

# Purity Culture's Racist Fruit: Centering the Voices of Black Womanists and Feminists in the Deconstruction of Purity Culture

Olivia Jayne Schultz, *Concordia University*

The last ten years have seen an emergence of scholarship examining and interrogating the evangelical purity movement and purity culture in North America.<sup>1</sup> Though the term “purity movement” refers to a specific movement oriented towards adolescents in North America beginning in the 1990s, it is not unlike previous theological purity campaigns. Rooted in the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, purity campaigns seek to convince adherents that Godly sex is permitted exclusively within heteronormative marriages between cis-gender people.<sup>2</sup> North American purity culture scholar and historian Sara Moslener has argued that purity campaigns often seem to arise when traditional Christian ideals of marriage, gender, and sexuality lose their hold in

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1. See Christine J. Gardner, *Making Chastity Sexy: The Rhetoric of Evangelical Abstinence Campaigns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), Google eBook; Marie R. Griffith *God's Daughter's: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Sara Moslener, *Virgin Nation: Sexual Purity and American Adolescence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), Google eBook.

2. Monique Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 16–17; Amy DeRogatis, *Saving Sex: Sexuality and Salvation in American Evangelicalism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

institutional power structures.<sup>3</sup> Beginning in the 1800s, as conservative and politically inclined Christians felt their weakening political influence, they invoked narratives linking sexual deviance to moral decline. This positioned biblical ideals of marriage, family, and sexuality as the means to national salvation.<sup>4</sup> The 1990s purity movement sought to re-establish Christian hegemony by linking sexual immorality to feminist sexual liberation movements, teen pregnancies, rising divorce rates, youth delinquency, prostitution, the rise in HIV/AIDS and STDs, and the eventual fall of North America if it does not return to a path of Godly morality.

While one of the main goals of the purity movement was political – it sought, and indeed received, US federal funding and support for abstinence education in public schools – it was also interested in tapping into the revolutionary energy of evangelical adolescents.<sup>5</sup> Because of the new sexual freedoms and opportunities available to adolescents, the messaging of the 1990s purity culture movement was specifically targeted at adolescents. Organizations like True Love Waits, Silver Ring Thing, and books such as Joshua Harris’s *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Towards Romance and Relationships* (2003), linked the “true demonstration of faith” to whether one could maintain their chastity until heteronormative marriage.<sup>6</sup> Purity culture discourse told adolescents that a pledge of

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3. Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 13–28.

4. See Marie Griffith, “Introduction,” *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), and Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 2.

5. For information on United States funding of abstinence-only education, see Marcela Howell, “The History of Federal Abstinence-Only Funding,” *Advocates for Youth: Rights, Respect, Responsibility*, 2007, <https://www.advocatesforyouth.org/wpcontent/uploads/storage//advfy/documents/fshistoryabonly.pdf>

6. Joshua Harris is one of the most controversial figures of the purity movement. He was just twenty-one when he became a significant leader in the purity movement, and just twenty-two when he became a pastor. However, in 2018 he disavowed his teachings due to the harms he became aware of in purity culture.

abstinence would honour God, ensure they attained a God-blessed marriage, and, moreover, that they would be part of saving North America by restoring it to God's plan.<sup>7</sup> Purity culture thus describes the environment that is created when singles and adolescents are policed, surveilled, and judged within evangelical communities based on their ability to maintain community-defined chastity and gendered behaviours.<sup>8</sup> A recent and growing body of scholarship has emerged in response to this, beginning the important work of examining the historical formation and impacts of the purity movement and purity culture.

Deconstructing the purity movement is unequivocally a feminist project. There is, however, more to be done to ensure this work reflects the inclusivity and intersectional concerns of contemporary feminist movements. While there is upcoming research directly related to the experience of women of colour in purity culture, almost all of what is currently published is written by White women, and largely speaks to the experiences of White women (although men are also discussed sometimes). Barbara Smith, a Black feminist and lesbian, defines feminism as “the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, as well as White, economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely female

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7. Moslener, *Virgin Nation*, 3; Griffith, *Moral Combat*, xi.

8. Inspired by Emily Joy Allison's definition of purity culture in, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Broadleaf Books, 2021), on page 51 of Kobo. For other information on the harms of purity culture, see Caroline Blyth, *Purity Culture, Rape Culture, and Coercive Control*; Elizabeth Gish, “‘Are You a ‘Trashable’ Styrofoam Cup?’: Harm and Damage Rhetoric in the Contemporary American Sexual Purity Movement,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 2 (2014): 5–22; Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement that Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Touchstone, 2018).

self-aggrandizement.”<sup>9</sup> Though many White authors do touch upon racialized elements of purity culture discourse, it has not yet become commonplace for White people deconstructing their experiences in evangelicalism and the evangelical purity movement to recognize the racialized origins of purity. Furthermore, many White people deconstructing purity culture do not adequately consider the specific and multi-layered experience of racialized bodies brought up within purity culture – an oversight which highlights the need to abandon the problematic tendency of discussing purity culture in the singular.<sup>10</sup>

In *Black Feminist Thought* (2009), Patricia Hill Collins demonstrates that racism in contemporary feminism and scholarship may be subtle; for example, when White women continue to focus primarily on their own experiences, the voices of Black women are suppressed through omission.<sup>11</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist known for her work on intersectionality, demonstrates that when individuals only focus on analyzing the experiences of the most privileged groups in society, they further the marginalization of those who experience multiple burdens within their experiences.<sup>12</sup> To apply

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9. Barbara Smith, “Racism and Women’s Studies,” *University of Nebraska Press and Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 5, no. 1 (1980): 48–49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3346304>. See also, bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981).

10. The need to speak of purity cultures in the plural was brought to my attention in conversation with Sara Moslener (personal communication, February 27th, 2021). In sum, the idea is that, when we pay attention to intersectionality, we see that purity culture is not universally homogenous; rather, it takes on different forms and is experienced differently by different groups and individuals depending on a variety of intersectional factors.

11. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2009). See “Introduction” to learn more about how the intellectual work of Black women often gets suppressed either intentionally, or simply through omission.

12. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A

this to scholarship purity culture is to recognize that White body supremacy is apparent when White experiences in evangelical purity culture are centered at the expense of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Colour) experiences – experiences which tend to be systemically excluded from intellectual projects. It is for this reason that Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto argue that the perpetuation of “White feminism” is likely the greatest obstacle to the liberative ideals of feminism.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it seems that Barbara Smith’s call in the 1980s for feminist work to address the problem of racism is still relevant today.<sup>14</sup> This is part of the legacy of White body supremacy, something that we, and indeed I – a White scholar of purity culture – must reckon with.

The term “White body supremacy” may sound threatening to White readers. We may tense up and think to ourselves, “Yes, I am White, but I do not consciously believe that I am superior to other races. I do not consciously attempt to suppress the experiences of people of colour in purity culture, I am just speaking from my experience.” However, we cannot always readily conceptualize the ways we are complicit in racism. As Resmaa Menakem – a Black Somatic (nervous system and trauma) scholar who coined the term White body supremacy – would say, “white body supremacy doesn’t

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Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 140.

13. White feminism, as defined by Nash and Pinto, is when White people claim to be doing the intersectional and liberative work of feminism but continue to exclude intersectionality in their analysis. When we speak in the language of feminism, but do not include people of colour in our conversations, we perpetuate racism and White feminism, which is unfortunately the dominant feminist narrative. See Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto, “A New Genealogy of ‘Intelligent Rage,’ or Other Ways to Think About White Women in Feminism,” *Signs* 46, no. 4 (2021): 883–910. See also bell hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4, no. 1 (1991): 1–12.

14. Smith, “Racism and Women’s Studies,” 48.

live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies.”<sup>15</sup> Throughout the history of North America, White comfort has relied on Black labour and marginalization. BIPOC bodies have been seen – and used – as a tool for White colonizers, and the wide range of abuses they have faced – murder, rape, mutilation, slavery, etc. – are baked into North American institutions, laws, regulations, norms and beliefs.<sup>16</sup> White body supremacy thus refers to the political, economic, cultural, and social systems of domination that have been historically built to privilege, centralize, and elevate the White body, all while creating discourses to systemically undermine bodies of colour.<sup>17</sup> The fact that we, as White people, *have space* in academic settings to examine and publish *our* experiences in purity culture is, then, indeed a form of White body supremacy (and privilege).

What makes White body supremacy insidious, so hard for White people to understand and detect, is that it is *structural* – which is to say, it often doesn’t manifest consciously, but rather shapes the norms and institutions we orientate ourselves around, the opportunities we can access, etc. White body supremacy thus describes the phenomenon of inheriting a position of privilege simply by being born White.<sup>18</sup> This is, in part, what Menakem means when he says White body supremacy lives in our bodies rather than in our cognitive intentionality. As Menakem states:

Our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different than our cognitive brains. This knowledge is typically experien-

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15. Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Path to Mending Our Heart and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 2, Google Playbooks version.

16. Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 20–21.

17. Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, xviii.

18. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2010).

ced as a felt sense of constriction or expansion, pain or ease, energy or numbness. Often this knowledge is stored in our bodies as wordless stories about what is safe and what is dangerous. The body is where we fear, hope, and react; where we constrict and release; and where we reflexively flight, flee, or freeze [...] White body supremacy is always functioning in our bodies. It operates in our thinking brains, in our assumptions, expectations, and mental shortcuts. It operates in our muscles and nervous systems, where it routinely creates constriction. But it operates most powerfully in our lizard brains. Our lizard brain cannot think. It is reflexively protective, and it is strong. It loves whatever it feels will keep us safe and hates whatever will do us harm.<sup>19</sup>

While it might be normal for a White person to have grown up in an evangelical purity culture that consisted of mostly or only White people, this is a demonstration of both White body supremacy and the legacy of segregation. As Black scholars like Anthea Butler have demonstrated, evangelicalism is an institution which seeks to maintain and perpetuate White body supremacy. The fact that you may have attended evangelical institutions that were predominantly White was often intentional, for these spaces are simply reproducing White body supremacy. Menakem and Smith both compassionately articulate that it is not the fault of White bodies for inheriting White body supremacy. They do, however, argue that it is our responsibility to do the work to change these realities.<sup>20</sup>

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19. Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, xviii.

20. Smith, "Women's Studies and Racism," 49. Menakem specifically speaks about the necessity of healing our trauma as part of how we heal White body supremacy. He highlights that social and political activism is not enough. Since White body supremacy lives in our bodies, we must do embodiment work to help heal it. See Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*.

As a White former evangelical turned researcher of North American purity culture, this paper thus seeks to contribute to the work of amending some of the problems discussed above; to discuss this topic, and my own experiences with it, while simultaneously foregrounding the racialized legacies and racialized impacts of purity culture. By specifically focusing on the Jezebel trope that has been attached to Black female bodies, this paper asks: How have evangelical teachings of purity, both historically and contemporarily, been employed in the construction and perpetuation of White body supremacy? What can we learn about the function of sexuality and purity campaigns by following the racialized Jezebel trope that has been attached to the bodies of Black women? How have Black Christian communities, womanist theologians, and Black feminists sought to use scripture and other theorizing as forms of resistance?<sup>21</sup> How can White Christians or ex-Christians center the wisdom of scholars of colour to build discourses of resistance to respond to the ongoing evangelical teaching of purity culture? With these questions in mind, this paper will argue that, although purity culture is pre-

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21. Womanism, a term created by Alice Walker in 1979 in response to White feminism, recognizes that real societal healing and equality cannot simply occur through the White feminist goal of gender equality. Black women require a complex framework that interrogates the multilayered forms of overlapping oppression in an individual's experience – such as race, gender, and sexuality – while simultaneously embodying a collective love for Black life, survival, and thriving. Womanism, then, can be understood as interrogating the struggle for Black wholeness and well-being, often against power structures that have been built to reinforce hierarchal oppression. By embodying radical self-love and acceptance, womanists actively desire communal restoration of connection with themselves, others, spiritualities, and the ecological environment. Anything that alienates individuals from embodiment connection, womanists must resist. See Alice Walker, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1981).

sented in evangelical communities as God's design for gender, sex, and marriage, it has been constructed and employed by evangelicalism as a sexist and racialized tool in the building and maintenance of discourse legitimizing White Christian patriarchal hegemony in America.

This paper is made up of three parts. In the first part, I take the time to unpack my own positionality and acknowledge how the reality of White body supremacy had blinded me from seeing the racialized violence beneath evangelical purity culture.<sup>22</sup> In the second part, I conduct a historical analysis and trace how purity rhetoric and the Jezebelian trope emerged alongside Europe's first encounters with Africans in the sixteenth century, and was solidified in American slavocracy, emancipation, the Civil Rights Era, and in contemporary Black faith-based sexuality ministries. In the third part, I will foreground interventions by Black feminist and womanist scholars, with a specific focus on Kelly Brown Douglas' *Sexuality and the Black Church* (1999), Monique Moultrie's *Passionate and Pious* (2017), Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984), and Tamara Lomax's *Jezebel Unhinged* (2018). Douglas, Moultrie, and Lomax all assert that to lift the oppressive Jezebel trope off Black women, we must re-interpret purity discourse and evangelical interpretation of scripture in a way that brings embodiment and thriving to Black communities.

This paper is not meant to be a high-level academic read. In loving memory of bell hooks, this paper takes seriously her earnest belief and desire that feminist theorizing is not merely an academic endeavour, but rather something that can be used to transform our

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22. Although I use the past tense "had" it must be emphasized that, as a White person, I am still learning and unlearning White body supremacy and how it exists in my body. This paper is only just one step in the process.

everyday lives and liberate all that may come across it.<sup>23</sup> My goal is to make this work accessible and readable, especially for White people who may be struggling to acknowledge how White body supremacy bears on their efforts to deconstruct evangelicalism and/or the purity movement. My hope is that, together, we can find the hope and direction to transform our body-minds<sup>24</sup> through the liberative power of intersectional and inclusive feminism.<sup>25</sup> By predominantly foregrounding the research and writing of Black scholars, I want to highlight the possible transformations that can occur when we center the extensive and transformative wisdom that Black feminists and Black intellectuals, who aren't even directly speaking about purity culture, have to offer to the deconstruction of evangelicalism, purity culture, and White body supremacy. As you read – especially *you*, White reader – do not be overcome with guilt or shame; rather, be gentle with yourself. Redirect your feeling towards the transformative power of *knowing*, which has the power to disrupt White body supremacy and evangelical purity culture.

### Situating Myself

I was born into a White middle-class Christian family in Canada<sup>26</sup> in the mid-1990s. Though I didn't know it at the time, I was born during the height of the North American evangelical purity

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23. hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Praxis," 1–12.

24. Coined by White, disabled, and genderqueer activist, Eli Clare, the term "body-mind" seeks to highlight the inextricable link between our body and mind; to highlight the necessity of resisting the Western dualism that separates them. See Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pages 12–14, Google eBook.

25. hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Praxis," 9.

26. I acknowledge that I am a settler on the Indigenous lands of Turtle Island (North America). More specifically, I write in Hamilton, Ontario, located on the

movement. By the time I was an adolescent, much of the purity movement's messaging had become normative within my faith community. I learned from my church community, my youth leaders, my *True Images* teen girl Bible and other evangelical books and resources, that to demonstrate the authenticity of my faith, build a strong personal attachment to Christ, and secure a God-blessed marriage, I was to abstain from sex and dating.<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that, until the mid-2010s, evangelicals and adherents to purity were not aware of the terms "purity culture" and "the purity movement." These teachings were positioned as God's eternal plan for goodness – not as a human-made movement. Purity, piety, modesty, submission, gender essentialism, and heteronormativity were, then, simply understood as normative elements of what it meant to be living after God's heart. Living in this way was positioned as good, while not doing so was cast as a sin. I recall learning that if we lived sinfully, we were likely to miss out on the Godly spouse that God had set aside for us; that, in following temporary pleasures (such as lust), we no longer deserved God's gift of a lifelong Godly spouse.<sup>28</sup> Though I had always been enchanted by spirituality and what I perceived to be the Holy Spirit in me, I wasn't fully committed to Christian purity teachings until the late 2000s, a period when I

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traditional and unceded territory of the Anishinabek, Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Mississauga.

27. *True Images: The Bible for Teen Girls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012) was one of the three teen girl Bibles analyzed in Caroline Blyth's *Rape Culture, Purity Culture, and Coercive Control in Teen Girl Bibles* (Routledge, 2021). Blyth highlights that these teen girl Bibles are heavily encoded with editorials that espouse harmful purity culture teachings affirming messages of coercion, shaming, and rape culture. As a teen, I followed these editorial inserts that claimed to be God's voice more than I followed the Bible.

28. Although this messaging was communicated to me in a myriad of ways, both implicit and explicit, one of the specific messages that really impacted me was from Andy Stanley's sermon series called "The New Rules for Love, Sex, and Dating," which I listened to when I was 14 shortly after it came out in May 2011,

struggled with depression, darkness, and self-image issues that only intensified as I became aware that I had a significant body “malformity.”<sup>29</sup>

In my first week of grade nine while trying out for touch football, an older girl saw me bending over and told me that my back “was puffed out on one side.” Humiliated, because I was unaware of what she was talking about, I felt my back and realized she was right. The next day, I was diagnosed with severe idiopathic scoliosis. The doctors told me it was so severe that I needed to either have surgery to straighten and fuse my spine, or to wear a back brace until I stopped growing so my spinal curve didn’t continue to worsen. Though I did go on to have surgeries years later, at the time my mother and I decided I should start with the Boston Brace. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The Boston Brace was a full upper-body back brace that was fitted specifically for my body and had to be fastened extremely tightly to work properly.

