

**Draft: Please Do not Cite or Circulate outside of Culture Workshop**

**Chapter Five**

*Consuming Purity : Living Real*

All too often faith in the inner city of Kingston, like other urban areas around the globe, is about coming to terms with violence, death, poverty and heartbreak. While people's everyday lives are not a one-dimensional response to these realities – as they are enlivened by the realities of work, family, fun, food and faith – they are at the same time given context by these conditions. The October 2005 cover story of the Sunday edition of the *Jamaica Gleaner* newspaper highlighted in shocking red images one of these realities – the trauma of women violated by rape. So far that year 606 reported cases of rape were documented, compared with a total of 860 in 2004 and 931 in 2003.<sup>1</sup> The inside stories were gloom filled accounts of women tortured, raped and sometimes murdered in random acts of violence and in what some scholars were beginning to call gang related “reprisal rapes.” These rapes were assaults on the loved ones, including girlfriends and family members, of opposing gang members. According to some studies, because of the inefficiencies of the criminal justice system, many rapists remain on the streets and those captured tend to do abbreviated sentences. The social havoc that such a system leaves for the area's inhabitants is traumatic. Speaking to the pain of those affected by destructive behavior is often the work of religious leaders.

As we sat in bible study one Friday night, a group of women prayed for victims of abuse and rape. The speaker that evening, after sharing her own story of abuse, held up a picture from the newspaper concerning the increase in assaults against women and girls. She then led those gathered in a time of travailing prayer- the particular form of fervently entreating the divine in and about times of great struggle. Forever in love with their country for its beauty and warmth, the women prayed for a return to the times in Jamaica

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<sup>1</sup> Petrina Francis, “One rape every 12 hrs,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, October 30, 2005.

where perennial violence was not the norm. At Calvary Pentecostal Church, the answer for the approximately 75 women gathered was a lamentation for God's supernatural intervention. The administrators of government had all failed. Their only hope lay in the hands of a God who hears.<sup>2</sup>

Televangelists like Juanita Bynum, Paula White and Joyce Meyer offer tangible witness to the intervening power of a God who responds to desperate situations. As discussed in the previous chapter, women televangelists have gained tremendous national and international followings based upon sharing their experiences of (sexual) trauma and redemption. The rise in the prosperity gospel, interestingly, runs in line with the rise in televangelistic discourses about sex and sexuality. The relationship between the simultaneous emergence of these two discourses is not inconsequential. Urbanization and its related decline in job opportunities wreak havoc on the social and sexual lives of women. This is not to say that sexual trauma and other forms of sexual misuse were not present prior to urbanization; the observation only highlights what scholars point out as a dramatic increase in the issues brought on by the confluence of urbanization and economic strain.

Diane Austin-Broos, in describing the "sweetheart life" in Jamaica, points to the ways in which women have often partnered with older, sometimes married, men in order to sustain themselves in difficult economic times. In Jamaica the transition from country living to city dwelling under neoliberal reform opened the city region as the place to secure jobs (much like the period of urbanization in the US). The massive influx of laborers into the city was often met, however, with the disappointment of slow economic growth and insufficient employment opportunities in the formal sectors of the economy. In response, women have at times turned to more financially stable men for support.<sup>3</sup> Scholars examining issues of sexuality in the Caribbean have generally focused such women's liaisons with men under discussions of marriage and family; however, increasingly scholars in talking about issues of sexuality have pointed to the rise in sex tourism. According to anthropologist Denise Brennan, the increase in Western tourism in

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<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of how prayer is seen as a way of intervening when governmental structures are seen as ill equipped, see Timothy Nelson, *Every Time I Feel the Spirit: Religious Experience and Ritual in an African American Congregation* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Austin-Broos, *Jamaica Genesis*.

the Caribbean as well as the economic need of the area has contributed to the development of the Caribbean into a “sexscape,” where a “global economy of commercialized sexual transactions” exists.<sup>4</sup> Such a transformation exemplifies developments occurring both throughout the region and in many other locales around the world. As Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto observe, “Globalization has involved not only an economic restructuring of the world but a sexual one as well...”<sup>5</sup>

Scholars studying women’s lives in other developing areas have also made the connection between increased globalization and urbanization and new configurations of sexuality. Women in South Africa, for example, according to sociologist Maria Frahm-Arp, find in the aftermath of apartheid both great opportunities for economic advancement as well as great disappointment. These women, similarly traveling to the cities en masse from the country, often struggle to make ends meet. “The sex-for-goods industry...where young women were in quasi mistress type relationship with older men, has been one of the unforeseen phenomena to emerge since the end of apartheid.” “Sociologists,” she contends, “had expected the politics of race, gender and inequality to be dominant features of the New South Africa, but the politics of sexuality was unpredicted.”<sup>6</sup> This sex-for-goods industry that influences the material well being of a number of young women informs in many ways the growing appeal of Pentecostal type

