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Feminism and The Black Church: A Qualitative Analysis Of Feminism Among Black Women In A Southern Baptist Church

Brianne Alexandra Painia

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, bpaini2@lsu.edu

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FEMINISM AND THE BLACK CHURCH: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF FEMINISM AMONG BLACK WOMEN IN A SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCH

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Brianne Alexandra Painia
B.S.B.A., The University of Southern Mississippi, 2012
M.A., The George Washington University, 2014
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This work is dedicated to black women and men, all over the world, whose soul looks back and wonders how they got over.

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Abstract

Black women's religious faith has been found to be integral to their survival (Harris-Perry 2011) in a world that many times chooses to marginalize them due to a host of factors, including their race, gender, and expressions of sexuality (Collins 1996; Morgan 2000) meaning that for black women religion is more than a simple denominational label (such as Lutheran, Catholic, or Baptist). Black women's involvement in the Black Church has been covered from a variety of angles with researchers noting the importance of African American women to the success of many black churches (Evans 2001), the benefits such faith practice has on their self-esteem (Bauer et al. 2017), and the avenues for leadership and advancement such involvement provides (Carpenter 1989). Though much of the sexism that pervades the black church (Best 2006) has been critiqued and challenged by a variety of feminist and religious scholars, there still stands a gap in the literature about black religious women's agency in engaging specific ideologies related to their faith, their gender, or their race.

In this dissertation, I identify three distinct but interrelated aspects/processes of black religious women's interaction with feminism: signification, identification, and reconciliation. Interviews with 30 women within one church, coupled with several hours of ethnographic field notes, provided insight into black religious women's signification of the helpmate identity, varying identification as feminist, and reconciliation of a religious feminist identity. These women's truth about their hunger for their faith, their love for their partners and families, and their demand for self-respect within their homes and places of worship provided a glimpse into what intersectional living looks like when one's race, gender, and religion bears upon her sociopolitical and personal politic.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Black women's religious faith has been found to be integral to their survival (Harris-Perry 2011) in a world that many times chooses to marginalize them due to a host of factors, including their race, gender, and expressions of sexuality (Collins 1996; Morgan 2000) meaning that for black women religion is more than a simple denominational label (such as Lutheran, Catholic, or Baptist). Professor Richard A. Davis supports a similar notion when defining black religion as "ultimately a collective search for power within a system that denies access to it" (1997: 110); and religious scholar Charles H. Long defines religion as "Orientation—that is how one comes to grips with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world….more than a structure of thought; it is experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms" (1986:7). Legal scholar Sheryl Conrad Cozart defines spirituality, a term she uses interchangeably with 'religion', as "inner submission to my God consciousness" (2010:257). For the purpose of this dissertation, religion is viewed as a location in which black women exist in order to deeply and meaningfully make sense of the world around them (Wiggins 2016)—no matter how oppressive that world may be.

With many of the largest black women organizational and empowerment efforts being rooted in some aspect of black religious life (service organizing, community building, social justice movement building) (Du Bois 1903), it is necessary to flesh out more of the relationship between black religious women's faith and their feminism since black women, as a collective, have such a time-honored history with both. This dissertation makes no attempt to quantify black women's religiosity or levels of religious involvement but operates under religious scholar Daphne Wiggins' definition of religiosity as "an individual's beliefs and behaviors in relation to/on behalf of the supernatural, as well as the consequences of these aspects upon that

individual" (2016:3) with the belief system being Southern Baptist Christianity. Though I do not go in depth in the following chapters about the nature of black women's connection to the supernatural, I do treat religion as a part of an identity that bears upon black religious women's perception of the world.

Using the Pew Research Center's measures of religious commitment—weekly attendance at a worship service, frequency of prayer, and belief that religion is 'very important—African Americans, as a group, overwhelmingly outnumber all other ethnic and racial groups in religious involvement and practice. With many of the first black-run Protestant churches starting on plantations, Christianity has long been a part of African American communities (Wortham 2009; Savage 2000), culture (Smith 1994; Anderson 1995), and activism (Pinn 2003; Weisenfeld 1997). The black church is one of the first institutions that African Americans owned and controlled from its inception (Barnes 2010). With 78% of African Americans identifying as Protestant and 15% of the group claiming an evangelical denominational, such as Southern Baptist, it is clear that the black Protestant church matters to black Americans in the United States, especially those in the regional South where the majority (60%) of black religious persons and historically black Protestant churches reside.

Amongst African Americans, black women have been found to be the most involved in the black Protestant church, with roughly 60% of the group reporting religious service attendance of at least once a week, and to have the strongest religious commitment with 84% of African American women stating that religion is important to them (Sahgal and Smith 2009). A Kaiser Family Foundation poll found that 96% of the black women in their sample believed religion or faith was important in helping them through tough times, compared to 83% of all respondents believing the same thing (Kaiser Family Foundation).

Black women's commitment to the black church has not saved the group from experiencing a multitude of intersecting oppressions within their places of worship. Run many times by black men (Baer 1993)—who represent the numerical minority, black churches can serve as a place where black religious women's race and gender can be put in tension. Many Protestant black churches promote a patriarchal ideology of male headship for both the church and the home (Barnes 2006), which requires black women to be loyal to the men in their lives at the potential cost of their own livelihoods. With a promotion of the male as the head of the church and the home, black churches subjugate women to a secondary role despite their greater numbers and overall involvement in their religious spaces. This demand for black women to take a back seat to the men of their lives potentially causes great conflict for a group of women who are many times perceived to be ceaselessly strong (Abrams et al. 2014), resilient (Woods-Giscombé 2010), and supportive of gender egalitarianism in romantic partnerships (Brooks 2017).

Before moving further it is necessary to address the specific meaning of the word patriarchy in the terms of this text. The term patriarchy has many times been used to describe the uplifting of white men at the expense of white women. Within black feminist analysis, it refers to the oppression of black women in an effort to support the sexist uplift of both black and white men, and to ensure the racist supremacy of white men above women of all races and nonwhite men (Harris-Perry 2011). Due to the ambiguity of the term when describing inter-racial groups, some scholars have called for acknowledgement of "black patriarchy" or another term for the ways in which black men and women uphold male supremacy. Since many feminist and black feminist scholars have agreed upon usage of the term patriarchy to describe both the racist and sexist ways in which black women are silenced and neglected within their places of worship and

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work, the broad term "patriarchy" will be used to refer specifically to the ways in which black men and women engage the helpmate role within a predominantly black space. In this project, I will establish the helpmate as a construction of white supremacy that is enforced in a unique way at predominantly black space. Though I argue that the ways in which the role is enforced at Believer's Baptist is specifically raced, the role is still initially rooted in white supremacist gender hegemony making patriarchy a sufficient term to describe the gender hegemonic role of the helpmate.

Outside of the conflicts between gendered calls of faith and socially constructed standards of black womanhood, this positioning of black women in many Protestant religious spaces also highlights the invisibility of these women in their churches. Although most black churches welcome and promote involvement on the part of their female congregants, opportunities for advancement and positions of major leadership[1] are many times restricted to men only. Even when black women are ordained and given ministerial titles, they still experience sexism at the hands of those around them (Mahon 2015). This creates another conundrum for black women whose labor is many times commodified in the church as an act of service or ministry work (Weisenfeld 1997), yet their access to paid positions and those of higher institutional power is limited.

Black women's involvement in the church has been covered from a variety of angles with researchers noting the importance of African American women to the success of many black churches (Evans 2001), the benefits such faith practice has on their self-esteem (Bauer et al. 2017), and the avenues for leadership and advancement such involvement provides (Carpenter 1989). Though much of the sexism that pervades the black church (Best 2006) has been critiqued

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[1] Major leadership refers to roles that grant one the access to preach within this space

and challenged by a variety of feminist and religious scholars, there still stands a gap in the literature about black religious women's agency in engaging specific ideologies related to their faith, their gender, or their race.

Black female academics and activists have considered black feminism the brand of feminism that addresses the "particular and legitimate issues that affect our lives as Black women" (Lorde 1984:60). Black feminism is intentionally geared to acknowledge the feminist practice(s) of everyday black women and use such practice(s) as a means of empowerment and activism toward the goal of collective black women's freedom (Collins 2000). The topic of black feminism and religion is still vastly understudied with the exception of a few scholars who explicitly identify as black feminist and study black religion (Lomax 2016; Coleman 2006).

Black feminists have "trod lightly on religion and spirituality" (Lomax 2016) and it is in this lack of critical engagement with black women's religious and spiritual practice (Stewart 2002) that this project enters. Dr. Lomax notes the difference between womanist religious work and black feminist religious work is that womanist thought seeks to "offer faith claims or religious statements of truth" (2016:31) regarding their work whereas black feminist religious thought works to provide an "iconoclastic framework for reading the operation of race, sex, gender, religion and culture" (31). This means that the major distinguishing feature between womanism and black feminism is the former seeks to produce religious and theological insights about women and religion while the latter seeks to create work that can speak to black women's experiences inside, and outside, of the church or religious affiliations.

Womanist[2] and black feminist[3] scholarship has noted the many ways black women's faith and faith practices influence a host of factors, such as their sense of self (Cannon 1988), their resiliency against oppression (Brice 2011), and their ideas about their roles as mothers (Coleman 2006), yet less attention has been paid to the way black women's faith influences their attitudes about feminism—a movement geared towards the equality of all genders (White 2006). Prior literature focuses on the relationship between black women and either a womanist or a black feminist practice, but less focuses on black women's relationship to the label without the racial (in the case of black feminism) and spiritual (in the case of womanist) qualifiers. Learning more about black religious women's relationship with feminism tells us about the ways race, gender, and religion impact ideas about the ideology.

Black women have long practiced, and some argue innovated, feminist activism as displayed by Sojourner Truth's famous "Ain't I A Woman" address (White 1999) at the Akron Women's Convention—where she advocated for the inclusion and enfranchisement of black women by her white counterparts—or Shirley Chisholm's historic run as the first black female candidate for President in 1972. Despite the legacy of feminist contributions and participation, studies on feminist identification and attitudes on feminism have been remiss of meaningful samples of black women and religious respondents. It is in this gap that this dissertation stands. In order to learn more about black religious women's attitudes about and engagement with feminism, I studied women at one black, Southern Baptist church—Believer's Baptist—as a case

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[2] Black female theologians and scholars rose to provide an understanding of God that advocates for the inclusion of black women and their voices within black religious traditions (Grant 1989; Cannon 1996; Douglas 1999).

[3] Black feminism is intentionally geared to acknowledge the feminist practice(s) of everyday black women and use such practice(s) as a means of empowerment and activism toward the goal of collective black women's freedom (Collins 2000).

study. Throughout this dissertation the term 'Southern Baptist' refers specifically to the practices and positions of the cooperating churches of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Site and Sample

The Site

Believer's Baptist (BB)[4] is a 5000-member church located in a city in southeastern Louisiana. Believer's Baptist is a predominantly black church within the Southern Baptist Convention's (SBC)[5] network of socially conservative Baptist churches located in the regional south of the United States. Before describing BB in depth, it is necessary to briefly describe the Convention and address the Believer's Baptist's connection and obligation to the Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention is a predominantly white network of churches that have "banded together to make an impact for God's Kingdom" (sbc.net). Of the Convention's 47,272 cooperating churches, 39,094 of them are categorized as "Anglo" or white and 3,228 of them are African American with the remaining 4,950 churches being composed of majority non-Anglo or African American ethnic and racial populations. Though initially supportive of racist societal norms such as slavery and segregation (Green 2015), the SBC has made efforts to reconcile their contemporary ethnic and racial diverse population with their (at best) benevolently racist past. Within the past three years the Convention has made two published resolutions addressing racism. The first being its resolution "On Racial Reconciliation" (published in 2015) in which it is resolved that coordinating churches are urged to "demonstrate their heart for racial reconciliation" by intentionally increasing racial and ethnic

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[4] The name of the location and the names of all participants in this study have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality of participants.

[5] On sbc.net, the Southern Baptist Convention is also stylized as "the Convention" when it is not abbreviated as SBC. Accordingly, "the Convention" refers to The Southern Baptist Convention in this dissertation as a reflection of its stylization on the organization's website.

diversity in their "church staff roles, leadership positions, and church membership" (sbc.net "On

Racial Reconciliation"). The second resolution "On the Anti-Gospel of Alt-Right White

Supremacy," published in 2017, distances the Convention and its cooperating churches from

"every form of racism, including alt-right[6] white supremacy" while recommitting to its earlier

resolves to the promotion of ethnic and racial diversity within its member churches. Though the

Convention's resolutions may intend to acknowledge the diversity of its membership, its sole

governance of its network of diverse churches may not prove adaptable to the specific ethnic or

racial makeup of each church. Despite the Convention's commitment to racial and ethnic

diversity, Believer's Baptist is a black church governed by the Constitution and resolutions of a

white network of Baptist churches. Much scholarship (Sobre-Denton 2012; Johnson 2015) has

highlighted the ways in which gender and race impact one's engagement with an idea, ideology,

or statute (Parent, DeBlaere, and Moradi 2013) therefore it is reasonable to believe that the

Convention's stances on topics such as racism or sexism—which were constructed by white men

and women—may not always prove useful or relevant to churches, such as BB, whose racial

makeup does not mirror that of the Convention's governing body.

Believer's Baptist's membership in the Southern Baptist Convention represents an

agreement to abide by and enforce the parent organization's constitutional by-laws. All churches

partnered with the SBC are deemed "cooperating church" which is defined by the Convention as:

> A cooperating church is a church that freely and gladly identifies itself as a Southern
> Baptist church, affirming its willing cooperation with the Convention's purpose,
> missions, and ministries and providing regular financial support for the Convention's
> work as part of the church's adopted budget.

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[6] The Southern Poverty Law Center defines the 'alt-right as "a set of far-right ideologies, groups
and individuals who core belief is that 'white identity' is under attack by multicultural forces
using 'political correctness' and 'social justice' to undermine white people and 'their'
civilization (splcenter.org)

Believer's Baptist is considered a "cooperating church" of The Convention meaning that it agrees to the parent organization's Constitution. Though The Convention's Constitution emphasizes that it (The Convention) "does not claim and will never attempt to exercise any authority over any other Baptist body, whether church [church autonomy], auxiliary organizations, associations, or convention" (sbc.net, "Welcome to the Southern Baptist Convention") there is the potential loss of financial backing of the parent organization if cooperating churches' practices do not align with statements and resolutions of The Southern Baptist Convention. This means that Believer's Baptist could lose a significant amount of financial support from the Convention if they were to break away from the practices and expectations of the parent organization.

The Southern Baptist Convention Statement that proves most relevant to this dissertation is its position statement on "Women in Ministry" because it reflects the literal position of many women at Believer's Baptist, regardless of whether they are pursuing a minister position. Though the Convention's statements are not documented in their Constitution, they do "reflect the actions of the Convention and its entities" (sbc.net, "Position Statements") meaning that they serve as indicator for the commonly held practices and expectations of both the SBC and its coordinating churches. The statement reads as follows:

> Women participate equally with men in the priesthood of all believers. Their role is crucial, their wisdom, grace and commitment exemplary. Women are an integral part of our Southern Baptist boards, faculties, mission teams, writer pools, and professional staffs. We affirm and celebrate their Great Commission impact.
> While Scripture teaches that a woman's role is not identical to that of men in every respect, and that pastoral leadership is assigned to men, it also teaches that women are equal in value to men (sbc.net)

In line with The Convention's position statement on women in ministry, women at Believer's Baptist are considered "equal in value to men" but they cannot partake in pastoral leadership. It

is also important to note that women's contributions to the SBC, as "an integral part" of the Convention's boards, faculties, and various teams, are not defined in terms of leadership or governance. Women, according to the Convention's position, are valuable workers to their respective churches but are not expected to obtain positions of leadership within the ministries they serve. The Convention explicitly states pastoral leadership as exclusive to men due to "a woman's role [not being] identical to that of men in every respect" which reflects a belief that men and women are inherently difference and destined for separate gender-specific tasks within their churches. Believer's Baptist positon as a cooperating church of the Southern Baptist Convention reflects an agreement to The Convention's Constitution, bylaws, and positons. Throughout this dissertation the term 'Southern Baptist' refers specifically to the practices and positions of the cooperating churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. Now that the connection between the Southern Baptist Convention and Believer's Baptist (BB) has been briefly covered, I will discuss more about the history and contemporary practices of the site.

The church was founded in the 1940's as an all-white, Southern Baptist-affiliated institution in the predominantly white 'Central Canal' neighborhood. As the 70's ushered in an era of black influx to Central Canal, white residents left the area en masse in a classic show of "white flight[7]" (Believer's Baptist Church Website). Patterns of white out-migration of neighborhoods generally leaves the areas they have deserted with a dearth of resources and large disinvestment (Crowder and South 2008; Reber 2004)—Central Canal was no different. As the population of BB dwindled to a low of 50, the nearly abandoned church was converted into a

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[7] White flight describes the historical trend where "aversion to living in racially-integrate settings leads Whites to vacate neighborhoods with large or growing minority populations, with such an exodus bolstering residential segregation by race" (Crowder and South 2008: 794).

mission (Faith Baptist Church). Encyclopedia Britannica defines a mission in Christianity as "an organized effort for the propagation of the Christian Faith" (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica 1998). In the context of my field site, once the church's white membership fled, the remaining members chose to donate the campus to the Baptist Association of the city. The church was used as a facility for another established church to conduct various activities and outreach in an effort to further spread their message of Christian. Believer's Baptist was being used as a domestic mission as opposed to the standard international missions with the goal of converting non-American, non-Christians to Christianity.

The current pastor of Believer's Baptist, Barney Jones, was elected as lead pastor of the church in 1986 the population of the church continued to grow over the next 19 years. Prior to Hurricane Katrina submerging the sanctuary under 10 feet of water, Believer's Baptist touted a congregation of over 7,000 members attending three Sunday morning services. The accomplishments, or "blessings…[by] the hand and the grace of God," (BB Church Website) of the church under the leadership of Pastor Jones is no small feat for any Christian congregation, let alone a predominantly black one. Under 30 years of Pastor Jones' leadership, the institution added a 2,000-seat sanctuary to its campus, grew its population by 140%, expanded its campuses to multiple satellite locations, and transitioned from being a mission to an independent church (BB Church Website).

Due to a campaign led by the head pastor of the church, Reverend Barney Jones, to increase male participation within BB, the church contains a higher than average amount of men—a fact which Jones and many other members who have belonged to the church for decades are very proud of as displayed by the celebration of an all men's choir and a thriving men's

exclusive ministry. With such an emphasis on male presence within the church it is almost possible to neglect the large participation and labor by the women in the space.

Composing most ministries which are not gender exclusive (i.e. Men's Chorus, Deacon's Ministry, etc.), black women are highly active in this church despite their inability to become a minister or pastor. Leadership as ministry heads[8] and Sunday school teachers is regularly positioned as evidence to the inclusivity and valuing of women at Believer's Baptist. Believer's Baptist is the subject of this case study because its racial and gender makeup allows for the study of the social position of black women within a long-standing, black religious denomination which has a historical tradition of promoting the patriarchal ideology of the male as the sole leader of the home and the church (Harris-Perry 2011). The purpose of studying Believer's Baptist and the women who attend is not to generalize findings to all black women in Southern Baptist churches but to show the ways feminist practice can be present and empowering to some black religious women in spite of their membership at a church where the male as the head of household ideology rings true (sbc.net).

The Study

The data for this study was collected via in-depth interviews with 30 participants and two years (over 60 hours) of ethnographic participant observation at Believer's Baptist (BB) church. All interviews were conducted between February 2015 and September 2017 while all fieldnotes were collected between September 2015 and October 2017. Observational data was collected at Believer's Baptist during Sunday morning service at 7:30 AM, during Sunday school that followed morning service, and during community service events. Observational data was also collected at other churches that shared similar denomination or ideologies as Believer's Baptist

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[8] Also known as ministry directors or leaders

as a means of comparison for findings at BB (Charmaz 2014). I obtained access to the site through my longtime membership at the church throughout her childhood and young adult years. My intent in this project was to use my "power as [a] writer" (Becker and Aiello 2013) to expand the stories of women who shared the same racial, gender, and religious makeup as myself. All interviews were requested in person, or via social media, and then conducted via a follow-up meeting in person at a location of the respondent's choosing or over the phone. Prior to the beginning of each interview, respondents signed a consent form. If the interview was conducted via phone, verbal consent was given after I read the consent form to participants.

