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"CHECK WITH YO' MAN FIRST; CHECK WITH YO' MAN": PERRY APPROPRIATES DRAG AS A TOOL TO RECIRCULATE PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY

by

TIMOTHY SCOTT LYLE

Under the Direction of Dr. Kameelah Martin Samuel and Dr. Shirlene Holmes

ABSTRACT

In this thesis project, I investigate the drama of Perry and introduce his dramaturgy into the academic landscape. As the critical discourse is shifting towards the realm of popular culture, we must begin to locate several discourses at work in the drama of quite possibly the most popular, visible, and financially successful African American playwright of the twenty-first century, if not of all time. Drawing on gender and queer theory, I offer a theoretical discussion about subversive and non-subversive drag acts, and I question the degree to which Perry appropriates drag in a politically liberating or constraining manner. Moreover, I examine the gender and sexual politics in *Madea's Family Reunion* to illustrate the ways in which I read Perry as offering a very conflicted dialectic between activist aspirations and oppressive tendencies, particularly in regard to questions of safe feminist spaces, motherhood, female self-sufficiency, female self-definition, domestic violence, and homosexuality.

INDEX WORDS: Tyler Perry, *Madea's Family Reunion,* Drag, Theatre, Popular culture Criticism, Queer theory, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Black gay male, Male feminists, Heteronormativity, Homoeroticism, Blow-bite-blow

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TIMOTHY SCOTT LYLE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

2009

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Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
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DEDICATION

Out of all the pages in this rather lengthy document, this is perhaps the most important and undoubtedly the most difficult page to write. When I first read about the university's requirements for said dedication page, I had no idea that one even wrote a dedication page for a document of this nature. I had always assumed that honor was reserved for one's first book-length study, assuming that that opportunity ever presents itself. With all of that being said, I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to publicly acknowledge and document the unwavering support, encouragement, and inspiration that I receive from my mother. During my researching and composing, I watched my mother fight for her life against Breast Cancer. As always, she exhibited such incredible strength and courage in the face of an incredibly challenging time. With each new hurtle, she rarely stumbled, rarely stopped smiling, and never ceased to motivate my completion of this project.

When I was a small child, I haphazardly formed a rather inquisitive, slightly annoying phrase: "why come." The phrase was an accidental combination of "why" and "how come," an inquisitive hybrid of sorts. Throughout my childhood, the phrase stuck, and my mother never discouraged that voice—that little boy's voice who always questioned everything—who asked more questions about the questions he had just asked a moment ago. Her patience and her nurturing of that voice never subsided. Above all else, I attribute any success that I may have as an academic or as a person to that motivation. Dear mother-- I live, breathe, and write to make you proud. If I give you half as much as you give me, I can ask for little more. I am so proud of your victory over Cancer, and I am so impressed with your spirit, your mind, and your heart. This is for you! Thank you for always letting me ask questions and never silencing my inquisitive spirit.

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In terms of my larger career development, I would be remiss if I did not express my incredible gratitude to Dr. Nancy D. Chase at Georgia State University and Dr. Dana Williams from Howard University. Both of these scholars and teachers have forever altered the ways in which I read, conceptualize, and write about literature and popular culture. More specific to this project, I express my appreciation to Dr. Stephen Nadler at Spelman College for painstakingly "reading" Perry's plays with me and offering engaging and insightful commentary on my thoughts and drafts throughout the development of this project. I am particularly thankful for his contribution to my treatment of failed motherhood in Perry's fictive world and for pointing me in the direction of Essex Hemphill and the notion of "coming home." To my advisors, Dr. Kameelah Martin Samuel and Dr. Shirlene Holmes, you two gave much such freedom to explore my ideas with confidence and to take educated risks. This project would not be possible without your guidance and tireless investments.

Additionally, I offer my thanks to my great friends Kris Cannon and Stacey Cohen for continuously dialoguing with me about our various academic inquiries, victories, and frustrations. Our collaboration on my work and yours influences me to be a more thoughtful academic, and our friendships constantly reinvigorate my creative energies. Furthermore, I would like to centralize my gratitude to a local Women's Resource Center in Atlanta, Georgia. In an effort to be socially responsible and respectful of the organization's privacy, I will withhold specific names and locations. I am so grateful that you shared your thoughts, feelings, laughter, and tears with me. I cannot thank you all more for opening up your lives to me and to one other during our screening. Family and friends not named, you know who you are, and none of this would be possible without your love, support, and encouragement.

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CHAPTER 1: READING BEYOND THE LAUGHTER AND THE MUSIC: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE DRAMA OF TYLER PERRY

There are few moments in life as annoying as sitting in the unforgiving heat of the southern sunlight in the middle of seven o'clock Atlanta traffic. As I soon realized, due to traffic, there was no humanly possible way I was going to make the eight o'clock showtime to see a play that a friend had invited me to at the last minute. Assuring myself of the fact that the pileup was not a result of this small play, I asked myself what could be the root cause of the complete and utter mess of cars, buses, and pedestrians in the middle the evening. Finally, after sitting on Peachtree Street, a few blocks shy of the theater, without moving an inch or two for fifteen minutes or more, I rolled down the window to ask a fellow driver the cause of the delay. His reply: "oh, you haven't heard? Tyler Perry's new play is in town at the Fox Theatre." I distinctly remember my self-reflective process at that moment; I remember asking myself if Perry's audience really drew a crowd that large. Of course I knew Perry's play was in town as I, too, was traveling to see the show. But I had not yet been introduced to the cultural phenomenon that was and continues to be: Tyler Perry as Madea! I had no idea of the power that this fictionally created female persona, brought to life by Perry himself, exercised in the world of Perry's dramas. However, I was soon to find out and, as a result, be forever changed as an intellectual and a scholar.

As the traffic finally thinned out and the anxious audience began to pile into the theater, it was already thirty minutes after showtime. While communities of women, church groups, couples, and friends of various ages and both genders made progress to their seats, a man who stood about 6'5" walked out to the center of the stage dressed in a grey-haired wig and a fat suit. Unbeknownst to me at the time, it was the man behind the phenomenon: Tyler Perry. Not yet dressed completely in his Madea costume, Perry took the microphone and shouted to the

audience something to this effect: "Y'all sit the hell down! Yes, you; Sit down! Y'all are over thirty minutes late. Damn---even the few white folks are late. Just…Just…sit the hell down so we can get this show on the road." My first introduction to Perry, as a partially dressed but fully conscious Madea, perfectly set the tone for the next two hours of his play. After the play was over, the cast and crew performed their stage bows, and Perry, out of his Madea persona, addressed the audience as himself. After the stage was cleared and the houselights came up, I was convinced that Perry, as a dramatist and as a popular culture icon, must be a subject of academic inquiry. Though I later learned that his pre-show berating of the audience was a fairly characteristic introduction, Perry's interestingly aggressive approach, to which I bore witness, never left my memory. I remember, distinctly, the look on my academic mentor's face when I confessed to her that I intended to focus on Perry and his drama as the topic of my scholarly research. While she was encouraging and slightly excited, she warned me to prepare myself for the challenges that I would face from the academy. Since that initial meeting, I have indeed faced and welcomed those challenges and strongly understand them to be part of this educational journey and certainly part of this project. As the age-old debate continues over what defines art and what is worthy of academic response, I remain of the sternest opinion that the texts produced in the realm of popular culture and entertainment are igniting a powerful dialectic between audience and artist in which the tenets of American ideology are undergoing continuous renegotiations and are steadily revised by artist and audience alike.

In this thesis project, I intend to investigate the drama of Perry and to introduce a conversation about his dramaturgy into the academic landscape. As the critical discourse is shifting towards the realm of broadening our definitions of a text and exploring those productions found in popular culture, I believe it is of the utmost importance to begin to locate

several discourses at work in the drama of quite possibly the most popular, most visible, and most financially successful African American playwright of the twenty-first century, if not of all time. Initially, this project was motivated by my own conflicting feelings of bafflement and enjoyment after seeing one of Perry's productions for the first time. Deciding to turn my energies into a productive bafflement, I began to research scholarly journals and publications to learn more about Perry and the academy's response to his work.

Shockingly, I found only one article by K.B. Saine titled "The Black American's Chitlin/Gospel/Urban Show: Tyler Perry and the Madea Plays" (2005), which is a paper delivered at the Southwestern Theatre Conference in 2005, that amounts to less than ten pages in length. While Saine poses an interesting professional dilemma by admitting that his lack of familiarity with Perry's drama sparked his own scholarly inquiry, the article does little in the way of launching any sort of detailed discussion about Perry's aesthetic choices, thematic concerns, or sociopolitical significance. Saine does, however, highlight interesting thoughts about Perry's redefining of theatre that I, too, have argued for quite sometime. Perhaps the most pertinent question that Saine raises is the following: How does Perry fit into the history of Black theatre in America? Even though I will pull briefly from Saine's essay, I am rather unsatisfied with his cursory comments about Perry's cultural place in the African American theatrical world, and I certainly feel that the need for a close examination of Perry's politics and the larger discourses operating behind his fictive world is necessary and timely. In an effort to launch an academic dialogue about Perry's importance to African American drama and African American politics, I have decided to pursue answers to my own questions by way of penning my master's thesis on Perry's work.

Before discussing the specifics of Perry's narrative structure, the thematic concerns, and the politics contained within his drama, the focuses of this discussion, we must establish, in rather limiting, provisional terms I realize, a working definition of Perry's style and approach and a label by which it can be referred. While the nature of Perry's work has been described and/or criticized as low-brow, illegitimate theater, a capitalization of the black minstrel characteristics of the plantation entertainment tradition and early American theater, or a revival of the Chitlin Circuit culture of drama by popular media productions and popular film critics, I am not particularly satisfied, neither is Perry, with these limited spaces in which his work is being placed. Though it may be said that Perry draws upon elements of the humor found in everyday black life, the minstrel tradition paradigm does not accurately describe the style or approach of Perry. Considering that, at its basest level, the minstrel technique or style of drama was reproduced by black actors as a means of resistance to and mockery of traditional white notions of black inferiority or as a form of entertainment for their white counterparts, one can see that Perry's art transcends this categorization. Because of Perry's employment of African American Vernacular English (or variations stemming from this linguistic structure), his allusions to figures in the African American community (whether contemporary or historical), and his overall engagement with African American culture (fictional texts, religious practices, cultural engagements, and musical forms), if one is not adequately fluent in African American culture, much of Perry's politics, jokes, or overall objectives will be inaccessible, at least in an immediate or complete sense. Perry's nearly all-black fictive stage world is neither concerned with parodying or commenting on white perceptions of black life nor is it preoccupied with the entertainment of a white audience; as a matter of fact, in Perry's dramatic vision, the white race is almost completely absent. (This absence will change as his stage plays are grafted onto

mainstream movie screens in Hollywood). Therefore, with these facts in mind, we can observe the ways in which Perry's work resists the rigid categorization of minstrelsy.

In addition to its being labeled as a capitalization of the minstrel tradition, the dramatic vision of Perry has also been criticized as a revival of the Chitlin Circuit Theatre culture, which can be traced back to the first quarter of the twentieth century. Despite the pervasive use of this label for his dramas, Saine's article points out that Perry prefers to think of his work as participating in an Urban Theatre Circuit, which is a term that he prefers as a more politically correct label than Chitlin Circuit. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes as he historicizes the Chitlin Circuit theatrical culture, "perhaps OyamO [otherwise known as Charles F. Gordon] brings us closest to comprehension [of the Chitlin Circuit] when he despairingly observes an uncomfortable truth: 'a lot of what they call highbrow, progressive, avant-garde theatre is *boring the shit out of people*.' Not to put too fine a point on it" (49). The Chitlin Circuit gives name not only to a type of theatrical entertainment that attempts to reach the Black masses but also to an underworld, a culture, or a community of everyday people who are searching to find art with which they can relate. This underworld is a culture in which food lines the streets, fashion is of a top priority, and music fills the air. While the Chitlin Circuit tradition describes a great deal of what audiences may find in Perry's art, especially in reference to thematic concerns and elements of excess or "ridiculousness" or exaggeration, we must also consider the key ways in which Perry does not fit so neatly into this tradition. One of the principal ideas surrounding this form of entertainment is the fact that this art is "for domestic consumption only—export strictly prohibited" (Gates 52). With his idea of domestic consumption, Gates is essentially suggesting that this community theater is for the enjoyment of a black audience only; if white people

witnessed this form of entertainment, it could be used as a tool of subjugation or a mechanism to reinforce stereotypical images that are rooted in antiquated ideas of supposed racial inferiority.

Moreover, there is certainly a less attractive side to the Chitlin Circuit tradition, which is, of course, the criminal element of this underworld theater. According to Larry Leon Hamlin, "contracts have been put out on people. If you are a big-time drug dealer, it's like, these plays are making money, and I've got money. I'm going to put out a play" (Gates 53). Most of the business of the Chitlin Circuit Theater is handled in cash, and actors run the risk of not receiving compensation for their hard work and performance. Aside from the actors not being paid properly, it can be a dangerous world for them offstage. Therefore, while I recognize the similarities between Perry's art and the plays popular in the Chitlin Circuit tradition, Perry's plays, again, escape a neat categorization. White people certainly attend his plays, though the number is disproportional to black audience members, and he works with a family of actors who have remained with him through most of his plays; his theatrical group has formed a safe community of artistic collaboration.