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<sup>4</sup> Denise Brennan, *What’s Love Got to Do With It? Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> In these networks both men and women engage in sexual activity with tourists as a means of supporting themselves and their families. See Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto, “The Sweetest Taboo: Studies of Caribbean Sexualities; A Review Essay,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, 1 (2006): 247-274. For further discussions of sex tourism in the Caribbean see Brennan, *What’s Love Got to Do With It?*; Kamala Kempadoo, ed. *Sun, Sex, and Gold: Tourism and Sex Work in the Caribbean* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (New York: Routledge, 2004). More recent studies of the Caribbean have also focused on gay, lesbian and transsexual experiences in the Caribbean. See Suzanne LaFont, “Very Straight Sex: The Development of Sexual Morés in Jamaica,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2, 3 (2001); David Murray, *Opacity: Gender, Sexuality, Race, and the ‘Problem’ of Identity in Martinique* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002.) For a discussion of masculinity in the Caribbean, see Barry Chevannes, *Learning to Be a Man: Culture, Socialization, and Gender Identity in Five Caribbean Communities* (Barbados: University of the West Indies Press, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Maria Frahm-Arp, *Professional Woman in South African Pentecostal Charismatic Churches* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 202.

doctrines of sexual abstinence and restraint as people look for new, clear boundaries at a time when sexual standards have been disrupted by economic uncertainty.<sup>7</sup>

**Argument:**

In this chapter, I argue that women followers of religious broadcasting often use televangelists' testimonies of sexual trauma and triumph as inspiration for navigating and reclaiming their own lives. Theoretically, I am interested in the significance of such discourses during a period of late capitalism and the influence that they have in promoting agency among black Christian women who are attempting to carve their way both economically and socially in a world to which their existence has often been marginal. Ultimately, I am interested in how black female bodies have become sites of personal agency in the social, political and economic climate of twenty-first century industrialized(ing) nations.

Women find in the Pentecostalist doctrines of the church a way of reclaiming their sense of sexual boundaries. Ironically, the near inability of women to live up to the sexual mores prescribed by the church given the instability and uncertainty of marriage, creates a constant cycle of sexual, and hence, spiritual failure and redemption as women map new paths for themselves. Evangelists from abroad speak directly to these concerns – not disrupting the standard, but offering transparent, “real,” testimony as a way of identifying with the women’s ongoing struggles.

Sitting in Kingston, Jamaica, talking with Valencia, it became evident that Juanita Bynum’s admonition to “call back” one’s body parts had penetrated the hearts and minds of women who live far beyond Dallas, Texas. When I met Valencia she had recently

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Brodwin describes how Haitian migrants in Gaudaloupe join Pentecostal churches as a means of countering prevailing images of Haitians as an “economic drain on society.” Comparing Haiti to Jamaica, he asserts that, “Members of the black working class face deep obstacles in conforming to the English-derived code of respectability; they are denigrated especially for their ‘superstition’ and their ‘immorality.’ In response, Jamaicans join Pentecostal churches, where they credential themselves to perform the marriage rite and they ferociously denounce ‘fornication’ in sermons and everyday talk. Church members thereby generate distinctive modes of collective identity (Austin-Broos 1997:10) through the sanctifying practices of marriage and sexual restraint.” See Paul Brodwin, “Pentecostalism in translation: Religion and the production of community in the Haitian diaspora,” *American Ethnologist* 30, 1 (2003): 85-101.

been elected the new president of the women's ministry at Calvary Pentecostal Church. Every second Friday the women here come together for the service, a mixture of Pentecostal praise and worship along with a word of encouragement from a guest minister. After the message, they share testimonies of deliverance and make petitions for healing and offerings of thanksgiving. For those slain in the spirit, ushers cover their legs with cloth to offer discretion. Taken by the openness of the women to discuss some of their trials, I asked Valencia if we could talk about how the ministry developed. She obliged, explaining that she was compelled to help women because of the enormous amount of pain that she experienced in her own life. The encouragement she received from the ministries of T.D. Jakes and Juanita Bynum was central to her healing.