I constructed the initial interview guide in February 2015. The interview guide was revised as major themes or "sensitizing concepts" (Bowen 2006:2) emerged. Sensitizing concepts are considered to be the starting point for most grounded theory analysis as they "provide starting points for building analysis, not ending points for evading it." (Charmaz as cited in Bowen 2006: 3). The sensitizing concepts of "the helpmate," "feminist identification," and "black feminist religious practice" served as the starting points for the analysis of each respective chapter and data was collected until a point of theoretical saturation was reached. At the start of this research, "feminist identification" was the sole sensitizing concept due to my interest in feminist self-identification amongst black women in a Christian religious space.

The concept of "black feminist religious practice" became relevant in the initial revision of the interview guide due to my interest in black women's engagement of both their religious beliefs (specifically Southern Baptist Christian) and feminism. The "helpmate" was the last and most organic sensitizing concept as it was not until one respondent Ida (Interview #6) proclaimed herself as her husband's helpmate that the concept became pertinent to my dissertation. For interviews conducted prior to Ida's, data about the helpmate was extrapolated from relevant

quotes which paralleled similar notions of the woman as helpmate and the man as head. Most interviews prior to Ida's did not use the word "helpmate," but did explicitly refer to the "man as the head" implying women are to be in a secondary position to their male counterparts. Preliminary testing of the interview guide with fellow graduate students produced the final interview guide (Appendix A) used for this study[9].

The interview guide covered the topics of: respondents' involvement at Believer's Baptist[10] the positions of men and women at Believer's Baptist, the gender makeup of the leadership at BB, respondents' attitudes about gender relationships in the home, respondents' attitudes about gender equality and feminism, respondents' personal experience with feminists, and respondents' attitudes about feminists at Believer's Baptist. The limitation of using interviewing as a methodology is the inability to analyze beyond what respondents are willing to reveal about their interactions with feminism. Varying individual definitions and perceptions of feminism guided respondents' self-identification and does not account for the ways in which interviewees may enact a type of feminist practice in their personal lives.

The Sample

The sample is composed of 30 women who explicitly claim a Christian religious identity. The sample set is the same for each of the chapters with each chapter focusing on a sensitizing concept that was covered in the interview guide. The majority (N=27) of respondents were either currently attending or had attended Believer's Baptist in the past with the remaining respondents claiming affiliation with Southern Baptist churches. Women who were not members of Believer's Baptist were included in the sample to serve as evidence for the common principles of

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[9] IRB Approval was obtained for this study in February 2015; Approval Letter in Appendix A
[10] For those who were not current or away members of BB, they were asked about their involvement and participation at their respective churches.

the Southern Baptist Convention. I was able to obtain interviews with three women who had spent multiple years in Southern Baptist Convention coordinating churches through the suggestions of women within my sample at Believer's Baptist. These women were recommended based on their compatibility with my sample criteria of being black women who were familiar with both the practices of Southern Baptist churches and the position of the Southern Baptist Convention. The largest denomination represented amongst respondents was "Baptist'" with "Non-denominational" as second most represented. Respondents ranged in age from twenty-five to seventy with the majority of the sample falling between the ages of thirty and thirty-nine (N=12).

My 20+ year membership at Believer's Baptist established a familiarity with the church and the majority of the sample. I was familiar with many of my respondents prior to the beginning of this project. Due to my time there, I chose to use purposive sampling to select my initial interviewees. Purposive sampling "relies on the researcher's situated knowledge of the field and rapport with members of targeted networks" (Barratt, Ferris, and Lenton 2015:5). In order to be a part of my "targeted network," a potential respondent had to be both a member of Believer's Baptist and involved in at least one ministry there. Participants' membership was determined by their response to the question, "Are you a member of Believer's Baptist?" Membership was defined to be at least two years of official membership at Believer's Baptist. In order to become a member of Believer's Baptist, one must respond to the altar call[11] by walking to the pulpit (located at the front of the sanctuary) and declaring one's intent to join the church.

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[11] The Altar Call at Believer's Baptist is a period at the end of the service in which prospective members are invited to join the church.

Respondents' ministry involvement[12] was determined by their response to the question, "What all are you involved in at Believer's Baptist?" Participants 1-10 were selected based off my prior knowledge of their level of involvement at the church.

As data collection continued, theoretical snowball sampling was then used to select the remaining respondents (N=10) with references from other respondents—who were familiar with the topic of the research—of potential participants who were also black, female, and involved (either currently or in the past) in ministries at Believer's Baptist. Respondents were chosen based on their level of involvement in their churches (whether current or past) so as to gain a better picture of the ways in which the helpmate role permeates outside of the happenings of the Sunday morning service. Respondents were also chosen by their time involved in the church with at least two years of membership being the minimum time spent at Believer's Baptist.

By engaging in theoretical sampling, an approach in which "I does not seek 'generalizability' or 'representativeness' and therefore focuses less on sample *size* and more on sampling *adequacy*" (Bowen 2008:141), I collected data until a point of theoretical saturation[13] was reached. Wiggins, in her study of black women's participation in their churches, notes that a small sample allowed her to "garner qualitative depth in my data gathering, rather than mere volume" (2006: 3). For better understanding the interplay of black religious women's understanding of feminism, submissive gender identities, and feminist religious identity reconciliation, a sample size of 30 proved adequate for my study. Once the data regarding the

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[12] Membership is not mandatory for ministry involvement but it is mandatory for ministry leadership

[13] Theoretical saturation has been broadly defined as the point when "no new data are added because that category has been adequately explained" (Bowen 2008:141)

helpmate, feminist identification, and black religious practice began to produce no new data or findings, I concluded data collection and began in-depth analysis.

I chose to use a constructivist grounded theory methodology for this dissertation because it was the most appropriate tool for qualitatively engaging my research interests in race, gender, and religion with the ultimate goal of furthering "the continual improvement of existing theory" (Burawoy 1998:28). Constructivist grounded theory employs the methodological rigor of classic grounded theory, as developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm S. Strauss, while incorporating and emphasizing the importance of reflexivity in the research process. Instead of viewing social reality (or society) as a distant item which can be studied and verified without involvement on the part of the researcher, feminist scholar Kathy Charmaz advocates the belief that "we must take the researcher's position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality…relativism characterizes the research endeavor rather than objective, unproblematic prescriptions and procedures" (13). In order to get at the why of my research I listened to the subjects themselves and closely observed the ways in which the women in my study dealt with the female-subordinate environment they occupied. In-depth interviews and ethnographic participant observation were the only ways to address my research questions.

By studying a specific case—women in one black Southern Baptist Church—and attempting to extend theory out from my data, I aim to develop theoretical contributions that can tell us more about the social intersections of race, gender, and religion. By participating in the processes he studied, Burawoy built on the foundation of prior theory while working toward the development of useful theoretical insights for further research. Immersing myself in my field site, through participant observation and interviewing, allows for me to build on prior literature

regarding black women's feminist identification while developing my own theoretical innovation regarding black religious women and black feminism.

A quantitative study of women's attitudes about feminism may be able to draw a correlation between one entity and another, but reflexive science allows for investigating the 'why' and the 'how's' (Kleinsasser 2000). My ethnographic work allows me to engage methodology with the goal of producing viable theoretical expansions while also remaining reflexive and aware of my power, privilege, and social location in the research. The purpose of both reflexive science and grounded theory is to provide a tool to qualitative researchers who are looking to marry the exciting work of theoretical production from original data while simultaneously acknowledging the social position of the researcher as an actor in her own work.

By employing grounded theoretical methodology and adhering to the rules of reflexive science, I can produce a theoretical framework by studying the practices and attitudes of black women in one Southern Baptist church. The methodological mandates of employing grounded theory (comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, simultaneous data collection and analysis) provides the guidelines along which qualitative researchers may immerse themselves in the field without fear of biasing or contaminating their data. Biasing of the data is the risk all researchers run if they are not careful to check their methodological approach and adopt a reflexive analysis of their position and power as researchers.

In the following chapters, three distinct but interrelated aspects/processes of black religious women's interaction with feminism are examined: signification, identification, and reconciliation. Signification, described as "communicating by indirection" (Gates 1988:76) or "a process which obscures and obfuscates a discourse without taking responsibility" (Long 1986:1), serves as a way for black women to give new meaning to their assigned gender roles in their

church. Feminist identification simply refers to respondents' self-identification as a feminist while reconciliation refers to respondents' process of merging a feminist and Christian identity regardless of their feminist self-identification.

In chapter two, I answer the following questions using participant observation fieldnotes and interview data, collected from February of 2015 through September of 2017, from thirty women who are affiliated with a Southern Baptist church either through personal membership or association with a member. 1) How are the roles and duties of women depicted and reinforced at Believer's Baptist? 2) How do black women in a male-dominated space signify on the subservient identity of the 'helpmate' placed on them by the principles of the institution and the guiding text of their faith? 3) What level of signification occurs for black religious women who do not endorse the helpmate role? In this chapter, I highlight how black religious women use their understandings of the Bible and their perceptions of the canonically submissive role of the helpmate to signify on disempowering, misogynoiristic depictions of the role. The term 'misogynoir' was created by Dr. Moya Bailey to reference a "particular brand of hatred directed at black women in American visual & popular culture" (Bailey 2010). The term has also been used to refer more broadly to "the intersection of racism, anti-Blackness, and misogyny that Black women experience. The term is specific to Black womanhood, as Misogynoir cannot be experienced by women of any other race but can be perpetuated by people of any gender or race" (Bristol 2014).

Applying the lens of signification allows a way to examine black religious women's understandings of themselves as women, wives, and mothers while accounting for the spiritual and specific nature of black religious women's social location. Respondents who endorsed the helpmate role signified their performance of the role as for the good of their marriage, beneficial

to the wife, and as an expansion of their spirituality. Those who did not support the helpmate role enacted no levels of signification. The occurrence of signification in the presence of gender hegemonic depictions of marriage reflects black women's negotiation of their faith practice and the gender norms attached to said practice. Next, the study turns to black religious women's feminist identification and the factors that impact their attitude about feminism.

Chapter three discusses black religious women's willingness to identify as feminist and what factors impact their identification. Using interviews with respondents with varying levels of exposure to feminism and the feminist movement, I addressed the following research questions: 1) What factors impact black religious women's feminist identification? 2) How does race and religion, specifically, influence black religious women's attitudes about and identification as feminist? This study yielded three types of feminist identification amongst my sample—Non-Identifiers, Other Identifiers, and Identifiers—with race and religion, respectively, only proving influential for a minority of respondents. Participants showed an overall support for feminist and gender equal goals while providing insight into barriers to identification for black religious women. Lastly, this population's ideas about the reconciliation of a feminist religious practice are investigated.

In chapter four, I examine black religious women's identity reconciliation process of an identity that is both feminist and Christian. The research questions were as follows: 1) What are the characteristics of a feminist religious identity reconciliation process amongst black religious women who support feminist ideology? 2) For those who do not reconcile the two identities, what factor proves most important in their understanding of the identities as conflicting? Although the majority of the sample did not explicitly identify as feminist, most respondents supported or believed in the existence of a feminist religious practice.

The common support for a feminist religious practice provided three characteristics of a religious feminist identity reconciliation process which is shown to be part of a black feminist religious practice: recognition of Christianity as problematic for women, endorsement that feminism is good for women, and belief that Christianity and feminism work towards the same goal of liberation of and equality for women. For those who did not believe the two identities could be reconciled, their identity as Christians proved more salient than a feminist identity. Engagement of black feminist religious practice shows respondents' awareness of their position within their faith while simultaneously endorsing a joint remedy to combat sexism.

The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a few more layers of enlightenment about black women's knowledge production and lived experience to the ever-growing body of literature about them within the scholastic fields of race studies, gender studies, and religious studies. I hope to expand readers' awareness and understanding of the impact race, religion, and gender bear upon those who live at the varied intersections of these identities. Black women's integral participation in the maintenance of many of our country's social and professional institutions has been documented from within and outside of the academy, yet there's still so much to learn about black women's ways of existing and meaning making within the institutions they maintain by choice. This body of work, years of data collection and analysis incarnate, serves as my contribution to highlighting black women's stories within their churches and homes.

Chapter 2:
"Gender Has Its Place in the Order of God": A Qualitative Analysis of the "Helpmate" in a Black Southern Baptist Church

One of the longstanding debates regarding Christianity and the family centers on the appropriate model of marriage—male headship or equal regard partnerships—among Christian couples (Trainor 2011). As many Protestant churches uphold the conflation of male headship and 'proper Christian marriage,' many women in these religious spaces find themselves held to a standard of appropriate gender performance in the Biblically derived role as the 'helpmate' of her husband (Blankenhorn, Browning, and Van Leeuwen 2004). Though most literature focuses on the responsibilities and expectations of the helpmate within white Christian congregations, (Murray 2015) black women in predominantly black Baptist churches are also expected to fulfill the Biblically derived role (Bendroth 2001).

Less discussed in this debate of family structure is how such a role impacts those who continue to patronize their respective churches in spite of its patriarchal norms and practices, more specifically the women who are expected to fulfill the helpmate role. Though male headship and the helpmate have been depicted many times as patriarchal and oppressive for the women subjected to such a model of family (Bellis 1994), the very loose description of the role in the Bible leaves much room for interpretation of the responsibilities and expectations associated with it, particularly when accounting for the racial and gender makeup of the persons engaging it. As with many discussions of gender roles and gender hegemony[14], one must pay attention to how such roles impact those who are not white and male—specifically black women

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[14] R.W. Connell (2005) defines hegemony as "the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life;"

whose race and gender has an ongoing impact on how they view and experience the world (Collins 2000).

Many times the victims of racist and sexist depictions as "irrationally angry" (Harris-Perry 2011: 29) or "too strong" (Collins 2000: 84) to attract a mate, black religious women—women who are involved in at least one ministry at their respective churches and who openly profess membership to the Christian faith—stand at an interesting and seemingly contradictory intersection when confronted with the canonically submissive and subservient role of the helpmate. Yet, investigating such a topic provides insight into the intersection(s) of race, gender, and constructions of femininity for black religious women and how such women use the tool of signifying (Long 1986; Mitchell-Kernan 1971; Abrahams 1976)— in order to construct a space for themselves within their church.

In order to investigate how black religious women interpret and engage such a role, I conducted a case study on the women of Believer's Baptist, located in a city in southeastern Louisiana. Qualitative interviews and ethnographic participant observation provided the data to answer the following research questions:

1. How are the roles and duties of the helpmate depicted and reinforced at Believer's Baptist?

2. How do black women in a male-dominated space signify on the subservient identity of the 'helpmate' placed on them by the principles of the institution and the guiding text of their faith?

3. What level of signification occurs for black religious women who do not endorse the helpmate role?

It is important to learn more about black women's notions of themselves in their places of worship since their community work and participation is what keeps many African American churches running (Gilkes 2001). The purpose of this paper is to expand understandings of black women's engagement with problematic images created by their faith while also reinforcing the agency and autonomy many black women exert in their places of worship despite the presence of problematic gender roles. In studying significations on a gender hegemonic femininity, I incorporate literature from religious and gender studies in order to provide more insight about the intersection of race, gender, and spirituality for black religious women.

Literature Review

What is a Helpmate?

Feminist scholars have frequently critiqued the traditional male headship model of marriage as patriarchal and oppressive of Christian women (Klein 2003). The male headship model of marriage promotes a male as head/woman as helper dynamic within married relationships. It is within the male headship model that the helpmate exists. Derived from Genesis 2:18 (The King James Version),[15] the "help meet[16]" or 'helpmate' usually "refers to the role of woman as a helping mate or wife" (Bellis 2007:27) and also includes the woman's role as a mother.

Most scholastic and religious definitions of the helpmate refer to the woman as the helper of the husband (Jelen 1989), yet they do not examine what the helpmate role means for the women who must perform it or whether Christian women accept this role at all. Seldom does the

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[15] "And the Lord God said, [It is] not good that the man should be alone; I will make an helpmeet for him"

[16] From here on, the term 'helpmate' will be used since it is the colloquial version of the term at the site

helpmate role explicitly refer to men in partnerships and when female headship is discussed it refers to women's sole-leadership of a household (Wildsmith 2004). Though feminist scholars and theologians have argued for the promotion of, or at the very least similar consideration for, an equal-regard model of marriage (Blankenhorn et al. 2004) within religious spaces of all denominations, the model of male headship still prevails in many Southern Baptist churches. (sbc.net)

The Southern Baptist Convention[17]along with an explicit denunciation of female ordination (sbc.net), declared headship or leadership of a marriage/family to be the responsibility of the male partner, preferably the husband in a heterosexual relationship (Bendroth 2001). With its strong endorsement of male-headed marriages as the idealized male-female relationship, Southern Baptist churches construct a gender hegemonic relationship to which members are to subscribe as part of their Christian identity.

The helpmate is promoted to many Christian women as a path to spiritual and marital fulfillment (Hall and Schem Jr. 2010; Murray 2015), as the calling "of every wife" (Beeke 2013: 209), and as beneficial to the safety and wellbeing of themselves and their children (Tracy 2003). With tasks and responsibilities that center around the success and care of the head and husband of a marriage, the helpmate's role is predominantly coded as submissive and many times subordinate to her male partner (Lambert 2010). Such an understanding is meaningful to explore within a predominantly black, socially conservative context due to predominant trends of far more egalitarian views of gender roles amongst black Americans (Davis 1983).

With American slavery forcing an equal division of labor in American black family units, African Americans have been found to possess far more liberal understandings of gender roles

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[17] The predominantly white and politically conservative parent organization to Believer's Baptist

and responsibilities (Davis 1983; Simien 2004) with housework and childcare being shared amongst both parents when possible. It is of importance to learn how the submissive identity of the helpmate—derived from a white, conservative religious ideology—is understood by black women who were once considered "their men's social equals within the slave community" (Davis 1983: 23) and are statistically more likely to view themselves as the equal partner of their husband in the home (Wilcox 1990). Though more likely to share an equal division of labor with their male counterparts (Davis 1893) it has been found that black women still subscribe to traditional gender roles at similar rates as their white counterparts (Wilcox 1990). Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier described the black church as "under the domination of the men, and whatever control it attempted to exercise tended to confirm the man's interest and authority in the family" (1939: 172) meaning that patriarchal norms of male headship are present in many black churches regardless of the division of labor of its congregants.

The Helpmate as a Role not an Identity

Literature on the helpmate many times treats the Christian construct as a naturalized identity meaning that it is believed to be a normal expectation for all women who subscribe to the faith practice (Shields 2008). This also means that the helpmate identity is discussed as if its constitution and reinforcement is same for women of all races and faiths (Miles 1997). The helpmate could be considered both an identity and a role. For those who personally identify as a helpmate the identity is one "in which an individual claims membership as well as the personal meaning associated with those categories" (Shields 2008: 301) that is constituted uniquely in a black Southern Baptist church. Yet, a crucial aspect of identity construction and performance is the individual's self-identification with the identity (Ajrouch and Kusow 2007).

The ways in which the helpmate is discussed in prior literature focuses on women's ability to be a supportive wife, mother, and example to her community (Bellis 2007) with a specific focus on the multiplicity of her responsibilities. This focus on the helpmate[18] "as constructed from diverse 'parts'" (Stryker 1968: 559) makes the helpmate a role since explicit personal identification with it does not influence whether a woman in a Southern Baptist church is expected to perform it. Another reason for classifying the helpmate as a role is due to the fairly standard expectations of adequate mothering, spousal support, and submission (Bellis 2007) to the role (Drumm et al. 2017). In the next section, the historical and social narratives that drive the ways the helpmate is presented to and understood by black women are briefly discussed.

