which black women are rendered invisible by classism, sexism, and racism.[156]

Moreover, Hegel's recognition theory presupposes freedom. "Recognition is the process wherein and whereby freedom becomes both actual and ethical."[157] For Hegel, genuine autonomy, or freedom, comes only through recognition by and in others. Stated another way, self-determination in a social and political economy is directly influenced by one's visibility, or lack thereof. Hegel's master/slave relationship may be interpreted as one of unequal recognition, "a transitional, inherently unstable, configuration of intersubjectivity."[158] I would argue that black women experience a *mis*configuration of intersubjectivity, facilitated by historical stereotypes. Authentic autonomy is realized through "reciprocal recognition" of others.[159] Jones and Shorter-Gooden show how black women respondents often compromise their authentic selves in pursuit of recognition.

In the African American Women's Voices Project, Jones and Shorter-Gooden endeavored to find out "in what ways Black women change how they behave in order to counter the myths and manage direct acts of discrimination."[160] The study found that black women 'shift' to accommodate differences in class, gender, and ethnicity, changing tone, attitude or behavior "as easily as they blink their eyes or draw a breath—without thinking," write Jones and Shorter-Gooden.[161]

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[156] Harris-Perry, 42.
[157] Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition, 6*.
[158] Williams, 10.
[159] Williams, 10.
[160] Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (New York, NY: Perennial, 2004), 13.
[161] Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 16.

> *"Shifting is what she does when she speaks one way in the office, another way to her girlfriends, and still another way to her elderly relatives. It is what may be going on when she enters the beauty parlor with dreadlocks and leaves with straightened hair…shifting is often internal, invisible. It's the chipping away at her sense of self, at her feelings of wholeness and centeredness…"*[162]

According to the research, significant numbers of American black women feel the necessity to present themselves to the world in such a way that is socially acceptable, though not wholly faithful to their true selves.[163] This re-presentation of self includes measuring themselves against Eurocentric beauty standards. The inability to meet acceptable aesthetic markers such as skin color, hair texture and body shape causes extreme pain and shame. The study found that many Black women are pushed to what the authors call the "lily complex," or the belief that the only way to be beautiful is to look as close to "white" as possible.[164]

Jones and Shorter-Gooden contend that *all black women shift*, sometimes consciously, but more often subconsciously – "she's shifting on automatic pilot."[165] Though the black church is often a place of solace and escape from the expectations placed upon black women in America, it is also "a place where black women have to fight to be seen as equal, as capable, as valuable, as whole."[166] In a space where black women seek relief and revival, they find themselves shifting for acceptance; shifting for recognition; and shifting for visibility. The constant self-adjusting may lead to the "yo-yo paradox," or the feeling that she is always on

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[162] Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 17.
[163] Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 21.
[164] Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 358.
[165] Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 132.
[166] Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 550.

guard, self-conscious, or "treading on shaky ground."[167] These feelings of instability are emotionally costly and add to the complex of conditions that threaten the health and wellbeing of black women. Townsend-Gilkes stresses the spectrum of mixed messages with which black women contend daily:

> *If we deviate from the dominant culture norms by being too dark or too light, we suffer a myriad of assaults on our self-esteem…If we are light and European-looking, we may find it easier to become campus queens, wives, and girlfriends…If we are dark and full figured…members of our community presume that we are ready to take charge of our church organization and our little brothers and sisters…If we are women clergy who are dark and large, we are attacked for embodying a mammy stereotype; however, if we are light and thin we are told that we are "too pretty to preach."*[168]

This is the paradox of the black female body in America: loved and troubled. Poor, less educated black women, with round bodies, as Townsend-Gilkes notes, are particularly vulnerable to the cultural humiliation and societal vitriol perpetrated against black women's bodies.[169] In this light, as Townsend-Gilkes asserts, "[Alice] Walker's insistence that a womanist 'loves love and food and roundness' takes on the character of a revolutionary manifesto."[170] "Loves herself. *Regardless*" is the black woman's exclamation point to life.[171]

By loving themselves and their black bodies, every day black women both defy constructed visual norms and reconstruct dimensions of beauty not dictated by the capitalist media and the white gaze. Visual nonconformity empowers women to

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[167] Jones and Shorter-Gooden, 135.
[168] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Role of Women in the Sanctified Church.," *Journal of Religious Thought* 43, no. 1 (March 1, 1986): 184.
[169] Cheryl Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women--: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2001), 188.
[170] Gilkes, 193.
[171] Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*.

perform beauty on their own terms and mitigates ways in which beauty standards in America marginalize black women and exoticize other women of color. Throughout history black women have used strategies of resistance to counter normative ideology and practices that violate black women's bodies and be-ings.

~Participant Profile~

Carla grew up surrounded by women in authority, and viewed this as an extension of the local church. She actively works in ministry with her mother and does not see gender as a determinant for religious authority. She is astutely attuned to the prevailing stereotypes about black women, and how these stereotypes impact black laywomen performing religious authority. Carla is a professional-working woman, and acknowledges how she shifts in differing spaces, to defy denigrating stereotypes.

Chapter Three. Symphonies of Resistance

During my doctoral studies I was a teaching assistant for a Womanist Theology course. I recall the professor asking us to fill in the blank: black women are_____. Immediately students responded almost univocally with "strong!" While a list of other adjectives and attributes filled the air, strong remained the dominant characteristic associated with black women. The discussion after this opening prompt challenged students to deconstruct how this seemingly affirming attribute often underscores caricatures of black women that don't take seriously the true experiences of living in the United States in the 21st Century, while black and a woman.

The experiences of black women are not new phenomena, but robust discussion about black women's existence and life practices are still limited in the broader spaces of the academy. The scholarship of black women remains additive in syllabi and often relegated to special topics in the specified discipline. Nonetheless, black women scholars persist. This chapter offers a glimpse into the ways in which black women scholars resist misperceptions of their identities, capabilities, and capacities for

knowledge generation. I assert that these strategies of resistance are transferable to black laywomen who resist in religious spaces. This chapter brings forward offensive and defensive strategies that are helpful when thinking about how black laywomen flourish in the performance of religious authority.

Recognition of Difference

Audre Lorde offers several strategies of resistance for black women who have been ignored, muted, silenced and misrecognized. A forerunner in black feminist discourse, Lorde's *Sister Outsider* provides readers a glimpse into the public and private life of Lorde, and the ways in which she navigated race, sexuality, and class. One of her most quoted essays, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," critiques academic feminists for not recognizing their own complicity with patriarchy and institutionalized othering. "This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors," writes Lorde, "to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns."[172] Lorde suggests that generalizing women's experiences under a single category is a practice that mimics white men's recognition of women as a whole, without distinguishing factors. Recognition of difference is critical to addressing the needs of all women, as opposed to the universal women's agenda, proposed by formally educated, middle-upper class white women. The pretense of homogeneity under the guise of 'sisterhood' results in distortions and mis-naming of those who deviate from the mythical norm.[173]

Lorde's insistence on differentiation is a strategy used by black women for recognition and identity clarification. By refusing to allow her raced-gendered-sexed

[172] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 113.
[173] Lorde, 116.

body to be subsumed in the larger feminist project, Lorde demonstrates not only her own individuality, but also the ways in which the dominant culture seeks to camouflage universality as a social good. The particularities of race, gender, class, and sexuality must not be bracketed in the name of false solidarity.

Silence & Storytelling

"I have often repented of having spoken," said Arsenius, "but never of having remained silent."[174] While Arsenius' commitment to silence may be suitable as a spiritual discipline, it is particularly problematic for black women who have been politically, economically, socially, and culturally silenced against their volition. The muting of black women publicly and privately has contributed to the maintenance of hegemonic phallocentric epistemological norms. The entrance, or rather, irruption, of black women's voices into academic discourse and religious spheres called for reexamination of that which had been posited as the standard.

Though at times silence was used as a strategy for survival of enslaved women, Lorde contends, "even if we maintain silence, there is still pain."[175] She writes, "For we have been socialized to respect our fear more than our needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us."[176] In her reflections, Lorde recounts how her silence did not mitigate her fears or change the outcomes of her difficult condition; thus, she concludes, "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation."[177]

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[174] Henri J. M Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 36.
[175] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 44.
[176] Lorde, 44.
[177] Lorde, 42.

Breaking silence moves women toward wholeness and self-identification. Breaking silence moves black women from invisibility to visibility. While silence once facilitated safety for black women, in effect, it produced hidden figures in hidden spaces that could be discounted. Taking voice is an act of taking back, talking back, and reclaiming the richness that is black womanhood. A study by sociologist Amy Wilkins' provides an example of black women escaping silence and using storytelling as a means to identity clarification.

In "Becoming Black Women," Wilkins examines how black college women used interracial stories as resources to create and manage collective identities.[178] The study focuses on the ways in which black women from predominantly white backgrounds faced identity crises as they matriculated through higher education. More particularly, the study participants shared how the propensity of black male students to date white women caused black women students to understand themselves differently in the world. Two respondents explained, "I never realized my blackness until I came here. I never hung out with black people until I came here; never heard specific comments like 'black people do this'…here, it is almost like, you have to [racially] identify."[179] Furthermore, repeated hostile encounters with white students, Wilkins writes, "pushed [black] women to think about themselves, newly, as black and to seek out other black students."[180] Respondents relayed their identity-forming experiences through stories about interracial intimacy and outright rejection by black male students.

[178] Amy C. Wilkins, "Becoming Black Women," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2012): 180.
[179] Wilkins, 181.
[180] Wilkins, 181.

Wilkins argues that the interracial stories are a form of storytelling used by participants to navigate race, class, and gender identities.[181] The stories "create a collective identity, imbue it with meaning, and socialize black women into common dispositions and practices."[182] The intimate stories of black women converge with existing cultural phenomena and become cultural vehicles, "through which they craft…and enact solutions to the everyday identity dilemmas they encounter…"[183]

These black women students used storytelling as a way of talking back and questioning black men's behavior.[184] Respondents generally viewed white women as weak, and black men as weak for using them. Storytelling also mitigates invisibility by allowing black women to be seen and to see themselves, "as strong and independent as a group, despite individual and contextual variations in their interpersonal behavior."[185]

The image of the StrongBlackWoman, as penned by Walker-Barnes, is reflective of the burden these black women experienced as they performed independence and outspokenness. "This controlling image," writes Wilkins, "provides a cultural template around which black women imagine gendered racial authenticity, even when they do not embody these characteristics themselves."[186] Furthermore, black women experience the conundrum of independence, that is at once empowering, and also feeds cultural reproductions of black women as asexual, sexually suppressed, emasculators of black men.

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[181] Wilkins, 177.
[182] Wilkins, 177.
[183] Wilkins, 177.
[184] Wilkins, 186.
[185] Wilkins, 186.
[186] Wilkins, 186.

Anger

Lorde's use of anger as a strategy is particularly instructive. Anger is best used for change. Rather than suppress anger or deny its presence, Lorde admonishes, "We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us or seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty…"[187] Beyond the therapeutic benefits of openly expressed anger, women of color are charged to use anger deliberately and sensibly. It is an appropriate response to racism and other forces that function to siphon the life force of black women.

> *"Women of color in america* have grown up within a symphony of anger, at being silenced, at being unchosen, at knowing that when we survive, it is in spite of a world that takes for granted our lack of humanness, and which hates our very existence outside of its service. And I say symphony rather than cacophony because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart."*[188]
> *(*Lower case maintained from original text.)*

Lorde's offering of anger as "libation for my fallen sisters" reflects a communal intentionality in which women *see* and *hear* and *feel* other women in their fullest humanity.[189] It is libation, and it is a tool of survival. The tenor of Lorde's writing suggests precise uses of anger, yet at the same time, validates radical anger in the face of radical racism and injustice.

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[187] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 128.
[188] Lorde, 129.
[189] Lorde, 129.

Dissemblance

"The act of dissemblance," writes Harris-Perry, "was a tactic to find the upright in the crooked room…"[190] Historian Darlene Clarke Hine describes dissemblance as "self-imposed invisibility" as a means for black women to "accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own…"[191] While giving the appearance of disclosure, black women hide their private lives as a protective measure against external scrutiny and misinterpretation. This 'cult of secrecy' provides black women emotional space that is obscured from the gaze of white America; it allows space for authenticity without social observation.

Dissemblance may be understood as a performance of self-care, in which black women intentionally distance others from the internal realities of life as black women in America. Unfortunately, dissemblance also results in bifurcation of black women's beings as they daily navigate life with and without the 'mask' of safety. The distancing of oneself from others may lead to unmitigated distancing of oneself from oneself. Safe spaces for black women to connect and reconnect after dissembling have long existed, spaces such as the kitchen table, the beauty shop, or the parlor in the women's restroom at church. Black women meet at these wells and receive the refreshment of familiarity, not because their life experiences are monolithic, but because their experience of distancing is not uncommon.

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[190] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 60.
[191] Harris-Perry, 60.

Strategic Religious Authority

The black woman who emerged from the political economy of slavery – independent, autonomous, self-reliant, strong – was a contradiction to the female role model of Euro-American patriarchy.[192] "In order for the free black church to conform to its counterpart in the dominant culture," Townsend-Gilkes writes, "it was necessary to suppress the freedom with which black church women had exercised their roles in the churches…"[193] Despite lack of recognition by white slave owners, enslaved black women participated in religious practices as authoritative agents of the black religious tradition. Debates about the role of white women in public life animated in the dual-sex politics of the black church. While black church leaders sought to restrain the authority of black women, the women, nonetheless, carved out roles imbued with power.

Though constrained by male hierarchy in religious spaces, particularly in the pulpit, black women function with significant authority in black church leadership. For example, the traditional "Church Mother" in many black churches is a position of power. Through informal authority, the Church Mother influences the politics of the church and helps shape the culture of the church, particularly the culture for women. She is free to wield her privileged position on behalf of the women's work in the church, to the extent that her efforts remain aligned with those of her male overseer. Indeed, despite the Church Mother's stated and unstated power, she serves at the pleasure of the male (traditionally) pastor. The dance of the Church Mother is such that she may privately advance the cause of women against patriarchy and sexism while publicly assuming a stance of submission. Strategic leadership of black church women is often most visible

[192] Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women*--, 100.
[193] Gilkes, 102.

as they advocate for the vision, mission, and goals of the local ministry, via extensions of the church that privilege 'women's work.'

Knowledge Validation

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins theorizes the interconnectivity of knowledge that exists between a black woman's standpoint and black feminist thought. The first level of knowledge includes "everyday, taken-for-granted knowledge" shared by members of a group.[194] The second level of knowledge represents specialized expert knowledge that articulates the taken-for-granted knowledge, on behalf of the group.[195] This interplay of epistemologies enables black women to imagine themselves differently, independent of external stereotypes. By privileging their own instinctive self-definition, black women revive and rearticulate a self-consciousness that the myth of true womanhood failed to extinguish.

Furthermore, Collins contends, the expert knowledge of black feminist thought that is validated by ordinary black women, meaning those not in academia, defies the traditional Eurocentric masculinist political and epistemological requirements of validation.[196] The Eurocentric masculinist knowledge-validation process consists of a community of experts evaluating knowledge claims made by those external to the community. The community of experts is part of a larger dominant group which validates taken-for-granted knowledge.[197] Stated differently, Collins argues that historically, white male scholars functioned as gatekeepers of that which is deemed as

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[194] Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, 340.
[195] Guy-Sheftall, 341.
[196] Guy-Sheftall, 341.
[197] Guy-Sheftall, 342.

knowledge. In this way, dominant epistemology intends to control knowledge generation and validation. Black women scholars must choose to meet the measures of white-male-controlled validation or accept the risks of not doing so. Black feminist and womanist scholars participate in the validation process, and at the same time, subvert it by creating theories rooted in experience and by creating space for silenced epistemologies. Taken-for-granted knowledge is deconstructed as a tool wielded for power over and suppression of alternative ways of being and knowing.

Erotic as Life Force

Finally, Lorde advocates for a revaluation of the erotic as life force and power. "We have come to distrust that power which arises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge."[198] The distrust of self is arguably linked to internalized racism and sexism that causes black women to undervalue their capabilities, capacities and worth. White institutionalized hegemonic resistance against black women's epistemologies may cause black women to label their own knowledge as alternative or insufficient. Lorde affirms the erotic as "the nurturer of all our deepest knowledge."[199] Not only do black women distrust their own internal power, but also, they distrust one another.

"Jugular vein psychology" is the fallacy that one's self-defining will somehow prevent or retard another's self-definition.[200] It is based on the false notion that freedom is limited, and thus, is meted out sparingly. Black women have been taught to treat one another as suspect, always in competition with one another, rarely complimenting one another. Consequently "horizontal hostility" emerges as a separator or limiting

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[198] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 53.
[199] Lorde, 56.
[200] Lorde, 51.

condition.[201] Even as Lorde identifies the trappings of universalism, silence and unwarranted competition, she proposes reclamation of the erotic as life force as a strategy for rebirthing communal trust between black women and valuation of individual black womanhood.

Summary – Chapters One, Two, and Three

Chapters One, Two, and Three of this study reflect a survey of how black women's bodies in America have been deconstructed and constructed across time and space. It shows how the notion of black women as the subjects of denigrating stereotypes is rooted in dehumanizing ideology against black people, and black women, in particular. Perpetuation of the myth of true womanhood created the conditions in which black womanhood was deemed incongruent with societal expectations of femininity. The literature shows how undeterred black women intellectuals, dating at least to the mid-nineteenth century, have resisted depictions of black women created by the white imagination, by authoring discourse and initiating conversations within and without the academy. The intent of Chapters One, Two, and Three is to provide the background for how I interpret and analyze the data collected in this research. Central to the research is black religious feminine embodiment in the United States in the 21st Century. These chapters provide a particularized genealogy that makes clearer the experience of black laywomen today.

Womanists and black feminists continue to mine history for the subdued epistemologies of black women and to create spaces in which black women may tell their own stories. Notwithstanding the collective history of degradation experienced by black

[201] Lorde, 48.

women in America, there exists an irrepressible hope for and commitment to scholarship that appropriately identifies the polyvocality of black women's experiences. Recent projects by Monica Coleman, Anthony Pinn, Layli Maparyan, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, Patricia Hill Collins, Stephanie Crowder, Keri Day, and others, reflect a continuous effort to expand academic discourse about black women and black women's bodies.

Notwithstanding persistent stereotypes, black women have long employed strategies of resistance when faced with ideologies that errantly dehumanize or diminish black be-ing in the world. Expressive acts that might be used against black women, such as anger, have been reclaimed and reinterpreted as tools for dismantling stereotypes. These strategies demonstrate agency that is made visible by radical subjectivity. This research project extends the work of Townsend Gilkes by focusing on black laywomen and how they navigate religious spaces as radical subjects.

I argue that 21st Century black laywomen continue a legacy of asserting religious authority outside the confines of the pulpit. The study examines perceptions about black laywomen's religious authority and the factors that influence those perceptions. Additionally, it analyzes the ways in which black laywomen refute or reinterpret negative stereotypes that diminish their capabilities and capacities for leadership. Finally, the research offers a glimpse into how those stereotypes may impact the listeners of black women who preach. Responses to a secondary research question exposed expectations and critiques of black women preachers, critiques that are grounded in social misperceptions.

~Participant Profile~

Charles is over 60 years old. He grew up in the Christian Methodist and Baptist traditions, and recalls women preachers, but never women pastors. He came to Christ during the preaching of a woman evangelist who visited his church, yet did not realize until years later that she was never afforded the same treatment as other male clergy. He reflects: "I was in my 50s before I noticed that women are treated differently." Charles has long worked alongside laywomen in ministry, with no thought to gender.

