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“Don’t Touch My Hair”: Exploring a Womanist Pedagogy of Resistance in the Music and Art of Beyoncé and Solange Knowles

Abstract: For many young Black women, aesthetic rituals and practices related to their hair serve as embodied forms of resistance that also reflect a constitutive, yet often unrecognized dimension of their spirituality. This study will highlight specifically that the art and music of two black female popular artists, Beyoncé and Solange are being utilized by young Black women not only to theologize from their unique positions in the world but also to engage in distinctly womanist pedagogies that employ a natural black hair aesthetic as a primary site of resistance to white dominance.

Introduction

Preoccupation with white beauty standards has a long history in the legacy of Christian tradition, especially with respect to hair. In this regard, a preoccupation with white beauty standards represents one feature of a racialized, Eurocentric aesthetic regime within Christianity that ultimately gives way to viewing white bodies as beautiful, good, and divine. The effects of this racialized aesthetic are particularly evident in the distinct pedagogical agenda adopted by many churches that privilege a white aesthetic and make it difficult for persons of African descent—and especially Black women—to locate themselves within the images of the Christian tradition they have claimed.

Womanist scholars of religion have sought to resolve this conundrum by prioritizing Black women’s stories and experiences and reflecting them within theological, aesthetic, and pedagogical frameworks of Christianity. Still, these attempts have not always addressed the aesthetic needs, concerns, and interests of younger Black women in ways that attend to their bodies and namely their hair. These attempts tend not to honor these qualities as a constitutive dimension of spirituality within the context of the Black church. Given the significance that hair often has on the social and spiritual identity development of young Black women, this oversight warrants attention within religious education and research. At its core, the current disconnect begs a fundamental inquiry: how can religious education within the Black church begin to frame a more adequate aesthetic vision that reflects the needs, interests, and concerns of younger Black women, especially in relation to their hair?

Although many young Black Christian women look to the church and religious education for solace and identity in the development of their faith, the church tends not to pay attention to the aesthetic and embodied dimensions of their lives. This is one factor that has contributed to the sense of invisibility many young women feel within their churches. Additionally, this dynamic has produced a sense of fragmentation in their

relationships to spirituality; it makes it difficult or impossible for them to see Christian faith as being relevant and responsive to their concrete, lived realities.

Instead, many young Black women have turned to the work of contemporary Black female artists as a religious and theological resource in their lives. More specifically, these women are often drawn to the art and music of two specific Black female artists: Beyoncé and Solange Knowles. The Knowles sisters are significant in that they fill a void that many young Black women feel within church education as currently constituted. The music and art that they create allows young Black women to engage with a spirituality that attends to their entire personhood.

In light of this trend, in this paper, I argue specifically for the consideration of new resources in the development of religious, theological, and pedagogical frameworks within religious education. I posit that churches should look to the vast engagement of young Black women with these two artists so that they can more appropriately meet their needs. To this end, the purpose of this paper is to argue that religious education needs to frame a more adequate aesthetic vision for young Black women by attending to popular culture and references to Black hair as part of its real, embodied aesthetic. In particular, the church needs to prioritize the work of Beyoncé and Solange in order to reconceptualize pedagogies within religious education that present and define how these young women see their bodies, and what is defined as good, beautiful, and divine.

Method

The research employs theomusicology as a central research method. A theomusicalological approach to research seeks to understand the theological inferences in varied musical forms, including popular music forms that don’t appear to be explicitly religious. To accomplish this, the method emphasizes the importance of moving beyond mere textual analysis to uncover the less-explicit theological messages in this music forms. In this study, I do so by attending to the following contextual factors: (a) cultural context, (b) political climate, (c) artist’s upbringing and background, (d) album cover and art, (e) cultural era, (f) religious landscape, and (g) artist’s geographic location. Within the study, I employ theomusicology specifically to explore the womanist spirituality inherent in the music and art of Beyoncé and Solange and especially the aesthetic of Black hair they present.