I wore this plastic corset for four years, the whole duration of my high school experience. As a consequence of having to wear the brace for so many years, I experienced significant weight loss, patterns of disordered eating, and a great deal of physical pain. It was very marginalizing. I felt malformed, ugly, and unlovable, the oppo-

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<https://northpoint.org/messages/the-new-rules-for-love-sex-and-dating/the-right-person-myth>. After asking listeners if they are “becoming the person the person they are looking for is looking for,” Stanley shares a story of a girl who strayed from pursuing God and purity before meeting the Godly man she wanted to date. Once she meets him, he rejects her because of her ungodliness. The message is clear: pursue purity and God to secure a respectful mate.

29. At least, this was the only frame of reference I had at the time to understand my diagnosis; that I was malformed, disordered, and in need of repair. I have been inspired by the work of the disabled genderqueer activist Eli Clare, who says, “I wonder what we would know about ourselves and about each other if our diagnosis [our differences] projected acceptance rather than disorder onto our body-minds.” See Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 12–14.

site of a beautiful person. Due to normative beauty standards, I slowly began to believe that because my body was so hunchbacked, I would never be able to find someone who would really love me. The only flashes of hope came from what I learned at Church. I learned that if I focused my adolescent years, not on dating, but on reforming my heart towards Christ, that God would bring me someone who would fall in love with my heart for Christ; that my body would not be an issue. This was rooted in the idea that our spiritual selves were more important than our fleshly selves. I had a brief two-session counselling experience with a Christian therapist who told me that if I pursued purity and holiness, a man would eventually fall deeply in love with my heart for Christ. This messaging – combined, of course, with my diagnosis and my felt sense of the sexism that existed within evangelical culture – fueled my desire to do whatever it took to be loved unconditionally. I made a conscious decision to follow Christ and purity no matter the cost.<sup>30</sup> I completely denied my sexual self in the name of serving Christ, waiting for the promise of future happiness that comes from purity.

Since I was born in a female body – or, perhaps better said, in a body assigned female at birth (I now identify as non-binary) – I was subjected to intense messaging about how my “sexualized” features were an inherent threat to female modesty and purity.<sup>31</sup> I remember being at an all-girls youth retreat where we were told that, although yoga pants are extremely comfortable, we should abstain from wearing them around men because “yoga pants leave nothing to

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30. Inspired by Matthew 8:18–23 NIV.

31. Though purity discourse is marketed to binary male and female genders, its messages and products often specifically focus on female virginity. Women are cast as less sexual than men, but as having the ability to cause men to stumble due to the nature of their bodies. The message is thus: protect your purity or risk losing it or being assaulted. See Carolyn Blyth, *Rape Culture, Purity Culture*, 17.

the imagination. Girls wearing yoga pants really cause Christian men to sexually sin.” Since I was already convinced to do whatever it took to be loved properly, it was easy for me to be convinced by this rhetoric. If yoga pants were impure, I would wear jeans.<sup>32</sup> This was especially damaging for me, because the constriction of jeans combined with the tightness of my back brace only aggravated my pain. One day I decided to wear yoga pants to school for some pain reprieve. After lunch, I was walking to my locker when a male student who was several years older than me and who I did not know, came up behind me with his friends and slapped my behind. As he and his friends walked away laughing, I remember feeling humiliated, dirty, sinful, and ashamed. I thought, “this could have been avoided if I didn’t wear yoga pants! I was told I would be sexualized if I wore these!”<sup>33</sup> It would take about ten years before I would come to understand this experience as a form of sexual assault. At the time, this experience only compelled me to deepen my commitment to living for Christ and purity, as I desired nothing more than to be respected and loved. I became heavily involved in evangelical projects all throughout high school and university, hoping eventually to become a missionary.

However, towards the end of my undergraduate degree, I had a handful of experiences that made me feel disillusioned with purity teachings: I broke up with the man I thought God wanted me to marry; I was chastised time and again for “impurely flirting” – which was often just talking – with boys that I did not intend to date; I was blamed by the few evangelicals I confided in for numerous instances

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32. On page 99 of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, Harris says, girls, “your job is to keep your brothers from being led astray by [your] charms [...] many girls are innocently unaware of the difficulty a guy has in remaining pure when looking at a girl who is dressed immodestly.”

33. See “Purity, Modesty, and Rape Culture in Teen Girl Bibles,” in Blyth, *Rape Culture, Purity Culture*.

of sexual assault I experienced; my older brother came out as gay and lost numerous friends and Christian community because he was “living in sin”; and, finally, it came out that my dad, a missionary in Haiti, had numerous extended extra-marital affairs throughout the duration of my parent’s marriage. During these years, I had ongoing and mysterious illnesses and symptoms that made it difficult to live my life. For years, I was told to pray and to overcome my body with God’s strength. I tried. Earnestly, I tried. But the longer I tried to push through, the worse and more extreme my symptoms got. After tracking my symptoms, I realized that they worsened when I was proximate to church, faith communities, or faith commitments. By this point, my life was so saturated and directed towards evangelical pursuits (I attended a Reformed Christian university, worked in Christian jobs, and was a youth leader and pastor at my Baptist Church), it was hard to give myself rest from it. However, in 2018, it got so bad that I had to leave church for my own bodily survival. In 2020, after numerous tests and a lot of despair, I was diagnosed with Fibromyalgia.

As I had learned that church was the only place where I could be truly loved and safe, I was overwhelmed by the contradictions I was seeing and experiencing. I asked myself and others *How can God-designed teachings that are supposed to bear good fruit bring about so much pain? I thought Church was supposed to be a safe space. What is going on?* During this period, I came across a book – *Pure* by Linda Kay Klein – that changed the trajectory of my life.<sup>34</sup> For the first time, I learned that the teachings I had been earnestly adhering to, believing they were for my wellbeing, were part of the

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34. *Pure* by Linda Kay Klein was released in 2018. Like the other purity culture books referenced here, this book largely details White evangelical experiences in purity culture, but does touch briefly on racialized experiences. Her hard work and dedication in writing this book has contributed to purity culture conversations becoming mainstream. I am forever grateful.

“purity movement.” I learned how evangelical purity culture permits rape-culture discourse, sex-shaming messages, body dysphoria, spousal abuse, sexual-and-gender based violence as well as coercion, all of which specifically target women, people of colour, and the 2SLGTBQIA+ community.<sup>35</sup> I learned that those who manage to survive purity culture often do not often escape unscathed; they may struggle with self-doubt, depression, anxiety, fatigue, and PTSD-like symptoms.<sup>36</sup> Like me, they may eventually get diagnosed with chronic illness and struggle to walk into church settings without experiencing panic attacks.<sup>37</sup> When I brought these critiques to my former Christian community I was often brushed off – I was told that purity teachings *are* God’s plan for humanity, and that the harms I was describing were not inherent to the movement, but were rather demonstrative of our sinful humanity.<sup>38</sup>

However, it seemed that the effects of the evangelical purity movement clearly *were* harmful. But how did I not see them for so long? Why was I taught to believe that purity inherently brings goodness and happiness? As Sara Ahmed, a queer scholar of colour who analyzes the affective function of happiness in society, says:

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35. See Blyth, *Rape Culture, Purity Culture*; Gish, “‘Are You a ‘Trashable’ Styrofoam Cup?’”; Linda Kay Klein, *Pure*. As a number of different acronyms are now in use to refer to this community, I should clarify that 2SLGTBQIA+ refers to two-spirit, lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, queer, intersex, and asexual, while the plus sign is meant to acknowledge other non-normative expressions of sexuality and gender.

36. See Blyth, *Rape Culture, Purity Culture*, 18.

37. This theme deserves a whole paper of its own. There is much research coming out demonstrating how trauma and disembodiment may connect to chronic illnesses. For resources on this, see Gabor Mate’s *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress* (Knopf Canada: 2004); Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015).

38. In these instances, scripture such as Romans 3:23 (NIV) are quoted, “for all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God.”

There is something false about our consciousness of the world; we learn not to be conscious, not to see what happens right in front of us. Happiness provides as it were a cover, a way of covering what resists or is resistant to a view of the world, or a worldview, as harmonious. It is not that an individual suffers from false consciousness, but that we inherit a certain false consciousness when we learn to see and not to see things in a certain way.<sup>39</sup>

Like millions of others who have been subjected to evangelical purity teachings, I learned to see purity as a means of creating a happy future. Inheriting this consciousness indeed made it such that happiness – or at least the future promise of happiness – covered the violence beneath it.