The call to personal empowerment offered by evangelists like Bynum and Jakes through prayer, fasting, sowing seeds, and ultimately taking control of one's destiny offers those in the audience hope that despite institutional barriers to success their personal circumstances can change. Research on the rise of global Pentecostalism points to how these narratives of personal transformation have effected change in local communities by offering conservative discourses of personal responsibility that advocate pietistic living. Followers, for example, recant lives of womanizing and gambling and eschew penchants for drug and alcohol abuse.<sup>8</sup> Such narratives are generally not about political organizing or structural change, but they offer individuals a sense of efficacy in changing their individual lives.<sup>9</sup>

## **Valencia**

For Valencia, who has followed Bynum and Jakes faithfully, both televangelists' ministries have "enlightened" her life, she explained as we sat in the car talking away from the rumblings inside the church. Although service had ended, teenagers hung around playing on the drums and singing as children wandered around outside. Valencia's short, stout body frame, adorned in stylish summer colors and accented by her upbeat personality, belied the heart wrenching narrative that she would tell. Jakes, she

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<sup>8</sup> See Smilde and Miller.

<sup>9</sup> See Miller and Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism*.

said, didn't allow her to simply throw a "pity party" for herself, but instead insisted that she find her purpose. Given the unique trials she has experienced and the pain that she has witnessed among other women in her small Jamaican community, she felt that Jakes had "opened up a path for women who have been downtrodden." She had never found that in her local church.

T.D. Jakes and Juanita Bynum...have a great affect on my life – in the way I study the Bible, in the way I see myself as a woman – because even being a Christian, there was still hurt, and I never knew how to deal with it. But after watching T.D. Jakes, that really had an impact on my life. ...Juanita Bynum has a tape that says, "No More Sheets." That means, I saw myself in Juanita Bynum.

The calls to personal empowerment through the renunciation of sexual sin, the acknowledgement of sexual vulnerability and the open profession of victory are what move Valencia and other women viewers to see hope in their situations. Curious as to how Valencia saw herself in Juanita Bynum, I inquired. Her response was clear.

Juanita Bynum. Being on the street, being rejected, hurt, you know... I have been through a bad marriage, rejected, growing up in my childhood and never really knowing love... I never knew how to leave my past behind.

Like too many women growing up in poor and underserved communities in Jamaica's urban center, Valencia experienced the terror of unrestricted male aggression. As she narrates, the issues of rape and violence immediately surface. She tells her story matter-of-factly, without emotion and clear as to how television ministries have played a part in her own healing.

My sister was about fourteen, and I was about twenty-eight. We were coming from a party. We decided to walk home. Then, a gunman came out from behind a gate and a column, and he stuck us up. He wanted to take my sister. I said, "No! It is better that you rape me than take my sister!" And he said, "No." I said, "Rape me or do whatever you want to do, but don't touch my sister!" He raped me and left. I reported it to the police, but nothing was done.

I went home but I didn't tell anybody. I could not sleep. My sister kept crying about it. We didn't tell anybody. I bathed, I bathed, I bathed, I bathed. It took a toll on my life. That is about the third time I was raped at gunpoint. This shattered me, and I hated myself. I hated myself. I hated everything about me, and I hated everybody. I thought I was guilty, and I lived with that for years.

The brutality of the encounter was magnified by the shame created by being raped in front of her sister. The type of bargain described was the negotiation point that framed not her first experience of rape, but her third. In a strange way the negotiation with the gunmen over her body signals both a deep and abiding love for her sister as well as the uncanny way in which she had come to devalue herself, trading her already assaulted body for the innocence of her sister's. Trying to come clean of the rapist, she bathed repeatedly all the while erecting a shelter of silence that facilitated the internalization of her pain.

Against the sore reality of Jamaica's out of control system of violence, Valencia found solace in the mediated American based ministry of Juanita Bynum. While their experiences of sex differed, the scars and silences surrounding any discussion of sexuality remained. The strength and triumph Valencia distilled from Bynum's tale of personal struggle and eventual triumph was precisely what Valencia needed in order to move from a place of self-hatred. While the offenders were never caught and brought to justice, she was able to regain control of her own life. Ironically, her first time ever hearing anyone speak publicly about rape was while watching the Oprah Winfrey show, and subsequent to that a television sermon by T.D. Jakes. Since then she has been an avid follower of his ministry. "Jakes, Woman Thou Art Loosed, that helped me," she insisted. "The way he teaches... He gives you something to go on when you think you are nobody." Nevertheless, it is the candid and transparent ministry of Juanita Bynum that truly speaks to her.

... Juanita, there is just something that makes her the top. Many times, you want to emulate somebody, but you never hear their story. But she shares her life story. She doesn't mince words. She doesn't hide anything. This is a woman who tells

you where she is coming from. She tells you. I say, “If she has been there, and the Lord has raised her up from there, then why not me?” When she says, “No more sheets,” it means that for too long, she had been hiding. And, I have lived that kind of life too. I was hiding from my past, because I had been raped, molested, abused, and rejected. Because of all of that, I had a very low self-esteem. These television people, they comfort me.