Chapter Four. Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions about African American laywomen performing religious authority in the 21st Century. The intent of the research was to move beyond the location of religious authority in the pulpit and examine the ways in which black laywomen perform authority in other religious spaces. Central to the research was an investigation into the views of those who observe or participate with African American women in authoritative religious acts. Little research exists to examine the phenomenon of African American women performing religious authority from the perspective of laypersons. To address the question of perceptions about black laywomen, I employed a qualitative research approach, using womanist theory and methodological process.

Research Design

Qualitative research is generally used to explore and understand the meaning persons ascribe to particular events.[202] "It is about the what, how, and why of something."[203] It allows researchers to perform in-depth studies on a range of topics including what appears to be the mundane of daily life. The qualitative genre makes space for examining the lived experiences of individuals and people groups.[204] Five features typify qualitative research: 1) studying the meaning of people's lives; 2) representing the views and perspectives of the people; 3) attending to the context of the people; 4) contributing to insights of existing concepts that may help explain human social behavior; and 5) striving to use multiple sources of evidence.[205] It is typically conducted in the natural setting of participants; relies upon multiple sources of data; and uses inductive and deductive analysis.[206] Creswell also suggests that the research process is emergent, meaning the research plan may change during execution.[207] Emergent designs allow for changes in research questions, and shifts in data collection methods as the researcher engages more fully with the research participants. The overall research plan of this study remained intact; however, the research questions were tailored during the semi-structured interview process as discussed later in this chapter.

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[202] John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014).
[203] Marilyn Lichtman, "Qualitative Research for the Social Sciences," by pages 27-52 (55 City Road, London: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2019), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781544307756.
[204] Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 5th ed (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 93.
[205] Robert K. Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish* (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 7.
[206] Creswell, *Research Design*.
[207] Creswell.

The study may be characterized as qualitative narrative inquiry in that it "studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives."[208] Narrative inquiry typically elicits a sequence of ordered events connected in a meaningful way for a particular audience.[209] Drawing from the traditions of literary theory, narrative inquiry assumes that "people construct their realities through narrating their stories."[210] Narrative inquiry has a long history in the humanities because of its focus on the voice of participants, and how those voices are shaped by a myriad of factors. This study combined narrative and phenomenological inquiry by focusing on how the phenomenon of African American women performing religious authority is assessed in the lives of research participants.

More precisely, I conceptualized the participant narratives as spiritual narratives.[211] Following the expansion of the narrative genre by Noelle Arnold, this research project examined the "multi-defined, multi-storied, multi-historied nature of leadership religion and spirituality" as recounted through twelve research participants.[212] The participants were both laywomen in leadership, and lay men and women who had experienced laywomen in leadership.

Arnold shows how spiritual narratives progressed beyond conversion narratives of the enslaved to fuller examinations of living the Christian life.[213] The research reflects how the participants formed perceptions about African American women and religious

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[208] Creswell.
[209] David Silverman, ed., *Qualitative Research: Issues of Theory, Method, and Practice*, 3rd ed (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011).
[210] Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 5th ed (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011).
[211] Noelle Witherspoon Arnold, *Ordinary Theologies : Religio-Spirituality and the Leadership of Black Female Principals* (New York: New York : Peter Lang, 2014).
[212] Arnold.
[213] Arnold, 46.

authority, in the context of their own narratives of spiritual development. The phrase *spiritual narratives* appropriately captures the stories of spiritual awakening and growth told by each study participant. The contexts in which they 'grew in the faith' cannot be separated from the ways in which they perceive women, African American women, in the faith. Therefore, I hold the life stories, the spiritual narratives, of each participant, central to this research, narratives shared in fragments from episodic reflections. The narratives are not linear; they emerged as partial memories evoked by the research questions and by stories shared by others in the study. As a collective, these narratives offer a glimpse of the perceptual terrain across which African American laywomen have come.

Research Questions

Research questions arise from a range of sources. Researchers may formulate questions around concepts, such as power, gender, friendship, or initiative.[214] Questions may also be centered around categories of people, places, or events. Researchers may choose to focus on persons different from themselves, or those with whom the researcher has some commonality. The research questions in this study represent my thoughtful reflections, as one who identifies as an African American woman who has performed religious authority at varying levels across time and space. The particular focus on laywomen in this study reflects my commitments to decentering traditional notions of authority and making visible the ways in which African American women define themselves, with or without external validation.

[214] Lichtman, "Qualitative Research for the Social Sciences."

Questions for this study emerged from my experience with religious leadership and observance of laywomen who are the driving forces within countless black church settings. Furthermore, engagement with the literature on this topic tends to focus on clergywomen, ordination, and position-based understandings of authority. I sought to better understand how laywomen see themselves as involved in religious performances of authority that differ from clergywomen, yet are not less significant. Additionally, the questions arose from how the literature addresses viewpoints about black feminine embodiment, but not with the particularity of black laywomen.

Research questions in qualitative research may also take on a variety of forms. Generative questions are designed to discover new aspects of an identified phenomenon. These questions may lead to "hypotheses, useful comparisons or the collection of certain classes of data."[215] Maxwell categorizes research questions as descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical.[216] The questions should be nondirectional, avoid yes/no response options, and not infer quantitative type measurement. The questions designed for this research follow Creswell's model of central questions and associated sub-questions.[217] The central questions focus broadly on the phenomenon of African American women performing religious authority, while the sub-questions function to narrow the focus, yet maintain the open-endedness of the inquiry. Overall, the research questions converge to focus on perceptions and factors that may illuminate or contribute to participants' perceptions.

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[215] Uwe Flick, *Introducing Research Methodology: A Beginner's Guide to Doing a Research Project* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2011), 90.
[216] Joseph Alex Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*, 2nd ed, Applied Social Research Methods Series, no. 41 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005).
[217] John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), 185.

The following questions were created for this study:

RQ1: What perceptions about black women performing religious authority prevail in the 21st century laity?

Sub-question: How does the convergence of race, gender, class, tradition, and culture, influence congregants' views about religious authority at this religious location?

RQ2: Do laywomen subvert traditional structures of authority in the black church, and if so, how?

Sub-question: Are the categories of ministering authority and governing authority adequate in describing the types of religious authority women are granted?

RQ3: Do stereotypical images of black women impact how listeners perceive black clergywomen or laywomen?

Sub-question: Do perceptions about black women's bodies and religious power impact listeners?

RQ4: Does personal engagement with women as senior pastors impact one's perception about women performing religious authority?

The central questions were asked without prompt of theory or reference to literature, as suggested by Creswell. Inserting interrogatives such as 'what', 'how', and 'in what ways' ensured that the questions remained open-ended during the interviews and focus groups.[218] *Grand tour* questions were used to begin each session, as a way to orient the group to the research study.[219] For example, each session began with 'what is religious authority?' The research questions informed crafting of the interview and focus group instruments. The research questions were asked both directly and indirectly, as shown in Appendices E and F.

Research question four (RQ4) was used with the interviews only. The question was intended to reveal how proximity to women performing religious authority in the

[218] Linda Dale Bloomberg and Marie Volpe, *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation: A Roadmap from Beginning to End* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 37.
[219] Robert K. Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish* (New York: Guilford Press, 2011), 137.

highest levels of the local church might impact broader views about laywomen in authority.

Theoretical Perspective

Qualitative inquirers may use theory to explain behavior and attitudes, as well as to provide an orienting lens for the study. Traditional modes of inquiry include anthropological, philosophical, sociological, phenomenological, and historiographical. Each of these methodological approaches may yield theories, or broad explanations about the phenomenon or persons under study. Critical scholarship in the 1980s resulted in broadening the field of qualitative inquiry to include critical theoretical lenses or perspectives as those which "shape the types of questions asked, inform how data are collected and analyzed, and provide a call for action or change."[220] These broadened modes of inquiry allow researchers to address issues such as marginalization, disempowerment, and discrimination against particular people groups. Qualitative theoretical perspectives of this type include feminist perspectives, racialized discourses, critical theory, queer theory, and accessibility perspectives, to name a few. Critical theories are increasingly used in qualitative studies to resist traditional notions of objectivity rooted in power and normalized assumptions. This qualitative study used the womanist theoretical perspective.

The womanist theoretical perspective, like the black feminist perspective, is informed by the conviction that black women participate in constructing and reconstructing oppositional knowledges.[221] Womanist scholarship is concerned with the

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[220] Creswell, *Research Design*, 98.
[221] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2009).

"mental, physical, and social dimensions of black women's real-lived epistemology…and grants epistemological privilege to the lived everyday realities of black women…"[222] Moving beyond Alice Walker's initial definition of the word *womanish*, womanist scholars employ womanist thought as an analytical rubric to mine the lives of black women for intellectual standpoints that have been neglected and ignored.[223] Whereas other theoretical methods may hold firm the boundaries of theory and practice, womanist scholarship is intentionally entangled in and informed by the expertise of everyday women.[224] Rather than undergirding theoretical distancing, womanist practitioners are intentionally in proximity to those with whom the scholarship is produced. This on-going engagement typifies the womanist commitment to bridging the gap between theory and practice.

This project uses womanism as its interpretive framework and is informed by three particular philosophical beliefs. The study deviates from Creswell's adaptation of Lincoln's interpretive frameworks by blending together philosophical beliefs that more accurately portray the philosophical convictions of the researcher. First, the study is grounded by the ontological belief that power and privilege create and deny access. For the purposes of this study, power and privilege might be negotiated according to gender and/or religious hierarchal authority. Second, "reality is co-constructed between the researcher and the researched, and shaped by individual experiences."[225] This social

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[222] Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 6.
[223] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, A Harvest Book (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004). Walker provides a four-part definition of the term *womanish*, upon which black women scholars developed tenets and definitions for womanist thought as an academic discipline.
[224] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Religion (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 206.
[225] Creswell, *Research Design*, 36.

constructivist approach suggests that the knowledge generation in this study is the result of the researcher and all participants. Expertise gained from the study is the product of the collaborative efforts of all participants. Third, this study values differing viewpoints as crucial. Creating space in which all standpoints were honored undergirded the interview and focus group process. Finally, I used an inductive approach to inquiry, which allowed themes and concepts to emerge from the data.[226]

Methodology

For the purposes of this research, womanism is defined as:

> *"A social change perspective rooted in black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension."*[227]

While other definitions of womanism are available, Phillips' definition offers the flexibility and "improvisational character" that is most useful to this project.[228] Further, Phillips offers five overarching characteristics of womanism. It is: 1) antioppressionist; 2) vernacular; 3) nonideological; 4) communitarian; and 5) spiritual.[229] The vernacular, communitarian, and spirituality characteristics, as well as radical subjectivity, framed this study.

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[226] Creswell, 36.
[227] Layli Phillips, ed., *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xx.
[228] Phillips, xxi.
[229] Phillips, xxiv.

Vernacular

Recognizing Meaning in the Seemingly Mundane

Vernacular refers to the significance of everydayness, the value of the seemingly mundane. This study design intentionally involved recruitment of laypersons, that is, participants without clergy credentials or other official appointments in the local church. Additionally, there was no educational level requirement in participant selection. I sought to include everyday people in the context of everyday life, albeit in this case, religious life. Stated differently, the project grants epistemological privilege to the lived realities of African American laywomen. The method intentionally mitigated power differentials that may place participants in opposition or in hierarchical relationships. This was crucial to gaining unhindered insight into how persons understand religious authority in their daily experiences, and how their viewpoints have been influenced by their experiences in and around faith traditions.

In the spirit of everydayness, I intentionally wrote the dissertation in what might be considered layperson's language. This is not to suggest an elite versus layperson language dichotomy; rather, I wanted to make the study accessible to most literate adults, especially those attending the research site. This indicates the value of bridging academic – parish divides, often perpetuated by inaccessible language.

Traditional Communalism

"Uncovering and explicating life-giving norms embedded in black women's moral practices"[230]

[230] Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 78.

Communitarianism, also known as traditional communalism, indicates a concern for the collective state of well-being. Its focus is on the health of community members at all levels. While womanism may originate with the radical subjectivity of black women, as does this project, it envisions wellness toward all humans and livingkind.[231] This project examined how African American women view themselves as engaged in religious leadership, as well as how others view them. Religious spaces are *communities* that shape and are shaped by those who are members of the community. The research raised questions about access within the community and what subliminal forms of gatekeeping exist. It excavated the everydayness of African American laywomen's religious lives to unearth intersecting oppressions, clothed as routine.

Spirituality

> *""Girl, you just like your mama," somebody said one day when I was feeling a whole lot like God."*[232] (excerpt)
>
> *-RevSisRaedorah*

The spiritual aspect of womanism is most pertinent to this research. Womanist methodology allowed me to investigate the spirit-driven facets of participants' perceptions and viewpoints. Womanist theology provides the lens for interpreting experiences and texts, in ways that acknowledge the influences of Spirit and the influences of humankind. "Womanist theology is the systematic, faith-based exploration of the many facets of African American women's religiosity…based on the complex realities of black women's lives,"[233] writes Stephanie Mitchem. This distinction is crucial when attempting to understanding how participants are influenced by sacred

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[231] Phillips, *The Womanist Reader*, xxvi.
[232] Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 18.
[233] Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Introducing Womanist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002), ix.

texts and particular interpretations of those texts in particular communities. By valuing the ontology and epistemologies of black women, and women of color, womanist theology reimages black women as real beings, Spirit-animated beings, rather than stereotypical caricatures of the white imagination.

Womanist theology seeks to reclaim the marginalized epistemologies of black women and their lived experiences. As such, womanist work, broadly speaking, is resistance against the limiting structures that confine black women to certain jobs, class status, education, ways of knowing and ways of being. Moreover, womanist scholars deconstruct hegemonic practices and structures that maintain and perpetuate the cultural production of evil against black women's bodies.[234] Considering the centrality of faith and spirituality to many black women, womanist theology interrogates the faith community, particularly the black church, concerning traditional church doctrines that restrict, control, and silence black women under the guise of Divine mandate. This research examined the lived experiences of twelve members of this black church community, analyzing how tradition, cultural, family, and other formative elements, converge to inform particular viewpoints about African American women and religious authority.

Radical Subjectivity

> *"A form of identity politics that is not a tangible, static identity that measures and gauges the extent to which one is or is not what others had planned or hoped for one to be…The empowering assertion of the black woman's voice"*[235]

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[234] Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Black Religion, Womanist Thought, Social Justice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

[235] Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*, 16.

In its most basic form, radical subjectivity is about acknowledging one's self worth and one's inner ability to generate knowledge for the transformation of one's self and one's community. Black women assume this posture as both an offensive position of readiness, and a defensive position of response. The difficult history of black women in America precipitates a way of being that resists erasure, invisibility and silencing. The participants in this study don't refer to themselves as womanists or womanist allies; they do, however, affirm black women as traditionally capable and conscious in ways that defy oppositional stereotypes. Participants in this study understood themselves as significant contributors to the mission of the local church. Whether one was a lay leader or a participant on the ministry team, the awareness of one's ability to make a difference is indicative of radical subjectivity.

Role of the Researcher

The nature of qualitative research necessitates that the researcher be the central research instrument for collecting and analyzing data.[236] During the research preparation phase, I prepared all necessary institutional review board documents and secured all site approvals necessary for research. During the recruitment phase, I intentionally excluded any interested parties who belonged to my immediate social network, meaning family, immediate relatives, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. During the data collection phase, I conducted interviews and focus groups. During the data analysis phase, I analyzed the data using Creswell's process of data analysis.[237] I

[236] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 123.
[237] Creswell, *Research Design*.

was casually familiar with the participants involved in this study, as fellow congregants at this particular house of worship, as will be discussed in more detail below.

The nature of qualitative research and design introduces a power dynamic with which the researcher and research participants must contend. Several factors made this research project vulnerable to bias and preference. The research was conducted at a house of worship with which I have been affiliated for the duration of my doctoral studies. Being an insider – outsider at the study location is both useful and risky for research. While I do not serve in a denominationally-appointed leadership capacity, my role as a clergyperson in a religious setting carries an inherent degree of authority. Consequently, I am familiar with persons in the congregation from a pastoral perspective and Christian educator perspective. Stated differently, I have preached at the location, led religious studies, and performed pastoral care duties. Thus, there exists a familiarity of persons in the congregation, some more personally than others, and at the same time a distancing because of intentional clerical boundaries and the intent to do research. In addition to my role as clergy, my experience as an African American lay and clergy woman, associated with three Christian traditions, was a strength and a risk.

On the one hand, my multiple identities in black church settings are what informed my interest in this research project. Both positive and negative experiences in predominantly black churches, particularly with respect to clergy and lay women are the seeds from which this project has grown for years prior to my entering academia. The treatment of women, and women in leadership, is not a new consideration; I've engaged in countless conversations on this topic with friends, church members, and ministry colleagues. Researching perspectives about laywomen in authority allowed me to formalize the table talk of countless African American women and men serving in

religious settings. At the heart of this project was a desire to center the voices of black laywomen in the 21st Century.

To mitigate the impact of bias during the research, I took the following actions. At the onset of the research project, I explicitly identified the factors that could potentially impact this particular study at this particular location: familiarity, gender, personal background, and clerical status.[238] During the recruitment phase, I intentionally selected interested persons with whom I had had limited contact or contact that did not involve discussions regarding my research interests. Having been at the location for four years, it was not possible to locate persons who knew nothing of my status as a doctoral student.

At the beginning of each data collection session, I reminded the participants of my role as a researcher interested in their thoughts for the specified research project. During data collection, participants were reminded of the request for candid responses. This was particularly important during the men's focus group, where my gender and race might present as a barrier to free expression about African American women.

Target Population

Participants in this study belong to a 152-year old United Methodist congregation, located south of Atlanta, Georgia. The specific congregation was selected for several reasons related to conditions that make answering the research questions possible, while controlling the procedures.[239] Control in this case means maintaining consistency in the research process and conduct, while allowing differences to show in

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[238] Creswell, 237.
[239] Uwe Flick, *Introducing Research Methodology: A Beginner's Guide to Doing a Research Project* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2011), 65.Flick, *Introducing Research Methodology*, 65.

the research participants and responses. First, the study site was selected because the congregation has a denominational history and local history that includes African American women functioning in leadership capacities.

The presence of women with religious authority is not a new phenomenon to the congregation as a whole. In the past ten years of its history, the congregation has been led by its first two African American women senior pastors; at the time of the study they were led by a male pastor. Though externally the congregation appears progressive in terms of gender equality, the research study sought to determine how congregants respond to African American laywomen in various positions of non-clerical leadership, on a personal level. While the United Methodist denomination is affirming of women in religious leadership at the highest levels of the organization, the research interrogates attitudes among the laity that may resonate with the denominational position, or may deviate from it. These conditions of the study site made it possible to answer the study questions.

Additionally, study participants were required to meet two criteria: over 18 years of age and active membership in the congregation for a minimum of six months. The study was intentionally geared towards adults who may have experienced women in religious leadership in this context or other contexts, and formed opinions about said leadership, however malleable those viewpoints may be. Active participation at the study site means persons were reasonably present for six months, which would in turn, result in some degree of exposure to African American women performing religious authority. Regular presence at the study site also indicated connection and communal ties to the location, suggesting participants have a vested interest in the activities of this

specific congregational assembly. These two criteria formed the basis for engaging participants on the research subject.

Procedures

The following paragraphs detail the procedures for conducting the study. The procedures primarily follow qualitative research scholarship guidelines as published by Yin, Creswell, Bloomberg and Volpe, and Marshall and Rossman.