Although promises of happiness are promoted as accessible to all, one's proximity to a privileged identity is often what decides who can access said happiness.<sup>40</sup> For instance, evangelical purity culture promises happiness to those who remain obedient to God, to those who remain sexually pure, to those who remain monogamous until heteronormative marriage, and to those who remain faithful to essentialized ideas of masculinity and femininity and pursue a nuclear family. From this, we see that those who are privileged in this dynamic are those that identify as cis-gender, monogamous, and heteronormative in their positionality. But what about race? Are all races equally given access to purity's promises of happiness, so long as they also embody cis-gender, monogamous, and heteronormative positionalities? Anthea Butler's *White Evangelical Racism: The Poli-*

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39. Sara Ahmed, "Creating Disturbance: Feminism, Happiness, and Affective Differences," in *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings: Disturbing Differences*, ed. Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen (New York: Routledge, 2010), 31.

40. Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 11.

*tics of Morality in America* (2021) will be helpful in answering this question.

Although the term “evangelical” may be simply described as “one who spreads the gospel,” Butler demonstrates that scholars of evangelicalism have largely ignored the historical construction and privileging of Whiteness within history of evangelicalism.<sup>41</sup> Butler thus seeks to highlight the racism and White body supremacy within evangelicalism. She argues that:

evangelicalism is not simply a religious group at all. Rather, it is a nationalistic political movement whose purpose is to support to hegemony of white Christian men over and against the flourishing of others. To put it more baldly, evangelicalism is an Americanized Christianity born in the context of white Christian slaveholders. It sanctified and justified segregation, violence, and racial proscription. Slavery and racism permeate evangelicalism, and as much as evangelicals like to protest that they are colour-blind, their theologies, cultures and beliefs are anything but [...] Evangelicalism is a religion that has benefitted and continues to benefit from racism on both an individual and structural level, always under the guise of morality and patriotic nationalism.<sup>42</sup>

It is thus Butler’s assertion that slavery is the foundation of racism and power in American evangelicalism, and that, unless otherwise specified, evangelicalism should always refer to White American Christianity.<sup>43</sup> To return to the question posed above, Butler’s work thus helps us see that all races are *not* given equal access to purity

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41. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 15.

42. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 149–150.

43. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 15–16.

culture's promises of happiness; that accessing the happiness promised by purity culture is indeed decided by one's proximity to whiteness. With this being said, the following question still remains: If American evangelicalism was "born in the context of White Christian slaveholders," and purity movements are born from the American evangelicalism, then how have bodies of colour, and Black female bodies in particular, been constructed and understood within this movement? For this, we must turn to Black historiography, in particular Black historiographies of the construction of the Jezebel trope.

### **Finding the Root of the Jezebel Trope in European-African Encounters**

Michel Foucault asserts that power is realized through "the will to knowledge," which is to say, through the production and dissemination of certain forms of knowledge which come to be received as cultural truths.<sup>44</sup> This knowledge – which Foucault terms "discourse" – is concerned with defining proper or improper conduct. As discourse establishes the proper or ideal state of being, it simultaneously creates its binary opposite: the non-ideal, improper, inferior, or "othered" state, which can be used for both oppressive and productive means.<sup>45</sup> Once established, discourse is socially communicated through education, family, religious teachings, and other institutions. An example of purity culture discourse is est-

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44. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 95–96. See also Jana Sawicki, *Disciplining Foucault, Power, and the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 23.

45. Kelly Douglas Brown, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 22. See also Tamara Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) 2.

ablishing and teaching young children that those who remain pure are holy, and those who do not remain pure are sinful.

According to Kelly Brown Douglas, what is particularly important is how Foucault's notion reveals that integral to the establishment and maintenance of White hegemonic power is the establishment of oppressive sexual-related discourses or tropes that reduce a group to their constructed inferiority.<sup>46</sup> Foucault argues that if certain sexual conduct comes to be seen as improper, then a whole people can be discursively rendered as inferior or pathological.<sup>47</sup> Applying this insight to discourse on Black sexuality, Douglas argues that virtually every aspect of Black sexual well-being – both historically and contemporarily – has been fractured by White Christian purity discourse and scriptural interpretation, which has naturalized the Jezebelian trope on Black bodies in the project of building and maintaining White body supremacy.

Scholarship on the root of the Jezebelian trope traces it back to sixteenth century European-African contact. As Europeans arrived in Africa, they saw African women who, due to the climate, were wearing significantly less clothing than Europeans were used to seeing on middle-class European women. Coming from Protestant traditions which had theorized the female body as a site of sexual temptation and sin,<sup>48</sup> Europeans read the scarcity of clothing on Black African women as demonstrative of their innately sinful nature – a

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46. Douglas articulates that whiteness “is distinguished by its ability to promote the sanctity of whiteness by that which is non-White. This culture asserts the supremacy of whiteness and is accompanied by social, political, economic systems that also privilege whiteness.” Individuals racialized as White therefore benefit from these systems. See *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 16–18.

47. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 22.

48. See Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 14–41; see also Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 25 ff., and Yvonne C. Zimmerman, *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, Sex, and Human Trafficking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013),

nature rooted in a carnal and lustful sexuality.<sup>49</sup> Carter Heyward identifies the European Christian tradition as the main architect of proscriptive sexuality in European history. This tradition, and how it interpreted sexuality, made it possible to use sexual practices as a means of devaluing and demonizing human beings.<sup>50</sup>

Europeans also defined the Black female body in terms of “excess” – Europeans read the “exaggerated” breast and body sizes of Black women as a further demonstration of their seductive and impure qualities.<sup>51</sup> This discourse then informed how Black African men were read; if the Black female has a raging sexual appetite, then Black men had no choice but to be sexual animals, if only to fulfill the desires of Black women.<sup>52</sup> Europeans constructed Africans as more aptly compared to apes than to White “civilized” humans, which further coded Black Africans as animalistic and inferior to their White counterparts.<sup>53</sup> In this way, Jezebel imagery “was necessary to ideas of White male and female privilege and superiority. The Black woman as a Jezebel was a perfect foil to the White, middle-class woman who was pure, chaste, and innocent.”<sup>54</sup> These discourses are not rooted in the reality of who Black people

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81. As these sources indicate, Eve's alleged role in the fall of humanity has been historically used as a pretext for assigning women primary responsibility and blame for humanity's sinful state. This is often interpreted both as divinely mandated and connected to their sexuality.

49. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 31.

50. Carter Heyward, “Notes on Historical Grounding: Beyond Sexual Essentialism,” in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 12.

51. See: Jennifer L. Morgan, *Labouring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Imani Perry, *Vexy Thing*, 38; Sabrina Strings *Fearing the Black Body: The Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1–14.

52. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 45.

53. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 33.

54. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 39.

were, but in interpretations of Protestant ideals of purity, sin, and sexuality.<sup>55</sup> Unlike “civilized” Europeans, Black people were constructed as removed from the Christian virtues of sexual self-control or sexual purity, for they were the epitome of sexual excess.

### **The Jezebel Trope in American Slavery**

By the time Europeans invaded America, discourses surrounding Black animality had already been normalized and reinforced to justify the capture and forced enslavement of Black Africans. Brought to North America – which is to say, to stolen Indigenous land – Black slaves were beaten, raped, and exploited. In *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (2018), Imani Perry demonstrates that when Africans were stolen and thrown on boats during the transatlantic slave trade, Black women would often undergo a ritual raping to be rendered a non-virgin, which not only functioned as solidification of their position as impure and sinful, but to assert White domination over Black women’s bodies.<sup>56</sup>

Though slavery was, overall, seen as sinful within the Christian tradition, many Christians did own slaves, which they justified through biblical scripture.<sup>57</sup> Evangelicals interpreted Genesis 9:18–27, Noah’s cursing of Ham, and Ephesians 6:5–7, the command for the enslaved to be obedient to earthly masters, to be scriptures in support of slavery.<sup>58</sup> When Ham was cursed by Noah, Noah claimed that his descendants (Canaan, which came to be interpreted as Black people) would become servants of other nations, which seemingly legitimized the White subordination of the Black body. The Bible thus gave southern evangelical slaveowners space to

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55. Perry, *Vexy Thing*, 16.

56. Perry, *Vexy Thing*, 37.

57. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 29–30.

58. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 29.

interpret themselves as moral actors in their injustices. The enslaved were not granted direct access the Bible, and instead had the Bible preached at them both for the sake of missioning and as a form of control. They were told – with reference to Ephesians 6:5–7 – that the only way they would receive salvation and eternal life was if they were completely obedient to their masters, as this reflected humanity's obedience to God.<sup>59</sup>

White Christians believed that teaching the Bible was a true gift to the enslaved, a form of love, for it saved their souls. Christian slaveowners believed in a mind-body dualism which held the condition of the enslaved person's spirit to be more important than the condition of their body – in other words, the physical pain of enslavement was framed as temporary; as a small price to pay for the gift of eternal salvation. This rhetoric gave Christian slaveowners permission to believe they were blessing the enslaved with the gospel while simultaneously violating, raping, and subjugating their bodies.<sup>60</sup> And rape they did. Even as White men venerated the supposed virtue, piety, and respectability of White women, many saw no contradiction in valorizing these ideals while simultaneously sexually assaulting the bodies of Black women.<sup>61</sup> If a Black woman resisted the sexual desires of a White man she was beaten for her disobedience.<sup>62</sup> The Black Jezebel was interpreted to always be on the sexual prowl, so if a man raped her, he was never punished because she was viewed as the instigator. In reading the biblical Jezebel trope as descriptive of the Black female body, White Christ-

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59. The logic of the evangelical cult of masculinity is rooted in the idea that all of America's problems can be solved by instating proper (read male) authority figures in the family, church, and the government. For more on this see Kobez du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 73–74.

60. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 27.

61. See Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 344.

62. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 39.

ians thus forced Black women into a life filled with sexual violence, which, in turn, perpetrated the stereotype that they were “impure” and “promiscuous.” By constructing things in this way, White women – the perceived opposite of Black women – were able to maintain an aura of purity and Christian virtue.

It is well-documented that Christian slaveowners often asserted that the enslaved had a better life than any other free laboring population, because, in addition to having their needs provided for them, they were taught about Christ.<sup>63</sup> Figures like Frederik Douglass, however, tell a different story. In his 1845 autobiography, Douglass asserts that Christian slaveowners were the worst of the slaveowners, citing their cruelty, violence, and frequent use of the Bible to justify their subjugation and frequent violation of Black bodies.<sup>64</sup> According to him, slaveholding Christianity had no relationship to the Christianity of Christ. The Bible was thus used by White Christians to force Black people into conformity and to permit religiously sanctioned violence over them. The violence and dehumanization that enslaved Black people experienced did not align with the liberative interpretations the enslaved gleaned from the Bible, which fractured their relationship with God. The enslaved thus began meeting in forests in “hush harbours” and “invisible institutions” – spaces away from their masters where they could practice and preach Christianity and their traditional African religions.<sup>65</sup> It was in this space that the liberative foundations of the Black Church began. In these spaces, the enslaved were able to claim that the gospel message they interpreted did not call for their submission to slavery and violence. In coded messages and through

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63. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 31.

64. See Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office, 1845). See also Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 31.

65. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 30–33.

song, they turned the meaning of scriptures into messages of hope. Though Christian slaveowners framed scripture as reinforcing Black subordination and slavery, in hush harbours, Christianity was interpreted as being about freedom.<sup>66</sup>

Where the Jezebel was rendered uncontrollably sexual, the Mammy trope constructed older Black women as maternal and asexual in a bid to legitimize their presence in the White Victorian household. Though the White mother may have handed down moral and religious values to her children, the Mammy was both the housekeeper and the surrogate mother, which maintained the façade of successful White Victorian womanhood.<sup>67</sup> As the Mammy figure cleaned the house, took care of the children, and made the meals, White Victorian women were able to preserve their role as pure and competent mothers.<sup>68</sup> Deborah Gray White articulates that the Mammy figure was an ideal expression of the southern Christian patriarchal tradition: she mirrored Victorian whiteness, she was obedient and respectable, dedicated to White progress, and had an ordered and controlled sexuality.<sup>69</sup> Though the Mammy was constructed as asexual, she could not always escape the Jezebelian trope, and was often raped by male figures in the household as a form of domination and control.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, if the Victorian housewife came to feel threatened by the Black woman and her sexuality, she may have experienced further hostility and punishment.

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66. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 30–33.

67. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 11.

68. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 41–43.

69. Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1985), 58 and 61.

70. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 44.

### The Jezebel Trope in Emancipation

Unfortunately, violence against the Black body did not end after emancipation.<sup>71</sup> The purity, innocence, and respectability of southern womanhood was part of the logic that kept Black men and woman in subjugation and fear. The practices associated with the White female – religiosity, respectability, and homemaking – “reflected genteel morality and emphasized the sacredness of a particular type of family life and structure. These women, existing virtually on a pedestal, were seen as the virginal ideal of the home. This image was juxtaposed with stereotypes of freed Black women, who were considered sexually promiscuous and impure.”<sup>72</sup> Southern Christians felt it was their God-given duty to defend White female purity and the Southern Christian civilization. This Christian civilization was defined by patriarchal heterosexual Christian marriages, and by this point, coloniality and slavery had structured the United States in the image of patriarchy.<sup>73</sup> The rhetoric produced by southern evangelical Christians falsely idealized antebellum slavery as a time where God blessed America with progress because Christians were obedient to Christ-like sexual morality and were similarly committed to the divinity of how the family unit operated. In fact, prominent evangelical leaders asserted that the Civil War was not a war over slavery, but a war where the South was defending Christian America.<sup>74</sup> This created White longing for a mythical Christian past, a longing which obscured the brutality experienced by Black people.<sup>75</sup>

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71. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 25–26.

72. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 36–37.

73. Perry, *Vexy Thing*, 83.

74. Kobez du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 71.

75. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 35.

Organizations such as Religion of the Lost Cause, the Ku Klux Klan, and the White League arose with a mission to maintain “southern Christian values” and to “protect Whites and Christian civilization against freed Black people.”<sup>76</sup> Members claimed that slavery and White dominance were key to the thriving of Christian civilization. In the KKK’s 1915 constitution, which at the time was led by a former Methodist minister, members wrote, “the Klan wanted a homogenous, Protestant White America, free from the corrupting influences of diversity.”<sup>77</sup> These groups, which included many southern evangelical Christians, contributed to the brutal lynching of over 4,400 Black people between 1877–1950, and crimes of slavery, rape, murder, violence, and racism were hidden behind the noble language of “protecting Christian civilization, order, and purity.”<sup>78</sup>

To reduce the antagonism directed at them by White people, Black people – and the Black Church itself – began adhering to strict White ideals of respectability, sexual purity, and hetero-patriarchal marriage.<sup>79</sup> As the Black female body was the site where White people located the sexual deviancy of the Black race, attempting to adhere to White Christian ideals of respectability led to the disproportionate policing of Black female bodies.<sup>80</sup> Many Black women had to perform asexuality in the hope of being protected from violence. The most conclusive way for Black women to escape the Jezebel trope was, and continues to be, conformity to the White Christian ideal of heteropatriarchal marriage and the nuclear family.<sup>81</sup>

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76. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 38–39.

77. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 38.

78. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 41, 36–37.

79. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 15–16.

80. Cooper, Brittney C. *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

81. Jennifer Nash and Christina Sharpe, among others, speak about how Black

As a result, the practice of adhering to extreme notions of purity and respectability before heteronormative marriage has been institutionalized in the Black Church. Due to this, a whole market of Black faith-based ministries – separate from the White purity ministries mentioned above – emerged in the later 1900s, and have increased in influence since the 2000s. The aim of these ministries is to keep single Black women respectable and accountable to their values through sexual celibacy.<sup>82</sup> As this historical overview reveals, the impact of the Black Jezebel trope is not only historical but contemporaneous. I will now move on to discuss the commodification of the Jezebel trope, which arose following the commodification of Christian faith-based beliefs around purity during the rise of the White capitalist evangelical marketplaces in the 1900s.

### **The Profitability of the Jezebel Trope**

Kate Bowler demonstrates that to be successful in the Christian marketplace, individuals must reflect the messaging of this marketplace, a messaging which largely privileges whiteness and conservative Christianity.<sup>83</sup> Bowler describes the contemporary American Christian marketplace as “made in the image of evangelicalism and developed in order to meet the desires of a Protestant subculture that wanted to remain distinct but not isolated,

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women had to come to control their sexualities for the sake of Black survival. See Jennifer C. Nash, “Black Sexualities,” *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 1 (2018): 3–5, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700117742865>, and Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

82. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 19.

83. Kate Bowler, *The Preacher’s Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 92.

privity to the same music, television, radio, books, and goods that the wider culture enjoyed – but with a sanctified twist!”<sup>84</sup> As there are more opportunities for White bodies in a culture where White body supremacy is operative, for the majority of the nineteenth twentieth centuries, White evangelicals monopolized the marketplace.<sup>85</sup> It was only in the 1970s that the White evangelical marketplace began to incorporate Black people, and they only did so limitedly. As Butler demonstrates, the original intent behind including Black voices on televised or recorded Church ministries was to respond to the critique that evangelicalism was racist. Megachurch pastors and parachurch ministries thus began including a limited number of Black folks to create the façade that they were not racist, while simultaneously refusing to engage in any meaningful anti-racist structural change. Since this type of capitalist Christian platforming was – and is – intended to present the platformed individual/message as a product to be consumed, evangelicals took pains to only platform *certain types of* Black people – i.e., those who affirmed whiteness, respectability, and purity as the ideal; those who did not speak about racial justice issues or attempt to change the status quo; those who continued to attach the Jezebel trope to Black bodies.<sup>86</sup> It was out of this competitive White evangelical marketplace that Black faith-based ministries arose.

Alongside the White purity ministries that proliferated in the 1990s, figures such as T. D. Jakes and his apprentice Juanita Bynum created Black-led faith-based sexuality ministries. Black sexuality ministries modelled themselves after White purity ministries. Though their messaging spoke of Black empowerment, Bynum, Jakes, and other Black faith-based ministries continued to harmfully naturalize

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84. Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*, 13.