The idea that Bynum does not “mince words” nor “hide anything” factors into Bynum’s appeal. The sense of comfort Valencia receives in relating to Bynum is also the message that she wants to convey to the women who gather for women’s ministry meetings on Friday evenings at the church. They testify in less candid detail than Bynum, but they nevertheless convey their own stories of struggle and triumph. It is in these testimonies that some women find solace from lives of turmoil while others simply find affirmation for their spiritual journeys as single or married women. Although such sermons do not preach the need to organize against an inefficient criminal justice system or global media culture that celebrates the objectification of women’s bodies, such ministries have challenged the church’s own silence on matters of sexuality.

For women in Jamaica (and the US) who watch Juanita Bynum, Paula White and other women televangelists, their reasons for watching often center around the idea that what the evangelists share is “real.” The ability to sit in one’s living room and consume the personal narrative of an evangelist whose life of struggle resembles one’s own is a powerful drawing tool for women in the viewing audience. Often, and regardless of whether the incidents are identical, the very fact that these women televangelists have experienced pain and are willing to talk openly about it offers a level of comfort to the viewer. Scholars examining the rise of the self help industry and television shows like *Oprah* point to the effect these shows can have on the viewing audience.<sup>10</sup> Sujata Moorti suggests that Oprah’s episodes on rape create a “protofeminist discursive space” where

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<sup>10</sup> Gloria Masciarote, “C’mon Girl: Oprah Winfrey and the Discourse of Feminine Talk,” *Genders* 11 (fall 1991): 81-110; Linda Haag, “Oprah Winfrey: The Construction of Intimacy in the Talk Show,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 26 (spring 1993): 116; Janice Peck, “Talk About Racism: Framing a Popular Discourse of Race on Oprah Winfrey,” *Cultural Critique* 27 (spring 1994): 89-126; Sujata Moorti, “Cathartic Confessions or Emancipatory Texts? Rape Narratives on the Oprah Winfrey Show,” *Social Text* 57 (winter 1998): 83-102.



voice is given to the experiences of women who are victims of abuse. “The act of giving voice to pain,” she suggests, contains “the potential to transform these television programs into cathartic events for the participants.”<sup>11</sup> Simultaneously such moments create an “emancipated public sphere that highlights marginalized women’s voices.”<sup>12</sup> While these viewers are consumers of other people’s pain, those who watch religious broadcasting are invited to join those on the air in seeking communal healing. The end of the sermon is an explicit invitation to join in prayer with the minister for the spiritual and physical transformation of the individual.

**Monica:**

Like Valencia, Monica struggled with the history of economic restraints and sexual trauma in her life. One of the women gathered for the women’s prayer meeting, she offered a story that captured the hearts of all the women assembled. She and I later talked for hours about how she ended up at Calvary Pentecostal. Hers was a circuitous route through drug abuse and trafficking, imprisonment in the US and deportation back to Jamaica. Barely five feet tall, slender, dark skinned, high cheekbones and a stylish haircut, Monica talked with a sense of joy and relief about the transformation that her life has undergone. Interestingly, it was the ministry of televangelists that helped to rescue her while she was serving time in prison.

I was in my dorm one day and my friend Sabrina she helped me to read a scripture... She said to me, “You know God love you, Monica...” That’s the girl who was on death row and she told me about God.

The “dorm” room she described was the cellblock that she had come to call home. Spending most of her time there, depressed because of the situation in which she found herself, Monica thought little of herself or her future. Meeting with Sabrina changed her life. Sabrina challenged her to think once again about the God that she had come to know as a child while periodically attending church. This God had long since departed, once she decided to enter the drug trade to help make ends meet for her two young children.

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<sup>11</sup> Moorti, “Cathartic Confessions or Emancipatory Texts?,” 83.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

But, drug trafficking proved less than helpful in her quest for a better life; it virtually destroyed her along with her hope for the future. She was serving eight years in prison away from her children (and pregnant with her third) because she had agreed to be a “mule” for her boyfriend’s drug operation. All she had to do was get the drugs into Florida. Apprehended, imprisoned and alone, she tried everything she knew to abort the baby. One day after her meeting with Sabrina, she came upon a tape by T.D. Jakes.