Notification of Study

Notification of the research study was conducted using a typed pre-approved announcement about the intent to conduct research (see Appendix B). The notification was read by the researcher during regular worship services for two services, without elaboration on the expectations for the participants. The notification of research included the study topic, the researcher's professional intentions, and the criteria for participation in the study. Interested persons were directed to contact me directly for more information.

Participant Selection

Following the announcement of the notification of study, I used criteria-based strategies to collect the initial names and contact information of interested and eligible persons. Eligibility was verified both verbally and through oral church history. The communal nature of black church settings is often such that congregants know and note one another as *family*. This research site is no exception, in that simple queries of 'how long has Ms. Fields been here?' yielded a response rooted in observation of and participation with Ms. Fields, if not knowledge of an official church record entry.

Subsequently, purposive sampling, intended to select "information rich cases, with the objective of yielding insight and understanding of the phenomenon under investigation," was used for participant selection.[240] As is typical in qualitative research, the goal of participant selection was representativeness of this particular research site.

From the list of interested-eligible persons, I used purposive sampling to select six women and six men for inclusion in the study. Gender was a key determinant in participant selection as the research intentionally sought to secure views from laywomen and laymen for data analysis. The research analysis explored whether gender was a factor in one's acceptance of, rejection of, or ambivalence toward African American women in religious leadership. Volunteers who were not selected for participation were advised that they may be called as alternative participants; however, the extra volunteers were not needed for the research. All selected participants completed the study once it began.

Following eligibility verification and participant selection, participants were divided into two focus groups, one comprised of five women; one comprised of five men. Two participants agreed to the interview process only, one man and one woman. Twelve persons total participated in the study.

Data Collection

In qualitative research, interviewing, observing, collecting, examining, and feeling are the primary means of data collection.[241] The implementation of these means may take various forms, such as systematic or structured, or unstructured. The data

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[240] Linda Dale Bloomberg and Marie Volpe, *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation: A Roadmap from Beginning to End* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 69.
[241] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 129.

collection process for this research consisted of each of those means, facilitated by interviews and focus groups. The term 'conversive' best describes the nature of the interviews and focus group. While an interview instrument was created to facilitate the discussions, I allowed the conversation to progress organically, as indicative of a social relationship.[242] This proved crucial in participants' willingness to wrestle with questions that they admittedly either had not considered before or ever discussed in a public forum. All data collection occurred at the research location, in a space designated by the site liaison. Data was collected across a 60-day period, based on the availability of all participants. Participants were offered light snacks and beverages during the data collection sessions.

The use of multiple means of data collection allowed for triangulation of the data, and validation of the findings.[243] This project employed interviews, focus groups, feeling, observation, and life histories, as overlapping complimentary means of collecting data. Each tool provided data that contributed to a more complete understanding of the phenomenon under study. Throughout the study, I cross-checked notes from each data collection phase, gathering evidence to code themes, from which to draw conclusions. Additionally, Creswell suggests eight triangulation strategies to consider, two of which were used in this study – clarifying researcher bias and rich, thick description.[244] The first of these is discussed in greater detail in *The Role of the Researcher* section of this chapter. The latter is demonstrated in my detailed descriptions of the research site and research participants, as well as the research

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[242] Yin, 134.
[243] Bloomberg and Volpe, *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation*, 72.
[244] John W. Creswell and John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013), 252.

process. Moreover, thick description "provides abundant interconnected details…strong action verbs, and quotes."[245] The descriptions contained within this study are intended to enable transferability to differing contexts, while maintaining attention to the particular conditions that made this study possible at this site.

Interviews

Qualitative interviews, as opposed to quantitative, tend to be informal, conversational, and guided by the researcher's pre-existing topic or concern. Interviewing has been described as crossing the intersubjective bridge between researchers and interviewees, using techniques such as empathy, open-ended questions, and pauses.[246] Postmodern scholars propose that the interview is "a setting in which interviewer and interviewee collaborate to produce a context-bound description of a social world…the interviewer actively contrives to produce that description with the interviewee."[247] Marshall and Rossman, echoing Kvale, describe qualitative interviews as "construction sites of knowledge" where two (or more) individuals discuss a "theme of mutual interest."[248] Interviews may be generative as interviewers and interviewees engage in exploration of a particular topic. Yin notes how social relationships are built with each interviewee, as the interview is tailored in real-time to the respondent.[249]

Valuing the voices of interviewees was particularly significant in this qualitative study. The interviewing practices allowed for the participants' views on the

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[245] Creswell and Creswell, 252.
[246] Michael Bloor and Fiona Wood, *Keywords in Qualitative Methods: A Vocabulary of Research Concepts* (London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 2006), 104.
[247] Bloor and Wood, 105.
[248] Bloomberg and Volpe, *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation*, 142.
[249] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 134.

phenomenon to emerge and develop as they delved into interview questions.[250] This process required mutual trust and willingness to listen intently…, "to hear the meaning of what is being said."[251] The interview questions for this study were semi-structured, allowing the participant to elaborate on or deviate from the questions with personal anecdotes, at will.[252] The purpose of the individual interviews was to allow participants to respond to the research questions at length, narrating stories of the role of African American women performing religious authority.

Interview participants were invited to engage in narrative inquiry for one 30-minute session each, scheduled over a 30-day period. In actuality, the interviews lasted from 35-50 minutes each. Follow-up sessions were agreed upon with the participants, but were deemed not necessary by the researcher. Three of the interview participants were purposely selected after participation in the focus groups. These interviewees were selected based on their interest in further discussion of the research topic and their deep engagement with the topic during the focus groups. Two of the interviewees (one woman and one man) did not participate in the focus groups. These interviewees were purposely selected based on their longevity at the study site and gender.

There is no single standard for determining sample size in qualitative research. Creswell suggests that sample size depends on the qualitative design, while Charmaz proposes the idea of saturation for grounded theory.[253] For this study, five respondents participated in one-on-one in-depth interviews. Sample size for the interviews was

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[250] Marshall and Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 144.
[251] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 135.
[252] Flick, *Introducing Research Methodology*, 112.
[253] Creswell, *Research Design*.

based on the size of the overall study, and intentional gender diversity. This number of interview participants generated data sufficient for this study.

Interview Protocol and Instrument

The interview protocol consisted of the researcher posing questions and/or prompts; follow-up questions; and voice recording. Participants were asked to respond to a series of questions as shown in Table 2. The interview instrument was created based on the research questions and thoughtful consideration of the best means to elicit responses to the research questions. Questions on the instrument were designed to gain insight into the participants' perceptions and the formative contexts that contributed to those perceptions. Without insight into the religious histories, or narratives, of the participants, the study findings would be insufficient. The spiritual narratives evoked by the carefully crafted instrument provided in-depth insights, as discussed in *Chapter 4, Data Presentation and Analysis*.

Table 2 Interview Questions

Religious authority prompts: • What is religious authority? How do you define it? • What is/are the source(s) of religious authority? **Religious Authority questions:** • What is your perception of black women performing religious authority? • On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being extremely dissatisfied and 10 being extremely satisfied, how satisfied are you with your experience of women performing religious authority?
Religious Authority Perspectives • What/who do you think has influenced your understanding of religious authority?
Laywomen and Religious Authority • What was your first exposure to women performing authority in the local church? • Do you think laywomen perform religious authority? If so, how? If no, why not? • Thinking about traditional structures of authority in the black church, do laywomen subvert, complicate and/or disrupt traditional structures of authority in the church? If so, in what way? • Have you had any particularly positive or particularly negative experiences with women performing religious authority? Explain.
Laywomen and leadership • Do women in the church lead differently than men? If so, how? • Do you believe there are some positions in the church that are better suited for women or better suited for men? Please explain.

Engagement with women as senior pastors
• In its 150-year history, Wesley has had two women senior pastors. Why do you think there have not been other women appointed as senior or assistant pastor?
  ○ What was your first exposure to women as senior pastors?
  ○ What is your perception of women as clergy in the local church?
• Did you have a personal relationship (pastoral and/or professional) with either of the women pastors of Wesley, or any other clergywomen?
  ○ Did your perception of women pastors change as a result of this relationship? If yes, how so?
• Do you have a preference of gender for the senior pastor? If yes, what gender do you prefer as senior pastor? Why?

Other • Are there other questions I should ask in this study?

In a semi-structured format, each session began with the participant stating their understanding of religious authority. This question served as a starting point, with follow-up questions that probed deeper into the research topic. Prompts were posed to determine how participants came to understand religious authority. The question of religious authority was further compounded by questions of African American women with religious authority. Open-ended questions are intended to elicit views and

opinions from the participants.[254] In this case, the questions tended to elicit snippets of spiritual narratives centered around African American religious women.

The interview protocol served as a guide to conversations that revolved around the core research questions, rather than a series of ordered questions. Womanist methodology allows for participants to expand the conversation and/or shift it in directions deemed significant by the participant. Granting this epistemological privilege created opportunities for participants to share detailed personal stories of themselves and black women with whom they associate religious authority. The conversational nature of the interviews allowed the interviewees to share openly in manners consistent with the research project, and at the same time, allowed the researcher to steer the conversation in the interest of time and attending to the research agenda.

There was significant overlap in interview questions and focus group questions. The intent of repeat questions was to determine if participants held the same standpoints in the group setting, as stated in individual interviews. This triangulation strategy allowed for validation or clarification of the responses. Interviewees were advised of this overlap and invited to discuss the questions further or to add clarifying thoughts, if applicable. During the sessions, I probed for personal anecdotes about women as religious authorities and for general perspectives about authoritative figures, with prompts that emerged organically.

One of the strengths of interviewing as a data collection tool, is also a limitation, namely, the collection of large amounts of data in a controlled timeframe. The interviews provided an extensive amount of data, from which to distill that which is

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[254] Creswell.

most pertinent in this research project. Managing the wealth of data proved more challenging than anticipated in that each additional review of the data pointed to more findings for exploration. Nonetheless, this volume of data is incomplete. The interview process fractures the narratives of participants, creating disparate or partial narratives.[255] The coding process, as discussed later in this chapter, creates further fractures. Silverman writes, "Interviewees respond to us based on who we are in their lives, as well as the social categories to which we belong, such as age, gender, class, and race…"[256] At the beginning of the interviews, I named how gender could influence the conversation, and asked participants to make every effort to speak freely, without respect to my gender. I encouraged participants to refrain from self-editing, and only sharing stories that might be respectable, which in effect, are only fragments of stories. The nature of qualitative research is such that partial narratives may be combined, compared, and analyzed to gain insight into particular topics or phenomena. To this end, I mined and mirrored the spiritual narratives of five interview participants to analyze African American laywomen engaged in religious leadership in the 21st Century.

Focus Groups

The use of focus groups is most commonly associated with commercial market research, but increasingly it is used as a means of data collection in academia. The literature suggests four particular reasons for using focus groups:

- To elicit a range of feelings, opinions, ideas
- To understand differences in perspectives

[255] Silverman, *Qualitative Research*, 134.
[256] Silverman, 134.

- To uncover and provide insight into specific factors that influence opinions
- To seek ideas that emerge from the group.[257]

More succinctly stated, the purpose of focus groups is "to provide data on group beliefs and group norms in respect to a particular topic."[258] Focus groups are generally "composed of 7-10 people…who are familiar with one another."[259] Participants are selected based on identifying markers relevant to the research project. Focus groups, also referred to as group interviews, are particularly useful in qualitative research because of the social orientation, which may facilitate a more relaxed research environment than one-on-one interviews. Marshall and Rosser note, "this method assumes that an individual's attitudes and beliefs are socially constructed…and do not form in a vacuum."[260]

Focus groups were used in this study to gather data about how participants' perceptions about African American women in religious spaces took shape in communities, both religious and non-religious. Religious communities are spaces in which persons make sense of the world. Participants shared about how their understanding of faith and religious practice took shape in the context of their social community. The group setting was intended to mitigate resistance to the research process based on solo interviews.[261] In contrast to the individual interviews, this mode of inquiry allowed me to observe the *talk back* of participants, to each other and to the research topic. Employing a dialogical model enabled me to listen to the places of resonance and dissonance among participants, as well as the ways in which respondents

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[257] Bloomberg and Volpe, *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation*, 84.
[258] Bloor and Wood, *Keywords in Qualitative Methods*, 88.
[259] Marshall and Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 149.
[260] Marshall and Rossman, 149.
[261] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 142.

were challenged or upheld by the group. Additionally, group interviews allowed the researcher to observe how participants' narratives were reclaimed and reanimated in the context of other spiritual narratives.

The data collection process included two focus groups, delineated by gender. Five women and five men participated in women and men's focus groups, respectively.[262] Each focus group was scheduled to meet for one 45-minute discussion; in reality, the men's group met for 35 minutes, while the women's group met for 1 hour, 16 minutes. Both groups met within a 30-day period. The groups were divided by gender to allow for a comparison of the groups during data analysis. The focus group questions were semi-structured, allowing participants to elaborate within reasonable time constraints, as moderated by the researcher.[263]

Focus Group Instrument and Protocol

The focus group instrument is shown in Table 3. As stated above, the preliminary questions are the same as those on the interview instrument, for triangulation purposes. Additional questions were added as appropriate, to facilitate the conversation. The focus group protocol mirrored that of the interview process.

[262] The use of binary gender delineation in the focus groups reflects the self-identification of participants, and the genders publicly recognized by this congregation. This is not to suggest that persons identifying as other than female or male, or nongender conforming, were intentionally excluded from this research. The use of gender binaries is consistent with the culture of this congregation.
[263] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 141.

Table 3 Focus Group Questions

Religious authority prompts: • What is religious authority? How do you define it? • What is/are the source(s) of religious authority? **Religious Authority questions:** • What is your perception of black women performing religious authority? • On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being extremely dissatisfied and 10 being extremely satisfied, how satisfied are you with your experience of women performing religious authority?
Religious Authority Perspectives • What/who do you think has influenced your understanding of religious authority?
Laywomen and Religious Authority • What was your first exposure to women performing authority in the local church? • Do you think laywomen perform religious authority? If so, how? If no, why not? • Thinking about traditional structures of authority in the black church, do laywomen subvert, complicate and/or disrupt traditional structures of authority in the church? If so, in what way? • Have you had any particularly positive or particularly negative experiences with women performing religious authority? Explain.
Laywomen and leadership • If we divide religious authority into two categories, ministering authority and governing authority, does the religious authority granted to women *typically* fit into one of these categories? o Ministering authority meaning the authority to minister in various capacities o Governing authority, meaning the authority to govern/lead in religious settings • Are there other categories, or types of authority granted to laywomen?
Stereotypical Images of black women • Name any stereotypes about black women that come to mind. • Do you think these stereotypes influence how you perceive black women performing religious authority?
Religious Authority and Embodiment • Does the physical body – what you see visually – impact how you respond to religious authority? • Does the voice tone or pitch – what you hear – impact how you respond to religious authority?

As with the interview questions, the focus group question list served as a guide to the discussion. Establishing how participants understood the phrase *religious authority* was the crucial starting point from which discussions ensued. Subsequent questions or prompts were inserted by the researcher when the conversation lulled or the topic appeared exhausted. The discussions included short responses, lengthy narratives, rhetorical commentary, and expansions of the research questions by the participants.

Management of focus groups may be challenging because of personal dynamics, independent of the research topic.[264] Specific skills were needed to facilitate participation in the research discussion by all group members, as well as to navigate dominating or withdrawn members. In the men's focus group, one member tended to speak more regularly than the other participants, however, the group members respectfully interrupted or interjected, thereby ensuring their own balance to the discussion. The women regularly interrupted, talked over, or even finished one another's sentences. When space was not made for the one quieter participant, I intentionally directed prompts toward her to bring her into the conversation. Furthermore, Yin notes how the researcher must make decisions about whether or not to respond to questions asked by the group during the research session.[265] During each session I chose to defer questions that were not pertinent to the research, even in a cursory manner, to a later time. Effort was made to maintain an environment of mutuality in the research process, and at the same time maintain professional distance from the process.

Demographic Surveys

Demographic information may be used to analyze participant selection and during data analysis.[266] After completing the consent to study participation documents, the study participants were given the option to complete a demographic survey. All participants completed the demographic survey. The information was used to explore factors that may impact individual perceptions and factors that may link group

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[264] Yin, 142.
[265] Yin, 142.
[266] Bloomberg and Volpe, *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation*, 70.

members. It was also used to interpret sustained narratives, particularly among the individual interviews. The demographic breakdown of study participants is shown in Table 4:

Table 4 Demographic Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years at WC	Marital Status	Education Level
Carla	Female	18-25	1-5	Single	Graduate
June	Female	36-50	1-5	Married	Associates
Angel	Female	51-60	5-15	Married	HS or equivalent
Kelly	Female	51-60	5-15	Single, prev Married	HS or equivalent
Dawn	Female	Over 61	5-15	Married	Bachelors
Laura	Female	Over 61	Over 25	Single, prev Married	Graduate
Corey	Male	26-35	5-15	Married	Unknown
Anthony	Male	36-50	1-5	Married	Graduate
Peterson	Male	36-50	1-5	Single	Graduate
Mike	Male	51-60	5-15	Married	Some undergrad
Kevin	Male	Over 61	15-25	Single, prev Married	Graduate
Charles	Male	Over 61	15-25	Single, prev Married	Doctoral

The categorical information requested was intended to provide a broad-brush image of the social characteristics of participants. It was the researcher's hunch that certain characteristics may be useful in analyzing perceptions. In addition to analyzing responses according to gender, the researcher also looked for relationships between gender and age. Educational level was used to ensure the research process included participants with varying levels of formal education. Similarly, the marital status was used to confirm the study included both single and married persons. The educational level and marital status were not used during data analysis for this study, but could be useful in further research.

The demographic surveys were conducted via hard copies, which were distributed and collected by the researcher. The hard copies were maintained by the researcher for

the duration of the research study. The information was transcribed to an electronic file on the researcher's home computer. Each participant in the study was assigned a pseudonym, which was maintained separately from the demographic data. The association of pseudonym and demographic information is only present in the table above, and is used and presented in this manner throughout this writing.

Data Management

Voice Recording Protocol

Written consent to voice record interview and focus group sessions was gained via the IRB confidentiality and consent forms signed by each participant.[267] Interview and focus group sessions were digitally voice recorded by the researcher using a personally-purchased portable voice recording device.[268] At the beginning of each session participants were reminded of the voice recording intentions, and given the option to opt-out if they chose not to be recorded. Participants were also advised to inform the researcher if at any point in the session they wanted to cease or suspend recording. At the end of the session, participants were advised that voice recording had ended.

Voice recordings of each data collection session were indexed on the recording device, and later downloaded to the researcher's home computer. The data files were password protected on the computer, and the computer required a password for access. As consistent with the IRB-approved protocol of this research, data recordings will be held for one year following the completion of this research project.

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[267] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 171.
[268] Marshall and Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 206.

Observational Protocol

In addition to the voice recordings, I manually recorded observations during the data collection process. Observations are a form of primary data, in that it is data collected from the eyes of the researcher.[269] The observation process may be formal and systematic, or actively passive, as is the case for this research. The observational protocol consisted of simple notes jotted during the sessions, as well as a research journal maintained by the researcher.[270] The research journal is an ongoing writing of my reflective notes. It was maintained in a written file, separate from the research data.

At the beginning of each data collection session, I advised the participants that I would make notations during the session, and to the extent possible, participants were to disregard the notetaking actions. Participants were advised that the notes were part of the process of capturing contextual data that extends beyond the voice recordings. The observational protocol included observing the interactions between participants; gestures; and nonverbal behavior. Combining the observational notes with the voice recordings provided a more accurate review of the data during data analysis.