Though Perry's plays cannot strictly be referred to as Chitlin Circuit Theatre, we must call attention to the fact that we can certainly loosely situate him in a tradition of gospel plays and in some of their manifestations from the early 1930s up to the present. Turning to Errol Hill and James Hatch's incredibly useful *A History of African American Theatre* (2003), I believe understanding some of the major characteristics of the historical development of gospel plays will better equip us to ascertain what is new about Perry's productions and what is simply a revival of a tradition that has quite a history. Moreover, by understanding some of the many logistical, financial, and political problems that plagued the development and sustainment of Gospel Theatre (and Urban Circuit/Chitlin Circuit), we will have the opportunity to examine why

Perry's place is crucial in terms of the larger development and success of African American Theatre. According to Hill and Hatch, gospel plays "in dramatic form…combined spirituals and biblical parables with pageantry- a series of key moments held together by scripture, music, and spectacle…gospel plays employed local talent from church choirs…the plots were simple, usually a bible story already known by the audience" (381). Eventually, gospel plays moved from the walls of the church onto the Broadway stages and extended their audience appeal to white audiences. The 1930 production of *The Green Pastures* is perhaps the most emblematic of the tendency white audiences exhibit to seek out theatrical productions of African American spirituality. Even though some gospel plays were grafted onto the concert stages and Broadway stages, Hill and Hatch note that during the same time Black churches consistently featured gospel plays with folk themes within the walls of their own buildings. They note *Heaven Bound* (1930) as one of the most successful gospel plays that remained within the walls of the Big Bethel AME Church in Atlanta. Although Hill and Hatch make little mention of the gospel play during the 1940s and 1950s, they certainly celebrate the success of these plays in conjunction with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the monumental voices of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy who spoke quite like gospel play performers in their own serious activist contexts. Moreover, they highlight how Langston Hughes, Loften Mitchell, John Oliver Killens, Josephine Jackson and Joseph Walker capitalized on the gospel play tradition to produce incredibly successful musicals and dramas with a great deal of music featured during the 1960s. Despite any success that the gospel play enjoyed during the 1930s and 1960s, the genre no doubt found its greatest success in the last three decades of the twentieth century, particularly if we loosely situate Perry in this tradition of gospel theatre. Hill and Hatch posit a similar conclusion when they write that "the genre reached its peak with *Godspell* (1971) and *Jesus*

Christ Superstar (1971)…[but] by the late 1980s, the white audience's passion for gospel waned" (384). And, unfortunately, because so much of the commercial success of concert stage and Broadway stage versions of the gospel play depended on white patronage and financial backing from white theatre executives, when the white audience's passion waned, the genre's popularity dissipated on the concert hall stages and Broadway stages. By the mid-1980s and early-1990s, shows like *Sing, Mahalia Sing* (1986) and *Truly Blessed* (1990) did not even complete their originally scheduled runs. (Hill and Hatch 384)

Even though the white audience's thirst for Black gospel shows seemed to disappear, the genre did not fail entirely. Actually, quite the opposite happened. Hill and Hatch explain the revitalization of the genre when they point out that "Vy Higginsen…targeted a new audience of working-class people who rarely bought tickets to expensive Broadway shows. Using gospel music, and booking theatre parties through the churches, Higgensen and Ken Wydro staged *Mama, I Want to Sing* (1980), a musical whose entire plot lay in its title" (384). The show was quite successful on its Harlem stage. *Mama* ran for eight years and grossed over twenty-five million dollars. Eventually, as could be expected, with success came emulation; various producers began to try Higginsen's formula: "a few good gospel singers playing characters familiar to church congregations, a slight story with minimal scenery, and dramatic lighting to create a revival atmosphere" (Hill and Hatch 384). Higgensen's play emerged as one of the forerunners of the Chitlin Circuit (or Urban Circuit) of the 1980s and 1990s. In the late 1980s, we see Shelly Garrett producing wildly popular theatre in a similar tradition. Shows like *Beauty Shop* (1987), which grossed thirty-three million, *Beauty Shop Part II*, *Barber Shop*, and *Laundromat* earned Garrett the most successful place in box-office sales history for Black theatre, at least until Perry came onto the theatrical scene. Though Garrett's plays were

incredibly successful, he was never concerned with delivering particular sociopolitical messages to his audience. As Garrett himself admits, "my show is strictly entertainment. I don't want to teach anybody anything" (qtd. in Hill and Hatch 466). This admission did not stop theatre critics and industry insiders from criticizing and devaluing the "low-brow," popular culture productions that were both financially successful and popular. The plays were characterized as aesthetically subordinate and not worthy of the title of art. These criticisms are certainly familiar for readers who have followed receptions of Perry's work as well. One of the reasons why I centralize portions of this history in this project is because I want to suggest that Perry certainly is a part of the various manifestations of Gospel Theatre and Urban Circuit drama to a degree, particularly in terms of common plots, themes, inclusion of gospel music, target audiences, and production value. However, Perry's productions diverge from this history in some important ways. First, his plays have continued to succeed in the theatre culture for almost a decade without showing any signs of slowing down. Stability and maintenance are key. Moreover, his plays do aim to offer more than strictly entertainment. He is adamant that the plays are artistic and contain serious messages. Additionally, he has moved outside of a limited church following, though he certainly owes much of his foundational success to this demographic. But, most importantly, in terms of artistic control, one has to consider that one of the fundamental problems with much of the history of Black Theatre (especially in the Urban Circuit) is the question of financial backing. As Hill and Hatch continuously stress, not all of the financial rewards (not even half of the rewards) from Urban Circuit went to Black writers, singers, or actors. Producer Woodie King, Jr. announces the following rather discouraging reality:

> in the so-called urban circuit, a black guy will write the play, star in the play, direct the play, and the show will gross $600,000 in Philadelphia, but he makes only $50,000, and

> the actors make only $300 a week. What happened to the other $500,000? That's where we run into the problem. The man who owns the theatre says, "I like your show. I'll pay you fifty grand and pay all the other people and expenses." The theatre owner may then spend $100,000 promoting to a black audience. The black guy has nothing to do with the radio spots, nothing to do with the flyer that goes into the churches. All he knows is that his picture is on it and his name remains on the show; the white guy's name [theatre owner and producer] is nowhere to be seen. Then the black guy decides "I'll produce it myself," but he doesn't have a theatre or any of the promotional apparatus. (qtd. in Hill and Hatch 466)

When we consider some of the details of King's frustration, we realize some of the ways in which Perry diverges from this theatrical tradition and makes some significant changes in the history of African American theatre. Though Perry has certainly had his financial partners along his journey, Lions Gate being chief among that list, he has constantly asserted his artistic control and worked towards developing financial independence from white industry moguls who aim to direct the specifics of his work. This movement towards financial independence (if it is ever completely possible) is illustrated by how often Perry has changed details of the professional management of his career and, more specifically, by the opening up of his own production studios in Southwest Atlanta in 2008. When we consider the overall development of African American theatre and the many challenges that plagues the sustainability and artistic freedom of various Black Theatre artists and movements, we see that questions of money and space are highly influential in the demise of so many promising figures and historical moments. Thus, perhaps by observing the ways in which Perry has become an industry leader, a master of mass marketing, an artist with his own production apparatuses, and a cross-over success without losing

his foundational demographic, we begin to notice how he is making substantial changes in the history of African American Theatre.

After loosely situating Perry in African American Theatre history and showing the ways in which his work transcends some of the constraining spaces in which it is often placed, we have to ask more questions. If Perry's drama resists complete categorization in the realm of the minstrel tradition and the Chitlin Circuit culture, what can be said about his interesting blend of burlesque, call-and-response theatre that is fraught with elements of populist entertainment and postmodern tendencies? While a succinct term is not sufficiently encompassing, perhaps we could describe Perry's dramatic vision as a form of populist postmodernism that is drenched in elements of the black aesthetic. The populist element does not require much explication outside of recognizing its characteristics of everyday popular culture and its appeal to the everyday audience member, but we must call attention to the ways in which Perry has redefined theatre and appealed to demographics that have never gone to the theatre in the past, opening the doors of the theatre to rarely considered groups of people. He has taken a traditionally elitist activity and brought it to the Black masses. As Saine and Joe Brokaw, Perry's publicist at the press time of Saine's article, suggest, "because of the culture of exclusion…African Americans did not feel invited to go to a mainstream theatre and see a play before Perry opened the doors to them" (107).

Moreover, Perry has brought the theatre into the home by filming productions of his plays and releasing them on DVD. He is mobilizing theatre to the Black masses, making it accessible to a demographic that perhaps cannot afford to travel to one of his productions or pay admission to watch the show live. He has given the viewer control over theatrical entertainment. The viewer can pick the time, place, and frequency of viewing. And even if a viewer can afford

to see multiple productions, Perry's packaging of live theatre on DVD makes it possible to enjoy his work at any time of the day or night in the comfort of the viewer's own home. Watching Perry's productions can become a daily communal or individualistic activity. Perry comments on the fact that his productions are often enjoyed by families and have become a part of familial/communal traditions with some of his audience members. His work has the characteristic of mass appeal and appears to transcend several generational boundaries. Luckily, for scholars and students, we can have the unique opportunity to study Perry's plays as performances instead of as written plays. So often we are frustrated by the shortcomings of reading a play in a classroom when it was written specifically for performance. We wonder what is lost in translation from stage to paper or vice versa. Perry has made it possible to bring the theatre into the home and the classroom in a very interesting and popular manner. Additionally, Perry's refusal to publish his plays in the written form and his decision to perform orally are direct reflections of Perry's familiarity with African American sensibilities and particular artistic tastes that favor the tradition of orality. Perry ensures that his remain speakerly[1] texts, indeed. Perry's only written text, *Don't Make a Black Woman Take Off Her Earrings* (2006), is a text that he quickly realized he needed to get into audio format to satiate his audience's appetite for the Black oral tradition. He later sold the book in a package of four audio CDs.

Furthermore, Perry has made Black theatre incredibly financially profitable. Considering the historical fact (albeit discouraging) that theatre is a financially challenging enterprise, particularly off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway, I find Perry's commercial success worthy of

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[1] For more on the "speakerly text," see Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s fifth chapter titled "Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text" in his now canonical *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Theory* (1989). In his conceptualization of the speakerly text, Gates discusses the ways in which African American artists centralize the oral tradition and African American Vernacular English in their artistic productions.

discussion and of note. At the time of Saine's publication, The Perry Company (now Tyler Perry Productions) had grossed some fifty million dollars in ticket sales. The Brokaw Company, once in charge of Perry's publicity, has argued that "because of Perry, many African Americans, from senior citizens to blue collar workers to the hip-hop generation, have gone to the theater for the first time in their lives" (Saine 107). I would supplement that claim by positing the notion that once Perry gets his audience into the theater one time, he consistently motivates their return and their financial investment in his productions. As of this writing, Perry just recently opened the doors to his own production studios in Southwest Atlanta, Georgia in an area largely populated by African American citizens. He may very well be the first African American playwright/film maker to build his own production studios on this level, which will surely earn him a spot in future histories of African American Theatre and Film.

In addition to the populist elements of Perry's productions, we must also explore the postmodern tendencies more fully. Perry's dramas are postmodern to the extent that they are hyper-reflexive in nature and satirical of not only "artistic" form but also of figures of authority and of society at large. Perry continuously breaks the fourth wall[2] of drama to rupture the audience's suspension of disbelief—there is no doubt in the audience member's mind whether or not he or she is watching a fictitious play at times. This willful abuse of the fourth wall recognizes the audience members as agents of action and encourages their interactivity with the spectacle. Moreover, because Perry interjects himself into the fictive world in which he creates, he borrows the postmodern technique of penning a protagonist who is an artist, and he elevates

[2] In theatrical terms, the fourth wall is used to refer to the invisible or imaginary wall that separates the audience from the action of a play that takes place on a three-dimensional stage. In order to maintain theatrical realism and sustain the notion that the audience is peering into a window of reality, the fourth wall must be maintained, and the audience must remain invisible and irrelevant to the onstage action.

this technique to a completely different level. It is certainly assumed, to an extent, that the postmodern writer reflects upon and comments on the artist/writer through his/her protagonist who is also an artist. Even though he does not construct an artist as his protagonist, Perry, as writer and artist, acts as the character of Madea and takes on other multiple characters within his artistically constructed world. And similar to the satiric approaches of postmodern literature, Perry's populist postmodern dramas have deeply subversive and highly emancipatory messages embedded within the humor, the action, and the music, specifically addressing the struggles and celebrating the triumphs of a wide variety of females—at least at first glance. Even though I do argue for the ways in which Perry capitalizes on particular aspects of the postmodern tradition, some elements of his aesthetic choices are decidedly unpostmodern. I should offer a caveat or two. Unlike large portions of the postmodern tradition, Perry's plays do not challenge universalizing cultural metanarratives, and they do not resist unified, neat conclusions. In terms of some of Perry's incredibly reductive endings and his all's-well-in-the-end-if-you-turn–to-God formula harkens back to sentimental fictive traditions and strands of early American realism.

After establishing Perry's provisional place in the various categories of theatre, we can analyze the specifics of Perry's narrative structure, the thematic focuses, and the politics contained within his drama to appreciate his work on a "higher" academic level and to critique the larger, more complicated (and often paradoxical) discourses embedded in his dramatic world. Turning specifically to one of Perry's earlier dramas, *Madea's Family Reunion* (2002), I will investigate the ways in which Perry does or does not construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the figure of the mammy and other controlling images in which the inaccurate perceptions of the identities of black women are often locked, drawing on Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (1990; 2000) and *Black Sexual Politics* (2004). Moreover, by calling attention to Perry's

blow-bite-blow narrative strategy and by analyzing his presentation of problematic feminist politics and emotionally sensitive discourse, I will attempt to illuminate the value that the academic community may find in Perry's often-dismissed work. As Maya Angelou explains, "in West Africa there's a phrase, '*blow-bite-blow'* [that gives name to a healing strategy used to treat painful snake bites while distracting the snake-bite victim from the pain]. You blow on an area until it's partly anaesthetized, then bite, then blow again before they notice the pain" (Leland 3; emphasis added). Furthering Angelou's brief reference to the West African healing strategy of *blow-bite-blow*, I posit the idea that much of Perry's success is largely due to his narrative structure and the ways in which he carefully blends humor (blow), emotionally sensitive discourse (bite), and music (blow). These three elements are interwoven into a drama that delivers a strong, palatable message of female empowerment, love, and forgiveness without rendering one emotionally bankrupt and beaten down by the play's end—regardless of how problematic that message may be. If Perry were to adopt a didactic strategy in which he sermonized his audience about social issues (the bite) without the humor and the music (the two blow components), he would not, I imagine, be nearly as successful or influential. Just as a West African snake-bite victim goes through a process of medical healing without noticing the pain associated with recovery methods, I argue that Perry's audience members receive therapeutic messages and communal critiques without being brow-beaten to the point of discouragement and exhaustion. And his audience members subscribe to his discourse. They listen. With finesse, Perry is able to entertain his audience members while seemingly proffering messages of community improvement and personal growth. The investigation of the political impact of Perry's messages and the larger discourses operating behind his fictive world will later make up the majority of this project.

As he employs the narrative strategy, stemming from West African tradition, of *blow-bite-blow*, Perry blends humor (jokes, playing the dozens, channeling of Black popular culture icons, and intertextuality), emotionally sensitive discourse (child molestation, domestic violence, prostitution, drugs, unequal relationships, insecurity, and fear), and music ("shoutin," musical monologues, dialogues, and group performances) to provide a pleasurable experience in which the audience takes home a serious message. Even though Perry produces plays which are full of humor and music, it is his hope that the audience is able to read beyond the laughter and the music to receive the message. At the end of each of Perry's plays, he comes out on stage, dressed as himself, to recap moments in the play that are important to him, a practice of his that I will take up in detail in chapter two. As Perry notes, "I never want people to miss the message—that's what it's all about for me—the message" (*Madea's Family Reunion)*. Throughout chapters one and two, I concern myself with that "message" of his.

In chapter one, I will problematize his gender and sexual politics and question the degree to which Perry is progressive in his political messages. Firing off Madea's gun, Perry seems to promote a radical feminist agenda in which he presents typical controlling image stereotypes that plague African American women, and he deconstructs, reclaims, and reconstructs the images to offer a different vision. He shifts the relations of power from a male-centered negotiation of power to a female-centered renegotiation of power. *Or does he?* Drawing on gender and queer theorists like Judith Bulter, Judith Halberstam, bell hooks, and Collins, I begin chapter one with a theoretical discussion about drag acts and their subversive and non-subversive characteristics and question the degree to which Perry appropriates drag in a politically liberating or constraining manner. Later in the chapter, I turn to questions of men in feminist thought and politics, and I examine the textual specifics of *Madea's Family Reunion* to illustrate the ways in

which I read Perry as offering a very conflicted dialectic between activist aspirations and oppressive tendencies, particularly in regard to questions of safe feminist spaces and issues of motherhood, female self-sufficiency, female self-definition, and domestic violence.