I saw this CD with TD Jakes, *Woman Thou Art Loosed*, and I decided to listen to it and I cried, you know, to what I hear and from then I said Lord...it’s all about you. Help me to know you. Help me to know how you feel about me. Even though I’m messed up, even though I am nothing... You know I messed up...Tell me how to build up that confidence within me...

Jake’s message was the response to her prayer. It answered her questions, and offered her the opportunity to begin addressing her own personal struggles with men and sex and poverty. The stress of being in prison, alone and without support, fed her desire to terminate her pregnancy. “I do all sorta things just to lose the child you know. I said I can’t have a child in this.” Because of her refusal to eat, the guards sent her to the hospital twice, pleading with her, ‘You gotta eat!’ But, her spirit was broken. And, she didn’t want her child’s life to mirror her own. When her time came, Hanna was born weighing 7.5lbs, a true miracle, she declares. But, looking back on her life, she connected the dots that brought her to this place.

When my childhood come up I was abused by friends of my mother, I was abused by my cousins... I was sexually abused by him [her mother’s boyfriend]. I wish I pray to God to see that man every day. I don’t know if he’s better or whatever, but at the time I was about 11. It don’t even insert but...it was painful and that man was so abusive... I had to see his penis and every time I think about it, that is what I see. And I wish and I pray to God I wish I could see him. Everything, my mother don’t know. My mother’s in Canada and I said when she come home I will sit her down one day and I will let her know how I was hurt by one of her friends. I was abused by two of my cousin, she didn’t know.

Silence dominated Monica's response. For over thirty years she held quiet about her experience, never letting her mother or anyone else know what had happened. After the death of her father, her mother had to raise nine children on her own. The daily struggle of survival prevented her from truly dealing with her own pain. Her mother's life reflected the struggles of other single parents who had to rely on others in the raising of their children. Monica never blamed her mother; she only wishes that she had said something sooner. Now, listening to Jake's she has found her voice.

Yeah, at the time we have recall, so at recall we have to be in our bed but I make sure to open the door and then I turn on the TV to that station and I always listen to him. Yeah I always listen to him. I remember when I would listen to him he would say loose from your infirmity loose from your pain loose from your anger, loose from this loose from that, and I was listening and I cried, I listened to that cassette and I went to Longwood the next day and I cried and I cried unto God, I know you're talking to me through this cassette.

Like other women in Valencia's ministry, Monica has found the confidence to stand up and make known her story. She listens to Jakes and finds in his ministry the confidence to address the pain of her past. She testifies with other women at Valencia's church to God's deliverance during women's ministry nights. Beyond reaching people in the comfort of their homes, Jakes' ministry has focused on getting his messages into prisons around the country.

### ***Keeping it "Real": Women's Responses***

The creation of an authentic self, one not masked by social and religious expectations of perfection, is what attracts women to someone like Juanita Bynum. Even their attraction to evangelist Paula White is based upon the idea that she speaks the truth. She offers a presentation of self in which the performance of authenticity is foregrounded. Speaking openly about her experiences of rape and abuse, White like Bynum, brings to light the hidden experiences of church women in first person narrative.

The call of women for ministers to present what is “real” is the single greatest concern that women watching religious broadcasting conveyed. Often working class and Pentecostal, the lives of the women I spoke with reflected an array of personal challenges through marriage, divorce, abuse and sexual disappointment. Interestingly, the issue that spoke most to them regarding televangelists was their focus on what’s “real.” Their transparent testimonies of sexual indulgence or abuse served as one of their strongest appeals.

Such televangelists play an important role in affirming the “realness” of women’s situations – ones laced with contradictions, disappointments, hopes dashed and yet hopes reborn. Amidst a cacophony of politicians, would be politicians, leaders, preachers, experts and radio news casters constantly mapping what should be, ought to be or will be in Jamaica, female televangelists in women’s eyes state simply what is. Often lamenting the church’s unwillingness to discuss such issues as sexual abuse, sexual indulgence and even sexual longing, women celebrated Bynum’s openness.

Women found comfort, I discovered, not in the deconstruction of ideals of purity and sanctification, but in their disruption. Women are not looking for the ideals to change, but rather for the acknowledgement that the standards are virtually impossible to uphold in the social and economic climate of the twenty-first century. To be “real” is to acknowledge this dissonance. Their sexuality is so interlaced with their spirituality that undoing one is tantamount to undoing the other, even though the ideals of sexual purity remain elusive and almost exclusively related to the disciplining of female bodies.

Several women with whom I spoke indicated that it was the “realness” of the messages of female televangelists that drew their attention. For Allison, a middle-aged divorcee who attends a Pentecostal church and lives at home with her parents in order to help make ends meet, the most important aspect of watching Bynum and White is that they have “real life” issues. Without hesitation she named Paula White, Juanita Bynum and T.D. Jakes as the televangelists that she faithfully watches.

