“Chosen to Deliver”: Black Female Jeremiads in American Literature and Culture

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Abstract of Dissertation

"Chosen to Deliver": Black Female Jeremiads in
American Literature and Culture

My dissertation brings a contemporary black feminist rendering to a rhetorical tradition that reaches back to the nascent days of the United States. This project is the first scholarly study to analyze the ways in which black women confront social injustices through a critical performance of the American Jeremiad, a "political sermon" whose historical location at the crossroads of politics and religious authority in the seventeenth century meant that this rhetorical tradition would be reserved exclusively for men. I argue that African American women in the post-Civil Rights era articulate a distinctive Black Female Jeremiad as a mode of resistive performance that operates on two critical levels. First, the Black Female Jeremiad offers a religio-political critique of one of the most foundational narratives of American identity – the belief in the United States as a "chosen" nation – by pointing out the discrepancy between an exceptionalist "City on a Hill" and a nation-state riddled with racial, economic, and gender injustices. Second, in performing a critique that calls into question the American national sense of self, the Black Female Jeremiad must negotiate what I term the maternal/militant bind of black women's subjectivity in the U.S. cultural imagination.

Because the Madonna/whore dichotomy of white femininity is not transferable to black women, whose bodies have always already been labeled as debased, I argue that a maternal/militant binary in which both sides are marked as pejorative is the racialized gender stereotype for African American women. While tropes such as the compliant mammy, the emasculating black matriarch, and the parasitic welfare mother plague

representations of black maternity, a militant black woman faces ridicule for her inherent promiscuity, as the trope of the angry black woman is marked by the indiscriminate use of her words, deeds, and body. Ultimately, I argue that the Black Female Jeremiad is characterized by her ability to navigate both the maternal and the militant in previously unacknowledged ways and that this subjective hybridity leads to the Black Female Jeremiad's marginalization from mainstream discourse through dismissive charges of insanity, blasphemy, and/or treason to American ideals.

Moreover, the Black Female Jeremiad's mobility between bifurcated representations of black womanhood results in a vexed maternity and a generative militancy that complicates Black feminist thought's predominant articulation of black motherhood as a site of power and activism. Thus, my dissertation prioritizes a missing strand within contemporary Black feminist thought by analyzing often-overlooked texts such as Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie*, Octavia Butler's *Parables* series, and Lauryn Hill's live album, *MTV Unplugged 2.0*, while at the same time deepening our understanding of literary predecessors such as late seventeenth-century sermons and nineteenth-century abolitionist texts.

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Introduction

The More Things "Change"…: American Exceptionalism,
the American Jeremiad, and the Black Female Jeremiad

Yes We Can, But Can She?

On November 4, 2008, the United States presidential election was heralded as a watershed moment in American history. Running on the platform of "change," Barack Obama became the first African American President of the United States and ostensibly catalyzed the passing of the torch to a *new* new generation of Americans.[1] Taking to the streets on election night, cheering citizens – many of them young and engaged in the political process for the first time – chanted the Obama campaign slogan "Yes We Can" with a vigor and intensity typically reserved for a professional sporting event. There was hope in the air and a fresh face in the White House. It was a "new day."

And yet, despite the undeniable turning point in American history marked by Obama's victory, holistically the 2008 presidential election race also reveals what has *not* changed in the political and cultural landscape of the United States: undiscriminating national self-aggrandizing and proclamations of American exceptionalism; the dismissal of a truly prophetic and subversive voice through the always readily available labels of "unpatriotic" and downright "crazy"; a showdown between race and gender in the Democratic primary – an unfairly reductive but nonetheless unavoidable framing of the Clinton/Obama battle of wits; the absence of black women deemed viable for elected positions of power; and a complex negotiation of a black woman's maternal and militant

[1] In his 1961 Inaugural Address, John F. Kennedy famously declared that "the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans."

subjectivities in the public imagination. If, in fact, a change did come to America, it was a very specific kind of shift that left other long-standing pillars of the nation's past firmly in place.

Bowing out of the Republican primary race in February 2008, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney delivered a concession speech so full of American exceptionalism and allusions to a righteous "errand" that he appears to be channeling that other Massachusetts governor, John Winthrop, who in 1630 first declared the burgeoning nation a "City upon a Hill." Delivered at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington, D.C., Romney concluded his remarks with the following:

> It is the common task of each generation and the burden of liberty to preserve this country, expand its freedoms and renew its spirit, so that its noble past is prologue to its glorious future. To this task, accepting this burden, we're all dedicated. And I firmly believe, by the providence of the Almighty, that we will succeed beyond our fondest hope. America must always remain, as it has always been, the hope of the Earth.

Although one would be hard-pressed to find remarks *more* steeped in American exceptionalism, countless examples of equivalent self-aggrandizing have occurred in the nearly four hundred years between Winthrop and Romney. As numerous scholars have argued,[2] American exceptionalism is the "single most powerful agent…concerning the identity of America and Americans" (Madsen 1). A chosen nation with a unique and divine mission, with this great power comes great responsibility, as our superheroes are quick to remind us. In essence, the American people firmly believe that the weight of the

[2] In addition to Madsen, see Robert Bellah and Greil Marcus for detailed analyses.

planet rests on this country's broad and uniquely capable shoulders. As the "hope of the Earth," we are imbued with an endless job, as Romney's repetition of "task" and "burden" iterates. But unlike other tangible examples of "work" in this country – for example, what we find in the drab Dreiser-esque literature of the industrial revolution – this "errand," or mission, is somehow both *always* present and *never* present. Through invoking a "noble past [which] is prologue to its glorious future," Romney exemplifies what Greil Marcus calls "the absolute of prophecy, referring always backward and forward to the New Jerusalem somewhere in the past, somewhere in the future" (25). Elusive, yet pervasive. Its sustainability perhaps a direct result of its impossibility.

But if, with these words, Governor Romney faded quietly back into one of his private mansions for the remainder of the election, the words of Reverend Jeremiah Wright – Obama's former pastor and leader of Chicago's 8,500-member Trinity United Church of Christ – dominated headlines in March 2008 and reached a fever pitch with the potential to cripple the promise of an Obama presidential future. If one traces the development of an American identity beginning with Puritan New England – what Perry Miller calls the "process of Americanization" – Romney's and Wright's words are engaged in a dialectical struggle at the very core of what it means to be an American in America.[3] Almost as soon as the "City on a Hill" model was put forth by Winthrop, late seventeenth-century sermons known as "jeremiads" began lamenting the declension, or failure, of the chosen people to live up to this model. This "dark underbelly" of American exceptionalism, as Greil Marcus qualifies the jeremiad, reminds the nation of

[3] My use of the term "America" rather than "United States" is intentional; as Russell Banks points out, America is "a very different kind of creature than the United States" (22). "America" evokes a deep history of national myths and pride, while the United States is a more neutral, geographical designation. In short, "America" is a quintessential part of what Benedict Anderson would call our imagined community.

its exceptional status, calls out the people's sin, and warns of the disaster that will ensue if there is no repentance. The ultimate prediction made by these sermons, however, is divine deliverance as a result of repentance – after all, could we really expect anything less from God's chosen people?

As the nation officially became its own after the Revolutionary War, the underlying question of who, exactly, was included in the "chosen people" came to the foreground. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the American Jeremiad rhetorical tradition of Puritan New England was appropriated by African American abolitionists. In what became known as the Black Jeremiad, America is once again identified as a chosen nation, but this time the chosen people's declension is explicitly related to white racism. In a sermon delivered on the Sunday after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Reverend Jeremiah Wright delivered a quintessential Black Jeremiad as he extrapolated on the failures of the United States to live up to the exemplary model outlined by Winthrop, echoed by Romney:

> And the United States of America government, when it came to treating her citizens of Indian descent fairly, she failed. She put them on reservations. When it came to treating her citizens of Japanese descent fairly, she failed. She put them in internment prison camps. When it came to treating citizens of African descent fairly, America failed. She put them in chains. The government put them on slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept

> them out of their racist bastions of higher education and locked them into position of hopelessness and helplessness. *The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and then wants us to sing God bless America? No, no, no. Not God bless America; God damn America!* That's in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating her citizen as less than human. God damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme! (emphasis added)

Here, Wright's cadenced references to national failure highlight the people's declension, and the repetition of "God damn America" echoes the doomsday rhetoric of Puritan jeremiads such as Jonathan Edwards's 1741 "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Clearly, Wright's rhetoric is nothing new; in fact, it was so broken in by Puritan ministers that listeners should slip comfortably into it – except for several critical factors.

To begin, any Black Jeremiad, even when speaking the same words and following the same formula as the American Jeremiad, is inherently vulnerable for accusations of "playing" the race card, as if race has not always already been on the table of American history. Second, in the age of YouTube and twenty-four hour news channels, Wright's words were taken out of context and spliced into salacious sound bites. Clips of his sermon, most focusing exclusively on the portion italicized in the segment above, received hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube, and Wright was crucified in the press as an America-bashing racist. Crucially, Reverend Wright's critics took their attacks a step further by labeling him "some sort of fanatic or as the learned journalist from the *New York Times* called me, a 'wack-a-doodle'" (Moyers interview). This

branding of madness as a justification for the dismissal of prophetic pronouncement dates back to biblical times; however, as this dissertation explores, the label of insanity in this particular national, racial, and gendered context serves a more nuanced function of silencing, preserving the status quo, and policing the public sphere.

In addition to the American exceptionalist rhetoric of Romney and the jeremiadic rhetoric of Wright, the 2008 election provoked a national discussion about the role of women in positions of political power. The first viable female candidate for the United States presidency, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton received over 18 million votes in the Democratic primary before suspending her campaign in June 2008. In both the Obama and the Clinton camps, there was a deliberate attempt not to explicitly acknowledge, and certainly not to "play up," the personal identity categories that made both of their candidacies groundbreaking; he was a candidate for President who happened to be black, she was a candidate for President who happened to be a woman – not a black candidate or a female candidate, each was running on their individual merit.

This approach, however, held an inherent disadvantage for Clinton. For reasons well-documented and far beyond the scope of this dissertation, certain individuals historically have been able to transcend race, while it remains much more difficult to transcend gender. In other words, you can be "not *that kind* of black person" but you can't ever really be "not *that kind* of woman." In a *New York Times* op-ed "Women Are Never Front-Runners," published just after Obama's victory in the January 2008 Iowa caucus, Gloria Steinem speaks to this contradiction, conjecturing that "there is still no 'right' way to be a woman in public power without being considered a you-know-what." Steinem states that she is not attempting to compare racial and gender oppressions; rather,

she is simply highlighting the different ways in which they manifest themselves in everyday life, particularly in public life. Historically relegated to the home by the nineteenth-century social ideologies of separate spheres and the cult of domesticity/true womanhood, women have long been denied positions of power and access to public voice. As Steinem suggests, even in the post-feminist movement emancipation of the twenty-first century, women may now occupy public positions of leadership, but those that are "in charge" are constantly at risk for being labeled a "bitch," that ultimate patriarchal expletive used to combat the threat of female power.

Moreover, Steinem's editorial offers a particular glimpse at a positionality lost in the shuffle of the Obama/Clinton matrix: African American women. Ironically, Steinem begins her piece by reframing the biography and experience of Obama as that of a woman, all other factors remaining the same. Steinem asks whether this individual – "say, Achola Obama instead of Barack Obama" – could be considered a viable candidate for President. The answer, of course, is no, because "[g]ender is probably the most restricting force in American life." What is most striking here is what lies under the surface but never exposed. Steinem uses the hook of "Achola Obama" as a means into the argumentative thread that, in this particular context only, Clinton has a tougher challenge than Obama in overcoming her marginalized positionality; why, then, does Steinem not call this fictional woman "Hillary Obama"? While gender may, in fact, as Steinem argues, be the most restricting force in twenty-first century American life, it is knotted up with race and class in a messy rock-paper-scissors that is the American caste system.[4] Achola Obama is not just a woman, but a black woman; Steinem's flipping of the script becomes not just a switch in sex but the formation of a uniquely qualified

[4] Steinem acknowledges as much in passing, but fails to recognize the fatal flaw in her opening illustration.

female experience in the United States. Thus, when Steinem asks questions such as, "So why is the sex barrier not taken as seriously as the racial one?" the either/or set-up here crumbles under the always already both/and experience that is the everyday lived reality for women of color in this country, with its particularly restrictive roles historically afforded to African American women. While Steinem examines why "Women Are Never Front-Runners," a response to her piece could aptly be titled "Black Women Are Never Runners." Indeed, a black woman was never in the running as a viable candidate for the nation's highest office, in 2008 or otherwise. However, the presence of Michelle Obama as part of her husband's presidential package reveals much about the ways in which black women are depicted in the U.S. cultural imagination.

Along with the first black President came the first black First Lady. As Hillary Clinton notes in her memoir, the First Lady "is expected to represent an ideal – and largely mythical – concept of American womanhood" (qtd. in Gibbs and Scherer 30). Given the fact that African American women have historically been deemed "unworthy symbols for U.S. patriotism" (Collins, *BFT* 249), Michelle Obama faced an incredible challenge: how can an idealized representation of American womanhood be mapped onto a figure whose gendered and racialized body has always already been labeled as debased? In their June 2009 *Time* article "Michelle Up Close," Nancy Gibbs and Michael Scherer trace the public perception of Michelle Obama from "the caricatured Angry Black Woman" during the heated Democratic primary of early 2008 to "her exalted status as a New American Icon" at the time of her husband's inauguration (28). This profound shift in the way in which Michelle Obama was conceptualized by the American public is evident when comparing two highly disparate depictions of her on the cover of the *New*

Yorker.

On July 21, 2008, the *New Yorker* cover features a satirical image of Barack and Michelle Obama as fist-pumping militants. Dressed in combat boots and camouflage pants, Michelle has an automatic rifle slung over her back and an ammunition strip across her chest. With her eyebrows sharply raised and an afro hairstyle, Michelle appears every bit the guerrilla warrior joining forces with her husband, depicted in garb suggesting a Muslim terrorist, while an American flag burns in their fireplace. Flash-forward eight months. The *New Yorker*'s March 16, 2009, cover – their biannual Style Issue – features Michelle Obama as a runway model in a colorful fashion sketch. With a beaming smile and hands girlishly on hips, the First Lady poses in a pink skirt and shawl, with slimming yellow gloves and a belt. The ensemble is capped off with classic pearl earrings. How did she transform from scary Angela Davis to the new Jackie O?

In short, the image of Michelle Obama transformed from the militant to the maternal. The *Washington Post*'s Ruth Marcus refers to Michelle's "mommy stamp," while Rebecca Traister analyzes the "momification" of Michelle Obama.[5] Writing for *Salon* only a week after Obama's election, Traister notes the rapidly shifting discourse surrounding Michelle Obama. In her address at the Democratic National Convention in August 2008, Michelle highlighted her maternal subjectivity and followed up in an interview with *Ebony* by labeling herself "mom-in-chief." Pointing to this "cheerily unthreatening title," Traister argues that in order to become an acceptable representation of American womanhood, Michelle Obama must be framed as a dedicated mother and traditional wife, *not* as a smart and independent woman with a high-powered career

[5] In *The Rising Song of African American Women*, Barbara Omolade defines "mammification" as the way in which black women continue to be vocationally and economically pigeon-holed even as job opportunities open up beyond the stereotypical "mammy" running the white woman's domestic space.

history of her own. As Ruth Marcus points out, Michelle "is, after all – by résumé, anyway – more Hillary than Jackie," but her race pushes her beyond the bounds of acceptability in the mainstream cultural imagination unless she downplays her personal accomplishments and her status as an Ivy-League educated female lawyer: "Michelle's power is potentially scarier than Hillary's could ever have been. She is not simply a smart and powerful woman, but a smart and powerful black woman…The exoticism and difference of Obama's race was all the progress the American people could take in one election, conventional wisdom went. A threateningly competent woman might put them over the edge" (Traister). Thus, the shifting cultural configuration of Michelle Obama illustrates the maternal/militant bind of African American female subjectivity. In order to compute with the American public, she must be pigeon-holed into one of these pre-wrapped boxes, and the First Lady must fall into the idealized motherhood positionality.

The 2008 election race, then, proves a microcosm of the ways in which key American myths and political rhetoric, with roots in the founding days of the nation, continue to play out in contemporary American life. Moreover, this groundbreaking election nonetheless reveals a persistent discomfort with certain racialized and gendered public figures. After historicizing the two-sided coin of American exceptionalism and the American Jeremiad that is the social currency of Americanization, I argue that black women, particularly in the post-Civil Rights era, have engaged in a religio-political critique of American society through a resistive expression of a uniquely Black Female Jeremiad.

The 1980s Were "Exceptional" / Jeremiah Was a Male Prophet

When, aboard the ship *Arabella* about to embark across the Atlantic in 1630, John Winthrop delivered his famous speech that launched America on its perpetual mission, he instated the spirit of "chosenness" on those seeking the New Jerusalem: "for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us" (43). Fittingly, and perhaps presciently, Winthrop was not a preacher but a politician, holding the post of governor of Massachusetts upon arrival in the New World. Two hundred and fifty years after Winthrop's pronouncement, Ronald Reagan appropriated the "City on a Hill" imagery so vehemently that it "became the national metaphor" (Vowell 59). Indeed, as Sarah Vowell quips, "Talking about Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" without discussing Ronald Reagan would be like mentioning Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You" and pretending Whitney Houston doesn't exist" (59). In other words, while Winthrop may have penned the phrase, Reagan popularized it, reinvigorated it, and holds responsibility for its cultural familiarity.

Over the years, Reagan employed this favorite phrase signifying America's exceptionalism during such monumental political moments as the night before his 1980 presidential election victory, his reelection acceptance speech in 1984, and his farewell address in January 1989. In fact, Reagan became so associated with the "City on a Hill" that, as Senator John Danforth eulogized the president at his funeral, "[t]he Winthrop message became the Reagan message" (qtd. in Vowell 67). During Reagan's reign in the 1980s, then, the rhetoric of American exceptionalism was part of the political justification for "new heights of militarism and chauvinism" and a renewed emphasis on "the traditional values of Puritanism" (Omolade 37). Since the 1980s, American

exceptionalism as the core of a national sense of self has increasingly grown with the United States's unique global influence. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, "A greatly changed global political economy has left America as the sole remaining superpower" (*From* 7). Nothing boosts the belief that your nation's agenda is destined to take precedence over all others on the planet more than that nation's unchallenged global prominence. It is at this point that the City on the Hill appears most attainable – and, depending on your vantage point, the most dangerous and thus in need of jeremiadic critique.

Just as the "Modell of Christian Charity" was espoused by a politician, so, too, was the flipside of American Exceptionalism – the sermon considered the first American Jeremiad – immediately connected to the political. Delivered as the Election Day sermon in 1670, Massachusetts minister Samuel Danforth's "A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness" begins by quoting the Book of Jeremiah: "Thus saith the Lord, What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone from me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain?" (151).[6] Danforth draws a parallel between those who have recently settled the Massachusetts Bay colony and the biblical Children of Israel, who also quickly "forg[o]t their Errand into the Wilderness, and corrupt[ed] themselves in their own Inventions" (155). Here, Danforth introduces two of the three major components of the American Jeremiad as defined by David Howard-Pitney: citing the promise – we're on an errand – and the current declension, or failure to live up to said promise (8). The final structural element of the traditional jeremiad – predicting repentance and the chosen people's ultimate return to their sacred mission – is called upon when Danforth evokes God's promise to Jerusalem: "I will restore health

[6] Jeremiah 2:5.

unto thee, and I will heal thee of thy wounds, saith the Lord" (169) – but only, Danforth and Jeremiah remind their audiences, if the community remembers *who* they truly are and *for Whom* they are truly there.[7]

With so many biblical prophets to choose from, why is this rhetorical tradition named after Jeremiah? According to Sacvan Bercovitch in his foundational study of the American Jeremiad, "No prophet stressed repentance as much as Jeremiah did, and none so fervently foretold the gratuitous spiritual transformation in store for the house of Israel" (32). In other words, Jeremiah, while heavy on the castigation, was equally heavy on the promise of handsome reward. This deliverance, however, would come with a cost – often at the expense of life as society knew it; Jeremiah not only emphasized the nation's need to repent but did so in a way that "deepens the concept of repentance" (Achtemeier). In rejecting surface-level contrition, the biblical Jeremiah made a demand which theologian James Cone would call *truly* prophetic – one "demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society" (2). While this demand for radical systemic change was eventually lost during the jeremiad's Americanization, the American Jeremiad nonetheless retained the biblical prophet's pronouncements of gratuitous spiritual – and later, material – reward.

Danforth's sermon ushered in the Golden Age of the American Jeremiad, late seventeenth-century popular – yes, popular – sermons delivered by "second generation" Puritans such as Increase Mather and his famous "The Day of Trouble is Near" (Miller 2). Indeed, therein lies the draw of the jeremiad: the "day" is always *near* but never actually *here*. The chosen audience can anticipate a rollercoaster of emotional payoffs – fear, excitement, anxiety, the threat of destruction, and the promise of deliverance – but

[7] Jeremiah 30:17.

never actually experience them. As Perry Miller reminds us, the first best-seller in American history was the children's book *The Day of Doom* (1692), a "versified story of the judgment" that was "loved" by children from New England to Virginia (218). Notably, this best-selling book is indicative of the jeremiad's swiftly-expanding generic options; as early as the seventeenth century, it was not just a message delivered in sermons but in literature. In his study of twentieth and twenty-first century U.S. culture, Greil Marcus argues that while American exceptionalism and the American Jeremiad are clearly present in the political realm, as the 2008 election conveys, they are even more evident in our "art."

Indeed, from its Golden Age in the late seventeenth century, the jeremiad continued to morph and mold with the evolving nation. Bercovitch defines the American Jeremiad as a "*political sermon*" that is "designed to join spiritual criticism to spiritual renewal" (xiv, xi). As the errand transformed into Manifest Destiny, the jeremiadic sermon became increasingly secularized along with the nation, and this rhetoric became available "for the use and abuse of subsequent generations of Americans" who became more interested in following the Constitution than following Corinthians (Bercovitch 92). America was living up to *its* ideal, not God's.[8] Indeed, because the pseudo-doom of the jeremiad is tied to the reiteration of the audience as a redeemer people, even the negative message is intertwined with self-importance, which took on an entirely new level once the rhetoric lost its firm scriptural hold.

This ultimate belief in redemption mitigates the doom and encompasses what Bercovitch called the "unshakable optimism" at the core of the American Jeremiad (7). Who *doesn't* want to hear that they are the hope of the Earth? That even though the day

[8] For a detailed account of this shift, see Bellah's "Civil Religion in America."

of doom is coming, "our" greatness will ward it off? A more recent example of the popularity of the jeremiad as evidenced by *The Day of Doom* is the marketing campaign of James Baldwin's 1963 jeremiadic essay *The Fire Next Time*. Advertisements for the essay in the *New York Times* played up the book's apocalyptic aspects. On April 17, 1963, the headline of one advertisement declares, "This is one of America's top three bestsellers. It is also a time-bomb – and its time is *now*!" At the conclusion of the ad, it repeats: "THE FIRE NEXT TIME is a time-bomb – and time is running out for all of us." Similarly, a June ad refers to "these last tense weeks" and identifies *Fire* as "part of the time-bomb which has already gone off in Birmingham and Englewood – a time-bomb which may engulf all America tomorrow." These advertisements clearly reveal a recognition – even an exploitation – of *Fire*'s jeremiadic elements.

In fact, perhaps Baldwin's text, in a way reminiscent of the traditional American Jeremiad, employs the role of the Jeremiad *too* well – it allows its readers to feel comfort in its rhetorical familiarity and to experience guilt and the threat of danger in only the most delectable degrees. For as Kenneth Burke notes, "Form…is an *arousing* and fulfillment of *desires*. A work has form insofar as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be *gratified* by the experience" (qtd. in Carpenter 104, emphasis added). The marketing approach of these advertisements for *The Fire Next Time* suggests that there is something pleasurable in being scolded, especially when you know, from your familiarity with conventions of form, that you will ultimately be granted a reprieve. In other words, mainstream America eats up the message, without having to genuinely digest it. Thus, while jeremiads inherently threaten destruction, there remains something remarkably *non*threatening about them. We've heard this all before, and the

house doesn't actually burn down. However, if the jeremiad becomes too demanding – truly *prophetic*, like Reverend Jeremiah Wright, rather than commercially palatable – the American public is, at best, disinterested and, at worst, deeply invested in discrediting the prophetic voice. We want the Martin Luther King, Jr. who has a dream, not the one who acknowledges that he is living in an American nightmare.[9]

The jeremiads of Baldwin, Reverend Wright, and Dr. King exemplify a subcategory of the American Jeremiad rhetorical tradition which emerged as part of the abolitionist movement in the early nineteenth century. Espousing the belief in America as a chosen nation, the first Black Jeremiads argued that the "errand" could not possibly succeed so long as the country continued to enslave human beings. Wasn't America the cursed, plague-beckoning, slaveholding Egypt to the true chosen ones – African Americans, God's enslaved people? Thus, as Wilson Jeremiah Moses observes, the Black Jeremiad concentrates on "the judgment that was to come for the sin of slavery" and "represents both a rejection of white America and a participation in one of its most sacred traditions" – American exceptionalism (30, 14).

If Danforth's sermon is the prototype for the American Jeremiad, the quintessential Black Jeremiad is David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829). Born in North Carolina in 1785 to a free black mother and an enslaved father who died before his son's birth, Walker eventually settled in Boston in 1825, and by 1829 he was a prominent figure in black Boston.[10] In his *Appeal*, Walker literally underlines the hypocrisy of white Christians by repeatedly placing words and phrases

[9] Similar trajectories occurred for Black Jeremiads such as Frederick Douglass, Baldwin, and W.E.B. Du Bois, who were at one point quite popular with white audiences but who lost their appeal as they became increasingly frustrated with the lack of real societal change.
[10] See Hinks and Aptheker for biographical details on Walker.

which reference them in italics: *Christians*, *Christian* Americans, "*enlightened Christians of America*" (11).[11] Drawing a clear division between "we" (coloured people) and "they (the whites)" (14), Walker declares that "whites have always been an unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious, and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking after power and authority" and that they are "*natural enemies*" of black folk (19, 13, 14).[12] It is to these "enemies" that Walker directs his greatest condemnation and pleas, in textbook passages of jeremiadic rhetoric: "O Americans! Americans!! I call God – I call angels – I call men, to witness, that your DESTRUCTION *is at hand*, and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT…I tell you Americans! that unless you speedily alter your course, *you* and your *country are gone*!!!!!!" (45; 42). Yet, in the final pages of his *Appeal*, also in true Jeremiadic fashion, Walker's reprieve for the fate of the nation breaks through: "Now let us reason – I mean you of the United States – whom I believe God designs to save from destruction, if you will hear" (72). Speaking explicitly, now, to his white audience, Walker instructs:

> Treat us like men, and there is no danger but we will all live in peace and happiness together…What a happy country this will be, if the whites will listen…Treat us like men, and we will be your friends. And there is not a doubt in my mind, but that the whole past will be sunk into oblivion, and we yet, under God, will become a united and happy people. The whites may say it is impossible, but remember that nothing is impossible with God. (73)

[11] All citations for Walker's *Appeal* can be found in the text edited by Hinks.
[12] Walker later qualifies what he means by natural enemies: "I say, from the beginning, I do not think that we were natural enemies to each other" (72). Yet, he continues, while this condition may be a product of environment, it is a social reality, nonetheless.

In addition to Walker, Wilson Jeremiah Moses examines prominent African American figures including Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Ralph Ellison, and Martin Luther King in relation to the Black Jeremiad. In his seminal work *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* – still the most widely referenced study of the Black Jeremiad thirty years after its publication – Moses offers several key jumping off points for my project, the most salient of which emerges from the limitations of his text: Moses categorically omits black women from his analysis of messianic and jeremiadic figures.

To begin, Moses highlights the ability of jeremiadic rhetoric to successfully introduce into national discourse the concept of black messianism, "the perception of a person or a group, by itself or by others, as having a manifest destiny or a God-given role to assert the providential goals of history and to bring about the kingdom of God on earth" (4). While this general notion can be ascribed either to an individual or to an entire nation or race, black messianism specifically echoes the popular concept of Ethiopianism. Taking its name from the biblical passage Psalm 68:31, which declares that "Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God," this tradition purports that subjugated African nations and the African diaspora are soon destined for a return to greatness (196). Thus, black messianism explicitly highlights the fact that jeremiadic rhetoric is inseparable from nationalism, an element which, in other contexts, can often be covered by the façade of a purely (or even predominantly) religious endeavor.

Notably, however, Moses's contribution – while foundational – is nonetheless restrictive. First, Moses asserts that the Black Jeremiad "was mainly a pre-Civil War phenomenon" and points to "the disintegration of the myth of destiny that once flourished at the center of American consciousness" (15). A brief analysis of the 2008 election race

illustrates that this myth has remained very much integrated into the national imagination; in fact, it has flourished with renewed vigor since the Reagan era. And while the Black Jeremiad no longer emphasizes the sin of slavery as he did in antebellum America, this rhetoric continues to critique social injustice in its various formulations. Moses's most significant limitation, however, stems from his failure to recognize black female participation in the jeremiad tradition. In identifying the balancing act that would be required of a chosen prophetic voice, Moses muses: "*He* would have to be, at once, a symbol of aggressive militancy and social change but, simultaneously, a subtle, manipulative seeker of good will from white American society" (156, emphasis added). The assumptive masculine nature of all of the elements which converge in the jeremiad – public voice, nationalism, religious leadership, messianism, and political literacy – remains unchallenged in Moses's work. The following chapters systematically undercut these oversights as I analyze the resistive performance of the Black Female Jeremiad.

Additionally, this dissertation both builds on and offers a critique of Black Liberation theology, the theological arm of the Black Power movement that emerged in the 1960s and is closely connected to Moses's definition of black messianism. James Cone was the first to articulate a Black Liberation theology with the 1969 publication of *Black Theology and Black Power*. Arguing that God has historically aligned Himself with the oppressed and that the Gospel is essentially one of liberation, Cone and other Black Liberation theologians developed a theology in response to questions regarding the meaning and place of God in the lives of African Americans. Cone asserts that the institutionalized white church, largely long-complicit in slavery and racism, misses the heart of the Gospel; in short, if Jesus is not in the ghetto with the poor and lowly who

have been denied privilege and humanity, then as far as Black Liberation theology is concerned, the Gospel is a lie.

Thus, Christianity needs to be emancipated from the "white" God and its accompanying gospel of wealth and health, to use Cornel West's term. Moreover, Cone declares that Jesus himself is, in fact, black. This designation is an ontological one: "Being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are" (151). Interestingly, while the declaration that Jesus was black caused an uproar in conservative Christian circles, the image of Jesus – a Middle Eastern Jew – as a fair-skinned, fair-haired, blue-eyed figure is widely, and uncritically, accepted. As a consequence of these precepts, Black Liberation theology hopes to create a new understanding of black dignity among black people as well as a new hope for freedom in this life rather than focusing on heaven as a someday-reward for the suffering experienced on earth.

While Black Liberation theology offers a religio-political critique of racial oppression, Cornel West cites a limitation in this framework stemming from an "absence of a systemic social analysis, which has prevented black theologians from coming to terms with the relationships between racism, sexism, class exploitation, and imperialist oppression" (106). In contrast to existing Black Liberation theological examples, by appropriating the basic tenets of womanist theology and incorporating them into their fuller rhetorical repertoire, Black Female Jeremiads *demand* this type of holistic analysis of oppression and push their audience to reconsider the ways in which black women are depicted in the U.S. cultural imagination.