Within religious education, the use of theomusicology encourages a fundamentally religious understanding of the whole of Black life. It posits that it is sacred in the ways in which it averts the binaries of “good” and “bad” that might lead to overlooking the rich religious significance inherent in explicitly “secular” music forms. Such a method enables us to view the work of secular artists like Beyoncé and Solange as theological and religious resources.

Interviews

Second, given the sheer frequency with which certain forms of popular music contribute to sexist and misogynistic depictions of young Black women, many analyses that engage young women’s relationship to popular culture often posit that Black popular music is corruptive, pathological, and violent. To avoid these pitfalls and the ways in which researchers routinely position young women as “victims” of popular culture, this study seeks to affirm the critical agency of young Black women by privileging their
voices in ways other studies have not. More specifically, it draws insights from focus groups that I conducted with five young adults, all of whom were Black female seminarians ages 24 to 28. This research was part of a larger mixed-method study designed to explore the significance of mentoring as it pertains to four central areas of urban ministry practice: ministry efficacy, community involvement, job satisfaction, and vocational retention. I conducted this study as part of preliminary focus group where six populations were interviewed. The paper is concerned solely with the focus group that composed urban millennials.

The paper highlights three distinct womanist pedagogies of resistance that emerge in the music and art of Beyoncé and Solange. These include (1) pedagogy of (re)presenting (2) a pedagogy of solidarity and (3) pedagogy of healing. Overall, these themes elucidate the title for the paper “Don’t Touch My Hair” which also serves as a metaphor for the womanist pedagogy of resistance that emerges out of Beyoncé and Solange’s music and art around hair.

The Spirituality of African American Youth

This paper calls for the development of pedagogical frameworks within religious education that are more deliberately attuned to the aesthetic needs and interests of young Black women within the Black church. Such an exploration necessarily entails attention to the spirituality of young Black women. To do this, I draw from prior explorations of the spirituality of African American youth who are engaged by religious educators and practical theologians.

Two key contributions include the work of Evelyn Parker and Almeda Wright. Parker’s research first introduces themes related to the fragmented spirituality she observed in the lives of African American youth living in Chicago. She then points to a prevailing trend among the youth she interviewed: an inability to view Christian spirituality as being connected to and responsive to the moral and social ills plaguing their lives and communities. Although Parker’s work focuses on an adolescent population, it provides an important reference point for naming the dynamics of fragmentation also observed among the young adult women who are the focus of this study. Here, I borrow from Parker’s general understanding of fragmented spirituality as an inability to join religious belief to social action.

Building upon Parker’s framework, Almeda Wright explores alternatives to the presence of fragmentation in the lives of young African Americans by proposing revised


theological and pedagogical frameworks to foster a more integrated spirituality for this population.  

This paper continues in the vein of this research by identifying new pedagogical frameworks within popular culture for the development of an integrating spirituality in the lives of young Black women. In particular, it asserts the significance of the work of two artists, Beyoncé and Solange, as a fundamental starting point for understanding their spirituality this way. A focus on popular culture situates spirituality in the everyday lives and experiences of young Black women and necessarily demands attention to their bodies as a central site through which their knowledge of God is made manifest. To this end, the focus of this exploration is to highlight the significance of hair as an embodied form of spirituality that is one feature of the womanist pedagogy of resistance that is present in the music and art of Beyoncé and Solange. Additionally, because the central thrust of this work is to identify ways the church can revise its aesthetic vision, attention to how womanist religious educators have treated the aesthetic dimensions of practice is also important to explore.

In general, womanist scholars of religion have affirmed the need to focus religious and theological reflection through the lived experiences of Black women. Quite frequently this has included considering how Black women’s lives reflect the beauty and justice of God. Womanist religious educators have also made an awareness of the aesthetic dimensions of life a significant feature within their work. For example, Lynne Westfield relies on an aesthetic of poetry to explore the resilience of African American women through the practice of hospitality to frame a distinctly womanist approach to teaching/learning within the Black church. In Reclaiming the Spirituals: New Possibilities for African American Christian Education, Yolanda Smith utilizes the African American spiritual, which is forged primarily out of the creative imaginations of enslaved Africans, to inspire an artistic approach to curricula in the Black church. Both Westfield and Smith utilize aesthetic frames to explore approaches to religious education within the context of the Black church. While womanist religious educators have engaged the aesthetic dimensions of religious education in developing their distinct approaches for the Black church, there has been a paucity of attention to Black hair as an aesthetic form within religious education. This paper seeks to address this gap in literature while highlighting the aesthetic significance of hair to the spiritual and social identities of young Black women.