85. Bowler, *The Preacher's Wife*, 32–33.

86. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*, 92.

the Black Jezebel trope, and were exceptionally well rewarded by the Christian marketplace for doing so. To be able to have a Black voice on evangelical stages, Black faith-based ministries thus had to put great effort into teaching Black women how to embody White ideals of sexual respectability.<sup>87</sup> Following Tamara Lomax’s terminology in *Jezebel Unhinged*, this will further be referred to as the Jezebel/lady or ho/lady binary.

When Jakes first preached his “Woman, Thou Art Loosed!” sermon in 1993, he was among, if not *the* first Black man to publicly recognize the sexual and emotional abuse that Black women experience.<sup>88</sup> However, instead of attempting to liberate them from inherited purity rhetoric, Jakes mirrored the Jezebelian trope by placing the onus of maintaining purity on Black women. Jakes suggested that their struggles to find suitable husbands – as well as any abuse they experienced – was due to them dating men who wanted “loose women.” In other words, they were told they were not taking the steps they needed to pursue a Godly marriage. Jakes told them they could find healing through submitting to Christ and becoming celibate – i.e., by leaving their “loose” ways behind – until they found a husband.<sup>89</sup> In *Jezebel Unhinged*, Lomax notes that Jakes has been preaching the same sermon, seemingly unchanged, for over twenty years. During this time he has turned “Woman, Thou Art Loosed!” into a multimedia franchise spanning a TV series, a stage play, books, cookbooks, Bibles, annual conferences, two feature films (one of which earned 6.8 million in 2004), and more.<sup>90</sup> At his most recent conferences, Jakes has had between 80,000 to 100,000 attendees, all of whom pay around \$600 for their ticket and accom-

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87. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 45.

88. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 131.

89. See “Whose ‘Woman’ Is This? Reading Bishop T. D. Jakes’s Woman, Thou Art Loosed,” in Lomax’s *Jezebel Unhinged*.

90. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 130.

panying merchandise.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, Jakes is the Bishop at The Potter's House, a megachurch in Texas with over thirty thousand members.<sup>92</sup> While Jakes and other sexuality-based ministries are financially rewarded for perpetuating the harmful Jezebel trope, Black women continue to make decisions about their sexual practices based on their adherence to these Black faith-based purity ministries.<sup>93</sup> The fact that these discourses are thriving with immense profitability demonstrates that sexual discourses of resistance are required within Black cultural and religious spaces to inspire institutional change.

Bynum has also been particularly impactful for Black women, as she was one of the first Black female Christian celebrities to speak to Black women about the struggle of being Black, single, celibate, and lonely. In her sermon "No More Sheets," Bynum argues that to live a life for God, Black women must give up casual sex in favour of celibacy, modesty, and submission to Christ, which is interpreted as preparation for their future husbands. Black women saw themselves in Bynum and were convinced that if Bynum could be celibate, so could they.<sup>94</sup> And if they failed to be – i.e., if they pursued their natural ways of promiscuity – the message was clear: they would not find a Godly loving spouse. As these examples demonstrate, in Black faith-based sexuality ministries, the Jezebel trope is alive and well.

In *Passionate and Pious*, Moultrie interviews Black women who adhere to Black faith-based sexuality ministries and finds that generally, women following faith-based sexuality ministries need not

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91. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 135.

92. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 135.

93. Marla Frederick, "'But it's Bible': African American Women and Televangelism," in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, ed. Marie R. Griffith and B. Savage (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 283.

94. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 43–44.

be convinced of the value of marriage.<sup>95</sup> They believe that heterosexual marriage is God’s best plan for their lives, and they are actively pursuing that goal. Black women in Moultrie’s focus group seemed to universally adopt the foundational messages of celibacy in pursuit of Black ladyhood – purity before heterosexual monogamous patriarchal marriage – and many believe that challenging these basic assumptions is sinful and heretical.<sup>96</sup> Despite being convinced by Godly chastity, Moultrie found that almost every individual she interviewed in the making of *Passionate and Pious* transgressed their vow of chastity, which brought about guilt, shame, and depression for not being able to resist their lustful desires as they wrestled with what it meant to be a single woman with no foreseeable marriage partner.<sup>97</sup> Some of the women interviewed desired marriages, while others simply desired an intimate connection but felt discouraged to pursue this because of the potential sin it could bring about, which is reinforced by Black faith-based sexuality messaging.<sup>98</sup>

As a Black Christian herself, Moultrie expresses concern over this ideal, because on top of the perpetuation of the Jezebel trope – which has not only been demonstrated to cause harm, but to be rooted in histories of oppression – Black women make up the smallest population of married women in the United States.<sup>99</sup> Due to the high incarceration rates of Black men – another demographic trend rooted in Black oppression – as Black women get older, there is a decreased amount of opportunity for them to marry heteronormatively.<sup>100</sup> There are approximately 129 adult Black women for every 100 adult Black

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95. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 11.

96. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 11.

97. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 18.

98. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 100.

99. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 12.

100. Peter Wagner, Leah Sakala, and Josh Begley, “States of Incarceration: The Global Context,” Prison Policy Initiative, 2016, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/>; see also: <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2020/07/27/disparities/>.

men, and when Black women reach the age of 85, there are 200 Black women for every 100 black men.<sup>101</sup> Moultrie demonstrates that Black women, and Black churchgoing women, continue to live in the legacy of the Jezebelian trope that marks their bodies as impure. The ministries they adhere to continually espouse that for them to be pure they must remain celibate or get married. However, many of them must go the extra mile to prove their purity because of the assumed Jezebelian impurity that is read on their bodies as the legacy of White manipulations. Moultrie demonstrates that many Black women struggle, knowing that they may never get married, and are often left feeling hopeless, constricted, lonely, and depressed.

Moultrie argues that it is irresponsible for faith-based purity ministries, both Black and White, to continue to highlight monogamy or celibacy as the only norm permissible within respectable female sexual activity, especially when many of these Black women may never experience marriage.<sup>102</sup> As long as White evangelicalism continues to demand purity, and as long as White ex-purity adherents continue not to center Black experiences with purity culture, the harder it will become to unhinge the Jezebel trope from the bodies of Black women in the Church. Black women deserve to be unyoked from these messages. There must be recognition that there are literal empires built upon the perpetuation of the Jezebel trope at the expense of the well-being of Black women. Letting the Jezebelian trope live on in purity culture rhetoric within general Christian society and the Black Church reinforces men's institutional power to discipline and define female bodies and makes Black women continually vulnerable to violence. I will now turn to the work of some Black feminists and womanists to learn how we, as White

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101. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 102.

102. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 111–112.

people, can listen to and stand alongside their interventions to create a feminist framework of resistance.

### **Womanism and Black Feminism as Discourses of Resistance Against Purity Culture**

In *All About Love: New Visions* (2001), bell hooks argues that, in the world we live in, love is hard to find because many individuals are confused about love or have been taught that love includes forms of abuse. The first meaningful definition of love hooks came across was in M. Scott Peck's book, *The Road Less Travelled* (1978). Peck defines love as, "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. Love is as love does. Love is an act of will – namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love."<sup>103</sup> To love includes "care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, trust, as well as honest and open communication."<sup>104</sup> What is most striking about hooks' comments on this definition of love is when she states, "when we understand love as the will to nurture our own and another's spiritual growth, it becomes clear that we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive. Love and abuse cannot coexist. Abuse and neglect are, by definition, the opposites of nurturance and care."<sup>105</sup> Evangelicals claim to be all about love. The truest and deepest forms of love. However, the demonstrable harms and abuses condoned by this movement proves otherwise. This section will highlight Black feminist and womanist theorizing on love, theorizing which focuses on how to overturn White lies about

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103. M. Scott Peck as referenced by bell hooks in *All About Love: New Visions*, (New York, William Morrow, 2001), 4.

104. hooks, *All About Love*, 5.

105. hooks, *All About Love*, 6.

love for the sake of Black flourishing and flourishing for all bodies. There is much we can learn from these theorists.

Foucault demonstrates that within any power structure, resistance is inevitable. Once a power structure and its accompanying discourse is identified, individuals can expose and disrupt these power relations through discourses of resistance. Since power is relational, power can be manipulated on any level where people interact; if individuals change or resist the normative web of interpersonal relations on the microlevels of society, then the way power is institutionalized can be changed.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, if both Black and White communities begin to demand different sexual discourses, the demand within the Christian marketplace can change the stories and narratives being told. Kelly Brown Douglas, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Monique Moultrie, and Tamara Lomax, among many other scholars, are Black women who have grown up in the church and experienced Jezebelian violence. Together they demonstrate that to unhinge the Jezebel trope from Black female bodies, we must dismantle the concept of purity, the lady trope, compulsory celibacy and heterosexism, and all the policing that comes alongside traditional purity teachings.