Black Female Jeremiads

In the 1970s and 1980s, black women began to challenge the patriarchal privileging of Black Liberation theology and the Black Power Movement and call for the elimination of *all* types of social oppression; for a people to be truly liberated, racism had to be eliminated in conjunction with sexism and classism. Indeed, the language of Black Liberation theologians during the Black Power movement was staunchly gender-specific, and their ideas overlooked the unique tri-dimensional experience of racism, sexism, and classism historically faced by African American women. As womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant states, "The failure of the Black Church and Black Theology to proclaim explicitly the liberation of black women indicates that they cannot claim to be agents of divine liberation" (qtd. in Hayes 27). Developed as a response to the sexism of Black Liberation theology and the racism of feminist theology, which privileged a Eurocentric feminist perspective,[13] womanist theologians derived their name from Alice Walker's term for a feminist of color. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a plethora of scholars attempted to codify this theological and theoretical tradition.

Theologian Delores S. Williams was the first to articulate a womanist perspective in Christian theology, and black female theologians such as Katie Canon, Diana Hayes, Jacquelyn Grant, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Emilie Townes soon followed suit. As Hayes asserts:

> [T]he appropriation of Alice Walker's term 'womanist' by black women theologians is not only reasonable but responsible. Their doing so is not an effort to place on Walker's definition a burden it cannot bear, but to

[13] See Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus* for the delineation of a racialized female experience with Christianity.

> enlarge upon and deepen its meaning in a way that is uniquely theirs. It is an appropriation which sacrilizes the term, bringing to bear the rich, dense, and diverse spiritual tradition" of the African American experience. (50)

In addition to advocating for wholeness and healing – on individual as well as intra-racial and interracial communal levels – womanist theology exposes the contradictions within the black church as well as the universal manipulations of Christianity and calls for constructive changes.[14] Further, womanist theology puts forth a framework that is non-antagonistic and all-inclusive, both/and rather than either/or. The goal of womanist theology is to enable black women to love themselves, regardless. As Emilie Townes notes, "[t]he individual (as are all the other aspects of womanist) is grounded in love. Love of self, love of community, love of the worlds of Black women, love of the Spirit. These are all held together for the womanist – regardless" (9-10). Moreover, this love is not of the sentimental, passive variety; rather, womanist theology advocates a tough, active, empowering love.

The Black Female Jeremiad, while related to womanism, is a distinct variant of black feminism. To underscore the key difference between womanism and the Black Female Jeremiad, the following prototypical womanist pronouncement in African American literature is illustrative. As a plethora of womanist scholars argue, Baby Suggs's wilderness sermon in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* "personified what it means to be a womanist in the world today" (Hayes 42). This stirring message of healing and wholeness urges the fractured community of former slaves to simply love themselves, regardless. To love every part of themselves – "Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them…*You* got to love it, *you*!...love your

[14] See Kelly Brown Douglass's *Sexuality and the Black Church*.

neck…and all your inside parts" – but especially to "love your heart. For this is the prize" (88, 89). While Baby Suggs's sermon poignantly calls for self-love, it is *not* a jeremiad, as the analysis in the following chapters illustrates. While Black Female Jeremiads do not reject Baby Suggs's nurturing message, they also draw heavily on a personal militancy and a critique of systemic oppression that Baby Suggs lacks.

In short, the Black Female Jeremiad participates in and extends the project of womanism. Patricia Hill Collins distinguishes Black feminism from Black feminist thought by identifying "Black feminism as a social justice project and Black feminist thought as its intellectual center" (*BFT* xii). In this vein, I characterize womanism as the *spiritual* center of black feminism and the Black Female Jeremiad as its *religio-political* center. Thus, while portions of these subsets of black feminism inevitably overlap, it is the convergence of distinguishing features that give each center its "distinctive contours" (*BTF* 25). For the Black Female Jeremiad, it is the convergence of politics and religion, as linked to a national or communal mission, which distinguishes this modality from other kinds of black feminist discourses.

Indeed, a true Black Female jeremiadic performance – like those of their male jeremiadic counterparts, both black and white – rests on the symbiotic relationship between politics, religion, and nationalism. It is not enough to simply be an artist who calls on faith, or one who uses their medium as a political platform. In the literary tradition, for example, the jeremiad is not synonymous with the genre of spiritual narratives nor of protest literature; rather, the jeremiad is both and, in the combination of these elements, beyond both. Similarly, in the musical arena, traditional gospel singers frequently lack the anger, militancy, and politically-charged elements of the jeremiad,

while an undeniably political artist such as Ani DiFranco, whose work lacks a spiritual foundation and who does not connect her activism to some sort of sacred motivation, does not engage in a jeremiadic performance. Thus, a jeremiadic figure does not fall on either end of the political/apolitical or spiritual/secular spectrums. Nor does she lie somewhere in the middle; rather, she ties these often ostensibly polarized strands together and sees their union as essential to the fulfillment of both of their true natures.

Unlike their male jeremiadic counterparts, however, Black Female Jeremiads must negotiate what it means to be a prophetic voice in a culture whose fundamental definitions of political and religious authority are both overtly and covertly patriarchal. In their seminal study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify similar difficulties for women writers as they attempt to secure a literary voice: "[D]oes the Queen try to sound like the King, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she 'talk back' to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre, insisting on her own viewpoint?" (46). Ultimately, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that "a 'complex vibration' occurs between stylized generic gestures and unexpected deviations from such obvious gestures, a vibration that undercuts and ridicules the genre being employed" (80). I argue the same about the Black Female Jeremiad, who offers a critique of the traditional American and African American Jeremiads even as she herself *is* a Jeremiad, revised and reinvigorated.

This dissertation argues that African American women in the post-Civil Rights era articulate a distinctive Black Female Jeremiad as a mode of resistive performance that operates on two critical levels. First, the Black Female Jeremiad offers a religio-political critique of one of the most foundational narratives of American identity – the belief in the

United States as a "chosen" nation – by pointing out the discrepancy between an exceptionalist "City on a Hill" and a nation-state riddled with racial, economic, and gender injustices. Second, in performing a critique that calls into question the American national sense of self, the Black Female Jeremiad must negotiate what I term the maternal/militant bind of black women's subjectivity in the U.S. cultural imagination.

Because the Madonna/whore dichotomy of white femininity is not transferable to black women, whose bodies have always already been labeled as debased, I argue that a maternal/militant binary in which both sides are marked as pejorative is the racialized gender stereotype for African American women. While tropes such as the compliant mammy, the emasculating black matriarch, and the parasitic welfare mother plague representations of black maternity, a militant black woman faces ridicule for her inherent promiscuity, as the trope of the angry black woman is marked by the indiscriminate use of her words, deeds, and body. Ultimately, I argue that the Black Female Jeremiad is characterized by her ability to navigate the maternal and the militant in previously unacknowledged ways. The results of her mobility – a vexed maternity and a generative militancy – are not contradictions in terms, but rather a fulfillment of theoretical holes and existential destinies by prophetic voices that have been historically, and, in fact, conveniently, pushed through the cracks. Indeed, this subjective hybridity leads to the Black Female Jeremiad's marginalization from mainstream discourse through dismissive charges of insanity, blasphemy, and/or treason to American ideals.

Maternity has always been intimately connected with national mythologies. In fact, as the colonies became "America," motherhood became the one acceptable means through which women could participate in the national political arena. In *Women of the*

Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America, Linda Kerber contends:

> "In the years of the early Republic a consensus developed around the idea that a mother, committed to the service of her family and to the state, might serve a political purpose. Those who opposed women in politics had to meet the proposal that women could – and should – play a political role through the raising of a patriotic child…Republican motherhood was a very important, even revolutionary, invention. It altered the female domain in which most women had lived out their lives; it justified women's absorption and participation in the civic culture." (283, 284)

In short, the Republican Mother was politics lite – with only enough calories to keep women and the nation in proper form. However, as Collins reminds us, "this entire process is racialized" (*BFT* 248). The opening analysis of the tricky negotiation Michelle Obama must manage illustrates this point.

During the 1980s, racialized and class-specific maternal subjectivities became part of the national discourse along with the "City on a Hill." With Reagan stigmatizing the Cadillac-driving welfare queen, "poor Black women simultaneously bec[a]me symbols of what was deemed wrong in America and targets of social policies designed to shrink the government sector" (*BFT* 88). After being labeled emasculating matriarchs who inhibit the development of a strong black American family with their domineering ways in the infamous 1965 Moynihan Report, black women in the post-Civil Rights era were now simultaneously being accused of a parasitic citizenship and domestic laziness. In response to these cultural stereotypes for black maternal subjectivity, Black feminist

thought attempts to refute the black matriarch, welfare mother, and compliant mammy depictions of black women and to reclaim black motherhood as a site of power. This work is theorized in more detail in Chapter One; throughout the dissertation, however, maternity remains a primary concern. In her preface to the second edition of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert writes, ""Mothering, motherhood, and mothers: as I look back on the years when we were researching and writing *The Madwoman*, I realize that maternity was always somehow central to our project" (xxii). So, too, is the case with this project. Moreover, Gilbert's words underscore the connection between discourses of maternity and madness. The militant side of the maternal/militant bind for black women's subjectivity encompasses the double meanings associated with mad black women – anger and insanity.

In explicating the militant positionalities associated with African American women, the Black Female Jeremiad complicates existing definitions of racialized domestic militancy. Trudier Harris has traced the progression of black women "from mammies to militants" and argues that the fulfillment of black female militancy involves "overt physical violence" from a woman who is "without mercy and without guilt" and who does not "allow sentiment to interfere with her battle" (34, 156). The Black Female Jeremiad does not ascribe to such a narrow definition. Instead, she allows – and indeed, insists upon – an emotionality that does not mitigate her militancy but rather showcases its nuances.

One such militant nuance speaks to the Black Female Jeremiad's recognition of anger as a generative device. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde distinguishes between hatred, whose "object is death and destruction," and anger, whose "object is change"

(129). Lorde qualifies anger as a tool that produces real societal change, the ultimate goal of Black Female Jeremiads and any truly prophetic voice: "I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives" (127). Clearly, this type of message is disconcerting to the benefactors and beneficiaries of the status quo, and it is extremely disconcerting coming from a *black woman*, of all people. If Steinem's Achola Obama didn't have a shot at winning a presidential nomination, this Achola Obama is at risk of *being* shot.

While there is a deplorable history of the elimination of African American male prophetic voices through assassination, the silencing of prophetic black women has been more nuanced, though no less – and, arguably, even more – thorough. One of the most readily available tools for this dismissal in the arsenal of hegemonic discourse is the label of madness. While madness remains notoriously difficult to define, Marilyn Yalom argues that it is a gender-specific experience and points to the two most commonly represented "triggering agents" of madness for men and women, respectively: "war and childbirth" (7). Perhaps just as gendered a term as the jeremiad is the term "hysterical." Utter this signifier and the signified is a sobbing, screaming woman. In fact, the term itself comes from "hysteron," the Greek word for womb (Showalter 129). Thus, to some extent, women – simply by being women – are considered biologically prone to mental breakdown. When women become mothers, their predilection for instability is on high alert for activation.

In her seminal study *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter traces the twisted historical roots of the "fundamental alliance between 'woman' and 'madness'" (3). The nineteenth-century belief that women were biologically predisposed to insanity conflated

with Victorian era "[m]oral insanity, [which] redefined madness, not as a loss of reason, but as deviance from socially accepted behaviors" (29). Calling this term into question, feminists argued that moral insanity tells us nothing about individual pathology, but instead functions as a misogynistic tool employed to maintain patriarchal control. As Jane Ussher writes in *Women's Madness*, women who used a profession or an artistic outlet to resist nineteenth-century patriarchy would inevitably "risk a diagnosis of madness, just as in earlier centuries one risked being called a witch" (89). Perhaps the twenty-first-century diagnosis is an amalgamation of these two: crazy bitch, or its racialized variant, the mad black woman.[15]

While there is an historical alliance between women and madness, there is also one between prophecy and madness; the Bible and classical Greek texts overflow with narratives about prophets who are both outcast and revered, living on the fringe of society and of sanity and announcing "truths which 'sane' people refuse to acknowledge" (Yalom 106). Thus, a "female prophet" seemingly has two strikes against her before she even opens her mouth. In her study of female prophets in Europe from the 1430s to the 1640s, Diane Watt asserts that these women are all, crucially, "linked by their persecution and suffering" (4). Perhaps Lady Eleanor Davies is the most applicable example of the way in which society often "deals" with prophetic women. A noble woman who accurately predicted the death of her husband as well as the execution of King Charles I,

[15] A substantial limitation of the studies on women and madness referenced in this section is their privileging of a Eurocentric, middle-class framework. Thus, this analysis of the Black Female Jeremiad not only problematizes the masculinization of the traditional American and African American jeremiad, complicates conventional portrayals of African American maternal subjectivity and Black feminist thought's depiction of black motherhood as a site of power, and reconsiders the boundaries of female militancy, but it also extends the leading literature on women and madness to black women's experiences in the public sphere.

Davies published approximately seventy pamphlets between 1625 and 1652 and was imprisoned multiple times before being committed to Bedlam (Watt 118, Porter 53). Davies's life highlights the ways in which the label of madness may be used as a tool for the dismissal of a female prophetic voice:

> What is historically interesting in her case is the use (or abuse) against her of the label of insanity…Had she been treated as a criminal, she might have acquired the status of a noble, brave protester, a defender of spiritual and intellectual freedom, for treason implied the possibility of truth. The meaning of committing her as a mad woman to a madhouse, by contrast, was to deny her protest any validity: she was simply crazy. (Porter 59)

If, in the words of Ani DiFranco, "Boys get locked up in some prison/ Girls get locked up in some house," the latter fate serves to psychically castrate and not just physically contain a prophetic voice.

An additional positionality which has historically been associated with madness is the artist, who is often depicted as living life on the fine line that blurs genius and madness (Van Gogh, ear). If a woman, a prophetic voice, and an artist – each sold separately – invoke the predilection for madness, it comes as no surprise that the Black Female Jeremiad is at risk for dismissal by reason of insanity; indeed, a black female prophetic artist has so many strikes against her, she is ostensibly already out. However, "Chosen to Deliver" examines the ways in which instability may, in fact, be a tool used to dismantle the master's house, as the fictional Willa Nedeed does in Chapter Two. In essence, it is the very instability of the Black Female Jeremiad – her readily changing subjectivity – that enables her mobility across the maternal/militant bind and pushes her

audience to reconsider the ways in which black women are depicted in the cultural imagination.

"Chosen to Deliver": Chapter Summaries

"Since Lincoln, the drama in which the country judges itself, asks itself what it really is, what it is for, measures the promise by its betrayal and the betrayal by the promise, has been played out most intensely in art: in speech and acts that begin with a single citizen – a single imaginary citizen, a character made up by a novelist, a singer, a filmmaker, a performer – saying what he or she has to say, as if there are others attending to those acts and speech, even though there may be none." – Greil Marcus

In the following analyses of Black Female Jeremiads, I expand on the existing tradition of turning to literature to unpack representations of American exceptionalism and the American Jeremiad. Bercovitch, for example, mines the work of American Renaissance writers Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. So, too, does Perry Miller point to Thoreau. Wilson Jeremiah Moses explicates the literature of Du Bois and Ralph Ellison, and womanist theologians universally view the black women's literary cannon as the central "repository" for their investigations.

In Chapter One, I read Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, one of her least-studied novels, as a critique of American exceptionalism and the redemptive black motherhood so often lauded in the scholarship on her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beloved*. With clear allusions to both the biblical Israelites as well as the Massachusetts Bay colonists, *Paradise* depicts the founding of a patriarchal, parochial, all-black community in which the women and children answer to the men and the men answer only to a righteous and vengeful God – until, that is, the independent women at a nearby Convent begin to "corrupt" God's chosen people. I classify *Paradise* as Toni Morrison's most explicit and in-depth Black

Female jeremiadic text and argue that the novel's numerous troubled maternal figures complicate black feminist thought's reclamation of black maternity as a site of power.

Building on the maybe-libratory violence which cryptically ends *Paradise*, Chapter Two analyzes Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* and Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie* as narratives of what I term generative apocalypse. While the American Jeremiad, as Bercovitch notes, is "*corrective*, not destructive" (8), the Black Female Jeremiad advocates destruction *as a means to* correction. In short, the generative apocalypse advocated by the Black Female Jeremiad is not the end of the world, but the end of the world as we know it, a cataclysmic event that produces neither heaven nor hell on earth, but a fighting chance for regeneration. In order to create a space for a radical new set of possibilities, the present corrupted society must end, completely and unapologetically. In *Linden Hills*, Willa Nedeed precipitates the destruction of her world through the arsenal most readily available to – and indeed, inflicted upon – her: vexed maternity and questionable sanity. In *Thereafter Johnnie*, Patricia Snowden bears her father's child and is banished from her family as a consequence, and while she believes she has returned the city's lost soul through the work of her womb, Patricia's sanity is destroyed along with the District of Columbia.

Examining the potentiality of a post-apocalyptic generative space, Chapter Three analyzes Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. These texts create an opportunity to explore what comes after the apocalypse that actually comes. The two essential preoccupations of protagonist Lauren Olamina – her complex relationship to her own maternal identity and her relentless drive to establish a spiritual alternative to the oppressive state-sanctioned religion – place the *Parable* novels directly

within the two-pronged framework of the Black Female Jeremiad. First, through the puritanical President Jarret, founder of the fundamentalist Christian America denomination, Butler critiques the traditional American Jeremiad and its misdiagnoses of national ills. Second, through her "incompatible" roles as religious and community leader, loving but non-sacrificing mother, and empathic militant, Lauren embodies a vexed maternity and generative militancy that complicate essentialized notions of black female subjectivity.

Finally, all of these maternal, militant, and religio-political discursive threads culminate in Chapter Four. I offer a re-reading of Lauryn Hill's *MTV Unplugged 2.0* and argue that, rather than representing a creative failure, this album marks the fulfillment of Hill's Black Female jeremiadic message. In analyzing Hill's Black Female Jeremiad, I draw not only from her music but from the public discourses surrounding her motherhood and her perceived mental instability. Furthermore, in examining the rise and fall of Lauryn Hill, the historical precedents set by Maria W. Stewart and Nina Simone provide striking parallels regarding the fate of a black woman activist in the public sphere. Beyond their common jeremiadic rhetorical strategies, both Hill and Stewart explicitly identify – indeed, *justify* – their public careers by attributing them to a divine calling; this sense of enacting a mission from God contributes to both women's self-identification as a messianic figure. Moreover, Hill has come to share Simone's controversial public image as a doubly mad – angry *and* insane – black woman. Ultimately, the careers of all three women expose a recurrent dynamic of acceptance followed by erasure, celebration followed by exclusion that results in the extreme marginalization which constantly threatens a black female voice that has been chosen to deliver a prophetic message.

Chapter One

"Full of a [Mother's] Venom": Toni Morrison's *Paradise* as a
Critique of American Exceptionalism and Redemptive Black Motherhood

"[T]he country I live in is haunted by the Puritans' vision of themselves as God's chosen people, as a beacon of righteousness that all others are to admire."
– Sarah Vowell, *The Wordy Shipmates* (2008)

"[U]nlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted. Or hunted either, she might have added. But there she would have been wrong."
– Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (1997)

"Marching, marching, marching, marching to Zion…"
– Lauryn Hill, "To Zion" (1998)

Introduction: *Paradise* Is Not Very *Beloved*

In 2006, the *New York Times Book Review* asked several hundred "prominent writers, critics, editors and other literary sages…to please identify 'the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years'" (Scott). Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) won by an overwhelming erudite mandate. In his assessment of the results, A. O. Scott acknowledges that "[a]ny other outcome would have been startling" and recounts with a touch of amusement those non-*Beloved* voters who, in making their case for their own selection, defensively felt the need to explain why they were *not* voting for Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.

Nearly a quarter of a century after its original publication, *Beloved* – an incredible tale of the emotional, physical, and psychological trauma of slavery, particularly on young mother Sethe who makes an unthinkable choice in an unbearable moment – remains Morrison's towering literary achievement. According to renowned African

Americanist scholar Deborah McDowell, "*Beloved* is so epic in its scale" that it "really compels us to read it in relations to the rest of Morrison's corpus" (216). Not surprisingly, then, *Paradise* (1997) – Morrison's seventh novel and her first after winning the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature – has been inevitably, and unfavorably, compared to *Beloved*. In her *New York Times* review, Michiko Kakutani declares that while *Paradise* "addresses the same great themes of [Morrison's] 1987 masterpiece…[u]nfortunately, *Paradise* is everything that *Beloved* was not." Among her critiques, Kakutani describes the novel as "heavy-handed," "clunky," "contrived, [and] formulaic." She reserves her greatest distaste, however, for the two components of the novel that are intimately connected to my classification of *Paradise* as Toni Morrison's most explicit and in-depth Black Female Jeremiadic text.

By criticizing what she calls "gratuitous biblical allusions…and even more gratuitous suggestions that the women at the convent are feminist martyrs," Kakutani is lashing out at the text's most foundational Black Female Jeremiadic elements. Her remarks, however, reveal a deep miscalculation of Morrison's work; in other words, Kakutani is hitting the nail on the side rather than the head. First, what Kakutani identifies as "gratuitous biblical allusions" in *Paradise* may be more accurately qualified as Morrison's critical engagement with the traditional American Jeremiad and its accompanying rhetoric of American exceptionalism. Among its various narrative threads, *Paradise* privileges a rhetorical and theological battle between Ruby's young people and the town's founding New Fathers, who insist that their flock of "destined" individuals must strictly adhere to a patriarchal Old Testament religion. As such, the world of the novel creates a uniquely appropriate late twentieth-century stand-in for the

society contemporary to the first purveyors of American exceptionalism and the Jeremiad in the seventeenth century.

Indeed, Morrison herself has acknowledged the reluctance of critics such as Kakutani to engage with a book so steeped in Christianity: "Twice it's been mentioned or suggested that *Paradise* will not be well studied because it's about this unimportant intellectual topic, which is religion" (Jaffrey interview). While the repeated theological debates between the New Fathers and the young generation may at first glance appear irrelevant to many late twentieth-century readers, the stakes of these debates – Are we a Chosen people? How do we define our communal and spiritual responsibilities? What is our purpose? – speak directly to the heart of American exceptionalism and the United States's self-proclaimed status as a "City on a Hill." In critiquing the fusion of American exceptionalism and religious doctrine on which the religio-political culture of the United States was founded and from which an abundance of inequalities continue to abide, *Paradise* calls into question mainstream America's very sense of national self. Thus, while the subject matter of *Beloved* is unquestionably disturbing, this celebrated novel does not hold within its discomfort the potential to threaten the national fabric in the way that *Paradise* does. *Beloved* exposes the atrocities at the center of the institution of slavery and its historical legacy; *Paradise* implores us to reconsider what lies behind the prevailing habitual prayer "God Bless America."

Now thirteen years after its publication, *Paradise* is indeed not well-studied when compared to Morrison's other works. In terms of the existing scholarship, a number of articles have focused on the ways in which *Paradise* engages with American exceptionalism and the American Jeremiad.[1] However, while these essays identify

[1] See Jill Jones, Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos, Philip Page, and Katrine Dalsgard.

Paradise as a Jeremiad or as a particularly African American version of American exceptionalism, they overlook the specificity of Morrison's Black Female Jeremiad. Moreover, existing scholarship fails to take into account the ways in which the vexed maternal subjectivity in *Paradise* complicates the predominant reading of *Beloved* as a narrative of redemptive black motherhood.

Relatedly, Kakutani's distaste for Morrison's treatment of the women at the Convent in *Paradise* points to a discomfort with the basic discursive threads which weave throughout the Black Female Jeremiad's negotiation of black women's subjectivity in the U.S. cultural imagination: complicated maternity, female militancy, women-led threats to hegemony and subsequent charges of evil-doing or insanity, and a generative apocalyptic ending that leaves open the potential for redemption – but only through substantive communal change and the realization of, rather than the reprieve from, irrevocable consequences. In negotiating the maternal/militant bind of black female subjectivity, *Paradise*, through its numerous troubled maternal figures, complicates the redemptive maternity so often lauded in the scholarship on *Beloved*. While maternity may be more subtly depicted in *Paradise* than in *Beloved*, this incredibly compelling and complex representation remains largely unconsidered.

In short, not only does *Paradise*, through its critique of the traditional American Jeremiad, call into question Americans' national sense of self, the novel also calls into question black feminist thought's reclamation of black maternity as a site of power. Finally, the at-best mixed responses to *Paradise* further solidify the novel's place in the Black Female Jeremiad tradition. In *The New Yorker*, Louis Menand succinctly summarizes the prevailing verdict on *Paradise* as "the strangest…book that Morrison has

written" and thus one that "is unlikely to achieve, or to achieve quickly, the kind of canonical esteem" bestowed on works such as *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* (78). In fact, the buzz surrounding the publication of *Paradise* was all but eclipsed a few months later by the release of the filmic adaptation of *Beloved*. As critics panned Oprah's attempt to bring Morrison's lyrical language to the big screen, conversations surrounding Toni Morrison quickly forgot about her latest publication and returned to their literary darling. Typical of the Black Female Jeremiad, this dismissal or truncated reading of *Paradise* makes the novel all the more ripe for renewed analysis.

Aiming for "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain"

A text dense in both length and diction, *Paradise* is the story of Ruby, Oklahoma, "the one all-black town worth the pain" (5). From its jarring first sentences – "They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time" – *Paradise* compels its readers to unravel who "they" are and why "the white girl" and "the rest" are being gunned down.[2] While the majority of the novel spans the late 1960s and 1970s, the narrative is prone to a certain temporal displacement, for the mores that unofficially govern the self-made, self-maintained, and self-contained town are reminiscent of seventeenth-century America. Ruby is ruled by a group of nine families, and while all nine are credited with founding the town, the financier – and therefore the family in

[2] Morrison never identifies which of the Convent women is the "white girl." As in her short story *Recitatif*, Morrison wants her readers to interrogate their own compulsion to conceptualize individuals as racialized subjects: "I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn't matter. I want to dissuade people from reading literature in that way…Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing" (qtd. in Gray).

charge – is the Morgan clan, led by twins Deacon and Stewart. After returning from World War II and assessing the bleak prospects available to them in their home town of Haven, Deacon and Stewart decide to repeat the action of their grandfather, who established the all-black town of Haven in 1890, because they share his sense of mission: the Old Fathers, "[s]mart, strong, and eager to work their own land…believed they were more than prepared – they were destined" (13-14).

With clear allusions to both the biblical Israelites as well as the Plymouth colonists who settled present-day Massachusetts in 1620, Zechariah Morgan and his fellow Old Fathers established a patriarchal, parochial, racially-pure community in which the women and children answered to the men and the men answered only to a righteous and vengeful God. This history is revealed in pieces throughout the novel and explains Deacon and Stewart's motivation to embark on a second pilgrimage in 1949, going deeper into unsettled Oklahoma to get "as far as they could climb from the grovel contaminating the town their grandfather had made" (16). The new town, Ruby, retains all of Haven's traditions, including "the Oven" that their grandfather's generation used as a community kitchen and on which the Old Fathers engraved the words "Beware the Furrow of His Brow." Much of *Paradise* centers on a theological debate about what the Oven's sacred command means for the people of Ruby. The new generation of young people, born in Ruby and whose only memories of the Old Fathers are what has been passed down to them by the New Fathers, advocate that the Oven should read "Be the Furrow of His Brow."

This battle over the words of the Oven and the resulting implications for one's conceptualization of God, exceptionalism, and identity is one of the two predominant

threads in a novel full of multiple narrators and numerous loosely-connected tangential storylines. The second major narrative thread centers on a Convent located seventeen miles away from Ruby. This liminal space is occupied and run solely by women, many of whom are seeking refuge after emotional trauma and physical abuse. While the women of Ruby occasionally visit the Convent to buy fruits and vegetables or even to seek temporary refuge, the Convent's five "permanent" occupants come from various parts of the country, and most stumble upon the place by happenstance. Morrison gives these women – Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Pallas, and Consolata – their own chapters which unfold the sequences of events leading up to their arrivals at the Convent.

Tragically, these two narrative strands – the male-led generational struggle over the words on the Oven and the women-led sanctuary of the Convent – converge in a violent confrontation in which the men of Ruby descend on the Convent and execute the women in what can only be described as a witch hunt. As Reverend Misner, the voice of the young generation, sums up the constraining state of affairs within the town itself, "the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares and their foals" (150). Totally unrestrained, the Convent is a threatening space outside of patriarchy's firm reach: "The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though [a woman] might meet herself here – an unbridled, authentic self…" (177). The men rationalize their assault on the Convent as protecting their own and their community, which was chosen as the destination on the narrow path of righteousness.

Like something straight out of an old-school Puritan Jeremiad such as Increase Mather's lament "The Day of Trouble is Near" (1674), the men approaching the Convent

list the signs that the women's evil is seeping into the chosen Ruby flock:

> A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common (11).

Thus, within the New Fathers' paradigm, they believe they have "God at their side" as they "take aim. For Ruby" (18). For their imagined community and with God's blessing; there are no two better motivations for American patriots to do anything.

While Ruby may be an all-black town, as Morrison has stated in numerous interviews, Ruby is not an antidote to traditional American exceptionalism or exclusionist nation-building but rather an inverted ally. Ultimately, *Paradise* underscores the flawed, limiting traditional approach of the rightful heirs of a Promised Land; in describing her initial interest in the concept of paradise, Morrison states that "it requires you to think of yourself as the chosen people – chosen by God, that is. Which means that your job is to isolate yourself from other people" (Marcus interview). In short, Morrison suggests that exceptionalism precludes the potential of an integrated, thriving community. In interrogating the misplaced religious fervor that often accompanies notions of chosenness, Morrison critiques the misinterpretation of a manifest destiny with its often violent repercussions. In fact, Morrison wanted to title the novel *War*, but her publishers pushed her to reconsider. As the remainder of this chapter analyzes the generational doctrinal struggle located in the linguistic battle over the Oven and the novel's complex representations of black maternity and female militancy located in the subversive hybridity of the Convent, Morrison's intended title can only be described as fitting.

Oven Lips and Religious Quips

The theological battle between, as Morrison has stated, "the very stern Old Testament view of religion, with its emphasis on punishment, and the individualistic notion of God being in you" (Jaffrey interview) occurs throughout *Paradise* but most explicitly in two extended moments. The first occurs during a heated interaction between the New Fathers, who packed up Haven and its Oven and transplanted their lives to Ruby, and the young generation who came of age during the tumultuous racial climate of the 1960s. The second manifests in a rhetorical battle between Reverend Pulliam, who speaks from the stern Old Testament view, and Reverend Misner, who is the voice of the emerging liberation theology and the figure with which Morrison herself claims ideological affiliation (Jaffery interview). These two key moments mark the articulation of a deep theological debate rarely seen so explicitly in contemporary literature; moreover, this debate serves to highlight the major tenets of the Black Female Jeremiad, distinguish her critical rhetoric from that of the traditional American Jeremiad, and establish the stakes for national and communal – as well as individual – identity within the Black Female Jeremiad framework. Interestingly, both of these significant textual moments are located in a battle of and over words, which suggests the power of rhetoric in shaping ideas of self and nation.

As the leaders of the old and young generations – all men, of course – meet to discuss the words on the Oven, they gather around what was a "community kitchen" in Haven at the turn of the century and what has lost all functionality by the time Ruby is founded: "A utility became a shrine (cautioned against not only in scary Deuteronomy but in lovely Corinthians II as well)" (103). In a move that works against traditional

gender stereotypes, the men insist that sentimentality takes precedence over efficacy. Significantly, the community commandment "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" is inscribed on, of all things, an "Oven's lip" (14). There is something undeniably domestic about gathering around an oven – an object which evokes nourishment as well as maternal activity. In this case, however, this metonym of "women's work" is revered by the men and resented by the women, who understand that the Oven has simply become, in the men's eyes, a monument to their sense of self-importance and their communal errand (7).