The Significance of Hair within Black Culture

Within Black culture, hair has never just been for purely cosmetic purposes. The social, aesthetic, and spiritual significance of hair has been intrinsic to the personhood of

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Black women for centuries. Prior to the twentieth century, many continental Africans wore hair to identify one’s marital status, age, and social rank. However, as Europeans colonized the region, Africans were thrust into a world shaped by a new aesthetic landscape that viewed their skin, hair, and other physical features as ugly while lifting up White skin, straight hair, and thin noses as the ideal standard of beauty. In the face of this oppression, some enslaved Africans turned to using their hair as a form of embodied resistance. Elaborate and unconventional hairstyles were a way for Black people to assert their individuality and humanity in an oppressive hair culture.

In the era that followed slavery, the vestiges of this White aesthetic regime continued to shape the way many African American women viewed themselves, including within the context of the church. Imitation of White beauty standards became a way of venerating the White universal. Willie Jennings argues that imitation ultimately sets the conditions out of which one comes to judge one’s aesthetic value. He writes, “The process of racial imitation or mimicry enfolds people in unrelenting patterns of comparison bound to visions of originals and copies. Imitation in this regard is a power that not only continuously generates the white body exemplars of beauty, goodness, and truth but also carries forward housing capacities—patterns of thinking and ways of being—within which people may judge their own bodies, manners and moods.” For Jennings, an examination of imitation within the Christian tradition gives rise to a central question for Black people: Why should I love my black body? For young Black women, a variation of this question today might enquire: Why should I love my Black hair?

The thrust toward imitation of White beauty standards for African Americans was deeply lodged in the quest for survival. Imitation through straightening one’s hair was prized as a way of gaining widespread acceptance through conformity to White standards.

The Emergence of a Natural Black Hair Aesthetic: Black Power and the Black Arts Movement

During the twentieth century, hair once again emerged as an embodied, aesthetic form of resistance during the Civil Rights era. During this period, the emergence of the Black Power movement advocated a militant approach to oppression that was focused on promoting Black consciousness within society, including advancing a radical political agenda through the arts, which became known as the Black Arts (BAR) movement.

The BAR movement gave rise to a radical collective of Black artists and thinkers who emphasized the need for a distinct Black aesthetic to address the conditions of Black people who were living in the United States during the turbulent Civil Rights era. The goal of this art was to engage resistance to White supremacy through, at times, violence and aggression. From this perspective, art was never just for art’s sake—art was necessarily political. While emphasizing the need for a Black aesthetic, these artists rejected older political, cultural, and artistic traditions by creating an oppositional

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framework that contested the notion that White critics could be the sole arbiters of African American accomplishments within the arts or otherwise.\textsuperscript{9} To this end, artists sought to reflect the inside lives, consciousness and concerns of everyday Black people through varied art forms, including an aesthetic of Black hair.\textsuperscript{10}

As such, perceptions of hair shifted from simply concern over style to seeing hairstyles as political statements that signaled resistance to oppression. One of the foremost symbols of this aesthetic was the wearing of the Afro. The rise of the Afro during this era became a symbol of both self-acceptance and of resistance to White oppression. “Black is Beautiful” became a mantra and rallying cry that many Black people adopted to reshape aesthetic consciousness within the United States. Not unlike today’s artists, young Black adults played a vital role in advancing this aesthetic revolution.

**Religious Dimensions of the Black Arts Movement**

The Black church was generally not supportive of Black Power groups’ militant efforts, which included embracing wearing natural hair as a resistance to White beauty ideals. Because of the apparent aesthetic and ideological divides between the Black church and the radical agenda advanced by the Black Power movement, proponents of the latter are often cast as youthful, radical, separatist, and secular critics of the clergy and churchgoers.\textsuperscript{11} Such patterns reflect the prevailing tendency today to overlook the religious and spiritual dimensions inherent in the art and music of artists like Beyoncé and Solange.