Yin offers another data category that is useful to this research, that is, *feeling*.[271] Feelings may represent specific data about the environment (temperature, sound) or may represent data about people. Additionally, he suggests that feeling may represent your "gut feelings about a situation."[272] While feeling in the latter form is more difficult to measure or explain, it is an important clue for interpretation. I recorded feeling as

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[269] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 143.
[270] Creswell, *Research Design*.
[271] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 150.
[272] Yin, 151.

part of the research journal, annotating the specific conditions in which said feeling occurred. Feeling as data need to be validated by other data, but in womanist methodology they are not discounted as insignificant. This project takes seriously the researcher's privilege to see interpretive possibilities when feelings, that of the researcher and the participants, are valued as a data.

This position admittedly defies the traditional knowledge-validation process in the academy. Black feminist thought is instructive here. Collins contends that the expert knowledge of black feminist thought that is validated by ordinary black women, meaning those not in academia, defies the traditional Eurocentric masculinist political and epistemological requirements of validation.[273] The Eurocentric masculinist knowledge-validation process consists of a community of experts evaluating knowledge claims and the community of experts maintaining credibility in the larger group from which it draws its' 'taken-for-granted knowledge.'[274] In this way, dominant epistemology intends to control knowledge generation and validation. Black women scholars must choose to meet the measures of white-male-controlled validation or accept the risks of not doing so. This project joins black feminist and womanist scholarship by participating in the validation process, and at the same time, subverting it by creating and embracing theories rooted in experience and by creating space for silenced epistemologies. Feeling as a source of knowledge is one of the womanist tools enveloped within the tenet of radical subjectivity.

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[273] Beverly Guy-Sheftall, ed., *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995), 340.Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire*, 340.
[274] Guy-Sheftall, 342.

Transcription

Transcripts of the data recordings for this research were produced manually by the researcher over the course of 3 months. F5 Transcription PRO, a for-purchase software solution, was used in this process. The software enabled time-stamping, note-taking, and use of a foot pedal, during the transcription process. The software also allowed transcripts to be saved in searchable .doc or .pdf format, which was integral to the coding process. Each transcript was appropriately labeled and kept separately from the clarifying list of pseudonyms. Research transcripts were secured on the researcher's home computer in password protected files, on a password protected computer.[275] Consistent with the IRB-approved protocol for this research project, participants were informed that transcripts may be kept indefinitely.

The difficulty of capturing the nuances of a recorded session during transcription cannot be understated. Care was taken to capture pauses, laughter and other nonverbals during the transcription process.[276] Yet, the transcription is still void of visual cues that help make sense of a speaker's intentions. Each transcript was prepared and then reviewed against the voice recording for accuracy. I acknowledge that the spoken word does not directly correlate to the written word; punctuation is speculative, as are conscious, and subconscious, interjections when speaking. Focus group participants who participated in one-on-one interviews were given the opportunity to redress any topics from the focus group, and transcriptions were compared to better capture the participants' intentions. Lastly, transcriptions were triangulated with the

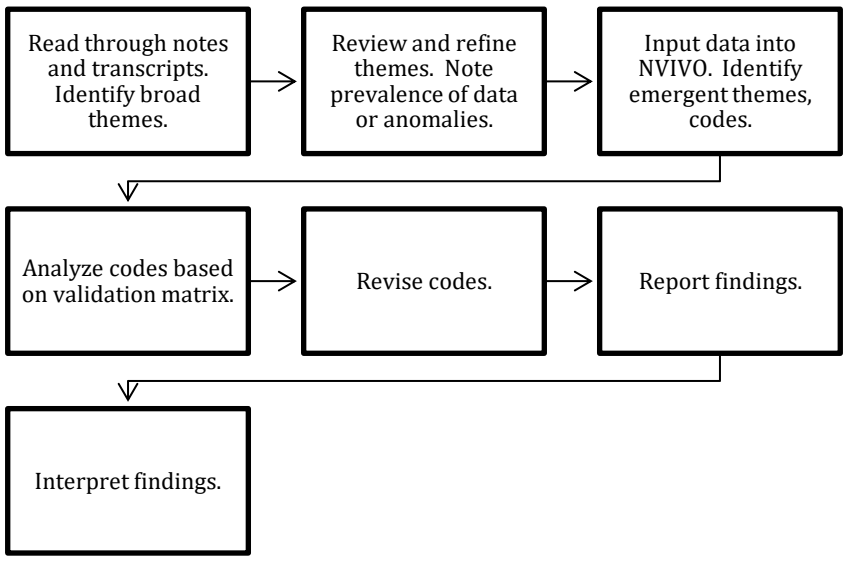
[275] Bloomberg and Volpe, *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation*, 97.
[276] Bloomberg and Volpe, 97.

research journal and other notes to prepare the most complete data documents for analysis.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, analysis of data is an analysis of words to identify units of information that may contribute to themes.[277] The primary sources of data for this research were interviews and focus groups. The most significant task of the researcher in the initial stages of analysis was to reduce the mass of data to manageable chunks of data that directly or indirectly responded to the research questions. This reduction process involved making decisions about which story(ies) would be told from the data and how it (they) would be told. Figure 1 shows the overarching data analysis strategy, adapted from strategies presented by Creswell,[278] and Marshall & Rossman.[279]

Figure 1 Data Analysis Strategy



[277] Bloomberg and Volpe, 98.
[278] Creswell and Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, Chapter 8.
[279] Marshall and Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, Chapter 8.

Coding Strategy

Following transcription, I read through each transcript to gain an initial impression of the data. The second review of transcripts involved marking similar responses that pertained directly to the research questions. Responses that may have a tertiary connection were also marked separately. The third review of the transcripts was to group comments under summary themes, also referred to as coding or indexing. "The process of coding," writes Creswell, "involves aggregating the text into small categories of information, seeking evidence for each code…then assigning a label to the code."[280] The number of categories varies by project; for this project I practiced lean coding, that is, reduction of the data marking to five or six themes, comprised of four to eight words each.[281] Most qualitative research follows an inductive approach meaning it allows the data to lead to emerging concepts or themes.[282] The coding process is at the heart of qualitative analysis, in that it allows the researcher to engage manageable chunks of the data in thoughtful ways. I selected themes informed by the literature review and by the specific language of the participants, known as in vivo codes.[283] The process of reviewing the transcripts for clarity was ongoing throughout the writing process.

Subsequent to manually coding the transcripts, NVIVO data analysis software by QSR International was used.[284] Using computer-assisted analysis allows researchers to discover themes and commonalities that may be less visible with manual coding. The

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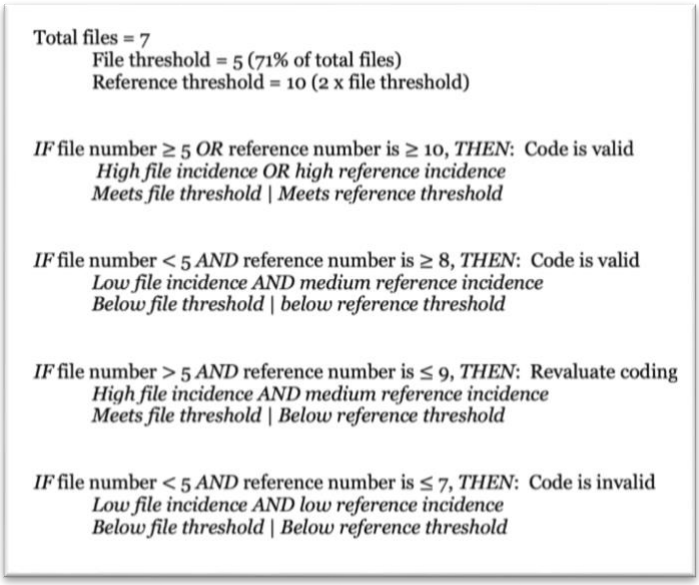
[280] Creswell and Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 184.
[281] Creswell and Creswell, 184.
[282] Yin, *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*, 94.
[283] Marshall and Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 211.
[284] NVIVO is a for-purchase software option used for qualitative and mixed-methods data. https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo/what-is-nvivo.

software may assist in noticing overlapping themes, anomalies, or common terms or phrases. I used NVIVO to assist with clarifying emergent themes, subthemes, and comments of interest, as well as to validate the manually identified codes. Moreover, the software enabled me to discover concepts that may have been significant in one data set, but were not prevalent across the data.

Emergent Theme Determination

Emergent themes are those themes which are most dominant across the data, and which respond to the research questions. Emergent theme determination was accomplished using the decision matrix shown in Figure 2. The created matrix uses a transcript threshold of five, meaning, a code may be valid if it is detected in five of seven transcripts. Additionally, the matrix uses a reference threshold of ten, meaning, a code may be valid if it has a minimum of ten references. As indicated, theme validation was based on a combination of transcript and reference incidence.

Figure 2 Decision Matrix



Using the decision matrix and NVIVO, I color coded themes to indicate emergent themes, subthemes and comments of interest, or notable comments. Emergent themes and subthemes formed the basis for data analysis and discussion of key findings. I also noted in the data, areas for further research, which I discuss in *Chapter 6, Conclusions*.

Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to IRB procedures as outlined by Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. Specifically, I performed a public notification of study; obtained proper approval to perform research at the site; obtained written consent of all participants; and obtained consent to voice recording and storage of collected data. The study posed minimal risk to participants. Confidentiality was the highest priority, as the study was performed in a congregational setting.

To mitigate risk of participant exposure, I used pseudonyms for all participants, for the site under study, and any individuals or persons they may have referenced during data collection sessions. Additionally, as I used participants' words, at times

verbatim, I was careful to dissociate any identifying data, except where gender is noted for the purpose of analysis. My intent was to maintain data integrity, and maintain the confidentiality established with each participant. Data storage was consistent with IRB procedures, as discussed in the data collection section of this chapter.

Limits to the Research Design

As with all research projects, there are limits to this study. The choice of qualitative research is appropriate given the research questions and the womanist methodological framework. The use of interviews and focus groups is also consistent with the research agenda. However, the research is limited by the following:

1. The research findings are based on my interpretative analysis of data collected. There are limits to the degree of certainty with which I interpreted the narratives of participants. Similarly, there may be inconsistencies between what I heard and interpreted, and what participants said or intended to say. The privileges I took to make meaning of participants' words, may contain misinterpretations.
2. My relationship with the participants and my experience with the study subject introduce the potential for bias. The participants' willingness to participate in the project could be construed as bias toward me, the researcher, rather than genuine interest in the project. In either case, the capacity for valid research remains. My first-hand experience with the congregation and subject matter also influenced the research topic, design, and site. There is no absolute control or filter for bias that may occur based on familiarity; nonetheless, attentiveness and identification of potential bias were used to ensure mitigation of the bias, to the degree possible for this study.

3. The findings in this study have transferability, as discussed in *Chapter 6, Conclusions*, but are not broadly generalizable. This study was not intended to represent perceptions about all African American laywomen, across denominations, and across other demographic markers. This study is particular to this site, with its particular culture, congregation, and customs. The goal of this research, as consistent with qualitative research scholarship, was to understand the phenomenon of religious authority as performed by African American laywomen, in the context of selected participants and their spiritual narratives. Each participant's experience was held as valid and significant to the research project.

~Participant Profile~

Kevin is a lay minister at the study site. Kevin attended parochial school during his formative years, and was acquainted with women with religious authority early in his spiritual journey. Despite his close relationships with the nuns who taught his courses, Kevin was influenced by a community that marginalized black women. He learned through observation that women "belong in the kitchen or somewhere…but not in the pulpit." Kevin held this belief until he was introduced to literature that suggested otherwise. He is now over 50 years old and though he still believes women cannot do everything that men can do, he now affirms the religious authority of women as equal to that of men.

Chapter Five. Data Presentation and Analysis

Introduction

This study focused on exploring layperson's perceptions about the ways in which African American laywomen perform religious authority in the 21st century. The research examined interrelated factors that influence present views of religious authority and how those factors may contribute to broadened notions of authority in the religious practices of contemporary black laywomen.

This qualitative study aimed to answer the following primary research question: What perceptions about black women performing religious authority prevail in 21st century laity? This question is informed by two secondary research questions: 1) Do laywomen subvert traditional structures of authority in the black church, and if so, how? and 2) Do stereotypical images of black women impact how listeners perceive black

clergywomen or laywomen? The following paragraphs present the data collected from the research, and briefly discuss the research findings.

Site Description

The church under study was founded in 1867, just four years after the Emancipation Proclamation. It is a United Methodist Church located south of Atlanta. At its inception it was named after one of its founders and its first Pastor. Through the years the church has had 4 names, 3 locations, and 31 pastors, only two of which have been women. There are approximately 410 worshipers present on most Sunday mornings, with a regular flow of visitors and returning friends. The official membership count is 1,587.[285]

This church is a vibrant, predominantly African American congregation, comprised of persons of all ages. The worship style varies weekly. One Sunday there may be a procession of ceiling-high banners on gold posts, with the pastor in full clerical attire; and on the next Sunday, there may be dancers and a jazz saxophonist, painting the pulpit with melody and rhythmic motions. The variety of expressions of the tradition of faith is a mark of this worshiping congregation. The enthusiasm of the membership is another mark.

The members of this congregation regularly volunteer in the community and in the church. On any given day, members are actively engaged in missions, health and welfare, education, and other endeavors designed to "welcome the entire community for the making of disciples for Jesus Christ."[286] As with United Methodist congregations,

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[285] There are two Sunday services: 8:00 am & 10:30 am. Statistics provided by church administrator in a request for public information.
[286] Church mission statement, "Study Location Website."

the official leadership is comprised of the senior pastor, assistant pastor (if appointed) and lay leadership. At the time of this study, 12 of 29 key lay leadership positions were filled by women, or 41%.[287] Lay positions are filled by a nominating committee, in conversation with the senior pastor. Of the six women participants in this study, two had served in appointed lay leadership positions at some point in time, while all were currently participating in some form of ministry capacity as a servant worker.[288]

Participant Sample

There were two basic criteria for participation in this study: membership at the research site for over six months, and minimum age of 18 years old. Twelve persons total participated in the study, six women and six men. The target participant base was laypersons, however, one lay minister and one ordained clergyman participated. All of the six women participants were laywomen. Aside from gender, participants were differentiated by marital status and level of education achieved, as shown in Chapter Four, Table 4.

Participants in the study were divided into two focus groups, one women's group and one men's group, with six persons each, respectively. Five persons participated in individual interviews and focus groups, two men and three women. Of those five, one man and one woman participated in individual interviews only. Figure 3 is a visual depiction of each participant's role.

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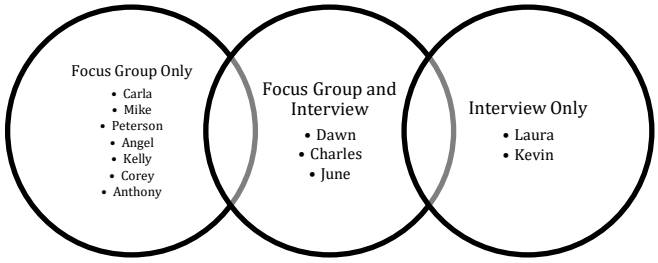
[287] Leadership data granted by church administrator via request for public information access.
[288] The term 'volunteer' is not used in this setting. Servant worker more appropriately conveys the senior pastor's theological and ecclesial views on serving in the local church. Servant workers refers to those who offer their time, talents, and finances to the service of the church. All members and regular attendees are encouraged to take part in the life of the church as ministry servants in some capacity.

Figure 3 Participant Roles in the Study



Emergent Themes

The themes identified in this study emerged from the data collected in the focus groups and interviews. Analysis of the data indicates five emergent themes:

1) authority of the believer

2) black laywomen's leadership is a '10'

3) hindrances to black women persist

4) black laywomen's leadership is 'normal'

5) media depictions of black women are detrimental.

The overarching themes are listed in Table 5, with the corresponding number of transcripts in which the theme was found and the number of references to the theme noted in the transcripts.

Table 5 Emergent Themes

Theme	Total # of transcripts identifying this theme	Total # of references to theme
Religious authority is the authority of all believers	6	8
Perceptions about black women performing religious authority in the 21st Century are rated a '10'	5	15
Culture, tradition and scriptural interpretations continue to hinder black women, particularly in the performance of preaching	7	22
Black laywomen performing religious authority is 'normal'	5	10
Media depictions of black women are detrimental	2	18

Authority of All Believers

The question of religious authority for black laywomen is of major consideration in this research study, therefore, an understanding of how participants understand religious authority was the logical starting place for this research. Rather than offer a definition of religious authority, each data collection session began with prompts such as, "What is religious authority in the 21st century? What does it look like? More specifically, what does it look like for black laywomen?" I found it most appropriate to hear what the phrase 'religious authority' meant to congregants; who it applies to; and how persons come to have religious authority. The most significant finding was respondents view religious authority as inherent to all Christian believers. This is consistent with teachings about authority within the Christian faith and the priesthood of all believers. Beyond individual authority, participants viewed religious authority as granted externally by a higher authority. The way participants understand religious authority might be loosely categorized as theologically, institutionally, and interpersonally. Responses showed that while all believers may have authority in a general sense, there is also another level of authority that is granted beyond the self.

Theological Authority

> *"I think now we all have religious authority. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, and live according to his word, then He has already authorized us to spread the Good News. So, of course we adhere to the hierarchy of organized religion, wherever we may be, but we [lay members] have religious authority also."*

> *"I think it involves the authority of God given to people to get them to become who God wants them to be."*

When questioned about the nature of religious authority, participants stressed that spiritual authority resides with all believers. There is a particular level of authority that is granted clergy by institutional bodies, however, this does not supplant the authority given from God to all believers. Authority that comes directly from the Divine is not limited to positions or certain persons within the faith community; it is for all who believe and are willing to accept it. Participants expressed exercising their authority as a spiritual responsibility to and for others. In this view, religious authority is used in the service of others, rather than in exerting power over others.

> *"Years ago, I was chairperson of council on ministries in my church and I worked very well with it. But there were times when I not only had to present, tell them about items, I had to present it; I had to get them to see it. And I could feel that I as I was giving to them, they were giving to me too, religious authority was involved in that."*

Several participants emphasized that religious authority is shared authority among persons of faith for the purpose of discipleship.

> *"Religious authority is someone who has a personal relationship with God and keeps that line open to be used by Him in whatever position that they are [in]. So being the light of Him. That could be from the pastor down to the person driving the church bus - not down to, but either or."*

> *"To me it just means the authority given to me by God through Jesus, to make disciples for Christ."*

Institutional Authority

Beyond the authority given to all believers, respondents acknowledged that there is a validation process involved in granting religious authority for the leadership of the church. While it is the responsibility and right of all believers to participate in the life of the church through service, there are those who are singled out to lead congregations in more formal appointments.

> *"Religious authority can mean an individual or a body that has been ordained or has been voted, nominated by the church members to lead. Again, I think that one has to recognize the Spirit of God that is within them to move forward into that position."*
>
> *"It is an authority that has sort of been given to you; not that it necessarily came from God, well it may have come through God, but it comes through some type of governing body. It is given by some entity."*
>
> *"People are granted religious authority when they prove that they are worthy of having it. First there has to be an understanding of this calling from God, and the ability to lead and have authority. But if this authority is not acknowledged by an entity, is it authority? Some body validates that authority. There has to be some mechanism or organism that validates the authority."*

Laypersons view religious authority as authority that is given by God, and validated by the local church and external institutions. This understanding of institutional authority overlaps with theological authority. The hierarchical structure of the church is viewed as a source of validation for those who lead within congregations and other religious spaces. Several participants emphasized the process of receiving religious authority as an ordered structured, structured process. This description is consistent with the United Methodist Church's ordination process for ordained deacons or clergy.