As the New Fathers depart Haven in search of a new haven, "The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed, moved, and reassembled it. But privately they resented the truck space given over to it – rather than a few more sacks of seed, rather than shoats or even a child's crib. Resented also the hours spent putting it back together – hours that could have been spent getting the privy door on sooner" (103). This passage reveals several crucial intricacies about the community dynamics: first, it underscores the absolute patriarchal hierarchy of decision-making that goes unchecked in Ruby and eventually leads to the massacre at the Convent and implies that those seeds of disaster existed from the town's inception; second, the passage highlights the resentment that the women feel regarding their lack of agency; third, the inclusion of "truck space" is a jarring reminder that while the Oven is treated as an Ark of the Covenant-like religious relic being carried by the Chosen People, this narrative actually takes place in an era of pick-up trucks. In *Paradise*, Morrison paints an extreme version of the Puritanical ideals on which the country was founded – recapitulating them rather than revising or updating them, which serves to underscore just how far back their roots reach. And yet, as Sarah

Vowell reminds us, the Puritans' vision of themselves is so very relevant to 21st-century America. If prophecy is, as Greil Marcus asserts, "referring always backward and forward to the New Jerusalem somewhere in the past, somewhere in the future," the Jeremiad, then, creates a rhetorical wrinkle in time in which disparate historical moments – from the New Millennium to the early seventeenth-century and 700 B.C. – converge in a place that is paradoxically both intimately bound to specific cultural contexts and yet somehow timeless.

Additionally, the Oven inherently evokes imagery associated with fire, a biblical motif for everything from eternal damnation and God's destructive wrath to redeeming trials of faith from which one emerges cleansed and purified. These two quasi-opposite ends of the biblical fire motif play out in Ruby's debate over the Oven's inscription. According to the New Fathers, "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" is a command: "That's not a suggestion; that's an order!" (86). The view of God that accompanies this interpretation would be very familiar to the New England Puritans who so loved the Jeremiad. For the founders of Ruby, God's overarching message can be summarized as "Look out. The power is mine. Get used to it" (87). If this immutable verdict articulates one's understanding of God, then our relationship to Him is as "a population of supplicants begging respite from begrudging authority; harried believers ducking fate or dodging everyday evil; the weak negotiating a doomed trek through the wilderness; the sighted ripped of light and thrown into a perpetual dark choicelessness" (146). This puritanical theology – that we are irrevocable sinners at the mercy of a controlling authoritarian Father – is precisely that of the fire and brimstone sermons of the second-generation New Englanders.

Furthering this parallel, Ruby's annual children's Christmas play encompasses a harrowing mash-up of the Nativity story, the founding of the town, and their Old Testament theology. With one child representing each of the remaining founding families, the children recite: "'God will crumble you, God will crumble you.' The audience hums agreement: 'Yes He Will. Yes He Will'" (211). Just as the traditional American Jeremiad came into vogue with the second-generation New England Puritans – who had not been in the New World long enough to have forgotten the original errand into the wilderness but just long enough to witness the community slipping away from its blessed "City on a Hill" mission – so too does the Jeremiad inhabit a special place in the hearts of the New Fathers, this second-generation of community founders.

In contrast to the New Fathers's concept of God as someone whose approval we must always be in the business of earning with no guarantee that we've ever done so,[3] the young generation in Ruby believes the inscription on the Oven should read "Be the Furrow of His Brow." Taking issue with the New Father's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" theology, the young men believe that "No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time. To 'beware' God. To always be ducking and diving, trying to look out every minute in case He's getting ready to throw something at us, keep us down" (84). When the New Fathers label "Be the Furrow of His Brow" as blasphemy, as equating oneself with God, the young people respond, "It's not being Him, sir; it's being His instrument, His justice" (87). In short, a personal agency lies at the heart of this theology which the New Fathers cannot abide by, for they must squelch any belief in self-determination. Essentially, the young generation is proclaiming, in the words of Lauryn Hill, "My

[3] As Reverend Pulliam preaches, "…you have to earn God. You have to practice God. You have to think God – carefully..How do you know you have graduated? You don't" (141).

emancipation don't fit your equation." This perceived insubordination explains why the New Fathers silently despise Reverend Misner, an authority figure whose "suspicious" activities include "tempting the young people to step outside the wall, outside the town limits, shepherding them, forcing them to transgress, to think of themselves as civil warriors" (145). Indeed, this aspect of the young generation's theology is central to that of the Black Female Jeremiad. Their God is not a scary overseer, waiting to crack the whip. But while the Black Female Jeremiad rejects the puritanical view of God, she does not reject God; rather, she does quite the opposite. The Black Female Jeremiad remains profoundly invested in mission, but not as a ducking, passive, and doomed subject. Instead, often explicitly articulating their disagreement with this Old Testament view of God, Black Female Jeremiads see themselves as active agents whose relationship with God shifts "from CEO and supplicant to one-on-one" (146) and arms them for righteous and radical militancy.

The young generation's view of one's relationship with God as dynamic, active, and adaptable is beyond threatening to the New Fathers. In showing his tendency to inflict violence on all who might defy him and his idea of God, Stewart Morgan punctuates the end of the Oven debate by flatly declaring: "If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake" (87). When the Oven inscription does change, however, it is only after Stewart has blown away five women in the Convent. On the morning of the attack, in the midst of heavy rain, "[t]he Oven shifts, just slightly, on one side. The impacted ground on which it rests is undermined" (287). The implication here, of course, is that the "clean and blessed" mission has ultimately been undermined

not by the young people but by the New Fathers themselves: the "mission devour[ed] itself" (292). Thus, by the time the young people, in response to the violence at the Convent, actually change the Oven's words to "We Are the Furrow of His Brow" (298), the initial, irrevocable shift has already occurred. The graffiti can be removed, but the sliding foundation cannot be misread. It is not the Convent women or the young people but rather Ruby's New Fathers who have become the furrow of His brow.

In line with the legacies of prophetic voices, the exposure of religious hypocrisy is a key component of the Black Female Jeremiad as well as the traditional (male) African American Jeremiad. From that point of convergence, however, the Black Female Jeremiad then takes on a rhetoric of her own, augmenting the traditional Jeremiad's potency through her hybridized articulation of "failing" to live up to cultural expectations of maternity, sanity, sanctity, and deliverance designed to maintain institutional control. In *Paradise*, the Black Female Jeremiad's negotiation of these elements plays out among and around the women-centered space of the Convent.

Paradise is Full of Questionable Black Mothers

"Although frantic with the defeats that have occurred through the years,
the Black mother…never quits on you." – Mary Burgher[4]

"[T]here was something so valuable about what happened when one became a mother.
For me it was the most liberating thing that ever happened to me." – Toni Morrison[5]

Negative representations of black motherhood pervade the U.S. cultural imagination in such disparate contradictory permutations as the asexual compliant mammy, the overbearing angry black matriarch, and the lazy-but-perpetually-reproducing

[4] Qtd. in Williams 51.
[5] Qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 270.

welfare queen. In general, second-wave feminists – speaking predominantly from white, middle-class, and Euroamerican positionalities – have skewered the culturally-assigned role of motherhood as "the source of women's devaluation and lack of transcendence" and "a socially supported myth designed to keep women in their place" (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan 6, 3). In contrast to white feminists who tend to view maternity as a means of patriarchal control over their bodies and their potential for self-actualization,[6] the discourses surrounding African American motherhood emerging from black feminist thought offer a much more celebratory governing paradigm.

I argue that instead of the Madonna/whore dichotomy of white femininity, which is not transferable to black women because their bodies have always already been labeled as debased, a maternal/militant binary in which both sides are marked as pejorative is the racialized gender stereotype for African American women; thus, because black mothers, as Barbara Christian asserts in *Black Feminist Criticism*, "are clearly under attack" (224) by mainstream U.S. culture, the concept of black motherhood holds a place of centrality in black feminist thought and a place of deep reverence in the African American community. In her seminal work *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins argues that "[t]he controlling image of the 'superstrong Black mother' praises Black women's resiliency in a society that routinely paints us as bad mothers" (188). Collins locates the 'good' Negro mother and 'bad' Negro mother in the figures of the mammy and the matriarch, respectively.[7] With its stereotypical origins tracing back to mid-19th century minstrel shows, the mammy is the acquiescing servant who never stirs the pot in the

[6] For an in-depth analysis of this perspective, see such classical texts as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.
[7] While Collins creates a binary between the two positionalities, I place both of these stereotypes under the label "maternal."

white man's house except to make sure that dinner is to her employers' liking. While mainstream U.S. culture both praises and exploits the mammy figure,[8] this female version of the Uncle Tom stereotype is viewed unfavorably in the African American community. In contrast to the passive mammy, the "overly aggressive, unfeminine" black matriarch, crystallized in the U.S. cultural imagination by the infamous 1965 Moynihan Report, is berated by white America (Collins 83). Summarizing the report's depiction of pathological women-led black households, Collins states, "Black mothers were accused of failing to discipline their children, of emasculating their sons, of defeminizing their daughters, and of retarding their children's academic achievement (187).

While the white perspective of the black matriarch is damning, the African American depiction of the matriarch is celebratory in a way that attempts to negate not only the cultural attacks forged against black mothers but also white feminist critiques of the institution of motherhood. In short, Collins explains, "Many African-American thinkers tend to glorify Black motherhood" and black feminist thought has worked to re-articulate this much-maligned positionality "as a symbol of power" (188, 209). This reclamation is all the more salient in the post-Civil Rights era, with the addition of "welfare queen" – another one of Ronald Reagan's long-lasting hyperbolic rhetorical gems – to the list of pejorative African American female stereotypes. Barbara Christian exemplifies this reclamatory position when she writes that for the African American community, maternity "'represents maturity and the fulfillment of one's function as a woman' and thus is greatly respected" (*BFC* 219). Indeed, many of the foundational texts of black feminist thought prioritize the discussion of black maternity and praise, as

[8] For detailed analyses of the mammy figure, see Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, M.M. Manring's *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, and Kimberly Gisele Wallace-Sanders's *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*.

Delores Williams does in *Sisters in the Wilderness*, "the intensity of the black mother's commitment to the survival of her children and her willingness to do what is necessary (including being a mammy, a domestic or stealing food from the white folks) to maintain the life of her offspring" (51). In other words, motherhood brings black women's "by any means necessary" militancy to fruition. Ironically, Morrison's *Beloved* has been heralded as an *example* of this unwavering maternal commitment to the survival of one's children.

Inspired by the real-life events of Margaret Garner, the harrowing linchpin of *Beloved* is Sethe's decision to kill her children and herself[9] rather than return to the slavery they have just escaped. Clearly, this action must be understood within the context of slavery's psychological trauma and the institution's *de jure* elimination of familial rights and relationships. In this light, the predominant interpretation – from critics, scholars, and readers alike – qualifies *Beloved*'s child murder as "loving" (Keenan 73) and "hauntingly protective" (Perry 164). Morrison herself describes Sethe's act as "an excess of maternal feeling, a total surrender to that commitment" (*Conversations* 252), while numerous critics attribute Sethe's decision to her "fierce" maternal love (Keenan 61, Gray). In "'Four Hundred Years of Silence': Myth, History, and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Sally Keenan exemplifies this frequent interpretation when she identifies child murder in *Beloved* as "a defiant answer to slavery's brutal destruction of maternal connection…Sethe's double act of flight and infanticide was her way of renaming herself, not animal but mother" (66, 67). In short, Keenan's ultimate evaluation of *Beloved* is that the novel unravels "deadly cultural myths" (53) about the

[9] Sethe only succeeds in killing her oldest daughter, whose tombstone reads 'Beloved,' before the slave owners intervene.

pathology of black maternity. If *Beloved* is interpreted as somehow redemptive of black maternity, the unexamined representation of motherhood in *Paradise*, however, calls into question this reclamation and black feminist thought's articulation of "maternal identity as a site of power for black women" (O'Reilly 1).

In *Paradise* nearly all of the women who seek refuge in the Convent have serious "mommy issues." The novel is replete with maternal figures that abandon, betray, abuse, or kill their children – not exactly the depiction of motherhood lauded by black feminist thought. For example, at the age of five, Seneca is abandoned by her guardian, a young woman she believes is her older sister. After four lonely days and five scary nights of searching for Jean, the only adult presence that exists in her world, Seneca decides that she was abandoned for misbehaving and "if she did everything right without being told, either Jean would walk in or when she knocked on one of the apartment doors, there'd she be!" (127). After discovering an indecipherable note from Jean written in lipstick, Seneca "put[s] it in her shoe and carrie[s] it with her for the rest of her life" (128). This early childhood experience of maternal neglect leaves Seneca traumatized and susceptible to self-destructive behavior like cutting. Years later, when she finally discloses her difficult past to the other women at the Convent, her friends – speaking from their own ambivalent maternal experiences – inquire, "Are you sure she was your sister? Maybe she was your mother. Why? Because a mother might, but no sister would do such a thing" (265). These suspicions are confirmed later in the novel during a chance encounter between Seneca and Jean, which is narrated in free indirect discourse from Jean's point of view.

While Seneca suffers maternal abandonment, Mavis jettisons responsibility of her

two remaining children after a tragic event of maternal neglect. Fixated on buying the appropriate meat to serve her husband for dinner – "Spam ain't nothing for a working man to eat" (24), Mavis emerges from the grocery store to find her twin babies suffocated in the hot backseat of her car. Paranoid that her still-living children are planning to cut her throat in her sleep, Mavis skips town in the middle of the night and ignores her own mother's pleas for Mavis to return: "You still have children. Children need a mother. I know what you've been through honey, but you do have other children" (31). Mavis and Seneca represent both sides of the maternal abandonment coin so foreign to the predominant currency of black feminist thought; as Barbara Christian notes, abandoning your child is "the ultimate sin against black motherhood…[because] freedom for black women had meant that they could keep their own children" (*BFC* 238). Defying Mary Burgher's proclamation that "the Black mother…never quits on you" (qtd. in Williams 51), the pre-Convent lives of Mavis and Seneca call into question the Great Black Mother.

In addition to maternal abandonment, the women at the Convent experience other permutations of maternal betrayal. For example, Pallas's boyfriend leaves her *for* her mother; the girl's sudden departure from her pre-Convent life is precipitated by walking in on her mother and her boyfriend engaged in intercourse. Moreover, Pallas's mother issues are further complicated by the fact that she herself is pregnant, a condition she adamantly refuses to admit even to herself. In fact, the Convent is a place where more than one woman comes seeking "help" for an unwanted pregnancy; Deacon Morgan's wife, Soane, and his nephew's fifteen-year-old girlfriend, Arnette, arrive asking for assistance. While no abortion is performed by the Convent women, Soane miscarries

and, in the novel's most graphic display of vexed maternity, Arnette delivers a baby who dies shortly thereafter – killed by a mother-to-be who wanted to be without child, by any means necessary.

While Sethe's murderous act has been interpreted as an extreme example of maternal commitment to her children's survival, the infanticide committed by Arnette bears no contextual resemblance to Sethe's "hauntingly protective" act. In a conversation with Deborah McDowell and Nellie McKay on the power of *Beloved*, Barbara Christian argues that infanticide is "the one act that no woman, definitely no black woman, right, would ever do: kill her child" (213). However, the great debate on *Beloved* centers on how her historical circumstances might mitigate judgment on Sethe's infanticide, reading it as a continuation rather than a disavowing of black maternal commitment. In *Paradise*, however, no such extenuating circumstances exist. When Arnette arrives at the Convent, "She was not anxious, as might have been expected, but *revolted* by the work of her womb. A revulsion so severe it cut mind from body and saw its flesh-producing flesh as foreign, rebellious, unnatural, diseased. Consolata could not fathom what brought on that *repugnance,* but there it was" (249, emphasis added).

This emotional revulsion turns physical as Arnette begins abusing herself in the hopes of killing her fetus. In addition to repeatedly punching herself in the stomach, "the real damage was the mop handle inserted with a rapist's skill – merciless, repeatedly – between her legs. With the gusto and intention of a rabid male, she had tried to bash the life out of her life. And, in a way, was triumphantly successful" (250). Born several months prematurely – "it tried to escape the battering and battered ship that carried it" (250) – the baby clung to life for a few days before succumbing to his prenatal injuries.

In this way, *Paradise* complicates the sugary maternal mythology associated with the scholarship on *Beloved*; while Colleen Cullinan argues in "A Maternal Discourse of Redemption: Speech and Suffering in Morrison's *Beloved*" that "maternal voices speak not of endings and cancellations but of continuity and wholeness" (78), the maternal voices who converge at the Convent are frequently terminal.

Relatedly, the conclusion of *Paradise* also defies the type of return to "wholeness" prescribed to *Beloved*. While Morrison closes the text with the Convent women's mother-daughter encounters, these reunions are not redemptive for any parties involved. When Mavis crosses paths at a diner with her oldest daughter, now in her late teens, Mavis appears distracted and dismisses Sally's attempts to reconnect. Opening up about the difficulty she had in dealing with her mother's absence, and frustrated by Mavis's focus on the gravy and juice sitting between them on the table, Sally exclaims, "'Mom! I don't want to talk about food!' Sally felt as though her mother was sliding away, acting like their seeing each other *wasn't important*" (313, emphasis added). Likewise, when Pallas returns to her mother's home, she is not interested in confronting or connecting with the woman who betrayed her; the sole purpose of her return is to reclaim her belongings. After Jean stumbles upon her now-grown daughter on the street, Seneca does not even recognize the woman who abandoned her decades earlier. When an eager Jean exclaims, "Don't you remember me?" a disinterested Seneca replies, "Should I? From where?" before hurrying away (317). In short, even after these potentially recuperative interactions, each of these vexed maternal situations remains unresolved. Forgiveness is neither granted, nor is it asked for and refused. In contrast to the deflating mother-daughter relationships of the women who seek refuge at the

Convent, the most redemptive maternal figure in *Paradise* emerges in the childless Consolata, who urges the women to thwart society's devaluation of them by embracing their own ability to navigate a hybridized subjectivity.

Marching Towards Hybridity

Kidnapped off the garbage-filled streets of Portugal by a nun and raised as a ward in Christ the King School for Native Girls,[10] Consolata has already spent thirty years at the Convent before Mavis, Grace, Seneca, and Pallas arrive. As the tensions mount between the men in Ruby and the women in the Convent, Consolata undergoes a spiritual transformation and vigorously begins to instruct the women "like a new and revised Reverend Mother" (265). Consolata's burgeoning liberation theology is characterized by that essential component of the Black Female Jeremiad, the glue that ties all of her other strands together: hybridity. In fact, rather than locating the site of black female power in maternity, *Paradise* suggests that a hybridized identity functions as the source of black women's agency.

Emphasizing the interdependence between the flesh and the spirit – so often demonized and revered, respectively, in orthodox religious interpretations – Consolata urges the women, "Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (263). This fusion of the Madonna/whore binary couched in maternal discourse is also central to the text from which the novel's epigraph is taken: the Nag Hammadi Gnostic scripture "The Thunder, Perfect Mind." Discovered in Egypt in 1945, the collection of more than fifty texts known collectively as

[10] This is the official name of what is colloquially referred to as the Convent.

the Nag Hammadi offers a key source for understanding early Christianity. Considered unacceptable to early Christians in their attempt to canonize Christianity, these texts include alternative versions of creation and salvation, sayings of Jesus, The Gospel of Thomas, and writings such as "The Thunder, Perfect Mind," in which the female speaker repeatedly resists an either/or classification as she blurs the boundaries on which Western Manichean society and religion so depend.

While Morrison chooses the final stanza of "Thunder" as the epigraph,[11] a larger look at the noncanonical scripture as a whole establishes the passage's original context: "For I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned one. I am the whore and the holy one." Ultimately, the epigraph creates a textual hybridity on two levels: first, the content of the scripture itself advocates a hybridized positionality; second, Morrison's decision to include a noncanonical scripture in a narrative steeped with traditional religious rhetoric suggests the possibility of understanding Christianity outside of the kind of oppressive orthodoxy (re)produced by misguided religious fervor in which the New Fathers of Ruby are unapologetically complicit.[12] For the men of Ruby, the mere suggestion that their view of Christianity could be reconsidered is entirely threatening because this alteration would require them to shift their views of themselves. Stewart Morgan's declaration that he would blow the head off of anyone who altered the words on the Oven is evident of the weight of such "openness."

Ultimately, Consolata's insistence that the Convent women see themselves as

[11] "For many are the pleasant forms which exist in numerous sins, and inconsistencies, and disgraceful passions, and fleeting pleasures, which (men) embrace until they become sober and go up to their resting place. And they will find me there, and they will live, and they will not die again."

[12] Interestingly, Octavia Butler performs an inversion of this tactic in her *Parables* series; the novels themselves develop in great detail the radical new religion being created by Lauren Olamina, but Butler closes the texts by quoting the novels' namesake parables from the definition-of-canonical King James Version of the Bible. Taken together, the fusion of canonical and noncanonical texts suggests the "hybrid vigor" of the Black Female Jeremiad.

"both/and" creates what Ana Fraile-Marcos calls "a positive transfiguring power" (5) and a space for healing and acceptance. The ghosts from their traumatic pre-Convent lives disappear as the women learn to reconcile their internalized divided selves; they "embraced and finally let go of" their emotional burdens, which symbolically wash away as they "danc[e] in the hot sweet rain" (283). And yet, this hybridity which fosters internal healing leads to external destruction because "the men of Ruby perceive hybridity as a disruptive evil which threatens their sense of selfhood and nationhood" (Fraile-Marcos 4-5). Because the Black Female Jeremiad is threatening, society attempts to neuter her – at best, through dismissal and, at worst, through death. Unfortunately, the Convent women experience elimination in its most extreme form.

The novel's dénouement, however, highlights the hybridized vigor of the Black Female Jeremiad's eschatology: a generative apocalypse accompanied by militant female action. The aftereffects of the massacre orchestrate an apocalyptic moment that offers regeneration and redemption – both for the men of Ruby and the women of the Convent. Like the mourners at the tomb on Easter morning, the townspeople going to tend to the dead bodies at the Convent find instead an empty house; this unexpected turn of events does not mean that the executions did not occur, but rather suggests that destruction – while actualized – does not get the last word.

For the people of Ruby, the disappearance of the women's bodies signifies, according to townswoman Lone Du Pres, that "God had given Ruby a second chance" to repent, to follow Him and not their warped version of Him (298). For the Convent women, the dematerialization of their deceased bodies suggests that they have been given a second chance to *act* on the healing they have finally experienced through Consolata's

hybridized teaching and to emerge from the Convent's walls and out into the world in search of a future. As they do so, the former Convent women are literally armed and ready. In the final pages of the novel, Morrison leaves the reader with descriptions of Gigi, wearing an "army cap and fatigue pants – camouflage colors. Heavy army boots, black T-shirt…[her father] could swear she was packing," and Pallas "carrying a sword. A sword?" (310, 311). In the following chapter, Gloria Naylor and Carolivia Herron further articulate the Black Female Jeremiad's negotiation of maternity, militancy, and generative apocalypse – a cataclysmic event that produces neither heaven nor hell on earth, but a fighting chance for regeneration and to engage in, as Morrison's text concludes, "the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise" (318).

Chapter Two

"Leaving Every Surface Wiped Clean": Generative Apocalypse in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* and Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie*

"I'm telling you all, it all falls down."
– Lauryn Hill, "The Mystery of Iniquity" (2001)

"In order to rise / From its own ashes / A phoenix / First / Must / Burn."
– Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (1993)

Introduction

"The end approaches, but the apocalypse is long-lived."
– Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy"

It's the end of the world as we know it. Whether it is Michael Stipe mumbling his 1987 hit song on our radios, Bruce Willis and Ben Affleck barely thwarting global disaster in our movie theaters with *Armageddon* (1998), or the 60 million copies[1] of the *Left Behind* series sitting on our bookshelves, the apocalypse is a perpetual part of the American cultural lexicon. Ironically, then, as the epigraph from Derrida underscores, we seem to have a never-ending supply of narratives centered on the End Times. This chapter analyzes Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) and Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie* (1991) as narratives of what I term *generative apocalypse*. What if the apocalypse, rather than always threatening from the periphery, is realized rather than narrowly avoided? What if the result of apocalypse is not other-worldly paradise but something more complicated? What if women – mothers, maybe crazy, fighting for agency – perform their mundane domesticity on a suddenly epic scale and literally leave

[1] Rosen xvii. This sixteen-volume book series, written by evangelical minister and political activist Tim LaHaye, has also spawned movies and video games.

every surface wiped clean?

In short, the generative apocalypse advocated by the Black Female Jeremiad is not the end of the world, but the end of the world as we know it, a cataclysmic event that produces neither heaven nor hell on earth, but a fighting chance for regeneration. In order to create a space for a radical new set of possibilities, the present corrupted society must end, completely and unapologetically. Consequently, generative apocalypse is a difficult revolution rather than a dismal resolution. When asked about the rather bleak endings of some of her novels, including *Linden Hills*, Gloria Naylor often quotes Flannery O'Connor in her rebuttal: "People without hope do not write books" (Fowler interview). In other words, Naylor implies that the very act of writing suggests the presence of a voice in front of an audience and the accompanying potential for generative discussion and action.

Relatedly, in *Arguing the Apocalypse*, Stephen O'Leary offers a reevaluation of what "the end" of the world signifies: "perhaps the End is always near, if not as an absolute closure to temporality and history then as a normative standard against which our actions may be measured. To be sure, this amounts to a definition of Apocalypse as essentially concerned not with temporality, but with ethics" (219). This type of generative apocalypse is concerned not with the end of time but with the end of oppression; the clock is not up for the planet Earth, but rather for its systemic abuses. In order for a viable "City on a Hill" to survive and shine, generative apocalypse insists that the overgrowth of national deception, complicity, and corruption must be cleared away. The destruction of the worlds of *Thereafter Johnnie* and *Linden Hills* – Washington, D.C., and the fictionalized Linden Hills, respectively – represents the destruction of the

intangibles of the nation: its sins of materialism, slavery, hypocrisy, betrayal, violence, racism, and sexism in which, the texts suggest, we are all complicit.

Along with castigating the hypocrisy of an exceptionalist "City on a Hill" and a nation-state riddled with racial, economic, and gender injustices, *Thereafter Johnnie* and *Linden Hills* engage in the Black Female jeremiadic negotiation of the maternal/militant bind of black women's subjectivity in the U.S. cultural imagination. In *Linden Hills,* Willa Nedeed precipitates the destruction of her world through the arsenal most readily available to – and indeed, inflicted upon – her: vexed maternity and questionable sanity. In *Thereafter Johnnie*, Patricia Snowden bears her father's child and is banished from her family as a consequence, and while she believes she has returned the city's lost soul through the work of her womb, Patricia's sanity is destroyed along with the District of Columbia.

While apocalyptic narratives have been part of American discourse as early as Michael Wigglesworth's best-selling 1662 classic *The Day of Doom*, scholars have noted the increased presence and cultural capital of apocalyptic rhetoric in mainstream U.S. society around the time of the publications of *Thereafter Johnnie* and *Linden Hills*.[2] According to Elizabeth Rosen, in the 1980s "a convergence of historical events with eschatological implications…relocate[d] considerations of the End from the realm of the theoretical and place[d] them squarely in the realm of the possible" (xvii, xviii). The nuclear arms race and escalating tensions in the Middle East seemingly confirmed end-time biblical predictions of Holy Land warfare. The onslaught of HIV/AIDS actualized prophecy of global pandemic. These historical events only magnified pre-existing apprehension about the approaching millennium. Politically, the decade saw the

[2] See Stephen O'Leary and Catherine Keller for detailed accounts.

reinvigoration of conservatism accompanied by, as Patricia Hill Collins summarizes, "the reworking of religion, ethnicity, so-called family values, and race" in the American cultural imagination (83). With so much uncertain in the nation and in the world at large, it is no wonder that "the apocalyptic myth as an explanatory framework for viewing current events" became even more prevalent (O'Leary 175).

Indeed, what Stephen O'Leary calls "the power and flexibility" of apocalyptic rhetoric since the 1980s resides in its ability to speak to and for a growing number of Americans who identify as evangelical Christians – fundamentalists who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible, including the Book of Revelation, as the inerrant word of God. Additionally, this strand of Christianity began to exert a greater political influence on the national scene than ever before; religious leaders such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, with their Moral Majority and Christian Coalition, urged their adherents to become involved politically, arguing that God-fearing voices and votes were crucial to the establishment, maintenance, and success of a God-sanctioned nation and government. In short, apocalyptic rhetoric became legitimized and politicized in the 1980s "in increasingly high places" (Keller ix). Reaching into the highest echelon of American politics, the New Christian Right found its "most eloquent spokesman" in President Ronald Reagan (O'Leary 179). The man could deliver a line, and one of his most employed, which he appropriated from the script of Abraham Lincoln's 1862 Address to Congress,[3] proclaimed America as "the last best hope of man on earth"

[3] In his 1862 annual message to Congress shortly before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln declared, "In *giving* freedom to the *slave*, we *assure* freedom to the *free* -- honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth."

(O'Leary 180).[4] Another frequent – and related – rhetorical flourish was, of course, Reagan's insistent declaration that the United States was destined to be "shining city on a hill." In short, by the 1980s, the Puritan "errand" and the Great Awakening's doomsday rhetoric had been reinvigorated and updated in shiny suits by a master rhetorician national leader. With its concurrent emergence in the post-Civil Rights era, the Black Female Jeremiad offers a religio-political voice counter to the loudest ones on a political landscape that found salience "in a particular and restricted" version of apocalypticism (O'Leary 173).

For multiple reasons, *Thereafter Johnnie* and *Linden Hills* lend themselves to paired analysis. First, both texts signify on epic myths and literary works; *Linden Hills* is a clever and intricately woven adaptation of Dante's *Inferno* to an upper middle-class African American community in an undisclosed location in the mid-1980s. *Thereafter Johnnie*, which takes place in Washington, D.C., receives frequent comparisons to Milton, Joyce, and *The Odyssey* in both style and scale. In both texts, the location is one of the narratives' key characters, as both settings seem to literally take on a life of their own. Second, both texts are ripe with biblical allusions and scriptural rhetoric. This style is perhaps not surprising given the religious lives of both authors. Naylor was a Jehovah's Witness minister in her early twenties, while Carolivia Herron converted to Judaism in her late forties and her religious positionality appears prominently in her post-*Thereafter Johnnie* work.[5] Additionally, both texts examine the role that "crazy" women

[4] In 2008, Mitt Romney invoked The Gipper when the former Massachusetts governor concluded his presidential nomination concession speech with the following: "America must always remain, as it has always been, the hope of the Earth." Throughout 2010, Sarah Palin frequently quoted Lincoln and Reagan in identifying America as "the last best hope of earth."

[5] The subject of her children's book *Always an Olivia: A Remarkable Family History* (2007) is Jewish African-American ancestry.

– mothers in particular – play in saving or precipitating the demise of the nation. And finally, in both texts, the "world" is not saved. The apocalypse happens; the Linden Hills community watches the Nedeed house burn to the ground with the Nedeeds in it, and the "Happy New Millennium" which briefly seems like a viable option for Washington, D.C. is eliminated in the final moments of the text like the shocked and tearful favored winner of a reality television show.

Indeed, the repetition of the phrases "They let it burn" and "Happy New Millennium" in the final pages of *Linden Hills* and *Thereafter Johnnie*, respectively, speaks to an element of psychological difficulty in grasping what exactly transpires as the text expires. Unsettling and perhaps unexpected, the realization of the apocalyptic endings in *Thereafter Johnnie* and *Linden Hills* carries the potential to bring survivors to their senses, as the end of time and history can be reinscribed as an opportunity for a renewed ethical commitment in a space ripe for rebuilding. For although the heart of Linden Hills burns down and the District of Columbia is essentially abandoned and left in ruins, the "witnesses" to "the End" at the end of the stories – Naylor's Lester and Willie and Herron's Johnnie, but most crucially the reader – remain behind to awaken in their wake.