Religion played a vital role in the political and aesthetic dimensions of the Black Power movement; this included people within and beyond the Black church. Many young religious scholars began to affirm the need for a racialized critique of the Christian tradition, which necessitated a reframing of Christian theology through the lens of Black experience. However, womanist scholars critiqued these frames as being focused exclusively on Black men, and in response began developing theological frameworks of their own that were attentive to the particular experiences of Black women. Church education in the Black church was necessarily affected by these new developments and began to envision pedagogical approaches that made Black experiences central to teaching and learning processes. A major effort within all of these frameworks involves bolstering the significance of Black culture, especially popular culture, within theological and pedagogical discourse.

**Generational Critiques**

While engagement with Black popular culture is central to the development of both the Black liberation and womanist theologies that have shaped the Black church’s education, many young Black Christian women find it difficult to locate themselves within these theological traditions. From one perspective, the heart of the divide between


younger Black Christian women and the church is a cultural one, focused specifically on the negative appraisal of the music of Black female artists and its perceived depiction of women. These tensions immediately surface when artists like Beyoncé are identified as womanist voices through which a pedagogy within religious education for young women might be re-envisioned. Over the years, Beyoncé’s unapologetic display of sexuality within her art and music has made her the source of immense scrutiny by many within the church. The response to Beyoncé immediately highlights the generational tensions around narratives of civility and control that have come to define expectations for women’s conduct within the context of the Black church. Whereas the prevailing tendency has been to secularize artists like Beyoncé, both she and her sister, Solange, are shaping how young women understand God and engage faith in ways that affirm their love of their bodies and especially their hair.

**Beyoncé and Solange: Womanist Pedagogies of Resistance in the Form of Natural Black Hair Aesthetics**

*Solange*

Beyoncé and Solange grew up in the South in Houston’s predominantly African American Third Ward, where their mother Tina owned a hair salon. As such, hair has always assumed a prominent role in the life and art of these two women.

As the younger sister of a widely popular music star, Solange lived in the shadow of her sister’s success for much of her career. She toured as a backup dancer with her sister’s group, Destiny’s Child, before releasing her first set of solo recordings, which only garnered a modicum of success. However, it was the critically acclaimed *A Seat at the Table* that solidified Solange’s place as one of the most influential protest artists of her generation. A central feature of the album’s appeal is the emergence of a distinct aesthetic vision that reflects clear womanist sensibilities. For example, the album cover, which features Solange’s recreation of the *Mona Lisa*, is indicative of how she uses her art and music—as a way to disrupt traditional artistic paradigms by prioritizing and imposing Black women’s images and voices. Within minutes of the album’s release, fans began to replicate the album cover, posting their own versions.

*A Seat at the Table* is a deeply personal yet political work of art that engages themes of racism, activism, and cultural appropriation that is at the heart of the Black female experience. The album ignites resistance to white norms that have shaped the United States’ cultural aesthetic. To this end, Solange promotes a natural hair aesthetic as a central feature within her activism.

At the beginning of her career, Solange sported an array of wigs and weaved straight hairstyles, but in 2009, she made a bold decision to wear her natural hair. Since then, she has sported an array of natural styles such as afros and twists and a variety of


braided styles. Solange’s wearing of her natural hair has been a significant symbol for many young Black women who contend with racialized pejoratives with respect to their hair. Solange represents an ally, someone who allows them to be seen. As such, Solange’s Black hair aesthetic functions as a resistance to the invisibility young Black women experience within society, including at times in the church. Invisibility here is understood in two ways. First, it refers to whether young Black women are seen and second to how they are seen.