In addition to questioning Perry's feminist politics and his participation in drag acts in chapter one, I address Perry's homophobic tendencies in the second chapter of this project. If we recognize and analyze the fact that Perry is in drag, an act so heavily centralized in queer subcultures, how do we account for Perry's conflicted mixture of homoeroticism and heterosexism and homophobia? As I note in chapter two, though Perry centralizes and engages in homoerotic moments as Madea sexualizes hypermasculine, shirtless young men onstage, he still manages to insert moments of homophobic dialogue and to privilege taken-for-granted heteronormativity. As a matter of fact, the only presumably homosexual character in *Madea's Family Reunion*, and one of the only homosexual characters in Perry's entire gamut thus far, is the only character who has no dialogue, the character always spoken of and ridiculed but never allowed to speak for himself—emblematic of the silence endured by queer persons throughout history, particularly in the African American community. Additionally, Madea constantly references the "tambourine player" in a rather pejorative manner, the player being one who represents the "anything-but-that" abject, queer other. The "tambourine player" is symbolic of that character who embodies the mixture of silence and homophobia popular in African American communities, especially in heavily religious communities. He is the character in the church choir who everyone "knows" is homosexual but no one speaks of the sexual and political realities of this individual. Drawing upon Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill's notion of "coming home," I will illuminate the ways in which Perry sustains the problematic realities that the Black

gay man (and other queers, certainly) faces while negotiating the politics around race and sexuality.

Though my methodology will in large part rely on a black feminist framework, this does not mean that I will subscribe to an essentialist notion of black feminism that excludes the voices of those who are not both female and black. Contrastingly, I will follow the theoretical thrust by several queer theorists like Butler and Halberstam to adopt a more nuanced, social constructivist understanding of gender and sexuality. I recognize gender categories not as the sole property of particular sexes. Instead, I understand gender as a political category that one adopts (or inherits, even) in large part based on cultural conflations between gender and sex and cultural imperatives to subscribe to one's particular prescribed gender. This problematic but pervasive conflation makes up much of the subject matter that I discuss in the theoretical framing of my discussion of Perry's appropriation of drag acts.

Because I understand my position in the academic community to be part of a larger social justice project and because I aim to marry my political aspirations with my academic endeavors, I adopt rhetorical choices that some may characterize as conversational or slightly informal. I recognize this potential criticism, and I welcome it. My commitment to remain accessible to larger public audiences and my desire to appeal to smaller academic circles fuel my rhetorical choices. Moreover, I strive to make a place for the reader in my manuscript, and I can only hope to be a critical co-investigator in examinations of Perry's work. Thus, readers may notice that I often concern myself much more with asking complicated questions rather than offering a multitude of conclusive ideas and statements. This characteristic, too, is intentional. My largest polemical goal is to plant several seeds for potential academic discussion. I hope to locate several

of the larger discourses at work in Perry's fiction to ignite a powerful dialogue among students, scholars, and other interested "readers" of Perry's work.

As I immediately suspected after viewing one show and as I soon realized after studying Perry's dramas in great detail, his ability to create a text that communicates a message in a way that reaches an unprecedented group of people is nothing short of remarkable. His skills and talents, both as a dramatist and as an actor, inspire audience members all across the country. Not only does Perry have an extensively large fan base which follows him in and out of each project he also attracts attention from political and social organizations like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), for example. Additionally, one can also see by the reactions from his primarily female demographic and his concrete endorsements from key African American female writers and leaders like Maya Angelou, Cicely Tyson, and Alice Walker, to name a few, that Perry's seemingly feminist messages are well-received and supported by African American women (or at least are thus far uncontested in publication). Moreover, as the incredible amount of daily posts on his online message board suggest, Perry has a strong female support structure that does not seem to be fading anytime soon. The populist and the political community are beginning to understand the impact Perry's dramas have, whether consciously or unconsciously, on the minds of his millions of readers and viewers. And I hope that the academic community will soon follow. I hope this project will motivate other members of the academic landscape to join me in an investigation of Perry's work. Labeled one of the most profitable Return on Investment artists in the business by *Time* Magazine, Perry controls all aspects of his production from writing, directing, and acting to booking, marketing, and producing. As one of his millions of female fans suggests on his online message board, Tyler represents "our words, our experiences, and our voice." As Perry's popularity continues to climb

the charts and his politics are ingested by millions of people in the African American community (and the American and global communities at large), I am more convinced than ever that he is a force with which we must reckon.

CHAPTER 2: "CHECK WITH YO' MAN FIRST; CHECK WITH YO' MAN[3]": PERRY APPROPRIATES DRAG AS A TOOL TO RECIRCULATE PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY

After situating Perry in a history of African American theatre and theorizing about his narrative structure in brief detail, I want to problematize his gender and sexual politics and question the degree to which Perry is progressive in his political messages in this first chapter. Firing off Madea's gun, Perry *seems* to promote a radical feminist agenda in which he presents typical controlling image stereotypes that plague African American women, and he deconstructs, reclaims, and reconstructs the images to offer a different vision. He shifts the relations of power from a male-centered negotiation of power to a female-centered renegotiation of power. *Or does he?* As Trudier Harris notes, "called Matriarch, Emasculator, and Hot Momma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody…felt qualified to explain her, even to herself" (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 69). With this idea in mind, what does one make of Perry's politics considering the gender to which he actually belongs? I should pause for a moment to explain that I align myself with most of the major ideas proffered by poststructuralism and queer theory that denies an essentialist understanding of gender that blindly conflates biological specifics with socially conventional gender scripts. However, when I speak of the 'gender' to which Perry actually belongs, I am calling attention to the fact that we have to analyze the degree to which

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[3] *Madea's Family Reunion* (2002)

Perry offers specific rhetoric that aligns him with or makes him a mouthpiece for the masculine gendered political category and its accompanying patriarchal rhetoric and sociopolitical and cultural power.

While one might feel tempted to separate, generally speaking, artist/writer and text, Perry problematizes this idea by interjecting himself into the text as actor in addition to already being director, producer, and writer. If we consider the fact that the feminist messages of supposed empowerment, healing, and testimony are delivered from a male dressed in drag, do we assume that his messages are loaded with masculinist ulterior motives? As Nikki Giovanni warns us, "know who's playing the music before you dance" (qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 112). Contrastingly, do we recognize that Perry's drag acts are parodic attempts to destabilize and denaturalize gender categories and to illustrate the ways in which gender is simply a matter of the performative? If the former is the case, we can analyze the specific means by which Perry appropriates the queering potential of drag acts and uses the act of drag as an attempt to re-circulate rather conservative, disempowering (for women and homosexuals), and masculinist logic. If the latter is more the case, we will find Perry adopting and deploying drag in a very subversive, political manner. To be more specific, do we realize that his acts of bodily subversion (Butler's term for the political, destabilizing acts of drag) provide him a platform from which to centralize his feminine sensibilities? Even though most of his conservative, church-going female demographic refuses to acknowledge with any true reflection that Perry's Madea is a male dressed in drag, if we are going investigate Perry's drama and his sociopolitical significance with precision, we must address the fact that the brother is participating in potentially queer, subversive bodily acts—if that is indeed what he is doing. And if he is not, we

must remove his seemingly progressive mask, hair, and make-up to expose him as the misogynist that he is acting like.

hooks reminds us in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (1994) that our job as cultural critics is not to passively affirm progressive popular culture expressions and icons; rather, our fundamental task is to critique carefully those popular culture productions that are seemingly progressive, to take a second, "closer" look. hooks asserts that "practical engagement with cultural practices and cultural icons who are defined as on the edge…disturbing the conventional" is not enough (hooks 5). We cannot just affirm those productions that are heralded as progressive and/or entertaining; instead, our job as cultural critics is to "cross boundaries to take another look, to contest, to interrogate, and in some cases to recover and redeem….[because] cultural criticism can be an agent for change, educating for critical consciousness in liberatory ways" (hooks 5). Perry has indeed been criticized by film critics for his aesthetic deficiencies, his predictable plots, and the way in which he perpetuates inaccurate notions of racial inferiority through presentations of buffoonish, unserious black characters. Moreover, Perry has been accused by the Black intelligensia and by fans of neglecting ideas of racial solidarity by "airing the dirty laundry" that plagues the African American community, particularly the dirty laundry that deals with problems within the black domestic sphere. Moreover, he is critiqued for urging for communal improvement in a very public medium. But I do not know that Perry has been appropriately questioned for his gender and sexual politics. Embarrassingly, I must admit that I initially heralded Perry as a radical feminist who proffered messages of female empowerment and urged for a collective sisterhood for support and healing. After taking a "closer," more critical look at the discourses operating overtly and covertly in

Perry's drama, I have to ask myself and his adoring supporters (mostly female) some very important, difficult questions:

1.Is Perry sincerely promoting messages of feminist agency and combating domestic violence, or is he perpetuating unhealthy coping mechanisms and perpetuating and/or sustaining a culture of violence—reifying the construction of the mad black woman?

2. Does Perry utilize the queering abilities of drag acts to their fullest potential, or does he simply don the disguise of a female to reinscribe patriarchal domination? In other words, instead of truly destabilizing notions of gender and sexual politics (some of the queering functions of drag acts) and delivering messages of female agency and self-sufficiency, does Perry appropriate the process of drag and strip it of its politically subversive, queering capabilities?

3. Thus, does the act of drag become a tool to re-circulate conservative, patriarchal ideology that furthers traditional male domination and renders women passive subjects upon which men can act freely? When we consider that Perry's Madea is the only authentically autonomous "female" character in the fictive world, the larger discourse operating behind Perry's surface-level message of feminist empowerment reads something like the following: a man has to help a woman get out of a domestically violent situation and has to teach her how to respect herself, even if that man is dressed in female clothing and wearing make-up. Moreover, if a woman is to find any sort of healing, she must move from an abusive man to a man who is not abusive—the message always being that a man is absolutely necessary at all times. And a man (drag or no drag) must come to the rescue, sustaining the prince charming-like fairy tale scripts that are rooted in female passivity and subordination. The rescue plot emerges. I realize that most (if not all) major fairy tales centralized in American culture are formulated by and feature white supremacy as the only (taken-for-granted) reality that should be glamorized and sought

after; however, I still argue that these fairy tale scripts are part of a larger cultural logic (male-centered) that infiltrates popular culture productions at large and Perry's productions in particular. Thus, chapter one begins with a theoretical discussion about drag acts and their subversive and non-subversive characteristics. Later in the chapter, I turn to questions of men in feminist thought and politics, and I examine the textual specifics of *Madea's Family Reunion* to illustrate the ways in which I read Perry as offering a very conflicted dialectic between activist aspirations and oppressive tendencies.

"We're Born Naked. The Rest Is Just Drag[4]"—
Some Preliminary Notes on Subversive Drag Acts

Before we begin a close reading of Perry's drama and examine the ways in which Perry does or does not reason through the prism of patriarchal thinking and offer conservative, masculinist politics in his work, it is necessary to delineate between the queering, subversive capabilities of particular drag acts and the ways in which drag can be appropriated by the dominant power structure to re-circulate particular culturally hegemonic ideas about gender and sexuality. Turning to the gender and queer theories of Butler and Halberstam, I will attempt to explicate some of the queering, politically subversive functions of drag and some of the more conservative appropriations of drag, pausing for a moment to point out the nuanced way in which I am employing the word queer and any of its inflected forms. When I write queer or queering, I am not necessarily speaking solely of a particular type of sexuality. In other words, I do not mean to write homosexual or gay or lesbian or bi-sexual by writing queer; instead, I employ the term queer in a very political/theoretical manner. As a matter of fact, I join so many queer

[4] I am indebted to RuPaul for this quote. For more on Rupaul's opinions about drag and gender, see Seth Clark Silberman's article titled "Why RuPaul *Worked*: Queer Cross-Identifying the Mythic Black (Drag Queen) Mother" (2000).

theorists (and poststructuralist theorists) in arguing that queer is a word that describes any non-normative logic. As Michael Warner describes in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993) and as David Haperlin argues as well, queer emerges as a term to encompass anything at odds with the normative or the hegemonic or the dominant. After we understand more about the political significance of queer and the subversive potential of the act of drag, perhaps we can understand more clearly how Perry is participating in acts that can have very serious political consequences for specific groups of people and for cultural logics in a more general sense.

As Butler tells us in her monumental work on drag and the way in which the act of drag can serve a politically destabilizing function, particularly as it relates to the socially constructed nature of gender and its links to sex, "the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (Butler 187). Butler goes on further to assert that notions of a natural gendered self are not only parodied in drag acts, but that "*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself---as well as its contingency.* Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of performance, is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary" (Butler 187). If I understand Butler clearly, drag acts (as subversive bodily acts) have the political potential to point to the utterly constructed, fabricated nature of the social scripts regarding a natural, fixed gendered identity that is directly tied to a natural biological specific and a pre-existing ontology of sorts. If drag is at its best (politically subversive), it has the power to motivate a radical rethinking of the idea of two discrete genders and their appropriate, corresponding anatomical specificity: one being masculine for a biological male and one being feminine for a biological female. In fact, drag

seems to have the potential to completely separate any "natural" link between sex and gender at all—at least any link that unquestionably conflates the two categories in a specific logic. Thus, as Butler argues, "the notion of gender parody defended here does not assume that there is an original [gender] which such parodic identities [drag identities] imitate. Indeed, the parody is *of the very notion of an original"* (Butler 188; emphasis added). There is no pre-existing ontological being that gender expresses; rather, gender is a constitutive process—an actively productive process (a girl*ing* or a boy*ing*)—that has no original pre-existing origin that is just magically there at birth or even before birth. It is a socially constructed, political category that is constantly performed and inscribed on cultural bodies and caught up in linguistic construction. But what Butler stresses and what so many feminist critics have argued against are the specific ways in which some drag acts are not politically subversive at all.

As Butler explains, "parody [or drag acts] by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions *effectively disruptive, truly troubling*, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (189; emphasis added). This distinction between subversive and non-subversive drag acts is crucial to the foundation of my argument regarding Perry and his appropriation of a series of acts that can have wildly politically liberating qualities. Those parodic repetitions that Butler describes as disruptive or troubling are those acts that make us hesitate, those actors who pass, and those actors who then use moments of passing to make a strong political statement, an act of queering some normative logic or normative script. If a drag act is truly subversive, it has the capability of motivating a radical rethinking of the entire gender apparatus and its link any natural or assumed sex. Moreover, subversive drag acts have the potential to make any attempt at identity categorization "permanently problematic."

Butler and others who study drag in detail are after those actors who disrupt our complete psychological dependence on an occularcentric epistemology. An occularcentric epistemology, which is a concept that I will use throughout this essay, is a term that highlights the ways in which we know what we know by equating the visual with the knowable and the true. With careful consideration, one can see how heavily we rely on an occularcentric epistemology to distinguish between two discrete genders: male and female (sex) and man and woman (the expected accompanying gender). As Freud succinctly states in much of his earlier research, one of the first distinctions we make when we meet new individuals is whether the individual is male or female, and we generally make the distinction quickly and with a moderate to high certainly. [5] What is interesting about the way in which we think about whether the individual is a male or a female is that we rarely (if ever) ask the individual to reveal any anatomical specifics; instead, we follow a particular semiotic system that is socially constructed to give us information about gender and its supposed connection to biological specifics. But what happens when this system of gender intelligibility fails us? What happens when our cultural inscriptions on the body and our linguistic determinants do not accurately communicate a connection between what our culture's logic promises to tell us about the connection between one's supposed gender and one's supposed sex? This is where drag can have its most promising subversive potential.