Interpreting the Helpmate Role

Within any space there is the potential for gender hegemony (Connell 2005) to dominate and provide strict gender scripts for its participants. The helpmate can be interpreted as a type of hegemonic femininity within the gender hegemonic framework of the church. A hegemonic femininity is defined as:

> the characteristics defined as womanly that legitimate a hierarchal and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Schippers 2007: 92)

The helpmate role (and the broader roles of women in their families), as preached and taught in many churches, serves as a model against which other types of femininity are compared (Beeke 2013). Since the helpmate cannot exist without a head of house, the role is part of an idealized helpmate-head gender script (Budgeon 2014) in many churches that promote male headship. Despite the prevalence of this model of male headship which explicitly supports male exclusive

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[18] Though the helpmate is treated as a role in the analysis of this work, respondents' race, gender, and religion are treated as self-proclaimed identities meaning that in discussion of such concepts the term identity will be used.

women make up the majority of most churches (Bendroth 2001). Studies have shown that black women use their faith as a source of strength (Cozart 2010) and as a shield against distorted depictions of themselves in their daily lives (Brice 2011; Harris-Perry 2011). Although the helpmate is generally associated with submission and subservience, its usage within black religious spaces sometimes reflects many misogynoiristic tropes specific to black women's sexuality and mothering capability. Since the helpmate role is a running commentary on women's ability to mother effectively, and by proxy deny herself sexual liberties for the sake of her children, it is necessary to briefly address the long-standing criticism of black women's motherhood.

Though grandmothers and mothers are highly revered and respected within black communities (Simpson and Cornelius 2007), such honor does not come without a multitude of incisive and vicious critiques as well. Black women's capability as mothers has historically been attacked and criticized despite their ability to bear and raise children in the harsh conditions of slavery and other eras of systematic and state-sanctioned racism and sexism. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, in *The Negro Family in the United States,* provides a scathing analysis of black women as occupying "the dominating position of the mother" (1939:50) who was the "dominant and important figure in the slave family" (60). Even when describing post-Emancipation era black women, the sociologist believes that their "unfettered motherhood"—which he describes as a propensity for having illegitimate children and unwillingness to marry simply for the sake of upholding proper, patriarchal family status—must be policed by "the church as an institution of control over sex behavior" (119). Frazier's patriarchal commentary on black women's mothering and sexual practices—two factors that are many times jointly analyzed—is not rare.

Of the major stereotypes about black women only two prove useful for the purposes of this paper: The Matriarch and the Jezebel. Rooted in slave era propaganda about black families, the Matriarch is marked by sole dominion of her home and her assertion of authority over her male partner (Kelly and Floyd 2001). Contrasted with Jezebel whose rampant promiscuity distracts her from her ability to properly and appropriately raise and care for one's children (Sinha et al. 2007). Though the Matriarch and the Jezebel are on perceived opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of sexual behavior they are both rooted in myths about black women's behavior and personal sensibilities (Sewell 2013) hindering them from fulfilling their proper "function as a woman" (Frazier 1939:115). Despite black women's efforts to present themselves as capable and sexually respectable women (Higginbotham 1993), these tropes have followed them as a collective group for centuries. In a recent study of perceptions of black women's motherhood and sexuality amongst undergraduates, psychologists Rosenthal and Lobel found that

> a Black female target, regardless of pregnancy status, was perceived as having had sex with more people in the past month, less likely to use birth control regularly during sex, more likely to have children and to have been pregnant some time in the past, more likely to receive some form of public assistance, to have lower education, and to earn less income per year than a White female target (2016: 421)

Meaning that irrespective of black women's actual attitudes about sexuality or performance of motherhood, they are still assumed to engage bad sexual health and mother several illegitimate children. The helpmate proves problematic for a number of reasons, but the women who are expected to fulfill it are not mere victims of the role. Instead they use their familiarity with the role to add personal gain by engaging a practice that is rooted in collective black knowledge, that of signifying.

Responding to the Helpmate

Black women have used their involvement and activism in their churches as a means of leveraging power and influence within their communities (Gilkes 2001). Using the tools of their faith to correct and control the images about their roles as wives, mothers, and citizens mirrors a process that religious scholar Charles Long calls signification (1986). Signification is a tool African Americans employ in response to the names and meanings put upon them by oppressive, external communities (1986). Though Long's work focuseson and is primarily applied to black persons signifying upon their racial otherness, it is reasonable to believe that black women, a group with a long history of spiritual connection and participation in religious work (Smith 1994; Grant 1995), can use their religious and cultural experiences to turn this subordination into a source of empowerment.

Before delving into Long's interpretation of signification, it is necessary to provide more context about the presence of the act of signification within black culture. Signification is a long-standing tradition within African American communities (Florini 2014). Much of the literature on the process of signification focuses on the verbal and physical ways in which black persons enact the process (Gates 1988). In his well-known work *The Signifying Monkey*, historian Henry Louis Gates Jr. highlights defining characteristics of what he deems as the "rhetorical play" of signification (1988). The most pertinent aspects for this research are the necessity for shared social and cultural knowledge amongst the signifiers (those practicing the act of signification) and a manipulation of language in order to convey a secondary or hidden meaning.

Though Gates provides a breadth of information about the process of signification as a linguistic act, it is his intellectual predecessors Claudia Mitchell Kernan and Roger D. Abrahams who highlight a gendered understanding of signification (Gates 1988) with the major difference

tied to delivery methods. According to Abrahams, women (and children) are more likely to take an indirect approach to delivery (such as passive comments or talking about a person present as if they are not there) whereas men rely more on direct methods (i.e. playing the dozens) (1976). Anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan expands the act even more by highlighting the importance of various aspects of identity, such as age and social environment, to the method and style of signification that occurs (1971). Kernan marks signifying as "a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations," (Caponi 1999) suggesting that a signification is open to a variety of interpretations and contexts. Whereas signification is many times discussed primarily as a style of communication to which only black persons are tapped into, Charles H. Long discusses the impact of possessing such an ability and the ways in which signification functions as a means of resistance and empowerment for its participants.

Signification does not only occur as a reaction to oppression or marginalization; sometimes it occurs as a means of identity reinforcement and empowerment. Media studies scholar Sarah Florini examined signification as a performance of black identity on the social media site Twitter (2014), where users can present as whatever race they choose. By signifying on the tools inherent to the social media application (i.e. hashtags, trending topics, etc) black users are able to create a space of collective black consumption of media and world events known as Black Twitter. The ability of black persons to draw upon a collective pool of socio-cultural knowledge in order to perform a collective, digital racial identity shows the power and mastery of signification that black people possess. The performance of a black identity on the social media platform of Twitter served as an example of black people creating a space to display racial pride. Black Twitter users engagement with the platform to produce 'Black Twitter' also

shows the ways in which tools—language, vernacular, or a social media—not created for Black persons can become a space of racial and/or gender identity enrichment and solidarity.

Similar to the conclusion reached by sociolinguists who study the concept, Long frames signification as a response to racial subjugation. Long frames signification as a "very clever language game" in which signifiers are able to use the language and devices of their oppressors to create new, positive meanings for themselves (1986). Yet, he merges the rhetorical theory of signification and situates it within the context of the Black American religious experience, unlike other authors who highlighted secular acts of signifying. Since signification focuses on the use of shared cultural knowledge and the manipulation of pre-established meaning for the purpose of empowerment it is an apt ideological framework for analyzing women who engage the hegemonic femininity of the helpmate.

The study of black women's signification on their designation as helpmates expands the literature of the tool by contextualizing it within a gendered, racialized, and religious population. Prior work on signification focuses more on the method by which black persons signify and less on the meaning such reinterpretations has on the signifiers. Signification scholarship also tends to focus on the signification of a single aspect of identity (such as race alone), and not the enactment of the process on more than one othered identity (such as race *and* gender) or how those significations of identity impact a role, such as the helpmate, which serves as a culmination of multiple identities. An investigation into black religious women's perception of the helpmate provides both a look at the process of signification using religious texts and ideologies and insight into the specific ways signification provides empowerment and fulfillment amongst a religious population. Studies of signification or context manipulation within religious spheres has mainly focused on the speaking styles and interactions of black preachers with their

congregations or the function of the church as whole to resist white supremacy (Holt 1999) and less on the collective power of the act for individual signifiers. The aim of this project is to show how individual significations amongst thirty women contributes to a collective redefining and reframing of a restrictive gender role.

Before proceeding to the means by which themes became apparent, it is important to note that not all significations are perceived as empowering or useful. The act of signification in itself is a secondary reaction to othering done by those with the power to do so (Hall 1997; Bickford 2017) meaning that the initial signification (or othering) occurs as a means devaluing and/or disenfranchising a group of people. Signifying can also be interpreted as a means of distancing oneself from her oppressive reality in turn stunting any efforts to change her position (Reid 1994). In this project, respondents' signifying processes are understood to be a reaction to the initial signification on them as the submissive and subservient helpmate (Reid 1994).

Methods

The Study

In order to capture the ways in which the helpmate is constituted and reinforced by the "relations of ruling" (Smith 1987:3) of Believers' Baptist, I conducted over 60 hours of participant observation over a period of two years (2015-2017). Jottings were crucial to capturing my observations in the field because they "translate to-be-remembered observation into writing on paper as quickly rendered scribbles about actions and dialogue" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011:29). Jottings were collected at Believer's Baptist during Sunday morning service at 7:30 AM, during Sunday school that followed morning service, and during community service events. Jottings were also collected at other churches, named Lily Nondenominational (LN) and Resurrection Baptist (RB), that shared similar denomination or ideologies as Believer's Baptist

as a means of comparison for findings at BB. Collecting jottings only proved difficult during volunteer events such as the church's monthly bag packing service event. The bag packing service event requires full physical participation and taking notes on a phone during the event would not be considered practical. In order to capture notes during service here I took mental notes and later expanded them into full fieldnotes. All jottings were converted into full fieldnotes within days of leaving the site. Fieldnotes were pertinent to this chapter because they provided insight into the ways the helpmate role is portrayed within the site. Participant observation and interviewing allowed me to see and document the construction of the helpmate at the site while simultaneously collecting perceptions about the role and the expectations of it.

Emergent codes for fieldnotes were: "Interaction between couples," "Sermon Anecdotes," and "Mothers." "Interactions between couples" refers to any time in which a couple (married or not) was mentioned in fieldnotes. "Sermon Anecdotes" reflects any story or joke that was told by a pastor of the church during the sermon period. This code served as a point of reference for all stories told during the sermon. Since the sermon is the longest engagement congregants have with the pastor of their church (lasting on average about 30- 45 minutes) it was useful to note the comments pertaining to women. The code "Mothers" was used for any reference to the roles or duties of mothers at the site which included sermons and informal discussions amongst church members. The helpmate role as a commentary on black women's mothering made the code "mothers' relevant to analyze.

The sample is composed of 30 women who explicitly claim a Christian religious identity. The majority (N=27) of respondents were either currently attending or had attended Believer's Baptist in the past with the remaining respondents claiming affiliation with Southern Baptist churches. Since the helpmate is defined by its exclusive assignment to women and its relation to

a male partner, participants' relationships status is pertinent to this paper. Respondents were asked about their current relationship status: fourteen respondents identified as married, eleven identified as single, three identified as divorced, and two identified as in a long-term relationship but not married. Respondents' self-identified their relationships tatus and were grouped together based on their response to the question, "What is your current relationship status?"

This study relied primarily on responses collected through interviews to learn what participants believed about the helpmate role. Respondents' answers only provide a snapshot into what the helpmate *actually* looks like in their everyday lives and homes. More observations of couples in informal environments such as the church's annual marriage conference ("Marriage Retreat") or weekly married couple's' Sunday school class could provide a breadth of data on the performance of the helpmate role in partnerships. Access to the Marriage Retreat is limited due to requirement that attendees be married and both husband and wife are present. Access to the Couple's Sunday School class is open even though the focus of each lesson is geared toward a married audience.

The 'Helpmate' as a Sensitizing Concept

The term 'helpmate' emerged in the data after it was mentioned organically by a respondent, Ida. In asserting herself as an influential woman in her church and community, this participant contrasted her success and independence within her church with her most important role as the 'helpmate' of her husband. It was in transcribing this interview (#6) that the helpmate became the focus of this paper. After comparing Ida's transcript with prior ones in which similar roles for women were discussed, though not explicitly referenced as the 'helpmate,' I decided to revise the interview guide to include the topic. The term served as a point of recognition for all respondents going forward in the process, with all participants expressing familiarity with it.

Though the focus of this paper is the helpmate, respondents were asked about their definitions of both the helpmate role and the head of household in order to gather the most thorough data on the role as part of the idealized masculine-feminine relationship of the site. Participants were asked, "What does the term 'helpmate' mean?" and "What does being the 'head' mean?" with follow-up questions exploring the role of each in the home and in the church. Interview transcripts were analyzed and coded in Atlas.Ti for themes related to 'marriage', 'helpmate', and 'head of household'.

Findings

Believer's Baptist is not unique in its assertion that male headship is the ideal path for families with the wife fulfilling her role as helper and subservient (Klein 2003:1). Even when the term helpmate is not used specifically, pastors and leaders of these churches assert specific roles and appropriate behavior for Christian women. Throughout this section I, will provide field note excerpts which suggest a potentially negative or limiting role for women as helpmates in relation to their husbands and children and then display the ways in which participants signify upon this role to provide value and importance to their work in the church, their homes, and their marriages.

For the Good of Marriage

At Believer's Baptist, the burden of supporting the family and producing functional citizens was placed on the mother figure. During a sermon, Pastor Barney focuses on the role of mothers and their impact on their children:

> 'Our houses are no longer led by Madeas, but by divas.' He continues 'not by Big Mama, but by foxy mama who just got in from being out last night.' "And we wonder why our juvenile centers are filled (FN 14, 8.1.17, BB[19])

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[19] All fieldnotes are coded by their number and the date they were recorded. The church at which they were recorded is also included in the citation.

In this sermon, Pastor Barney correlates overfilled juvenile prisons with mothers neglecting their children to party all night. Though the name "Madea" has become attached to Tyler Perry's movie franchise (Lomax 2016) it is used here to refer to a grandmother or mother figure who embodies specific motherly characteristics such as caring for both her offspring and grand-offspring (Simpson and Cornelius 2007). Pastor Barney is invoking the black sociocultural figure of "Momma" who folklorist Roger D. Abrahams defines as a woman whose "respect for the home begets respect from the others in it but must be asserted in many non-home situations" (1976:67). The term "Big Mama" also refers to a motherly or grandmotherly figure who serves a similar function as the Momma figure. As the Madea/Big Mama reference taps into expectations of black motherhood, the foxy mama figure invoked in this sermon references black women's sexuality. Though different in name from the Jezebel trope, the "foxy mama" mentioned by Pastor Barney is a commentary on black female sexuality. Lambasted for her foxiness or perceived lasciviousness, the foxy mama's personal attachment to "being out" gets in the way of her ability to keep her children out of correctional facilities.

Since homes are "no longer led by Madeas", they are in peril of crumbling and contributing to the rise of underage incarceration. By placing the sole responsibility for child rearing and life outcomes on mothers, Pastor Barney suggests a narrative of family life that reflects a "homemaker" who, if ever irresponsible, will compromise her duties as the guardian of the home and the children. On Mother's Day, a similar commentary was reflected in the sermon on why mothers are valuable to their respective families, as this field note excerpt illustrates:

> Pastor Barney emphasizes that the godly woman or mother had a husband or "somebody to give her cookies to." He makes this point to shame "shacking up" or fornication before marriage. He begins to talk about the importance of the family unit and how a family is made up of one mom and one dad, not two moms or two dads. He says "the reason we have so many problems in our society has everything to do with the breakdown of the

family as God intended it to be." This statement is met with applause and agreement from the audience. (FN 6, 5.14.17, BB)

In citing a mother's willingness to shack up or "give her cookies" to someone who is not her husband as an integral part of the "breakdown of the family as God intended it to be," Pastor Barney once again places the responsibility for success of the family on women. He also invokes a commentary of the sexual behavior of his anecdotal "godly woman." Her sexuality and sexual practices are only acceptable within the confines of marriage. The audience's applause suggests a shared endorsement of this expectation of women. Though Barney does not explicitly name the helpmate, he does comment on expectations of roles specifically for women. During these sermons, the proper Christian mother is a chaste woman who understands her role in keeping our society afloat by devoting herself to her children and her family. As stated earlier in this chapter, the helpmate is not just a commentary on black motherhood but also on black women's sexuality. As much black feminist scholarship has shown, black women have historically had to defend not just their physical sexual bodies but their sexual image (Lomax 2018). Falling in line with many misogynoiristic commentaries of black women's sexuality (Smith 1987), the gender specific commentary on women in churches serves as a means of reinforcing a narrative of black women's physical body as sites of a "probing, pornographic gaze" (Miller-Young 2014: 33). Discussions of women from the pulpit sometimes reflected a narrative of women as in need of protection from other men. The following excerpt describes an interaction between Pastor Barney and his wife—whom he publically declares as the helpmate to his head—during the 31st Pastor's Anniversary service:

> Pastor Barney then hands the mic over to Ruth who walks to the podium in the pit and unfolds a piece of paper she brought up with her. She places the paper on the side of the pulpit closest to her. As she is walking to the podium PB says 'Let me walk in behind you so none of these guys [the ministers sitting in the pit] have to repent.' The congregation laughs while some of the ministers stand up and move from their seats. One

minister walks out of the pit, across the stage, to the choir stand pew nearest the music pit. His gesture elicits more laughter and clapping from the audience while the other ministers feign urgency in moving from behind Ruth. PB steps behind her while the crowd is laughing and mocks as if he is guarding her behind from being seen by the ministers seated behind her. He then moves to her right side as she begins her remarks. (FN 19, 10.15.17, BB)

These interactions, both occurring on the stage of the respective sanctuaries, depict women as hard to understand and tempting to other men. By highlighting his wife's attire and potential to draw the attention of men seated behind her, Pastor Barney draws attention to his wife's physical body before she is even allowed to speak. In drawing such attention, the congregation's gaze is collectively drawn to his wife's body and her potential to seduce or cause the men behind her to think or do something which would cause them "to repent" or have to ask for forgiveness. The implication is that Ruth's figure is so distracting that it can cause men, all of whom are ministers of the church, to potentially sin. Ruth's position as Pastor Barney's wife makes her highly visible whether she is physically on stage or seated in her designated seat as the First Lady. The ministers behind her further the joke by participating in Barney's joke. Barney physically blocking Ruth's body so it is not seen reflects ongoing narratives of black women's bodies as something to be guarded or hidden for risk of inducing sexual reactions from male counterparts. This gaze at the black women's body is not uncommon within churches with women's sexuality constantly being policed based on its potential distract men (Lomax 2018).

Though commentary on women's roles with no mention of the role of the husbands' may appear to be restrictive and unequal, respondents asserted that the helpmate's centrality to her family was not a source of burden but of fulfillment and accomplishment. Participants signified on the responsibility external forces, such as pastors and religious leaders, place on them by viewing their contribution to the success of the family simply as integral to the unit.