Apocalypse Reinvigorated

"We love apocalypses too much."
– Saul Bellow, *Herzog*

Derived from the Greek word meaning to unveil or disclose, "apocalypse" in the twentieth century has undergone a "profound shift from a descriptive term that referred specifically to the hopeful biblical story of ultimate judgment and reward, to an adjective

now understood to be a synonym for the catastrophic or devastating" (Rosen xiv). Rosen defines those narratives of "definitive End scenarios" in which "all mankind is beyond renovation" as neo-apocalyptic (xv). In contrast, generative apocalypse actualizes an "end scenario" *so that* humanity may have a chance to renovate itself. Thus, generative apocalypse allies with a postmodern version of apocalypse in which the New Jerusalem is reconceptualized "as a radically reoriented understanding of the world, rather than as a different world" (Rosen xxiv).

In addition to revising the concept of the New Jerusalem, generative apocalypse also revises the notion of female participation in and relationship to apocalypticism. Scholars have coined the terms "anti-apocalypse" and "counter-apocalypse" to describe potential feminist responses to the traditional apocalypse.[6] The anti-apocalyptic tradition opposes apocalypticism because of the limiting roles the biblical Apocalypse, as written by John of Patmos in Revelation, offers women: the "whore in power," the "mother in agony," and the "virgin in the end" who signifies "the New Jerusalem herself" (Keller 59).[7] Not surprisingly, feminists find these problematic archetypal roles for women unappealing; the possible avenues for female embodiment presented in the biblical Apocalypse continue to reverberate two thousand years and countless "near-miss"

[6] See Lee Quinby and Catherine Keller, respectively.

[7] "One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." (Rev. 17:1-2); "A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born." (Rev. 12:1-4); "I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband." (Rev. 21:2)

apocalypses later: the female whose promiscuity gets her to the top or who, alternatively, gains a position of power through what is perceived as masculinized behavior, which still, ironically, receives the derogatory label of whore;[8] the long-suffering mother who spares no expense in sacrificing all for her children; and the pure and perfect woman who can only exist in fantasy – or a convent. While the first and last options historically have been limited for African American female access, the middle option, as Chapter One examines, is always already available to black women, but problematically so. Alternatively, the counter-apocalyptic stance, rather than dismissing the efficacy of apocalypticism on these grounds, "finds relevance in apocalyptic narrative without acquiescing in its cruelties or its literalizations" where women are concerned (Keller xi). Although both the counter-apocalypse and generative apocalypse find relevance for women in apocalypticism, counter-apocalypse seeks to avoid a realization of actual apocalypse, while the Black Female Jeremiad sees apocalypse through to the end of the story.

Ultimately, the generative apocalypse of the Black Female Jeremiad offers a more nuanced and more complicated religio-political option than these existing models of female relationship to apocalypse. Like the counter-apocalyptic framework, the generative apocalypse does not acquiesce to the limiting role that the traditional apocalypse affords women. Rather than simply powerful whores, crying mothers, or pristine madonnas, women in the Black Female Jeremiad's generative apocalypse may actually generate the apocalypse through a radical act of maternal power, as Willa Nedeed does.

Furthermore, in articulating a theory of generative apocalypse, Black Female

[8] See the analysis of Hillary Clinton in this project's introduction.

Jeremiads also enter into a long-standing tradition of African American apocalyptic expression which reaches back to the slave songs.[9] As Houston Baker writes, "[F]rom the earliest days of slavery, preachers and singers of the spirituals have provided examples of the black American's belief in the apocalypse as a means to freedom" (57). Baker highlights a key turning point in this expression during the 1960s through activist-intellectuals such as LeRoi Jones and James Baldwin, in whose works "this theme takes a new and secularized form; *the agency of apocalypse* shifts to the writer and the armed revolutionary" (57, emphasis added). In short, the "liberating destruction" of the apocalypse is no longer precipitated by an act of God but an act of human agency, either individual or collective. While both Baldwin and Jones succeed in removing agency from heaven and place it within earthly reach, they differ on how this occurs, as well as to what end. James Baldwin advocates a loved-based ethic among and between races that will result in liberation "with the threat (rather than the actual instigation) of an apocalyptic event"; LeRoi Jones, on the other hand, "does not advocate love, nor does he think the apocalypse should be staved off" (Baker 55). A brief examination of two of their apocalyptic essays – Baldwin's 1963 *The Fire Next Time* and Jones's 1964 "The Last Days of the American Empire (Including Some Instructions for Black People)" is illustrative of their divergent end-time paradigms.

First published in the *New Yorker*, Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* underscores the belief in human control of human destiny when he writes: "What it comes to is that if we, who can scarcely be considered a white nation, persist in thinking of ourselves as one, *we condemn ourselves*, with the truly white nations, to sterility and decay, whereas if we

[9] See Montgomery and Leigh for discussions of the distinct patterns in African American apocalyptic narratives.

could accept ourselves as we are, *we might bring new life* to the Western achievements, and transform them" (374, emphasis added). Despite his warnings that if "we" do not repent, the nation's "dishonored past will rise up soon to smite all of us" (378), Baldwin ultimately retains a genuine belief that destruction can be staved off. [10] A frequently-quoted closing passage from *Fire*, one infused with a faith and optimism that drives and directs the cadences of Baldwin's prose at this point in his career, proclaims: "If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world" (379).

In contrast to Baldwin's inclusive rhetoric and ethos, Jones's "The Last Days of the American Empire" challenges the reader to justify "[w]hy should this terrible place not fall? Who can *dare* defend it?" (190). Insisting that "there is *no chance* that the American white man will change" and rejecting Baldwin's calls for an inclusive community, Jones believes "an absolute gulf that separates white from black" will ensure that the races will irrevocably exist in "two different worlds" (198, 193). In fact, the only "hope" that Jones maintains in this essay is that a black uprising might destroy the white world:

> I say if your hope is for the survival of this society, this filthy order, no good. You lose. The hope is that young blacks will remember all of their lives what they are seeing, what they are witness to just by being alive and black in America, and that eventually they will use this

[10] The floating "we" of Baldwin's rhetoric – sometimes referring to white people, sometimes to black people, sometimes to everyone – is a key element in his articulation of the potential for real community.

> knowledge scientifically, and erupt like Mt. Vesuvius to crush in hot lava these willful maniacs who call themselves white Americans. (208-9)

While Jones equates the white world with the "filthy order," the Black Female Jeremiad acknowledges a matrix of domination and thus does not limit her critique to racial lines. Her hope for generative apocalypse lies in the elimination of multiple oppressive orders and she is driven, like Baldwin, by a love ethic and desire for kinship with all people. Consequently, to employ theologian Diana Hayes's articulation of womanist's desire, the Black Female Jeremiad's "goal of liberation, therefore, which is both spiritual and physical, is not simply for herself but for all of her people and beyond that, for all who are also oppressed by reason of race, sex, and/or class (140).

Ultimately, the apocalyptic visions in *Thereafter Johnnie* and *Linden Hills* bring together the most productive elements in a polarized "Jones vs. Baldwin" rhetorical and ideological battle in order to create a more potent recipe for generative apocalypse. The Black Female Jeremiad fuses the most efficacious elements of these two paradigms – it advocates love and a renewed possibility for community and liberation for all as part of the reason the apocalypse *should not* be staved off. In this resistive framework, the instigation of the apocalypse is catalyzed by a desire for something more, something greater *in the here and now* than the systemic structures of oppression that the worlds of the texts perpetuate. These worlds must be destroyed, but not in the neo-apocalyptic sense of destruction as an end to itself, nor in the traditional apocalyptic narrative in which an other-worldly Messiah will swoop in and carry His faithful to a heavenly paradise. Just as "the agency of apocalypse" lies in human hands, so too does the agency for regeneration.

Wiping it Down and Letting it Burn: *Linden Hills*

"*Grandma Tilson, I'm afraid of hell.*
Ain't nothing to fear, there's hell on earth.
I mean the real hell where you can go when you die.
You ain't gotta die to go to the real hell.
No?
Uh uh, you just gotta sell that silver mirror God
propped up in your soul.
Sell it to who – the devil?
Naw, just to the highest bidder, child. The
highest bidder."

Detailing a conversation between Mamie "Grandma" Tilson and a youngster, the above epigraph to *Linden Hills* (1985) establishes the eschatological stakes of Naylor's text. In response to the child's fear of dying and going to hell, Mamie Tilson's assertion that "[y]ou ain't gotta die to go to the real hell" revises the conventional understanding of Hell as the afterlife for unrepentant souls by suggesting that hell may be instead a current state of our own creation, right here on earth. The catalysts of this real-life hell, Mamie Tilson laments, are those whom Lauryn Hill classifies as the "lost ones" who have "gained the whole world for the price of your soul."[11] Through her critique of the lost ones occupying the exclusive fictional community of Linden Hills, Gloria Naylor interrogates the materialism, hypocrisy, and sexism that have trickled down from national prominence to infect an upwardly-mobile black middle class striving to assimilate and achieve the American Dream. In Linden Hills, a gated upper middle-class black community in an unspecified location, the perversion of "keeping up appearances" creates an inversion of the American Dream and reveals a nightmarish world that must be destroyed in order to be rebuilt.

[11] "Lost Ones" is the second track on *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*.

Structurally, *Linden Hills* is modeled after Dante's *Inferno*, with the descending "drives" or circular streets of Linden Hills representing the descending circles of Dante's Hell. At the bottom of Linden Hills sits the house of the community's founder, Luther Nedeed, an undertaker who lives next to a frozen lake.[12] Nedeed's ominous, ubiquitous presence throughout the text, coupled with his ghastly deeds and ability to manipulate his tenants with a merciless puppet master's skill, suggest that he is no less than evil incarnate. After the novel's initial chapter recounts the "genesis" of Linden Hills, the rest of the narrative takes place over a span of six days – December 19 to December 24 – as two workmen, Lester and Willie, travel the circles of Linden Hills, perform odd jobs in order to pay for Christmas presents, and witness one troubling event after another that calls into question the price of the ticket in being admitted to this community. In the novel's final chapter, Lester and Willie witness the fiery destruction of the House of Nedeed on Christmas Eve. The destruction is precipitated by a radical act of "housecleaning" by Nedeed's wife, an abused woman emerging from her husband's prison with the singular goal, as she walks the line between madness and revelation, of bringing down the house.

As in Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie*, the setting of *Linden Hills* itself is perhaps the most salient character in the novel. With explicit reference to the "city on the hill" in its name, Linden Hills offers an inverted world, both geographically and figuratively. In this indeterminate space – "[t]here has been a dispute for years over the exact location of Linden Hills…its boundaries contracted and expanded over the years to include no one, and then practically everyone in Wayne County" (1) – the "hill" is actually a valley, as

[12] See Catherine Ward's "A Modern Inferno" for a close reading of *Linden Hills*'s Dantean model.

the development spirals and dips into the earth.[13] Elusive and amorphous like Winthrop's hilltop city, a once-exclusive pronouncement used so liberally over the centuries that the metaphor now functions as a free-for-all patriotic umbrella for anything done in the name of America, Linden Hills and its inversive state is further solidified at the level of its creator, Luther Nedeed, whose surname, according to Naylor, is an inversion of "de eden" (qtd. in Ward 70). In addition to the site of the biblical Creation, "de eden" evokes "deaden," an apt descriptor for the spiritual and emotional state of the vast majority of the inhabitants of Linden Hills as well as the effect – both figuratively and sometimes literally – that Nedeed's presence casts on his tenants. While his first name, Luther, may be a modification of the devilish Lucifer, it also suggests a connection to Martin Luther; Naylor's Luther, however, is invested not in spiritual reformation but quite the opposite: material aspiration at the expense of humanity.

With thinly-veiled allusions to a sinister kind of Genesis, Nedeed founded the community and "on the seventh day of his vigil, Luther Nedeed closed his eyes slowly and smiled" (3). The idea of epic creation turned inside out is reiterated in his family's seemingly unchanged line of patriarchal succession; the original Luther Nedeed leaves behind a son – with an identical name, face, disposition, address, and occupation (i.e. running Linden Hills and undertaking the dead) – as do all the Nedeed sons for the next 150 years, from the founding of Linden Hills in the mid-nineteenth century to the time of the primary action of the novel. The perpetual presence of Luther Nedeed – seemingly, when the elder dies, "he hadn't died at all" (4) because the next Luther Nedeed is waiting to take his place – suggests his immortality, a trait that, along with his immorality, further

[13] Just as *Thereafter Johnnie* has distinct parallels to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, so does the inverted geography of Linden Hills suggest her follow-up novel, *Sula*.

solidifies Nedeed as a supernatural incarnation of evil.

Just as its founder and genesis signal an inverted world, so does the ultimate demise of Linden Hills "inverts epic conventions," as John Moore argues: "the grand scale of the epic is reduced to the 'microscopic' and the minutia" (1422). The apocalypse is set in motion not by superhuman or global warfare, but by a solitary woman emerging from her basement to set her house in order. Not only does Naylor create a space for a black woman to reclaim her lost agency, but also Willa Nedeed's reclamation reverberates to epic proportions, inverts the resolution of apocalypse, and collapses the inverted world of Linden Hills on itself in her wake.

Furthermore, Willa's actions at the end of the novel are all the more remarkable when analyzed in light of the legacy of the misogynistic mistreatment of the women in *Linden Hills*, along with the flickers of female resistance that eventually aid in sparking Willa's reemergence from her basement. In another inversion of conventions, rather than locking his "crazed" wife upstairs – the recurring "madwoman in the attic" literary motif – Luther Nedeed imprisons his wife, along with their sick child, in the basement. Willa's unpardonable sin is that she gave birth to a Luther boy that does not look like all the rest; the only explanation, Luther concludes, is that his wife was unfaithful to him. Consequently, he must teach her a lesson: ensure that the child, deprived of nourishment, dies downstairs in the morgue/basement and then quickly produce another heir – this time with Willa under lock and key – to continue the Nedeed line.

Indeed, Nedeed's grievance against Willa stems from what he sees as the wrench she has thrown in the one valid purpose of female existence; one of the most central and troubling sins of Linden Hills is the "systematic dehumanization of women as papa-

copying machines" (Okonkwo 123). Here, the relationship between black women and maternity is complicated by the latter's dictated status. Rather than functioning as a site of power for black women, maternity for the Nedeed women in *Linden Hills* is mandatory – not respected but merely expected, and failure to comply with the stringent demands of reproducing a viable male heir is grounds for serious reprimand. Crucially, it is not enough that Willa produces an heir to the undertaker's rocking chair; she threatens the patriarchal rule of Linden Hills by giving birth to a son that does not look like his father, but rather his maternal grandmother – "And the mother before that. And the mother before that" (93). Nothing could be more despised in Luther Nedeed's world than even a hint of matrilineal influence, let alone the constant physical reminder of such defiance of the natural order.

Not surprisingly, Nedeed attributes Willa's "insubordination" to a "deep flaw" somewhere inside her (19). Notably, the only other person characterized this way in *Linden Hills* is Mamie Tilson, the lone woman in the text, until Willa's final moments, who "had never minded staring down a Nedeed" (13). Nedeed's tactic was to "bury that one flaw deep in the middle of his jewel" (13) by giving Mamie Tilson's house an inconspicuous plot of land in Linden Hills that would be easily lost among its grander, more compliantly-occupied surroundings. In *Linden Hills*, these "flaws" that the Luther Nedeeds attempt to conceal ultimately – and literally – break the jewel and instigate its destruction.[14]

Significantly, the long-lost voices of the former Nedeed wives, long-suffering and long-silenced, mobilize and nurture Willa, giving her a framework and strength to serve as the catalyst of the apocalypse. While trapped in the basement and mourning the recent

[14] In *Thereafter Johnnie*, the District of Columbia is also described as a flawed jewel – a "struck diamond."

passing of her son, whose father-forsaken body lies nearby, Willa discovers a Bible and cookbooks, with marginal notes written in by previous Mrs. Nedeeds. These texts of traditional domesticity and womanhood are subverted, tagged, and rewritten in exceptional ways. The most influential text is the Bible of Luwana Packerville Nedeed, dated 1837. With Luwana's marginal commentary, a woman's words are literally written into the Bible, a text reserved exclusively for male authority and authorship.

In short, Luwana, the first Mrs. Nedeed, chronicles her life via biblical progression, creating a nineteenth-century blog about how the sacred text is relevant to her life. For example, between Genesis and Exodus, she writes of her excitement in starting a new life in Linden Hills as a wife and some-day mother; in Leviticus she writes about "[h]er bewilderment over the rules [Nedeed] had given her about housekeeping and his diet" (118). Crucially, the last marginal entry in the Old Testament of Luwana's Bible falls between Jeremiah and Lamentations. Lamenting the deterioration of her once hoped-for expectations of holy matrimony, Luwana writes: "O Blessed Savior, can it be that I have only exchanged one master for another! Can it be that the innocent scribblings I sought only to hide from a husband's amused contempt are now the diary of a slave?" (117).[15] Here, in a language that fits into the women's sentimental rhetoric of the decade in which Maria W. Stewart wrote, Luwana characterizes her husband not as the deliverer but as the enslaver – not Moses come to free the Israelites but rather the Egyptian ruler. Just as the nineteenth-century traditional African American Jeremiad argued that rather than correlating white Americans with God's chosen people, a more apt analogy would be the white slaveholding nation as the Egyptians, Luwana suggests the ungodly behavior

[15] Rumor has it that the first Mr. Nedeed bought his wife out of slavery. Luwana's biblical diary appears to provide confirmation on this point.

of a patriarchal nation/husband that equates being a wife with being a slave.

Further, Luwana carries the theme and importance of "innocent scribblings" into the New Testament. In conjunction with the Book of Acts, Luwana writes of her jealousy over the purpose and audience the Apostles knew was attached to their writing: "it must have been wonderful to know that someone was awaiting their messages and that if they did not write, they would be missed. I write to no one and am missed by no one on earth" (120). Like other Black Female jeremiadic voices, then, in *Linden Hills*, Naylor underscores the power of writing for women in building and maintaining a sense of self. Moreover, with the arrival of Willa to Luwana's text, the first Mrs. Nedeed now has the audience her text so craved for nearly 150 years. She is the ancestor speaking to Willa in her time of need – Mrs. Nedeeds symbiotically supporting each other at such a time as this, when a strong maternal voice is needed to facilitate a generative apocalypse.

Coupled with Luwana's Bible is Mrs. Evelyn Creton Nedeed's cookbooks. Taking the distress Luwana laments and turning it into action, Evelyn's cookbooks reveal a subtle legacy of resistance among the Mrs. Nedeeds; etched in with the flour and sugar are ingredients such as "powdered dove's heart," "snakeroot," and "shame-weed" (147). While it is unclear whether this modified meal plan was intended to kill her husband or simply alter his unseemly behavior in some way, these writings are crucial in that they introduce the possibility of female agency and resistance – through and within the inescapable confines of domesticity – to both the text and to Willa's mind. Indeed, the closing chapter of *Linden Hills* quickly gains momentum as Willa's reading time in the basement transforms her from a traditional suffering mother, one of the three options afforded women in the traditional Christian Apocalypse, and enables her emergence as

something else, something the present world of the text cannot contain. As Willa reads the words of the Nedeed women who have come before her, she makes the decision *not* to die in the basement. While Luther had tricked her and their child into walking downstairs so that he could bolt the basement door behind them, Willa latches on to the "singular germ of truth" that since she had walked down the steps, "whenever she was good and ready, she could walk back up" (280). As she begins her ascent, Willa navigates the bounds and nuances of agency, sanity, and messianic potential in facilitating a generative, realized apocalypse.

Through the stories of the preceding Mrs. Nedeeds, Naylor illustrates how compromised female sanity under patriarchal rule, which serves as a tool of dismissal or negation, may result in tragedy. Luwana Packerville Nedeed exemplifies the abused woman whose mental state deteriorates until she embodies the negative entities that men said about her in the first place: fragile, inefficacious, a burden. In the letters she begins writing to herself, Luwana slowly advances from affirmative statements such as "I am not losing my mind" (123) to a slippery "I fear for your [meaning her own] sanity" (123) to finally declaring defiantly, after not speaking for a year and marking her body for each of the 665 times that she had opened her mouth, "Now I ask you, are these the ranting of an insane woman?" (124).[16] Unfortunately, the 666th time Luwana opens her mouth, and the first time in a year that she does so to disclose a sentence, her utterance is unwittingly and tragically ironic.

In contrast, Willa draws a distinction between her Mrs. Nedeed ancestors and herself, insisting that "[s]he wasn't like these other women; she had coped and they were crazy" (204). Further, Willa is determined to solidify her sanity by taking a resistive

[16]Luwana tattoos herself by using a hat pin and black ink.

stance – morally, emotionally, and physically – that Luwana and Evelyn did not have the means or the opportunity to take. After coming to terms with the fact that she is dying, refusing nourishment in the locked basement, Willa begins to establish agency for the first time – certainly since becoming a Nedeed, perhaps in her life – by declaring that "she would die in her own way" and that somehow in the midst of her death, "she could rebuild" (71, 268). Interestingly, this newfound access to agency only occurs when the societal constraints placed on women – particularly harshly on the nameless line of Mrs. Nedeeds – is finally lifted: "Willa Nedeed was a good mother and a good wife. For six years, she could claim that identity without any reservations. But now Willa Nedeed sat on a cot in a basement, *no longer anyone's mother or anyone's wife*" (279, emphasis added). As Chapter Three and Chapter Four argue regarding the resistive performances of Octavia Butler's fictional Lauren Olamina and nineteenth-century activist Maria W. Stewart, the release of maternal duties enables these Black Female Jeremiads to deliver prophetic words rather than babies. In the same way, Willa Nedeed is now free to, as Margaret Homans argues, "giv[e] miraculous birth to herself and to a revolutionary intention" (369). Ironically, Willa chooses to do so through a radical act of domesticity.

Before Willa walks back up the basement stairs on her own accord, she straightens up the room in which she has been held captive – "Beds made, dishes washed, the metal shelves dusted, the floor picked clean" (294), determined to then "start on the rooms upstairs" (289). There is something delightfully foreboding in such a statement of intentions. Something suggesting the opposite of traditional domesticity, yet couched in familiar rhetoric. As she climbs the stairs and clutches the body of her dead child, Willa's push-back to the Nedeed patriarchy builds with every step as she transforms into

a figure to be feared and revered – or at the very least, reckoned with. One thing is unequivocally clear – the day of reckoning has arrived.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, "[m]iraculously, the bolt slid back when Willa reached for the knob" (298). The ultimate negation of the external element that Willa believed was preventing her escape from the basement suggests that perhaps the power to leave was always hers for the taking, whenever she was ready to do so. Still clutching her dead child on one hip, Willa diligently begins to make her way through the kitchen as she "methodically attacked all the grease and dirt…leaving every surface wiped clean" (298). Suggesting a Christ-like removal of sins, of purifying and making things white as snow, Willa, on this December 24, functions as what Christopher Okonkwo calls "an *irregular* messiah – as a gendered reification of both Moses and Christ" (118). Like Moses, she is leading her people – herself, her son, and all of the Mrs. Nedeeds who have gone before her – out of their slave status under Nedeed rule. She is leading her people not only to physical freedom but, like Jesus, purifying their path by wiping away the dirt that has soiled their living. Additionally, Okonkwo explicates his description of Willa as an "*irregular* messiah" by acknowledging the historical prominence of "visible Black male 'redeemer' figures, especially those who did big, notable, rational, and public things" (120). Willa's actions, however, occur in private, are interpreted as irrational by Luther, and are cloaked in the mundanity of everyday domestic chores such as cleaning kitchen counters. By painting Willa as the figure who catalyzes the destruction in *Linden Hills*, Naylor creates not only an irregular but an inverted messiah – one who "saves" and "redeems" through instigating the apocalyptic end of the text.[17]

[17]John Moore also points out that the ending is an "inversion of the biblical myth" by providing an "apocalypse without paradise" (1428).

When Luther Nedeed finally discovers his freed wife – pale, thin, and wielding her dead son like a holy weapon – he fatally mistakes "the determination in her eyes as madness" (300). While the physical description of Willa evokes the "someone 'like a son of man'" in Revelation 1:13-14 whose "head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire," Naylor explicitly compares Willa in this moment to "a lone army ant…the wingless queen who cannot fly from danger, blindly dragging her bloated egg sac as long as at least one leg is left uncrushed" (300). Here, maternity, resistance to patriarchal rule, labels of insanity, and the struggle to create a new space for generative possibilities fuse together, as do Nedeed, Willa, and their dead son. When Luther reaches for his son's body, Willa transfers her death grip to Nedeed, and "the three were welded together. Luther tried to wrench free, but they breathed as one, moved as one…" (300). This ghastly trinity wrestles through the house until a knocked-over candle on Luther's lavishly ornamented Christmas tree sets the entire House of Nedeed on fire.

Outside the house, Willie and Lester, who were commissioned by Nedeed to decorate the Christmas tree, watch in horror as the landlord of Linden Hills perishes in his flaming house next to a frozen lake. Shocked and appalled at the lack of response from the fire trucks and neighbors, who arrive on the scene but do not put out the blaze, Willie and Lester close the narrative by incredulously repeating, "They let it burn…They let it burn" (304). This is, as Moore notes, "apocalypse without paradise" (1428) – as an end unto itself, not the penultimate act. Apocalypse realized. With the death of Nedeed and the destruction of the Nedeed line, the lifeblood of Linden Hills has been extinguished. There is no deliverance for the devil in *Linden Hills*. It remains to be seen,

however, whether or not there will be deliverance for the remaining inhabitants of Linden Hills. The community members have passively accepted both Luther's rule as well as his death. Who will set the tone for whatever Linden Hills might become?

One predominant scholarly interpretation of Willa's action and the novel's dénouement asserts that "the line of mothers is inefficacious against the fathers – or can at best only suicidally negate them" (Homans 396). This exegesis, however, overlooks and oversimplifies the necessity of apocalypse realized in making a new generative space possible. If the phoenix first must burn before it can rise from the ashes, as Lauren Olamina's Earthseed proclaims, Linden Hills must burn before anything else can rise in its place. Consequently, while Luther Nedeed may be the leader of Linden Hills, Willa Nedeed is the governing agent of *Linden Hills*. Her actions precipitate the end of the world as Willie and Lester know it. Thus, although the traditional understanding of paradise is indeed missing from *Linden Hills*, the generative apocalypse leaves open the revolutionary possibility that *this* world, now that there has been some "cleaning house," may become a better place.

Lamenting a Nation's Soul: *Thereafter Johnnie*

Eva: "What's going to happen to him when he grows all in love with you? What are you going to do with him?"
Patricia: "I don't care what happens then, I want everything to fall down."
– *Thereafter Johnnie*

Whereas *Linden Hills* centers on an exclusive black community striving, at all costs, to achieve the American Dream, Carolivia Herron's *Thereafter Johnnie* explicitly interrogates the United States as an exceptionalist land of opportunity through the

tribulations of an African American family living in the heart of the nation's capital. Herron's novel tells the story of John Christopher Snowdon, a heart surgeon at Howard University hospital, and his three daughters. The eldest daughter, Cynthia Jane, is a poet-turned-nun. Eva, the rebellious and complex middle daughter, embraces both her sexuality and a prophetic love ethic. Most troublesome of all is Patricia, the impish, mythically-subscribing youngest daughter whose own child, Johnnie, is the product of an incestuous and highly eroticized affair with John Christopher himself.[18] As the family falls apart following the revelation of Patricia's pregnancy, so too does the capital city in which they live, until all that remains is a questionably-corporeal Johnnie, "a light" sifting through the abandoned ruins of the once-great District of Columbia.

Epic in scale and biblical in tone, *Thereafter Johnnie* very quickly establishes a sense that while the story told is of this family, it is somehow our national story as well. In her review of the novel,[19] Barbara Christian asserts that like the *Odyssey*, in Herron's text, "*sex* is *religion* is *nation*, that, to use a Freudian term, 'family romance' is a nation's soul" (6). This is a soul – both national and familial – that would benefit from some serious jeremiadic entreaties.

In fact, Herron establishes her text as staunchly jeremiadic not once but twice before the novel's first sentence. The text's epigraph is taken from the Book of Lamentations, which directly follows the Book of Jeremiah and which is also credited to the prophet: "How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become a widow! she that was great among nations, and princess among provinces, how is she

[18] Notably, John Christopher's wife and the girls' mother, Camille, is one of the least developed voices in the narrative.
[19] Christian includes this review, "Epic Achievement," in her 2007 collection *New Black Feminist Criticism, 1985-2000*.

become tributary!"[20] Here, Herron sets the tone for a novel in which the city itself – as the capital, a stand-in for the nation – is a primary and unifying character. Additionally, Herron explicitly states her connection to the jeremiad tradition in the text's acknowledgements; the author offers her thanks to everyone from her parents to the U.S. National Park Service to Gloria Naylor. The final acknowledgement, however, that emphatically punctuates the entire piece is a single-word name: Jeremiah.

Published in 1991, *Thereafter Johnnie*, Herron's first novel, met with critical praise from the mainstream press and received legitimization by the African American literary elite in glowing praise from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Gloria Naylor, who respectively labeled the text "a remarkable achievement" and "a groundbreaking work" in the African American literary canon.[21] However, despite Gates's applause and Naylor's belief that *Thereafter Johnnie* would become "a book for the ages," interest in the novel quickly waned. It was left up to Herron to self-publish the second edition in 2001 at print-on-demand 1stBooks,[22] and by 2004, the novel was out of print (Polhemus 344). As of 2010, only a handful of scholarly essays have been published on the novel.[23] Similar to the devaluation of Lauryn Hill's prophetic black female voice which is analyzed in Chapter Four, Herron's initially positive reception was overshadowed by dismissive charges surrounding the author's questionable mental state.

Around the time of the novel's publication, Herron, a native of Washington, D.C.,

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[20] Lamentations 1:1

[21] "*Thereafter Johnnie* is a remarkable achievement. Herron sweeps into our literary tradition like a fourth Fury…" (Gates); "This book is fated to be a groundbreaking work in the Afro-American and American literary tradition…This is a book for the ages" (Naylor). For reviews in the mainstream press, see Bierhorst in *The New York Times*, Patricia Smith in *The Boston Globe*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Newsweek*, and the *L.A. Times Book Review*.

[22] Now AuthorHouse.

[23] See Polhemus, Keizer, Breau, and Daly in Works Cited.

began publicly speaking about repressed childhood memories of repeated rape and psychological abuse. In addition to speaking out against two male relatives on charges of sexual abuse, Herron claimed that she was sold into sexual slavery by her aunt and forced to have sex with a regular "customer" named Big White Daddy; it was at this house of prostitution that Herron "witnessed four murders before she was 11" (Britt D1). Herron's family remains divided over the accuracy of these recovered memories. Some close family members, including Herron's parents and a cousin who recovered similar memories around this time as well, support Herron's claims. Other family members, however, deny such abuse ever occurred.

In an interview with Donna Britt for the *Washington Post*, in which Britt also speaks with one of the accused relatives, various family members refer to Herron as insane, saying she is "crazy, always has been"… "from the time she was born…She's smart, but…crazy as a bat" (D2, D3). Regardless of Herron's personal mental state, the text of *Thereafter Johnnie* itself grapples enough with the elision of female insanity, brilliance, and agency without the need to speculate further on Herron's personal life. Yet, Herron's reported personal experience with abuse, as one family camp argues, and with mental health issues, as another family camp asserts, cannot be ignored in a project that examines the ways in which black women engage in resistive prophetic performance. Thus, while the novel itself grapples with black female negotiation of sanity and of prophecy, the author's controversial autobiography adds an additional layer of salience to the textual critique.