Picture this: you see what you assume to be a biological female in your favorite corner of your favorite coffee shop. The individual is dressed in conventional female attire and exhibits typically female behavior (assuming that there is ever such a thing). You have a conversation with this individual, assuming that the person in question is a biological female and a conventionally feminine woman. All of the sudden the individual begs your pardon to exit but

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[5] For more on how Freud's research contributes to drag studies and transgender theories, see Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests: Crossdressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1993).

invites you to a local nightclub to meet for a drink later. As you wait for the individual later in the evening at a local bar, "she" appears on the stage to perform a popular dance number to a group of adoring fans. At the end of the dance number, the individual whom you have "read" as a woman and, consequently, as a biological female pulls up her dress to reveal her four to five inch mildly flaccid penis. Sitting in complete and utter shock in this revelatory moment, you are in a moment of subversive confusion, as Butler calls it. You experience a mixture of signs. The gender apparatus, which relies so heavily on an occularcentric epistemology, has failed you. The cultural semiotic system that promised you the opportunity to read gender and its "natural" biological accompaniment has failed. Then what? This is the moment in which, or one of the moments in which, drag is its most politically subversive and has its most transformative potential to motivate a radical rethinking or a queering of a normative logic of gender and its connection to sex. Finally, drag has the ability to illustrate the ways in which gender is ultimately performative (and illusory) in nature, a performance caught up in a system of repetitive bodily acts and linguistic determinants. Consequently, gender has no essence and no natural link to any particular biological sex, which makes room for so many bodies who are rendered unintelligible by the larger culture for falling outside of the gender binary. Now that's queer.

In addition to drag's destabilizing, disruptive potential, drag acts also have the capacity to go in the opposite direction. There are those drag acts that do nothing to destabilize culturally hegemonic ideas about gender and its construction; instead, these particular drag acts absorb the subcultural, non-normative character of drag and its queering potential. Well, it is not as if drag makes this happen on its own. Drag is a tool that can be used in a number of different ways by the individuals who engage in the practice. Non-subversive drag acts do not work to expose the constructed nature of gender norms; instead, these drag acts highlight, sustain, and even

perpetuate the constructions, maintenance, and reiteration of gender norms, upholding hierarchal gender relations and normative power scripts that ultimately privilege the masculine political category. Therefore, drag can emerge as an appropriation by the dominant power structure of radically liberating practice. The practice of drag is thus "domesticated" and utilized as a tool to re-circulate conservative, normative logics and to sustain and even to perpetuate culturally sanctioned ideas about gender and its oppressive consequences for females (and those males who fall outside the gender binary). Sustaining the power of the dominant or the power of the normative is the name of the game. These drag acts do not want to denaturalize gender and to highlight its constructed, oppressive nature. These conservative attempts to maintain the regulatory fictions of gender and compulsory heterosexuality aim to camouflage the performative nature of gender construction and the ways in which that message could be incredibly challenging to gendered notions of power and agency. In fact, by naturalizing gender and linking gendered behavior to some sort biological determinism (or a pre-existing ontology), hegemonic power structures seek to maintain traditional male domination.

What can also be dangerous and deceptive about these non-queer appropriations of the subcultural practice of drag are the ways in which these mainstream productions like Perry's refuse to acknowledge any indebtedness to the queer subcultural practice on which their work often depends. In her book *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005), Halberstam explores the ways in which heterosexual male comedies like *The Full Monty* (1997) and *Austin Powers* (1997) often draw upon the subcultural practice of drag kinging (females who perform masculinity) for much of their film's material, but rarely, if ever, does the mainstream culture acknowledge or pay homage to queer predecessors. Moreover, not only do mainstream cultural producers absorb subcultural practices without any indebtedness but they also financially profit from these

practices on a much larger scale while so many of the subcultural practitioners of drag acts remain poor and largely invisible, except in particular communal safe-havens like gay and lesbian bar-culture. And, most importantly, these mainstream appropriations of subversive drag acts domesticate the practice and strip the subversive capabilities from drag to reify and to sediment a very normative logic that is quite disempowering to specific minority groups, including women and members of LGBTQ communities. Investigating the "strange and barely discernable" influence of subcultural practices on mainstream productions, Halberstam argues that "not surprisingly, mainstream comedies about masculinity [and femininity in Perry's case] never do articulate their indebtedness to these subcultural and queer comedic representations" (128). Halberstam goes further to assert "the mechanism of mainstreaming can be seen in precisely the way two films create a neat circuit of transmission that cuts out the subcultural" (151). What Halberstam is especially interested in are the ways in which mainstream culture absorbs and disarms the subculture material upon which it depends.

Since the 1970s onward, feminist critics have argued that drag is simply another attempt from the men to formulate and control the social identities and political realities of women. Collins and Jill Nelson have noted some of the ways in which Black men have appropriated drag practices to defeminize and demonize Black women. Taking up this very issue, Collins writes that "Black male comedians dress up as African American women in order to make fun of them" (*Black Sexual Politics* 125). Collins goes on further to assert that "through this act of cross-dressing, Black women can be depicted as ugly women who too closely resemble men (big, Black, and short hair) and because they are aggressive like men, they become stigmatized as 'bitches' [or crazy]" (125). In addition to demonizing Black women through the appropriation of drag, Nelson notes how Black entertainers have capitalized on making fun of Black women in

their careers by noting that "the way to elicit a guaranteed laugh is to put on a dress and play the unattractive, dominating, sexually voracious black woman" (qtd. in Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 125). Perry plays into that line of thought that reasons that the only females who talk back and speak out against male authority are big, fat, and ugly. Those females who are conventionally beautiful and sexualized and desired, at least in the male imagination, are those who are submissive, passive, and obedient. With his participation in drag acts, Perry joins a long tradition of Black males who dress up as females in popular culture productions. He sits alongside Martin Lawrence's Big Mama, Eddie Murphy's Mama Klump, Grandma Klump, and Rasputia, and Flip Wilson's earlier Geraldine.

But unlike several of the mainstream movies and television shows in which drag is centralized, Perry does not focus on the act of a male performing a female. In other words, getting into drag is not part of the plot. In a number of mainstream representations, we usually see the male who dresses in drag featured in a parallel "male plot" that asserts his "authentic" identity as a male and his heterosexuality. The formula is fairly standard: drag is appropriated as a vocation or as a means to an end; it is usually part of some larger strategy or part of some undercover operation to meet an end-goal that serves the male character in his male plot. The act of transformation is usually included in a series of scenes. We see the male getting in drag (not appearing to know what he is doing), and we see him living a life outside of drag that affirms his male identity and his compulsory heterosexuality. But Perry does not include the act of becoming Madea into his stage play plots. Additionally, he does not double himself as a male character in a male plot in the fictive world either. (We will see this shift slightly in the Hollywood mainstreaming of his stage work into major film productions).

These artistic decisions of Perry's are quite telling if we consider the theoretical distinctions between politically subversive drag acts and non-subversive drag acts. Part of what makes particular subversive drag acts so transformative is the way which the act motivates disruptive confusions. These acts result in crises of categorization; basically, occularcentric epistemologies (equating the visual with the knowable or the true) prove to be faulty logics, and one cannot tell with certainty the differences between males and females without exploring anatomical specifics. This moment of subversive confusion or unintelligibility is quite threatening to the ways in which people perceive the world around them. When many of the mainstream treatments of drag do so much to expose drag as an act of dress up and to include a safe male plot, they are ultimately ensuring that audiences are never thrown into a crisis of categorization, and their epistemologies and belief systems are never questioned. Thus, drag acts are never truly troubling to the viewer or reader. The status quo is often maintained.

Though Perry's audience members (mostly female) often ignore or forget that Madea is a man in drag, Perry does expose his maleness onstage. In moments of revelation, Perry rips off his wig, appears onstage baring his fat suit, or drops his voice really low to expose the fact that he is really a male underneath the dress. The seemingly contradictory goals of needing to hide the fact that he is in drag to be a convincing Madea and needing to expose his participation in drag to mitigate his audience's fears about gender and sexuality are perhaps not so paradoxical. Perry has the uncanny ability to strike the balance between enough and *too much*. Let me make myself more lucid here: Perry is able to present a digestible presentation of a relatively convincing drag act onstage. What I mean is that he is able to don the disguise of a female and play the part convincingly for his audience without threatening their occularcentric epistemologies or questioning their value systems with any seriousness. He does not make them

uncomfortable. He is not trying to subvert the gender apparatus at all; rather, he highlights conventional gender roles and maintains the conservative status quo. Perry is not a Rupaul-like figure[6]. He is not attempting to be sexual and sensual; he does not want to threaten your ability to read gender. Most importantly, I think, he makes it clear that he is not trying to take himself seriously as a female, especially not once the lights go down. Perry does, however, have a vested interest in suspending his audience's awareness of fact that he is in drag in order to perform the identity of Madea convincingly and palatably. As Majorie Garber writes in "Black and White Transvestism: Cross-Dressing the Color-line" (1993), "the cultural masquerade of transvestism has been appropriated with enormous energy, perception, and wit by Black performers, writers, and filmmakers as a vehicle for social and political empowerment. We certainly see that Perry has the wit and energy that Garber writes about, but it is certainly questionable whether or not Perry's drag becomes a vehicle for social and political empowerment. Only a close reading will tell.

"Put Your Hands Up and Receive This. Put Your Hands Up! Receive It! Receive It![7]": A Critical Investigation of Perry's Gender Politics in *Madea's Family Reunion*

Now that we have a background on some of the theoretical material offered about drag and its politically transformative possibilities and its non-subversive limitations, we are better equipped to pursue a more informative analysis of Perry's drama and his uses of drag to communicate a political message to women. The larger questions, for me at least, are the following: is Madea a subversive employment of drag, an instrument of queering some

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[6] See Seth Clark Silberman's, Seth Clark. "Why RuPaul *Worked*: Queer Cross-Identifying the Mythic Black (Drag Queen) Mother" (2000) for biographical information about RuPaul and the cultural/sociopolitical position of this figure.

[7] *Madea's Family Reunion* (2002)

normative logic about gender and power? Does Perry use Madea as a mouthpiece of feminist empowerment and agency, or does Perry utilize Madea to discourage radically political messages that service the political standpoints of women as a collectivity? Does Perry *allow* Madea (because he is in artistic control) to echo ideas about the empowerment that comes from a consciousness-raising sisterhood that fosters love, support, and collective self-definition, or does he don the mask of femaleness to negate the possibility of the development of an ethos of Black women's resistance? By performing a close reading of the major female characters in *Madea's Family Reunion* (2002), the play with which we will be chiefly concerned later in the essay, and Madea's relationship with these women, I will attempt to pose answers to several of the preceding questions and will illustrate the ways in which I read Perry engaging in a conflicted rendering of drag. To be more specific, I will explicate the ways in which I read Perry as neither offering a completely subversive rendering of drag nor a completely non-subversive rendering of drag; instead, I argue quite vehemently that Perry proffers a very conflicted politics of gender and sexuality with his characterization of Madea. Rather than an "either/or" conclusion that rests almost entirely on a faulty Western binary logic, I serve up a "both/and" possibility, a "both/and" conceptual framework that is crucial to a more Afrocentric Black feminist epistemology. Therefore, rather than putting forth an argument that is conclusive and reductive concerning Perry's gender and sexual politics, I aim to deliver a reading that swims in Perry's conflictedness and his contradictions; I want to revel in his complexity and explore the dialectical play between oppression and activism that is so embedded in his work, making Perry an exciting, interesting, and problematic playwright who is a rich source of academic and political analysis.

In questioning Perry's usage of drag and in quoting Giovanni's now famous warning "know who is playing the music before you dance," it is quite obvious that I am calling into

critical investigation Perry's participation in feminist politics and thinking. If we consider that the largest part of Perry's loyal demographic is African American females and that he continues to centralize "women's issues" in his artistic productions, we cannot avoid questions about Perry's participation in feminist politics and thinking. One could certainly pose the argument that by criticizing Perry's contribution to feminist thought one is subscribing to an essentialist notion of gender and a rigid prescription of identity politics that argue that only biologically female persons can participate in feminist thought and feminist politics. I understand this position and some of the motivations/fears that fuel this position, and I want to assert that my stance is quite the opposite. In short, I am not questioning the messenger because of the biological specifics of his sex; instead, I am radically calling into question his message. Not the messenger so much as the message. A male who is pro-feminist is precarious, at least in the eyes of many feminist theorists and critics, but a male pro-feminist is certainly possible. I align myself with Halberstam and some of the major tenets of *Female Masculinity* (1998) to refute any essentialist notions of gender and any arguments that claim that any gender is the specific property of a certain sex. In fact, that type of naturalizing discourse is often used as the justification for the oppressive construction and containment of two discrete gender categories that belong to specific anatomy. Instead, I urge for a constructivist understanding of gender and point out its performative nature. Moreover, I encourage building coalitions among various political groups/social justice projects and suggest that males (like myself) not only read and study with deliberation the voices of feminist theorists and thinkers but that they also contribute to the dialogue, providing a male voice in the debate. We, as males, have much to learn from feminist and queer theory. In "Straight Out of the Closet: Men, Feminism, and Male Heterosexual Privilege" (1999), Devon Carbado explains that "in arguing that men should identify as feminists, I am not suggesting that

men should endeavor to speak in a 'different' (read: women's) voice; male feminism should not attempt to replicate female feminism. The last thing we want or need is more men—*under the guise and ostensible legitimacy of feminism*- presuming to define the nature of women's experiences" (417; emphasis added). Indeed, there is an intense need to delineate between those who are biologically male and those who adopt politically and ideologically masculine belief systems. It appears that the strenuous work for men who want to participate in feminist thought and help build coalitions across the sexes is that men must recognize, discuss, and reform the ways in which male supremacy and heterosexual privilege operate pervasively in our culture. We have to understand how ideas of male supremacy contribute to our understandings of what it means to by a man in the American cultural, sociopolitical, and economic landscapes. We must understand how gender works and how masculine privilege is absolutely contingent upon underprivileging and even negating the feminine. As Collins has argued repeatedly in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990;2000), even though male voices are desired in the formation and dissemination of a body of Black feminist critical social theory, *black women must be in charge of this particular discourse*. Otherwise, what men run the risk of doing is attempting to replicate existing male supremacist power relations and stripping this particular area of critical social theory of its emancipatory capabilities and its self-definitive possibilities. Carbado goes on further to explicate a similar point by noting that "male feminist criticism should be *explicitly* informed by men's experiential 'differences.' These 'differences' could be the basis for consciousness raising among and between men….a way for men to examine the multiple ways in which they are privileged and then to challenge the social practices in their lives that reproduce, entrench, and at the same time normalize patriarchy" (419). A refutation of male privilege is necessary. Because there is a long history of male domination, males who participate in feminist

thought and politics must be aware of this history and the ways in which men tend to silence, oppress, and possess.

Even if we choose to ignore the political gender to which Perry culturally belongs and we recognize the ways in which Perry is tapping into the cultural figure (often mythological) of the Black matriarch and all of her power and wisdom, then we also have to look at the degree to which this figure has also serviced the needs and aspirations of the patriarchy. If we ignore that Madea is a male in drag or if we ignore the messenger and simply focus on the message, don't we still walk away with similar results? In Perry's only written text, a text that he quickly realized that he needed to get into audio format to satiate his audience's appetites, *Don't Make a Black Woman Take Off Her Earrings* (2006), Perry discusses Madea in the Foreword. As Perry describes the many factors that make up Madea, he shares his opinion that "Madea used to be on every corner in every neighborhood when I was growing up and generations before….but today she is missed. Back around the 1970s the Madeas in our neighborhoods began to disappear and they have left an unmistakable void" (*Foreword).* I think some would argue that Perry's Madea is a nostalgic longing for a different past, a past in which women remained at the ethical center of the home and the community at large and bore the burden of communal health and stability on their backs while managing complex lives outside the home in a compromised position in the political and social American economy. But we need only look at much of the writing by major Black women authors to examine the ways in which the figure of the matriarch (the mother or the grandmother) has served as an oppressive force for those Black women who are seeking a break from patriarchal rhetoric and practices—those who engage in feminist consciousness raising and transformative logics.