They all speak to issues, real life issues [–] hurting, pain, destruction, disappointment [–] all of them speak to that and all of them are very real. If one thing that would attract me to a minister is your candidness, your transparency, because as far as I’m concerned...if you ain’t gone through nothin’ you really

can't help me... So I gravitate towards persons who have been through something...

Other women also indicated without hesitation that it was the transparency of televangelists that drew them. Between trying to manage her bustling household, Felicia listens to the messages of Juanita Bynum and Paula White because "...they speak to the real issue, the *real*. Hey, we're facing these things, let's get real." For Felicia these issues were illustrated best in the message of Bynum. "One of the things I can remember from one of Juanita Bynum's messages was, the 'No More Sheets' one, ...hey, we...have struggles, we have everyday sexual struggles, mind struggles... You know that sort of thing, so it's the real issues, the real human issues that we face." While she didn't expand on her own personal struggle she was clear that the significance of Bynum, along with White and others, is the extent to which they share that which is "real."

Celeste described it differently, for her instead of using the term "real," she suggested that Bynum's ministry focuses on "cleaning." "I recognize that her ministry is what I call, I personally call it a cleaning ministry; she's called to clean the Body of Christ. That is my take on her." For Celeste the different ministries serve different purposes in the body of Christ.

So, you find that her [Bynum's] ministry is about what's going on in churches, so she come to tell you, "Live right!" So, that's her ministry. Paula has a ministry where she's an encourager... That's her ministry to encourage you that a better day is coming. She always, she uses her life a lot. I admire that; she's not afraid to tell you where she's been, to bring out, "Look at me, now God can do the same for you," so that's her ministry.

Hearing another's testimony is a way of identifying eventual triumph. Married and in ministry herself, Sharon simply confirmed that she watches the ministry of Jakes and Bynum because they are practical. "I love how they are practical, very practical about the Word... They use illustrations... Sometimes you might be going through some struggles or, you know, have some concerns and you're in need for change and that came across as the way home."

Monica appreciated the fact that Bynum is someone who actually struggled almost to the point of death, yet preaches now with great power and authority. For her

Bynum is “a very powerful woman of God and she’s coming from very far, she could have died, lost her mind, God gave her back her mind...” Caroline too appreciates the personal narratives of televangelists. It is for her the realness, and the willingness to perform normalcy even while in ministry, that leaves for her such a lasting impression.

What I believe in with Joyce and Paula and Juanita, they speak of their experiences. You can identify with them and the Word. I think Joyce is a real, real person. She doesn’t cover it. She doesn’t say, “Because I’m a pastor, I can’t get mad,” or, “Because I’m a pastor, I don’t like that.” I guess she captures a lot of people in Jamaica... She is real. She speaks about what you are experiencing. Consistently women point to the idea that televangelists like Bynum speak “about what you are experiencing.” In other words, they are “real” and are unafraid to use their own life stories as a means of communicating a message. Their willingness to bare all gives those in the viewing audience someone with whom they can identify and strive to emulate. They can connect.

Anthropologist John Jackson argues that the quest for “realness” in analyzing something as precarious as race is mapped through the tension between authenticity and sincerity. Sincerity, he suggests implies “social interlocutors who presume one another’s humanity, interiority, and subjectivity.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed in the prostration of so many of their own faults, shortcomings, and abuses, women televangelists offer to their audiences a candid sense of their interior lives. The quest for “realness” here is different than the quest for authenticity, as Jackson might suggest. “Authenticity presupposes a relation between subjects and objects;’ whereas, “sincerity presumes a liaison *between subjects...*”<sup>14</sup> Measuring authenticity, as described in the previous chapter, is akin to products, something that can be disrupted by market structures pulling female televangelists towards disclosing all as a means of selling more products and earning greater market share. Sincerity as a marker of being real, conversely, allows the viewer to presume from the speaker a high level of emotional tie and conviction. As Jackson tries to “disentangle sincerity from authenticity’s sticky webs,” he argues that racialized discourses of authenticity should be reframed under a discursive examination of

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<sup>13</sup> John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Jackson, *Real Black*, 14-15.