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For respondents, the helpmate role was a way in which they were fulfilling their role in marriage. Many of these women spoke of marriage as similar to a business partnership between husbands and wives. Commitment to this role was less optional due to its importance to the success of marriage. Women in this group saw the role as not subservient, but simply as a duty that must be fulfilled in order to better their marriage:

> R: Um the term helpmate means to me I mean within the household um of a man and a woman… I'm not only serving the husband but I'm serving the marriage and so um I would think that helpmate is someone who is saying to not only to serve my husband, to serve this marriage, to serve this family so we can all have what we have hoped for within this union. (Roxie, Interview 30, 2017)

Like Roxie, many participants believed the needs of the marriage dictated what the helpmate was to do. Marriages in themselves were considered an entity or greater purpose than the individual needs of either the husband or wife. Many of those discussing the helpmate brought up the place of husbands in comparison to the helpmate indicating that the two are perceived as linked. Though support of a partner or a husband may have been mentioned amongst these respondents, all support was credited to furthering the goals of the unit as whole:

> R: Um a helpmate for me, from my perspective would just be someone who's helping to fulfill the common goals that we have that we're like minded we're on the same page where we're both working for the success of our households and our marriage so whether that means cleaning, whether that means cooking, whether that means travel, whether that means savings, just that we're on, we're on the same page and we're working for the same goal (Destiny, Interview 21, 2017)

> R: Facilitator, person to implement…like a business in a sense kinda like you know there's a CEO and there's the COO you know they're still both C-suite but the chief operation officer makes sure that things are operating within the organization…And then the head of whatever is kinda, they kinda assume the most responsibility at the end of the day for whatever happens even if operations go, go badly (Karen, Interview 20)

The helpmate as a necessary role to the success of a marriage containing both a helpmate and a head presented an understanding of the role as part of a marital obligation. Though not all who expressed this opinion explicitly labeled the woman automatically as the helpmate, it was clear

that all believed the role was essential to success of a relationship—regardless of who was performing it. The helpmate as someone who has equal stake and utility in the marriage unit is a signification on prior understandings of the term as subservient and only the assistant of the head, with little to no expressed autonomy.

Other women believed the helpmate role was necessary to the marriage because they fill in the gaps of their partner-husband. Most women in this group subscribed to a fixed gender designation for the roles and defined the helpmate primarily by her assistance and effectiveness in supporting the husband. Whereas as the beneficial-to-marriage understanding portrayed the role as integral to the success of marriage, by filling in the gaps of the household and the marriage, those who viewed the helpmate as support for the head primarily focused their answers on correcting and working with the flaws or shortcomings of their partners:

> R: Well, the Holy Spirit is described as a helper so I take the position that a wife's role as helper is not subservient but it is to assist the husband in fulfilling his role. I think the husband has gaps that the wife is there to um fill in for him um in her role as helper. (Susan, Interview 23, 2017)

> R: I think a helpmate uh would be the person that is just I guess the wife would be the backup for whatever the husband needs… wherever the husband lacks you know you pick up and then you play your own part as well, in my opinion. (Essence, Interview 25, 2017)

The helpmate as the "gap filler" for the head-husband points to an understanding of the role as conditional on the needs of their partner. In order for the marriage to succeed, the head has to succeed, and it is the helpmate's job to make sure the head lives up to all the expectations upon him pertaining to his family and household. The helpmate is an active participant in the marriage dynamic. In addition to the signification of the helpmate as a central and necessary part of any partnership as opposed to simply as a guardian for her children's, and by proxy society's, success respondents expressed the benefits of the role to the women who endorse it.

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Beneficial to the Wife

Another narrative of the proper partner or helpmate is a woman who is beloved and praised by her husband and children. In preaching about the importance of mothers to the family, Pastor Barney references Psalm 31, a well-known Biblical scripture about the ideal wife and mother. In the beginning of his sermon he reads the scripture:

> Who can find a virtuous and capable wife. She is more precious than rubies. Her husband can trust her, and she will greatly enrich his life. She brings him good, not harm all the days of her life. (Psalms 31:10-12)

The scriptural emphasis on the value a wife brings to her husband paints a picture of the helpmate as only as successful as her performance as a wife and a mother. These constraints can seem limiting and stereotypical of women who have achieved the ability to work alongside their male partners and earn wages for their households. Though only an excerpt of the 31st chapter of Psalms is listed above the rest of the chapter continues the description of the ideal wife and mother. The 'Psalm 31' woman is praised for her contributions to the family—for her work ethic, her ability to maintain a presentable home, and her wisdom—but much of her attainment is defined by her utility to the people around her (Psalm 31). Although this focus on her utility to others could be interpreted as a decentering of the helpmate in her own life, respondents used personal experience and the belief that their performance of the helpmate was a choice to signify on this potentially draining interpretation of the helpmate's work and resources.

Respondents described the role of helpmate as one they actively accepted and choose to perform on a regular basis. Their endorsement of the helpmate was due to the benefits the role has to their lives, not that of their husbands or children. Participants described relief in having a partner to help with household responsibilities while others took solace in not having the expectation of making hard decisions–-a task many respondents defined as the major

responsibility of the head of house. Nala, a married mother of two, expresses a preference for the helpmate role because it leaves critical decision making to her husband:

> R: My husband thinking of himself as the head of the household benefits me because there are some hard bucks that I don't want and being able to like take those things on …that is a burden that I don't have to carry [I: right] and I appreciate somebody else carrying that burden. There are lots of other burdens that I carry that he doesn't (Interview 12, 2017).

Nala states that her husband "thinking of himself" as the head benefits her in several ways pointing to her intentionally embracing the role for her own benefit. Not having to make hard decisions, the responsibility of the head, is considered a plus for Nala, as it was for other respondents who defined the helpmate role by its benefits to the wife. Amongst the benefits to the helpmate were spiritual, financial, and emotional assistance while also not having to make hard decisions which impact the family unit. Yet, not all women initially supported the role of being a helpmate. Hannah, a businesswoman who has been married for over twenty years, talks about having to accept the role as time progressed before she saw the benefits of it:

> R: You know, so, it's wonderful to me now but, um, you know at first it was a bit of a challenge and it's like a weight lifted off of your shoulder when you realize that it's not my, even though I work, I'm not responsible, fully responsible for making sure that this house runs like it's supposed to run. [inaudible] So, you know, we, we bear too much of the burden as women and it's about perspective. When you start seeing it from that perspective it feels so really good. (Hannah, Interview 9, 2017)

Hannah expresses initial resistance to the role, yet she believes it's "wonderful" now because she does not have to take sole responsibility for the functioning of the house. In mentioning how "we bear too much of the burden" as women, Hannah references the overwhelming feeling many black women experience due to expectations of almost superhuman perfection and responsibility (West, Donovan, and Daniel 2016). The reliefs of having someone help her run the house makes the helpmate role a good thing. For these women the role functions for them in that it is a source

of relief and shared responsibility and ultimately of benefit to the wife. Another signification on the helpmate dealt with the spiritual growth the role provides for participants.

Expanding Spirituality

Though submission is one of the major markers of the helpmate, according to many participants, it can be interpreted as a silencing of women. In discussing preparation for the birth of Christ, Kurt, a teacher for the 26- 34 year old Sunday School, class paints the Virgin Mary as an interchangeable vessel for bring Jesus Christ into the world:

> Kurt then asks what was so special about Mary. There are multiple responses, one is that she was a virgin another was that she had great faith, she didn't question God. Kurt accepts these answers but does not seem satisfied with them. He smirks and someone says "nothing" and he chuckles and says "nothing. There was nothing special about Mary." He then goes on to say that anyone could be chosen. Meaning that God could use anybody and we are all can be used by God. There is verbal agreement for the class. (FN 4.1, 12.11.16, BB)

> He goes on to say that the role of a mother is so important that a woman bore the Savior (Jesus). He notes that "God honors the role of mothers."

Much of Mary's value relies in her carrying of the Messiah and though she "had great faith" her primary role is delivering her child. This conflation of Mary's importance with her childbearing and rearing reflects E. Franklin Frazier's statement that "motherhood signifies maturity and the fulfillment of one's function as a woman" (1939: 115). In speaking about the importance of the Virgin Mary, Pastor Barney attributes the birth of Christ as the event that brings value to all mothers.

Placing women's value on their ability to birth and raise a child also adds an extra layer of scrutiny about their romantic partners as well. When speaking about the hopes he has for his college-age daughter, the pastor of Lily Nondenominational discusses his expectations of any future partner for his child:

> PA speaks directly to women when he says 'ladies just because you kiss a frog doesn't make him a prince.' He says that he tells his daughters, one who is currently in college, that they should be so into Jesus and living a life he would approve of that anyone pursuing them will have to dig deep in God to find them.

Pastor Andrew's connection of spirituality to a woman's ability to draw a worthy partner once again contextualizes women's faith in relation to her partnering or her mothering. Respondents took this connection to women's spirituality and credited it as a significant benefit to the role. Becoming deeper in one's prayer life and helping the leader keep his spirituality were presented as indicators of women's stronger spirituality and deeper consistent prayer. Annette defines the helpmate while describing her performance of the role during a rough period in their lives:

> So a helpmate would be a person that prays for the leader constant prayer, you know stay in prayer for the leader, will encourage the leader, and will follow the directions of the leader…you know what I'm saying but it [being a helpmate] kept me in prayer mode [I: uh huh]. So it really bettered my prayer life, it gave me a better prayer life cause it kept me in prayer mode you know so, so a helpmate don't usurp authority they just support. (Annette, Interview 10, 2017)

Annette refers to her performance as a helpmate as giving her "a better prayer life," suggesting that it helped her in her spiritual journey. By constantly praying and also supporting the leader, Annette is fulfilling her duty as a helpmate. Like Annette, other respondents also felt their roles as women were defined by God to be the helpmate and in performing their roles they were bettering their spiritual life. One respondent Ida, the head pastor of her own nondenominational church, argued that women were naturally spiritually stronger than men and therefore suited to be the helpmate in order for the marriage to follow God's order:

> Because if I'm your helpmate, I can only help you if I'm stronger than you. You can't get help from somebody weaker than you they, they just can't help you. If you really understand the order of God and the comparison between the physical and the spiritual then you do understand that we are really the stronger of the gender, spiritually, physically we are the weaker of the vessels. But our place is the supportive role of the head. Doesn't make him greater than me. Means he has a place of what he's to do and I have a place of what I'm to do. If we each are doing that, we're in the order of God. It gives us the progress, wow. Hallelujah! (Ida, Interview 6, 2016)

By connecting this role in marriage to spiritual gain, respondents have given the role a religious purpose that they are able to enact in order to better their spirituality. Perceptions of the helpmate as a religious role shows that for some black religious women their Christian values and principles drives their marriages and their understandings of themselves as wives and partners (Vaterlaus, Skogrand, and Chaney 2015). In both excerpts the women use their spirituality and the performance of the helpmate as a counter to perceptions of weakness on their part. In highlighting women's physical weakness and contrasted it with her spiritual superiority, Ida uses the helpmate as marker of women's spiritual fortitude.

No Signification

As shown in the prior sections of this chapter, the helpmate role is constructed at Believer's Baptist as a woman who bears the lump share of the responsibility for the success of her marriage, her home, and her children. Although some respondents found ways to signify upon the role and find value in it, not all participants felt the signification was necessary. Of the 30 participants, two explicitly rejected the title of helpmate and head to describe their romantic partnerships. These women engaged no signification with the role because they did not find it functional for their lives or relationships. These participants felt the helpmate-head dynamic of a romantic relationship was not necessary or useful to the marriage or the individual partners within it. When asked whether the helpmate was necessary to a marriage Leah responded:

> R: Um no I don't. I think that everything should kinda be equal. Um there are, there are gonna be situations where you, one person may be better at the other person at something and even let's just say the finances. Just because a male wants to be the head of the household and control the finances but they may suck at it and the woman may be better at making sure that they stay on track, stay on budget and save money and so if that's what she's better at than allow her to do that and not so much be in this this role thing…so that's what I think it should be you know, whatever your strengths are, whatever your weaknesses are you know what those things are and if you're better at one

thing then you do that and let the other person do what they're better at but it should be a team effort.

Similar to Leah's attitude that defined roles were not necessary to the success of a partnership, others in this group rejected the roles of helpmate and head. Amongst these respondents were perceptions of the helpmate role as potentially oppressive to wives. Where women who signified that the helpmate expanded their spirituality referenced spiritual superiority and other self-defined signs of spiritual strength such as a better prayer life, those who did not signify the role referenced spirituality as a reason for equal roles and responsibilities in the marriage. This theme was connected with an endorsement of equal distribution of tasks based on abilities and a rejection of titles, particularly those based on gender perceptions. The helpmate does not function as conduit to spirituality within this understanding, but as a potential burden to the success of the marriage. Signification, the spinning of this designation into something that is beneficial to the lives of the women, is not present here and there is more of a highlighting of the negatives of the role to women and marriages:

> R: It has to be a two-fold thing you know but sometimes I feel like it's more like okay the man is the head, God, the man, his wife you know and all of the kids and things like that but she is constantly reaching up and feeding into you right? She's reaching up feeding into you, she's reaching down feeding into the kids and you over here like 'yeah I pay the bills and I'm running shit' (Amy, Interview 16)

Amy's critique of the way many women are treated in their families echoes her belief that all responsibilities for the family should be shared between parents. Focusing on women's depleted energy and weariness due to the caring of her family, Amy rejects the narrative of the woman as the sole caretaker of the entire family. Women who rejected the roles altogether felt there was no need for a helpmate or head regardless of the type of partnership.

It does seem that perception of the role directly impacts the type and level of signification that occurs. Women who were able to draw personal empowerment for and benefit to themselves

from the role signified upon it. Those respondents who did not find value in the role for either men or women within a relationship chose not to signify and focused primarily on the inequality they perceived the role carried. Though age and relationship status were varied across groups of signifiers, participants' ideas about the role are what drove their signification.

Discussion

The upholding of the helpmate as the idealized femininity of Believer's Baptist reinforces multiple long-held functions of black churches in steering and guiding the black community's moral compass (Baldwin 1985). The focus on female congregants' responsibility for the success of their racial community via their care for their husbands and their children echoes Zora Neale Hurston's descriptions of black women as 'de mules eh of de world' (1998). By serving as the standard for women's parental and sexual politic within Believer's Baptist, the helpmate highlights the ways idealized femininities are shaped by the race, culture, and gender of the actors. Male religious authority figures' usage of Scripture and religious anecdotes to define idealized femininity reflects the ways in which the black church still serves as an institution which surveys and polices the sexuality of its congregants.

This study focused on the construction and enforcement of a hegemonic femininity within a black religious population. Whereas prior studies of gender hegemony categorized non-White hegemonic masculinity or femininity as *alternative* masculinities and femininities (Connell 2005), this work centered black men and women as performers of a unique black gender hegemonic structure. In presenting the ways an idealized religious femininity (the helpmate) reflects not only sexist of black womanhood, this study acknowledged the ways in which African American gender performance is simultaneously related to and resistant against patriarchal norms. The helpmate itself represents a raced form of white patriarchal norms while

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its enforcement at Believer's Baptist reflects a sexist standard for black women. Though respondents expressed a willing submission to male partners' decision-making and leadership skills, they also described the role as a conscious performance on their part and a mutually beneficial arrangement for themselves.

The women who endorsed such a role promoted it as beneficial to the marriage, themselves, and their spirituality. The 'helpmate' was less of a secondary role to those who signified it; they found ways to establish self-importance and value to their performance of this idealized femininity. Those who openly rejected the gender designations or the assignment of any type of roles enacted no type of signification to make it seem functional. Since they did not endorse or embrace the role they presented no desire to provide benefits to it. Although the helpmate role may be one that can prove potentially oppressive for women who are subjected to it, findings show that women have found spiritual and personal meaning in their designation. By signifying upon this designation and turning this role into a functional one, black religious women are enacting a subversive form of empowerment and tapping into a legacy of black spiritual practice.

Black religious women's signification on the hegemonic femininity of the helpmate, and the greater gender hegemonic idealized masculine-feminine relationship, shows that their endorsement of and participation in this role is nuanced. By signifying the role as beneficial to primarily the wife for her emotional and spiritual betterment, the women in my study show that the role is an active one in which they are able to express agency and autonomy in their performance. This signification also agrees with prior literature that shows women endorse such a role—and the gender hegemony it supports—because they believe it to be beneficial to themselves, their marriages, and their families (Lambert 2010). With black women and men

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historically being denied many of the luxuries associated with traditional breadwinner/homemaker roles (Charleston 2014) respondents' endorsement of the helpmate presents a counter narrative to the racist and sexist images of black women as controlling and emasculating of their male counterparts (Harris-Perry 2011). This study also highlights the way the helpmate identity an idealized femininity is uniquely constructed for black women in a predominantly black space. Though notions of submission are expressed regarding the identity, a focus on adding value to one's family and home serves a source of pride for the signifiers in this study.

Findings show that even amongst religious women there is variance and fluidity in the roles they perform and how they understand those roles. The site which these women were members of and the ideologies taught there were influential to these women's attitudes about gender roles within the church. Either by causing further endorsement of or fueling an outward resistance to such fixed roles, Believer's Baptist and its gender scripts had an impact.

The majority of the sample (N=28) came from one church with a specific denomination and convention affiliation. Further research into non-Southern Baptist black Protestants churches will provide more literature about the helpmate in non-Christian black religious populations. In focusing specifically on the helpmate role its partner—the head of house—is left out of the discussion. It is impossible to talk about femininity without talking about its relationship to masculinity (Schippers 2007) requiring that future research examine women's and men's attitudes about the role of the head in order to provide a more complete picture of this gender dynamic in black religious spaces. Also, black men have shown an awareness and support for woman's ministerial ordination (Simien 2004) and it would be of great use to race, gender, and religion studies to investigate their perception of the helpmate and their expected fulfillment of

the 'head' of house role. Focusing on non-married religious couples also would provide a fruitful expansion on this research, but investigating such a topic would prove more challenging since there are few events at the church geared toward couples who are not legally married.

None of my sample identified as a member of the LGBTQ community meaning that my sample is exclusively straight and cis female. Prior research has found that black lesbian partnerships displayed traditional breadwinner/homemaker behaviors and roles similar to those in dominant hetero partnerships (Moore 2011). An investigation into how roles such as the helpmate and the head may apply to non-heterosexual religious couples could greatly expand this line of research by showing how race, gender, and sexuality is influenced by religious roles and ideologies even when one's family structure is frowned upon or openly discredited from the pulpit.

It is also of import to note the obligations Believer's Baptist has to uphold the positions of the Convention. As Whitney, the daughter of a pastor, expressed, "gender roles are established through the conventions and not necessarily the churches themselves and so once churches either make the decision to leave the convention" but of course most conventions they're tied to financially." Though I have no evidence to support her claim of religious gender roles coming directly from Convention by-laws and rules, her quote is relevant nonetheless. Believer's Baptist affiliation with the Convention, like many churches who are part of formal church networks, drives a significant position of what they can and cannot do regarding women in leadership positions. It would be of benefit to the field of sociology for more investigation to into the dynamic of parent denomination convention and individual church. At Believer's Baptist, much of its stance on the black women congregation and the value of those women to church is steered by the rules of its white financial parent. As with many other white patriarchal norms and gender

practices (hooks 2014), the helpmate's enforcement and production within the nonwhite space of Believer's Baptist creates a unique raced performance of the role, yet its origins still lie in white supremacist values.

As problematic as placing sole responsibility for the success of the family on women may be, the black community's collective respect for female leadership, specifically mother figures (Finley 2012), is reflected in the reinforcement of the helpmate as an idealized mother and wife. Prior literature has discussed the ways in which hegemonic masculinity is reified by both men and women (Gorga 2017; Currier 2013) and this study of the helpmate as an idealized femininity shows that similar dual reinforcement occurs for idealized and hegemonic femininity. The parameters of the helpmate were defined not only by women interviewees but also by male preachers and teachers.

The women in this study are not mere victims of the helpmate ideology, with prescribed responsibilities and tasks defining their performance of the role but are active agents in the production of this role. This article highlights the ways in which black women's participation in and performance of the gender script of their church serves as a means of self-actualization for them. As institutional understandings of the helpmate may relegate her to a role of service and submission, respondents have navigated and reinterpreted the role to serve as a means of agency and power for the women who endorse it. This work also sheds a light on the many ways the helpmate role can be interpreted. The role itself is not problematic for the women in this study, but it does cause tension between their understandings of themselves as independent beings and their willingness to subscribe to the gender norms of their faith. Reminiscent of the "twoness" Du Bois (1909:7) described when referring to the "double consciousness" black Americans possessed in Emancipation-era America, respondents who endorsed the helpmate displayed an

awareness of themselves as strong and valuable black women while simultaneously navigating the restrictive expectations of their church and their faith (Bantum 2010).