Turning to figures like Nanny in Zora Neale Hurston's paramount feminist text *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) or Harriet Jacobs's grandmother in the canonized slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) (just two of many possible examples), we notice the intergenerational struggle that so often occurs when old and new value systems collide. Though Jacobs's grandmother (and Janie Crawford's Nanny) is a source of major comfort and protection for her, "there is a significant tension between the values espoused by [Jacobs's grandmother] and [Jacobs's] more oppositional response to slavery [and patriarchy]" (Li 16). The problematic presence of the grandmother is interesting to consider within the context of "new" women fighting against patriarchy rather vehemently. While Jacobs's grandmother desires to see her granddaughter free, she cannot overcome her selfish need to have her family in close geographic proximity. Moreover, because her grandmother cannot overcome an ideology that is locked into a system of religious doctrine influenced by the patriarchy, she discourages Jacobs's attempt to subvert male control. Therefore, instead of providing a maternal voice of encouragement and female empowerment, her grandmother reinscribes oppressive patriarchal ideology in the form of a maternal voice. In these two rather disparate examples, both maternal figures act to reinscribe patriarchal rhetoric that demands female subordination and passivity. And both granddaughters must rail against these figures to arrive at any sort of self-defined female consciousness. Of course this history of intergenerational struggle (or mother/daughter conflict) is not as simple as I am presenting it here, especially not in the African American community. Collins has discussed the precarious position of Black mothers and the difficult decisions they are often faced with to help their daughters negotiate successful places in a traditionally male-dominated, white supremacist America. Theorizing about the troubling dilemmas facing black mothers with daughters, Collins argues that "on the one hand, to ensure

their daughter's physical survival, mothers must teach them to fit into the sexual politics of Black womanhood….Mothers also know that if their daughters uncritically accept the glorified "mammy work" and sexual politics offered Black women, they can become willing participants in their own subordination" (*Black Feminist Thought* 183). Regardless of whether or not these matriarch figures echo the mantras of the patriarchy because they have internalized and believe in patriarchal ideology or because they are employing a protective rhetoric that teaches their daughters how to negotiate survival in compromised positions, the fact remains that we must come to terms with the ways in which the Black matriarch often serves the interest of the patriarchy. And with this recognition, we see that Perry cannot hide behind the history of the Black matriarch to free him of any criticism of masculinist thinking.

When Perry has this nostalgic longing to resuscitate this often- mythological figure of the Black matriarch, I wonder what type of older order he is looking for in particular. Again, I do not think that the "either/or" framework will work here as a broader answer. If we employ the "both/and" conceptual framework for Perry's utilization of Madea and the ways in which she offers empowering messages for women or reinscribes masculinist ideology, we can observe the dialectical play between Perry's activist desires and his oppressive tendencies. Just as the figure of the matriarch *can* embody a symbol of incredible strength, encouragement, and empowerment for a collective political sisterhood and can also serve as an instrument of the patriarchy, Perry's Madea is an example of this very contradiction—this dialectic—this play. In order to discern the specific means by which Perry's employment of Madea illuminates this contradiction between feminist activism and female disempowerment, let us now turn to the textual specifics of *Madea's Family Reunion* and investigate the ways in which Perry's gender politics emerge in the text and the subtext of the drama. As we interrogate Perry's text to take a closer, more critical

look at some of the discourses operating in his fictive world, particularly in regard to his messages about the females in his text, we will look at the ways in which Perry immerses himself into traditionally safe feminist spaces that foster opportunities for feminist consciousness raising, he creates or denies the possibility of the formation of a collective sisterhood, and he encourages or discourages the power of female self-definition. Additionally, we will analyze Perry's comments about domestic abuse and motherhood, and we will examine the ways in which Perry appears to uphold a faulty black gender ideology (strong Black woman/weak Black man) that has never worked in the interests of Black women. Through our investigation of the ways in which Perry employs Madea to deliver specific messages to the women in his fictive world and in his audience, I aim to illustrate Perry's conflicted rendering of drag and to highlight the complex dialectical relationship between Perry's activist goals and his oppressive tendencies to show how drag ultimately emerges as a instrument that reinforces patriarchal rhetoric and urges for male domination. It is ultimately not very queering.

Donning the disguise of Madea, Perry interjects himself into traditionally relatively safe feminist spaces to speak with the females in the text about particular problems that plague their everyday realities. These safe spaces like the front porch, centralized in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) as a cultivating site for feminist agency, the kitchen, and the church offer women spaces to come together free of male intrusion to discuss obstacles, to nurture a support structure, and to develop a possible ethos of female resistance to male-supremacist oppression. Even though these sites have not always functioned in simply liberatory ways, females have found ways to reclaim these sites of domestic oppression and transform them into sites of sharing, strength, and empowerment. Women's studies has done much to point out the ways in which spaces like the kitchen, the porch, and the church have all

historically functioned as oppressive locales that tie females to the domestic sphere or expose them to limiting prescriptions of proper femininity that curtail their active involvement in sex, politics, and economics, but many Black feminists and authors have also paid close attention not only to how these sites are transformed by females but also to how males become intimidated and apprehensive about the possibilities of such spaces coming into existence and what could happen to male power when these spaces are formed. Collins comments on this point by writing that "one reason that safe spaces are so threatening to those who feel excluded, and so routinely castigated by them, is that safe spaces are free of surveillance by more powerful groups" (*Black Feminist Thought* 111). What if a male could find a way to mitigate his fears and apprehensions about feminist safe spaces by incorporating himself into those spaces under the guise of another female? What happens to these routinely safe spaces once they are shared with those who are male? I should ask the question more pointedly: what happens to these safe spaces once they are shared with someone who is male yet pretends to be or dresses up as a female, a respected, elderly female at that? Clearly, the spaces become compromised. Perry is interesting to look at in this regard because he not only centralizes these safe spaces in his fictive world as the primary settings but he also interjects himself (as Madea) into these safe spaces to discuss everyday interpersonal issues that affect Black women in America (and some globally as well). Perry's activist tendencies emerge in the ways in which he constantly preoccupies himself and his productions with issues that concern Black women, especially when so many popular culture productions virtually ignore the everyday realities of Black women. Unfortunately, even today, there are not enough popular culture productions that deal with domestic violence against Black women, rape crimes against Black women and Black children, or everyday issues of love and relationships. More often than not, when these issues are broadly discussed in popular culture,

the specificity of the treatment does not deal with the realities of Black women with any deliberation. Perry's audiences respond to this inclusion. They want to see issues that concern Black women featured on the stage. At the very least, perhaps Perry can be credited with initiating a discussion about various issues that are often suppressed in imperatives of silence.

Even though Perry might have some activist aspirations or some progressive goals in mind, we must recognize the degree to which his progressive goals fall short and resemble quite the opposite of progressive politics. Yes, Perry features these traditionally safe spaces in his work. The women are often found crowding around on the front porch, in the house, or in the backyard, but these spaces do not share the features of safe feminist spaces. For one, Perry's mere presence (even as Madea) renders the space slightly precarious, though I think it is possible to share these safe spaces with males who are willing to critique and to combat patriarchal thinking and behavior—unbecoming men. Secondly, Perry's Madea does not foster any type of sincere dialogue among women in these spaces. Not only does he interject himself into the space in the disguise of Madea he also dominates, regulates, and controls the space. The equality in dialogue that is such a key fundamental characteristic of a safe space that cultivates an ethos of Black women's resistance and fosters the possibility of a collective, self-defined sisterhood is not present in Perry's presentation of these spaces and these conversations among women. According to hooks, we must be mindful of the politics of power when assessing dialogue or an instance that one attempts to pass off as dialogue. Focusing on what constitutes equality in dialogue, hooks writes, "dialogue implies talk between two (or more) subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination" (*Talking Back* 131). She goes on further to argue that mutuality is very necessary in productive dialogue. hooks draws the distinction between a dominating dialogue and a non-dominating

dialogue by noting that "we must distinguish between the bonds of care and commitment that develop in a dominant/submissive, subject/object encounter and that care and commitment which emerges in a context of non-domination, of reciprocity, of mutuality" (131). What hooks calls mutuality is what I call symbiosis. If we buy into hooks conceptualization of equality in dialogue, we notice the ways in which Perry's Madea exercises domination and subjectivity in her speech and simultaneously renders the females in the text passive objects, audience members who are subjected to her *almost-monologues*. In several of the conversations that emerge in Perry's dramas, the females sit around Madea, and she tells them about the error of their ways. She explains to them what they are doing wrong; she directs them on how to *fix* their lives. There seems to be little dialogue among females and little mutuality. Actually, if we continue our realization of Perry's participation in drag, we see that females are almost rendered obsolete in the safe space that was initially a ground for cultivating feminist agency. What ultimately happens is that to mitigate male fear about the potential of female resistance developing in these safe spaces and to sustain male power, Perry appropriates the space through which females may find empowerment. Moreover, in the disguise of a *trusted participant*, Perry subsumes the space, directs the discourse, and proffers masculinist, oppressive messages that absorb the power that could come from forming a collective, symbiotic sisterhood. He negates the possibility of gaining feminist power through female self-definition and pollutes the safe spaces with counterproductive strategies that promote obedience and dependency rather than independence and female self-sufficiency. In short, what was once a safe site in which one was able to nurture strategies of feminist resistance and to promote supportive dialogue among women becomes a site infected by a masculinist rhetoric that is often packaged and disguised as feminist resistance.

Throughout many of the conversations with the females in *Reunion*, Madea is situated in the position of the knower, the agent of knowledge. As Madea speaks about experiences, she is the educator for the female or the crowd of females around her. And, again, her model of education is not founded on ideas of equality in dialogue. Instead, it is one that resembles what Paulo Freire popularly theorizes as the banking concept of education, a concept in which the teacher deposits information into a passive receptacle: the student. There is little room for the voice and perspective of the student within this model. (Freire 92-93) Now, indeed, Perry taps into the value that a Black feminist epistemology places on experiential knowledge and the power of personal testimony. The importance of the tradition of African American orality is also vital here. Perry recognizes what constitutes knowledge in the African American community in certain respects. Additionally, he understands that the figure of the ancestor or the elder also has an important role in the act of disseminating knowledge. Perry knows his audience and understands the ways in which they place value on particular ways of knowing. But is there a responsibility or a code of ethics that comes with this understanding? Does Perry abuse the ways in which he understands his audience's sensibilities? Does he earn trust with which he is not all together responsible?

Because Perry capitalizes on the traditions and valuations with which he is so familiar, I think his audience members almost forget (whether forced amnesia or not) that Madea is indeed a male who is proffering a very patriarchal point of view while donning the disguise of a female elder. The whole problem with the lack of reciprocity in conversation and placing a man in drag as the agent of knowledge who adopts a banking concept of education while speaking to females is the inherent, perhaps slightly embedded, assumption that females must be taught by males how to live their lives. There is a fundamental critique aimed at females that they cannot see their own

situations clearly; rather, Madea (Perry in drag) must point them in the *right* direction. But I have to have to speculate about the following: Perry points females in the right direction for whom? Whose interests are protected? In terms of stage direction and blocking, Madea is often placed physically above the females with whom she is engaging, or she is placed in the center of a group of females; Madea, more often than not, occupies the physical space of dominance or centrality. When she is conversing with Vickie about her presumably homosexual son Mike, Madea is situated above Vickie in the porch swing while Vickie sits below her on the porch. The parallels between Madea's elevated position in the physical space and her condescending superiority in dialogue are quite telling. As Madea is situated above Vickie and looking down on her, she attempts to explain to her that her son is gay and she does not know it.

Perry's suggestion of failed motherhood is also a discourse that operates behind this scene and many others that are similar. Vickie is not only presented as a mother who has a gay son (which is already judged in Perry's text—a issue that I will take up later in the chapter and in chapter two) but also as a mother who cannot see her child clearly. Madea has to tell Vickie, or try to tell Vickie, quite condescendingly, that her son is a homosexual who likes to play with Barbie dolls. Madea sits above Vickie and explains to her what she is not capable of seeing by herself. As a mother, Vickie has some shortcomings in Madea's eyes. What is perhaps more overt than Perry's suggestion of Vickie's failed motherhood is the pointed example of failed motherhood with Cora. Interestingly, as Perry tries to address the issue of childhood rape with Cora's daughters, Lisa and Tina, the blame falls almost entirely on the mother. Perry falls victim to the masculinist tendency to place the woman in the ethical center of the home and the community to bear the moral burden for everyone around her. In no way does the play offer a critique of the actual rapist or molester; instead, just like so many conventional rape scripts that

focus on what the victim could have or should have done differently (or what the *female* could have done differently), Perry's text focuses entirely on the fact that Cora did nothing to stop the abuse inflicted on her daughters. She bears the burden of blame. And because of her failed attempts at motherhood, one of her daughters has turned into a "crackhead mother" (another failed mother) who is presented as a jezebel figure who has no sense of self-worth, and her other daughter has turned into a money-hungry gold-digger who will marry a man who beats her just because he has money. Quite clearly, if Cora would have only done her job as a mother successfully, her daughters might not have developed into the females that Madea has to fix or put up with. The mother is placed in the ethical center of the family, and the father who is the actual culprit of wrongdoing escapes any form of punishment or critique. Of course, the father is not an actual character in the text, but it would have been quite simple for Perry to insert a harsh critique of fathers who impose abusive behavior on their children. A critique like that would be exactly the type of assessment of patriarchal thinking that Carbado encourages in male participation in feminism.

In addition to Perry's critique of Cora and Vickie, he has Madea actually take physical control, a kind of informal adoption, of Tina's child because Tina is such a messy mother. Even Jackie is offered up as a mild example of failed motherhood as she does not have the intelligence not to overwork herself during her pregnancy. Keeping her unemployed man taken care of, Jackie works herself nearly to death while she is pregnant. It is her responsibility to provide for him and keep him economically secure. Moreover, there is a suggestion that Jackie must serve as Kevin's moral compass as well to keep him from dealing drugs on the streets and to keep him out of jail. Furthermore, she has to keep the whore and drug addict, Tina, away from Kevin. Pitting women against each other in the interest of preserving male privilege, Madea warns

Jackie that "you don't take the word of some trick over yo' man…check with yo' man first. Check with yo' man" (*Madea's Family Reunion*). Thus, Tina emerges as the reincarnated mythological figure of the tempting Eve, a figure who has justified countless oppressions against women. Perry not only negates the power of sisterhood but he also puts forth the notion that men would be able to walk the straight and narrow if it were not for those seductive, lying women who contaminate their morality. And Madea's "check with yo' man first" mantra that she repeats successively uncomfortably echoes Ice Cube's (and much of male hip hop culture's) misogynist mantra that "you can't trust no bitch" (qtd. in Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 160). Stand by your man at all costs is the name of the game. Madea has to intervene to ensure that Jackie not only never trusts a female over a male but also that she takes care of her body and prepares for her impending childbirth. Jackie is incredibly reliant upon Madea's assistance. Vickie, Cora, Tina, Jackie, and even Mrs. Brown all emerge in the text as failed mothers who need Madea's help. Every female character has made a mess out of motherhood, and Madea, in some form or another, emerges as the savior. Again, the male body comes to the rescue and adopts the maternal voice and the maternal influence that the female characters in the text are incapable of assuming.