“sincerity” because quests for racialized authenticity are inherently flawed by the very fact of the construction of race.<sup>15</sup> In other words, people can be “sincere” about their racialized commitments, but identifying “authentic” racial identities is cumbersome, inaccurate, fluid and nearly impossible. Given the audience’s quest for “realness” among televangelists, one wonders whether the quest for authenticity in religious broadcasting too is a hollow pursuit given the coupling of religion with the market and media, a form of communication based largely upon image and performance. Sincerity, instead, looks towards intention and motivation, I dare say initial intention/motivation, linked to the subject/evangelist herself and her relationship with her audience, not her relationship with the market, the distributors, the video editors or even the evangelists’ debts and expenses. In identifying the “realness” of televangelists, audiences often unconsciously or voluntarily look past the other objects that produce the medium in order to establish connection with the speaker herself. It is this sense of the “real,” the sincere, that matters most in their transformation.

### **Moving Towards Agency**

Messages by female televangelists and those, like Jakes, speaking specifically to women in the church often disrupt the silences that have permeated discussions of sexuality. Historically seen as operating under the rubrics of respectability and sanctification, religious narratives around sexuality found on religious broadcasting explode such expectations by speaking in “real,” transparent terms about the experiences and consequences of sex. Too often relegated to positions of silence and invisibility within male dominated church narratives, women find in the neo-Pentecostal styled messages of televangelists a space to name their pain and address it.

While much of the rhetoric shies away from engagement in the political and social amelioration of these problems, the work of personal salvation and restoration proffered by religious broadcasters has ironically undergirded the personal triumphs of women seeking to overcome painful periods in their pasts.<sup>16</sup> Counseling women through

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>16</sup> On this front, historian Scott Billingsley discusses the role of pioneering women religious broadcasters like Aimee Semple McPherson and Kathryn Kuhlman; prominent women who followed in their wake like Paula White, Joyce Meyer and Juanita Bynum; and other less widely known but still influential figures like

abuse and helping them navigate sexual relationships, these broadcasts have in surprising ways helped women, like Valencia and Monica, to think of themselves as agentic subjects in a social context that often works against their own articulations of self. The influence of such conservative forms of religion has been the subject of a growing body of literature in religious studies, sociology and anthropology.<sup>17</sup> These texts seek to examine the notion of “agency” given the growing influence of conservative religion on individual lives.

Saba Mahmood’s engaging work on the lives of Muslim women in Egypt, for example, suggests that some of the work of religious ritual belies conventional understandings of public, political engagement.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, progressive social scientists have for too long wed notions of agency with progressive politics, Mahmood continues. For her, in order to truly understand how pious women might experience their own agency one must decouple these notions and read them within their own cultural and historical contexts.<sup>19</sup> In this way we might read agency in the church as the very presence of personal testimonies of sexual indulgence and redemption or sexual abuse and recovery in light of the churches’ long held silences on these issues.

...if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes “change” and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in

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Marilyn Hickey, Vicki Jamison-Peterson and Anne Gimenez. Billingsley argues that while these women appealed to traditional discourses of submission, they nonetheless “encouraged a receptive audience of conservative Christian women to take public leadership roles in their churches. They used the same message and ministry-building techniques that their male counterparts used, and by recounting their own personal hardships they identified with a broad segment of the American population... They opened doors that, to a large extent, had previously been closed to women, and they forced many conservative Christians to rethink their views about gender roles in the church and society.” See Scott Billingsley, *It’s a New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2008), 96-97.

<sup>17</sup> R. Marie Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Brenda Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Christel Manning, *God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic, Evangelical Protestant and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple with Feminism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Marla Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Carolyn Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity. Viewed in this way, what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view may actually be a form of agency—but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.<sup>20</sup>

Such intervention in the scholarship on agency and women's lives is invaluable for interpreting how media forms such as religious broadcasting influence Christian women's religious worlds. The very individualist currents that undergird neo-Pentecostal movements of the twenty-first century are the impulses that give women the freedom to focus on their own healing, by naming their experience, testifying about it to others and confronting the silence that would rob them of their dignity in a male-centered society. As more and more communities adopt religious ideologies which are historically connected to politically and socially conservative ways of making sense of Christian theology, it becomes increasingly important to understand how women are employing these messages.

### **Conclusion:**

Even as their messages reverberate around the world to women in the Caribbean, South Africa, West Africa, Europe, Latin America and Australia, the messages American based televangelists carry with them as much influence as when they are spoken in the United States. Juanita Bynum's message has been appropriated as much by those outside of the US as those on the inside. Like women in the Caribbean with whom I spoke, women in the US have similarly appropriated the narratives of televangelists like Bynum and Jakes as a way of claiming their voice and naming their personal struggles.<sup>21</sup> What is

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> Marla Frederick. "'But It's Bible': African American Women and Televangelism" in *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, eds. R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Savage (John Hopkins University Press, 2006).

interesting in the telling of the narrative of women from Jamaica is how neither the message nor its effect changes much as it traverses across continents. Women experiencing economic shifts in the US, Jamaica and South Africa have in various ways appropriated the messages of televangelists and other conservative religious leaders as a resource for articulating past hurts, finding purpose in their lives and crafting out a better future for themselves and their children. These transformations are rarely about a change in political and economic structures. Rather, women latch onto these narratives of realness and sincerity in order to help construct their personal models of transformation.