> *"In my experience, there was always some steps they had to go through. And that authority was given through someone who maybe had a step up, could have been a pastor at a church who might have nourished someone's growth, so they were the authority."*
>
> *"When I hear religious authority, I think of the people who are at the top of the religious pyramid. So, in the Methodist church, that'd be like the Bishops and the people above the Bishops…That's what I think of when I hear religious authority."*

Interpersonal Authority

Several participants described religious authority as a degree of authority granted to individuals from the community, based on one's spiritual growth and potential for leadership. Kelly shared how her military Chaplain asked her to take on increasingly more ministry roles as she performed well in each ministry endeavor. Congregants commented on her leadership abilities and she was asked to lead the children's ministry. Observable growth was also noted as key to religious authority.

> *"When people see where you started, and where you ended up, and how God has been a blessing in your life, I think that also gives you spiritual authority."*

Angel shared how she and her spouse were asked to mentor youth in the congregation. "I can't honestly say that I know the Bible, know the Bible," she gently adds, "But it is because we felt in our hearts, not because we were asked." She combines congregational affirmation with an internal desire to serve in ministry.

The willingness to serve without compulsion surfaced as an undertone to each of these categories of religious authority. Participants repeatedly stated that one must want to lead and serve, or it doesn't really work. At the same time, there seemed to be a certain expectation of some level of ministry service, whether as a leader or one who supports the leaders.

Summary. While the data shows a belief in the religious authority of all believers, participants also stated that formal religious authority is granted by an authoritative body, such as an institution or other governing body. Though the question was not intended to refer to clergy persons, in particular, the responses indicate a subconscious association of clergy persons to religious authority. As participants moved

beyond their initial responses, they acknowledged that religious authority extends beyond those sanctioned by formal governing bodies, to the everyday religious practitioner. However, the initial response is significant because it indicates a subconscious expectation about religious leadership and external validation. More specifically, it indicates that while respondents acknowledge their own authority, they also value requirements that those in formal leadership, i.e., clergy, receive validation by an institution beyond the local church. Governing bodies typically include denominational authorities and institutions of higher learning, such as seminaries and divinity schools.

This finding is significant because black women have historically been excluded from the highest levels of local church leadership, whether by denominational policies, lack of validation by the local religious body, or some combination of the two. While some congregations may affirm black women's leadership, the pipeline to that leadership lags due to institutional gatekeeping even as black women who meet all formal requirements continue to emerge. For example, when black women are redirected from pastoral leadership positions to administrative support positions, as stated by one participant, religious bodies simply impose a camouflaged form of marginalization. This redirection, in effect, reinstitutes male-dominated church leadership, despite inclusive rhetoric that suggests otherwise. Thus, to better gauge the execution of religious authority by black laywomen, this study challenged participants to look beyond the pulpit, to the ways in which individual laywomen live out their authority as a believer, with or without formal validation.

There were no significant discrepancies among the participants in how they described the nature of religious authority and how it is granted. Both women and men

participants alike claimed individual religious authority as laypersons. At the same time, they acknowledged that they've observed and experienced fewer black women in the formal validation process of licensing or ordination.

Black Laywomen's Leadership is a '10'

"Mine is a 10!"

When asked specifically about black laywomen and the performance of religious authority, participants expressed overwhelming support, based on past and present experiences. Participants were asked to rate their perceptions of black laywomen's leadership, on a scale of one to ten, with one being most negative and ten being most positive. I intentionally allowed participants to interpret 'performance of religious authority' in their own manner. This enabled me to determine if the default perception about religious authority was pastoral authority, or at least, clergy related, despite the affirmation of the authority of individual believers.

> *"My experiences - I'd give it a 10. Here's my reason for saying that. I will start with the most recent. Even for the women here now, at [this church], when I hear them preach and teach, it causes me to stop and think. Cause some of their thoughts and some of their examples are outside of the box; things I hadn't thought of. And what they're teaching and preaching, it's all scripture, it's all good - for men and women and children."*
>
> *"10 easily" (3 participants nod in agreement)*
>
> *"What I experienced with female leaders pastoring – it's a 10."*
>
> *"I still give it a 10 because of my early experiences. I've never had a problem with women in the pulpit at any point in my life."*

Though pastoral ministry was not the intent of this question, participants consistently responded to their perceptions about black clergywomen. Even with gentle prompting

to consider the performances of black laywomen, responses tended to fold in experiences with black clergywomen. This indicates an inherent assumption about religious authority being primarily located within the cleric, despite responses that state otherwise.

Additionally, the responses showed acceptance of and appreciation for black laywomen and their ministry leadership. Respondents relayed animated stories of how "sister so-and-so" was integral to their religious formation. Despite studies that indicate a rejection of or hesitance toward black women with religious authority, this study found that laypersons embraced black women's leadership, both as lay servants and clergy. One participant commented on a noticeable difference in black laywomen and clergywomen as they execute their leadership positions. She hesitated to elevate women's leadership, but wanted to emphasize "something, that is noticeable."

> *"For me personally, I love seeing women in leadership positions."*
>
> *"I'm very satisfied, realizing that women, black women especially, really have a responsibility. It's there. If they will recognize it, accept it, and act on it. Because the need is really, really there, in many areas. Culturally, religiously, and in many other ways. So, I respect it, and I rate it very highly, because of the need."*
>
> *"I respect them, feel that they are really able to perform the responsibilities well. They seem to exert, I think, a little more, I don't want to call it enthusiasm, but a different kind of energy in the church. And it is not that much different, but there is something, that is noticeable."*

Two participants rated their perceptions of black women performing religious authority lower than 10, but for reasons not anticipated. Peterson, the only seminary trained participant, stated that while his experience with black women religious is positive, the systems through which they must matriculate for formal validation, are

much less affirming. Specifically, he reflected on women minister colleagues whom he'd watch excel academically and in ministry settings, yet whom were not given leadership opportunities so readily available for their male counterparts.

> *"I would say 4-5. And I base that on my experience with black women in the academic setting and beyond, where their experience has not been one that is very affirming. They have the same competence, and ability as their male counterparts, but for many of them, years after seminary, they still have no [pastoral] appointment."*

Similarly, Anthony expressed his displeasure with the lack of prevalence of black women ministers:

> *"I would say 1. And my 1 is not based on what I've experienced of their authority; that would be a 10. But my rating of 1 is based on the fact that I had never even heard a black woman preacher until I came to [this church]. So, across the several denominations I've been in, for 37 years, I'm just now encountering black women ministers at all."*

Furthermore, both men expressed disdain for societal systems that place black women at the lowest levels of public consideration. "They are at the bottom," exclaimed Anthony, "and that is a problem in this country." Both Peterson and Anthony responded to systemic issues that hinder women in ministry. While they appreciated their experiences with black laywomen's leadership, they were more so focused on the lack of black women clergy, particularly as senior pastors.

Summary. Ten of the twelve participants (83%) expressed affirmation for black women performing religious authority. Positive experiences contributed to this support, as well as egalitarian views on one's capacity for religious authority. Stated differently, participants rejected notions of gender as a determinant in effective leadership or pastoral duties. While they expressed positive perceptions about black women performing religious authority, respondents were keen to clarify that gender does not

indicate effectiveness or ineffectiveness of persons performing religious authority. Additionally, the responses showed that laypersons did not express a preference of leaders based on gender; rather, it was based on one's ability to accept responsibility for leadership and the demonstrated ability to lead and influence others.

Those participants who expressed low perceptions about black women performing religious authority did so from an alternative interpretation of the question. Two of the twelve participants (16%) stated that their perception of black women performing religious authority was low, because of the ways in which black women are marginalized from the most prominent positions in religious vocations. "For example," Peterson noted, "many black women with the same credentials as their black male counterparts, are not given church appointments upon completion of seminary." "If they are given a church," he continued, "it is a small struggling church, in which she must prove her qualifications against the odds." If the respondents affirmed their experience of black women performing religious authority, they strongly critiqued the systems which hinder black religious women.

It is significant to note that the men's focus group collectively asserted that societal norms and diminished views of black women directly impact black women's influence in religious settings. They seemed intent on dislodging notions that black women create their perception problems, and are recipients of the conditions they created. In this instance, black men in this study defended black womanhood and the complexity of living while black and a woman in the United States. While the women's focus group acknowledged this complexity, they downplayed its impact on black women performing religious authority. Rather, women participants emphasized the necessity for black women to 'work twice as hard as men' so they may 'prove that they can do the

job.' They tended to place more emphasis on the behaviors necessary for black women to be perceived as capable and successful leaders, as opposed to the systems or processes in place that make over-performance a normal reality for black women.

Hindrances to Black Laywomen Persist

> *"Early on it was whatever was the custom of the scriptures of God, the traditions of the religious community that I was in. But as I became a woman, at first, I had my own prejudices, because I was just raised that way and its just the hierarchy of the family structure. We are always taught that the man is the head, and wife submitted to your husband. And as I grew I realized that just because you're a man, you're not right."*

Despite positive perceptions about laywomen executing authority in religious spaces, respondents acknowledged that hindrances to that authority persist. For the purposes of organization, the hindrances may be understood to align with three categories: cultural, traditional, and scriptural interpretations about women. These categories are at once distinct, and overlapping, as the select comments indicate.

Culture as a Hindrance

> *"Especially culture [hinders black women]. And the structure of the church, you know, makes a difference, has made a difference in the past."*

> *"I think culture has some differences. I grew up in a home where my mother was Methodist and my dad was Baptist. The Methodist church is where I got most of my religious training. They're an open church. Women had authority, especially Sis X who preached in the '60s. My dad's church did not have that kind of (pause) experience at all. In fact, I didn't see a woman in his pulpit until I was [later in life], when they changed. And so, I think culture more than anything else."*

> *"I think it is because of the cultural background that we have here, in the South. But it is probably across the nation. When you look at the history of [this church], during its early stages, well first of all, as far as the land, the man owned it. So therefore, you needed a male presence as a protector, to make certain that nothing went wrong. And that's just part of our culture and part of our history as black people, that the man needs to be up front."*

While participants did not clearly define their usage of culture, the responses suggest culture as the way of being that constitutes daily living. Historically, black men were positioned as the formal leaders of black families, black communities, and black churches. Though women were vital participants in black populations, participants stated that their experiences were of black male leadership primarily. The normalcy of black male leadership is viewed as a hindrance to black women because it positions women performing religious authority as abnormal, or at least as different from what persons have experienced. Both women and men in the focus groups stated that while women leading in the church is common, women in pastoral leadership is less common, and at one time was also less desirable.

As with other elements of this study, the conversation shifted to cultural acceptance for black clergywomen, rather than black laywomen. Even with redirection, participants offered stories about their engagement with women in ministry, or lack thereof. Participants expressed how attitudes within their immediate surroundings, with respect to black women, initially shaped their beliefs about black women in the church. Culturally, women were expected to follow their men, Dawn explained. This view wasn't a matter of theological reflection or preference; it was "the way it was."

Tradition as a Hindrance

> *"Ok, how I was raised was you stay in your place. But at the same time there was an equality-type thing going on as well. But there are some things that - just like going to the household, a man should lead the house, but most of the time women do…But I do think that in some positions that there should be a male role. I think it just makes a difference."*
>
> *"Then on top of that there was just that traditional comfort, thinking that yeah, we have women here; maybe we'll let them get to step A, but not to*

> *step B. As long as we have them at step A, we feel better, cause at least we can say we have women, within, but we just won't let them get to the top."*
>
> *"The way I think of religious authority has a lot to do with the way I grew up. I grew up in the church, so I understood that the pastor was someone important and you should listen to what he says. But I also understood that he's human and he's flawed."*

Similarly, participants shared how church and family traditions influenced how they think about black women with religious authority. Though all participants affirmed black laywomen's religious authority now, several revealed backgrounds in which they rejected women as church leaders. For one participant, Dawn, it was her church upbringing that caused her to question women pursuing pastoral ministry. For Kevin, it was embedded stereotypes that made him resist feminine leadership.

> *"Because initially, my thing was some of the old school thinking. We don't need no women in charge because they tend to change their mind, or kind of like shoes. They say I need another pair of shoes because I don't have any shoes to match this dress. Whereas you know what, if you just go back to basics, you've got the shoes. It is just you want something different…So, even that, I need something different…can add to it, and embrace it, as opposed to just being that same boring routine type of plan or schedule. So bringing something different in, helps out… I think it is more of a challenge for a woman. Because they still tend to be put in that same stereotype role. You know, being a mother, here's where she needs to be. And in the event she's got children, she needs to take care of the children. But still, you can work outside of that. Especially when God puts you there."*

Kevin shows how stereotypes about women, such as indecisiveness, may work against women seeking to lead in ministry settings. The need for "something different" may be viewed as excessive and unwarranted, rather than refreshing and inspiring. Additionally, Kevin's environment led him to view raising children as a maternal responsibility. This is a cultural and traditional presumption that is prevalent in black families, communities, and churches. While Kevin attempts to mitigate this expectation

of black women with the importance of divine calling, it is clear that black laywomen and clergywomen must navigate expectations of their home lives, as they engage in ministerial service. The women's focus group participants viewed this less as a challenge than did the men's group; rather, the women viewed it as 'what women always do.'

Scriptural Interpretation as a Hindrance

Scriptural interpretations that relegate women to helpmate, weaker vessel, or silent member were noted as the basis upon which cultural and traditional practices formed. Both focus groups talked about their interpretations of what 'women be silent' means to them, and how they don't see this as justification to limit laywomen's authority in the 21st Century black church. The men's focus group was visibly uncomfortable with this line of discussion, though it was initiated by a group participant.

> *"Well Paul says let the women be silent (nervous laughter)."*
>
> *"Well Paul ain't here. [Laughter by all participants]. Until we die and see Paul, I'm gonna have a question for him, back then, what were you thinking? [Emphatically] Don't get me wrong. We're in 2018, and we need to be up front. I don't want to get political, but it's all political, even the Christlike things."*
>
> *"We're laughing, but I think the scripture certainly impacts our treatment of women and religious authority."*

Summary. Respondents indicated a range of sources that inform how they think about religious authority, in general, and black women performing religious authority, in particular. Cultural and traditional church norms readily emerged as the primary influencers of perceptions about black women in religious authority. Those

who experienced black women in some form of religious capacity during their upbringing, more readily accepted black women clergy, as opposed to those who experienced black male leadership only. All participants affirmed the prevalence of black women's leadership in the church, but mostly as supportive to male counterparts or subordinate to male oversight. Participants reflected on the ways in which the absence of black women clergy was normative and thus, unquestioned. Heavy emphasis on scriptures that seemed to support the silencing of women contributed to the acceptance of male-dominated leadership. Two participants (16.6%), Dawn and Kevin, shared stories of how tradition and teaching shaped their perceptions about black women performing religious authority.

> *"The women. The women were leading smaller, subcommittees. Like my auntie was the chairman of pastor's aide, for years…So I saw her in a leadership role, but only as it relates to a smaller subcommittee. She wasn't in the pulpit. There were very few women actually in the pulpit, unless they were there to be the mistress of ceremony or to introduce the guest speaker. But not to bring forth the word."*

Furthermore, the rejection of the feminist movement by black communities helped maintain the patriarchal status quo. "I grew up Baptist, and my Baptist church was very conservative," Dawn continued, "and they didn't want to have anything to do with feminism or homosexuality or women who loved women - it was just, unnatural – that's what they would say, unnatural." Dawn was vocal about her own initial rejection of black women clergy, and insisted that it was based on her church environment and experience.

> *"As I've gotten older, I'm more accepting. But as a child, I grew up when women did not have authority… I just never saw a lot of women in the pulpit; that was not my experience. And the people who talked to me about pastors and preachers and clergy, would always say the man is the head, and God calls men, and women have to be submissive and all*

> *that…I was taught, it was my experience, it was my lifestyle that the pastor was the man."*

Even as her mom led the household, she was subordinate when it came to matters of religious formation. Dawn's transition to acceptance of women's leadership came in her mid-career adult years, as she began to think more critically about black women's capability in the broader community, and the local church. Her experiences with women leaders in corporate settings contradicted her belief about women's subordinate status in religious settings. Whereas she once questioned whether women could lead as well as men, in the women's focus group she joined the chorus of affirmation that "everyone knows women rule the world."

Participants stated that their understanding of religious authority is rooted in communal notions of authority. Family communities were the most influential element in shaping participant views on religious authority. The family structure, as well as the ways in which authority was navigated, informed several responses. More specifically, the tradition of "men are the head" as a reinterpretation of Paul the Apostle's teaching, caused several respondents to reject the authority of women in religious spaces. Dawn was joined by one male participant, Kevin, in the strong messages she received against black women's leadership in the church. "Women are supposed to be home, having babies," reflected Kevin, on the unspoken messages he intuited as a young man.

Despite positive experiences with nuns in his primary educational years, he was significantly influenced by church traditions that silenced women, or accepted them only if they, "stayed in their place." Dawn echoed this communal stance, but quickly pivoted with, "…But I learned men don't know everything!" Her comment was less

about the men, and more about her mid-life awakening to the capacity and capabilities of black women in religious spaces.

Kevin's dismissal of black women's leadership is primarily patriarchal in nature. He confessed, "I had to read a book by Miles Monroe to get a better understanding, to get a better feel for women having authority and ruling positions within the church. Because me being old school, the thing is, women need to sit over here on the side and be quiet." Though Kevin later affirmed the value and necessity of women's perspectives in the local church, he maintained that black women who perform religious authority are an asset "as long as they are performing in their particular role." On the surface Kevin affirmed the leadership of black laywomen and clergywomen, but throughout the data gathering process there were consistent traces of patriarchal perceptions.

The theme of hindrances emerged as we explored the sources behind perceptions about black women performing religious authority. Though the inquiry focused on black women performing religious authority in general, respondents consistently related the authority to pastoral authority. This indicates an inherent interpretation of religious authority as the authority granted male clergy, with women clergy as an exception to the norm. Additionally, the motif of 'the man is the head' was palpable throughout these discussions. While on the one hand respondents articulated uncompromising support for black women performing religious authority, on the other hand, they repeatedly defaulted to masculine language when referring to pastorates or other senior positions in congregational life.

Black Laywomen's Religious Authority is Normal

> *"I think it [black women with religious authority] is very positive. I'm used to seeing black women, just growing up and coming up in church,*

> *and my aunt was the minister, and all of my cousins, and all of my elders were leading the church - and most of them were women."*
>
> *"In this day and age, I'm comfortable with women. I'm waiting on our woman president to come. (Laughter). To me in this day and age, I don't see, as far as us playing a role in any type of positions, I don't see it as a shakeup. Its normal, I feel comfortable. I don't feel like, should she be doing that? It's just normal."*

Despite the many ways in which black women may be hindered in religious settings, this research is consistent with other scholarship in validating the real presence of laywomen doing the work of the church. Participants enthusiastically identified performances of authority that are not limited to preaching and pastoral responsibilities. Participants in both focus groups affirmed the leadership of laywomen and the stressed how crucial they are to the life of the church. Laura's discussion of the 'Improvement Committee' is a case in point:

> *"So we decided to call ourselves 'The Improvement Committee'. And we organized it well. We just didn't ask for money. We organized the church into families. And had a person in charge, a chairperson of each family, who would collect the money. And we keep a record of every penny that every person contributed. And we really raised the money; we had too much. We bought an organ from [X] Piano Company. We bought a piano and we had money left. And that was the beginning of the money for the building of the new church…We've done many, many things, but that was one that I particularly liked."*

With deep pride and enthusiasm, Laura boasted of the work of the 'Improvement Committee.' She stressed how much the members worked together and wanted to help their church in whatever manner possible. For Laura, this is but one story in a long history of normal behavior for black laywomen. "We did whatever we could," she offered, "because it was our church." This sense of loyalty and commitment was prevalent in the stories of authority collected throughout this study.