Not only does Perry's discourse offer an embedded critique about a female's inability to mother properly, to see her own situation clearly, and to develop a strategy of action but also Madea's interventions actually seem to render the females inactive, dependent objects. Each time a female is in trouble, Madea must come to the rescue with knowledge or with action to save the female character who cannot save herself. I am thinking immediately of the scene in which Jackie's husband puts his hand on her arm and she screams "Madea, Madea, Madea" to which Madea replies "what's up, baby? what's up, baby?" (*Madea's Family Reunion)*. When Jackie is

in trouble, Madea comes running to the rescue with her gun in hand. Even though one might not completely buy into the notion that Madea's calling Jackie "baby" is an apparent infantilization, I, too, recognize that might be a textual stretch, one could certainly see how Madea's action and Jackie's inaction illuminates a female's dependency on Madea's strength and superiority. We will return to the specifics of this issue of domestic violence in a moment and the degree to which Perry examines and critiques domestic violence. But what I think is crucially important is the recognition that it is ultimately the *male body* that saves the day on Perry's stage; he presents the male body, though in disguise, in the position of superior protector and the female body as an object in need of male security. Men are the agents of change. I am not suggesting that I am incredibly troubled by a man in drag who attempts to put an end to domestic abuse; instead, I am cautioning readers to be aware of the masculinist logic behind the rescuer syndrome and the dangers of reasoning through the prism of male superiority and female dependency. Moreover, I want to draw attention to the fact that there is a thin line between males championing for the protection of females and males controlling females and their insisting that females must rely strictly on male protection, relegating them to a position of subordination and passivity.

Perry's treatment of domestic violence is another instance in which our both/and conceptualization and our dialectic between activist aspirations and oppressive tendencies emerge so clearly. Though I believe that Perry certainly reads himself and his work as speaking out against domestic violence against women and children, readers can find several contradictory discourses at work in terms of Perry and abuse. First, what even constitutes abuse in Perry's artistic imagination? It seems as if the only type of abuse that Perry wants to speak out against, at least in regards to domestic violence, is that abuse that is overt and strictly physical. In order to be a subject of Perry's critique, you have to literally beat the hell out of a woman. Slap her or

punch her in the face, actually. But it seems that any deliberate examination of abuse would take into consideration the various types of abuse that are endured by Black females. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of abuse ensured by Black females, Collins reminds us that "such violence takes many forms, including verbally berating Black women, hitting them, ridiculing their appearance, grabbing their body parts, pressing them to have sex, beating them, and murdering them" (*Black Sexual Politics* 225-226). We do not see many of these diverse faces of abuse discussed on Perry's stage. Moreover, when we do see Perry addressing domestic abuse, I question the degree to which he offers helpful advice. Because the issue of domestic abuse against Black women is centralized so infrequently in popular culture productions (and in everyday legislation and social discourse), those productions that bring up the issue assume added political and social significance.

In addition to interrogating what constitutes abuse for Perry, I question, and ask his other readers to question, the solutions that he proffers. Each time domestic violence surfaces in the fictive world, the solution revolves around *more* violence. It should be noted that Madea also attempts to inflict violence on women herself. She threatens Vickie and Tina with physical force, shoots her gun at Tina, and talks about punching other females in the face. Madea's answer is to pull out her pistol. Is there a benefit to fighting back and combating domestic violence with physical force? Perhaps. As I interviewed various women at a safehouse for abused women in Atlanta, Georgia, I was shocked and interested to hear the ways in which they shared how Madea's power and strength excited them. Perry's treatment of domestic violence gave some of the women license to feel their anger and their hurt, and they felt empowered to fight back. Others, however, warned me of the dangers of Perry's advice, particularly the legal dangers that face women who retaliate against their attackers. Unfortunately, the rhetoric of self-defense does

not always work so neatly in the de facto realm of the American judicial system. Often women are incarcerated and convicted for fighting back against their attackers, taking matters into their own hands so to speak. And some women bravely shared their intense fear of the thought of more violence as a way out of an abusive situation. With all of these ideas in mind, I ask what type of advice Perry offers to some of these women who might watch his play in their darkest hour? Thus, the question becomes the following: does Perry truly attempt to combat abuse against women, or does he ultimately perpetuate a culture of violence and reify the oppressive constructions of the mad Black woman? Does he provide helpful short-term survival strategies *and* long-term healing strategies? Moreover, does he offer any resources to women who are facing domestically violent relationships? Does he give any sustainable, long-term solutions on his stage to help women who might find themselves in similar situations? In feminist thought and politics, we are looking for transformative logics and political action to put an end to violence against women.

What is also interesting about Perry's treatment of domestic violence is that once again he misses a vital opportunity to examine and to critique masculinity and those major tenets of masculinist thought that motivate and justify male violence against females. The male who commits violence against Lisa in *Reunion* is never really punished for his crime against a female. Madea threatens violence against him but never really follows through with any type of punishment. Once Ronnie, the perpetrator, shows up to face the music, he brings a gift from Tiffany's Jewelry and walks away with a mild talking-to and a slap on the wrist. Madea actually comments at one point, perhaps slightly in jest, "you promise not to hit her again?" And, looking at the jewelry, she jokes, "hell, he can hit me for this" (*Madea's Family Reunion*). She simply demands an apology from Ronnie. Now I can recognize the humor in this scene and can

appreciate the therapeutic and distracting power of laughter. But one has to keep reading this portion of the text side by side so many other moments in the text to arrive at a clear understanding about Perry's misogynist rhetoric here. First, domestic violence against women is no laughing matter. Secondly, notice the authorities are never called. Punishment never ensues. Even if domestic violence, especially in the Black domestic sphere, is not always taken seriously by the police, we must lobby for more protection and urge for transformative policies to protect those who suffer from abuse. Lisa is never given any type of resources to address any of the effects that accompany an abusive situation. Shockingly, she almost marries the abuser because he has money, but in a reductive, unrealistic ending, A.J. breaks up the wedding between Lisa and Ronnie and professes his purer love for Lisa. Lisa decides that she loves A.J., and she leaves Ronnie at the altar. The larger idea that ultimately emerges is that Lisa would have married Ronnie if A.J. had not come to her rescue and provided her with another option or a better option. She did not come to any sort of feminist consciousness of empowerment that would have allowed her to assert her self-worth and her independence by leaving Ronnie as an independent female who can operate without a male to take care of her. She did not stand up against the act of domestic violence. Perry seems to suggest that a female should leave an abusive male if and only if she has another one to sweep her off of her feet. Lisa should leave Ronnie, an abusive man, to marry A.J., a man who is not abusive. The larger message is that a man is always necessary for a female to reach any sort of self-actualization and fulfilled life.

The only woman that presents a challenge to this notion that females are completely dependent on males is Vickie. At the beginning of the play, Vickie self-defines herself as a woman who is living independently in the world, taking care of her children, and directing her attention to her career. She critiques male supremacy and urges for a collective sisterhood that

combats male exploitation of females. Each time that Vickie attempts to speak out against male abuse or to council another female in the text to assert some sort of feminist agency and self-determination, Madea silences Vickie quite literally. She is told to "shut the hell up," and Madea removes her from the scene in which she was attempting to speak and to form a strategy of resistance against male domination or poor treatment of females. Madea constantly refers to Vickie in a pejorative manner. Madea repeatedly tells Vickie that "she's messy as hell." Messy—in need of cleaning up—of transformation. What is so messy about Vickie? Interestingly, Perry depicts Vickie as a female who is in desperate need of conversion. Following his conversion narrative script, which fits so nicely with his religious overtones, Perry characterizes Vickie as a female who is in need of a male but just does not realize it. By the end of the play, Perry has Vickie converted into a love relationship with a man—the Reverend of the church, ironically. This act of domestication and conventional feminization is incredibly telling. It is the more covert version of what Collins hints at when she writes that "being strong enough to 'bring a bitch to her knees' becomes a marker of Black masculinity" (*Black Sexual Politics* 189). A female who can operate successfully without the assistance of a male is not only unattractive to Perry but also something he is not willing to consider in his fictive world. Through Vickie's plot, we can see more of Perry's conflicted nature shine through, and we can see the dialectic between activism and oppression resurfacing. Collins has argued in *Black Feminist Thought* as well as elsewhere that the feminist notion (often misunderstood) that women do not want men is a Eurocentric feminist idea. Black feminists, according to Collins, do not want Black men to become obsolete; rather, they urge for Black men to treat Black women more fairly. While I certainly take issue with parts of Collins's argument here, particularly the ways in which she misreads or reduces a Eurocentric feminist stance on this issue and her heterosexist vision of

Black feminism, I think that her argument has some viability. Moreover, I believe that it is relatively informative to consider in regard to Perry's activist aspirations. One could certainly argue that Perry is merely highlighting the advantages of finding a fulfilling love relationship and urging the successful Black lady to balance a successful career with a satisfying personal life. But what we have to take into consideration is that Vickie never does much in the way of expressing unhappiness. She is told by men that she is unhappy and in need of their deliverance. Vickie is not given the opportunity to self-define. Additionally, we must consider Vickie's larger place in the play and what she symbolizes and threatens to undermine. We have to read Vickie's character throughout the play to understand why she must be domesticated and silenced to maintain the patriarchal order that Perry sustains on his stage. Vickie's presence suggests a threat or a challenge to male supremacy that must be eradicated. This voice of transgression is domesticated and silenced as Vickie agrees to marry the Reverend and transforms into a swooning female who is at the whim of her man—another successful heteronormative proselytization.

Throughout the course of the play, Madea is the agent of action, the only autonomous "female" character in the fictive world. Thus, if Madea emerges as the agent of knowledge (the knower and teacher) and the agent of action, and if we realize that Madea is a male in drag who is created and sustained by a male artist, does our reading of Perry's progressive, feminist sensibilities change? Perhaps we recognize that even though Perry is attempting to be progressive by bringing relevant feminist issues into the limelight in popular culture productions and attempting on the surface to champion for female protection and happiness, he offers quite interesting, contradictory discourses about a female's capacity to self-define, self-valuate, and self-defend. Instead of providing a complementary male voice in feminist thought that reckons

with male supremacist logic and critiques the ways in which patriarchal points of view devalue and disempower women, Perry appropriates the practice of drag to parade around as a trusted participant in the Black female community to subject women to conservative rhetoric that threatens feminist agency. He participates in exactly the type of discourse that Carbado warns against when males enter into the realm of feminist thought and politics. While Carbado argues that "a fundamental goal of male feminism should be to facilitate the process of men *unbecoming men*, the process of men unlearning the patriarchal ways in which they have learned to become men" (425; emphasis added), Perry attempts to adopt a female voice and a feminine identity to describe female experiences from his interests, experiences, and motivations as a male who enjoys male privilege. It is perhaps the most poisonous of methods, and it is certainly the most deceptive.

Up to this point we have concerned ourselves with textual specifics and the ways in which Perry's feminist or anti-feminist politics collide and diverge in the textual world of *Reunion*, but the dialectical play that we have examined thus far applies to some of the professional dimensions of Perry's artistic world as well. In terms of his activist goals, Perry has provided employment opportunities for so many Black females on the stage and a few behind the scenes as well. He is creating work for such an underrepresented minority in show business. Substantial roles for Black females are not readily available by and large. Moreover, he is writing for and entertaining Black females, though his message is wildly problematic at times. But I do think that Perry is considering the presence of a Black female demographic far more than so many artists adding work to the American and African American cultural landscapes. Despite these activist professional goals, we must recognize how Perry engages in some oppressive business practices as well. Because Madea is the focal point of the play, she (Perry)

becomes the star. The Black female body does not take the lead role in these plays, even though Perry is trying to pass himself off as a female character. Ultimately, Perry is pimping the Black female body and subsuming the lead role from a Black female. He does not cast an elderly Black female actress to play Madea. He remains the star; he builds the empire; he profits more than anyone else. Most titles carry his name at the top and illustrate his centrality. Though he is providing work for Black female actresses, he successfully relegates the Black female body to the supporting role while Black females constitute his largest following and issues that plague their everyday lives remain the foundation of most of his subject matter. Black females pay the most, and the Black male takes home the bulk of the profit and notoriety. Thus, Perry's *theatre of paradox* or our dialectical play between activism and oppression transcends the fictive world and also animates many of the professional specifics of Perry's productions as well.

CHAPTER 3: "STILL PLAYIN' WIT DEM BARBIE DOLLS? NEVER MIND, DON'T ANSWER THAT[8]": PERRY'S STAGE IS A LONELY PLACE FOR THE BLACK QUEER

In addition to questioning Perry's feminist politics, I would like to address Perry's sexual politics and his slightly homophobic tendencies. If we recognize and analyze the fact that Perry is in drag, an act so heavily centralized in queer subcultures, how do we account for Perry's conflicted mixture of homoeroticism and heterosexism? Though Perry often centralizes and engages in homoerotic moments onstage as Madea sexualizes hypermasculine, shirtless young men on stage, he still manages to insert moments of homophobic dialogue and to privilege taken-for-granted heteronormativity in his fictive world. In order to discover the larger homophobic rhetoric operating obviously and subtly in Perry's work, we must look to Perry's

[8] *Madea's Family Reunion* (2002)

characterization of his presumably homosexual character in *Madea's Family Reunion* (2002), his aesthetic and artistic choices concerning the staging and dialogue of this character, and the comments made about, around, and to this character. Moreover, we must also couple this characterization in *Reunion* with Perry's other peripheral references to homosexuality in other plays to theorize about the ways in which Perry contributes to a discourse concerning homosexuality in the African American community. My chief objectives in investigating Perry's treatment of the presumably homosexual character in *Reunion* is to illustrate the ways in which Perry toys with this dialectic of oppression and activism in reference to homosexuality in the African American community. I do not wish to brand Perry as a homophobic artist; rather, I want to point to the complicated nature of Perry's discourse concerning homosexuality, and I aim to illuminate the degree to which Perry dramatizes a few of the fundamental dilemmas facing the Black gay man in the African American community as described by some of the earliest Black gay male critics and prominent Black feminists, especially dilemmas surrounding family, grudging acceptance, and the silence imperative. Drawing heavily upon Essex Hemphill's notion of "coming home," I will discuss the ways in which Perry sustains the problematic realities that the Black gay man faces while negotiating the politics of race, sexuality, and family/community. Additionally, borrowing from Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, I argue that if Perry is indeed attempting to offer empowering messages of communal healing and education, he must recognize the specifics means by which he is sustaining a debilitating view on homosexuality that fuels a problematic Black sexual politics that is exclusionary and oppressive for all members of the African American community.

Looking first at the presumably homosexual character of Mike in *Reunion*, we recognize that we are introduced to him within the first five minutes of the play by the other characters

onstage. Before Mike ever appears onstage and the audience members are able to draw their own conclusions concerning his character and his sexuality (which, unfortunately, are not distinct in Perry's imagination), Madea and Mike's mother, Vickie, discuss his childhood behavior and the ways in which that behavior serves as a marker of his adult sexuality. Sitting on the front porch, Madea, situated above Vickie and looking down in her direction, questions her about her sons, particularly her youngest son: Mike. As she continues her inquiry, Madea fires off a round of questions to which she apparently already has the answers. Assuming the position of the knower and the educator, Madea asks, "how yo' youngest one, Mike, doin'… he still playin' wit 'dem Barbie dolls" (*Madea's Family Reunion*)? As Vickie nervously defends her son's behavior, she argues that "oh, no, he grew out of that." Madea goes on to deliver the punch line: "oh, he playin' with Ken now" (*Madea's Family Reunion).* This is an interesting moment in the play that serves nicely as an entrance point towards an investigation of the ways in which Perry handles notions of homosexuality. Even if one does not make the immediate connection that Madea is equating Mike's childhood toy selections and his behavioral choices with his adult sexuality, she explicitly goes on to ask, in the same breath, when Mike is getting married. She puts forth the notion that he never will. Not only is this another moment in which Madea adopts the privileged position of the agent of knowledge and Perry inserts another instance of suggested failed motherhood but this is also a moment in which Perry proffers a dangerous and inaccurate conflation of gender and sexuality that has been debunked by queer and gender theorists alike. By characterizing Mike as a child who made the "wrong" gendered choice for a toy selection and by subsequently labeling him as homosexual, Perry succeeds in delivering the stereotypical characterization of the effeminate gay male. Moreover, he equates homosexuality with some sort of gender deviance. Because authentic, heterosexual boys would not play with Barbie, Mike

must be of another ilk. He must be playing with Ken, which would place him only in a substandard category of othered maleness: the homosexual, the bitch, or the punk that we will discuss later in our investigation.