The helpmate is a complicated figure. Its reinforcement of many black woman tropes proves problematic for black religious women, yet it also serves as a way for black religious women to undercut many stereotypes about their livelihood. The ability to display one's adherence to the religious gender scripts of their faith practice, and their willingness to submit to a partner, conflicts many racist narratives of black womanhood. With the black family being under constant attack since the days of slavery (The Freeman Institute), it is important to note the ways in which black women are able to exert agency over their familial choices and partnerships.

The lack of signification on the part of respondents who did not endorse the role reflects the variety of perspectives present among my sample. It is reasonable to assume that such variance also exists among other black religious women groups. This study also delved deeper into the meaning of the helpmate for black women who are expected to perform such a role. In their interpretations of the helpmate position, the women of this study displayed the empowering nature of signification in the presence of hegemonic gender norms in their places of worship.

The goal of this work is to expand both religious leaders' and scholars' understanding of black religious women. It is of great import that religious leaders address the complexity of the messages they share on womanhood and mothering. Though this paper focused on one black Baptist church, I observed similar notions of proper Christian womanhood in non-black religious services meaning that even when the helpmate is outside of a black context her potential impact is all the same—limiting to women. For religion and feminist scholars it is of much importance for women's agency in their faith practices and rituals be acknowledged as valid and complex. Many times, black religious women's devotion to their faith and their churches is framed as a

process of mere tradition (Kaiser Family Foundation; Labbé-DeBose 2012) without much nuance to the ways in which specific aspects of their faith give them fulfillment and empowerment even if they never touch a pulpit, lead a ministry, or exert a great show of leadership. Many studies of black religious women and the black church focuses on the exemplary acts of individual churchwomen (such as Nannie Burroughs, Maria Stewart, Mary Church Terrell, etc.) or the political and community activism engaged in those spaces. This work focused on respondents' resistance to misogynoiristic expectations of their roles as wives and mothers by emphasizing the employment of signification in reaction to the helpmate.

Chapter 3:
"We're All Women First": Feminist Identification Among Black Women in A Black Southern Baptist Church

Studies on feminist identification amongst women have found that though many women are supportive of feminist goals, they hesitate to explicitly self-identify as such. Religious values and racial identity have been found to influence individuals' feminist identification and their perceptions of the feminist movement. Amongst black women, non-identification has many times been linked to perceptions of the mainstream feminist movement as racist (Collins 2000; Morgan 2000). Much of the literature on black women's perceptions of feminism has addressed women who already openly identify (White 2006) or has referenced a black feminist politic specifically (Simien 2004).

Some religious women have been found to reject a feminist label due to a commitment to Biblically-defined gender roles (Suter and Toller 2006) while others believe their feminism and their religion work together (Dufour 2000; Kraus 2010). Many of these studies on religious women's feminist identification lack significant representation from black women who have been found to be significantly more religious than their white female counterparts (Labbé-DeBose 2012). Black religious women's self-identification has been less studied but deserves an investigation due to its potential expansion of knowledge about the intersections of religion, race, and gender in the lives of black women. Black religious women's feminist self-identification can also provide information about the perceptions these women hold about a movement that many times has been perceived as anti-black (Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003) and anti-Christian (Turner 2013). To investigate feminist identification among black religious women I ask:

1) What factors impact black religious women's feminist identification?

2) How does race and religion influence black religious women's attitudes about and

identification as feminist?

The focus of this paper is feminist self-identification amongst black religious women in a

predominantly black, Southern Baptist church in order to learn the influence their race and their

religious values have on their perceptions of the movement and their willingness to identify with

it. Using in-depth interviews from 30 respondents connected to one black, Southern Baptist

church in Southeastern Louisiana, I find that religion and race only proved influential in feminist

identification for a small set of respondents while perceived lack of involvement in the

movement was far more of a deterrent to identification. With a third of respondents identifying

with some brand of feminism (womanism or black feminism), my study shows that black

religious women have well-informed and nuanced understandings of feminism with many

participants expressing support of feminist goals.

Literature Review

Black Protestant Women

Black women compose the majority of most American Protestant, majority black

churches (Lomax 2016), yet within many Black churches women are excluded from ministerial

positions and other positions of "power[20]" while simultaneously being encouraged to accept

submissive designations in their homes as a model of proper Christian womanhood (Gilkes 2001;

Brice 2011). Their influence and presence within their places of worship have earned them the

designation of the "backbone" of the black church (Grant 1995). As womanist theologian

Jacquelyn Grant and several other critical scholars have noted, the label of backbone serves as a

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[20] Using Arthur Farnsley's definition of power as "the means to act whether one has Iity to do or
not" (1994)

back-handed compliment at best and at worst as a sobering commentary on black woman's position at the "back" of many pulpits and churches as whole (1995). Just as a backbone is integral to the body but invisible, so are many black women in their respective place of worship. Nevertheless, it is not all oppression and repression for black women in their respective religious communities.

With Women's Day celebrations[21] and opportunities to serve in positions of authority[22] —such as leaders of ministries and on deaconesses' boards (Gilkes 2001)—being prominent in many black Christian churches, it is easy to see why black women feel empowered in their churches. For many black women, the church serves as a space "where safe discourse potentially can occur" and it also serves as "prime locations for resisting objectification as the Other" (2000:111). Meaning that in a world in which their racial and gender designations leave them constantly battling a variety of oppressions and subjugations, the church serves as a place where black women are empowered and able to construct positive depictions of themselves (Harris-Perry 2011).

Even with the potentially anti-feminist messages of subordination and submission professed from many black churches, black women have been found to be supportive of feminist causes and overall redress of oppression. Political scientist Clyde Wilcox states "black women are more supportive of collective and governmental action to redress sexism at least in part because they favor such action to redress racism" (1990: 120). Black women's overall commitment to social justice lends itself to a support for women's rights or "developing a

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[21] A tradition incorporated by activist Nannie Burroughs in order to highlight and further the importance of black women in their churches,
[22] Defined by Arthur Farnsley as roles where the individual has "institutional legitimation for one's actions," (1994)

woman's consciousness" (Collins 2000:34) even more so than their white female counterparts (Simien 2004) suggesting that even with their spiritual ties, black religious women are likely to support feminist principles. Yet, Black women's support for feminist goals does not translate into explicit self-identification for multiple reasons. The social position of black religious women in their places of worship as both empowered and suppressed points to an intersection of race, gender, and religion that provides a fit space for analyzing how such women think of a movement "to end the imbalance of power between men and women" (White 2006:455). The discussion will now focus on the ways explicit feminist identification proves problematic for black and white women while also mentioning the ways self-identification proves more beneficial for women (and men) than support.

Perceptions of Feminism & Feminist Identification

Many studies on feminist identification have concluded that though women and men in their sample profess support for feminism (or the feminist movement), they choose not to self-identify as feminists (Suter and Toller 2006). Non-identification has been associated with: having negative connotations of the movement and its participants, feeling the movement threatened personal gender roles (Toller, Suter and Trautman 2004), not feeling a collective identity of womanhood (Roy, Weibust, and Miller 2007), and rejecting labels of any sort (Suter and Toller 2006). Even though many studies on feminist identification have lacked significant representations of African-American women in their sample, studies discussing black women's feminist identification indicate Black women do not differ from their white counterparts regarding feminist endorsement without identification (Martin and Hall 1992), but what is more nuanced is their reason for not identifying. Though they shared many of the same aversions to identification a major difference was the influence of race on their perceptions of the movement

and identification.

With a long history of tension between black feminists and white feminism surrounding the need for an intersectional movement (Simien 2004), a major source of dissuasion for many black women has been perceptions of feminism as a white women's movement in which their identity as black would be erased (Combahee River Collective 1983; Lorde 1984). Another opposition to feminism found amongst black women had to do with a higher attachment to one's race identity than their gender identity (Charter 2015; Simien 2005). Though there is a depth of literature speaking about black religious women's production and performance of a black woman centered theology in womanist literature (Cannon 1988; Grant 1989), there is still room to investigate how black religious women view feminism—which in this paper refers broadly to any anti-sexist movement—that is not centered around their faith.

Scholars have touched upon the influence of religion, specifically Christianity, and its prescribed gender roles on attitudes about feminism (Suter and Toller 2006). In their study of college age students', Suter and Toller state that "students' religious ideologies strongly influenced their views of proper performances of gender roles" (2006:143) with this tension between their religious gender prescriptions and feminist ideology causing them to have a negative view of feminism. Yet, fewer studies (Dufour 2000) address the impact of Christian identity on explicit identification. As previously mentioned, explicit self-identification is not a necessary component for women to support feminist causes and ideas, but it does serve as an apt gateway to learning women's perceptions of feminism (Moradi, Martin, and Brewster 2012). Self-identification is also important because it has been found to be a pre-cursor to collective action for social change—or at the very least support for it (Moradi et al. 2012; Nelson et al. 2008)—and positive self-esteem amongst identifiers (Roy et al. 2007).

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White women's exclusion of black women's voices and presence from both the first and second wave feminist movement (Taylor 2017) has proven to be a source of tension between feminism—or the women's movement—and black women (Simien 2004). White women's reliance on racist language and political tactics to secure many of their political goals (such as suffrage and reproductive rights) has also created a distance between themselves, as mainstream feminists, and black women (Davis 1981). With the problematic history of black women and feminism (Igenoza 2017) and the potential perception of threat to Christian gender roles amongst black religious women, it seems necessary to investigate what the feminist movement and feminist self-identification means to a majority black, exclusively Christian group of women.

Methods

Sample

I was familiar with most respondents prior to her interview and those I did not know personally were recommended through an associate who participated in my study. This familiarity made requesting interviews and constructing the interview guide easier due to the shared church, religious, and cultural knowledge. In order to ensure variance in marital status, educational status, and age, I purposefully sampled (Charmaz 2007) women in the church who came from different educational and economic backgrounds and differing age groups.

I conducted 30 interviews with women who ranged in age from 25-70 years old. All the women in this sample, except for two, currently attends or has attended Believer's Baptist. A majority of respondents (N=29), except for one, identifies as Black or African-American. All respondents identified as Christian with 'Baptist' being the largest denomination represented (N=21) and nondenominational being the other denomination represented. Respondents in this sample were actively involved in their church—meaning they spent time at the church outside of

service time on Sunday. This time spent usually involved some type of volunteering at the church, participation in a ministry event, or attendance in Sunday School[23]. Most "away"[24] members left the church due to relocation to other cities after their post-secondary education (going away to college, moving for jobs). Respondents who no longer attended BB were highly involved when they attended—usually during their childhood and teenage years.

Feminist Identification

Feminist identification amongst black women in a Southern Baptist church was the starting point of this project. In all versions of the interview guide, respondents were asked about their identification as feminist and their opinions of feminism. Since I expected respondents not to identify as feminist, due to literature on the phenomena amongst black women (Simien 2004; Collins 2000), I asked participants about their opinions of feminism and gender equality[25] in order to gather a more holistic picture of their attitudes about religion, feminism, and feminist identification. Questions surrounding gender equality explored respondents' attitudes about gender equality in the home, church, and workplace in order to gain thorough explanations of the concept. In the interview, respondents were asked about the term 'feminism' alone, as opposed to the feminist movement, since I wanted opinions on the ideology as a whole and exposure to feminism was varied amongst respondents. Many of the women expressed multiple of the above sentiments in their answers even if they fell in one category. Respondents were categorized based on their primary reasons for identifying or not identifying for the purposes of this paper.

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[23] a class focused on biblical messages in a smaller group setting
[24] women who were no longer attending Believer's Baptist (BB
[25] Support for gender equality has been found to be more prevalent than explicit support for feminism (Zucker and Bay-Cheng 2010)

After I transcribed the interviews I engaged in initial coding using the qualitative data analysis program Atlas.Ti. Initial coding was line by line with each line being coded with a distinct and unique identifier (Charmaz 2014). After coding the first ten interviews using line by line coding, the themes of feminist identification, feminism and Christ, and feminism definition became recurring themes between transcripts and no new data was becoming apparent from interview to interview. Next, I began focused coding using the codes 'FEM ID' (feminist identification), 'FEM DEF' (feminist definition), & 'FEM & CHRIST' (feminism & Christ).

Feminist identification was relevant because it referenced participants' explicit personal identification as feminist. A respondent's definition of feminism provided commentary on the individual's perception of, and response to, the ideology while 'feminism and Christ' provided me with insight into a participant's understating of feminism's potential relation to their personal religious beliefs. In order to obtain "FEM & CHRIST" I asked interviewees "Do you believe it is possible to be both feminist and Christian?" I analyzed all responses for common themes regarding feminism and feminist identification groups emerged, I then separated definitions of feminism by identification type (non-identifier, other identifier, or identifier) and analyzed until the themes discussed in the analysis below emerged from the data.

Results

After multiple rounds of data analysis, three groups of feminist self-identification emerged: Non-Identifiers (n=18), Other-Identifiers (n=4), and Identifiers (n=5)[26]. Though prevalent non-identification was to be expected amongst my sample, the variance in reasons for non-identification was of interest. Non-identifiers responded no to the question "Do you identify

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[26] It must be noted that of the 30 respondents, three expressed mixed or temporal identification indicating they sometimes identify as feminist or they failed to express explicit identification.

as feminist?" due to their resistance to labels, their perception of feminism as an affront to gender roles, and their perceived lack of activity within the feminist movement.

Non-Identifiers

Non-Identifiers explicitly rejected the label of 'feminist' in the study. Amongst non-identifiers, reasons for non-identification fell into three sections: resistance to labels, commitment to Biblically defined gender roles, and lack of active involvement in the feminist movement.

Resistance to Labels

The smallest subset of non-identifiers resisted the label of feminist due to a personal opposition to labels of any kind. This group expressed support for feminism and a support for women's equality in all areas of life but chose not to identify because of the perceived commitment to a label. As Leah, a 41-year old veteran, expressed:

> R: Uh yeah I'm not a big label person so I won't say that I identify as it but I do…believe that it is an individual female's right for whatever it is that she wants to do whether it's abortion, being on the front line…whatever it's the individual female's right to choose what they wanna do. (Leah, Interview 19, 2017)

Like Leah, 'label' non-identifiers resisted identification because of an opposition to committing to labels. Amongst these non-identifiers, support for gender equality in work, home, and church was present, but self-identification embodied a threat to a fluid self-perception that is not attached to any one identifier. Label-resistant non-identifiers understood feminism simply as a title. Though most showed a familiarity with the ideology it did not impact their identification status. One label-resistant participant had once adopted the label but felt a change in the meaning of the word made the label non-descriptive of her experience and that currently is "just a term that has been redefined in so many ways." Though she does not explicitly state a resistance to overall labels she does view feminism as "just a word" or a label that she chooses not to adopt.

Next, I will discuss the non-identifiers who had no problem with labels but resisted a

compromise or potential challenge to appropriate gender roles.

"There's Really No Place for Feminism": Feminism as an Affront to Biblical

Gender Roles

Women who rejected feminism due to its affront to biblical gender roles were the ones

for whom religious beliefs were an influential factor in their non-identification. These

respondents posited feminism as oppositional to their understanding of God-ordained roles for

men and women. All but one of the women in this group cited the Bible ("Word of God") as the

standard from which they derived these gender roles. Resistance to being outside of "the place

that God ordained" for women was a deterrent to identification because feminism brought to

mind a compromise of God's ordained gender roles and therefore drew aversion for some

respondents in either identifying with or defining the term:

> Um, again from a Biblical perspective, uh, I would say a little bit skewed in their
> thinking…when I think of feminism I just think it's a little bit hostile towards, um, the
> word of God (Hannah, Interview 9, 2017)

> I think it [feminism] means people that's saying I have as much power as a man. You
> know I can do whatever he do, I could do it greater or I could do it better and I'm better
> you know I'm just as equal to a man, you know, my role is just as important and I think a
> woman's role is important but I think a woman's role has the place that God ordained
> (Annette, Interview 10, 2017)

Of all the non-identifiers, the Biblical gender role respondents had the most negative perception

of feminism. Feminism was perceived as oppositional to not only traditional male as

head/woman as helpmate gender roles but to the Bible itself. Perceiving feminism as a threat to

their Christian values, specifically the Southern Baptist ideals their church preaches, led these

women to perceive feminism as anti-religious. For these respondents, feminism could not co-

exist alongside Christianity. Women in this group did express support for gender equality in the

workplace but were less equality-minded when the areas of the church and home. One respondent commented that she "encourages women to climb the corporate ladder but…the most important thing…should be your Christian values" implying that professional attainment is valid for women as long as they are fulfilling their proper gender roles according to their "Christian values" outside of the workplace. All of these women endorsed a commitment to a male-led church and marriage relationship. Feminism as an ideology represented a deviation from their spiritual allegiance. The next subset of non-identifiers focuses not on religious perceptions of the movement but expectations of inadequate involvement.

"Standing on the Front Lines Burning Bras": Involvement Tied to Activism

This subgroup's identification hinged on their perceived lack of active work (such as protesting, picketing) in the name of feminism. Some expressed support for the goals of the movement such as equal pay and reproductive justice but felt they did not need to identify as feminist in order to create change in their lives. Common in these responses was the language of "fighting," or "protesting" which further contributes to the notion that feminism is perceived as an active work not just an ideology or a belief system. When asked why she does not identify Evelyn, a 51-year old businesswoman, responded:

> R: So whatever I have, whatever I'm gonna have, I know it's already pre-destined for me. So it's like I don't need to fight for anything else. I think everything's ordered and whatever's gonna be is gonna be. I wanna make sure I always do what's right in any given situation but you're not gonna see me out there holding a sign up or anything. Not happening *laughs*. (Interview 14, Evelyn, 2017)

> R:…when you think of feminists you think of like those bold people standing on the front lines burning bras and things like that, which I don't see myself that way, but I do support you know some of the ideals some of the causes um yeah. (Belle, Interview 28, 2017)

In labeling feminists as "bold people that like burn the bras and stuff," Belle depicts the group as an active group of women. She references mainstream imagery of second-wave feminists who

"burn bras" (Suter and Toller 2006). Women in this group shared a support for gender equality in all areas and feminism but felt a lack of active work proved a barrier to identification. Attitudes toward feminism were positive and most expressed support for feminist ideals while maintaining their non-identification. For women in this group feminism is an ongoing movement that requires active participation in order to claim membership.

Amongst this group of non-identifiers, there were women who spoke of greater allegiance to their blackness than their womanhood driving their activism. Like the other activist-minded non-identifiers, these women tied their identification to their perceived level of active work against sexism. Unlike other non-identifiers, these women engaged in anti-racist work and felt their commitment to that work eclipsed their efforts against sexism. Though they expressed support for feminism they felt their efforts against sexism were secondary or passive, if existent. This separation does not automatically translate into a separation of their blackness and their womanhood in their individual lives, but it does show that these women believe both facets of their identity are separated in the work or "fight" they conduct against identity-specific oppressions. Both women in this category compared their current community activism against racism to their efforts against sexism:

> I: A lot of my fight is around racism that really centers around men. Um, and by product we benefit, uh, but I hadn't backed down from the feminist stand of the rights of women but I don't fight it. (Ida, Interview 6, 2016)

> I: I don't give myself that title um because I don't do the work if I'm honest like of being a feminist…I would say that I'm an advocate for feminist[s]…but I wouldn't call myself that cause I'm not actively doing that work. In the same way I would call myself an anti-racist, I would call myself that because I'm actively doing that work. (Assata, Interview 24, 2017)

Assata's inability to identify as feminist speaks to a separation of race and gender as displayed by her belief to actively fighting a racial battle while passively supporting feminist work. The

women perceiving feminism as a work separate from their current work fighting racism implies a separation of blackness and womanhood. In negotiating their place as black persons in our society these women have chosen to presently work against the influence they perceive most threatening to their race over identifying with a movement that potentially betters their position as women in society. Ida asserts that she supports feminist work, and when faced with issues of women's rights she has advocated for them, yet when it comes to the fight she identifies with most it is that which pertains to her race. Black women's choice of fighting racial battles over gender ones is not unique to this sample. Constantly living in the tension between loyalty to race (black men) and loyalty to gender (non-black women), some black women have been found to identify with race over gender (Moore 2011).