The women with whom I worked placed high value on the sincerity of the speakers. The ability to identify hurt for hurt, pain for pain, is for many viewers the epitome of what it means to be “real.” In this sense “real” is more often than not equated with struggle; while, the absence of struggle is taken for superficiality. Interestingly, this same dynamic emerges among rap music loyalists who identify “real” with a life of drugs, women and violence in the streets. For a more sanitized version of rap to exist is for some a sign that the music, the product, has lost its “authenticity.”

As I spoke to a gathering of high school students in Jamaica upon the invitation of their teacher, the test of “realness” came in my own communication with the students. A Catholic, all girls school, the teacher wanted me to inspire the students with a narrative about my own journey to the professorate, the things I’ve learned along the way. Noting the heavy influence of American cable television in Jamaica, I waxed presumably eloquent, warning them to be leery of many of the messages coming from the US. Fast money, fast life, easy sex – I encouraged them to focus on their school work and when the time was right, preferably after they are married, to engage in sexual activity. I pointed to alarming statistics and suggested that one of their greatest treasures is their body. I recall meandering through the discussion, as if one walking on eggshells. I knew my personal convictions; I knew the convictions of the pastor’s wife and teacher who invited me and I presumed the varied perspectives of my audience. Nevertheless, I pressed on with my remarks. At the end of the time, hands went up. One asked about my educational background, another my experience in Jamaica thus far, while another quite

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piercingly remarked, “Why do adults ask us to wait until marriage to have sex when they didn’t?!”

“Ummmmmmmm.” Great question. I paused, thought and suggested the following. “Maybe it’s because we’re trying to protect you from some of the pitfalls we’ve experienced.” I was indicted. I had not bared open my soul; not told of sin indulged; guilty prayers offered; wrenching tears cried; abandoning self-indulgent lovers. I had only lectured them on what not to do, why not to do it and the statistical consequences of ill conceived actions. I had told them of their possibility and their potential, how they needed to invest in themselves. I had not “testified” to their liking, though, or more importantly to their point of transformation. I failed as an evangelist. But, the questions continued. One student indicated that the issue was not necessarily with giving up one’s virginity with boys, but in engaging in sexual liaisons with other girls on campus. We were entering new territory. Melinda, the daughter of the pastor of another local church, spoke of her commitment to remain sexually pure until marriage—a theme more up the alley of my remarks. The class ended, a hodgepodge of responses, experiences and thoughts. I wondered about how the conversation went over.

Moments passed as I stood talking with Melinda and her friends about why they were committing to wait until marriage to have sex. They were individually passionate and convinced of their decisions. They sounded like proper Catholic school girls. One student sat, however, in the back of the class, her head on the table the entire time. She, I noticed, had not really been involved during the full duration of the course. Eventually she sat up. “My name is Denise. My parents have been married 22 years. I have two other siblings and I’m the youngest.” She paused for a moment. “My father has ten other children outside of the marriage.” I stood silent unsure of what she was communicating. Then, “While married to your mother?” I asked. “Yes,” she replied matter-of-factly. “And, your mother knows?” I clumsily asked unsure of where this conversation was going or why she chose to reveal such details to the small gathering left standing. Maybe it was because they spoke so hope-filled about marriage. “Yes, she knows.” “Why does she stay?” I inquired further – naively, hesitantly, foolishly. “I don’t know,” she replied and then placed her head back on the desk. She didn’t really want to talk anymore. She just wanted us to know that marriage was not her utopia. It

had not been for her mother and it seemed doubtful that she bought into the idea that it would be hers.

Sexual relations are forever changed and changing. Women navigate them as best they know how. Urbanization has influenced us all – regardless of income levels or gender. We live in fluid economic times, which lead to fluid sexual experiences – whether we are the longing lovers, the ones living the “sweet heart lives,” the faithful wives, the ones managing mistresses, the ones navigating the landscape of sexual tourism or the ones absolved of longing all together. Televangelists it seems, bare their souls, helping people to navigate these new terrains by narrating their own landmine experiences. Women I talked to appreciate this. They want someone who names the standard and yet identifies with them and traverses alongside them as they find their way through these shifting realities of sex.