In her examination of the possibility of gay children, Eve Sedgwick has commented on and theorized about the consistent, obdurate tendency to collapse gender and sexuality. As she notes quite deliberately in "How to Bring Your Kids up Gay" (1993), this tendency is not only a social habit but also has institutional implementations. During the very same year that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from a list of pathologized disorders (1973), they added "Core Identity Disorder of Childhood" to their diagnosis manual (DSM IV), which ultimately labels nonconformist children as being in danger of developing psychopathologies (homosexual tendencies). According to Sedgwick, CID is ultimately the failure to develop a core identity that is consistent with the gendered behavioral expectations attributed to one's biological sex. For example, "boys who display a preoccupation with female stereotypical activities as manifested by a preference for either cross-dressing or simulating female attire, or by [having] compelling desire to participate in the games and past times of girls" suffer from a CID that must be diagnosed and treated. (Sedgwick 70). Sedgwick argues that this implementation is part of a conceptual shift to eradicate the formation of *more* homosexuals. As she explores the links between gay adults and gender noncomforming kids, Sedgwick argues that the decision to remove homosexuality (in adults) from the list of pathologized disorders and to replace it with CID in childhood was motivated by the notion that society can manage the existing adult homosexuals so long as there are not more in the making. The only thing more unsettling than the existence of adult homosexuals is the threat that there are more on the horizon. Therefore, by "treating" a CID in childhood, there is a "programmatic undertaking [to]

prevent the development of [more] gay people" (Sedgwick 74). As Madea's reasoning and the audience's approval illustrate, this conflation of gender and sexuality has not changed very much in the popular imagination and continues to infiltrate popular culture and inform the public about sexuality.

Perhaps more important than Madea's dangerous conflation of gender and sexuality is Vickie's reaction. She adamantly refutes any non-normative behavior in Mike's adulthood and assumes a defensive posture to assert her son's masculinity and, thus, his heterosexuality as well. If Mike is indeed a homosexual male, whether effeminate or not, Vickie does not care to acknowledge that part of her son's being; rather, she hopes that he will marry "really soon." Though the reference to Mike is quick and meant to be quite humorous, we will notice that Perry is not done with the ridiculing of this character for comedic effect. While some might argue that Perry is not approaching the issue of homosexuality with any sort of seriousness or deliberation, it is important to note that he, I think, has some larger goal of communal health and inclusivity in mind, regardless of how problematic his politics become.

The audience neither hears nothing else about Mike nor sees him onstage until he appears in the final scenes of the play. As one of the many guests at the family reunion, Mike appears already seated at the picnic table in the background of the scene. He receives no entrance or introduction scene like almost every other character in the play enjoys. He appears in a bright-blue crocheted hat, a matching blue graphic tee shirt, designer sunglasses, an earring, and a necklace. It is obvious that Perry is capitalizing on the semiotics of clothing to dramatize Mike's presumable homosexuality. Intelligibility is key at this moment. He is characterized in a very fashion-forward manner (in stark contrast to the other characters), and the audience is supposed to recognize him as an effeminate Black male who is very concerned with fashion and

appearance. The only other men who are characterized as fashion-conscious constantly announce their heterosexuality to the audience (Jackie's "date" comes to mind). According to Collins, "stereotyping Black gay men as effeminate and weak, even though the majority of Black gay men do not fit this profile, becomes an important factor in constantly asserting Black male heterosexuality" (*Black Sexual Politics* 192). In Western binary logic concerning sexuality, a logic that has been internalized in large part by the African American community as well, the construction and maintenance of heterosexuality is entirely contingent on derogating and demonizing homosexuality. And, unfortunately, occupying a compromised place in the American socioeconomic, political economy, Black men feel that the safest privilege is that of heterosexuality. (This is even more true for Black women who are denied male privilege). As Jewelle Gomez summarizes, "I can pass as straight, but I cannot pass as white" (qtd. in De Lauretis 154). Because Perry employs a very stereotypical image of a Black gay male and juxtaposes him with other heterosexual men in the play, he believes that the audience can read Mike by his difference. Perry does not feel the need to include a detailed introduction scene for Mike. The audience members know him as the opposite of the other men in the play.

Within the first few moments of the scene, Madea addresses Mike by changing her entire demeanor. She elevates her voice and uses gentle hand gestures to welcome Mike to the family reunion as if he is a soft, delicate object to handle. The only thing that matters about Mike, at least as far as Madea is concerned, is whether or not he is still playing with those Barbie dolls. He is not even privy to the "hello, how have you been" series of questions that one might characteristically address to an estranged family member. Interestingly enough, Madea only poses one important question to Mike, and it is the same question that she posed to Vickie during the earlier portion of the drama: still playin' wit 'dem Barbie dolls? But he does not answer the

question. As a matter of fact, Madea does not even give him the opportunity to answer the question; instead, she quickly adds, "*don't* answer that" (*Madea's Family Reunion*; emphasis added). If we follow the metaphor of the Barbie doll and we recognize the equation of Mike's gendered behaviors to his adult sexuality, then, subsequently, we realize that Madea's silencing of Mike has vast political significance. What she actually does in that moment, if we follow her metaphor, is orders Mike to remain silent about his sexual practices.

Even though Mike is permitted admission to the family reunion, he is not allowed to speak at all; and if he were, he would certainly not be able to speak about his sexuality in this environment. As a matter of fact, Mike is only one of four characters who has no dialogue, and he is the only character always spoken of and ridiculed but never allowed to speak for himself—emblematic of the silence endured by queer persons throughout history, particularly in the African American community. In a medium in which dialogue reigns supreme, theatre, this aesthetic (and political) choice is crucial. And out of the four characters who do not have dialogue, he is one who serves as an object of homophobic ridicule. As Collins has observed, "representations of Black masculinity of the "punk," "the sissy," or the "faggot" offer up an effeminate and derogated Black masculinity" (*Black Sexual Politics* 171). Moreover, we must realize that this derogated image of Black masculinity is directly tied to notions of a devalued femininity; I think the male "bitch" should be added to Collins's list of pejorative characterizations. Perry waters this image down a little bit, but he still offers up a similar critique of the male who plays with Barbie dolls (or who is homosexual).

The family reunion scene is the moment in which the dialectic between oppression and activism seems to be the most clear in relation to Perry's treatment of homosexuality. Perry writes Mike into the family reunion scene, a scene in which he attempts to present a diverse,

problematic, yet unified, African American community. Though Madea's family has problems, the reunion is emblematic of inclusion and togetherness. Madea even tells Ronnie as she is half-heartedly berating him for hitting Lisa that her family is a family that is full of opportunities, but her family is a solid unit of community. But Mike's inclusion in this familial support structure, which is representative of homosexual inclusion in general, is completely contingent upon a few rules. He must function only as an object of ridicule, and he must always obey the silence imperative. In short, Mike is only welcome at the family reunion if he takes the heterosexist punches and never, ever assumes the position of subject, particularly a subject who announces his homosexuality. And, interestingly enough, *homosexuality* is never brought into language as a term by anyone throughout the course of the play; rather, the issue can only be addressed through metaphors of toy selection (read: sexual object choice). I do not know if Perry's treatment of this character can be read as entirely homophobic, though. It appears as if Perry is attempting to be progressive with his inclusion of this character and with his broader thematic of communal togetherness or communal health, but he seems to be constrained by his audience's expectations that are fueled by their cultural belief system concerning gender and sexuality. Moreover, perhaps he is himself constrained by his subscription to the rhetoric offered by the Black church and his internalization of a rigid, oppressive Black sexual politics (and gender ideology). I join Collins in pointing out that "too much is at stake…to ignore sexuality and its connections to oppressions of race, class, gender, and age any longer" (*Black Sexual Politics* 114). A progressive Black sexual politics involves a deliberate questioning of hyper-heterosexuality as the marker of an authentic or valid black masculinity. If we recognize that no art, whether humorous or otherwise, can be divorced from its political commentary *and* its sociopolitical consequences, we must ask Perry and others "how can any Black political agenda that does not

take *all* of these systems into account, including sexuality, ever hopes to adequately to address the needs of Black people as a collectivity?" (*Black Sexual Politics* 115). But regardless of the ways in which Perry's progressive agenda falls flat, it is interesting to note how the reader can observe the complicated tension between activism and oppression and the way he dramatizes some crucial components of the black homosexual experience.

In *Brother to Brother: Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991), Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam (among others) begin to theorize about the precarious position that Black gay men occupy both in the African American community and in the larger queer community. Describing a process that is so commonly referred to as "coming out" in so many of the discourses concerning queer communities, Hemphill (drawing from Beam) discusses a version of "coming out" that is distinctly African American as a "coming home" of sorts[9]. Instead of conceptualizing a "coming out" process that perhaps involves a familial separation between a homosexual individual and his or her familial support structure and a movement into an alternative queer community and alternative familial structures, Hemphill and Beam describe a process of "coming home" that involves, ironically enough, a reunion of sorts. According to several of the contributors of this volume of writing by Black gay men, their presence and their unique gifts are not valued in the larger (white) queer community. Moreover, rarely do the members of the larger queer community consider the specific goals or interests of the Black LGBTQ member in their larger political or social agendas. As Collins, hooks, and several Black gay critics have observed, the Black gay man has rarely received attention from the larger queer community except as a sexual object to be consumed, objectified, and commodified. In short, several argue that the Black gay

[9] I want to acknowledge that I certainly believe that this notion of "coming home" is widely applicable to members outside of the LGBTQ Black community, but I frame the discussion of the term in similar ways to the way in which it was originally conceptualized, and I apply it accordingly.

man has one place in the larger queer community: that of the big black dick. Instead of "coming out," which implies a *possible* separation from familial support structures, these Black gay writers imagine returning to the African American community. Hemphill and Beam conceptualize "coming home" as a reconciliation of their queerness and their blackness, two parts of the Black gay male's identity that are so often at odds with each other. (Are you black or gay first?) Black gay men want to come home to the African American community baring their queerness.

As Hemphill explains in his introduction, "we are a wandering tribe that needs to go home before home is gone….our mothers and fathers are waiting for us.… they will remain ignorant, misinformed, and lonely for us, and we for them, for as long as we stay away hiding in communities that have never really welcomed us or the gifts we bring" (XX). In "Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart" (1986), Joseph Beam explains this notion of *home* further by noting, "when I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community…Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or I am tolerated if I am *silent* and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply" (qtd. in Hemphill xvii; emphasis added). In Hemphill and Beam, we find a core dilemma that plagues the Black gay man that is dramatized in Perry's treatment of Mike. If Black gay men are indeed devalued in the larger (white) queer community and are denied access to the fruits of the African American community if they refuse to subscribe to the silence imperative that demands speechlessness about homosexuality, they face a fundamental dilemma that forces them to privilege either their sexuality or their blackness. Is there a negotiation possible? According to Marlon Riggs, Black gay man is a triple negation.

Writing about the links between homophobia and the construction of Black masculinity, Riggs writes the following:

> I am a Negro faggot, if I believe what movies, TV, and rap music say of me. My life is game for play. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black. A strong, proud, "Afrocentric" black man is resolutely heterosexual, not *even* bisexual. Hence, I remain a Negro. My sexual difference is considered of no value; indeed, it's a testament to weakness, passivity, and the absence of real guts—balls. Hence, I remain a sissy, punk, faggot [or bitch]. *I cannot be a black gay man because, by the tenets of the black macho, black gay man is a triple negation*. I am consigned, by these tenets, to remain a Negro faggot. And, as such, I am game for play, to be used, joked about, put down, beaten, slapped, and bashed, not just by illiterate homophobic thugs in the night but by black American culture's best and brightest. (qtd. in Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 172; emphasis added)

Hemphill does not necessarily disagree with Riggs, but he offers up further explanation about why it might be necessary to endure ridicule. In response to the silence and pejorative treatment forced onto the Black gay man in the African American community, Hemphill discusses the Black gay dilemma with family, and he speculates about the necessity to absorb the substandard treatment offered by pointing out that "we [Black gay men] cannot afford to be disconnected from these institutions [the African American community], yet it would seem that we are willing to create and accept dysfunctional roles in them, roles of caricature, silence, and illusion. In truth, we are often forced into these roles to survive" (xvii-xviii).

In addition to the pejorative characterization and substandard treatment of Mike in *Madea's Family Reunion*, Madea constantly references the "tambourine player" in a rather pejorative manner, the player being one who represents the "anything-but-that" abject, queer other. This characterization first appears in *I Can Do Bad All by Myself (*2000), the play before Mike's character appears in *Reunion*. In *Bad,* we see Perry toying with the notion of the tambourine player. He describes this person as a sensitive, effeminate man who wears his clothes

very tightly and loves bright, loud colors—preferably the colors of the rainbow. Moreover, this character talks (or shouts) in a high-pitched voice. Madea warns other women in the fictive world of *Bad* to watch out for the "nice, loving, sensitive man….so sensitive he a tambourine player" (*I Can Do Bad All by Myself).* The first character who is criticized under this label is the character of Brown or Mr. Brown, Madea's neighbor. We must note that Madea only ridicules Brown as a tambourine player for a few moments in the play; his connection to homosexuality is never supposed to be taken as seriously as Mike's in *Reunion.* And just in case audiences were concerned about Mr. Brown's potential homosexuality, Perry writes Brown's family into the script of *Reunion* to assert his heterosexuality. I wonder about the switch here in Perry's artistic imagination. I wonder why he played with the idea that Brown might be homosexual in this play only to go in a completely different direction in the rest of his dramas. As a matter of fact, an entire play is penned around Brown, his family, and his heterosexual nature: *Meet the Browns* (2004).

Along with hooks, I speculate about whether or not this refutation of any homosexuality in regards to Brown is due to Brown's position as the neighbor. Perhaps the idea that a homosexual could be someone living next-door unbeknownst to his or her neighbor is a little too serious of a threat. Heterosexual safety is in distance. In regard to this idea of distance, hooks asserts that "often when family members foolishly indulge in homophobic jokes and verbal gay-bashing, they assume that the gay person is a stranger, someone out there whom they will never know. The gay person is always with us—inside the home, a part of our family" (*Salvation* 206). But this lack of distance does not stop Perry from ridiculing the tambourine player in *Bad.* The tambourine player is not only stereotyped as effeminate but also characterized as a clown, a buffoon, and a fool. The homosexual or "possible" homosexual or hinted-at homosexual surfaces

again as an objective of ridicule and entertainment. Moreover, he is a figure who is not to be respected as intelligent or wise. The devaluation is crucial. There is a sense that Brown or the tambourine player is a little underdeveloped, which is a major tenet of so many (some antiquated) homophobic discourses in the medical field, in the social sciences, and in religious rhetoric. Brown is even referred to as a dead person at one point in the play.