The women in this subset of the non-identifiers were not alone in addressing the connections or potential conflict of their race and gender. Where they chose not to identify due to choosing race-work over gender-work another group of respondents chose to incorporate both identities into their identification as an 'other' type of feminists.

Other-Identifiers

In this category women expressed a support for feminist goals and ideas while identifying with another label other than 'feminist' to convey their sociopolitical stance. All of the women in this group perceived identifying as feminist as endorsing a white-exclusive movement and chose other labels as means of expressing their own support of inclusive anti-sexist movements (Simien 2004). This distancing from feminism due to its perceived racial exclusivity is not a unique phenomenon amongst women of color, particularly black women. Moradi et al. state that, "despite Women of Color's instrumental roles in the feminist movement, for some Women of Color, the legacy of feminism as a movement that prioritizes White women's concerns over

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issues of racism may continue to shape construal of a feminist identity" (Moradi et al 2012: 206).

This distancing from the term 'feminist' due to perceptions of the feminist movement as functional for only white women led some respondents to adopt an alternative identifier for their support for women's rights.

The four women who explicitly identified as either womanist or black feminist cited feminism's long-standing perception as a white woman's cause as their reason for not identifying. When asked why she identified as womanist, Maria, a 29-year old single woman, stated:

> Well just because feminism is usually a term that is embraced and overused by white women not necessarily women of color. Um so when I think of feminists I don't think of a unified community of people that are fighting for the rights of all women. It tends to be segregated I guess you can say and I say womanist because it's more inclusive (Interview 15, 2017)

Kiki, who identified as black feminist, cited inability to relate to white women's struggles and white women's lack of effort to include and understand black women's perspective as the reason for not identifying as a feminist:

> We're all women first. We should be able to say oh honey let's, let's unite let's do this but …I know when black women were given the right to vote. I know how this works. I know what we were doing in suffrage that we weren't included in that so I can't be on your level. I'm not that kinda feminist. I'm a black feminist. (Interview 22, 2017)

Kiki supports the notion that there is room for unification across race on women's issues but she juxtaposes that possibility for unity with white women's prior failure to support black women's suffrage and concludes that joint organizing and activism is not possible for her and potentially for women as collective.

All of the women displayed familiarity with anti-sexist movements and most were highly supportive of gender equality in all areas of life. Whereas prior scholars have attributed black women's association of feminism with white women to their non-identification, amongst my

respondents such a perception led to subscribing to a different brand of feminism but identifying

along the feminist spectrum nonetheless. Other identifiers displayed a more in-depth knowledge

of multiple brands of feminism than other groups. Each person in this group (N=3) self-identified

as black feminist or womanist without any prompting from me. Compared to identifiers, who

explicitly identified with the broad label of feminist, the other identifiers were the only ones to

select an alternative label to their anti-sexism. Finally, I will discuss the explicit identifiers

within the study.

Feminist Identifiers

For identifiers (N=5), themes of work and advocacy appeared in their definition of

feminism, but identification was not mitigated by the amount of work they performed for the

feminist cause. Though advocacy and "encouraging women" can be perceived as a form of

active labor, many identifiers' definition of feminism did not list physical forms of activism such

as picketing, protesting, or "holding a sign." In many definitions feminism was described simply

as an ideology which they endorsed because they agreed with the principles of women having

equal access to opportunity:

> Um because I've been told, once again I've been married before and I've been told there's
> certain things women are not supposed to do and I can't identify with that, you know so I
> have to, hey whatever I put my mind to, if you feel like that's what men only do that's
> on you but I'mma do it anyway okay and I'mma support the next woman and
> whoever else who needs that push to get to where they need to be and support their
> dreams so I'm all for women rights. We have a right to do whatever we want to do.
> (Dina, Interview 18, 2017)

> We're all free, this is America we're all free whatever but I should be able to do
> whatever the hell I wanna do and you shouldn't be able to tell me I can't do it so I feel, I
> really feel like I could do whatever I put my mind to that's how I you know like and you
> shouldn't be able to discourage me or put me down or anything just cause you feel like I
> can't do it because I'm a woman. That's a weak excuse you know (Amy, Interview 16,
> 2017)

For Amy and Dina, supporting feminism aligns with their ability to exercise their freedom as a human being. Both women expressed a sentiment that was common amongst all identifiers: viewing feminism as a destruction of gender barriers to opportunity. The construction of feminism as an ideology that supports and empowers women was the overall theme amongst identifiers. Freedom and upward mobility were the major reasons given for their identification. Each of these women identified as Christian and were involved in ministries at their respective churches, yet religion was not a part of their responses. Feminism for identifiers was seen as a way to combat gender roles, biblical or otherwise, which they viewed as barriers to the success of women.

As Annie explained when asked about their compatibility, "the principles of feminism that I stand on are all Biblical principles." Though all identifiers endorsed that one can be feminist and Christian there was also acknowledgement of the limited roles of women in the Bible. Speaking about women in the Bible, Dina recalls "the woman wasn't really looked at as a positive type thing," suggesting that the roles for women within the Bible and Christianity were limiting and potentially even demeaning. When speaking about feminism and Christianity, most identifiers cited the negative depictions of women as the by-product of outdated interpretations of the Bible or Convention-based traditions that had nothing to do with the religion. Ultimately, identifiers endorsed the belief that regardless of Biblical text or church restrictions on ordination women deserved to be treated equally in all aspects of church life. They either pointed to positive depictions of women in the Bible or their personal belief that God created women and men equally. Their engagement with the intersection of their feminist and Christian identities is best summed up by Amy's explanation of her faith:

> Certainly God does not think because you're a woman you should be walked all over...God is a God of love. He doesn't, he didn't put you on Earth for you to be ruled by

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someone else you know what I mean to be put under someone else so…yeah I think you can be a feminist and Christian totally

For identifiers, their faith and their feminism went hand in hand. Like Amy, many identifiers used the God of their faith to support and endorse their feminist beliefs. Unlike the gender non-identifiers these women used the Bible and the practices of their faith to support their feminist identification and endorsement not oppose it. Most women in this group displayed an in-depth knowledge about feminism as both an ideology and a brand of activism. Their knowledge of feminist foundational principles, such as gender equality and the resistance to male supremacist norms (White 2006), led them to self-identify with the general label with no qualifiers. By fitting their personal understandings of their faith with their personal belief about the place of women in society, these women created a space where feminism and faith coincided. Feminism for them was simply an ideology that, like their Christianity impacted, their outlook on the world.

Discussion

Black religious women are not a monolith. In a sample of 30 women it is important to note the variance amongst the respondents. Black religious women are not identifying as feminist for a multitude of reasons—but only few (N=6) had to do with belief that feminism is a 'white' movement or that feminism was a threat to Christian gender roles. Black women's history of activism and community involvement (Gilkes 2001) point to a resistance to identify with a movement they are not actively working for was confirmed by the subset of non-identifiers who cited 'lack of activity' as their reason for resisting identification. By not engaging in traditional means of protest against sexism, many women in my sample felt unfit to claim the title of feminist. The determining factor in feminist self-identification for the religious women in this study was the impact of personal perceptions of feminism. For women who believed feminist identification warranted high levels of physical involvement and activism in the feminist

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movement, lack of activity proved to be a barrier to identification. For women who perceived feminism as a simple label, a resistance to labels proved deterring to identification. For women who perceived feminism as opposed to Biblical roles, a commitment to those roles was the barrier to identification. Overall women who had more expansive knowledge of feminism and its history (e.g. Dina referencing the black women's delayed suffrage) seem more likely to identify with some brand of feminism.

Much literature exists about the sexist norms and ideologies in the Christian faith and other religious sects (Harris-Perry 2011) and there are alarmingly problematic aspects of Believer's Baptist. What this chapter has shown is that even amongst these potentially harmful ideologies and traditions, black women still display nuanced and informed understandings of feminism. Some women identify as feminist and find ways to coalesce both of these identities, with almost a third of my sample identifying as a member of some part of the feminist spectrum. As shown in this paper, black women are well aware of feminism and the impact of sexism in their lives. The term feminism elicits potential conflicts or combinations of identities amongst the women in my sample but all the same it points to the complex nature of black women's existence in American institutions like the church. Though my entire sample considered themselves religious, faith only played a determining role in identification for a small set of women implying that, though important, Christian principles are not perceived by all as anti-feminist or anti-woman. As shown by the identifiers, understandings of Christianity were seen as predecessors to feminist identification displaying that members of the Christian faith are receptive of feminist ideals.

What was common to all groups was an overwhelming support for gender equality in multiple facets of life—work, church, and home. Even when expressing resistance to the label of

'feminist' or the ideology of feminism, respondents expressed support for the equal treatment of women. As shown in prior literature on black women's attitudes regarding feminism and black feminism (Simien and Clawson 2004), black women are overall supportive of feminist goals and ideas. Despite racist narratives of black femininity as overbearing and emasculating (Frazier 1939), black women in my sample still express strong support for the equal treatment of men and women in multiple facets of life.

This project shows that black religious women have varying perceptions of feminism and are well informed about feminist ideals and work. Religion was only a deterrent to identification for a minority of the women in my sample showing that religion was not a large interacting factor for the majority of respondents. This study also showed that religion was not simply a deterrent to identification for respondents because some women believed their understanding of their faith went hand in hand with their support of and identification as feminist. This finding als Though their religious faith is very important to them, as shown by their involvement in their respective places of worship and their pronouncements of their beliefs within the interviews, black women do not inherently view their religion and feminism as oppositional. Despite the historical and contemporary exclusion of black voices from mainstream white feminist discourse and activism (Ortega 2006), the majority of participants did not mention race as a factor in their identification. This does not mean that my respondents do not hold such views it only suggests that race was not a major deterrent to their identification as feminist.

Many respondents possessed at least a Bachelor's Degree which means the sample is very "educated," with 22 respondents possessing at least a bachelor's degree. This could have implications for understandings and familiarity with feminism and the feminist movement. Though it did not appear to have any bearing upon identification since the majority of my

respondents did not identify, sampling those with only a high school diploma could provide more insight to feminism's (black or otherwise) impact on those who are not college educated and could tell more about feminism's ability to resonate outside of colleges and universities.

In sampling only women, a conscious choice on my part, black men's voices have been left out of the feminist identification conversation. As Evelyn Simien and Rosalee Clawson (2004) found in their study on black feminist consciousness amongst black people, black males expressed slightly more support for black feminism than their female counterparts indicating that black men do understand and are impacted by black feminist ideologies and beliefs. As one of my participants noted, "a win for women is a win for everyone" meaning that both black men and women benefit from the uplift of black women. Expanding this research to include black men's voices would provide a necessary look at black men's ideas about religion, feminism, and black women.

All respondents in my sample were straight, cis women. An expansion on this research would do well to consider the implications of religion and feminism within the LGBT religious population. Possessing a significant presence within black Baptist church congregations across the country (Pitt 2010), black LGBT religious persons are a marginalized group whose presence is many times erased from the narratives of most Black Christian churches. Unlike black straight women who are relegated to a submissive or secondary role within my site, LGBT members of the church are many times acknowledged only when their sexuality is being denounced from the pulpit (Valera and Taylor 2011). As persons who have been influential and integral in many of our Black institutions, especially the black church experience, it would benefit religion, race, and gender research and scholarship to learn more about the impact of both feminism and religion on Black queer persons.

In the interest of educating black women on feminism it is important to dispel myths that feminist identity requires protesting and marching. Though active participation is helpful to feminist organizations, there are several ways enacting a personal feminist politic can benefit the individual woman without her "burning bras" and "making signs." Also, exposure to different brands of feminism and racially inclusive depictions of the movement could improve black religious women's willingness to identify as feminist. As prior literature has shown, exposure to both self-identified feminists and positive depictions of feminism (Moradi et al. 2012; Yoder, Perry, and Saal 2007) can prove influential in the lives of black religious women. Though the majority of the sample did not cite gender roles or race as a barrier to identification it is important to note that many Christian women and men do hold these beliefs about feminism. (Suter and Toller 2006) Both feminists and Christians could benefit from discussions about the place of religion-derived gender roles in contemporary society. It is unrealistic to expect all Christian feminists to abandon gender norms derived from their religious practices, and it would be very close-minded to inherently assume that such gender roles are inherently oppressive or marginalizing to the women who subscribe to them. As found in chapter 2 of this dissertation, gender roles can prove empowering and fulfilling to those who endorse them and there is much to learn about perceptions of feminism from women who perform such roles. Respondents' feminist identification (or non-identification) is not unilaterally tied to any one source but is impacted and understood in a variety of nuanced ways. The women in this study have proven that their racial, spiritual, and gender social location intersects to create a unique and necessary commentary on feminist ideology.

Chapter 4:
"If You're a Christian, You're a Feminist": Religious Feminist Identity Reconciliation Among Black Religious Women

Whereas many religious women have found ways to reconcile a feminist identity with a religious one, (Dufour 2000) others experience stress and conflict when confronted with the two identities they see as conflicting (Cozart 2010). Due to the patriarchal norms of many Christian denominations (Bendroth 2001) and the anti-sexist nature of many feminist movements, (Collins 2000) many people see the identities as conflicting. Yet, less is known about Christian women who do not explicitly identify as feminist but support feminist goals. Particularly black religious women who, as a group, have a contentious history with the mainstream feminist movement dating back to the times of slavery, yet have a long-standing support of feminist efforts and activism (Springer 2002). Most studies on religious feminist identity reconciliation focus on predominantly Caucasian samples (Dufour 2000; Ecklund 2003) with little attention paid to women who have a culturally unique connection to their faith practice—such as black women and southern Christianity.

In order to investigate the religious feminist reconciliation process enacted by black religious women I ask the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of a feminist religious identity reconciliation process amongst black religious women who support feminist ideology?

2. For those who do not reconcile the two identities, what factor proves most important in their understanding of the identities as conflicting?

Expanding black feminist religious scholar Dr. Tamura A. Lomax's idea of a black feminist religious thought (Lomax 2016), I interviewed thirty women connected to one predominantly African American, Southern Baptist church to learn more about a black feminist religious

practice to reconcile a feminist and religious identity. Results indicated three common tenets of a black feminist religious practice: an acknowledgement of the problematic nature of Christianity for women, feminism as beneficial to Christian women, and feminism and Christianity working toward the same goal of gender equality. This study contributes to understandings of identity reconciliations amongst religious persons while also expanding knowledge about black religious women's relationship to feminism. The purpose of this chapter is to suggest a foundational outline for a black religious practice to parallel the ever-growing body of literature on black feminist religious thought (Lomax 2016; Lomax 2018).

Literature Review

Identity Formation

Though this study focuses on the merging or reconciling of already formed identities, it is necessary to briefly address the process of forming a social identity—such as feminist, religious, or racial. The formation and/or adoption of a racial identity serves as an apt point to enter the discussion of how identities are formed. Race scholar William E. Cross, in his work *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity,* discusses the formation of a black identity. His five-point model of nigrescence, or "the process of becoming black" (1991:147), details the steps that facilitate one's awareness and experience as a black person (Neville and Cross 2017). According to Cross, accepting and embracing a black identity is a deliberate and traceable process that ultimately ends in a common identification as black which "involves a wide spectrum of thought and orientations" (149).

Ethnicity scholar Richard A. Davis suggests that a common black ethnicity is a myth, but he does support the notion that identification with people of common origin or interests is a choice (1997) which then impacts one's behavior and practices. Racial identity formation is

"often seen as parallel to other forms of status-based groups identity" (Omi and Winant 2015:22) due to similar processes of group identity formation such as feminist, woman, or religious. Regardless of the identity that is adopted, many identity formation processes end in a step similar to Cross' model—internalization commitment (Walker, Hernandez, and Davey 2012; Chansaengsee et al. 2017; Ramirez, Ashley, and Cort 2014). In this final, step the "new identity is internalized, evidencing itself in naturalistic ways in the everyday psychology of the person" (1991:210) meaning that the identifier has fully accepted their identity and are now capable of incorporating it into their daily lives. In Cross' work, a complete acceptance of one's racial identity makes room for the exploration of other identities such as gender or religion, yet as other scholars have shown the separating or prioritizing of one identity (blackness) over others does not prove useful nor productive for those who have multiple intersecting marginalized identities (Collins 2000; Noy and Brien 2018; Crenshaw 1991). This research views feminist and Christian identities as not secondary to an internalized racial identity, but as being established in tandem to one's blackness.

Do Feminism and Christianity Compete?

Rectifying a religious identity with a perceived non-religious (or secular) identity such as feminist (Dufour 2000), homosexual (Winder 2015), or academic (Cozart 2010) can be a source of "high levels of stress" (Wedow et. al 2017: 293) for religious persons who see the two identities as competing. These trends are no different for black religious members of African-American Protestant churches. Within many black churches specifically, patriarchal traditions and ideology abound from women's exclusion from preaching to assertions of women as supportive but submissive helpmeets (Bendroth 2001) leading many to argue that the black church and feminism of any kind cannot coexist (Burk 2013).

Yet, many find ways to cope with competing identities by either choosing one identity over the other or finding a way to integrate them (Wedow et. al 2017; Ecklund 2003). Interestingly enough, not all religious persons who engage a seemingly conflicting identity experience conflict or stress maintaining both identities (Fuist 2016). For example, researchers have found that religious women implore a multitude of identity reconciling processes such as "sifting" (Dufour 2000) and "setting intention" (Kraus 2010) to combine their religious and secular identities with minimal conflict and stress. This means that variety exists in the reconciliation process for religious persons. Much of this research on feminist religious identity reconciliation describes the relationship between religious women who explicitly identified as feminist. Less investigated is the presence of a similar identity reconciliation process for women who do not explicitly adopt the 'feminist' label yet believe the two identities are highly compatible.

Black Women's Religious Feminist Identity Reconciliation

With the knowledge that black religious women actively engage feminist ideology, some explicitly adopting a feminist identity, it is necessary to learn more about the reconciliation process used to construct a feminist religious identity for black women. Black feminist religious practice, the performance of black feminist religious thought in the lives of black religious Christian women, is one means by which African America women merge feminist and Christian identities and ideologies. Though black feminist practice is the process of feminist religious identity reconciliation covered in this paper, it is necessary to note previous scholarship about the combining of an anti-sexist religious politic.

In order to combat some black churches' inability to "empower and nurture more than one half of its own constituency, Black women" (Douglas 1998:4), black female theologians and

scholars rose to provide an understanding of God that advocates for the inclusion of black women and their voices within black religious traditions (Grant 1989; Cannon 1996; Douglas 1999). This new paradigm became known as womanism. Alice Walker defines a womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color" (Walker 1983: xi). Yet, much womanist scholarship has been commodified "within the academic study of religion" meaning that its methodological and theoretical usefulness has become limited in its ability to address feminist practice and politic outside of the black Christian church (Coleman 2006:93). Black feminist religious scholar Tamura A. Lomax states "black women's religion insists on central space in black feminist discourse" (2016: 22). Though much black feminist and womanist[27] literature examines black women's ways of being (Gist 2017) in the world, it does not specify the ways religious women make room for feminist ideology within their male-dominated spaces which they still patronize and frequent. For the purpose of this paper, both black feminist and womanist understandings of the black church and black women's complicated relationship to it combine to inform the black religious feminist practice(s)? outlined here. The same way that womanist and black feminist scholarship has tenets that identify their respective practice, such an outline is needed for a black feminist religious practice.

Standing on the shoulders of her black feminist and womanist foremothers, Lomax states that "black women's religion, and the black church specifically, should matter to black feminists" (2016:30) because black feminist religious thought provides a space which is not rooted in theology or religious studies—as much womanist religious scholarship is—but instead rooted in cultural and feminist criticism. Women of color across a breadth of religious walks of

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[27] Several black feminist and womanist scholars (Coleman 2006) use the two terms interchangeably. For the purposes of this paper both terms will be treated as separate bodies of work which both contribute to the establishment of a black feminist practice.

life find themselves in tension between their faith, their gender, and an anti-sexist politic. In her study of black female Muslim hip-hop artists, Anaya McMurray highlights the way improvisation in music allows black Muslim women create space for themselves in hip hop and popular black culture (2008). A focus on the agency and choice of black women to participate in and support the black church (Wiggins 2005) is necessary to an examination of their faith and its coexistence with a feminist practice. Many scholars have shown that black women fill black churches because they choose to do so (Cone 2011; Floyd-Thomas 2006).