To completely know and love themselves, their spirituality, and their divinity, Douglas suggests that Black women must completely love and embody their sexuality. Douglas states that for Black women to have safe space to love and embody their sexual selves, there must be a reinterpretation of scripture, beginning with a transformed definition of sin. Sin, according to Douglas, is not lodged in the Black female body as Jezebelian discourse claims. Rather, as womanism demonstrates, sin is what alienates Black people from each other, their environments, themselves, and their spiritualities.<sup>107</sup>

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106. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 20.

107. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 125.

Like Douglas, Lomax articulates that the Black Church must recognize that “sin is not located in Black women and girls’ bodies. It is not biological. It is in the ways we cause harm [...] the ways we limit and halt thriving.”<sup>108</sup> Dehumanizing tropes based in Jezebelian or Mammy discourses were successful in disconnecting Black bodies from their humanity, tainting Black self-perceptions, invoking shame, and creating hostile relationships of policing between Black men and Black women. This is sin. This is harm.

First, it is important to reinterpret the White manipulation of 1 Kings 16:31, the origin of the Jezebel trope. Here, Queen Jezebel is thrown out a window by Israelites and brutally eaten by dogs. When the Jezebelian trope was projected onto Black female bodies, it justified the violence, breeding, prostitution, rape, and other atrocities they were exposed to.<sup>109</sup> However, a closer look at 1 Kings 16:31 reveals that Queen Jezebel’s suffering was never about her sexuality or her purity. Lomax demonstrates that, contrary to White interpretations, Queen Jezebel never used sex or her beauty against her Israelite enemies; rather, she used her knowledge, assertiveness, and power. Lomax finds that throughout the Christian Bible, when the Israelites came across “foreign” religions and cultures, these cultures were associated with sin, whoring, and promiscuity – whether this was true or not.<sup>110</sup> It was thus in this way that the figure of Queen Jezebel became a cultural, religious, and racialized “other.” In other words, what rendered Queen Jezebel sinful and deserving of violence was not any “whoring,” immodesty, or impurity – it was, rather, her otherness, an otherness which was later racialized by the White colonial desire to render certain people inferior for the sake of domination and empire building.

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108. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 206.

109. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 110.

110. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 42.

What Black womanists like Douglas are calling for us to recognize is that figures such as Jesus “did not tolerate hate or prejudice of any kind [...] and neither did he tolerate neutrality in the face of human misery or injustice.”<sup>111</sup> In fact, when Jesus was given the opportunity to problematize female sexual lives, he always pointed to lessons that transcend sex and gender, pointing back to faithfulness and love. Jesus never referred to women as “whores” or “Jezebels.”<sup>112</sup> Lomax’s notion of “unhinging Jezebel” refers first to the project of recognizing that the White manipulation of Jesus’ gospel has been used to control Black women, and second, to resisting any Biblical interpretations that continue to legitimize the violence of Jezebel’s death. If we are to walk alongside Black women, we cannot continue to sit by while injustices continue to be perpetrated against Black sexuality in the name of God. Unhinging Jezebel means creating new interpretations that focus on the celebration of female bodies as the inherently sacred vessels they are.<sup>113</sup> Violence created Jezebel, and violence continues to perpetuate Jezebel.<sup>114</sup> Embracing an unconditional love of ourselves and others, and rejecting harmful discourses about our sexuality – and the sexualities of our Black sisters – is how we can begin to do this work.

In her discourse of resistance, Moultrie turns to the womanist ideal of sexual generosity. According to Moultrie, a sexual womanist is “a responsible, grown, Black woman who is sometimes a lover of individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually [...] but is always a lover of the spirit.”<sup>115</sup> This model of sexual generosity offers a framework for young and old Black women alike to explore seeking

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111. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 116.

112. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 73.

113. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 7.

114. Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged*, 43.

115. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 73–74.

companionship rather than marriage.<sup>116</sup> This model takes seriously that aging churchwomen express their faith as the ultimate concern, but acknowledges and affirms that they are also sensual beings who may choose to act on their sexual desire or pursue intimate relationships that do not necessarily culminate nor strive toward marriage. There is space within this model for single women to explore their sexualities and be generous with what works for their own flourishing.<sup>117</sup> If celibacy is making Black women feel depressed, guilty, and alienated, then womanist theology can help determine that this practice is not to be continued; that it is not of love. Rather than compulsory celibacy, celibacy can be seen as a part of an individual's toolbox of sexual agency. However, others cannot demand that it be in everyone's toolbox, and it should certainly not be ranked as a "better decision" than others. Choosing to share one's body with someone else is a radical act of love towards the self, the other, and God.<sup>118</sup> Sexual generosity allows women to generously share the wisdom of sexual agency, responsibility, pleasure, and well-being with future generations, centering Black wholeness within Black communities.

Womanist models of sexual generosity demonstrate that to bring wholeness back to Black women, all teachings of sexuality must prioritize Black females as responsible sexual agents who deserve love, pleasure, and intimacy.<sup>119</sup> However, in womanist literature thus far, Moultrie asserts that centering Black female pleasure is often only an afterthought to conversations surrounding histories of interlocking oppressions and trauma that block women from connecting with their sexualities.<sup>120</sup> Many Black women in the

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116. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 112.

117. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 79.

118. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 77–79.

119. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 79.

120. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 114.

church have been taught – at risk of being chastised for having a Jezebelian-spirit – that they should not speak about their sexual pleasure. Moultrie asserts that neglecting bodily pleasure because of the politics of respectability is itself a form of oppression. In this case, Moultrie suggests a womanist model of erotic justice which focuses on self-pleasuring in various forms such as masturbation, oral and anal sex, and non-monogamous sex. Of this, Moultrie states, “radical sexual honesty and responsibility are the cornerstones of the womanist erotic justice model, starting with the Black churchwoman prioritizing her desires and her body.”<sup>121</sup> Rather than monogamous heteronormative marriage being the only space for “Godly sex,” erotic pleasure and responsible sexual generosity should be normative.<sup>122</sup>

Though a model of erotic justice is vital for Black women to learn their bodily desires, as theorized by Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde, an embrace of the erotic outside the bedroom will further connect women to their spirituality.<sup>123</sup> In *Sister Outsider*, Lorde states that the erotic is the power and embodied knowledge that lies within each of us but that exists specifically on a feminine and spiritual plane.<sup>124</sup> To further define the term, Lorde says,

the very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in

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121. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 127.

122. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 114.

123. Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 2007), 53–59.

124. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 53.

our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.<sup>125</sup>

Though we have been taught that the erotic exists solely in sexual moments, Lorde demonstrates this is not so. Rather, the erotic may be described as our embodied non-rational knowledge, the chaotic feelings we feel the strongest and the deepest. The erotic empowers women to examine the world and see the various ways in which society could exist differently. When one comes to recognize the erotic within them, they learn the fullness of what life can be, what they can aspire to and achieve, the type of love and respect they deserve from the world and from others.<sup>126</sup> As Lorde puts it, “recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.”<sup>127</sup>

However, as we have seen, White patriarchal capitalist supremacy seeks to maintain itself, whatever the cost, and, accordingly, has sought to repress and undermine the empowerment represented by eroticism (both sexual and non-sexual). Indeed, in our Western patriarchal society, the deep “feeling power” of women has been undermined and re-scripted as a manifestation of irrationality and psychosis – not only to legitimize claims of female gender inferiority, but also to keep women “in order” for the service of White patriarchal capitalist supremacy.<sup>128</sup> We have learned that only rational knowledge has meaning, and that we should be suspicious of embodied knowledge. This is especially the case in Christianity, which has sought to create a mind-body dualism that undermines the experience of the body and puts the reading and understanding of

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125. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 55.

126. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 54.

127. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 59.

128. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 53.

scripture, the work of the mind, on a pedestal.<sup>129</sup> In Western society, we have been taught not to trust the feminine irrationality that comes from our feelings, and in church, we have been taught that our embodied experiences – i.e., our “fleshly desires” – are demonstrations of sin. To cope, to not be ostracized, many of us have learned to be suspicious of and shut down the erotic knowledge within ourselves. But this, Lorde argues, is the perpetuation of sexist and gendered oppression, not just for women, but for all genders, as this is a form of individual undermining and disembodiment.

Though we have been taught to fear and chastise the chaos of deep feelings within our bodies, Sara Ahmed's work on affect demonstrates that emotions truly do “do” things.<sup>130</sup> Institutions, governments, and figures of authority frequently use fear, shame, the promise of happiness, and other affective emotions to direct our behaviours into compliance with them. The use of emotions as a method of social control demonstrates that these institutions want us to be guided by deep, non-rational feelings, just not when these feelings are our own. Rather, they desire us to submit ourselves to the feelings and beliefs they deem “rational.” Once we recognize this, we can recognize that the embrace of the erotic, of our own deep feelings, will not only connect us to ourselves, to humanity, and to others, but will also empower decolonial, liberating, and lifechanging transformations. A true feminist endeavour! We must, therefore, resist the narratives that seek to pathologize deep emotion. In fact, we must empower each other to recognize, believe, nurture, and foster these deep feelings in ourselves. As White people who have more assumed access to rationality, we must center the work of Black fem-

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129. See, for example, Kelly Kapic's discussion of killing our bodily desires (“dying to the flesh”) in “The Mortification of Sin,” *The Gospel Coalition*, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-mortification-of-sin/>.