Connected to *Thereafter Johnnie*'s portrayal of insanity is Herron's writing style itself. Critics have described the narrative design of *Thereafter Johnnie* as "a labyrinth

that intentionally displaces and continually rearranges time and event so that our notions of clearly defined categories…are challenged" (Christian 6), and Herron's style has been called "rapid" in a comparison to Homer's (Bierhorst 16). Perhaps the best word to describe her form is staccato – hard, abrupt, never lingering anywhere too long and yet often returning to a variation of the same note. The text's twenty-four chapters do not unfold with any sort of linear trajectory. In fact, one gets a sense that the chapters could be pulled out of a hat and read at random and the same narrative meaning would be conveyed to the reader. Moreover, Herron switches back and forth between seven[24] different narrators – John Christopher; his daughters Patricia, Eva, and Cynthia Jane; his wife, Camille; his granddaughter/daughter Johnnie; and Diotima, Patricia's lover after the birth of Johnnie – and frequently leaves it up to the reader to puzzle out whose voice is currently being privileged.

In short, the novel is disorienting – both temporally and textually. It is often unclear when a particular chapter takes place, as the story is not told in a linear fashion, and clues to time, place, and speaker are often hidden or missing altogether. Textually, the often unidentified narrator sometimes switches to another point of view suddenly within a chapter, and there are spurts of text in which punctuation completely falls away.[25] This chaotic reading experience produces the visceral affect of a world falling apart; the very text itself – along with time and perspective and language – is under de(con)struction. For example, Herron employs an infant Johnnie to narrate in explicit detail a sexual encounter she witnesses between her parents; a cryptic descendant of

[24] The number seven holds great significance in the *Book of Revelation*, as various symbols – churches, lamp stands, angels, seals, stars, and trumpets, to name a few – are grouped into sevens.
[25] For example, "Patricia walks through the room walks to the door walks out of the door turns around locks the door places the key in the bag on her shoulder pulls it up on her shoulder rests the bag on the white rabbit arm of her coat pulls on the brown leather gloves touches Johnnie" (6)

Diotima to recount what reads like a Native American fairytale; and a mentally-disintegrating Patricia to cry out "I hate you Daddy please hold me" in a stream-of-consciousness sentence that runs seventeen lines of text. If form is function and if "Herron's novel, like anyone's mind, is a chaotic stew…what James Joyce calls 'messes of mottage' and 'quashed quotatoes'" (Polhemus 346), Herron's style points to a self, a family, a city, and a nation in disarray.

In the true hybridized form of the Black Female Jeremiad, Herron's narrative suggests that the lines between such disparate avenues as "fact/fairy tale, science/poetry, past/present/future, religion/sexuality, [and] family/race/nation" (Christian 6) are much more permeable than is comfortable to believe – not buildings divided by towering fences but adjacent rooms with connecting doors. Perhaps the most unsettling characteristic of *Thereafter Johnnie,* one that affects and infects all of the other binaries under deconstruction, is the conflation of religious language and sexual content during Patricia and John Christopher's incestuous – sometimes "consensual" incestuous – encounters. For example, an infant Johnnie narrates the final sexual encounter between her mother and her "grandfatherfather": "So as it was in the beginning, the very beginning, as it was in her infancy, he places his right hand between the legs of my mother, and I watch carefully, carefully…I see it clearly" (9). At once invoking both the alpha and the omega of John Christopher and Patricia's incestuous episodes, Johnnie's narration, at first glance, might also call into question the reliability of the narrator. What baby can really serve witness to such an event? And yet, within the world of the text and its multiple, shifting narrators and accounts, reliability seems not to be the point, as if thinking about a "reliable narrator" is as nonsensical as, to employ a C.S. Lewis phrase, asking how many

minutes are in the color yellow. In short, Herron constructs the text in such a way that it seems to function *beyond* logic. Because of Herron's surrealist artistic strategy, this translogical reading experience itself can be seen as breaking down the walls between cognition and intuition, between faith and reason.

In wrestling with questions of faith and faithfulness, perhaps the most salient "character" in *Thereafter Johnnie* is Herron's explicit, repeated, and strategic depiction of the District of Columbia as the fallen modern Jerusalem. The very first page of the novel finds Johnnie grieving "the holy city" (1); soon after, the District is qualified as a "struck diamond," a description of its physical geographic boundaries, with the Potomac River serrating the otherwise perfect square perched on one point, which connotes the image of a precious, royal locale that was violently damaged and now flawed. The equation of Washington with Jerusalem, the holy city, or Winthrop's "city on a hill" is further solidified through repeated references to the District as a hill; standing on "the hill that cuts through the city, the hill with Howard University on one end and Georgetown on the other," Cynthia Jane imagines "a poem about beginnings" and paints the hill as "rest[ing] in liquid arms" (61, 62). This imagery suggests the tenuousness of fragile support, for the rivers provide a precarious hold on the holy city. Ultimately, however, the unifying, troubled force that is the nation's capital microcosmically indicts not only a city but the nation at large through the Snowdon family.

In one of Eva's prophetic dreams, she reports that "[t]here were two nations [Africa and Europe] fighting in a single womb, each striving to kill the other, they came to America, and fell as one into sleep, dream, nightmare, upon the Potomac River: They shall awaken unto death" (117). Here, the United States sounds not like a glistening

hilltop city but a failed aborted offspring and the product of disgruntled miscegenation whose demise – rather than deliverance – reads as predestined. Both the harbinger of this pending death, as well as the hope of restoration, comes through the womb and words of Patricia, a name which literally means "of the father" and "of the nation" (Christian 6).

Much to the dismay of her sisters, Patricia "talk[s] about herself as if she were a myth, a myth of a falling city, or nation, or world, or god" and feels "as if somehow a new sphinx had asked the same old question, and she herself were the new answer" (124, 128). Specifically, Patricia believes that through her womb and maternal potential – which, in the context of the novel means embracing a child created of incest – she will fulfill her purpose of epic proportions: "Washington had lost its soul according to her and *she would restore it* through you [Johnnie], through her child" (70, emphasis added). Here, Patricia claims a direct heritage both to Mary, the Mother of God, *and* God the Father and thus threatens the role of patriarchal nationhood and religion via the erasure of a viable male figure. As biblical accounts depict, Mary gives birth to the Savior, but the rhetoric surrounding the active restoration of the world through one's child is reserved for God Himself (e.g. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son…). Mary receives credit for delivering the child and submits herself to God as his instrument, while the Father and the Son receive credit for delivering the planet. In the above passage, Patricia credits herself with both levels of deliverance.

Indeed, the character of Patricia begs questions about the role of maternal power in saving a nation from apocalypse by restoring its soul. She sees her child as one who "embodied the city's lost soul" (70). However, in a text in which apocalypse ensues, Johnnie's potential to restore is not actualized. Instead, at the close of the narrative,

Patricia's child is left floating around the deserted city in the form of a questionably non-corporeal light. As Robert Polhemus notes, "What Herron seems to imagine in [Johnnie]…isn't always clear…" (347), though one valid interpretation, much more ominous than Patricia's, frames Johnnie not as a returning soul but as "a symbol of slave-era miscegenation as well as incest, of a nation's sins as well as the father's" (Chideya). Aesthetically, at least, an unavoidable correlation exists between Herron's Johnnie and Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. With her "white blue eyes in [her] coal black face" (15), Johnnie is like the destructive dream of Pecola coming to fruition. Morrison's text ends with the young girl – and victim of incest – driven to madness, which manifests in her delusional belief that her dream of having blue eyes is actualized. In *Thereafter Johnnie*, Johnnie is *born* with bright blue eyes; thus, Herron's text seems to build on the tale where Morrison's ends – a continuation of the horrific, warped legacy of internalized racism and U.S. standards of beauty, now morphed into a critique of state-sanctioned rape and chattel slavery.

While Johnnie may be Pecola's dream actualized, rather than linking the blue-eyed child to insanity, *Thereafter Johnnie* grapples with the role of madness in the agency and agendas of her mother's generation of the Snowdon family. Undoubtedly, the most obvious case for a crazy prophetic black female figure in Herron's text is Patricia. Johnnie herself dismisses her mother as crazy when she declares her "Monomaniacal. Thoroughly insane. Beyond return my mother" (14). Indeed, the words of Patricia herself, as represented in her journal entries and letters, indicate an unstable mind. In a letter Patricia writes to her father which closely echoes Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Patricia pleads that "it's a sin for you to keep me in

prison like this…knowing how depressed I get you shouldn't place me in such confinement. I think you must be crazy, too, you must be off balance to do these things to me and think you're doing good" (58).[26] Here, Patricia chastises her father's decision to lock her away after she becomes pregnant with his child. In the eyes of the rest of the world, including her own family, Patricia's maternal identity is a source of shame.

Unable to recover from the way in which she is excised from her family, Patricia cannot cope with her maternal responsibilities and her own heartache, and she eventually drowns herself in the Potomac. Just as Camille fails to protect a young Patricia from her father's abuse, Patricia's suicide leaves young Johnnie without a mother or father to protect her from the city's impending destruction. With her childhood molestation, her repeated attempts as a young woman to "seduce" her father, the trauma of her abandonment, and her ultimate decision to end her life, Patricia's mental health is indeed called into question throughout the text and thus calls into question her belief that she has bestowed on the nation the child that will save it. Instead, Herron provides an alternative – and ultimately more complex – prophetic figure in Patricia's sister Eva. As the third sister, Cynthia Jane, surmises, "I don't think Eva was ever crazy. Patricia was insane but Eva never was. Eva's problem was *even more complicated*…She loved too much, she was full of love…" (142, emphasis added). The differentiation between the two sisters manifests in their divergent prophecies concerning the fate of the world. While Patricia foresees a world damned to hell and in need of a savior in the form of Johnnie, Eva believes that the power to revolutionize the world lies within each individual.

In the novel's eleventh chapter, which is narrated by Eva, she criticizes Patricia's

[26] In Gilman's 1899 short story, a young woman is confined to her bedroom following the orders of her husband, a doctor who believes that this rest cure will treat her nervous depression. After her repeated requests to leave the room are denied, the woman slowly descends into madness.

perspective of the world as "a good idea that had failed…Horror and inhumanity validated her idea of life, a mythical belief that the world was damned. Apocalypse" (70). In Eva's more nuanced prediction of how the world will be revolutionized, in response to her friends' musings that "Perhaps a black boy will be born in Harlem to raise the true black nation," Eva proclaims that "it will be a girl, and she won't be in Harlem, and she won't raise it, and the nation will not be true black. In a room on the northwest corner of 14th and U Streets, Northwest" (6). Eva's prophetic paradigm is compelling for multiple reasons. First, like Patricia, she thwarts both biblical and black nationalist tradition by assigning messianic potential to a female figure. However, unlike Patricia, by stating that this redeemer will not "raise it [the nation]," Eva hints at the possibility that the nation does not need to fall in order to be revolutionized. Additionally, Eva envisions a more inclusive version of what deliverance might look like beyond "true black" and thus further complicates the Black Nationalist stance characterized by her friends. Finally, by locating the messianic figure at the very spot in which she currently sits, Eva suggests the possibility of herself – a childless young woman of sound mind and promiscuous body – performing such a redemptive function. While Patricia is outcast for her "relationship" with John Christopher and Cynthia Jane throws herself into organized religion as a means of coping with her familial dysfunction, it is Eva who argues for individual ability and responsibility in actively creating a better place. While Patricia declares that the world is damned and her daughter is its savior, Eva insists that the world may be revolutionized by redeemers that come in multiple, sometimes unlikely forms.

And yet, the conclusion of *Thereafter Johnnie* does not endorse either of these prophetic paradigms. Johnnie is born, Eva continues to subscribe to a salvific love ethic,

and Washington City falls and is not restored. In the disorienting closing moments of the text, a descendent of Diotima recounts a folktale in which the Potomac River is personified as an "old half-black Indian mother." As the tale reaches its resolution, the reader begins to anticipate the relief of the nation's deliverance: "it is ordained…joy shall come to our land" (157, 164). However, the repeated cry of "Happy New Millennium" that follows becomes not a joyful praise but an ironic, almost hypnotic chant sucked dry of promise. The novel's last paragraph laments the erasure of deliverance as well as the unrepentant, unrelenting action responsible for its impossibility: "But it came not to pass, for the byword not only for all that house but for all that village, that capital city of the north, Washington City kept as its byword forever for its grand family of Northern Europe and Africa, forever, 'Kill the boys and rape the girls'" (164). Tied into these seven conclusive words is a legacy of human atrocity and social ills by the self-proclaimed "City on a Hill": war and imperialism, slavery and sexism, prejudice and hypocrisy. The ultimate verdict in *Thereafter Johnnie*, for all its confusion and disorientation, is that the United States, in its current state, is irredeemable – a charge highly blasphemous to the American national sense of self. As long as violence and aggression and sexism and militarism continue to be the byword of the land, the land will perish. These cancers must be pulled up at the roots in order to make room for something else to grow.

Both *Thereafter Johnnie* and *Linden Hills* end with the collapse of their respective worlds. What can we take away, then, from these apocalyptic tales? What comes after the apocalypse that actually comes? With what exactly are we "left behind"? Can individuals, as Eva suggests, revolutionize their lives here on earth rather than passively

wait for the Messiah to arrive and carry or condemn them to an other-worldly eternal destination? One possible answer is found in the post-apocalyptic generative space in the Black Female jeremiadic work of Octavia Butler.

Chapter Three

"I'd Rather Be a Cyborg [Jeremiad] than a Goddess":
The Critical Jeremiad of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*
and *Parable of the Talents*

Introduction

"She used to love to buy the books by Octavia Butler
Parable of the Sower, the main character's name was Lauren"
– Talib Kweli, "Ms. Hill" (2005)

In his lyrical homage to Lauryn Hill, hip-hop artist Talib Kweli explicitly draws a parallel between "Ms. Hill" and the prophetic black female protagonist of science fiction writer Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). Spanning the years 2024-2090, Butler's *Parable* series traces the journey of Lauren Olamina from a precocious teenager whose family is killed in the violence of the apocalyptic near-future U.S. society to her death as an 81-year-old celebrity leader of a new religion, Earthseed. In *Parable of the Sower*, young Lauren sets out on foot from Southern California to go north – an allusion to the south-to-north trajectory of the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition – and amasses a group of traveling companions. This "remnant" includes the first converts to her humanist religion and eventually forms the basis for Acorn, the utopian community she establishes in Northern California at the end of the first novel.

Lauren's peaceful and protective community, however, proves to be short-lived. In *Parable of the Talents*, after five years of a challenging but fruitful existence, Acorn is infiltrated and seized by the Christian America Crusaders. This Nazi/KKK hybrid of

terrorists ascribes to the fundamentalist ideology of the newly-elected President Jarret, whose totalitarianism is permitted to take hold as a reactionary salve playing on the public's desire to restore order after the chaos of the apocalypse depicted in *Parable of the Sower*. Eventually escaping the "re-education camp" that was once her home, Lauren spends the remainder of the second novel searching for her infant daughter, who was snatched away in the raid and placed in a "proper" patriotic Christian American home, and recruiting followers for her new religion. Of Lauren's two primary missions, the growth of Earthseed proves to be the much more successful endeavor.

The two essential preoccupations Butler draws for her protagonist – Lauren's complex relationship to her own maternal identity and her relentless drive to establish a spiritual alternative to the oppressive state-sanctioned religion – places the *Parable* novels directly within the two-pronged framework of the Black Female Jeremiad. First, through the puritanical President Jarret, founder of the fundamentalist Christian America denomination, Butler critiques the traditional American Jeremiad and its misdiagnoses of national ills. Second, through her "incompatible" roles as religious and community leader, loving but non-sacrificing mother, and empathic militant, Lauren embodies a vexed maternity and generative militancy that complicate essentialized notions of black female subjectivity. Ultimately, this gendered, hopeful militancy in the midst of dystopian critique reinforces the Black Female Jeremiad's hybridized subversiveness and highlights the richest dimensions of both the fictional Lauren Olamina and, to an even greater extent, her creator Octavia Butler.

As a black female writer of science fiction, a genre overwhelmingly populated by white men, Octavia Butler runs the risk of becoming a token novelty, reduced to the

lowest common denominator "as a writer both female and black [who] has an especially acute perspective on issues of 'alien as other'" (Roberts 76). Butler, however, received critical acclaim irrespective of her undoubtedly unique positionality in the science fiction (SF) genre, winning the prestigious Hugo and Nebula awards and the MacArthur "Genius" Grant and publishing a dozen novels before her untimely death in 2006 at the age of 58. Her *Xenogenesis*[1] series is perhaps her most distinguished in scholarly circles, which have yet to give a comprehensive consideration of her role as a Black Female Jeremiad. Instead, critics have focused on Butler, along with Marge Piercy and Joanna Russ, as leaders of "the 1970s new wave radical female SF writers" (Roberts 75); these writers, SF scholar Raffaella Baccolini contends, helped to establish a new sub-genre she labels the critical dystopia: "works of SF that contain both utopian and dystopian elements…texts that maintain a utopian core at their center, a locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives" (13). In short, the critical dystopia shares the "unshakable optimism" Sacvan Bercovich identifies at the core of the traditional American Jeremiad, while at the same time deconstructing oppressive traditions such as the American Jeremiad itself and its complicity in perpetuating exclusionary myths such as American Exceptionalism. Thus, as Butler's work illustrates, the SF genre is a particularly conducive stage for Black Female Jeremiadic expression.

While the SF genre is notoriously difficult to define, a commonly-accepted working definition labels SF a subset of "metaphorical fiction" – a "rhetorical fiction [which] invokes a translation of this actual world through one or other algorithm of

[1] First published separately as *Dawn*, *Adulthood Rites*, and *Imago*, the series can now be found as one volume under the title *Lilith's Brood*.

difference" or what preeminent SF theorist Darko Suvin classifies as the *novum*: "the historical innovation or novelty in a SF text from which the most important distinctions between the world of the tale from the world of the reader stem" (Roberts 135; Csicsery-Ronay 118). In other words, something in the SF text signifies that this is not where "we" live, a characteristic of SF known as "cognitive estrangement" (Mendelsohn 5). And yet, crucially, the reader nonetheless retains a sense that this "other" place is somehow profoundly relevant to our own.

Still, the ability to maintain – at least partially – the world of SF as an "other" creates a space for subversive societal critique unique to allegorical genres, "where social, political, and cultural materials may be confronted in a way that simply would be too traumatic for much of its audience if tackled head-on" (Wegner 198). Moreover, as numerous critics have noted, the critically devalued and culturally marginalized status of SF novels as a genre further extends its subversive potential (Baccolini 15), perhaps because the genre's inherent dismissal mitigates the need for hegemonic policing. Conventional wisdom holds that SF is, by definition, a little bit "out there" – psychologically and often literally – and this always-already liminal space ensures that it will never access a place of cultural centrality. Thus, the threatening aspect of subversiveness, in SF at large but also as a genre conducive for jeremiadic critique, is relatively neutralized – suggesting that labeling a person, place, or thing "whacky" is a highly effective tool for institutional control.

In addition to the devaluation and dismissal of SF, the genre is also marked by a conduciveness to both defamiliarization and muddled temporality that make SF fertile soil for the emergence of jeremiadic critique. Defamiliarization has "long been

associated with SF" (Csicsery-Ronay 129); for example, Butler's explicit formation of Christian America in *Parable of the Talents* underscores and defamiliarizes the invisible[2] hegemonic qualifier before "America," the nation's most conventionally patriotic self-descriptive term. By extension, Octavia Butler effectively queers founding national myths such as Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism. While transcripts of Puritan sermons from Increase Mather, John Cotton, and Jonathan Edwards are often read as standard American history and literature, President Jarret's sermon-speeches, which echo the traditional American Jeremiad in both rhetorical form and content, become frightening cries for intolerance and elimination of the "other" in Butler's *Parable* novels.

Moreover, the SF genre lends itself to jeremiadic expression and prophetic denunciation by "predicting" a future that, like the traditional American Jeremiad, is intangibly located.[3] The muddled temporality of SF, what Frederic Jameson calls the transformation of "our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come" (qtd. in Miller 347), often leads to eerie moments in which the cognitive estrangement of the text becomes a disconcerting experience of cognitive recognition. For example, in *Sower*, Butler writes:

> There's a big, early-season storm blowing itself out in the Gulf of Mexico. It's bounced around the Gulf, killing people from Florida to Texas and down into Mexico. There are over 700 known dead so far. One hurricane. And how many people has it hurt? How many are going to starve later

[2] Similarly, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison argues that "white" is the invisible qualifier before the term "America."
[3] In *The Shape of Things to Come: Prophecy and the American Voice*, Marcus contends that prophecy is "referring always backward and forward to the New Jerusalem somewhere in the past, somewhere in the future."

> because of destroyed crops? That's nature. Is it God? Most of the dead are the street poor who have nowhere to go and who don't hear the warnings until it's too late for their feet to take them to safety. (13)

For a reader after August 2005, this passage written in 1993 appears to predict a Hurricane Katrina-like catastrophe. Suddenly, the narrative "leaps" Butler takes in her fictive text do not appear so otherworldly, leaving the reader to contemplate what other "predictions" may come to pass.

If, however, the reader is left with fear and trepidation at Butler's "prediction," she oversimplifies Butler's agenda and the *variant* of prophetic authorship that she embodies. In a 2004 interview with *Motion Magazine*, when asked about the portions of the *Parable* books that had, in fact, already come to fruition since their original publication, Butler redirects the conversation by emphasizing that "I was not trying to prophesize. Matter of fact, I was trying to give warning." By self-identifying as a creator of "cautionary tales"[4] who attempts not to predict but to "give warning" in the hopes that the future will, in fact, look *different* from the world of the novels, Butler engages in the hopeful denunciation at the heart of the traditional Jeremiad.

Before turning to the *Parable* novels themselves, I offer a reading of Donna Haraway's seminal feminist theory of the cyborg and Raffaella Baccolini's notion of critical dystopia in relation to the Black Female Jeremiad. In short, Butler's *Parable* series may be read as a cyborgian, critical Jeremiad in a way that evokes Haraway and Baccolini as well as extends their frameworks into a theological space, much in the same way that womanist theologians of the 1980s appropriated and theologized Alice Walker's

[4] 2005 *Democracy Now!* interview

secular term “womanist.”

Cyborgs and Jeremiads: The Holding Together of Incompatibles

Donna Haraway begins her widely influential “Cyborg Manifesto” by identifying the cyborg as a myth located “[a]t the center of my ironic faith, my blasphemy” (149). By qualifying her faithfulness[5] as blasphemous – an “ironic faith” rather than one predicated on “reverent worship and identification” – Haraway hints at the potential in unpacking religion by engaging with religious discourse in a non-traditional or “ironic” way. As Haraway defines it, “Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true” (149). Likewise, the Black Female Jeremiad does not *abandon* religion or the jeremiadic form but rather critiques them; she advocates embracing rather than erasing contradictions inherent in the explosive intersections of a complexly rich life and faith. For example, in the *Parable* novels, even as Lauren renounces Christianity and advances a new religion predicated on the doctrine that “God is change,” Butler closes both texts by quoting the King James Version of the novels’ namesake parables,[6] suggesting that even the most orthodox translation of the Bible might still hold significance alongside Lauren’s Earthseed.

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[5] In this context, Haraway is speaking of faithfulness to feminism, socialism, and materialism.

[6] [5]"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. [6]Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. [7]Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. [8]Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." [Luke 8:5-8]

[14]"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. [15]To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each

Additionally, if, as Haraway suggests, merely occupying the positionality of "'women of colour' might be understood as a cyborg identity" (174), this positionality is further embodied by black women like Lauren who perform the type of hybrid Jeremiad characterized by the holding together of "incompatibles" such as the dichotomies of maternal/militant, sacred/secular, destructive/generative, masculine/feminine, and iconoclastic/faithful. And if, in fact, "[Haraway's] cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusion, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as part of needed political work" (154), I add another potent fusion and layer of irony by applying the cyborg myth, in its original context so linked to late twentieth century science and technology, to the orthodox rhetorical tradition whose name is derived from the ancient prophecy of 7th and 6th century BC.

While still maintaining the essential traditional American jeremiadic components of denunciation and deliverance at its core, the Black Female Jeremiad is a particularly

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according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. **16**The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. **17**So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. **18**But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. **19**"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. **20**The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' **21**"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' **22**"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' **23**"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' **24**"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. **25**So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' **26**"His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? **27**Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. **28**" 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. **29**For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. **30**And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'" [Matthew 25:14-30]. [www.biblegateway.com]

radical derivative, an offspring of the traditional American Jeremiad but an "illegitimate" one at that – a shared, potentially subversive quality of the cyborg, whose "main trouble," Haraway declares, "of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (151). Here, Haraway suggests a number of cyborgian elements that may be productively related to the Black Female Jeremiad. First, the articulation of the cyborg's "main trouble" suggests that they somehow pose a threat, or at the very least a disruption, to traditional order. Similarly, the biblical Jeremiad was considered an unwelcome threat to the powers that be in Jerusalem; however, the traditional American Jeremiad established by the New England Puritans very much functioned as a tool *of*, rather than against, the ruling ideologies of the time – patriarchal, religiously-dictated governance.

By interrogating the traditionally oppressive regimes of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy *through* their radical Jeremiads, their illegitimacy, like that of the cyborg, creates an opening of sorts for Black Female Jeremiads; by being unfaithful to its traditional Puritan origins, Black Female Jeremiads are actually *more* faithful to a divine calling, to a God not qualified or diluted by specific nationalist interests, and thus they evoke more of the biblical Jeremiah himself rather than the Puritan Jeremiads of Samuel Danforth and Increase Mather. In this context, the Black Female Jeremiad's illegitimacy – a qualifier so often applied in the name of the derision of black women – is reappropriated as an ironic return to faithfulness and rhetorical fidelity.

Further, in deeming their fathers inessential, Haraway asserts that "the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden…[and]…does not

dream of community on the model of the organic family" (151). This description fully anticipates both the spiritual and communal efforts of Lauren Olamina in Butler's *Parables*. In creating Earthseed, Lauren revises Christianity's notion of salvation and Edenic completion; according to Earthseed, individuals are not saved through faith in Jesus but their faithfulness to one another, and the final destination of Earthseed followers is not Heaven but the literal heavens, as the closing of Talents finds the Earthseed faithful en route to establish colonies in outer space. Additionally, Lauren revises the notion of family; the kinship ties in her Acorn community are based, to use Judith Butler's terms, on "radical kinship" or "the social organization of need" rather than blood ties (qtd. in Wegner 206). As such, the *Parable* novels advocate for a disengagement with the heteronormative, patriarchal nuclear family, as well as the disavowal of the traditional Christian-anticipated resolution to human history.

In the cyborg figure, Haraway contends, "the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history" (158). The work of the cyborg and the Black Female Jeremiad, then, allows us to revise and reclaim the ending of the story – or more specifically, reclaim *through* (re)writing, as Lauren does in her journal entries that constitute the majority of the *Parables* text. In short, both Haraway's cyborg and the Black Female Jeremiad as exemplified in Butler's texts redefine prophecy itself. Going beyond the confines of predicting death and/or deliverance, the Black Female Jeremiad and the cyborg acknowledge that life itself is a constant, dynamic mediation between these two reductive binaries, which ultimately coexist *within* one another rather than serve as polarized, finite states of being.

Additionally, the success or failure of this mediation is predicated on the Black Female Jeremiad's confidence in her own hybrid identity and her ability in holding "incompatible" things together. Referencing Audre Lorde's seminal work, Haraway contends, "*Sister Outsider* hints at the possibility of world survival not because of her innocence, but because of her ability to live on the boundaries, to write without the founding myth of original wholeness, with its inescapable apocalypse of final return to a deathly oneness that Man has imagined to be the innocent and all-powerful Mother…" (176). In other words, if you revise Genesis, you revise Revelation – or rather, you create a universe in which the apocalypse need not exist. In the *Parables*, Lauren Olamina opens up these possibilities through the creation of Earthseed. Moreover, as Haraway asserts, such a revision opens up a place to recreate the traditional functions and qualifications of Mother, a component crucial to the work of Black Female Jeremiads, whose ability to navigate a complex spectrum of maternal and militant positionalities calls into question both the reductive hegemonic stereotypes of black motherhood such as the compliant mammy, the emasculating matriarch, and the parasitic welfare mother, as well as black feminist thought's redemptory celebration of black motherhood as a site of power.

(Critical) Utopias, (Critical) Dystopias, and the (Critical) Jeremiad

"I find utopias ridiculous."
-- Octavia Butler[7]

While Lauren's hybrid positionality and Butler's texts invoke the boundary-transgressing cyborg, Butler's employment of the critical dystopia subgenre of SF creates

[7] Qtd. in Miller 339

what I call the "critical Jeremiad" epitomized by prophetic black women's appropriation of the rhetorical tradition. Completing the list of Darko Suvin's key ideas of SF criticism is SF's generic link with utopianism (Csicsery-Ronay 118). Frederic Jameson defines utopia as a "socio-economic sub-genre of [SF]" (xiv); literally "no place," utopia lends itself to SF precisely because SF lends itself to the depiction of alternate realities. While preeminent SF scholar Lyman Tower Sargent's basic definition of utopia is "a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and place" (qtd. in Moylan 74), often the term "utopia" is understood to signify a "eutopia" or "positive utopia": "the homeland where no one has ever been but where alone we are authentically at home. It is the *promised land* that can only be attained by means of *exodus*" (Freedman 65, emphasis added). Pointing to the affiliation between religion and utopia, the clear religious overtones of Freedman's description equate utopia with a city-on-a-hill promised land. Further reinforcing the religious correlation is Jameson's characterization that the creators of Utopian societies, "whether political, textual or hermeneutic, have always been maniacs and oddballs: a deformation readily enough explained by the fallen societies in which they had to fulfill their vocation" (10) – a description, in short, that overlaps with the "mad" prophetic voice.

If utopias describe the "City on a Hill," its generic counterpart – the dystopia – points to the "underside of the utopian imagination" (Moylan xi) in the same way that the Jeremiad functions as the underside of American exceptionalism. The dystopian strategy, "according to Sargent, is to 'map, warn, hope'" (Stillman 15) – a strategy which mirrors the traditional jeremiadic structure of citing the promise, citing the declension, and predicting reprieve. The "hope" in dystopian fiction comes from their function not as a

prediction of certain doom but as a warning, which "implies that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible" (Sargent, qtd. in Moylan 136). The major distinction between dystopian and jeremiadic texts, then, is that a jeremiadic work is a dystopian text that interrogates, considers and/or engages with religion, either explicitly or subtextually, in essential ways, whereas dystopian texts need not include a religiously-slanted critique.

Particularly relevant to the study of Black Female Jeremiads in SF is the emergence of the scholarly addition of "critical" utopias and dystopias. A more nuanced approach, "[b]y 'critical' [Moylan] means – in the Enlightenment sense of *critique* – the expression of oppositional thought with regard to the genre and the historical situation and – in the nuclear sense – the '*critical mass*' required to make the necessary explosive reaction" (Baccolini 16). Thus, the emergence of critical utopia "was actually a transformation that had to pass through the *destruction* of utopian writing as it was known until then *in order to preserve it*" (16, emphasis added). In short, there is something destructive in a critical project, but destructive in the most productive sense of the word; a seminal verse from Earthseed points to the efficacy of such a critical project: "In order to rise/ From its own ashes/ A phoenix/ First/ Must/ Burn" (*Sower* 137).