Finally, the study participants offered specific examples of religious authority as performed by black laywomen. These performances constitute the quotidian contributions of black laywomen committed to black church communities. The naming of performances of authority beyond the pulpit underscores how contemporary laypersons value a variety of expressions of religious leadership.

Spiritual Formation as Religious Authority

> *"It was in a parochial school that I went to. Because there were nuns there, and they were in charge of the altar boys, and I was one of them. So, therefore they had to make sure that we learned our prayers that we had to say during mass…They were the ones who were responsible, and they in turn would report to the priest…So that was my first experience, as far as having a woman being in charge of my spiritual learning."*
>
> - *Kevin*

Teaching and Preaching as Religious Authority

> *"I think they can [perform religious authority]. I've known many women who had that gift to speak, even to preach and to teach, but yet they had not been called to the ministry. And they did not have a congregation or they didn't lead a group. I think laywomen have just as much authority to present the Word and to teach and preach as anyone else. And sometimes they might do a better job because they don't have the pressure of being the leader of a congregation or a flock of people."*
>
> - *Charles*

Communion Stewarding as Religious Authority

> *"In my Methodist church that I grew up in, we had stewards and stewardesses. So, the stewardesses were the women; stewards were the men. Doing the same thing, as the men, but for some reason they weren't called stewards. Many of them had authority in what they said and what they did. And of course, they were an all women group; they had the same leaders as the men's group, and they had the same power as the men's group. But they weren't combined as one. So, I do think they can perform / have the same authority as men who might be lay leaders or stewards or prayer warriors or para-prayer leaders also."*

> *"You mention being a communion steward; do I hear you saying that being a communion steward is a performance of religious authority. Is that right?" "Yes, I would say so. I think that is religious authority."*
>
> - *Charles*

Prayer Ministry as Religious Authority

> *"I think coffee and drive thru prayer. Just the fact that people are standing out there on the side of the road and praying with people; that gives you some type of religious authority."*
>
> *"Plus the prayer warriors…and the ministry that goes out, the care and visitation, to nursing homes, and all kinds of things like that."*
>
> - *Carla*

Nutrition Ministry as Religious Authority

> *"I'd like to say that the ladies that cook the food for us also are performing spiritual authority."*
>
> - *June*

Nursery Ministry as Religious Authority

> *"And also, to the people that are in the nursery. They are watching over these young people and they are helping guide them, into a spiritual world. I think there are a lot of women in the laity that perform spiritual authority in this church."*
>
> - *Angel*

Summary. Participants rejected notions of black laywomen performing religious authority as subversive, choosing rather to label it as "normal in the black community." Not only have black laywomen always been significant contributors in the black community, but they demonstrate a range of ways in which religious authority might be executed. Respondents tended to interpret traditional structures of authority as hierarchal in nature, and predominantly black male. However, the data shows that respondents deem every level of leadership in the local church valuable, while also acknowledging that much of the everydayness of religious life is accomplished by black laywomen.

The normalness of black laywomen's contributions is both commendable and cautionary. Respondents excitedly stated the ways in which black laywomen do the work of ministry. Prayer leaders, nursery workers, communion stewards, and ushers, are but a few examples of spaces in which black laywomen perform religious authority. One interviewee, Laura, shared passionately about how women of the church have always "led fundraisers" and helped support the church. Woman-led committee leadership in the black church is a norm and familiar to all participants. At times the responses carried a tone of pride about how integral black laywomen are to the life of the church.

However laudable, this view also situates the subordinate status of women as normative. While laywomen may be celebrated for their gifts of service, they are also pigeonholed into roles that are most acceptable or deemed appropriate for women. Laywomen's leadership in black church settings is often limited to the confines of cooking, children's education, prayer, fundraising, committee leadership, and pulpit support. The normalcy of women performing these roles is rooted in culture, traditions, and interpretations. For example, Charles commented on how women tend to flourish in particular areas.

> *"Like Vacation Bible School – they [women] have more patience, they can deal with more students than I think men would. I think men are a little bit less patient. Evangelism is another area that I think women tend to really flourish in. I think it's because of their nurturing nature. I think men can be a part of it, and I've seen men who are, who go out and share the word, but it's not with the same intensity as women… even in missions, I find women who go on mission trips are more apt to give more of themselves and complain less, than when men go, and do the same thing. I think it's because of the women's idea that these people need me; kind of like my children need me, so what can I do to make their life better and to lessen their suffering. It's not that women are just suited for certain things; but I think they do better at certain things than men do."*

While Charles affirmed the leadership of black women clergy, he, like other participants, tended to relegate laywomen to service roles, albeit vital service roles. Discussions about laywomen performing religious authority revealed slippage in participants' perceptions – while they expressed positive perceptions about laywomen exercising authority, they also tended to revert to masculine language when referring to pastoral leadership. Women's leadership in the church was considered normal, except in the pulpit. Women participants were the stronger advocates of broadened expressions of religious authority. They tended to embrace the research queries as reflective of their own ways of participating in church life.

Media Depictions of Black Women are Detrimental

> Black women are: *"Nannies and teachers." "Not as health conscious." "Angry." "Have attitudes and are strict." "Obnoxious." "Loud. Aggressive. Mean. Mad. Ugly." "Big nosed. Fat. Ugly. Big booty."* And the list goes on.

These are but a few of the terms spouted out when participants were asked to finish the sentence: Black women are _____. The stereotypes criticized black women's physical appearance, social behaviors and cognitive capabilities. Even attributes that might be acceptable on other bodies, were depicted as negative on black women's bodies. At times the atmosphere was tense as participants expressed discomfort with acknowledging the stereotypes lodged against black women. Men participants were hesitant to begin, with one even declaring, "I am not talking about my wife!" They seemed loathe to speak about or against black women, particularly to me, a black woman. I made efforts to ease their concerns by assuring them that I just wanted to hear what they've heard, and that I understood the stereotypes do not necessarily

reflect their own views. With this disclaimer, the men voiced their experiences of the talk about black women and what they see in visual culture and social media.

> *"I want to chime in on the press, and how they show us on television" [interrupting] – "they always give us like a mugshot, right. And then when its someone that's Caucasian, they go to their Facebook page and they just look all nice and cute. But when its anybody of color, it's always a mugshot."*

It is not simply that stereotypes are detrimentally reinforced in the media, but these stereotypes then impact how persons perceive black women participating in ministerial capacities. Carla initiated a discussion of Tyler Perry's Madea character as an example of damaging stereotypes of black women. The women's focus group commented on the popularity of the theatre productions and films featuring Madea, particularly with black Christian audiences. If the participants appreciated the artist's efforts at humor and levity during difficult times, they equally felt conflicted with the religious complexity of the black woman protagonist, that is, Madea.

> *"So, if you have an excitable sermon by a white male, or black male even, we say he's passionate. Its the same behavior from a black female, but, if you have it from a black female, the stereotype says she's angry, she raises her voice, she's loud - doing the same thing. If it's the man, its accepted as passionate; if it's the black woman, she's just loud and angry."*

> *"I also know, when it comes to African American women being spiritual leaders, the media just takes it to a whole different level. And it's more of a derogatory way. A good movie would be like Madea. When you see Madea, there is always that strong spiritual leader – it's usually female. But it's also kind of in a joking manner… Because a lot of those women, its true what they do; they are the ones who make those sacrifices; they are the ones that lead. They're the ones that have to stay and pick up all the pieces when everything else has fallen. So when I see [African American] women in authority I think that's what a true leader looks like. Someone who is willing to stay behind and do all the hard work, even when everybody else is gone."*

> *"I think it does affect the way people view black lay women in the church. Because pastor makes the joke all the time that I know that you're out in the club partying and shaking everything, and acting a fool. And then you come here in the morning and say I am holier than thou. So it's that two-faced mentality, but it really gets put on women of color - which is not fair."*
>
> *"But, as far as that, it [stereotypes] gives it a certain stigmatism that oh, if I go to a black church, with all these black women, it is just gonna be loud and it is gonna be unruly and it is gonna be "ghetto.""*

Participants acknowledged that the stereotypes they see and hear concerning black women instigate assumptions they have about black laywomen and clergywomen. Angel noted that she initially responded to black women in ministry positions with a grain of suspicion that is not present with male leadership. This led to a conversation about unconscious bias and the ways in which it shows up for black clergywomen, in particular. Men participants seemed more aware of the biases they carry against black women religious, and acknowledged the need to dissociate these stereotypes from their lived experiences.

Summary. When questioned about contemporary stereotypes of black women, both focus groups expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the way black women are viewed in American society. One participant commented, "Black women are at the bottom of everything and everyone." Participants fired off a storm of negative adjectives often associated with black women, regularly speaking over one another with the same terms. The stereotypes noted align with two general categories: physical appearance and behavior.

Denigrating comments about black women's appearance and behavior may be traced to the Victorian era, when black women were not considered to be of the feminine gender. Aside from the dehumanization of all black persons, black women were framed

as the undesirable *mammy* figure, or the hyper-sexed *jezebel*. Characteristics that defined womanhood – piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness – were not (and are not) associated with black women. Respondents recalled how former First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama was mocked as "monkey" and "ape" and how tennis champion Serena Williams is derided for her muscular physique. In the broader society, the notion of beauty and attractiveness is selectively applied to black women of notoriety, exoticness, or some other form of acceptable black femininity. This acceptability cannot be separated from acceptable behavior.

Nonconformance to particular standards of behavior for black women often leads to shunning and distancing, even within the black community. Respondents in the women's focus group shared examples of how public behaviors are interpreted differently when performed by black women. "While men are considered assertive," Carla insisted, "Black women are labeled aggressive." Furthermore, Dawn agreed, "Men are passionate, while black women are seen as angry." Mike proceeded with caution: "Black women are called loud, and sometimes they are loud." He laughed nervously, and said, "…but I'm not saying this is a bad thing."

Most significant to these discussions are the ways in which these stereotypes impact listeners in religious settings. Black women performing religious authority are initially assessed by external factors, that is, do they *look* and *sound* conventional, at the least, or exceptional, at the best? While the participants may not ascribe to the negative stereotypes imposed upon black women, they acknowledged how these stereotypes impact their ability to receive all black women on their own terms. For example, black laywomen who are assertive and directive may be perceived as "bossy." Black clergywomen who are expressive and demonstrative may be perceived as "loud" and

"theatrical." The timidity with which participants addressed their own implicit bias is insightful.

While both focus groups contributed to the list of negative stereotypes of black women, the overtones of the discussions were distinct. The men's focus group began by listing stereotypes, and then seemed hesitant to address behaviors that they've personally experienced with black women. While they were not asked for personal anecdotes, they cautiously volunteered instances of behaviors they deemed unbecoming of black women. "Loudness" and "having attitude" seemed to be the most unpopular with the group.

In contrast, the women's focus group were more forthright in listing the stereotypes, and then moved on to discuss how they combat the stereotypes. They were more comfortable naming what society thinks about black women, in conversation with how they think about themselves, than were the men participants. In fact, there was a tone of celebration for the varied expressions of black womanhood in the group. It is possible that my gender as the researcher impacted the men's comfort level when talking about stereotypes of black women. It is also possible that the discomfort is tied to an unmentionable desire for conformity in black women, for the sake of societal acceptance. Angel summarized the women's discussion in this way:

> *"But we as black women, we are all different colors and shapes, but we are all beautiful. And as she was saying, regardless of how someone looks at us, it is how we look at ourselves. Our confidence level. What we know it is we can / cannot do. What we know it is we're going to do, and make happen. So name calling, and how people perceive you, will always be forever and a day. But it is how you feel about yourself. How you feel deep inside about yourself. And that's why every one of us every day should say - I am woman, hear me roar, and I am beautiful."*

Subtheme

In addition to the emergent themes, one subtheme is related to, yet distinguished from, the other themes. The notion of attractiveness emerged as a significant factor in regards to listening to women, particularly black women. The role of physical appeal was identified in two transcripts, and referenced nine times. While this did not quite meet the threshold criteria for an emergent theme, it is useful to investigate based on the rich engagement that ensued around this topic.

Attractiveness as a Listening Factor

> *"A nice-looking body, person, woman, male, they like that. Some people that I'm finding come to church to get close to the pastor or the minister. Sometimes because of how they look. I like to see people who look good, in how they look, in what they're saying, how the message comes across. I like to see a nice-looking person/pastor, delivering the word for me to be a better person."*

Attractiveness was a key discussion in the men's group, and how appearance directly impacted their eagerness to listen to women with religious authority. Physical appearance was not an intentional research area in this study, however, the men's focus group were adamant that it matters in their worship experience. Mike discussed how it is nice to see a "fit, well-groomed person in the pulpit" and he is more likely to listen based on these initial attributes. He cautiously proceeded to comment:

> *"Now if it were Beyoncé, men and women would be there." (lots of laughter)*
>
> *"If you had a good-looking pastor, I mean just good looking; and it wouldn't matter if he had a First Lady, the women are gonna pile in. And it's even worse for a man, if you had a drop-dead gorgeous lady pastor, oh, they're gonna be here. You gonna really get new members, probably every Sunday."*

This seemingly benign commentary about external appearance is significant for black women, who are often ridiculed for not aligning themselves with white standards of beauty. The notion of appealing to listeners' visual appetites is a symptom of the larger discourse surrounding black femininity. Discussions in both focus groups raised issues of body type, body size, and colorism, as traits which impact black clergywomen.

> *"Particularly because I grew up a very dark-skinned girl. And I don't know if that bias is still there. Its dark skin versus light skin? It is, it is [several affirming echoes]. When I was growing up, if you were as black as me, you just didn't have a chance. It is like they want to say you have no beauty. But we are beautiful in God's sight. Oooow, my favorite line - you're pretty for a dark-skinned girl."*
>
> *"I want to say that it doesn't play a factor. But I also know a lot about implicit biases - the biases that you don't realized that you have. So I think it may play a role; it's probably not as huge as we might see if we're outside of the church walls. But it might still be there; you might take someone more seriously because she might be a little bit lighter."*

Regarding attractiveness, the women's focus group talked less about the beauty they see or want to see, and more about themselves as those who are beautiful. They celebrated one another as "beautiful black women," and how they appreciate the spectrum of beauty found in the black laywomen and clergywomen with whom they are associated. The reflections were not about Beyoncé fantasy; they were about women of all shapes, sizes, colors, and ways of being, and the attractiveness they all possess. With that, participants also noted the challenges they've experienced associated with physical attractiveness.

> *"I feel like, the prettier you are, the less respect you get. 'Cause everyone is like, don't worry about it, you're just a pretty face, don't think too hard." [multiple echoes of affirmation]*
>
> *"The name calling, and people look at how she looks, or she looks better - yeah, that happens in the church. It is in the world."*

Carla shared stories of how she mutes her attractiveness by not wearing makeup or toning down her attire, so that her intelligence takes precedence. "I'm more than a pretty face," she exclaimed. Similarly, June spoke about how at times she worked twice as hard to prove that she earned her position at work; it was not given because of her appearance. The women spoke candidly about how much effort is necessary to be taken seriously as an educated, professional black woman – who is also attractive.

Summary. Responses to this question indicate how beauty, or perceptions of beauty, impact the reception of black women. The female participants reflected on how physical attractiveness hinders one's ability to demonstrate intellectual capability. For black women, beauty is complicated by colorism. Participants acknowledged that initial judgements about a black woman performing religious authority may be tainted based on her appearance and visual appeal. One who is "drop-dead gorgeous" may draw a crowd, but must intentionally work to prove her abilities beyond aesthetic appearance. For black women of a darker hue, this reality is exacerbated by negative assumptions about their capacity based solely on their skin tone.

The male participants responded to this question from a position of visual pleasure. Their responses indicated no relationship between attractiveness and intellectual capability; rather, they cited attractiveness as a factor in their willingness to listen to persons in general, and black women, in particular. One respondent lifted Beyoncé as an example to which men and women would be drawn. All focus group participants agreed, with the exception of one. The Beyoncé reference shows the standard against which everyday black women are measured. This *image of beauty* functions as a lens through which black women are assessed as they perform religious

authority. Men in the focus group stated that they are drawn to physical beauty and tend to listen more when it is present. They were also careful to state that this does not suggest that they will not listen to those who are less visually appealing.

The sole outlier in this discussion stated that his "wife is enough," and that he does not consider physical attractiveness as a factor when engaging with or listening to women performing religious authority. He was reticent to validate the notion that what one sees may impact how one hears.

Juxtaposing the responses from women and men participants in the study reveals that while women perceive that they are less likely to be taken seriously and listened to because of their attractiveness, men indicated that they are more likely to pay attention and listen to those who are more aesthetically appealing. All respondents indicated that this tendency applies to how they perceive black women performing religious authority. Men participants are more likely to listen to black women who present as visually attractive, while women are more likely to listen with reservation, because of the attractiveness. The black women in the group were also more likely to downplay their own attractiveness, with hopes that they will be valued more for their intellectual capacities.

~Participant Profile~

Dawn was raised in the Baptist tradition by a single mother. She and her siblings grew up participating in various church ministries and Dawn had a personal encounter with God at a young age. She recalls listening to the preachers at her church – all male preachers – and the ridicule women experienced if they even hinted at a call to ministry. Based on her upbringing, Dawn was not a proponent of women leading in the church, without male oversight. In her later years of life, her view has changed.

Chapter 6. Conclusions

> *"I think laywomen have just as much authority to present the Word and to teach and preach as anyone else. And sometimes they might do a better job because they don't have the pressure of being the leader of a congregation or a flock of people."*

In this chapter I present a summary of the research findings, the implications of the research for womanist and homiletical scholarship, conclusions, and suggestions for further research. I began this research with the goal of expanding discourse on the authority exercised by black laywomen in the black church context. I sought to understand how black laywomen who perform religious authority are perceived in the 21st Century, during a time when women's rights and advocacy, as well as racial inequities are central societal discussions within the United States. If religious spaces are a microcosm of the communities in which they exist, black laywomen enter those spaces subject to prevailing notions about their gender and race. The research centered around three broad intersecting concepts: perceptions, authority, and identity. The

broad concepts are particularized by race, gender, and religiosity. In this study, I hoped not only to hear how others perceive black laywomen, but more importantly, to hear how they perceive themselves as religious leaders. As the primary group of persons who fill the pews of black churches across the nation, I wanted to give voice to their timeless contributions.

A qualitative research approach, using small focus groups and personal interviews, was the most appropriate method for this project because it made possible rich conversations and thoughtful reflection on the subject matter. Participants were able to share their narratives, their experiences, and their perspectives with open-ended guided queries. Using womanist methodology and theory I centered the voices of the women participants, while also giving voice to the men participants, who are equally critical to this worshipping community. Both groups added textured responses that enhanced both the research, and me as the researcher. Our shared commitments to the enrichment of predominantly black religious spaces provided for a dynamic and informative researcher – participant relationship.