130. Sara Ahmed, “On Collective Feelings and the Impressions Left by Others,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 21, no. 2 (2004): 25–42.

inists like Audre Lorde and womanists like Monique Moultrie; we must give credit to the work they've done and the knowledge they have, and stand in solidarity with them as they fight for erotic bodies of all forms to have space to flourish without being seen as pathological or Jezebelian.

In a similar manner, we must work against the discourse that seeks to define any identity or orientation in the 2SLGBTQIA+ community as sinful or pathological. This is something purity culture greatly perpetuates. Like White supremacy, homophobia represents another roadblock to the liberatory ideals of feminism.<sup>131</sup> When queer individuals exist in affective communities which declare all non-heterosexuals to be sinful or defective, it is this rhetoric that is harmful and sinful, not their bodies. This rhetoric can cause individuals to leave churches, to be separated from their spiritual selves, to experience self-hate and shame, and, tragically, to death by suicide. Though evangelical communities claim that this treatment of non-normative sexuality is loving, we must recognize that this is part of the discourse of patriarchal supremacy, where the husband must rule over the female partner. We must see through this. Homophobia causes suffering and alienation, and we must recognize that, although there are powerful forces seeking to convince us otherwise, homophobic rhetoric is not the fruit of Christ. To do this, we must begin to dismantle the norm of holding heteronormative marriage as the ideal, which joins this project with the project of unhinging the Jezebel trope. Currently, within the ho/lady discourse in religious-cultural spheres, anyone who is not committed to the nuclear project (read: "Jezebelian" women and 2SLGTBQIA+ individuals) represents a threat to the contemporary moral order and must be punished. This legitimizes homophobia and the policing and chas-

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131. Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," 48–49.

tising of female, racialized female, and gender non-conforming bodies. However, the 2SLGTBQIA+ population can – and, as I argue, should – be understood as representing the diversity of divinity.

To dismantle heterosexism and give space to the 2SLGTBQIA+ community, Moultrie suggests we could employ a womanist model of sexual fluidity and sexual hospitality. This model requires “a complete breaking of the binary to bring about acceptance of healthy relationships and sexual expressions of any kind... it can include celibacy, choosing to be in primary relationship with oneself, choosing to engage in a sexual relationship with any gender, and the flexibility to allow people space to identify across a wider range of sexual expressions.”<sup>132</sup> This model recognizes the wide fluidity of sexual expression that is possible when individuals see themselves as responsible and autonomous sexual agents, who sometimes love men, sometimes love women, sometimes love trans or gender non-conforming bodies, but always love God. There is no pressure for individuals to be ex-gay, to hide in a straight-passing relationship, or to maintain any sort of static sexual identity. Womanist sexual hospitality honours the grown woman as a responsible sexual agent who does not need to have a fixed identity, and therefore may exist in constant flux.<sup>133</sup>

To know the divine is to share her love with others. To demonstrate the divine act of love is to enter into loving relationships unashamed of our bodies and to encourage others to do the same. The production of a constructive sexual discourse of resistance will encourage individuals to firmly condemn biblical interpretations that encourage sexual silencing, homophobia, and/or the Jezebel/lady binary. This will clear space for individuals to see the divine within themselves regardless of their identity or their management of

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132. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 92–93.

133. Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious*, 94–95.

personal erotic desire.<sup>134</sup> For individuals within the church to flourish, the church can no longer tolerate homophobia, and it can no longer promote racialized Jezebelian violence.

## Conclusion

When White women deconstruct their experiences in purity culture, we do not get a true sense of how insidious this culture is if we do not include – and indeed foreground – voices of colour. When we do foreground these voices, we learn that White Christians are taught about the beauty of pursuing purity (and are chastised for failing to accept this teaching), not necessarily for theological reasons, but because our blind adherence to evangelicalism is necessary for White body supremacy to sustain itself in Christian spaces. We learn that for evangelicalism to perpetuate itself, we need to embody and pass down White, cis-gender, monogamous, and heteronormative ideals. We learn that purity is not about our well-being, but is, rather, part of discursive manipulations that have systemically oppressed bodies of colour in North America, while simultaneously wiping out Indigenous populations. Evangelicals want to spread the gospel; *the good news*, as they claim it. In accordance with Anthea Butler, I do not think the good news is primarily what evangelicalism is about.

I have used Christian language throughout this paper because, although I have left evangelicalism, its language still lives and breathes within me. As this paper has sought to demonstrate, reinterpreting scripture can be an empowering means of seeking new understandings, resisting old harms, and forging new beginnings. In this spirit, I would like to invoke Matthew 7:15–20 (NIV):

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134. Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 68.

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you shall recognize them [...] every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Evangelicalism and purity culture produces bad fruit. Evangelicalism was birthed amidst American slavocracy, Indigenous genocide, and the White nationalist movements that have flourished throughout North American history. We cannot forget that behind the legacy of evangelicalism and its movements lay dead bodies. Hundreds of thousands of bodies of Turtle Islanders, and hundreds of thousands of bodies that were stolen from Africa. We must remind ourselves of bell hook's beautiful reclamation of M. Scott Peck's definition of love as the will to extend oneself for the nurturing of one's self or another's spiritual growth. Love and abuse cannot coexist.<sup>135</sup> As scholars and individuals deconstructing our experiences in evangelicalism and purity culture, we must work towards having inclusive conversations. As Barbara Smith demonstrates, freedom for all is what feminism is striving for. Anything less is self-aggrandizement.<sup>136</sup>

I sit compassionately with those of you who have made it through this paper and feel shattered by its revelations. I, too, have been shattered. I, too, have seen my White fragility. Indeed, my fibromyalgia pain has flared. Indeed, I have been disoriented. You may be too. Allow yourself to feel shattered. Allow yourself to feel. Ahmed demonstrates that the inheritance of feminism may indeed be the inheritance of sadness, the inheritance of unhappiness. We come

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135. hooks, *All About Love*, 4–10.

136. Smith, "Racism and Women's Studies," 140.

to realize that the world we live in is not at all the world that thought we lived in.<sup>137</sup> But, in embracing the erotic, in partnering with and centering the work of humans of colour, we can demand different worlds. But we can no longer continue the legacy of having these conversations in racially segregated communities; we must do it together, and we must do the internal work required to do this well. Engaging in this dialogue may bring liberatory outcomes.<sup>138</sup>

Resmaa Menakem – the Black Somatic scholar mentioned earlier who coined the phrase “White body supremacy” – states that we cannot change White body supremacy solely from activist work and engaging in dialogue. In fact, Menakem argues, “Do not continue to read this book if you are convinced that ending White supremacy begins with social and political action [...] we need to begin with the healing of our trauma – in dark-skinned bodies, light-skinned bodies, our neighbourhoods and our communities.”<sup>139</sup> Educating ourselves on the racialized horrors of the past, partnering alongside individuals of colour to make structural changes, and creating liberative work that can help others understand the complexities of White body supremacy and purity culture is important, but we must also work on healing our nervous systems and healing our trauma. Since White body supremacy lives in our bodies, part of how we can heal our bodies is through embodiment practices and through recognizing our trauma responses. I urge you to read Menakem’s work *My Grandmother’s Hands*, as I cannot do it justice here. Compassionately, Menakem understands that all bodies are harmed by White body supremacy. From the position of a Black Somatic therapist, Menakem provides an accessible resource for understanding how White body supremacy impacts all our bodies,

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137. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 86.

138. hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” 1–12.

139. Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, xii.

and how we can work towards healing our bodies from intergenerational and personal trauma. If we do not heal, we may continue to repeat harm, or repeat racist tendencies, even if unintentionally. It is not our fault, as White people, that we inherited the world that we did. But it is our responsibility to heal ourselves and turn towards creating a safer and liberative world for all bodies.

We can resist the scripts of White body supremacy, but to do this, we must partner with womanists and Black feminists to promote interventions which seek to release sin from sex and sin from the Black female body. We must release individuals from mandated celibacy and heterosexism. We must promote reinterpretations of scripture that connect individuals to themselves, their bodies, their environments, their spiritualities, and others within their communities. We must embrace sexual and gender fluidity, the 2SLGTBQIA+ community, and womanist models of sexual generosity and erotic justice. We must individually and communally re-interpret sexual sin and place love, wholeness, embodiment, and well-being at the center of these interpretations. We must learn to love ourselves and each other. This is shattering, heartbreaking, and difficult work, but from it breathes love, life, resilience, and the potential for the transformational work of feminism.