The Black Female Jeremiad is a critical Jeremiad in this sense, as works that "interrogate both society and their generic predecessors," to borrow Sargent's description of critical dystopia (Moylan 188). Thus, while the critical dystopia offers a two-pronged critique – of society and of the dystopian genre – a critical Jeremiad, embodied by the Black Female Jeremiad, will engage in a religio-political critique of society and of the Jeremiad rhetorical form. Nowhere is this two-pronged analysis more apparent than in the *Parables*, which critique society in part by deconstructing President Jarret's

jeremiadic performances. In the same way that Haraway's cyborg is characterized by an ironic faith, the critical Black Female Jeremiad does not disavow its generic predecessors but rather attempts to regenerate them.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, "the contributions of feminist women occupy a leading edge" of critical dystopias (Moylan 188). In his book-length study *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Moylan dedicates an entire chapter to Butler's *Parables*. While analyzing Butler in the context of critical dystopia is not an innovative move, I put a fresh spin on the existing conversation by underscoring the previously unarticulated similarities between dystopia and the Jeremiad and – more crucially – between critical dystopia and the Black Female Jeremiad. An important component of this critical Jeremiad relates to its negotiation of pessimism and optimism. According to Soren Baggesen, "in the face of a bad situation [dystopia], which must be grasped in an honest pessimism rather than an idealist optimism, there are still two available responses"; borrowing Ernst Bloch's terminology, these two options are "resigned pessimism" and "militant pessimism" (qtd. in Moylan 153). While the first option holds no hope and lacks the Jeremiad's optimistic core, the second not only retains hope at its core but *maintains* this resolve and argues for its actualization. In the *Parable* series, Butler takes up the second positionality.

Octavia Butler's Parable of the Jeremiad

At the beginning of *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren Olamina is a fifteen-year-old "weird preacher's kid" (*Sower* 154) living in the walled community of Robledo – an enclave approximately twenty miles from Los Angeles. The inhabitants of Robledo,

including Lauren's Baptist minister father, stepmother,[8] and four younger half-brothers, strive to be as self-sustaining as possible; venturing outside the community walls is highly dangerous and takes place only for unavoidable excursions such as baptisms and target practice. By the middle of *Sower,* both Lauren's father and her oldest brother, a fourteen-year-old who embodies the type of nihilism Cornel West laments in *Race Matters,* are killed after they venture outside the walls.

A laundry list of diseases and natural disasters – cholera, measles, tornadoes, and blizzards (47) – are plaguing various parts of the country, and massive numbers of U.S. citizens are attempting to relocate to Canada; however, like the "undesirable" Cuban or Mexican immigrants attempting to gain access to the U.S. today, they are regarded as a nuisance: "People get shot every day trying to sneak into Canada. Nobody wants California trash" (73). Typically dystopic in that the book "begins directly in the bad new world" (Moylan 148), *Sower* takes a major turn mid-novel when Lauren's neighborhood is invaded and destroyed by fire-craving, drug-addicted thieves. These invaders are "pyros," young people addicted to a powerful new drug that produces endorphins that trump sexual pleasure as a result of watching fires burn. As Lauren's stepmother despairs after hearing a radio report of pyro criminal activity, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils[9]…" (128). While the presence of radio as the primary way in which information is disseminated alludes to the Great Depression era – further evoked by the exodus of traveling "Calies" akin to "Okies" – the novel's persistent and frightening fire imagery, which continues after the destruction of her community as Lauren walks north with a growing group of followers,

[8] Lauren's mother died while giving birth to her.
[9] Revelation 18:2

evokes an apocalyptic, fire-*this*-time atmosphere.

While both *Sower* and *Talents* depict a highly disturbing quasi-alternative U.S. society, *Talents* begins five years after the first novel ends and presents a more stabilized world; the question of the text becomes, however, "At what cost?" As Phillip Wegner succinctly summarizes the key distinction between the cultural climates of *Sower* and *Talents*:

> the allegorical center of the series shifts with the second novel, as Butler now focuses her attention on a rising tide of fundamentalism that takes root in the United States through its promise of returning some semblance of order to this chaotic world. In this, Butler also offers an allegory of what David Harvey among others has characterized as the neoconservative response to the destructiveness, violence, and social instability of neoliberal global economic policies. (201)

Thus, while the novels are distinct, for a project largely interested in tracing the evolution of Lauren as an individual and Earthseed as a religious movement, the series may be considered holistically. With the exception of the change in the political and cultural scene, *Talents* can be characterized as a continuation and progression of Lauren and her nascent belief system. The radical kinship formed at the end of *Sower* continues in the sequel, as does a second example of a walled community in Acorn, the community Lauren establishes at the end of *Sower* and which is violently converted into Camp Christian midway through *Talents*.

Another continuation from *Sower* to *Talents* is Butler's strikingly underemphasized depiction of race. In *Sower*, only after thirty pages of journal writing

does Lauren mention race or anything that might typically signify racial affiliation to the reader. When Lauren does explicitly do so, it is included in the context of the danger of being in a mixed-race group of people. In this world gone to hell, race clearly still matters, but the typical racial signifiers have shifted. Whatever language or cultural factors may typically be "coded," the world of Butler's novels empties those significations. In short, unless Butler identifies a character as a particular race, there is nothing in the story proper to identify this marker of difference, so much so that when she explicitly names an individual's race, the reader is often caught off guard.

Furthermore, both novels employ an epistolary structure. *Sower* is exclusively the journal of Lauren Olamina, peppered with her burgeoning verses of *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, while *Talents* expands on this technique to include journal accounts other than Lauren's alone. Butler's decision to frame the texts largely as Lauren's own writings reflects the novels' cyborgian agenda; as Haraway contends, "writing is pre-eminently the *technology* of cyborgs" (176, Haraway's emphasis). In both *Sower* and *Talents*, Lauren relies on her journals as a means of expression and sustainability. If, as Haraway contends, writing by U.S. women of color is "about access to the power to signify" and "[c]yborg writing is about the power to survive, not only on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (175), Lauren embodies this resistance throughout the series, but particularly in *Talents* when she declares, while captive in Camp Christian, "My writing is a way for me to remind myself that I am human, that God is change, and that I will escape this place" (223). Moreover, Lauren fulfills a literal translation of "seizing the tools to mark the world that marked [her] as other" in order to escape from that place –

dismantling the slave collars that mark her and her fellow Earthseed "heathens" as less than human.

Furthermore, the proliferation of narrative voices in *Talents* – the uncompromising leader, Lauren; her reserved and worried husband, Bankole; her insecure and fundamentalist brother, Marc; and her answer-seeking, angry daughter, Larkin – extends the second novel beyond the "single vision" of Lauren/Earthseed. If, as Haraway notes, "[s]ingle vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters," then the disparate voices in *Talents* provides readers access to multiple "perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point" (Haraway 154). Thus, while Lauren's vision is a substantial component of Butler's texts, even the protagonist's subversive critique of society is not dealt with uncritically.

"Religion is Everywhere"

Butler's most explicit societal critique comes in her depiction of the fundamentalist return of Christian America. In privileging religious dialogue, the *Parables* go against the grain of SF's generic treatment of religion, which is typically "seen less as a mode of thought and more as a lack of thought" (Mendlesohn, "Religion and Science Fiction" 266). In a *Democracy Now!* interview, Butler makes a case for her less reductive consideration of sacred beliefs: "Religion is everywhere. There are no human societies without it, whether they acknowledge it as a religion or not. So I thought religion might be an answer, as well as, in some cases, a problem. And in, for instance, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, it's both." In short, Butler offers a

negotiated reading of religion, one that undermines the Manichean foundation at the core of Western religious thought. Any given religion, Butler suggests, is not inherently *either* good *or* bad, *either* useful *or* ineffective – rather, it is only as good and effective as its practitioners; thus, Butler places religious agency in human hands rather than in deities they may fear or revere.

In *Parable of the Sower*, young Lauren makes a distinction between her burgeoning Earthseed beliefs and her father's faith almost immediately: "my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church…My God has another name" (6). From the beginning of the narrative, Lauren is always already thinking critically about traditional Christianity's conception of God and attempting to open it up in a way that deepens her lived reality. Like most individuals in the initial stages of major institutional revisions, Lauren first defines Earthseed in relation to what it is *not* rather than what it is – and what it is not is her father's God: "a big-daddy-God or a big-cop-God or a big-king-God…a super-powerful man, playing with his toys the way my youngest brothers play with toy soldiers" (13, 14). The problem, Lauren contends, with such a figure is that it places people in a passive relationship with God.

Indeed, one of the crucial distinctions Lauren makes between her father's God and her own is the distribution of human agency: "There's power in knowing that God can be focused, diverted, shaped by anyone at all. But there's no power in having strength and brains, and yet waiting for God to fix things for you or take revenge for you" (197). In a clash between generations over what it means to be faithful, similar to the conflict in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, Lauren believes not, as her father puts it, that "our world is coming to an end," but that "*your* [his] world is coming to an end" (55). As a

consequence, through Earthseed, Lauren articulates what Tom Moylan calls "the transcendent vision of a quite secular theology" (223). This label underscores Earthseed's cyborgian ability to hold together the "incompatibles" of sacred and secular. Further, Lauren's theology echoes that of another great radical Jeremiad, James Baldwin, who continued to articulate a secular liberation theology throughout his life – one in opposition to the church of his father and Baldwin's own boyhood preaching days, one that the writer admits is a faith but not "in any sense which would make sense to any church" (qtd. in Lynch).

Like Baldwin, Lauren argues against passive reliance on an all-powerful God and heightens personal responsibility to each other: "Nothing is going to save us. If we don't save ourselves, we're dead"; if "God doesn't care about you at all," then "[a]ll the more reason to care for myself and others. All the more reason to create Earthseed communities and shape God together[10]" (*Sower* 51, 199). Lauren repeatedly states that she did not *create* Earthseed, but rather observed "people…myself, everything I could read, hear, see, all the history I could learn" and then attempted "to put things down in ways that are as powerful, as simple, and as direct as I feel them[11]" (*Sower* 194, 69). The first verse of *Earthseed: The Books of the Living* – "All that you touch, You Change. / All that you Change, Changes you. / The only lasting truth/ Is Change./ God is Change" (*Sower* 70) – speaks to the religion's dynamic, organic interconnectedness theory of life. Lauren and her religion are confronted by a violent and thoroughly oppositional force in

[10] In the 1968 speech "White Racism or World Community?" Baldwin states, "[Jesus] claimed to be the Son of God. That claim was a revelation and a revolution because it means that we are all the sons of God. That is a challenge, that's the hope…we are responsible for our soul's salvation" (*Collected Essays* 441).

[11] Lauryn Hill echoes these sentiments in an *Unplugged* interlude: "And I've been really…just waiting for the patience and really trying to articulate where I'm coming from as simply as possible."

newly-elected President Jarret and Christian America. Before being elected President of the United States in 2032, Andrew Jarret's resume highlight was founding the Christian America denomination, making official and explicit the understood faith of the United States. Ostensibly resigned from his position after taking office, Jarret nonetheless remains recognized "as the head of the church" (*Talents* 20). Thus, the separation between church and state all but disappears. Evaluating Jarret's presidency, Lauren's brother Marc summarizes, "he pulled religion and government together and cemented the link with money from rich businessmen" (*Talents* 309). The infusion of capitalism and patriarchy with the "City on a Hill" closes off the potential for a radical subjectivity and instead solidifies the use of the form for traditionally conservative discourse. Both Jarret and Langston Hughes may urge citizens to "[h]elp us to make America great again" (*Talents* 20), but Jarret's game plan opens up a cultural space for a return of religious crusaders that enact Puritan intolerance – "Jarret's supporters have been known, now and then, to form mobs and burn people at the stake for being witches" (19) – and suggest KKK/Nazi terrorism by turning Acorn into a concentration camp-like prison while wearing "big white crosses on their chests" (18). Disturbed by the fundamentalist zealotry resonating throughout a country starved for any promises of structure, purpose, and connection, Lauren hauntingly observes, "This was something new…Or something old" (18).

This "something old" is reinforced in the extended transcripts of two thoroughly old-school Puritan Jeremiads delivered by Jarret, one as preacher and the other as President-preacher, as well as through the novel's explicit reference to perhaps the most "fire and brimstone" of all of the Puritan sermons, Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the

Hands of an Angry God." Recalling her high school required reading and the cultural climate of her "return to the roots of America" childhood, Lauren's daughter Larkin succinctly summarizes the eighteenth-century preacher's indelible message: "Its first few words sum up the kinds of lessons many children [including herself] were forced to learn in the world outside Acorn…You're worthless. God hates you. All you deserve is pain and death" (63). Likewise, President Jarret's sermon-speeches deliver a similarly harrowing take-away message.

Jarret's frightening pronouncements merit quoting at length, as not only the message but the rhetoric squarely align with the jeremiadic sermons in vogue three hundred years before his time:

> "There was a time, Christian Americans, when our country ruled the world," he said. "America was God's country and we were God's people and God took care of his own. Now look at us. Who are we? What are we? What foul, seething, corrupt heathen concoction have we become?...We are God's people, or we are filth! We are God's people, or we are nothing!...Oh my God, my God, why have we forsaken thee?
>
> Why have we allowed ourselves to be seduced and betrayed by these allies of Satan, these heathen purveyors of false and unchristian doctrines? These people…these pagans are not only wrong. They're dangerous. They're as destructive as bullets, as contagious as plagues, as poisonous as snakes to the society they infest. They kill us, Christian American brothers and sisters. They kill us! They rouse the righteous anger of God against us for our misguided generosity to them…

> Shall we let them continue to drag our country down into hell? Think! What do we do to weeds, to viruses, to parasitic worms, to cancers? What must we do to protect ourselves and our children? What can we do to regain our stolen nation?" (88-89)

In this traditional Manichean worldview, "we" are either "God's people" or "filth/nothing!" Here, Jarret also establishes the "them" – "heathens" such as Acorn and its Earthseed followers – who are responsible for the nation's woes. God's chosen people are at fault only insofar as they have "allowed" themselves to be "seduced and betrayed." This rhetoric suggests an Eve-like correlation with the 'heathens" and reinforces the traditional patriarchal order of the Christian Church, as well as of the traditional American Jeremiad. As a "heathen" black woman, no wonder Lauren's enclave must be attacked and destroyed by Christian America. The analogies of "weeds," "parasites," and "cancers" suggest the danger among and within us – the clear and present danger of the body politic turning on itself. This viral "segment" must be destroyed, Jarret commands, in order to avoid the destruction of the national fabric. After citing the promise ("we" as God's chosen people) and the declension ("what foul, seething, corrupt heathen concoction have we become!"), the only "hope" or "reprieve" comes from absolute intolerance of difference, with the "them" conveniently remaining an ambiguous umbrella term open to manipulation.

Jarret's inaugural address offers an even more blatant jeremiad, quoting directly from the first chapter of the Book of Isaiah:

> 'Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate as overthrown by

> strangers…'Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they will be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.' (147)

While the first sermon-speech indicates Jarret's planned methodology for achieving deliverance through expulsion of the Other, here Jarret focuses on the nation's pending deliverance, now that he has been elected; by shedding the blood of the Other, sins will be washed away, the Promised Land will be restored.

Clearly, Christian America and Jarret's fundamentalist terror are in direct opposition to Earthseed and Lauren's prophetic voice. And yet, Butler includes a third religious positionality that complicates the seemingly polarized Earthseed and Christian America theologies through the narrative of Lauren's brother Marc. A Christian America preacher, Marc shares striking similarities with Lauren in terms of the function that religion serves in their lives despite vast differences in their theologies.

Recalling Lauren and Marc's father, Larkin categorizes her grandfather as "a good and dedicated Baptist minister…but beyond that, he had no ambitions. It never seemed to occur to him that he could or should fix the world. Yet he was the father of two would-be world-fixers" (110). On the most superficial level, Lauren's and Marc's would-be solutions could not be more polarized; Marc's "gods were order, stability, safety, control" (111) – tenets in direct opposition to Earthseed's "God is change" faith. However, while the siblings' theologies could not be more different, Butler's representation of how their faiths play out suggests that regardless of the belief system

itself, *any religion* can function as a compromised and problematic, if not explicitly negative, force depending on the motivations of its practitioners.

After assuming that Lauren died in the raid on Robledo – an assumption that Lauren makes about him in return – Marc is unofficially adopted by a loving family who encourages him to answer his "calling" as a boy preacher: "And I loved being Marcos Duran – the little preacher. People trusted me, respected me…" (123). Indeed, it is this need to reclaim a place of reverence that drives him into the pulpit of Christian America after Lauren buys him out of slavery when he is nineteen. A brief period of strained sibling reconnection in Acorn is tempered by Marc's suspicion of Earthseed, but above all by what Lauren calls his "consuming need to be important, to reassert his manhood" (143). The physical and sexual slavery forced on Marc in his late teenage years 'feminized' him, to use Haraway's terminology:

> Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to the arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading an existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex. (166)

In Acorn/Earthseed, Marc's femininization is further perpetuated by the masculinist authority of his sister. As Larkin retroactively justifies Marc's decision to leave Acorn and join the ranks of Christian America, "[t]here really was no place for him at Acorn. He was 'Olamina's little brother,' or, as my mother said, a nice boy. He could have

married and begun a family in one more little cabin" – a suggested future steeped in the limited height of traditional female aspirations – but, not surprisingly, then, "[t]hat would have been intolerable to him" (169). The most readily available route for taking back his manhood, "to have his own turf where he was the one who said yes or no, and where everyone respected him" (152), is through the role traditionally afforded to men, exclusively, through the pulpit.

While one may be quick to judge a ministry predicated on its appeal as a source of male security and dominance, Butler, through the point of view of Larkin, also qualifies Lauren in this light: "she's always needed devoted, obedient followers – disciples – who would listen to her and believe everything she told them. And she needed large events to manipulate" (*Talents* 1). Indeed, through Larkin's characterization of Lauren as "misguided" (2), even Butler's Black Female Jeremiad protagonist does not escape Butler's critical lens, warning not against devotion to religion but against misguided religious fervor.

In short, the deep consideration Butler devotes to religion in the *Parables* suggests its powerful potential, with its always present underbelly of human destruction in the name of divine decree and dictation. The final analysis of the efficacy of religion and the jeremiad in Butler's *Parables* seems to be that of the old woman in Toni Morrison's Nobel Lecture: "[w]hat I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands."[12] Taking agency out of the sky and placing it in humanity's reach, Butler dares to depict a world in which those hands are black, female, and critically prophetic.

[12] http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1993/morrison-lecture.html

"Now that you're a mother…": Vexed Maternity and Empathic Militancy

In the *Parables*, Lauren Olamina epitomizes the "social misfit" who is typically the protagonist in dystopian literature and through whom the reader learns to critique the dystopian society of the text (Moylan 114). Lauren's clear status as a social misfit stems from her multiple subversive roots, all of which source from her transgression of gender norms. If, in the world of *Talents*, "[a] woman who expresses her opinions, 'nags,' disobeys her husband, or otherwise 'tramples her womanhood' and '*acts like a man*,' might have her head shaved, her forehead branded, her tongue cut out, or, worst case, she might be stoned to death or burned" (*Talents* 50, emphasis added), it is nothing short of a miracle that Lauren lives to die from natural causes as an old woman. Through her vexed relationship to her own maternal and familial roles as well as her militancy informed by "hyperempathy syndrome," Lauren queers femininity in a way that not only the dystopian world of the texts but the real world of the 21st–century reader finds, at best, strange and exceptional and, at worst, unsettling and threatening.

The most obvious way in which Lauren complicates gender presentation is through her physically passing as a man. Long before her Robledo neighborhood is destroyed by pyros, Lauren makes plans to leave the walled community, which she feels is ultimately doomed; a primary element of her departure is to "go out posing as a man" (*Sower* 123), a calculation she believes will give her added protection on the highway, now a mode of transportation for pedestrians rather than cars. Her decision to "play man" (*Sower* 154) repeats itself in *Talents* when Lauren again cuts her hair and is able to pass as a man as she searches for Larkin after escaping from Camp Christian. Significantly, in both instances, it is the loss of familial ties – in *Sower*, her nuclear

family, and in *Talents*, the death of her husband and the decades-long disappearance of her daughter – that "frees" her to temporarily live as a man.

While her intentional appearance as a man may be fleeting, throughout the texts Lauren consistently presents an aggressive, uncompromising command recognized by those around her as "masculine." For example, when she first escapes Robledo with Harry and Zahra, the only other known surviving members of her community, Harry retorts with frustration at Lauren's clear leadership role within the threesome: "You damn sure talk macho enough to be a guy" (*Sower* 163). After Jarret's crusaders overtake Acorn and kill Lauren's husband Bankole along with several other community members, Lauren reacts not with the weeping and hysterics of the other women upon seeing their dead loved ones, but with instinctual violent rage: "I was lashed into unconsciousness for trying to kill my bearded keeper with a pickax" (*Talents* 205). Larkin, Lauren's long-lost daughter, acknowledges her mother's gender transgression when she writes that Bankole's "mistake was in seeing [his wife] as a young girl. She was already a missile, armed and targeted" (*Talents* 9). Thus, Larkin suggests that while her mother's militancy ensures that Lauren is focused and prepared, this stance may also be dangerous, explosive, and destructive.

On a linguistic level, Bankole appears to acknowledge his wife's unfeminine positionality, regularly referring to her as "Olamina," as do other members of the Acorn community. There is something inherently masculine in calling someone by their surname, and it is significant that, in the case of Bankole (which is, incidentally, *his* last name), this interpellation not only creates a sense of mutual respect and equality between spouses, but by not taking her husband's last name, Lauren also retains a sense of

autonomy and self-ownership. Tellingly, however, on the handful of occasions in which Bankole does not refer to his wife as "Olamina," he calls her "girl," which leaps to the other end of the power-in-naming spectrum. Indeed, the men in Lauren's life throughout the *Parables*, from her father to her teenage boyfriend to Bankole to her brother Marc, seem to be drawn to her independence while, at the same time, deeply frustrated – if not emasculated – by it.

At the beginning of *Sower*, Lauren has established a romantic relationship with Curtis, a young boy in the Robledo community; despite the fact that the text is framed as the journal of a fifteen-year-old girl, Lauren barely writes about her boyfriend. In contrast to the most famous literary example of a teenager girl's diary, Anne Frank's fixation on her feelings for Peter in the midst of hiding from the Nazis, Lauren drops Curtis's name only a few times in passing over the three years from the time the novel begins until Robledo is attacked.[13] The dearth of description of this area of her life indicates that Lauren's romantic relationship is clearly not her priority. Rather, the focus of her writing is Earthseed, the new religion she has recently given a name to, and preparing for her survival outside the walls of the community. While the community expectation may be for her to commit to Curtis and start a family, Lauren all but dismisses this option: "how in the world can anyone get married and make babies with things the way they are now?" (*Sower* 77). When, halfway through the novel, Lauren finally presents the reader with the first and only extended interaction between the two, it is clear that Curtis desires this traditional life with Lauren, but she is holding out. Her reluctance here suggests that on some level, she believes that the path she feels increasingly compelled to follow – as a religious and community leader – is incompatible

[13] Curtis is apparently killed in the attack.

with her existing understanding of the roles of wife and mother.

This tension between maternal subjectivity and militant activism persists when Lauren meets and falls in love with Bankole on the trek north from Southern California as she navigates "the crew of a modern underground railroad" (*Sower* 262). As their relationship becomes serious, Lauren knows she must explain to him the importance of Earthseed in her life: "I was telling him there was someone else – something else. Maybe it would have sounded less strange if the something were another man" (247). Recognizing the primary position Earthseed holds for her, Bankole responds, "I know my rival." Thus, Lauren's dedication to Earthseed is first framed as a romantic rival and later, in *Talents*, as a rival for a mother's affection, couching her religious mission in relationship to traditional female positionalities – suggesting that this reference points are the only ones available to underscore the depth of her connection to her self-identified calling or "talent."

In Larkin's writings included in the second novel, Lauren's daughter repeatedly describes "damned Earthseed" as her mother's "other kid…her other child, her older and best beloved child" (*Talents* 3, 294, 379). This is a comparison that Lauren herself makes when explaining why she does not want to leave Acorn, the community, and Earthseed, the religious movement begun in Acorn, for the security of an established town: "I *wouldn't* walk away from it any more than I'd walk away from the baby I would soon be having[14]" (*Talents* 145). While committed to her husband and looking forward to starting a family, Lauren's priorities do not shift because of her growing (literally) maternal obligations; she is still equally committed to being the leader – spiritual and otherwise –

[14] Lauren makes a similar statement after the birth of the baby when she declares, "Babe, I'm no more likely to leave Acorn now than I am to leave Larkin" (177).

of Acorn and Earthseed. After reading her mother's journals years later, Larkin "got the impression that my mother didn't pay much attention to being pregnant. It wasn't that she resented it. There's no indication that she did. She simply ignored it" (170). In short, Lauren's pregnancy is not *prioritized* in her journals, in the same way that her relationship with Curtis is not prioritized in *Sower*; she loves them both – and her commitment to searching for Larkin after the child is kidnapped is indicative of just how much – but regardless of who or what else is in her life, Lauren will not allow the mission of Earthseed to be compromised. The top spot in her life is occupied, and while others may share it, they could never surpass it.

When Larkin is born, the increasingly-impatient Bankole argues for the re-prioritizing that goes against Lauren's very constitution: "Now that you're a mother, you've got to let go of some of the Earthseed thinking and think of your child" (*Talents* 178). Defending her ability – in fact, necessity – in maintaining both of her offspring, Lauren rebuts, "*We need purpose*!...When we have no difficult, long-term purpose to strive toward, we fight each other. We destroy ourselves" (179, Butler's emphasis). Here, Lauren implicitly advocates for a purpose beyond the traditional maternal role afforded to women. Republican motherhood would be a restrictive insult for Lauren Olamina; she wants to lead a movement, not encourage her children's inclusion in the existing one. Likewise, Lauren does not share Black women's standpoint on mothering which sees "motherhood as a symbol of power" (Collins 209); Butler's protagonist refuses to limit her activism to what might be made available to her through her maternal role.

Ultimately, the text neither endorses nor derides Lauren's vexed relationship to

maternity, but the eventual reunion between Larkin and Lauren over three decades after their separation underscores the fact that Lauren's decisions were not without negative consequences. After escaping Camp Christian, Lauren's search for her daughter, which she initially embarks on with fiery determination, eventually fades as Lauren resigns herself to the impossibility of locating Larkin and redirects her energy into building Earthseed. It is Larkin who eventually tracks down her birth mother and initiates contact. Unfortunately, their meeting proves too little and too late for re-establishing a mother-daughter connection. Interestingly, their face-to-face encounter, during which Lauren comes across as reserved and distant, is narrated from Larkin's point of view. Butler's decision to frame the reunion in this way suggests that Lauren's commanding voice is most "at home" outside traditional mother-daughter relations. The lack of access the narrative provides to this meeting from Lauren's point of view, by and large the predominant voice throughout the *Parables*, leads one to question whether or not Lauren even wrote about this monumental encounter. In her final journal entry, reflecting on her life in 2090, Lauren's focus is entirely on Earthseed and does not reference the daughter she reunited with almost twenty-five years earlier.

However, Butler further complicates the texts' Black Female Jeremiad through the "incompatible" representation of Lauren as not just an uncompromising mother but a painfully empathic militant. From the time of her birth, Lauren suffers from "hyperempathy syndrome," a genetic condition that results from a prenatal drug intended to enhance the performance of the fetus. Instead, the widespread drug's side effect leads to a generation with a significant marginalized population of hyperempaths or "sharers" who experience the physical pain of others as if it was their own. This syndrome, with its

effect of feeling the pain of/with others, is psychologically and emotionally gendered feminine; after meeting male sharers on the trek from California, Lauren realizes that this "terrible vulnerability…would be harder on a man" (*Sower* 291). In Lauren, then, always so "masculine" in attitude/behavior, her hyperempathy means she is always already vulnerable to pain in a typically feminine way. She "feels" deeply and must "act" aggressively – thus always already embodying the cyborgian positionality of holding "incompatibles" together. Lauren's form of militancy, then, complicates Trudier's Harris's definition of female militants as individuals who operate "without mercy and without guilt" (34); "They choose weapons, fight, and kill. They are soldiers in an army of revenge and rebuilding, and none allow sentiment to interfere with her battle" (156). In essence, through Lauren, Butler creates a Black Female Jeremiad whose sentiment is always already *part* of her battle. While Lauren calls into question the traditional definitions of black motherhood, she simultaneously calls into question existing definitions of militancy and suggests an effective militant can still be warm-blooded.

Moreover, while Lauren's hyperempathy condition may mark her, to a degree, as a martyr figure, this positionality is also qualified. Lauren is not simply a suffering *servant*, the martyr role typically reserved for faithful women. Rather, throughout both *Sower* and *Talents*, Lauren is unwavering in her role as a suffering *leader* – a radical subjectivity altogether. While male martyr figures often experience untimely death as a consequence of their threat as leaders of a movement, women as suffering servants most often escape a culminating violent end and instead live quiet lives of resignation to pain. Lauren Olamina fuses together elements of both traditions in typical cyborgian fashion.

Ultimately, Lauren's ability to navigate and complicate both the maternal and the

militant meets with violence and charges of blasphemy and treason from Christian America; in the *Parables*, however, the label of madness, so often applied as a means of attempted dismissal of a Black Female Jeremiad, reifies the respect that Lauren's followers have for her unwavering convictions. The first instance of the rhetoric of insanity takes place when Lauren begins to share her thoughts on Earthseed with her growing number of traveling companions: "'You're crazy as hell,' [Travis] said, but I like the soft, quiet way he said it – *with amazement rather than ridicule*" (*Sower* 199, emphasis added). The tone of Lauren's "craziness" is accompanied by this reverent awe throughout the series. In *Talents*, impressed with Lauren's commitment to Earthseed and her resistance to Bankole's pressure to leave Acorn for the safety of an established town, Zahra admires, "You're crazy as hell" (145). No doubt, some of this reverence speaks to her followers' recognition of the necessity of a voice like Lauren's in such a time as this.[15]

In *Parable of the Sower*, the entire world has "gone crazy" (205), and perhaps this master's house needs dismantled, in order to be rebuilt, with the master's tools: "You're nuts…But this is a crazy time…Maybe you're what the time needs – or what we need" (*Sower* 292). In short, the onus of "crazy" in the *Parable* novels is placed on the external situation. As Larkin observes, "If [Lauren] had been born in a saner time, she might have become a writer as I have or an artist" (*Talents* 2). Thus, Lauren Olamina is the fictional post-apocalyptic version of the Black Female Jeremiad, a resistive modality articulated by African American women writers like Octavia Butler in the post-Civil Rights – a time less "crazy" than that of the apocalyptic *Parable* series but no less ripe

[15] Esther 4:14: "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"

for deep religio-political critique. The following chapter analyzes hip-hop artist Lauryn Hill as a Black Female Jeremiad much maligned for having “gone crazy.”

Chapter Four

"I Must Confess, My Destiny's Manifest": Lauryn Hill
and the Public Performance of Maternity, Messianism, and Madness

Introduction

"They'll hail you then they'll nail you, no matter who you are
They'll make you now then take you down."
– Lauryn Hill, "Superstar" (1998)

In 1999, Lauryn Hill was one of the most recognizable faces and voices in America. Hill's photogenic face graced the cover of such mainstream publications as *Time* and *Newsweek*; placing her on a shortlist with Hillary Clinton and Melinda Gates, *Ladies Home Journal* selected Lauryn Hill as one of "The Most Fascinating Women of 1999"; *Cosmopolitan* published a "how-to" article on applying your eye makeup in a way that resembled the Fugees front woman. Nominated for ten Grammy awards and winning a record-setting five, her solo album debut *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998) achieved a nearly unprecedented combination of commercial and critical success, and she possessed a remarkable ability to speak to a crossover audience without compromising the respect she earned from any camp. As Christopher Farley summarizes in his *Time* review, "The streety hip-hop magazine *The Source* called Hill 'the flyest MC ever.' The not-at-all streety *New York Times* called her 'visionary.'" Just as astounding as all of this acclaim is the fact that she garnered it at the age of twenty-three.