Purpose of This Research

I became interested in this research as I engaged countless black laywomen who do the work of ministry without ordination or license by their denominational bodies. I observed how they campaigned for pews; cooked for choir robes; and at the same time taught toddlers to sing 'Yes, Jesus Loves Me.' These laywomen rarely asked for authority; they simply behaved authoritatively. With and without official appointments to leadership in the local church, laywomen are a forceful entity. I thought of my own journey, working on multiple levels in many churches, almost exclusively under the

direction of a male authority figure, yet often without real leadership from that figurehead. I found this structural arrangement troubling. My formative years in a faith tradition included women in ministry, therefore, I didn't know this was a contentious issue in other black church settings. Eventually I heard the grumblings of men and women of the church, about those *women preachers*.

Whereas black clergywomen have been critiqued for participating in the most masculine space of the black church, that is, the pulpit, I questioned whether black laywomen received the same level of critique for asserting themselves outside the pulpit. I observed and experienced a degree of fluidity in navigating religious spaces as laywomen that was less restrictive than that of clergywomen. These experiences, coupled with my interest in black women's leadership led me to question the current state of scholarship that addressed black laywomen and how they are perceived and perceive themselves as authorities in the 21st black church. Specifically, I explored the following research questions:

RQ1: What perceptions about black women performing religious authority prevail in the 21st century laity?

Sub-question: How does the convergence of race, gender, class, tradition, and culture, influence congregants' views about religious authority at this religious location?

RQ2: Do laywomen subvert traditional structures of authority in the black church, and if so, how?

Sub-question: Are the categories of ministering authority and governing authority adequate in describing the types of religious authority women are granted?

RQ3: Do stereotypical images of black women impact how listeners perceive black clergywomen or laywomen?

Sub-question: Do perceptions about black women's bodies and religious power impact listeners?

RQ4: Does personal engagement with women as senior pastors impact one's perception about women performing religious authority?

This qualitative study explored perceptions about black laywomen performing religious authority in the 21st Century. Womanist theory and methodology guided the ways in which I collected and analyzed the lived experiences of black laywomen in their execution of authority. Though much scholarship is devoted to the once-absent now-present place of black women in clergy roles, less focus has been on black laywomen and how they assert themselves in religious settings. Historian Bettye Collier-Thomas' *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and their Sermons, 1850-1979* provides a comprehensive collection of sermons by black women of the 19th and 20th Century, across faith traditions.[289] The anthology traces the "changes that occurred in churchwomen and the issues they addressed…across time and tradition." The 5-volume series *Those Preaching Women* by scholar and preaching professor Ella P. Mitchell began as a collection of sermons by black women, and in the final edited volume expanded to a multicultural edition.[290] The sermons collected bridge 20th and 21st Century preaching. Both Collier-Thomas and Mitchell situated black preaching women within the black preaching tradition, and more broadly, within the preaching traditions of the United States.

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[289] Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979*, 1st ed (San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
[290] Ella Pearson Mitchell and Valerie Bridgeman Davis, eds., *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection*, 1st ed (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2008).

Homiletician Teresa Fry Brown focuses on the journey of black women as they embrace the call to preach. In *Weary Throats and New Songs,* she analyzes the peculiarities of contemporary black preaching women, and considerations associated with preaching ministry, such as mentorship, sermon preparation, and personhood.[291] The book offers a glimpse into the lived experiences of black women as they navigate the journey from laywomen to clergywomen, often in faith traditions or religious institutions that don't affirm their ministry call. Without works such as these, the voices of other black clergywomen were left out of the field of homiletics, with few exceptions. This research study shifts attention from black clergywomen to black laywomen as authoritative voices and practitioners of the faith, working for the upbuilding of local churches and local communities.

This research project differs in that it centers the voices of women who don't profess a call to preach, per se, yet they still consider themselves proclaimers of the gospel. The laywomen in the study cited the many ways in which they share the gospel message informally, yet with intentionality. For instance, participants in the evangelism ministry spoke about how they witness to the community in drive-thru-prayer. The acts of sharing scripture and praying for others were viewed as proclamatory beyond the pulpit. Unlike black clergywomen, they aren't traversing pulpit boundaries and ordination requirements; rather, they navigate the terrain of lay ministry.

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[291] Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003).

The Power of Perceptions

In its most simple form, perception is defined as "giving meaning to sensation."[292] Perception refers to the ways in which awareness occurs through sense-ability. It is a process of categorization and interpretation of information, that ultimately results in particularized interactions.[293] How does one think about the intersections of gender, race, religion, and authority? In *The Perception of People*, Perry Hinton explores the cognitive and social psychology that informs how we make sense of other people. Hinton examines research in perception, social categorization, social inference, and cultural psychology to demonstrate how both cognition and culture inform perceptions of people. Social norms, expectations, and categorizations are means by which one assesses others. "If stereotypes are inaccurate judgments of people," Hinton queries, "why are they used so frequently?"[294] Does the construct of stereotypes obscure broader discriminatory ideologies?

Efforts to understand the world of the unselfconscious perceiver shaped the Gestalt approach to perception. Concentrating on brain functionality, Gestaltists explained perception by the ways in which figures and ground are separated visually. One of the most important tenets of this theory is the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.[295] Gestalt psychologists emphasized the organizing of sensory data as the way in which perception occurs. The manipulation of sensory data, in this case visual data, alters perception of the subject or object.

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[292] Perry R. Hinton, *The Perception of People: Integrating Cognition and Culture* (Hove, East Sussex ; New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2016), 7.
[293] Hinton, 10.
[294] Perry R. Hinton, *Stereotypes, Cognition, and Culture*, Psychology Focus (Hove, East Sussex; Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press, 2000).
[295] Ian E. Gordon, *Theories of Visual Perception* (Chichester; New York: Wiley, 1989).

Culture, stereotyping, and expectations are integral to how one assesses another person. Not only do social norms significantly influence one's behavior and an observer's assessment of that behavior, but also categorization and simple association undergird the seemingly benign social norms of societies. Construal-level theory argues "we construe psychologically near people (such as friends) in terms of concrete and detailed representations, but as the distance increases (strangers) the construal becomes more abstract and generalized."[296] This study sought to determine how perceptions about black women performing religious authority are formed, both in close proximity to observers and at a distance. It questioned whether gender expectations prevalent in contemporary society sway one's perceptions about black women performing religious authority, particularly in a context that formally affirms the authority of women.

The concept of proximity is significant when considering perceptions about black women in religious spaces because perceptions about black women are often formed from a distance, fueling stereotypes that are perpetuated yet unfounded. Moreover, stereotypes that appear valid may be misinterpreted because of the distant gaze of onlookers who observe without an understanding of the context and contours of black women's experiences. Womanist and feminist scholars have well documented the ways in which black women have been viewed historically, and how those stereotypical images continue to shadow the 21st Century black woman. Black religious women, laywomen for the purposes of this study, are not exempt from the shadow or the gaze.

[296] Hinton, *The Perception of People*, 53.

Lay Leadership in the United Methodist Church

Lay leadership is not uncommon, particularly in the United Methodist Church (UMC). On a missional level, UMC lay persons are called to carry out the Great Commission, as stated in Matthew 28:18-20.[297] The Book of Discipline affirms, "The witness of the laity…is the primary evangelistic ministry through which people will come to know Christ and the UMC will fulfill its mission."[298] Furthermore, the UMC interprets servant leadership as:

> "The privilege in the Church to share in the preparation of congregations and the whole Church for the mission of God in the world. The obligation of servant leadership is the forming of Christian disciples in the covenant community of the congregation. This involves discerning and nurturing…instructing and guiding…through acts worship, devotion, compassion, and justice…."[299]

The connectional church is structured such that laypersons have equal stake in the business and decisionmaking process of the church at the General Conference level, as well as on the local church level. As such, lay authority is an inherent part of the framework within Methodism. This research moved from general understandings of lay leadership and lay roles to the particularities of black laywomen in predominantly black churches, whether UMC or otherwise.

To ignore race and gender from discussions of authority, is to suggest that power and authority are neutral and without bias. Perceptions about black women in America are imbued with the history of black persons' dehumanization, devaluing, and denigration. Black women found themselves on the receiving end of critiques that

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[297] United Methodist Church Book of Discipline (BOD), 2012.
[298] BOD, 97.
[299] BOD, 98.

questioned not only black femininity, but black existence. In the post-emancipation and Reconstruction era, black persons sought to create a viable narrative that more accurately portrayed their right to thrive in the country built by their hands, namely, the United States.

Racial uplift became a center of gravity around which black social, political, and religious life revolved. The black church emerged as an entity empowered by black persons, to offer possibility and promise in the midst of national dejection. Black women, both historically and contemporarily, served without reservation in these religious spaces and created a different reality of black femininity beyond the gaze of white womanhood.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One of this dissertation introduced the ways in which I examine the body – philosophically, theologically, and materially. I began by showing how philosophical understandings of the body bracket the lived experiences of those who are embodied, and thus, are impotent for black women. Turner's social theory of the body is insightful in its claim of the inseparable relationship of body and personhood. Dolezal raises issues about the visibility of the body that are particularly pertinent to black women. Stereotypes about black women's being and bodies, as discussed in this study, have the potential to make shame a persistent experience of black women. Embodiment, Pinn argues, is what was missing from black theology. The problematic nature of black bodies that has been perpetuated across time and space is also found within black theology, leading practitioners to resist the body. Sexed, gendered, raced, differently-abled, bodies are rendered invisible. Therefore, historically, black women were viewed as nonwomen. Defense of black femininity was animated in women's Club Movements

and black church Women's Departments, as black women scholars, activists, and church ladies imagined themselves differently. Participants in this study acknowledged that black feminine embodiment in the 21st Century is both celebrated and challenged. Black laywomen must navigate perceptions about their capabilities, perceptions that are often based on stereotypes. At the same time, women in this study stressed the choice to live fully into their black femininity, regardless.

Chapter Two explores definitions religious authority and how authority functions in the context of the black church. I use Weber's categories of governing and ministering authority as points of departure to write about how black women participate in religious leadership despite structural barriers. While the categories are seemingly prohibitive for women's leadership, the study shows that black laywomen reject minimization of ministering authority as less consequential than governing authority. Rather, they affirmed performances of authority that nurture and inspire congregations as equally significant to governance. The second part of this chapter shows how womanist theologians positioned black women as co-laborers with black men in the context of black religiosity. By re-reading the history of religion in the United States, womanists and black feminists offer counternarratives to the marginalization of black femininity within and beyond the black church. Womanist scholarship disrupts narratives that mislabel and misidentify black women. This research shows how black laywomen are perceived as critical to the black church, and how they view themselves as authoritative in various ways.

Chapter Three summarizes a sampling of strategies of resistance used by black women to refute or circumvent negative stereotypes. Lorde's essay on dismantling the master's house by recognizing and appreciating difference serves as a lens through

which I analyze these strategies. Rather than assimilate to the techniques used by white men for advancement or success, black women use their own tools and techniques, even to the point of flipping stereotypes for alternative means. For example, whereas the image of the angry black woman is generally used as a denigrating image, the angry black woman may be reinterpreted as one who is passionately committed to change, justice, and disruption of the status quo. The unapologetic be-ing and *i*sness of black laywomen in this study reflects an inherent embodied resistance. Nonetheless, they cited instances in which they shift between personas, in order to contest negative viewpoints of their embodiment.

Chapter Four describes the methodology, research design, and research process for this study. As a qualitative study, the research process consisted of interviews and focus groups to collect the stories of twelve research participants. Womanism was used as the theoretical framework guiding the study. I used elements of Alice Walker's original definition of womanism, as expanded upon by womanist psychologist Layli Phillips and womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas. Specifically, I found the womanism characteristics of vernacular, traditional communalism, radical subjectivity, and spirituality as directly relevant to this study.[300]

This chapter also details the participant selection process, data collection procedures, data management, and data analysis. The processes primarily align with qualitative methods as described by Creswell, Marshall and Rossman, and Bloomberg and Volpe. The data analysis consisted of a thematic coding strategy and generation of a

[300] Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple*.

decision matrix for emergent theme determination. Attention is also given to my role as the researcher, ethical considerations, and limits to the research design.

Chapter Five is a presentation of the data, and discussion of the emergent themes, followed by analysis. The emergent themes identified in this study are:

1) religious authority is the authority of the believer
2) black laywomen's leadership is a '10'
3) hindrances to black women in leadership persist
4) black laywomen's leadership is normal
5) media depictions of black women are detrimental.

Each theme is supported by participant narratives and at times, anecdotal evidence. The themes converge to indicate that 21st century perceptions about black women with religious authority are positive. The data shows that at the lay level there is significant support for increased leadership by black lay and clergy women, despite gender disparities at the highest levels in mainline black religious traditions. This suggests that barriers to black women's elevation in religious spaces may be linked to persons at decisionmaking and certification levels, rather than lay person's resistance.

Research Implications

This research has implications for both womanist and homiletical scholarship. For the purposes of organization, I've separated the implications, however the categories are not mutually exclusive.

Implications for Womanist Scholarship

The study makes space for the spiritual narratives of black laywomen, who are often unrepresented in discussions about religious authority. These narratives contribute to an ongoing excavation of stories of black religious formation and spiritual formation in the United States, more broadly. It shows how black men and women interpret and reinterpret their own religious histories to make sense of their contemporary religious lives. It extends the work of womanist and black feminist scholars by examining the particularities of black women's informal leadership, in the 21st Century. While the pastorate remains a central focal point in black church traditions, congregations within the UMC adhere to a lay-led structure that inherently creates opportunities for leadership, including black women's leadership. However, this does not mean that power dynamics and gatekeeping of the key leadership positions are nonexistent. Structures may facilitate access, but that access may be restricted by other factors such as community culture, scriptural interpretation, and what one participant referred to as "habit." The habit of nominating or appointing laywomen to certain positions is undetectable without multi-year analysis; nonetheless, the practice is not unreasonable to suggest.

The enduring normalcy of dominant black male leadership in the black church was evident by the language used by study participants. The black church remains a place of power for black men, especially for those who are economically advanced, academically credentialed, and connected to legacies of civil rights advocacy. The prevalence of equally qualified black women, without access to the power base of the black church, reflects an ongoing preference for male leadership that the participants refused to acknowledge. One participant referred to the default of 'men are the head' as

habit and "that's how it's been, but I don't see them as better." Still, the habit is reinforced when women aren't even considered for positions traditionally held by men, and no one notices or questions why this oversight occurs. It is the work of womanist inquiry to detect and dismantle such habitual and routine practices.

The contributions of women in faith communities is evident; however, the degree to which they access and assert authority differs according to faith traditions. This is not simply an issue of clerical versus lay authority, but it is layered with race, gender, class, sexuality, and other factors which marginalize particular people groups. This study focused on the relationships between religious authority and race and gender, and to a lesser degree, theological interpretation. Race coupled with gender positions black women differently than white women, or even other women of color, because of the imbedded traditions and stereotypes with which black women contend. Further research on this topic would include an analysis of how class impacts 21st Century perceptions. Additionally, comparative analysis might be done on laywomen's leadership across two or more faith traditions.

Radical Subjectivity

> *"We can't all quote a whole lot of scriptures off the top of our head; we're not all preachers. But as we study the Word, in our quiet time, and just understanding what God really wants from us, then we can position ourselves so that we can just fit into His path. One of my gifts is the gift of hospitality."*
>
> *Women's Focus Group*

The choice to 'see themselves differently' changes the narrative that black women are consistently relegated to particular spaces of subordination within the black church.

June, an interview participant, insisted that some women actually choose to serve in what might be considered maternal or support roles because they feel called *to help*. In these instances, they view themselves and their roles as no less important than those in more visible positions of authority. For example, church nursery workers are often invisible, yet they are often responsible for introducing children to their first images and language of God, in ways that may or may not occur in children's homes. Thus, black laywomen choose to defy prescriptions about who they are and what they do as ministry leaders. Wiggins categorized women's labor as church extending and church maintenance activities.[301] Participants in this study showed how they partake in both types of activities, as both leaders and followers.

In contrast to claims that black laywomen are the most ardent opponents of black clergywomen, this research shows that more recently, they are the fully supportive. The laywomen participants affirmed not only the religious authority of other black women, but also the authority they themselves execute. They rejected boundaries to who has authority and who does not, arguing rather that they all have religious authority. While doctrinally this position is consistent with the UMC, it is particularly significant because it shows how black women have reinterpreted their contributions to the black church, against practices of marginalization and gender discrimination. Stated differently, 21st Century black laywomen chose to name their own value and contributions.

The act of naming for oneself is an act of resistance used by black laywomen and clergywomen alike. Women participants in this study affirmed themselves and one another. Not only did they celebrate the ministry contributions of the local clergy

[301] Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 115.

women, but they also pointedly commended the efforts of laywomen who often fill the pews and coffers. Claiming religious authority as nursery workers, prayer warriors, nutrition ministry workers, stewards, greeters, and music ministry workers, to name a few, indicates how laywomen in the 21st Century have expanded notions of religious authority.

A sense of unquestionable knowing laced the responses of women participants, the kind of knowing that is crucial to self-identity. The participants' expressions of self-worth, value, and the capacity for excellence, demonstrated an inherent resistance to demeaning stereotypes. More specifically, participants understand themselves on their own terms and the affirmation of their communities, rather than the terms of an external uninformed gaze. The life force of which Lorde writes is animated in the lives of these women who perform religious authority while embracing black femininity. In their daily existence they actively defy stereotypes, both consciously and subconsciously.

Agency

However, the measured agency with which black laywomen perform religious authority is related to the insecurities often experienced by black clergywomen. Women focus group participants stated that when called upon to lead in the local church, they approached their roles with the hopes that they will be received as capable to lead. At the same time, they acknowledged the need to work twice as hard as would a male counterpart, so that they show they are capable. This is no different than the burden of proof levied upon black women in other work settings. Typical stereotypes include images of black women as lazy, difficult to work with, and incapable of rational thought, decisionmaking, and knowledge generation.

Participants admitted working hard to combat these stereotypes in their professional environments. The external pressure is not as overt in religious settings, but the internal pressure remains. June suggested that the insecurity may lead to unwarranted competitiveness, "From not being equal in our mind. We have to compete from within each other, I guess, for that one spot that's available." Notions of wellness scarcity are less prevalent in local church settings, but the mindset is nonetheless detrimental and divisive.

Expanding the Confines of Religious Authority

> *"I would define it as being a leader in the church, whether you're a pastor, or leading ushers, leading the choir - you took that oath and that commitment to be a leader, in a religious setting."*
>
> *Women's Focus Group*

The expansion of, if not defiance against, religious authority that is reduced to that of religious credential holders, coupled with the assertiveness to assign value to alternative performances of authority reflects an ongoing 21st trend of black women to own who they are, in the face of denigrating stereotypical images. This way of being may be considered resistance, and it also reveals identity formation that is less shaped by the white gaze, and more shaped by internal conviction and communal reframing of the value of black women. In 2019 popular culture, this agency and ability is often referred to as 'black girl/women magic.' It is sass by another name in that it is a posture that refuses to be silent or sidelined.

Even in religious expressions, black laywomen destabilize perceptions about what it means to be a woman with religious authority. When asked about religious authority,

the energy in both focus groups was palpable. The participants were eager to express how religious authority flows at every level of Christian ministry, and how acting out that authority is core to who they are as believers. This responsibility was affirmed by all. Religious authority might be granted institutionally, recognized in individuals by the local church, and/or experienced as an internal call to ministerial service. It is the latter that most resonated with the women participants in this study.