Perry's derogatory treatment of homosexuality is especially interesting alongside an explication of his homoeroticism. From the very early moments of *Bad*, Perry engages in explicitly homoerotic behavior. If the audience member or perceptive reader pauses one minute to analyze the fact that the brother is a dude in drag, his behavior becomes very clearly homoerotic. As Madea talks about her ex-lover Herbert and as she throws herself onto the young Bobby, it is clear that Perry is centralizing some homoerotic moments into his fictive world. Interestingly enough, Perry does not even try hard to mask his drag (a point that I made in the earlier portions of this essay), so he does not seem concerned about the homoerotic implications of Madea's behavior. Perhaps he relies on his audience's successful suspension of disbelief. Not only does Madea continue to refer to Bobby as her baby's daddy but she also channels mantras from familiar Black popular culture and rap music. For example, as Madea approaches the towel-clad Bobby (shirtless, of course) and makes quite physical gestures to hint at some sort of sexual desire for Bobby, she channels lyrics from Snoop Dogg's "Drop it Like It's Hot," Khia's "My Neck, My Back," and Juvenile's "Back That (Ass) Thang Up." Not to be too crass, but Madea actually follows Juvenile's suggestion and backs that ass up in an attempt to welcome Bobby's sexual advances. One cannot help but notice, particularly in light of the fact that Perry is a male in drag, that Perry is quite readily assuming the position for anal penetration from a hypermasculine male in the fictive world. When the reader couples Perry's drag with all of the

sexual comments, the sexual allusions, the sexual movements, and the exposed hypersexual, shirtless male body onstage, it doesn't take long for a homoerotic understanding to emerge. And if those not-so-subtle references do not convince the reader of the ways in which Perry is toying with homoeroticism, one only has to consider the reason why Bobby is shirtless to begin with: he is looking for the soap. And why does Madea come into the scene? She comes into the scene to drop the soap. I am not sure that Perry could get much more deliberate with the way in which he characterizes a homoerotic scene, but just in case his readers did not get the allusion, Madea says to a running-scared Bobby that "boy, I can tell you've been in jail. You were scared as hell to bend over and pick up that soap" (*I Can Do Bad All by Myself*). Though one could also comment on the degree to which Perry features hypersexual, shirtless men on stage to satiate his mostly female demographic, it is next to impossible to deny the blatant homoeroticism that Perry engages in so long as the audience member ascertains the fact that Perry is ultimately a man in a dress.

And it is worth mentioning that yet again *homosexuality* as a term never makes it into discourse. Only signification for homosexuality (however flawed or derogatory) is employed to reference same-sex desire or behavior. It is as if Perry cannot even bring homosexuality into language as such. The pointed signifier is too much. And oftentimes his reference to the tambourine player is lost on other characters. Madea has to couple the metaphorical or coded reference with physical movements that are supposed to be characteristic of the effeminate gay male who flamboyantly rings the tambourine. This reference to the tambourine player becomes more significant as Perry develops his playwriting. Instead of simply being an object of homophobic ridicule, the tambourine player becomes an anything-but-that, abject other—that

which must be expelled to reestablish boundaries of selfhood—a politically desirable selfhood[10]. In later plays like *Madea's Class Reunion* (2003), lines like "you ain't a tambourine player, is you?" become interesting examples of the ways in which the differentiation from homosexuality becomes crucial for establishing the parameters around an authentic blackness. Robert Reid-Pharr, author of *Black Gay Man* (2001), has argued that "the homosexual, like the Jew, becomes in late-twentieth-century Black American writing a vehicle by which to express the omnipresence of the specter of black boundarylessness" (15). Perhaps Perry's contradictory blend of homophobic references to the tambourine player and Madea's homoerotic moments do not neatly fit into the dialectic of activism and oppression that operates more clearly in other areas of his drama and in other expressions of homosexuality; however, this label, the tambourine player, itself has that very dialectic embedded in its relationship the Black church's contradictory stance towards homosexuality.

The "tambourine player" is symbolic of that character who embodies the mixture of silence and homophobia popular in African American communities, especially in heavily religious communities. He is the character in the church choir who everyone knows is homosexual but no one speaks of the sexual and political realities of this individual. But even in the Black church, we find this dialectic between oppression and activism. The tambourine player or the choir director or any other individual that is widely known as homosexual is welcomed into most Black churches so long as he obeys the silence imperative. It is almost as if the Black church adopts a rhetoric of "hate the sin; don't hate the sinner," which some might argue is a remarkably more progressive opinion than those who excommunicate members and actively

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[10] See Julia Kristeva on the notion of abjection. Several sources feature explanations of Kristeva's terminology. Julian Wolfrey's *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory* (2004) provides a detailed account of the notion of abjection.

damn any members who are suspected of divergent, "perverse" sexual behavior. hooks and Collins have written extensively on the topic of homophobia in the African American community and have linked the need to eradicate homophobia to other social justice projects of racism and sexism in particular. Both theorists have argued in one way or another that the Black church has operated as an institution that is responsible for preaching a politics of respectability that protects the African American community from accusations of an always already insatiable, animalistic sexuality and for guarding the viability of the Black family. Because of homosexuality's supposed sexual deviance and because of its assumed denial of a reproductive logic, the Black church admonishes homosexuality as a sexual deviance that means genocide for African American families. Moreover, "the Black Church has also been partially reluctant to challenge Western arguments about sexuality and, instead, has incorporated dominant ideas…within its beliefs and practices" (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 183). Along the same lines, what Collins illuminates so clearly is that "the historical invisibility of LGBT[Q] African Americans reflects this *double containment*, both within the prison of racism that segregates Black people in part due to their alleged sexual deviance of promiscuity and within the closet of heterosexism due to the alleged sexual deviancy of homosexuality" (107; emphasis added). Perry plays into this logic perfectly, especially when one considers the ways in which he formulates conversion narrative after conversion narrative and weaves in gospel tunes like "pray together, stay together" with the ideas of healthy communities, religious faith, and heterosexuality. Even though Collins notes that "we [the African American community] need a black liberatory politics that affirms black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender sexualities….that understands the roles sexuality and gender play in reinforcing the oppression rooted in many black communities" (*Black Sexual Politics* 89), and hooks adds that "nothing has damaged this spirit of loving

kindness and tolerance in Black life more than the absolute embrace of patriarchal thinking," Perry cannot seem to actualize a liberating political stance in his treatment of homosexuality (*Salvation* 196). hooks goes on further to assert that "were more Black people willing to let go of the patriarchal mindset that stands in the way of love, homophobia could effectively be challenged and eradicated in our communities" (*Salvation* 202). Both Collins and hooks agree with Hemphill, Riggs, and Beam by noting the ways in which the derogation of the Black gay man is linked to the ways in which the African American community must closely examine the extent to which a failed gender ideology is fueling an oppressive Black sexual politics.

K.B. Saine argues that Perry "sustains a desire to treat the *entire range* of social, moral, and political problems that face black people, both as a group and as individuals" (109; emphasis added). If this is the case, then I ask about the social, moral, and political predicaments of the Black homosexual (or LGBTQ member) and the mutually contaminating effects of homophobia on the perpetuator and the victim. Because representations of Black homosexuality are already so rare, the moments in Perry's text seem all the more relevant and take on an added importance. hooks and Collins have both commented on the ways in which a liberated Black sexual politics and a critical investigation of Black gender ideology is vital to any attempt to address communal health or any attempt to proffer messages that aim to assist Black people as a collectivity. On this very issue, hooks notices that " …it must be continually stressed that our struggle against racism, our struggle to recover from oppression and exploitations, are inextricably linked to all struggles to resist domination" (*Talking Back* 124). She goes on further to claim that "it is essential that non-gay black people recognize and respect the hardships, the difficulties gay black people experience, extending the love and understanding that is essential for the making of authentic black community" (*Talking Back* 126). Perry must take into consideration the trials and

tribulations of the Black homosexual and recognize the vital role that Black LGBTQ individuals play in Black families, Black churches, Black artistic institutions, and in the community at large. Unfortunately, even though Perry is drawing heavily from the queer subcultural practice of drag, his fictive world is a lonely residence for the Black homosexual or Black LGBTQ person who is looking to "come home" to a liberated space that fosters togetherness and community improvement. Not only is the homosexual ridiculed and silenced, but heterosexuality is presented as the only option and continuously saves the day.

The only avenue that leads to genuine healing, forgiveness, personal fulfillment, and community is heterosexual marriage. In addition to displaying his homophobic tendencies with his treatment of Mike and his comments about the tambourine player, Perry constantly privileges heteronormativity in his fictive world. Interestingly enough, after the scene in which the presumable homosexual, Mike, appears onstage in *Reunion*, Perry cuts to a marriage scene as if to cleanse the home of the homosexual presence. In the play's last scene, most of the characters are coupled up in a heterosexual arrangement, and they are all holding hands and singing, "a family that prays together, stays together." The final scene of the play seems to indicate that the only authentic members of the family are present at the wedding and holding hands together and singing as a unified, heteronormative family. Mike is completely omitted from the play at this point. Actually, after the family reunion scene, Madea urges the family members to come into the house to continue their fellowship, but, strangely, Mike does not make it into the home. He actually disappears from the scene and from the play with no other explanation.

Before his disappearance, we see only him in the background of the family reunion scene discussing something that we are not privy to with the Reverend and his mother. A perceptive audience member might assume that Mike is being subjected to some form of proselytizing

moment in which the church and the family are trying to pray the gay away. Importantly, though, we never hear Mike's voice. Moreover, we never hear the Reverend or Vickie discussing his homosexuality, if indeed that is what is being discussed. Regardless of the content of their discussion with Mike, he does not come into the home with the other family members. He makes it half-way into the home: the backyard. His spatial limitations, too, are emblematic of the ways in which Mike cannot actualize the complete notion of "coming home" as Hemphill and Beam describe it. The reconciliation of one's blackness and one's queerness does not seem completely possible. Mike's acceptance, if one can call it that, or his inclusion in the familial space is limited and contingent. When he disappears from the play, he is never found again. The marriage scene comes in to wash away (or cleanse) any of the play's misfortunes, homosexuality of course being a part of that list. Mike does not even appear at the curtain call when the other characters are brought onstage to take their bows. He is physically, verbally, and sociopolitically absent. The actor who plays Mike is not even listed in the credits before the play begins or after the play ends. One might counter my argument by noting that Mike is only a peripheral character in the play and his absence is simply an industry standard for a minor character; however, I would then implore the reader to reconcile that explanation with the fact that Bryan, one of Jackie's other love interests who appears onstage about the same amount of time as Mike, is not only glamorized onstage as a masculine, heterosexual male who has his shit together enough to date Jackie but he is also given the space to take a bow at the end of the performance and given name recognition in the play's credits.

It is important to note two other things in the final scene of the play. Besides the fact that the play is brought to a close with heterosexual marriage that saves the day and most of the characters find peace and fulfillment within the confines of a heterosexual arrangement, there are

two women who are not coupled up with men: Cora and Tina. Both women represent some form of derogated womanhood. Cora is not only widowed but she is also overweight and conventionally unattractive; Madea constantly highlights Cora's weight as a means of disqualifying her from the dating realm. Moreover, Tina is addicted to drugs and representative of the jeezbel or the whore, a contaminating threat to Black masculinity; both women are characterized as undeserving of marriage. With that being said, Perry's heterosexism should be troubling for both women and homosexuals (or any men with progressive sensibilities). Presenting heterosexual marriage as the only saving grace renders the homosexual, the self-sufficient woman who chooses to forego marriage, and the woman who does not qualify as the standard model of beauty or morality as illegible non-options.

As the entire theatrical experience comes to a close and the cast members (most of them) have taken their bows, Perry takes off the dress, the wig, and the make-up, and he comes out to address the audience directly, announcing his "authentic" gender and his professed heterosexuality as well. This revelatory moment (or act of compulsory heterosexuality) is quite interesting. Perry does not leave the audience with Madea as the lasting image. Instead of wanting to leave the audience with an image of their beloved Perry in drag (and sexing up other men in the fictive world), he cleans up and delivers himself as a Christian, heterosexual Black man to his audience. The cultural demand for heterosexuality is undeniable. Sporting his clean suit, his tie, and his cross around his neck, Perry speaks to the audience about their play-going experience. The safety provided by the fictional quality of the stage, a historically safer space for social transgression, is over. The ante is up. The game is over. After the curtain call, it is time for Perry to assume his role heterosexual male role in the conventional social narrative. This is one of the more telling parts of Perry's artistic choices. Few playgoers see the playwright acting,

producing, directing, and singing as well as writing. But I suspect even fewer performances feature their playwright addressing the audience after each show to recap the night's happenings. Shockingly, Perry manages to insert yet another moment of artistic control in the text; he oversees nearly all aspects of production. His speech to the audience reads very much like the following: in case you missed any of my not-so-subtle messages, I am going to spell them out for you before you walk out of that door and apply them to your lives. It resembles an instructional seminar recap of sorts. Frankly, if some liken Perry's style to holdin' church, Perry assumes the microphone in his Sunday's finest quite like the preacher who is heading the congregation during a service. Perry goes to great lengths to ensure that he drives home very specific messages to his audience. He goes character by character to discuss why he wrote a certain character or plot into the play, and he takes time to do a little networking and public relations for himself. He announces upcoming projects, discourages bootleggers, and advertises Tyler Perry.com, which has been a monumental tool in fostering his growth across the U.S. This is the moment in which Perry could have truly flexed his progressive muscles (if he has them) to seriously centralize the issues of homophobia in the African American community and to speak out against mistreatment of females. But there are "no break[s] with stereotypes here. And, more importantly, no critical interrogation of the way in which these images perpetuate and maintain institutionalized homophobic domination" (hooks, *Outlaw Culture* 18). Perry could have at least apologized for his pejorative comments and made a cursory comment about how homophobia is a serious issue that needs to be addressed, even though he might not be the one who raises the seriousness of the issue. But just as the actor who plays Mike is missing from the stage bows, the issue of homosexuality is ignored in favor of a stack of problems that face heterosexual couples. Several feminist critics (like hooks and Collins) have noted how closely tied the rhetoric of the Black

church is to patriarchal (heterosexist) ideology. Perry, as a conservative preacher of sorts, sustains this trend rather solidly. Unfortunately, by the play's end, Perry and his cast walk off of stage, the lights come up, the audience begins to file out of the theatres to go back into their daily lives, and the silence imperative continues. The theoretical call for a liberating political stance that affirms Black LGBTQ community members never escapes the realm of the academy into a popular culture production.

After examining the larger, more subtle discourses at work in Perry's dramatic world coupled with the obvious discourses, I question and certainly revise my initial reading of Perry as an aggressive feminist with a progressive message of community improvement and healing. While I certainly still concede to several of the ways in which Perry is trying to promote liberating messages for women and while I can see how he is trying to approach a more progressive point of view about homosexual inclusion, I only see the positive in complicating his seemingly progressive stance and pointing to the ways in which he is locked into conservative religious doctrine that has its benefits and its drawbacks in terms of uniting the African American community and healing troubled communities. My chief objectives are not to critique Perry too harshly. I want to celebrate his successes, but I also want to highlight his complexities to locate the paradoxical discourses in action in his fictive world. By taking Perry to task, I think his drama becomes all the more interesting and relevant to discuss. While I certainly do not have a definitive conclusion concerning Perry's motives and his objectives, it is safe to say that he offers a *theatre of paradox* that presents an interesting dialectic between oppression and activism that serves as a fertile ground for academic investigation and discussion. I can only hope that I have barely embarked on a humble beginning.

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