In short, at the height of Hill's popularity near the turn of the millennium, as music engineer Gordon Williams observed, "Everybody was starstruck by her" (qtd. in McGee and Tresniowski). After bursting onto the music scene with fellow Fugees

Wyclef Jean and Praz Michel and experiencing heavy MTV rotation in 1996 with *The Score*, which went on to sell 18 million copies, Hill's solo album inspired Andrea Lewis in *The Progressive* to proclaim that Hill "could be the woman who would take hip-hop to the next level." Indeed, in the aftermath of *Miseducation*, word on the street and in the press was that the sky was the limit for Hill, who seemingly could do no wrong. As Sia Michel wrote in *The Village Voice*, "You'd call your own grandma a bitch before you'd call Lauryn Hill one…" No one could have predicted that in a few short years, the discourse surrounding Lauryn Hill would center on her virtual disappearance from public life and the loud whispers that Hill had gone crazy.

Indeed, by the tenth anniversary of the now-canonical *Miseducation* in 2008, a slew of magazine articles commemorating the anniversary center almost entirely on Hill's deflated career and public image. As Teresa Wiltz writes, "To listen to *Miseducation* today is to marvel at her talent, and to mourn what woulda, coulda, shoulda been." Beginning with a self-imposed exile shortly after the astronomical success of her first solo album, questions have persisted about the status of Hill's music and – even more frequently – her sanity. Hill's only other solo album released to date is her *MTV Unplugged 2.0*, released in 2002 to much anticipation and, ultimately, much antipathy. This live performance marks an indelible shift in Hill's musical production, as well as the beginning of a shift in her appearance and public perception. And it has been all *down*hill from there; in the years since *Unplugged*, Hill has become increasingly estranged from the music industry and her once adoring public. In fact, the former "It" girl has become a cultural punch line in the celebrity-fixated blogosphere, as if the once-beloved prom queen voted "Most Likely to Succeed" cannot attend the class reunion

because, rumor has it, she is in Bellevue.

This chapter offers a re-reading of Lauryn Hill's second solo album and argues that *MTV Unplugged 2.0*, rather than representing a creative failure, marks the fulfillment of Hill's Black Female jeremiadic message begun in *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Not only does Hill function as a Black Female Jeremiad through her strident critiques of the systemic iniquities in an "exceptionalist" American society, but Hill's lyrical "mixture, where hip hop meets scripture" employs a mobility across the maternal/militant binary that extends Imani Perry's framework of the hip-hop badwoman.[1] In analyzing Hill's Black Female Jeremiad, I draw not only from Lauryn Hill's music but from the public discourses surrounding her motherhood and her perceived mental instability.

As a female hip-hop artist, Lauryn Hill embodies the "badwoman" who occupies male linguistic spaces and simultaneously "call[s] into question the masculine designation of those spaces" (Perry 159). Relatedly, a Black Female Jeremiad occupies a rhetorical space traditionally gendered male and, at the same time, converts the space by critiquing "the power vested in" it that typically serves in the name of exclusion (159). In addition to the similarities between a female negotiation of hip hop and a black female negotiation of the American Jeremiad, the Black Female Jeremiad is characterized by the mobility that Perry claims offers the hip-hop badman – as well as badwoman – opportunity for subversion.

Specifically, Perry asserts that the female badman's use of "the language of violence" – which can be lyrical and metaphorical rather than physical – opens up a cultural space for, among other things, "rage and frustration in the black female

[1] "This mixture, where hip hop meets scripture" is a line from the *Miseducation* track "Everything Is Everything."

experience" and "the depiction of black female instability and insanity, which has historically gone repressed through the construction and role of black women as caretakers and as the backbone of the black community" (156, 164, 165). In other words, Lauryn Hill's militant lyrics, which criticize everyone from sell-out artists to former lovers to the criminal justice system, channel a righteous anger and expose the potentially harmful consequences of projecting the image of an unceasing nurturer while one's own source of sustenance depletes. However, while such militancy characterizes Hill's work, she also displays a profound investment in a maternal subjectivity that mitigates or, at the very least, complicates her badwoman status.

Unlike the Black Female Jeremiads analyzed in the three previous chapters, there is no written text to mediate Lauryn Hill's prophetic performances. Indeed, when examining the work of Lauryn Hill, one wonders if perhaps there is an increased urgency to silence a prophetic voice when that voice is audible. Farah Jasmine Griffin argues that singing black women embody a familiar and comforting cultural spectacle for mainstream American audiences, particularly during times of national crises; however, because black women's vocality "develop[ed] alongside and not fully within the nation, it maintains a space for critique and protest" (119). I argue that Lauryn Hill's first solo album provides enough familiarity and comfort to appeal to mainstream audiences as well as enough social critique to engage in religio-political protest. With the release of her second solo album, Hill's religio-political critique takes center stage and precipitates her fall from grace. Thus, although Lauryn Hill emerged as a public figure in the mid-1990s and performed outside of a larger political movement, I argue that Hill's work goes far beyond simply espousing "a personal politics," as Patricia Hill Collins asserts of

female hip-hop stars (192). Indeed, Collins includes Lauryn Hill on a list of female artists such as Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah, India.Arie, and Alicia Keyes in whose work "structural issues and social problems are noticeably absent" (193). In doing so, Collins thoroughly underestimates Lauryn Hill and altogether overlooks Hill's Black Female jeremiadic voice.

Furthermore, in examining the rise and fall of Lauryn Hill, the historical precedents set by Maria W. Stewart and Nina Simone provide striking parallels regarding the fate of a black woman activist in the public sphere, from such disparate cultural moments as the 1830s Boston lecture circuit to the protest music of the Civil Rights era. I argue that Maria Stewart, the first American-born woman to speak before a promiscuous audience,[2] and Nina Simone paved the road – or rather, two roads – that led the way and then merged in the figure of Lauryn Hill. The bold, nascent Black Female Jeremiad of Stewart gets accompanied by a hip-hop beat as Hill performs a twenty-first century adaptation of Stewart's rhetoric. Inheriting Nina Simone's previously unmatched ability "to fuse ideology and art" in her music (Russell 136),[3] Lauryn Hill has also come to share Simone's controversial public image as a doubly mad – angry *and* insane – black woman. Moreover, the careers of all three women expose a recurrent dynamic of acceptance followed by erasure, celebration followed by exclusion that ultimately results in exile. While Stewart was, by all indications, forced out of the public arena because of her gender (and, no doubt, racialized gender), both Simone and Hill became increasingly marginalized as their careers progressed, with Simone eventually disappearing from the

[2] Richardson xiii.
[3] In "Slave Codes and Liner Notes," Michele Russell examines the consciousness-raising of "blues singers" Bessie Smith, Bessie Jackson, Billie Holiday, Esther Phillips and Nina Simone. Russell asserts that Simone was more successful at fusing ideology and art "than any of her predecessors" (136).

United States altogether for a life overseas.

Indeed, Stewart and Simone each share strikingly nuanced similarities to Lauryn Hill with regard to messianism and madness, respectively. Beyond their common rhetorical jeremiadic strategies, both Hill and Stewart explicitly identify – indeed, *justify* – their public careers by attributing them to a divine calling; this sense of enacting a mission from God contributes to both women's self-identification as a sort of messianic figure. Moreover, it is hard to conceive of Hill's powerful female hip-hop presence without the precedent set by Simon: the difficult to categorize, difficult to deal with, difficult to top "High Priestess of Soul" whose press coverage anticipates the public representation of a black female performer who is not only aggressively lyrical but is personally "difficult" and unstable.

An essential dissimilarity between Lauryn Hill and her predecessors, however, regards the absences of a larger political movement during the height of Hill's popularity in the late 1990s. Whereas Maria W. Stewart's career coincided with the early nineteenth-century abolitionist movement and burgeoning first-wave feminism, and Nina Simone pounded her piano during the tumultuous Civil Rights era of marches and martyrs, Lauryn Hill's prophetic voice was not accompanied by a chorus of contemporaries. Because Hill did not have the support of a movement, the roads paved by Stewart and Simone become all the more invaluable: if no one was walking alongside her, at least Hill had some leads to follow.

Maria W. Stewart: Setting the Precedent

"I really think that we are in as wretched and miserable a state
as was the house of Israel in the days of Jeremiah."
– Maria W. Stewart, "Religion and The Pure Principles of Morality"

At first glance, the work and reception of Lauryn Hill, hip-hop megastar of the late 1990s, and Maria W. Stewart, the early nineteenth-century lecturer and pamphleteer with a brief public career in Boston – appear to have little in common. However, Hill's particular brand of religio-political art reveals a deep indebtedness to Maria Stewart. As Marilyn Richardson asserts in her biographical sketch, Stewart's "religious vision and her socio-political agenda were intrinsically bound together" (9). And yet, despite Maria Stewart's overwhelming display of jeremiadic rhetoric,[4] her name is largely missing from the leading scholarship of this field. In *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms*, Wilson Jeremiah Moses mentions Stewart in passing as a Black Jeremiad whose warnings were "militant and direct" but does not give her work any consideration beyond this single-sentence acknowledgement (37); David Howard-Pitney, in his effort in *The Afro-American Jeremiad* to analyze potential jeremiad figures who have been excluded from the traditional definition, looks at the careers of Ida B. Wells and Mary McLeod Bethune – ultimately concluding that neither proved a "true" fit as jeremiads – and does not even mention Stewart. Moreover, until very recently, Stewart has been underappreciated in

[4]As Richardson notes, Stewart frequently included the verses of Jeremiah and Lamentations in her speeches through the African American rhetorical technique known as voice merging. Her "Religion and Pure Principles" begins with a voice-merging of Jeremiah 9:1 and soon explicitly makes the connection between the prophet Jeremiah's intended audience and her own: "I really think we are in as wretched and miserable state as was the house of Israel in the days of Jeremiah" (32). She reiterates this connection in her "African Masonic Hall" address when she declares, "It appears to me that America has become like the great city of Babylon…" (63). With the words of Jeremiah 3:22, Stewart pleads with the sinful nation to repent so that God can fulfill his promise and vice versa: "I will return to you, and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God" (35).

scholarship in general. Laura Romero speaks to this erasure in *Home Fronts*, arguing that Stewart was too "feminist" for black nationalist discourses and too "militant" for womanist discourses. Thus, Stewart fell through the cracks, even as she made them in the glass ceiling for public women. In fact, it wasn't until Marilyn Richardson edited a collection of Stewart's essays and speeches in 1987 that her work became readily available to modern readers, and twenty more years would pass before a collection of essays about her work would be gathered in one volume.[5]

Born in New England in 1803 to free African American parents, who died when she was in early childhood, Maria Miller spent her adolescent years as a domestic servant in households that prioritized both religion and education. In 1821, she married James Stewart, a member of Boston's middle-class black society.[6] The Stewarts socialized in circles that included David Walker, whose *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) is considered the prototype of the (male) African American Jeremiad tradition. After the death of her husband, followed shortly thereafter by the mysterious death of Walker, Stewart emerged from her grief with a renewed religious and political commitment. In Walker's absence, Stewart made her own voice heard. Because Stewart both *had* been married and was now widowed – not, crucially, single – and her marriage did not result in children, this positionality granted her a license to leave the "home," since hers was now empty (Richardson 25). Indeed, it is her lack of maternal subjectivity that frees Stewart to engage in public discourse. If she had not been childless, Stewart's God-given purpose would have been to dedicate her life to raising her child. Thus, in

[5] See Waters and Conway's *Black Women's Intellectual Traditions: Speaking Their Minds* (2007). Part One of this volume, "Maria W. Stewart: Black Feminism in Public Places," is comprised of four essays on Stewart.
[6] See Richardson and Gail Hankins for Stewart's biography.

Stewart's cultural moment, the absence of maternity functions as a point of access to the public stage.

In 1831, Maria Stewart entered the public sphere with her pamphlet "Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality."[7] Published in the ladies' section of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, the pamphlet was accompanied by an editorial preface which described Stewart as "a respectable colored lady" and praised the "talents and piety of its author" (Richardson 11). The very notion of a devout woman with a public persona was paradoxical based on the nineteenth-century governing social ideologies of separate spheres and the cult of domesticity and true womanhood. It was nearly impossible to circumvent the problematic presence of a woman on public display. As Roxanne Mountford asks in *The Gendered Pulpit*, "How does a woman earn respect of an audience conditioned to regard her body itself as symbolic of lack (of authority, eloquence, power, substance)?" (13). In searching for an answer, Stewart attempted to claim authority to speak – to circumvent her obvious gender indiscretion – by claiming that she is simply fulfilling a divine calling – that God is speaking through her.

Indeed, Stewart opens her "Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall" (1832) with an appropriation of Isaiah's commission:[8] "Methinks I hear a spiritual interrogation – 'Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?' And my heart made this reply – 'If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus!'" (45). She would reiterate this justification – that she is speaking on God's behalf/at God's insistence – throughout her career. For example, in her address to the

[7] As Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapansky write in *Pamphlets of Protest*, pamphleteering was one of the most important components of the African American literary tradition in the early nineteenth century.

[8] Isaiah 6: 8 "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here I am. Send me!"

"Afric-American Female Intelligence Society of America" (1832), Stewart declares, "God has fired my soul with a holy zeal for his cause. It was God alone who inspired my heart to publish the meditations thereof" (52). In her "Farewell Address" (1833), even as she uses biblical and classical precedent to offer an apologia for women's public voice, she acknowledges her authority as God's messenger: "Lord, if thou wilt be with me, then I will speak for thee as long as I live…he hath unloosed my tongue, and put his word into my mouth" (67). Thus, Stewart positions not herself but God, rather, as the ultimate messenger, while she herself is simply a humble vessel in His service.

Closely connected to Stewart's belief that she is a spokesperson for God is her participation in the tradition of messianism linked to the jeremiad. Moses defines the term as "the perception of a person or group, by itself or by others, as having a manifest destiny or a God-given role to assert the providential goals of history and to bring about the kingdom of God on earth" (4). Messianic figures, Moses continues, "see themselves as a conscience for the rest of the human race – sometimes as a suffering servant or a sacrificial lamb, sometimes as an avenging angel" (5). Perhaps it is no surprise that Stewart performs the more docile modality. From her first pamphlet – "Many will suffer for pleading the cause of oppressed Africa, and I shall glory in being one of her martyrs," to her farewell address – "Well was I aware that if I contended boldly for his causes, I must suffer," she repeatedly characterizes herself as a suffering servant (30, 73). And yet, even in the midst of claiming this martyr positionality, Stewart nevertheless maintains a bold and militant stance that in some way belies her femininity. She explicitly urges her fellow "fair daughters of Africa" to "[p]ossess the spirit of men, bold and enterprising, fearless and undaunted" (38). Stewart's radical pronouncement entreats black women in

the early nineteenth century to embody traits that were exclusively approved for masculine agency.

Indeed, what distinguishes Stewart from abolitionist-era male black jeremiads, such as her mentor David Walker, is that she extends her pronouncements to black women in particular – and in a way that underscores mobility across a maternal/militant divide. "Daughters of Africa" is a frequent refrain throughout her work, and while Stewart, on the one hand, encourages black women to possess the bold and enterprising sprit of men, she couples this militant pronouncement with instructions for black mothers to adhere to traditional views espoused by the cult of true womanhood: "Could I but see mothers in Israel, chaste, keepers at home, not busy bodies, meddlers in other men's matters, whose adorning is of the inward man, possessing a meek and quiet spirit…" (33). Stewart follows up this call for female purity, piety, and submissiveness with an iteration of the ideology of Republican Motherhood so prevalent at that time: "O, ye mothers, what a responsibility rests on you! You have souls committed to your charge, and God will require a strict account of you. It is you that must create in the minds of your little girls and boys a thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue, the abhorrence of vice, and the cultivation of a pure heart" (35). Thus, within one pamphlet, Stewart both echoes the emerging black nationalist belief that "Black women becomes mothers of the nation" and challenges the stance that only "Black men serve as warriors in the revolution" by urging black women to embody the militant spirit of men (Collins 109). In short, Maria W. Stewart proves 150 years ahead of her time in critically engaging with the rhetoric of the American Jeremiad and, in doing so, negotiating the militant/maternal bind of black women's subjectivity.

Stewart's public career as foremother of the Black Female Jeremiad, however, was – perhaps not surprisingly – quite short-lived. On September 21, 1833, just short of the two-year anniversary of her first pamphlet's publication in *The Liberator,* Stewart delivered her farewell address to the people of Boston. While the details of her exit are scarce, Stewart's defense of women's right to participate in the public sphere in her farewell speech lends weight to the speculation that it was indeed Stewart's gender that made her message unpalatable. In her final public performance, Stewart cryptically acknowledges "the false misrepresentations wherewith I was misrepresented," as well as "the powers of earth and hell [that] had combined against me, to prove my overthrow" (67, 71). Concluding that "it is no use for me as an individual to try to make myself useful among my color in this city," Stewart's public career abruptly ended (70).

While Stewart continued to be involved in women's club organizations, her professional life would never transgress gender lines as it had during those brief years in Boston. Instead, her roles in later years as a teacher and a hospital matron fell very much within the prescribed gender norms of her day.[9] However, shortly before her death in 1879, Stewart "became eligible for a pension as the widow of a veteran of the War of 1812" and designated the money to publish a collected edition of her works (Richardson 79). Clearly, Stewart remained invested in the work she had produced during her public career over forty years after she had been pushed off stage. In light of the career of Maria W. Stewart, the rise and fall of Lauryn Hill begs the question of whether twenty-first-century audiences, as Ebony Utley argues in relation to Stewart's farewell speech, are *still* not ready to hear *this* type of message – a jeremiad – from *this* type of messenger – a woman (68).

[9] See Richardson xiv for a brief account of Stewart's biography after 1833.

Nina Simone: Mad, Mad Black Woman Artist

"So while you imitatin' Al Capone
I'll be Nina Simone and defecating on your microphone."
– Lauryn Hill, "Ready or Not" (1996)

In a moment of self-referentiality on a popular track from the Fugees breakthrough album *The Score*, Lauryn Hill draws an explicit connection between herself and Nina Simone – one that suggests a gender-specific militancy. Speaking to purveyors of the Gangsta rap so prevalent in the mid-1990s, Hill declares, "I can do what you do, easy, BELIEVE ME. Frontin' niggas give me hee bee gee bees." Instead of engaging in what Hill deems a dangerous form of aggressive posturing, she contrasts her performance style with those Al Capone imitators: "I play my enemies like a game of chess." Ultimately, Hill concludes the verse by locating her strategic artistic militancy in the figure of Nina Simone, a black female artist like Hill whose resistive performances, she colorfully declares, put the hypermasculine, hyper-violent hip hop artist to shame.

Almost fifty years after Nina Simone epitomized "the cultural dimension of armed struggle" during the Civil Rights Movement, she has "largely fall through the cracks of scholarship" (Russell 136, Feldstein 13521). With the exception of Ruth Feldstein's excellent article, academic writing has been surprisingly reticent on Simone. Most of the scholarly work on Simone consists of studies in which she is grouped in with a list of other artists or commemorative pieces written shortly after Simone's death in 2003. Notably, this lack of scholarship and narrow presence in informed public commentary also defines current analyses of Lauryn Hill. In this regard, as well as in their artistic militancy and their reputations as black female performers who are doubly

mad – angry *and* insane – Hill and Simone share striking similarities.

Born in North Carolina in 1933, Eunice Waymon took the stage name Nina Simone in her early twenties as an Atlantic City performer in an attempt to hide her "worldly" musical endeavor from her mother, a devout Methodist minister. As Simone writes in her autobiography *I Put a Spell On You*, "As far as church was concerned Momma was a fanatic" (16). Interestingly, with a preacher mother and fifteen extended family members in the ministry,[10] Simone speaks little of religion in her autobiography. Unlike Stewart and Lauryn Hill, Simone appears to keep an emotional distance from a personal belief in God, just as she keeps an emotional distance from her mother, as if both were always sort of around – a peripheral yet inescapable part of her life.[11]

As Mark Anthony Neal writes shortly after her death in 2003, "Simone's rejection of the religiosity of the Civil Rights Movement" was a bold move in and of itself. For example, one detects more than a hint of irony in Simone's description of her mother's reaction to her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter "playing hymns straight through without a mistake…To Momma's mind there was only one explanation: I had received a gift from God" (15). And yet, looking back on her years as a performer on stage, Simone nonetheless writes that "whatever it was that happened to me out there under the lights, it mostly came from God, and I was just a place along the line He was moving on" (94). In ascribing her performance as "mostly" coming from God, Simone leaves open a space to claim personal agency as well, a rhetorical move which belies the "voice authorized by God" validation so central to Stewart's sense of chosenness. In short, while Simone acknowledges her musical talents as a gift, she does not explicitly identify herself as

[10] *I Put a Spell On You* 2.
[11] James Baldwin has said as much about his minister father, and how his relationship with his father and his relationship with the Church were one in the same.

"chosen" to perform a particularly religious mission.

However, if Simone does not profess a *personal* manifest destiny in the vein of Stewart and Hill, she nevertheless espouses a belief in a *communal* destiny: "My music was dedicated to a purpose more important than classical music's pursuit of excellence; it was dedicated to the fight for freedom and the historical destiny of my people. I felt a fierce pride when I thought about what we were all doing together" (91). Simone's belief in her people's "historical destiny" iterates the ideology of Ethiopianism, a key element of black nationalism as well as a favorite talking point for Maria Stewart. The refrain from Psalm 68:31 – "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God" – was interpreted as a prophecy of sorts that the black race would eventually ascend to greatness.[12]

In contrast to Stewart and Hill, Simone's jeremiadic tracks "Mississippi Goddam" and "Go to Hell," as their titles imply, leave little room for deliverance and focus primarily on national doom. Notably, Simone's most written-about song, and one of the few from her enormous catalog that she herself wrote,[13] is also her most explicit jeremiadic performance. "Mississippi Goddam" marked a turning point in Simone's personal convictions and career. While close friendships with political artists such as Lorraine Hansberry had increased Simone's awareness of the prominent issues of the Civil Rights movement, she writes at length in her autobiography about the emotional breakthrough that led to the creation of her first protest song.

After receiving news of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham on September 15, 1963, Simone recounts:

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[12] See Sylvester Johnson's *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity* and Moses's *Black Messiahs and Uncles Toms*.
[13] See Ed Ward's liner notes to the box set *To Be Free: The Nina Simone Story*.

> I was trying to make a zip gin, a home-made pistol. I had it in my mind to go out and kill someone, I didn't know who, but someone I could identify as being in the way of my people getting some justice for the first time in three hundred years. Andy [her husband at the time] didn't try to stop me, but just stood there for awhile and said, "Nina, you don't know anything about killing. The only thing you've got is music. (89)

Luckily, on several levels, Simone stuck to what she knew; the ripple effect cannot be overemphasized. According to Mark Anthony Neal, "Literally all of the mainstream protest music recorded by Black artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s…were indebted to 'Mississippi Goddam'"; in fact, Neal lists everyone from hip hop's NWA to country music's The Dixie Chicks as beholden to Simone for paving the way for their musical protestations. While songs such as Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" immediately come to mind as earlier versions of protest songs, as does the entire folk tradition led by Bob Dylan and Joan Baez,[14] Simone not only protested – she was *pissed*. In "Mississippi Goddam," she swears and pounds on her piano and does not apologize for her frustration and rage. Breaking down the distinction between Holiday and Simone, Elton John noted shortly after Simone's death: "Billie Holiday's voice was tinged with sadness and pain; Nina Simone's was, too, but hers was also filled with anger." The first set of emotions is one women have been permitted – indeed, practically assigned – by patriarchal society. The second kind, however, threatens that very society. To paraphrase Maya Angelou,

[14] In contrasting Baez and Simone, the difficulty in making a case for a tradition of *white* female jeremiads comes into play. In short, as part of their more conservative politics, even as part of radical movements, white women as a group have historically lacked the militancy and anger that are critical components of the jeremiad. The religiosity of Stewart compared with that of Harriet Beecher Stowe, or Baez's musical response to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, "Birmingham Sunday," compared to Simone's "Mississippi Goddam" underscores this difference in times of national crisis, when white women tend to express not anger but rather tears and sadness.

when people get angry, they actually *do* something.

Performing and recording "Mississippi Goddam" live at Carnegie Hall in 1964, Simone declares "The name of this tune is 'Mississippi Goddam,'…and I mean every word of it." As the live audience, chuckling at this statement, waits for Simone to start singing, she and her band begin a tap-your-foot, up-tempo "show tune" beat that quickly becomes ironic when contrasted with the words themselves. As Neal asserts, "The brilliance of the song lies in the way she initially destabilized the immediate reception of the song, by placing the song's lyrics on top of a swinging show tune beat. It was as if the song was performed to the music of the 'Sambo Shuffle' – that moment when Sambo decides to stop 'shuckin' and jivin'' and actually starts to speak 'truth to power'." Indeed, the lyrics themselves stand in stark contrast to the catchy beat: "Oh but this whole country is full of lies/ You're all gonna die and die like flies"; "Lord have mercy on this land of mine/ We all gonna get it in due time/ I don't belong here/ I don't belong there/ I've even stopped believing in prayer." Save the jaunty tempo, there is no optimistic core of the traditional American Jeremiad here; destruction seems inevitable – the nation has gone past the point of no return, as *Linden Hills* and *Thereafter Johnnie* insist in Chapter Two. The emphasis Simone repeatedly places, both vocally and instrumentally, on the word 'Goddam' underscores both her personal anger and her prophecy of national doom. Nina Simone has stopped believing in prayer, and God has stopped believing the nation, choosing instead to "damn" it.

Not surprisingly, "Mississippi, Goddam" was reportedly banned from Southern radio stations; however, there is speculation that the reason for the ban "was apparently not so much its militant lyrics, but the fact that an entertainer, and a *woman* entertainer at

that, had declared to put them in music" (qtd. in Feldstein 1368, emphasis added). Here again, the question becomes whether an audience is willing to listen to *this* type of message from *this* type of messenger. In a less well-known song from her 1967 album *Silk and Soul*, Simone produces another jeremiadic track with "Go to Hell." Again, the musical accompaniment does not emotionally prepare the listener for the song's ultimate message. Though not quite as 'jaunty' as "Mississippi Goddam," the song begins with a relatively upbeat jazz tempo. Lyrically, Simone predicts: "So you're living high and mighty/ Rich off the fat off the land/ Just don't dispose of your natural soul/ 'Cos you know darn well/ That you'll go to hell." In essence, "Go to Hell" functions as a prequel to Hill's "Final Hour" and "Mystery of Iniquity," which interrogate the prosperity of the wicked. Musically, whenever the word 'hell' is uttered, both Simone's voice and the accompaniment let out what can only be described as a shriek. This move drives home the song's message with the same hammer-like quality as Simone's pounding of the keys to accompany the word 'Goddam' in her earlier jeremiadic track.

In addition to – and, I argue, closely connected to – Simone's expression of female anger at injustice, Simone's press coverage anticipates the public representation of a black female performer who is not only angry, but 'difficult' and 'unstable.' These tag words would plague Hill's later career as well, in an even more complicated manner. Examining the Schomburg Center file on Simone, Ruth Feldstein lists the adjectives frequently applied to Simone in the press, including 'temperamental,' 'insulting,' 'arrogant,' 'mean,' 'angry,' and 'unstable' (1359). Even Simone's fans and supporters readily acknowledge her difficult side.[15] In her autobiography, Simone unapologetically explains her uncompromisingly stringent attitude towards performing:

[15] See Elton John interview, for example.

> [A]n audience should sit still and be quiet…If an audience disrespects me it is insulting to the music I play and I will not continue, because if they don't want listen then I don't want to play. An audience chooses to come and see me perform; I don't choose the audience. I don't need them either, and if they don't like my attitude then they don't have to come and see me. Others will. (52)

Simone recounts a particularly memorable anecdote of one such a performance at the Apollo in 1961 in which "I stopped playing and gave them a quick talk about manners" (74). For better or for worse, Simone was not afraid to tell her audiences what they didn't want to hear. While Simone may have begun her career as what one critic called a "supper club songstress for the elite" (qtd. in Feldstein 1349), once Simone underwent her political conversion, her agenda changed dramatically. As Ed Warn writes in the introduction to the CD box set *To Be Free: The Nina Simone Story*, "To see this African-American woman get angry about the racial situation in her country, right there on stage, was a shock to people who'd come to hear her sing 'I Loves You, Porgy'," a reference to Simone's only Top 20 song, a cover version from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess.*[16] This audience "shock" anticipates that of Hills' *Unplugged* audience, who no doubt showed up expecting to hear stripped-down versions of hit songs from *Miseducation* such as "Doo Wop (That Thing)" rather than entirely new material from an artist whose soul was stripped down bear before them.

Like Hill's infamous *Unplugged* performance, which includes lengthy spoken

[16] See Neal. How ironic – and telling – that of Simone's massively prolific catalogue, replete with protest songs, the one song which broke into the mainstream is from an opera criticized for its stereotypical portrayal of African Americans. As Harold Cruse argues, *Porgy and Bess* "portrays the seamiest side of Negro life – presumably the image of black people that white audiences want to see" (qtd. in Standifer).

sections between songs – the record company calls them "interludes," most reviewers called them "rants" – Simone possessed a similar investment in being heard, sometimes at the expense of delivering a traditional performance. Elton John asserts, "Sometimes at her performances she'd turn up and she wouldn't sing: she'd just play the piano and talk to her audience"; relatedly, Jody Kolodzey observes that Simone's "activism did not always endear her to critics. One writer complained in *The New Yorker* that Simone had 'become more interested in the message of her songs than in the singing of them.'" Hill engages in a similar project in her "bizarre" *Unplugged* performance when she explicitly states at one point that "I might stop playing [the guitar] so that you can really hear the words." For those countless critics baffled by *Unplugged*, an investigation into Simone's performances might shed some light on Hill's project and place it within the context of black female prophetic performances.

Moreover, Simone gained a reputation that went beyond the pejorative characterization of her as unapologetic and difficult; she was also considered unstable. Sometimes this component of Simone's persona is written about almost with admiration, as Janus Adams does in her 2004 *Black Issues Book Review* piece: "Coming of musical age in the late 1950s, Nina outpaced eccentric. You had to be a little crazy to sing the songs she chose…Who, but a 'crazy woman' would dare pen and perform "Mississippi Goddam" just when we needed it the most?" (70).[17] Most often, however, Simone's instability was used as a weapon in her character assassination. Investigating the problematics of Simone's public perception is somewhat complicated by the fact, closely guarded until after her death, that Simone *was*, in fact, unstable and suffering from what

[17] This remark is similar to the ways in which Lauren Olamina's craziness is spoken of with awe in Chapter Three.

was most likely bipolar disorder.

In the aptly named biography *Nina Simone: Break Down and Let It All Out*, Sylvia Hampton writes, "In fact, [Simone's] infamous bouts of rage were caused by a chemical imbalance that left her prone to sudden and intense depression, underpinned by bleak, wild fury. Put bluntly, she suffered from a mental illness that often blighted her happiness" (11). Despite – and, in many ways, because of – her actual mental instability, Simone's reputation as difficult and unstable remains highly gender-inflected. As Feldstein argues, "…if rudeness in male jazz musicians confirmed their genius [an argument made by Ralph Ellison in *Shadow and Act*], similar behavior confirmed something else about Simone" (1359). In short, while the classification of Simone as "difficult" led to the label of "diva," her instability led to the similarly gender-inflected label of "crazy."