Participants acknowledged the complexities of black women in leadership in the black church. Overt sexism is relatively non-existent in this setting, however, both men and women participants noted how it skews views about lay and clergy women. What was less considered by the participants was how imbedded patriarchy may influence their perceptions about women leading. As individuals shared their experiences of women performing religious authority, we heard both the breadth of that leadership and the limits imposed. Charles recalled:

> *"As a little boy, I'm 67 now, I remember revivals, and a preacher named Sis. Beverly. She preached our revivals for years and years, until she passed. I joined the church under her preaching, as did several of my siblings. She would come every year. To me, my pastor, had the foresight to let a woman, or allow a woman, to come into his church, and preach. She had all the powers. What I do remember, and I think about it as I got older, well she never was called Rev. Beverly. She was always Sis. Beverly. But in my young thinking I thought well female ministers were called Sister, and men were called Reverend."*

This is but one instance of how black women have been afforded religious authority to a degree, but not fully. Later, Charles stated how he was well into his 50s before he noticed the different treatment of women. "These are thoughts that I may have thought about inwardly," he reflected, "but I've never interacted with people who have some of these same critiques."

Other men echoed this sentiment and seemed to experience a sense of relief in verbalizing gender oppressive practices they've witnessed or partaken in. The discussion was both confessional and insightful. This finding bears witness to the internal struggle of men participants to support black women leaders by rejecting unjust practices perpetuated against them. If men participants desired to offer unmitigated alliance with black laywomen, they acknowledged that gender injustices and discrimination exist, and are often reinforced by the history and language of the church.

Implications for Homiletical Scholarship

"So if they can be a firefighter, a policeman, why not preach the gospel? Cause we said at the very beginning, we are all out here to spread the word."

Women's Focus Group

This research shows that lay men and women affirm and embrace the leadership black laywomen provide in the local church. Even amidst traditions and scriptural interpretations that resist the authority of women, participants expressed acceptance and at times, preference for, black women's leadership. This acceptance may be most evident in the rising number of black clergywomen appointed to pastorates. As congregations acknowledge and appreciate the valuable work of black laywomen, the paths of leadership become more accessible for black clergywomen. As one male participant stated, "I have no problems with women preachers and leaders, because they're already doing everything else." Familiarity with women doing the work of ministry was a common thread among participants who affirm lay women's leadership. Those who were exposed to the authority of laywomen at early stages of their faith

development more readily accepted the prevalence of women leading in contemporary churches. Thus, exposure is a significant factor.

Exposure

Participants in the study revealed that personal contact with women clergy directly impacted their perceptions about black women's leadership in the church and in the pulpit. Both men and women who had contact from a distance, for example, with women clergy as visiting preachers, were less likely to embrace the religious leadership capacity of black women. In contrast, all participants stated that their stance concerning black women in church leadership was positively influenced by direct contact with the first woman pastor of the research site or contact at another place of worship. Thus, the research shows that increasing personal proximity to black women reduces negative views about black women.

During the process of teaching *Introduction to Preaching* at Candler School of Theology, I was intentional to share with students a wide range of preachers and preaching styles, including diversity according to gender, race, sexuality, and faith traditions. Several students commented near the end of the course, "I never would have watched most of these preachers, if it were not for this class. They do not represent what I understood as 'good preaching.' Nor would I have read from the books assigned. But I've learned some things…." Some of the men had never listened to a woman preacher. Many of the white students had never listened to a person of color preach. Most of the white males had never listened to a black person preach, beyond sound bites on media outlets. Most of those who commented to me about the course had never listened to a black woman preacher. Exposure matters. The history of preaching in the

United States, and certainly in the 21st Century is woefully under told when black women preachers are excluded or ignored. Not only are their sermons relevant to this age, but the preaching practices of black women preachers are instructive as demonstrated in homiletician Lisa Thompson's *Ingenuity*.

Thompson argues that black women preachers have a particular vantage point as those preaching from the margins. She challenges the authority traditionally associated with inductive and deductive preaching, and suggests that black women's communal assertiveness enables them to garner authority that begins with the community. Whereas historically black women have been rendered powerless and insignificant, Thompson asserts that this positionality enables black women preachers to connect to those who have also been left out. *Ingenuity* revolves around the voices of several black women preachers' sermons; which Thompson analyzes and interprets for the reader. In doing this, Thompson makes visible the contributions of black women preachers to the practice of preaching.

My expectation is that as experience with black women's leadership in public spaces becomes more prevalent, so it does within religious spaces. Only 1 of 12 study participants had had no experience with black laywomen in leadership; 11 of 12 participants had histories that included black laywomen and/or clergywomen, whether well received or not. Additionally, how persons understand religious authority continues to broaden. Participants in this study showed how decentralized understandings of religious authority are both inclusive and empowering to the local body. A sense of ownership and investment in the mission of the church at all levels serves to facilitate formation of ecclesia in the most authentic sense. In no way does this negate the significance of clergy, but it reorients the responsibilities of the community to

the church body. Participants in this study, especially the women, saw themselves as essential to the ongoing growth of the church, not simply because of their numbers, but because of their viable ministry contributions.

Valuing Difference

Both men and women participants noted that while laywomen's performance is commendable, it is generally of a different form than male leadership. Respondents were careful to note that difference is not better or worse; it is different. Aggressive, dogmatic, directive leadership was most associated with male religious leaders. In contrast, calm, nurturing, democratic leadership was most associated with women religious leaders. These observations were most prevalent in discussions about pastoral leadership. Though the research questions intentionally inquired of lay leadership, often the responses were about experiences with pastors. Although participants did not express a gender preference for pastoral leadership, they tended to appreciate a more communal style of leadership. "Women tend to teach you more," opined one participant, "instead of just telling you what to do." Another noted, "Women have a gentler approach; as opposed to just coming in and wanting to lay the gauntlet down or hit you over the head with the hammer." Participants noted that their experience with egalitarian, conversational type religious leaders was mostly with women leaders.

But this is risky for black women. As those who tend to receive the least amount of authority in public and religious spaces, the notion of shared governance in the local church may further weaken black women's voices. While 'listening to others' was hailed as an attribute of black women leaders, it may also be used as validation of one's inability to formulate plans, strategize, and make independent decisions. What is

interpreted as passion for men, is interpreted as anger or emotionalism in black women. Thus, there is the temptation for black women leaders to mimic the leadership styles of black male counterparts, in ways that are often less acceptable for women. Creating environments that make space for a spectrum of leadership styles allows congregations to experience the richness of differing styles in ways that most compliment the religious setting.

Future Research

~Participant Profile~

Mike came to Christianity later in life. He recalls the spiritual influence of his mother from an early age – for Mike, this is religious authority. Mike generously shares stories of a spiritual journey that is shaped by religious women, none of which were clergy. He began to participate in the life of the church more fully under his first female pastor. He is concerned about the lack of black women at the higher levels of the UMC, but is hopeful for change.

"My mother and grandmother were the ones that made certain that not only me, but also my brothers and sisters listened…You gonna learn something!"

Men's Focus Group Participant

This study was based on a predominantly black United Methodist congregation in Georgia. The history of black persons in the South provides an undertone to the research that is inescapable. Many of the older congregants were members of this church during the era of Jim Crow and segregation. One participant remembered, "All

this land was owned by white men, and the early church had to buy it." For the past four years I have attended the Church Anniversary celebration of the study site, where in the tradition of the black church, congregants remember from whence they've come as a community and as a people. The spiritual narratives in this study bear witness to people with spiritual heritages rooted mostly in black church traditions. They shared stories of how their sense of religiosity and spirituality came to be. They were shaped by what they heard, saw, and experienced – including the treatment of black women. They are hopeful in the gains the church has made in accepting the leadership of black women, and at the same time recognize the work that still remains.

This research project could be extended further by exploring the specific stories of black laywomen performing religious authority, such as prayer warriors, nursery workers or nurse's guilds. These positions are common in black church traditions across denominations, and insights gained would further demonstrate the capabilities of black women to plan, organize, and execute – that is, to lead – despite stereotypes that suggest otherwise. Furthermore, research might include bridging the gap between black laywomen and black clergywomen. How did black clergywomen's experiences as laywomen inform their leadership practices as clergywomen? Are there identifiable characteristics in black clergywomen that may be traced to their development as laywomen? Also, in what ways might the proficiencies gained in lay ministry prepare black women for ordained ministry?

Future research concerning black laywomen might involve comparative analysis with across two or more United Methodist churches, or another denomination. Minimal scholarship exists on laywomen's work across traditions and to what degree laywomen experience uninhibited leadership opportunities. Additional research might also

include black laywomen of the African diaspora. For example, my experiences with women lay ministers in Haiti suggest a different execution of religious authority than that expressed by participants in this study. More study is needed to appropriately examine how religious authority functions in spaces beyond the continental United States, particularly for black women.

Finally, the concept of black mothers as the primary religious authorities in black families surfaced multiple times, in both focus groups. Participants asserted that conversations about religious authority are incomplete without discussions on the role of black mothers as the first spiritual influencer. Recent scholarship by Stephanie Crowder,[302] which incorporates the lenses of black mothers, serves as an entry point for further research into the impact of black religious mothers. Follow-on research might investigate the activities of black religious women that proved most formative for those under their care. For example, a future study might invite respondents to delineate performances of authority by black mothers that significantly impacted faith formation.

[302] Crowder, *When Momma Speaks*.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Approval to Conduct Research at Site

Address of Study Site

RE: Study Site Permission for Courtney V. Buggs

To: Emory Institutional Review Board

This letter grants Courtney V. Buggs permission to conduct a research study at (site location) from January 2018 to August 2018. Ms. Buggs is granted permission to conduct the research in all spaces on the grounds of (site location), and is granted permission to interact with voluntary participants.

Please direct any questions concerning this letter to (name and contact information of site representative).

Signed by site representative

Appendix B: Notification of Intent to Conduct Research

This is an initial notification of a research study that will take place at (site location) from March 2018 – August 2018. Courtney V. Buggs (researcher) will conduct the study, in support of partial degree requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

You must be **at least 18 years of age** and have attended (site location) for a minimum of six months to participate in the research study. Participation in the study is completely voluntary, and there is no compensation for participants. If you choose to participate, you may alternatively choose not to participate at any time. Twelve persons total will be included in this study.

The focus of the study is to gain insight into lay perceptions on African American women performing religious authority. The research will occur in two data-gathering phases – focus groups and individual interviews.

Focus Groups
You may volunteer to participate in a women or men's focus group. Each focus group will discuss the research topic using interrogative prompts provided by the researcher. Sessions will be audio recorded for transcription by the researcher. All reasonable measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality of participants and discussions. Written consent is required for participation. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time prior to, during, or after the group session. Focus group participants will be provided a light meal and beverages in conjunction with the 60-minute session.

Interviews
You may volunteer to engage in one-on-one individual interviews with the researcher to discuss the research topic. Interviewees will discuss the research topic in a more in-depth, personal perspective, and using personal stories. Sessions will be audio recorded for transcription by the researcher. All reasonable measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality of participants and discussions. Written consent is required for participation. Participants may withdraw from the study at any time prior to, during, or after the interview session. Interview participants will be provided a light snack and beverages during the 30 to 60-minute interview session.

Please direct all questions about this study to Courtney V. Buggs.
Contact information:
Email: courtney.buggs@emory.edu
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Emory University
Consent to be a Research Subject

Title: African American Women Priests, Prophets, and Proclaimers: Laity and the Performance of Religious Authority

Principal Investigator: Courtney V. Buggs, MDiv, MPA, PhD Candidate, Laney Graduate School, Emory University

Funding Source: None

Introduction

You are being asked to be in a research study. This form is designed to tell you everything you need to think about before you decide to consent (agree) to be in the study or not to be in the study. **It is entirely your choice. If you decide to take part, you may change your mind later on and withdraw from the research study. You may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.**

Before making your decision:

- Please carefully read this form or have it read to you
- Please ask questions about anything that is not clear

You may take a copy of this consent form, to keep. Feel free to take your time thinking about whether you would like to participate. By signing this form you will not give up any legal rights.

Study Overview

The purpose of this study is to explore and identify perceptions about African American women performing religious authority. We will discuss questions that focus on the definition of religious authority, and how African American women execute religious authority in the 21st century. Twelve (12) participants will be enrolled in this study.

Procedures

You are being asked to participate in a focus group and/or interview.

Focus Groups

Participants who volunteer to participate in focus groups will meet for one 1-hour discussion. Focus groups are divided into one men's group and one women's group, each consisting of five persons. I, the researcher, will conduct both groups. The sessions will be executed using interrogative prompts and follow-on questioning. Focus group conversations will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Following the group discussion you will be asked to complete a demographic survey.

Recordings will be stored at the residence or office of the researcher, on a password-protected computer. Voice recordings will be destroyed one year after the

research project is finalized. By consenting to participate in a focus group, you acknowledge that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed; however, every measure will be taken to ensure your comments are handled appropriately. You will be assigned a pseudonym (nickname) to be used for the duration of your participation in the research.

You will be provided a light meal in conjunction with the group discussion.

Interviews

You have been invited to engage in one 30-60-minute interview session. The purpose of personal interviews is to gather local narratives on the subject matter. Interviews will be executed using interrogative prompts and follow-on questioning. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Recordings will be stored at the residence of the researcher, in a locked office, on a password-protected computer. Voice recordings will be destroyed one year after the research project is finalized.

By consenting to participate in an interview, you acknowledge that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, however, every measure will be taken to ensure your comments are handled appropriately. You will be assigned a pseudonym (nickname) to be used for the duration of your participation in the research. Following the interview, you will be asked to complete a demographic survey, if you have not done so already.

You will be provided light snacks and beverages during the interview session.

Risks and Discomforts

You may find that the questions of this study probe for personal or sensitive information because they explore your faith commitments or beliefs, which are often viewed as uncomfortable topics of conversation in our culture. This risk may be less severe in comparison with the general population, as you are regular attendees of a particular faith tradition.

To mitigate discomfort and risk of exposure, you will be assigned a pseudonym (nickname) which will be used on all notes and transcripts. A handwritten master list of pseudonyms (nicknames) for participants will be maintained in a file folder separate from data. The master list will be necessary in order to return transcripts of interviews to the correct participants.

Additionally, this research will require voice recording and note taking. For your privacy, all recordings and notes will be kept in encrypted files on my password protected laptop. Our recorded conversation will be transcribed and sent to you for review.

- Do I have your permission to voice record our conversation? _____Yes _____No (please initial)

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to the participants in this study. However, information received may be useful for further scholarship on African American women in religious settings and performing religious authority.

Compensation

You will not be offered payment or any other form of compensation for participating in this study.

Confidentiality

Certain offices and people other than the researchers may look at study records. Government agencies and Emory employees overseeing proper study conduct may look at your study records. These offices include the Emory Institutional Review Board and the Emory Office of Research Compliance. Emory will keep any research records we create private to the extent we are required to do so by law. A study number rather than your name will be used on study records wherever possible. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal from the Study

You have the right to leave a study at any time without penalty. You may refuse to do any procedures you do not feel comfortable with, or answer any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information

Contact Courtney Buggs at xxx-xxx-xxxx:

- if you have any questions about this study or your part in it,
- if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research.

Contact the Emory Institutional Review Board at 404-712-0720 or 877-503-9797 or irb@emory.edu:

- if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- if you have questions, concerns or complaints about the research.
- You may also let the IRB know about your experience as a research participant through our Research Participant Survey at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6ZDMW75.

Consent

Please choose your selection, print your name, and sign below if you agree to be in this study. By signing this consent form, you will not give up any of your legal rights. I will give you a copy of the signed consent, to keep. By consenting to participate in this study, you affirm that you are at least 18 years of age and have attended (site location) for at least 6 months.

Check ONE box only:

- ☐ I agree to participate in both the focus group and the interview.
- ☐ I agree to participate in the interview only.
- ☐ I agree to participate in the focus group only.
- ☐ I do not agree to participate in any research activities

Name of Subject

Signature of Subject Date Time

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion Date Time

Appendix D: Demographic Survey

Please make an X by the category that best describes you.

1. Age

18 – 25 yrs old	
26 – 35 yrs old	
36 – 50 yrs old	
51 – 60 yrs old	
Over 61 yrs old	
Decline to answer	

2. Gender

Male	
Female	
Decline to answer	

3. Marital status

Single, never married	
Single, previously married	
Married	
Decline to answer	

4. How long have you been a member or regular congregant at (site location)?

Less than 1 year	
1-5 years	
5-15 years	
15-25 years	
Over 25 years	
Decline to answer	

5. What is your highest level of formal education attained? Please select one.

Less than high school	
High school graduate or equivalent	
Some undergraduate courses	
Associates degree	
Bachelors degree	
Graduate degree	
Terminal degree	
Decline to answer	

Appendix E: Focus Group Questions

Sample Focus Group Questions. The following questions represent a sampling of prompts to facilitate this qualitative study. The questions are designed to stimulate open discussions that may lead to follow-on questions and more in-depth query in the interview phase. Several of the questions are multi-layered to drill down on particular themes. This list is intended as a primer.

1) Religious Authority
    a. What is religious authority?

    b. What is/are the source(s) of religious authority? How does one come to have religious authority?

    c. Are there formal and informal expressions of religious authority? Explain.

2) Shaping of Religious Authority perspectives
What/who do you think has influenced your understanding of religious authority?

    a. Culture? If so, how?

    b. Theology? If so, how?

    c. Gender? If so, how?

    d. Does race play a role in how you perceive religious authority, now or historically?

3) Perceptions about African American women and religious authority?

    a. What do you think about African American women performing religious authority?

    b. Is there a difference between women and men, with respect to religious authority?

    c. In what ways do women perform religious authority at Wesley, if at all? Please be specific in activities you deem as 'performing religious authority.'

    d. Has your perception about African American women performing religious authority changed over time? If so, how and why? If not, why not?

4) Images of African American women
    a. Are there characteristics that describe most African American women? If so, what are they?

b. What images of African American women are present in history? In the media? In the local church?

c. Do you think images in media influence how you think about African American women in leadership roles? Explain.

5) Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion? Are there other questions I should ask in this study?

Appendix F: Interview Questions

Sample Individual Interview Questions. Respondents may be asked to revisit questions discussed in the focus group, if they participated in the focus group.

1) Religious Authority
    a. What is religious authority?

    b. What is/are the source(s) of religious authority? How does one come to have religious authority?

    c. Are there formal and informal expressions of religious authority? Explain.

2) Shaping of Religious Authority perspectives
What/who do you think has influenced your understanding of religious authority?

    a. Culture? If so, how?

    b. Theology? If so, how?

    c. Gender? If so, how?

    d. Does race play a role in how you perceive religious authority, now or historically?

3) African American women and religious authority
    a. What was your first exposure to women with authority in the local church?

        i. What is your perception of women as clergy in the local church?

        ii. What/who influences your perception about women with authority?

        iii. Do you have any personal stories to share about your interactions with women performing religious authority?

        iv. Have you had any particularly positive or particularly negative experiences with women performing religious authority? Explain.

    b. Is there a difference between the leadership style of women and men as senior pastors?

    c. Is there a difference between the preaching styles of clergywomen and clergymen?
    d. Do you have a preference of gender for the senior pastor? If yes, what gender do you prefer as senior pastor? Why?

4) In its 150-year history, Wesley has had two women senior pastors. Why do you think there have not been other women appointed as senior or assistant pastor?

    a. Did you have a personal relationship (pastoral and/or professional) with either of the women pastors of Wesley, or any other clergywomen?

        i. Did your perception of women pastors change as a result of this relationship? If yes, how so?

        ii. What was your first exposure to women as senior pastors?

        iii. What is your perception of women as senior pastors?

    b. Do you believe there are some positions in the church that are better suited for women or better suited for men? Please explain your response.

5) Is there anything else you would like to add to this discussion? Are there other questions I should ask in this study?