Black feminist religious thought, as proposed by Lomax, is a methodological and theoretical venture into the examination of "knowledge and meanings about who black Christian women are and how they should be in the world" (19). A black feminist religious thought provides useful opportunities to further examine the complexities of black women's religious beliefs and experiences, but as Patricia Hill Collins notes, when discussing black feminist thought, "black feminist practice requires black feminist thought, and vice versa" (2000: 31). Meaning that, without black feminist practice the potential theoretical and epistemological gains of black feminist thought are lost on the people they were created to help—black women. Black feminist religious thought, or practice, does not reinvent the wheel regarding black women, their feminism, and the church. It simply narrows the focus to black religious women—and for this paper black, Southern Baptist women—in order to provide a clearer picture of a potential religious feminist practice.

Why do Non-Identifiers Matter in a Church?

Though feminism and religion has been studied before, black religious women's seeming multitude of reasons—such as white feminists' racism and expectations of stronger race identification—for resisting a mainstream feminist identity (Simien 2004) leaves much to be

learned about how religion and feminism are reconciled by black religious women, if at all. Though identification is the goal of many studies, women who do not identify still express support and positive attitudes about the ideas of feminism (Moradi et al. 2012) and it is these women's perspectives who are less studied regarding the reconciliation of the two identities. Though identification has many benefits, a positive reconciliation of the two identities can still prove fruitful for black religious women in both religious and non-religious spaces.

Meaning that, even though religious women may not identify as feminist their endorsement of feminist goals and ideas within religious spaces can provide positive attitudes and images about feminism for other members of their respective churches (Roy et al. 2007) Evelyn Simien found that black religious men and women endorsed a black feminist consciousness (2004). This support for feminist goals has translated into an overall compulsion to redress oppression such as racism, sexism, and even classism (Wilcox 1990). Regardless of explicit identification, black women have a history of supporting and creating a feminist politic. With a sample that predominantly does not self-identify as feminist (18 out of 30 respondents), this study explores the mechanism black religious women use to reconcile a religious feminist identity.

Methods

Feminism and Christianity

This paper is based off data collected from 30 qualitative interviews conducted with black women who self-identified as Christian, with most claiming 'Baptist' as their denomination. The interview guide (in Appendix) was constructed over a two-year period from February 2015 to May 2017. The interview covered topics from church involvement to feminist identification with the responses to the question "Is it possible to be both feminist and

Christian[28]?" being the basis of this paper. Of the 30 respondents interviewed, only 24 gave a response to this question that explicitly answered the question using "yes" or "no." Of those 24, 20 believed feminism and Christianity could co-exist with 4 stating reconciliation was impossible. I coded all answers to this question as "FEM & CHRIST." This question was a part of the initial interview guide since my interest in feminism also included interest in interviewees' belief that a Christian woman could also be feminist. No racial identifiers were attached to the question in order to elicit the most general response about the potential of being both Christian and feminist. This chapter differs from the preceding two in that it focuses less on organizing respondents into discrete groups based on their responses to a given questions and more on identifying common aspects, as they arose from the data, of a feminist religious identity reconciliation process amongst black religious women.

Feminist Identification

Twenty-eight out of thirty respondents are current or past members of Believer's Baptist (BB), with two belonging to churches in the same region. Those two participants are ordained ministers at their respective southern, Christian churches making them the only clergy members in the sample. All but one respondent self-identified as black or African-American. All respondents are highly involved in their respective churches with each person being a part of at least one church ministry, an obligation which requires attendance and participation outside of the regular services on Sunday morning. All respondents currently attend a church or were in the process of searching for a new church. Respondents who did not currently attend BB were members in their childhood and youth years and were usually brought to the church by a parent

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[28] The term "Christian" is used in the interview guide to refer to the Christian faith as a whole while the term 'feminist' was used to refer to all brands of feminism including black feminism, womanism, womynism due to most respondents' lack of familiarity with other types of feminism

or guardian. Respondents were over the age of 18 and were asked to participate by I via social media, phone, or in-person. Though feminist identification is not the focus of this paper, it is relevant to the analysis of the data collected. Feminist self-identification amongst respondents was majority not identifying (N=18), identifying as other (N=3), explicitly identifying (N=5), and no identification given (N=3).

Routine use of the same interview guide kept both I and the participant on topic during interviews, reducing the amount of personal conversation during the discussion. Deliberate construction of interview questions using the work of other qualitative scholars (Charmaz 2014; Holstein and Gubrium 1995) adjusted any researcher bias on the responses. Respondents were broadly informed of the subject of the interview (feminism, gender equality, and religion) prior to the actual interview.

Findings

As found in prior studies on religious identity reconciliation, many women felt little to no conflict between feminism and Christianity. Throughout this section I will identify and describe three statements common patterns amongst responses: 1) Perception of Christianity as problematic, 2) Perception of feminism as beneficial for Christians, 3) Perception of feminism and Christianity working toward the same goal against oppression. In order to support these beliefs, scriptural references and stories were referenced along with personal experience in their church and personal life.

Christianity as Problematic for Women

The first tenet of the black feminist religious practice was that respondents referenced the descriptions of women in the Bible and a Biblically-based gender hierarchy in their faith as contributors to this belief. In addressing the ways in which their church and their text of faith

contribute to oppressive and limited depictions of women, respondents commented on the

complex nature of their religious association:

> I: Okay cool, cool um and is it possible to be both feminist and Christian?
> R: That's where I struggle. I mean I think, I think so um I think so but you know
> Christianity like the basis of it is a hierarchy of power in a sense. Um God, man, woman
> so that's a struggle for me on paper *laughs (Karen, Interview 20, 2017)

> Cause I think a lot of times uh I mean you know the Bible is based on patriarchy so the
> things that people really, really believe and feel is based on that you know so being able
> to separate your personal societal hangups about patriarchy and things like that and going
> from what you think really is the Word of God and what's best for that person. (Amy,
> Interview 16, 2017)

Karen speaks of an explicit gender hierarchy present in Christianity and how such a dynamic

places women subordinate to men in many senses. Recognizing the problematic nature of

Christianity shows there are aspects of the religion that are not of service to women.

Acknowledging the problematic nature of Christianity sets the foundation for a remedy for the

subordinate placement of women within the faith. Karen speaks of Christianity as a whole

supporting a gender-based "hierarchy of power." Acknowledgement of the problematic nature of

Christianity speaks to a possession of self-awareness among black religious women. For most

respondents, the symbols of the gender hierarchy in their church such as exclusion of women

from preaching were not deterrents to their participation in the church. Other participants

acknowledged the disparate gender practices of their faith and took action to not support

churches which did not allow equal opportunities for women:

> R: At this point in my journey, churches that are not excited about any version of women
> in ministry are not really a good fit for me (Nala, Interview 12)

Nala's declaration that she cannot see herself comfortable in a church where women were not

allowed to preach suggests activism in response to women's exclusion from the pulpit. Refusing

to support churches where women are not given an equal voice in the pulpit is an enactment of

black religious feminist practice in that it ties action with anti-sexist ideology. Though these women still participate in churches or denominations that enforce patriarchal norms, respondents express an awareness of their position as women within Christianity and some take action to rectify such inequality.

Feminism as Beneficial to Christians

Despite the seeming contradiction between feminism, an ideology focused on the liberation of women, and Christianity, an ideology which relies heavily on the subordination of women in places of power, respondents acknowledged the benefits of feminism to Christian women. Roxie, a minister at a dually-aligned Baptist Church, highlights the benefit feminism provides for women in religious spaces:

> R: you need to be an advocate you got to have a love for women and the positions that they hold in life, being a daughter, a sister, the wife, the mother, the grandmother you know all these roles that women play just in living from one age to the next and helping each other grow and understand how to transition from one stage of life to another, things that are specific to being a woman (Roxie, Interview 30, 2017)

Feminism as beneficial to women and the opportunities a feminist minister can provide for women in their congregation are support for identifying as both feminist and Christian. The belief that feminism was a benefit to women was also prevalent among respondents. The valuing of feminist goals and leanings in conjunction with Christian values presents a reconciling of the two ideologies for the good of Christian women. According to respondents, feminism is viewed as a means of support and "necessary because of the concept of society" while Christianity is considered an open space for feminist advocacy. Even those who do not identify as feminist explicitly provide examples of the ways feminism could be of benefit to Christian women:

> I: Okay cool, cool, cool um and is it possible to be both feminist and Christian?
> R: Yes
> I: Okay cool and how so?

R: Um I think feminists you know their cause is to advocate for women so I would see feminist wanting to fight for equal opportunities in the church for all women to hold all positions to not have any positions withheld from a woman but that doesn't and I could see them using 'made in God's image' as their scriptural support for their you know their um their stance. I don't think there's anything anti-Christian about being a feminist. (Susan, Interview 23, 2017)

Susan depicts Christian feminists as advocating for the rights of women within the church. Working toward equal representation for women with support from the Bible speaks to a depiction of feminism as useful and helpful for Christian women. In painting feminism as not "anti-Christian," space for a joint politic is established. In acknowledging the problematic nature of Christianity, respondents used Biblical references and stories to support feminist work in the church. Both Roxie and Susan mention active work on the part of feminists to establish equality for women within churches. Embedded in these positive notions of feminism in Christian spaces is the assumption that feminism and faith do not conflict or oppose one another.

Christianity & Feminism Working Together

A black feminist religious practice recognizes the joint benefit of Christianity and feminism in the lives of Christian women. Respondents acknowledge the cooperation of Christianity and feminism by supporting feminist ideas with gender equal rhetoric and ideologies from their faith. Many respondents expressed a sentiment that Christianity and feminism were in fact one in the same due to their common goals of equality:

I: Yeah, I gotcha. In what ways is it possible to be both feminist and Christian?
R: I think when you look at it holistically, um, you know being Christian basically means to love one another as Christ loves the church and to, you know, just that premise alone. The fact that you have breasts and a vagina should not determine like you know, your lack of, you know, being a Christian. So I feel like with the two, I mean, I feel like it's just one in the same because if you're a Christian, you're a feminist because you're by default for not only men, but for all of us so. (Felicia, Interview 8, 2016)

Felicia positions the two identities as the same because she believes Christianity is support for all genders which is also a main goal of feminism. Since Christ loves all people, Christians are also

to love all people and one's gender should not be a deterrent from receiving that love. Understanding Christianity and feminism as both movements toward gender equality represents reconciliation for respondents. Other respondents point to Jesus' ministry, as documented in the Bible, and his use of women in his ministry as proof that feminism and Christianity complement each other. Belle, the wife of a head pastor, reflected on Jesus' affiliation with women:

> R: From some of the stories in the New Testament like Jesus had his disciples but he also had a lot of women around him. He had Mary, he had Martha so he had and like he just interacted and he encountered a lot of women and he saw them as equal. He didn't look down on them, he treated them just like everyone else so um I would say yes you can be um both a feminist and a Christian because you know taking that stance from as long as you're taking it from scripture if you're taking it outside of that but I'd say no but yeah (Belle, Interview 28, 2017)

Belle's support of feminist goals using the life of the founder of the faith, Jesus, points to a black feminist religious practice in which Christianity and feminism support each other and work together for the equal treatment and placement of women in religious spaces. Just as many religious scholars positioned Jesus as an anti-racist (Cone 1975), many respondents described Jesus as a supporter of women who would see no benefit to excluding them from his ministry. By marrying scripture and gender equal ideology, the black religious women in my site identify and practice a black religious thought which is empowering and uplifting for other religious women.

Christian Values Overrule Other Identities

Though the majority of respondents reconciled feminism and Christianity, there were respondents who did not believe feminism could co-exist with Christianity. Those who did not value a feminist identity saw no need to reconcile the two because their religious identity was the most salient. Respondents with a strong religious identity saliency positioned the two identities as contradictory of one another. Most referenced their Christian identity as the guide of not just

their religious life but of their life as whole. Hannah, a married businesswoman, asserts the

prominence of the Bible over other influences in one's life:

> B: Right. Um, do you believe it's possible to feminist and Christian?
> M: No.
> B: Okay. [laughs]
> M: I don't. No, yeah, um, like I said, I, I, um, encourage women to climb the corporate
> ladder, um, that's wonderful, that's great, but, um, the most important thing, um, should
> be your Christian values. [B: Mmhmm] And the respect for the Word of God and what
> God, God's word should be the final word. (Interview 9, 2017)

Hannah believes one's Christian values should be the most important influence in one's life.

Despite women "climbing the corporate ladder," their lives should be guided and ruled by the

"Word of God." Other respondents posited Christianity as the answer for all issues—sexism,

racism, etc., —yet unlike those who believed Christianity and feminism worked toward the same

goal, those with a dominant Christian identity believed that there was no need for other

movements to redress oppression. Hattie describes the lack of usefulness for feminism:

> R: *laughs* Now for me I don't think so. See don't have to worry about see what that
> thing there is neither male nor female for we are one in Christ Jesus see now that's my
> attitude. I don't have to worry 'bout uh being a feminist if I, if I'm a Christian cause see in
> God's sight I just have to be a believer he doesn't have male and female and whatever else
> all these, these labels on folk. I don't think there's such a thing as a female Christian or a
> Baptist Christian or a Catholic Christian or male Christian stuff if I'm a Christian that just
> includes all of it to me. Now that's just my thing (Interview 13, 2017)

Hattie does not believe the two identities go together because she does not view feminism as

necessary. She views labels pertaining to Christians' social identities such as race, sex, or gender,

or their denominational affiliation as divisive. With this belief that Christianity covers all, Hattie

reinforces 'Christian' as her primary and most salient identity when compared to feminism.

Discussion

Amongst religious women who were on a spectrum of feminist identification, identity reconciliation was of little issue for the majority of respondents. Those who openly rejected reconciliation between the two expressed their Christian identity as the most salient for them. This variance in identity reconciliation amongst my sample reflects trends in prior research on the merging of two potentially competing identities Where this work expands upon past literature is that it researches a population with varied feminist self-identification. The religious identity reconciliation process is important even for those who do not identify as feminist because of their potential influence and impact on younger boys and girls through teachings and interactions in smaller settings such as ministry meetings and service events (Ramirez et al. 2014).

These positive views on a feminist religious identity within a black, evangelical Protestant church with socially conservative politics and patriarchal faith teachings show that there is room for nuanced, gender politics within these spaces. This study highlighted that women within these settings are well aware of the precarious position of women within their faith, but they are open to solutions to combat negative depictions of women and take action to support more gender-equal religious spaces. Feminism is not perceived as an anti-Christian to these religious women and their religious identity does not prove the most salient for all respondents.

The endorsement of the co-existence of Christianity and feminism points to several understandings about the merging of religious and non-religious identities. The majority support for the possibility of co-existence speaks to understandings of both movements as sharing common goals: Women should be valued, The Church is problematic in its enforcement of doctrine as it pertains to gender roles, God and Christianity endorse feminist support, feminism

as a solution to the sexism that impacts their lives. A black feminist religious practice supports the uplift of women and equal treatment within religious spaces while simultaneously acknowledging the complex nature of Christian gender scripts. None of the women felt compelled to renounce their Christian faith due to its view of women, yet they described an identity reconciliation process which acknowledged the problematic nature of their faith and the potential for their faith, in conjunction with feminism can prove beneficial for them.

In identifying these three tenets of a black feminist religious practice, I presented identifying facets of a useful paradigm to analyze and understand black religious women's feminism. It takes into account the multiple identities that black women embrace and profess while finding meaning within their faith. Many times held in tension, feminism of any sort and Christianity (more broadly male-dominated faith practices) can and does work together in the lives of many black religious women. For those who did not subscribe to the unification of the two identities, they chose their Christian identity over other potential identities and cited incompatibility of the two ideas. Though the findings for this paper are meant to be sociological and gender studies relevant, they can prove useful for anyone interested in the intersection of multiple, potentially conflicting identities. In providing a roadmap to the ways that women think about and marry their various identities, this study looks to save others the internal conflict of questioning where one fits within feminist, Christian, and black circles.

Though most respondents did not identify as feminists themselves, they did support the equal treatment of women within churches and private spaces. Making room for feminist work and ideology within churches and other religious spaces allows for a place where black women's faith can eventually not prove so taxing or demanding on their identities as women. Pushes for revisions of negative connotations of women while demanding the valuing of women based off

their faith points to an active advocacy on the parts of religious women. Subscription to religious gender scripts within spaces of worship while concurrently supporting the work of women in those same spaces reflects a politic that accounts for black religious women's faith practice, gender dynamics, and sociopolitical support of women.

With the nature of this project, the interview guide and much of the analysis of this paper centered around respondents who were believed to have a very strong religious identity. Most of the sample has equal amounts of involvement at the site with all having been at the church at least two years. This study could be expanded by interviewing people with varying religious identity saliency in order to learn if varying levels of religiosity has a bearing on opinions about religious feminist identity reconciliation. This research started with the assumption that respondents were very religious. Using other measures of religious embeddedness, such as amount of times engaged in prayer or time spent studying religious text outside of church, may present new outlooks on what religion means to black religious women and how those meanings impact identity reconciliation.

Black feminist religious practice can be useful to religious and feminist leaders alike (the two identities are, of course, not mutually exclusive). As useful as the practice potentially is, it is still a fairly new body of scholarship. As black feminist religious scholar Lomax suggests there is a gap in black feminist work regarding "the Black Church" (Lomax 2016:22) and there is a lack of non-theological room within womanist discourse to provide in-depth religio-cultural analysis of black women's and girls' lives. There is much work to be done in the establishment of a black feminist religious practice and much more work to be done in the expansion of black feminist religious thought. This chapter is my contribution to the expansion of black feminist religious studies by addressing black women's faith practices with equal regard to their racial and gender

identities. The purpose of this paper was not to provide more insight about how black women make sense of God in the church (Cannon 1996; Grant 1989), it is to learn more about black women make sense of themselves within church spaces.

For black women who identify as Christian feminists this process of identity reconciliation gives context and affirmation to their religious feminist practice. For religious women who do not identify as feminist, black feminist religious practice expands the possibilities for engagement with feminist principles and ideologies within their faith despite their feminist non-identification. This reconciliation process also allows room for the production of religious feminist texts within their place of worship. For women who do not consider themselves religious due to the perceived negative gender parameters of religious circles (Stasson 2014), a black feminist religious practice opens possibilities for more nuanced understandings of Christian gender expectations while also making space for their feminist ideology. As found in this study, black feminist religious practice is a religious feminist identity reconciliation process which speaks to the specific needs and shared cultural background of black, Christian women. It ultimately ensures that black religious women's voices are included in the discussion of feminism regardless of their explicit identification status.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This dissertation is about black women's processes for navigating the nuanced sectors of their everyday lives such as their homes and their churches. With both the church and the home proving to be areas where religious women devote most of their non-professional time (Wiggins 2005), it was necessary to investigate how the women who are so essential to the success of these sectors make sense of their positions in these arenas. Though this work focuses narrowly on the interrelationship between black women's religious associations, opinions about feminism, and identity reconciliation processes it is ultimately a commentary on black women's ways of being in contemporary society.

A qualitative look at black religious women's engagement with the idea of feminism provided insight into not only their attitudes about feminist ideology and identification but also into perceptions of their position within their homes and places of worship. Where many studies on feminist identification and identity reconciliation focus on only two aspects of identity (such as race and gender but not religion or religion and gender but not race) this dissertation sought to analyze the way respondents' race, gender, and religious beliefs impacted their attitudes of the feminist movement and their willingness to identify as feminist. The active processes of signification, identification, and reconciliation expands understandings of black religious women's self-awareness in their churches and homes.