Complicating Simone's tricky negotiation of her own sanity is her maternal subjectivity. In her autobiography, Simone speaks of her daughter, Lisa, as someone she loved deeply, but their relationship often took a backseat to her career. Sylvia Hampton characterizes Simone and Lisa's mother-daughter relationship as "never what most people would describe as normal" (100). No doubt Simone's mental illness, as well as the demands of her career, strained their relationship. Lisa echoes this sentiment in an interview with Hampton in which she recounts that after her parents' divorce, "I remember thinking that she had turned into a monster. Mommy was selfish in a lot of ways and I often felt if she had taken two seconds to consider people around her, especially me, who depended on her 100 percent, she would have made a different decision with her behavior" (166). In short, Nina Simone embodied the vexed maternity

which often accompanies a Black Female jeremiadic voice. While Simone and Hill share a strategic artistic militancy, as well as a public verdict of instability, Lauryn Hill's maternal subjectivity takes center stage in such a way that causes her career to depart from the trail blazed by Nina Simone.

Lauryn Hill Superstar

"What you spit got the power to uplift a hill."
– Talib Kweli, "Ms. Hill" (2005)

"I must confess, my destiny's manifest"
– Lauryn Hill, "Ready or Not" (1996)

While Maria Stewart served, albeit briefly, as an itinerant preacher on the Boston lecture circuit, Lauryn Hill embraced the late twentieth-century cultural space of hip hop as her pulpit and did so with the undeniable talent and unapologetically angry-at-injustice stance of Nina Simone. If, as Imani Perry asserts, "[t]he MC sees himself as a kind of preacher, a traditional space of authority for black men, and assumes the kind of intellectualism, exposition, and arrogance accorded that role" (153), Hill's bold appropriation of the male-dominated MC role shines through in the pseudo-forced confession that her "destiny's manifest." In 1999, few who were listening to Hill would have disagreed. Hill's popularity stemmed not only from her undeniable talent but also from her beauty, strength, and streetwise savvy – and, notably, her status as a new mother. Indeed, the public's celebration a young, unwed African American mother in Lauryn Hill works against conventional wisdom. Hill's unique negotiation of maternity, however, was overridden by religio-political militancy with the release of her *MTV*

Unplugged performance, the fulfillment of her Black Female jeremiadic voice. An analysis of her "badwoman" mobility through black female maternity, messianism, anger, and insanity from *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* to *Unplugged* confirms Talib Kweli's declaration that what Lauryn Hill raps does indeed hold the power to uplift – and, in addition, thoroughly alienate – the "City on a Hill."

Eventually selling 15 million copies and winning a Grammy for Album of the Year, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* is a one-woman tour-de-force: Hill sings, raps, pens the lyrics, and produces the tracks.[18] Taking its title from Carter Woodson's 1933 work *The Miseducation of the Negro*, Hill combines the spiritual and the political in a way that is undeniably jeremiadic. Indeed, the overwhelmingly positive reviews of *Miseducation* pick up on its jeremiadic strand, in content though not in name; *Newsweek*'s Amanda Samuels notes: "Lauryn Hill is a little angry…Black female rage has never sounded so good as it does on Hill's debut solo release"; Sia Michel argues that "Hill's lyrics are at their best when she's angry, or indulging in Biblical-scale ego trips"; Jane Dark's piece in *The Village Voice* entitled "One Women Anti-Diaspora" points to the highly-charged political message of the album: "This isn't country music; it's a goddamned nation state." In short, the reviews of the album effectively tap into the very essence of Hill herself, who is described by friends as "spiritual, with an underlying soft-spoken militancy" (qtd. in Toure, "Lady Soul").

Although the political and spiritual are intertwined throughout *Miseducation*, the most explicitly jeremiadic track on this album is "Final Hour." A warning to those in positions of power who achieve and maintain them through corrupt means, Hill warns in the song's refrain: "You could get the money/ You could get the power/ But keep your

[18] Hill's Grammy win for 1999 Album of the Year was the first ever bestowed on a hip-hop album.

eyes on the final hour." Peppered with biblical allusions such as "New-Ark to Israel" and "Moses and Aaron," Hill predicts the destruction of the current corrupt nation-state and declares: "Things goin' change, it's apparent/ And all the transparent gonna/ Be seen through/ Let God redeem you." Ultimately, Hill preaches this warning and calls for repentance while she "remain[s] calm readin' the 73 Psalm," which speaks to the "prosperity of the wicked." The author of the biblical psalm cries out: "When I tried to understand all this [prosperity of the wicked], it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!"[19] This imagery evoked by Hill via scripture is very much in the vein of the fire and brimstone jeremiads of Jonathan Edwards, whose "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" paints human beings as spiders being dangled over the pit of Hell by a temperamental Supreme Being. Moreover, later in the album, Hill literally positions herself as a jeremiad in the track "Forgive Them Father": "I stand position/ L's known the mission since conception/ Let's free the people from deception." Her "mission" – since birth, notably – is to redirect the message of Moses to Pharaoh; rather than telling a third party to "Let my people go," Hill urges the people to let themselves go – to break free from the self-delusions of their miseducations.

Thus, as early as *Miseducation* – "this mixture/ where hip hop meets scripture" – Hill shows clear signs of participating in the jeremiad tradition. However, this militancy and anger were tempered by several factors which made her message more palatable for mainstream listeners, such as the soccer mom readers of *Ladies Home Journal*. What enabled them to find Lauryn Hill fascinating rather than frightening? Somewhere

[19] Psalm 73: 3, 16-19.

between Hill's aesthetic appeal and, ironically, her status as a new mother, she became, for the time being, a rather innocuous Black Female Jeremiad.

Notably, Hill's emergence as a musical megastar in the mid-to-late 1990s coincides with a surge of "angry" female musicians outside the world of hip hop. Kristen Schilt asserts that 1995 was the year of the emergence of "angry women" such as Alanis Morissette and Fiona Apple onto the popular music scene; unlike the ostracized artists of the Riot Grrrl movement, Morissette and Apple were "well behaved and polite" in interviews, and "[t]his coupled with their pop music style and stereotypically feminine appearance, allowed them to be angry without being threatening" (5, 11). Similarly, Imani Perry argues that Lauryn Hill belongs in the category of mid-1990s female hip-hop artists whose "visual landscape" transformed in order to conform to mainstream conceptions of beauty (156). A brief survey of Hill's magazine covers and interviews during this time period is illustrative.

Stunningly beautiful and exceedingly warm and gracious, Hill at the zenith of her popularity possessed the million-dollar smile to go with the million-dollar voice. As *People* magazine gushed, "The 5' 4'' phenom is a *visual hit* as well, handily mixing Cosmo-girl glamour (Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana) with dreadlocks and what *Essence* once called 'eyes like Bambi's mother's" (emphasis added). Here, the media's tendency to point to Hill's maternity extends into the animated animal kingdom and, in line with Hill's martyrdom, to a mother who ultimately sacrifices herself to save her offspring. Moreover, the doe-eyed descriptor suggests a naïve and innocent – and above all, endearing – subject.

Indeed, the extraordinary shift in Hill's public perception in recent years cannot

be separated from the drastic change in her self-presentation, both in her physical appearance and overall demeanor. But at the height of her popularity, Hill's appearance was manufactured to garner mainstream likeability. In "Not Pretty Girls?" Sexuality, Spirituality, and Gender Construction in Women's Rock Music," Kate McCarthy makes this argument in reference to a *Rolling Stone* cover in which Hill appears in bobby socks and an *Entertainment Weekly* in which she appears in pigtails and holds a lollipop several inches below her mouth (76). Moreover, McCarthy's article highlights another component of Hill's image that I argue initially served to mitigate her jeremiadic elements – motherhood, which, in turn, bleeds into the characterization of Lauryn Hill as "the chosen one."

In some ways, it seems motherhood alone made Lauryn Hill safe for public consumption. As Andrea Lewis writes, "it was interesting to note how much more attention was paid to Hill's single-motherhood and relationship with one of Bob Marley's sons than to the message within her music." While *Miseducation*'s message was jeremiadic, the messenger – at this point – was an attractive, bright young woman with a noteworthy love life, and the latter reality took public precedence. Indeed, there are two key aspects of this fixation on Hill's personal life: she is a mother – period, and she is perpetuating an almost sacred lineage through her reproductive abilities. Hill's first child was born in 1997 during the recording of *Miseducation*, while her second child was born just after the album's release in 1998; the father of her children is Rohan Marley, son of the legendary Rastafarian reggae musician.[20]

Highlighting her maternity, *People* begins its 1999 article on Hill by acknowledging this positionality: "Three weeks after she gave birth to her second child,

[20] As of 2011, Hill and partner Rohan Marley have five children together.

daughter Selah, last November, she was delivering an electrifying performance on *Saturday Night Live*. Even while on the *mommy track*, Lauryn Hill, 23, runs circles around the competition" (emphasis added). How ironic that a black single mother, so often the object of intense societal ridicule as the parasitic "welfare queen," is being praised for her fecundity. Similarly, in *The Village Voice*, Sia Michel boldly proclaims Hill "a new mom audaciously aiming for – at only 23! – the kind of Righteous Universal Motherhood icon which Queen Latifah first hinted at. Such a persona allows for no cracks in her armor; she must be an invincible moral machine." Clearly, the expectations being set for Hill were worthy of a Dickensian novel. What does it mean to negotiate a space of invincible morality as a woman already negotiating the gender-precarious space of the public sphere? It is an impossible feat for any human – a test best left up to machines and saviors, which apparently some thought she was.

Closely entwined with her status as a mother is the framing of Hill – both by the media *and* by Hill herself – as a messianic figure. Even as her lyrics reveal a resistance to the maternal discourse surrounding her in the press – "And on the cover / Don't discuss the baby mother business"– the album's material fueled fans and critics' fixation on Hill's motherhood.[21] One of the most talked-about tracks on *Miseducation* is "To Zion," a love song written to her first child, a son named Zion. While Hill had declared "my destiny's manifest" in her days with the Fugees, in "To Zion," she expresses her chosenness on a more concrete and explicit level: "I touched my belly overwhelmed/ by what *I had been chosen to perform*/ but then an angel came one day/ told me to kneel down and pray/for unto me a man child would be born" (emphasis added). Here, Hill draws an explicit connection between herself and Mary, the Mother of God, who received

[21] Lyrics are from the song "Final Hour."

a prenatal visit from the angel Gabriel. Hill is the creator of "Zion," a biblical term for the city of Jerusalem as well as an allusion to the ethereal house of God.

Moreover, Hill's lyric suggests a second level of chosenness in conjunction with the word "perform." As an artist, Hill asserts that not only her maternal status but her musical performances are divinely sanctioned. As she promoted the album and received subsequent accolades, Hill repeatedly returned to this notion of personal exceptionalism. In an interview with Toure published in *Rolling Stone*, Hill states, "I definitely know that what I'm doin' is sorta bigger than me. It's something that I've been assigned." Similarly, while accepting the President's Award at the 1999 NAACP Image Awards, Hill passionately speaks of her commitment to do God's work: "I've been chosen to deliver a message." This rhetoric on the part of Hill would only increase – and serve to further ostracize her – with the release of her *MTV Unplugged 2.0* album.

However, in the immediate aftermath of *Miseducation*'s release and before the public's perception of her took a decidedly downhill turn, Hill's positionality as a messianic figure was not simply self-imposed; critics and fans alike repeatedly predicted that she was going to be "the one" to save hip hop. Like the city of Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah, hip hop in the mid-1990s "had lost its way. The music grew more commercialized, and consequently more violent and self-involved, culminating in the deaths of Tupac [Shakur] in 1996, and then Biggie Smalls in 1997" (Chace). For some, Hill would deliver the hip-hop nation through her motherhood and perpetuating a sacred musical lineage. For others, Hill's musical talent alone sealed the spiritual deal. Writing on the tenth anniversary of the release of *Miseducation*, Wiltz reminisces, "Scroll back a decade…it couldn't get more fabulous than Lauryn, more celebrated, more anointed,

more praised...She's St. Lauryn, a modern-day Joan of Arc doing battle with the evildoers, the patron saint of hip-hop."

Even after her Hill's subsequent fall from grace, true St. Lauryn devotees can't stop, won't stop believing. In 2005, hip-hop artist Talib Kweli penned "Ms. Hill," a love letter not to Lauryn Hill the woman – "this no disrespect to whoever your man is though/ this relationship is strictly music like D'angelo" – but to Lauryn Hill the musical genius. Kweli insists, "You give us hope, you give us faith, you the one," and in a gesture that evokes John Winthrop's famous words, loaded with potential and a wedded religious and political national mission, Kweli sums up Hill's perceived power and talent with the repeated declaration "what you spit got the power to uplift a hill." This notion of Hill as a messianic figure is only reinforced through her very public crucifixion in the aftermath of her infamous and misunderstood follow-up album, *Unplugged*; Kweli's spiritual love song marks one of the few exceptions to the self-fulfilling prophecy Hill delivers on the *Miseducation* track "Superstar": "They'll hail you, then they'll nail you, no matter who you are. They'll make you now then take you down."

She's Come *Unplugged*

"Wake up you've been sleeping
Take up your bed and walk."
– Lauryn Hill, "Mr. Intentional"

In July 2001, Lauryn Hill recorded in front of a live audience in MTV's Time Square studios. Established as a series in 1989, *MTV Unplugged* has documented over one hundred acoustic or otherwise stripped-down performances from a cross-section of

artists including Nirvana, R.E.M., Bob Dylan, Annie Lenox, Alicia Keys, LL Cool J, and Jay-Z. The reviews of Lauryn Hill's intimate session, released as a double CD in 2002, can be summed up by this representative pronouncement in *Entertainment Weekly* by David Browne, who called *Unplugged* "perhaps the most bizarre follow-up in the history of pop." Robert Christgau in *The Village Voice* went so far as to declare *Unplugged* "[p]robably not the worst album ever released by an artist of substance…But in the running." Ultimately, the plethora of negative – or, at the very least, extremely perplexed – reactions to Hill's second solo album reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of Hill's agenda: MTV Studios is her pulpit and *Unplugged* is the mountaintop for her Black Female jeremiadic performance.

When Hill first arrives onstage, one immediately notices a shift in her appearance. Her newly close-cropped hair is covered by both a bandanna and a Yankees baseball cap. Wearing jeans, a sweater, and a denim jacket, Hill declares, "I used to get dressed up for you all." Later in the performance, Hill jokes about her low, gravelly voice by saying that people will see/hear her and ask, "Who's that boy on stage? Who's that little boy?" She is also armed with a guitar, an instrument Hill had just recently learned to play. As Kate McCarthy notes, "there is a sense in which simply by picking up a guitar women musicians are committing the kinds of gender trespass that feminist theory celebrates" (72-73). This is not the same woman who posed in pigtails and lollipops two and three years earlier.

Not only Hill's appearance but also her demeanor demonstrates a profound shift. In further evidence of her focused intention on delivering a message, Hill prefaces the performance by saying, "It's just very important that you really listen to the words."

Similarly, later in the performance – just before she embarks on a tirade against the criminal justice system in "Mystery of Iniquity," warning those who benefit from injustice, as she does in *Miseducation*'s "Final Hour," that "It all falls down" – Hill announces that she might completely stop playing her guitar so that the audience can hear the words.[22] Perhaps it is no wonder that Hill places such emphasis on the lyrics of her second album; the music itself leaves something to be desired.

Indeed the majority of the thirteen songs on *Unplugged* employ melodies so unremarkable that it is nearly impossible to get one stuck in your head. In a 2003 *Rolling Stone* piece, Toure quotes a veteran industry executive as saying, "Anyone with ears can hear there are only three chords being played on every song. I saw it with a roomful of professionals, and someone said, 'I feel like jumpin' out the window.'" Moreover, most of the tunes are not only indistinguishable from one another, but they far surpass the typical length of a popular song by lasting at least seven minutes, with some going over nine. Clearly, Hill is not crafting her work with consideration for radio play and single releases. Just as she acknowledges her defiance of the beauty aesthetic for a female artist on stage, she reveals a newfound defiance of a commercial aesthetic in her songwriting. However, perhaps even more unconventional – and controversial – than the songs themselves are Hill's spoken interludes which fall in between them. Here in the spaces between, unburdened by the necessity of accompanying her performance with requisite strumming in order to call it a song, Hill attempts to shed some light on her religiously-charged lyrics.

[22] Kanye West would make a hit of the chorus of "Mystery of Iniquity" with his 2004 single "All Falls Down." Copyright issues made Hill's voice too pricey to be directly sampled; still, Neil Drumming writes in *Entertainment Weekly* that "Die-hard fans – you know, the ones who somehow penetrated her relentlessly morose 2002 MTV Unplugged album – will be thrilled…".

In one interlude, Hill admits to her audience the complexity of her dense lines: "I know some of it sounds almost cryptic…" She expresses faith, however, that the message behind them will be received in the way that it should: "God doesn't lie and I know that He knows how to talk to the hearts of the people better than anyone else." In a later interlude, which stretches over twelve minutes in length and opens Disc 2 of the performance, Hill explicitly outlines her vision for the project: "He [God] showed me, you know, 'Look, Lauryn. You're the problem, okay? I'm a show you how you're causing the problem, and now I want you to be the solution.' And that's what all of these songs are about – problem, cause, and solution."[23] Moreover, the interludes center on Hill's investment in distinguishing between reality and fantasy – on repenting and letting go of deception in order to be free. This idea is further echoed in the song lyrics themselves. In the first track, "Mr. Intentional," Hill declares: "wake up you've been sleeping/ take up your bed and walk" – a verse merging of the words spoken by Jesus in John 5:8. Similarly, in Track Two, "Adam Lives in Theory," Hill identifies "all of humanity" as fallen and points to human shortcomings on an individual level: "unlearn everything you know and let Him teach you/ line upon line, precept upon precept, say goodbye/ to this decaying social system." In lamenting society's proclivity for systemic deception, Hill urges her audience to "wake up" so that they might join her in speaking truth to power.

The most explicitly jeremiadic track on *Unplugged* is "Oh Jerusalem," which laments national and communal failure and takes the words of its refrain directly from Jeremiah 4:14: "Oh Jerusalem, wash thy heart from wickedness/ That though may be

[23] "Be the solution" speaks to an agency and mission depicted in Morrison's *Paradise,* in which the two generations argue over whether the charge to the town is "Beware" the Furrow of His Brow or "Be" the Furrow of His Brow.

saved from thy deception/ How long shall thy face those lies within thee/ Oh Jerusalem, keep thee from perfection." The third song of the performance, this track is a whopping 8 minutes and 55 seconds long. At this point on the *Unplugged* DVD, the camera pans the crowd, in which once-eager audience members now appear either bored, annoyed, confused, or all of the above. This is not the Lauryn Hill they thought they were coming to see and hear.

Strikingly, it is during the spoken interludes, so ridiculed in the album's reviews, when the audience seems most connected to Hill. Jeff Giles in *Newsweek* mentions Hill's "awkward speechifying," and David Browne calls them "diversions….discursions [that] are perversely fascinating, but including them [on the CD] is a disastrous move." Indeed, with the audio alone, the interludes do not come across in a way that captures the spirit of the room. When watching the performance on DVD, however, it is clear that these spoken moments are heart-felt, well-received, and spontaneous, often occurring while Hill is waiting to be brought a notebook of lyrics or a guitar with different tuning.[24] And the audience, in these moments when Hill is just sharing, appears captivated – smiling, nodding, laughing, engaged – in a way that rarely happens during the performances of the songs themselves.

A crucial element of the spoken performance that seemingly gets lost in translation between DVD and CD becomes Hill's commentary on her own sanity. Acknowledging the growing rumors, Hill states, "The view is that I'm like emotionally unstable, which is reality – like you aren't?" As the camera pans to the crowd, the audience responds in agreement with laughs and nods. Again, during the final track "Outro," Hill returns to the public perception that she has gone insane: "When they think

[24] The performance was released on DVD in June 2002, a month after the CD was released.

you're crazy they don't mess with you…Now that people think I'm crazy and deranged, we have peace…So listen, as far as I'm concerned, I'm crazy and deranged…I'm emotionally unstable…That's my story and I'm sticking to it." It is clear to anyone watching the performance that Hill is being facetious; in fact, the audience is charmed by these words, in a parting moment that induces smiles rather than raises eyebrows. Taken out of context, however, and passed along like a game of telephone in the age of high speed internet, Lauryn Hill supposedly confirms her own insanity. As Toure writes in an October 2003 piece entitled "The Mystery of Lauryn Hill," "Few bought the [*Unplugged*] album, but many talked about how she could be heard on the record breaking down in tears and saying, 'I'm crazy and deranged…I'm emotionally unstable." Jeff Giles concurs, stating that Hill "sounds not just unplugged but unhinged."

In short, most reviewers just didn't get it. As David Browne notes, "*Unplugged* is baffling on so many levels, it's hard to know where to begin." Crucially, the one reviewer who truly *does* seems to get it is Bethany Versluis in *Sojourners* magazine. The subtitle of the magazine for this religious organization, based in Washington, D.C. and led by progressive Christian minister Jim Wallis, is "Faith, Politics, and Culture." This religio-political group, intimately familiar with the jeremiad tradition, qualifies Hill's performance very much as one. Calling *Unplugged* "a double-disc album that plays more like a four-hour sermon," Versluis describes Hill as "[b]old as the disciples after Pentecost" and identifies her as "the New David, plucking out lamentations and psalms on her postmodern lute." In summation, Versluis raves, "Musically speaking, Hill has gone where no artist has gone before. This isn't just new material, a new style, or a new genre: This is anarchy…Hill's come undone and done it well." In other words, while the

melodies to many of the songs may be mediocre, the lyrics dense and lengthy, and the accompaniment lackluster – if you evaluate Hill's *Unplugged* on the whole and in conversation with a prophetic history, as Versluis does here, it is a groundbreaking performance.

And yet, the vast majority of critics and fans continue to describe *Unplugged* as a huge misstep, one from which Hill's career never recovered. When discussing Hill's disappearance since *Miseducation*, Teresa Wiltz dismisses the live performance altogether as a form of creative output: "You can't really count that half-hearted MTV Unplugged CD as anything." In short, the performance continues to suffer from a deep misunderstanding on the part of the general public concerning Hill's mission as an artist and activist. In the context of the Black Female Jeremiad, *Unplugged* can be read as nothing less than the ultimate fulfillment of Hill's destiny.

Instead, slightly over a year after the album's release, Toure writes: "A world-class talent when she made 'Miseducation,' she had a public breakdown with 'Unplugged'." In the time since its release, Hill had "disappeared." Toure laments this disappearing act with the speculation that "Hill could have been J. Lo with political substance." Lauryn Hill could never have been "J. Lo," and thank God for that. If that is the path her handlers were pushing her towards, no wonder Hill chose a drastically different one. Following the *Unplugged* fiasco, Hill's name next frequents the papers in late 2003 after she very publicly denounced the Catholic Church – *at the Vatican* – for its handling of the child sexual abuse scandal. Reporting on the incident in *Entertainment Weekly*, Gary Susman writes, "the reclusive R&B diva, little heard from in recent years, resurfaced Saturday at a taping of a Christmas concert at the Vatican." And in true

jeremiadic fashion, “After urging officials to ‘repent,’ she scrapped her songs listed in the program and sang instead “Damnable Heresies” and “Social Drugs.” Not surprisingly, Hill’s remarks were edited out of the eventual broadcast.

Moreover, Hill’s defiant performance in the pope’s own house only served to reinforce the belief that she had lost her mind. Indeed, her instability continues to be the predominant cultural conversation regarding Lauryn Hill, and she has done little to combat it. Her physical appearance has become increasingly bizarre, with photographs splashed all over the internet of Hill in 2007 and 2008 with an orange-tinted afro and almost clown-like makeup. Clearly, these images are not going on the cover of *Teen People*, and nobody wants tips on how to put on that eye shadow. Hill is no longer a musical darling or a “visual hit.” Furthermore, Hill’s motherhood, once so lauded, is now ridiculed as excessive – she now has five children with Marley – and a contributing factor in (or a cynical scapegoat for) her absence and perceived instability.

Ultimately, only time will tell what happens to Lauryn Hill’s career. At only thirty-five, Hill could conceivably have decades of artistic output ahead of her. If her recent handful of public performances are any indication, however, Lauryn Hill is bringing too little to the stage, and too late. As part of the Rock the Bells hip-hop festival performing at suburban Washington, D.C.’s Merriweather Post Pavilion in August 2010, Hill arrived on stage three hours late only to perform six hurried songs; while concertgoers were told that Lauryn was “in the building” but her performance status was questionable because she was suffering from dehydration, *Washington Post* columnist David Malitz later reported that Hill was late because of a poorly-scheduled manicure-pedicure. In late December 2010, Hill again arrived three hours late for a show at an

intimate club in Brooklyn; Jon Caramica notes in his *New York Times* review that fans in the front row held up signs declaring "This Is Insulting" and "You Just Lost One," a reference to the second track on *Miseducation*.

Moreover, Hill's latest performances have not included any new material. Defending his partner against those critics and fans who insist that Hill is creatively spent, Rohan Marley, in an August 2008 article entitled "Whatever Happened to…Lauryn Hill?," insists that "[s]he writes music in the bathroom, on toilet paper, on the wall…She writes it in the mirror if the mirror smokes up. She writes constantly. This woman does not sleep" (qtd. in McGee and Tresniowski). Unfortunately, Marley's statement does little to combat the popular branding of Hill as the madwoman in the studio. While Maria Stewart was cryptically forced off the public stage and Nina Simone spent the last decades of her life in a self-imposed exile in Europe, Lauryn Hill's demise appears to be a combination of a forced and a self-directed move. Synthesizing the best – and what some would call the worst – of Stewart and Simone, Hill has emerged as a disgraced prophet who is still, according to her partner, putting the writing on the wall.

But does a prophet make a sound if no one's there to hear her proclamations? Until Hill's toilet paper and steamed-mirror lyrics materialize as songs on stage or CD, her troubled reputation will continue to overshadow her indisputable talent. As Zoe Chace writes in a 2010 piece for NPR, ""After *Unplugged*, those of us who grew up listening to her missed her voice in the same way we missed our hopeful youth. That powerful sound that represented great potential being fulfilled was silent." Hill's powerful voice echoes throughout this project; her self-described status as one "chosen to deliver" frames the dissertation's title, and her words enrich each of the individual

chapters as epigraphs that function as connective tissues. She is this project's unifying voice – one which has ultimately proven so divisive in the public sphere and which remains largely understudied in academia. Lauryn Hill has been anointed as the chosen one, hailed as a superstar, and crucified as a doubly mad black woman; still, her small but significant group of devotees continues to hope for her messianic Second Coming.

Conclusion

…The More We Need a Black Female Jeremiad

This project began as a footnote in the spring of 2007, the year before a United Sates presidential election. While researching the jeremiadic discourse surrounding James Baldwin, I was struck by the overwhelming dearth of scholarship and public commentary on women as jeremiad figures – and on African American women in particular, given the rich political history of the black church and womanist theology's analyses of the work of black women writers through a social justice lens. Four years later, as that footnote has become a dissertation, the nation again finds itself coming up on a presidential election year. In short, the lifespan of "Chosen to Deliver" has been roughly an election cycle. While some things have changed since this project was conceived – for example, Barack Obama's messianic appeal has significantly plummeted for a number of former supporters – so much of the political scene remains strikingly within the temple of our familiar. Mitt Romney appears poised for a second White House bid, and the ubiquitous Sarah Palin frequently spins Reagan's rhetoric backwards and in heels.

While it comes as little surprise that Romney and Palin continue to invoke the most popular conservative presidential figure of the twentieth century, The Gipper's influence on our current political rhetoric transcends party lines. In their first reactions to President Obama's State of the Union address on January 25, 2011, ABC's Christiane Amanpour characterized Obama's speech as "very Reagan-esque, [going] on and on about American exceptionalism," while CBS political analyst Jeff Greenfield called it

"down right Reagan-esque." Indeed, with pronouncements such as "I know there isn't a person here who would trade places with any other nation on Earth" because we live "in the greatest nation on Earth," a place "where anything is possible," where "[w]e do big things" and "[o]ur destiny remains our choice," Obama appears to be employing Reagan's sales technique, even if the product he hopes to sell is quite different.[1]

The week following the 2011 State of the Union address, *Time* furthered the connection between Obama and Reagan with a magazine cover that featured a fictionalized meeting between the two men. As the 40th President reaches his arm around the current leader of the free world, a beaming Obama makes a gesture of deference toward Reagan, next to the headline "Why Obama ♥ Reagan." The accompanying article clarifies that while their politics and policies are vastly different, Obama acknowledges and even admires the potential power in appropriating Reagan's persona and rhetoric. Of course, the mere suggestion that there is anything "Reagan-esque" about Barack Obama was taken as an insult by both the Reagan and the Obama faithful. I am reminded of the joke about the two parties' identical responses – for very different ideological reasons – to Abraham Lincoln: Democrats cannot believe Lincoln was a Republican…and Republicans cannot believe Lincoln was a Republican. But the notion that liberals and conservatives alike might be deeply offended by a comparison between Obama and Reagan brings to mind questions about access to, as well as the agenda surrounding, the rhetoric of American exceptionalism.

In other words, is American exceptionalism an inherently problematic ideology? The main argument against American exceptionalism, as Russell Banks summarizes, is

[1]For a transcript of the 2011 State of the Union, see http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/State_of_the_Union/state-of-the-union-2011-full-transcript/story?id=12759395&page=4.

that this belief encourages us to "see our values and needs as more important than those of anyone else on this planet" (60). And in a society like the United States that is composed of the "haves" and the "have-nots" – and even, as George W. Bush deemed his elite base, the "have-mores" – the nation's values and needs, while perhaps universally acknowledged in patriotic rhetorical flourishes, are neither universally met nor universal. In short, it is not just the needs of America that are prioritized over the rest of the world; it is the needs of a particular – and privileged – subset of Americans whose needs are prioritized over the rest. Moreover, Reagan reinvigorated American exceptionalism as the national metaphor during a time in which the United States emerged as the lone global superpower. Without a foreign nation as a truly worthy competitor, a deep need emerged for a new counterpart to ensure that the "Shining City on a Hill" is kept in check.

As a response to this need, "Chosen to Deliver" reveals the ways in which the Black Female Jeremiad operates as part of the checks and balances system of national discourse. This project includes writers and rappers, preachers and presidents, and underscores the ways in which they are in dialogue with one another. In analyzing works located at the intersection of religion and politics, "Chosen to Deliver" deals with the two once off-limits dinner table topics that have increasingly become the nightly soundtrack in millions of homes with televisions tuned to Fox News and MSNBC. This 24-hour news cycle in a post-9/11 culture feeds into a growing politics of fear and only exacerbates concerns about the future of the United States and its place in an unsettling world. At such a precarious time as this, the sense of security and identity that American exceptionalism provides becomes all the more appealing. Relatedly, the Black Female

Jeremiad – that prophetic voice calling out the "City on a Hill" for conduct incompatible with God's chosen people – becomes all the more necessary.

In fact, it was the events of September 11, 2001, that led Sarah Vowell to reexamine the nation's Puritan heritage in *The Wordy Shipmates*. After unpacking Winthrop's pronouncement of the not-yet nation's "City on a Hill" destiny, Vowell goes on to highlight the parts of Winthrop's speech that *weren't* subsequently engraved in the ideological constitution of the United States. When the speech as a whole is analyzed, Vowell argues, rather than simply its most famous sentence, "A Modell of Christian Charity" can be read as a declaration of *de*pendence. In this characterization, Vowell highlights the following passage as Winthrop's capstone phrase: "We must delight in each other, make other's conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body." *This* is the part of Winthrop's speech that the Black Female Jeremiad is most interested in as well. *That* is "the endless work" they are chosen to deliver. While the most-quoted part of Winthrop's speech may be where Black Female Jeremiads invariably begin, this often-overlooked message is ultimately where they are trying to go…and where they are trying to bring us all, together.

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