By analyzing women's views about their faith-assigned role as the helpmate of their husband, regardless of their relationship status, I found that black religious women do not simply accept the helpmate designation at face value but enact the process of signification to add significance and importance to the role. The establishment of the helpmate as an incarnation of misogynoir (or anti-black misogyny) problematizes the ways in which the role is constructed in a

predominantly black and female space. The signification of the role as essential to the success of one's partnership, beneficial to the helpmate herself, and an expansion of one's spirituality speaks to the ability of black women to tap into shared cultural meanings to make a potentially subjugating role meaningful and affirming. With some respondents openly rejecting the helpmate role, the idea that all black religious women endorse or signify upon the helpmate is proven false. The process of signification also showed the ways that despite historical notions of black women as emasculating (Moynihan 1965) and over-bearing (Ault 2013) this group finds way to express submission and unity with their partners.

Studying black religious women's feminist self-identification provided three kinds of identification amongst participants with each category telling us more about the perception of feminism in the lives of black religious women. Most non-identifiers fell into this category not because of a commitment to traditional gender roles or a distancing from whiteness, but because of a perceived lack of active involvement in the feminist movement. This logic dispels commonly held notions that black women's feminist identification choices are centered on proximity to white women (Bowman et al. 2001). The subset of women for whom religious ideology was a deterring factor in their non-identification was attached specifically to gender roles enforced by their belief system. This dynamic suggests an alternative understanding of religious women's feminist identification as not solely driven by commitment to gender roles. Respondents for whom race was an interacting factor chose to identify as another type of feminist rather than not identify at all. This trend suggests the importance of a feminist practice and ideology to participants and counters narratives of racism barring black women from practicing some form of feminism. Participants who identified as feminist viewed both their religious faith and their feminist ideologies as working toward the same goal of gender equality.

Lastly, examining black religious women's construction of a black feminist religious practice expanded knowledge about the ways religious women view the potential coexistence of feminist identity and Christian identity. The reconciliation of a religious feminist practice through a black feminist religious practice shed light on the ways that women who do not identify as feminist express support and endorse the joining of feminism and Christianity. A black religious practice provided space for respondents to critique the gender problematic nature of their faith, express support for feminist goals and ideologies, and endorse the common goals of both Christianity and feminism toward the equality of men and women. Regardless of feminist identifications, religion only proved important to those who did not endorse a joint feminist Christian identity.

Taken together, this dissertation is meant to enlighten the unfamiliar and affirm the informed about the active processes black religious women enact to make room for, or at the very least to discuss, feminism. There are many conflicting opinions about the utility of both religion and feminism to better the lives of those who support them. This dissertation did not deal with this intellectual conundrum, but in a way, it did touch on the utility of both religion and feminism for women who have the choice to subscribe to either ideology. This work touched on the awareness black religious women have about a submissive identity that was not socially constructed with them in mind, the variance black religious women display when engaging feminism, and the merging of two potentially conflicting identities by black religious women. In documenting the active process of respondents' signifying on the idealized femininity of the helpmate, I expanded knowledge about the construction of gender hegemony outside of and without direct comparison to white, cis maleness. Though influential in the norms and expectations of the helpmate through centuries of racist and sexist dominance, white men are not

standard against which all masculinities and femininities are compared. Many times, open resistance to proximity to whiteness and white gender performance has fueled various behavioral and social choices for black women (Lewis et al. 2013) and men (Majors and Billson 1993; Griffin 2014). Centering black religious persons and their version of an idealized masculine-feminine relationship allowed for the sole focus on black gender performances. I made this choice to hopefully provide a starting point for others who wish to explore gender hegemony in their respective racial, ethnic, and national contexts without having to qualify their work and their research as *alternative* to the default white gender hegemony. This study of black religious gender hegemony also reinforced the notion that black persons have unique and long-standing practices and traditions that have lived on because of their sociocultural and collective meaning and fulfillment for the practitioners. Literature on black lives and black women sometimes anchors itself in the oppression which has plagued the African-American community for centuries and though these studies are necessary and powerful the aim of this dissertation was to show the ways black religious women find fulfillment, exert agency, and expand knowledge with minimal regard to the oppression they are constantly enduring in many sectors of their life.

Several pieces of literature have described the varying racial differences in romantic partner dynamics (Vaterlaus et al. 2015), childrearing (Chaney and Fairfax 2013), and perceptions of community (Ackah 2010) between black and white families, but this dissertation sought to unapologetically let black women speak their own truths with whiteness being mentioned only on the part of the respondent. Black women's worth has a long history of being tied to their production (Davis 1981; Jones 2015) and their labor contributions to their homes, workplaces, churches, and other service arenas (Miller Young 2014).In this work, and future work I aim to chronicle black women's (and overall black persons) existence in different sectors

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in life without focusing predominantly on the work and labor they add to those sectors. This project sought to counter the narrative that black women are only worth studying when they are working by highlighting black women's ways of navigating their religious space without focusing solely on the labor they provide to the church.

An exploration into black religious women's attitudes about and identification with feminism was an effort at further centering of black women's experiences and voices. Since many studies of feminist identification have avoided tangling with the varied meanings that such a label might mean for black women (Toller et al. 2004; Nelson et al. 2008), specifically for those involved in their faith practice, this dissertation aimed to engage the nuance black womanhood to understandings of feminism. Investigations into black women's anti-sexist politic have applied a black feminist or womanist lens to the analysis (Turner and Jain 2011; Love 2016). While useful for describing the experience and history of black women, familiarity with black feminism as an independent brand and field of feminism was limited amongst respondents. As many studies on black feminist work has addressed religious women's faith as a secondary identity to their race, gender, or sexuality, (Collins 2000) this work added to scholarship that treated participants' religion as a primary factor of their identity (Stewart 2002) and analyzed the ways such beliefs impact one's outlook on feminism. For those seeking to relate feminism to black religious women, addressing this population's perception of necessary activity for identification would prove fruitful (Gilkes 2002). Feminist educators and scholars should emphasize non-protest means of supporting both the ideology and any related social justice movement. It is of import for religious leaders and scholars to note the bearing their teachings and philosophy potentially have on their female congregants. By highlighting the voices of one group of women in a black Southern Baptist church, I sought to provide insight into what

feminism means to religious women in an effort to provide avenues for religious groups and organizations to engage feminism and a feminist politic.

Three years of data collection has provided a breadth of data on black religious women, but for the sake of keeping this project succinct several interesting areas of inquiry were passed over. One major aspect is that of class and its bearing upon the ideas and the expectations of the women congregants of Believer's Baptist. As stated previously, the sample was highly educated and well-established financially—with most being homeowners and holding gainful employment—meaning that those from lower SES categories were left out of analysis. As scholarship on post-Emancipation black economy and political life has shown, the black middle class and the black working or under class experiences life very differently (Wilson 1987; Martin 2010; Hunt and Ray 2012; Lareau 2002; Ginwright 2002). Though all experience racism and sexism, the institutions in which they experience them and the figures from whom they experience it could be completely different. For most of the sample, legal marriage was a viable and favorable option therefore the wifely expectations of the helpmate did not seem far-fetched. Further research should explore the ways the helpmate—a married, spiritually aware idealized femininity—is understood by those who may not believe marriage is a worthwhile undertaking for themselves and their partners. Class also becomes apparent in one's exposure to feminism and feminist theory due to its long-standing connection to universities and other institutions of higher learning.

This project focused narrowly on the thoughts and experiences of female lay congregants of the church, with the only two clergy members belonging to other churches. This results in the exclusion of male laypersons and male clergy voices. Though the study of male laypersons would prove useful in investigating the other side of the idealized masculine-feminine

relationship (the head or head of household), the study of male clergy at the site would provide a different entry point into the construction of gender hegemony. Being the person receiving a message about the proper performance of womanhood is a different experience than being the person *writing* the sermon on proper womanhood. Much criticism of the black church and its shortcomings focuses on the structural impact of the text, sermons, and implied meanings (Chaney and Patrick 2011; Evans 2001) without a look at the individual leaders and organizers of the church. Future scholarship should investigate the perceptions of male and female religious leaders about topics such as feminism, gender equality, and gender roles and how such perceptions influence their preaching and leadership.

Feminism matters. There are countless articles (Johnson 2015; Love 2016) and books (Johnson 2015; hooks 2000; Taylor 2017) which highlight the plethora of benefits endorsing a feminist politic, let alone expressing explicit identification, has for women and men alike. One's religious background or politic should not bar her from enjoying those benefits. As perfect as one would like religious spaces, places of work, and the home to be perfect performances of gender egalitarianism for people of all genders, countless surveys and scholarship has shown the public they are not. Therefore, it appeared more useful to learn more about women's navigation of an imperfect space such as a church—which has been influential in the conscious-raising and development for many black women (Douglass 1999; Pattillo-McCoy 1998)—to grasp a deeper understanding of race, religion, and gender in one's daily life. This project combined my passion for her God with her pride in her black feminist practice by centering the voices of women who practice a possession of both in their everyday lives. These women's truth about their hunger for their faith, their love for partners and families, and their demand for self-respect within their homes and places of worship provided a glimpse into what intersectional living looks like when

one's race, gender, and religion bears upon her sociopolitical and personal politic. Through all the interviews and literature, the definitions and meanings of the term feminist are varied, but for the purposes of this work I selected one definition that conveys her personal politic regarding feminist, anti-racist, or any other type of anti-oppression work. That definition is one given by Evelyn, businesswoman and longtime member of Believer's Baptist, "…being a feminist is making sure that you speak up." Regardless of race, gender, or religion, it is important that when external forces seek to marginalize and oppress that someone speaks up. Whether that person be a religious leader, a women layperson, or a little girl inquisitive about her role in the church, feminism is for all of those persons because it simply refers to the willingness to "speak up."

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Appendix A: Research Instrument & IRB Approval

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR BLACK CHURCH STUDY

INTRO: Thanks so much for taking the time to come sit and talk with me about women in the church. I appreciate it! So we're going to start off talking about your involvement in the church you currently attend.

GENERAL CHURCH INVOLVEMENT

What are the events that led up to you attending [insert church]? / How did you end up attending [church name] [IF RAISED HERE/"BROUGHT BY PARENTS", SKIP TO B]

    [**A**] Had you considered other churches before attending this one?

        [IF YES: What was that thought process like? What made you end up choosing this one instead?]

    Did you attend other churches before attending this one?

        [IF YES: What made you choose this church now, over other churches?]

    [**B**] Have you thought about attending a different church?

        [YES] Why?

        [NO] Why not?

            2) What keeps you attending this church?

What is a usual day at [insert church] like for you on a Sunday?

Do you spend time there on other days of the week?

    If so, what is a typical one of those days like?

What all are you involved in at [insert church]?

    [IF THEY HAVE OFFICIAL POSITION] What is your official title?

Are you a member of [insert church]?

[YES] What led you to join? How long have you been a member?

[NO] Is there a reason why you've chosen not to be a member?

MEN, WOMEN, AND WORK AT THE CHURCH

[PREFACE: Okay, so now we're going to move onto how things work at the church. Next, I'm going to ask about different types of work done by different people at the church, as you see it.]

Is there a certain type of work that women do at your church? (i.e. What positions do you see

women in at your church?)

[*Remember to ask follow-up questions about the positions they name*]

What do you think draws women to these positions (ministries)?

[*try to walk them through an answer to this question for each diff type of work they name*]

Is there a certain type of work that men do in this church? (i.e. What positions do you see

men in at your church?)

[*Remember to ask follow-up questions about the positions they name*]

 What do you think draws men to these positions (ministries)?

[*try to walk them through an answer to this question for each diff type of work they name*]

LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

[PREFACE: Great. Next we're going to talk about leadership and ministry at your church]

What does it mean to be a leader in your church?

Are leadership positions available to *everyone* in your church?

Are the same leadership positions available to women and men in your church? Why / why not?

[YES] How do you know that is true?

[NO] What positions are available to one that is not available to the other?

Why do you think that is?

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Have there been any women ministers in this church?

[YES] Can you tell me a little bit more about that person / those people?

Tell me that story?

[NO] Why do you think that is?

Do you know any women who have tried to become a minister at this church?

[YES] Can you tell me more about what happened when they tried?

[No] Can you tell me why you believe a woman has not attempted to become a minister at this church?

Do you know any women who have tried to become a minister at another church?

[YES] Can you tell me more about what happened when they tried?

[NO] (might not need a follow up – but could ask them why they think that is(?))

What do you think would happen if a woman attempted to become a minister at this church today? [let them answer, then ask why they think that would happen]

Why do you think that would happen?

RELATIONSHIPS IN THE HOME

PREFACE: Kewl beans! Now we're going to move a bit away from the church and focus more on your home life and some of your ideas about the way home life should function, according to your personal beliefs.

Can you walk me through what your average day is like, outside of the church?

What do you think the ideal home life looks like?

Do you think this version of home life is typical of others at your church?

What is the ideal marriage or relationship to you?

What part does each person in this ideal relationship play in the home?

TRANSITION: There's a common depiction of marriage in Christianity of marriages being made up of head of household and a helpmate. I wanted to hear your thoughts about the roles in marriages. I wanted to talk more about those roles and how you view them.

What does the term 'helpmate' mean?

What does being the 'head' mean?

Do these roles apply to non-married men or women?

Would you consider the helpmate/head of household a necessary part of a marriage?

Do you feel the roles of helpmate and head apply outside of the home (at church, or work)?

    [Yes] In what ways? (do these roles have to match)

    [No] Why not?

Can men be 'helpmates'?

    Why? How? [*ask each of these separately, leaving room for them to answer each one*]

    Why not?

Can women be 'head'?

    Why? How? [*ask each of these separately, leaving room for them to answer each one*]

    Why not?

GENDER EQUALITY

TRANSITION: Thanks for sharing that with me, now I'm going to ask you about your thoughts about gender equality.

What is gender equality to you? [*let them answer*]

[Ok, since people often talk about GE in diff arenas, I'm gonna ask you about each of those…]

    --What does it mean to have gender equality in the home?

    -- What does it mean to have gender equality in the workplace?

-- What does it mean to have gender equality in the church?

Is gender equality important to you?

[YES] Why is it important to you?

[NO] Why not?

Is there gender equality in your home?

[YES] Why do you believe there is gender equality?

[follow-up: Do you see any inequality? (ask to explain);)]

[NO] How are things unequal?

Why do you think this is?

Is there gender equality in your place of work?

--[YES] In what ways?

[follow-up: Do you see any inequality? (ask to explain)]

--[NO] Do you see things being unequal? How are things unequal?

Is there gender equality in your church?

--[YES] In what ways?

[follow-up: Do you see any inequality? (ask to explain)]

--[NO] How do you see things being unequal? Why do you think it is that way?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH FEMINISTS

[TRANSITION: Alright, we're going to questions about gender equality and feminism amongst people you know]

Do you know anybody who identifies as feminist?

[YES] Why do you think they identify as feminist?

--What do you think feminism means to them?

[NO] Why do you think you don't know anyone who identifies as feminist?

What does the word feminism mean to you?

Do you identify as feminist?

[YES] Why?

[NO] Why not?

[SKIP IF PERSON IDENTIFIES AS FEMINIST] There is a trend in research that shows people may support feminist ideals/goals [like (put a couple examples here) but do not identify as feminist. Do you think you are a part of that group?

[Yes] Why do you think that is?

[No] Why do you think that doesn't apply to you?

Is there a difference between gender equality and feminism?

[Yes] What do you think that difference is?

[No] Why do you think they are the same?

FEMINISM IN THE CHURCH

TRANSITION: Thanks for sharing. I wanted to know a little bit more about feminism and the church.

Is it possible to be both feminist and Christian?

[YES] How so?

[NO] Why not?

If you were to identify as feminist do you believe other members of the church would be supportive of that label?

[YES] Why do you think they would be supportive?

[NO] Why do you think they would not be supportive?

WRAP UP

TRANSITION: Thanks so much for taking the time out to do this interview. I have a few final wrap up questions and then we'll be done.

Is there something that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?

Is there something else you think I should know to understand gender equality and religion better?

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

DEMOGRAPHIC

What is your name?

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your race?

What is your current relationship status?

What is your religious denomination?

     Is this the denomination you have held throughout your life?

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

"Feminist Self-Identification in a Black Southern Baptist Church"
Consent for Participation in Research

I, _____, consent to participate in an interview for Brianne Painia's research project "What If God Was One of Us?" The purpose of this research is to discover the ways in which feminist self-identification is impacted and informed by religion in a Black Southern Baptist Church.

The purpose and all procedures of this study have been described to me. Possible risks and benefits of this study have been described to me as well. I acknowledge that I have had the opportunity to request additional information or ask any questions related to this study. I understand that at any point during the study, I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation in this study without penalty.

There are very few risks associated with this research study. I, Brianne Painia, am taking all the necessary steps to ensure participant confidentiality. Any information obtained in connection with this research study that could identify you will be kept confidential. Names will not be identified in any written reports or publications.

I understand the interview will be recorded and if I do not wish to be recorded, I can still withdraw from the interview if I so choose. I understand that if, at any time, I wish to stop the recording and withdraw, I may if I so choose.

If any further questions arise, I may contact Brianne Painia for additional information.

This study has been approved by the LSU IRB. For questions concerning participant rights, please contact the IRB Chair, Dr. Dennis Landin, 578-8692, or irb@lsu.edu.

_____   _____

(Name of Participant)   (Date)

_____

(Signature of the Participant)

Researcher's Contact Information

Brianne A. Painia. M.A.
Ph.D. Student
Dept. of Sociology
Louisiana State University
Bpaini2@lsu.edu
Stubbs Hall, 110
Baton Rouge, LA 70803

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

LSU

Institutional Review Board
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair
130 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
F: 225.578.5983
irb@lsu.edu | lsu.edu/irb

TO: Brianne Painia
Sociology

FROM: Dennis Landin
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: February 11, 2015

RE: **IRB#** E9175

TITLE: "What If God Was One of Us?": Feminist Self-Identification in a Black Southern Baptist Church

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: New Protocol

Review Date: 2/11/2015

Approved_____X_____ Disapproved_____

Approval Date: 2/11/2015   **Approval Expiration Date:** 2/10/2018

Exemption Category/Paragraph: 2a, 4a

Signed Consent Waived?: No

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable): _____

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable) _____

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman _____

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –
Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:
1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon   request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. SPECIAL NOTE:
All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb

Appendix B: Table with Additional Demographic Information

Racial/Ethnic Diversity of Southern Baptist Convention's Cooperating Churches

RACIAL/ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Dominant Ethnic Composition	Churches	Congregations*
Anglo churches	39,094	40,621
African American churches	3,228	3,828
Hispanic churches	2,103	3,453
Korean churches	734	884
Native American churches	399	440
Haitian churches	357	514
Chinese churches	197	251
Filipino churches	140	191
Multi-ethnic churches	169	278
20+ other ethnic and language groups	829	1,276

*Includes churches and church-type missions

provided by NAMB Center for Missional Research from 2016 Annual Church Profile data

Vita

Brianne Alexandra Painia was born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana. Her lifelong love for books and her unquenchable curiosity about the world is what steered her to the academy. She received her B.S.B.A. from The University of Southern Mississippi and her Master of Arts from The George Washington University. It was in Washington D.C. that she discovered her love for teaching and decided to pursue doctoral studies in the field of sociology. She anticipates graduating with her Ph.D. degree from Louisiana State University in May 2018. When her head is not in a book, Ms. Painia can be found lifting weights, playing video games, writing a thinkpiece, or musing on one existential conundrum or another. Her family and friends have been her life blood for as long as she can remember, and it is amongst this tribe that she feels most at home. Her passion for the inclusion of black women's voices in all sociopolitical and academic arenas is what drives her research agenda, and that passion is only rivaled by her passion for her hometown of New Orleans. When life becomes difficult she remembers two of her favorite quotes: 1. "My light is brilliant" and 2. "The Lord is with me I will not be afraid, what can mere man do to me? Upon graduation, Ms. Painia will continue to publish about the lives of black women and men who, like her, are consistently trying to make their voices heard in a world that would rather them silent.