Frequently, in national and popular discourses, young women are viewed in ways that either depict them negatively or omit them altogether, especially with respect to their hair. Racialized pejoratives around natural Black hair are still pronounced within contemporary culture. Black women and other people of African descent are among the only groups criticized when they choose to wear hairstyles consistent with their natural hair textures. Younger Black women routinely report being humiliated and shamed in schools, places of employment, and even churches because of cultural bias against natural hair. One research participant recounts a particularly painful exchange within her church shortly after deciding to wear her hair naturally for the first time:

One Sunday, I had this big, chunky twist out, and my hair was just big and doing whatever it wanted . . . This woman made a face in response, and I hadn’t noticed until another woman asked the woman why she made that face. And the woman’s response was that my hair was too much and hard to manage. Mind you, it’s my hair. Clearly, I’m managing it, but I felt so insulted because my hair became a representation of me. I did this. I made the choice to do my hair in this way, and although it wasn’t something that could be understood by somebody else, it was something I could claim as my own. This is my natural hair, and it’s something that comes out of my body.

While the response of this congregant may appear extreme, it represents some of the prevailing narratives within contemporary culture that contribute to viewing Black women’s natural hair as undesirable and straight hair as more desirable. In ways akin to the artists of the Black Arts Movement, hair functions as a political statement for Solange, one that declares her power and agency in the face of oppression.

**Black Hair: Pedagogy of Re(Presenting)**

The lyrics of Solange’s song “Don’t Touch My Hair” explore many of the dynamics surrounding Black women’s hair:

Don’t touch my hair  
When it’s the feelings I wear  
Don’t touch my soul  
When it’s the rhythm I know  
Don’t touch my crown  
They say the vision I’ve found  
Don’t touch what’s there
When it’s the feelings I wear

The motifs highlighted in Solange’s lyrics go to the heart of the need to exercise autonomy in relation to one’s body. “Don’t Touch My Hair” delivers a statement of autonomy, one that declares that hair for young Black women is an exercise in personal agency. In a culture that historically has laid claim to Black women’s bodies as property, whether through objectification, exploitation, or cultural appropriation of Black cultural products, young Black women’s ownership of their bodies becomes essential. Ultimately, hair becomes one aspect of the body that is important for young women to own. To declare “don’t touch my hair” is to reclaim one’s agency.

For Solange, hair also represents a sacred dimension of one’s being, which she describes as an expression of the soul. Here, the meaning of “soul” is both a reference to one’s Blackness and to one’s spiritual identity. Essentially, hair is where the spiritual and material realities of one’s life collide; as such, there is a certain sacramentality attached to one’s hair that necessitates that hair be guarded and protected. There is a need to provide young women in church education with rituals of resistance that help them identify the sacredness of their bodies, including how God is revealed through them. For many young women, hair becomes one of the ways they are re-presented to the world. Through their hairstyles, young Black women not only present new images but also reflect how they come to know God through their bodies. One young woman reflected on this dynamic as follows:

For so long, you grow up with this image of what God looks like. And what God looks like, God doesn’t really look like you. But what I’m beginning to understand is that what I’m made up of and what naturally comes from me must be part of God’s image too. I’ve never thought about it this way until recently but I could confidently say that my relationship with God is much more personal because I feel like [God] knows me and has known me. [God] knows everything about me, including my Afro and whatever it wants to do.

Hair as a Pedagogy of Solidarity in the Art of Beyoncé

Whereas Solange’s natural hair aesthetic has been the key to how she is perceived by the general public as an explicitly Black artist, her sister, Beyoncé, has been viewed in the opposite way. With respect to hair, Beyoncé is renowned for her elaborate hairstyles, which range from tightly bound updos and bleach-curled waves to straightened manes and the occasional natural Afro. Because Beyoncé’s hairstyles and overall presentation have reflected more mainstream looks, people have been less inclined to associate her with the promotion of an aesthetic of Blackness.

However, the release of her Lemonade album signaled a shift in those perceptions. On Lemonade, Beyoncé repositions herself alongside a radical Black agenda intent on resisting race, class, and gender oppression. Lemonade’s decidedly womanist text links to a broader historical African American narrative of triumph over tragedy. Similar to the artists of the Black Arts movement, Beyoncé makes the personal political.

In particular, this visual album details the marital infidelity of her husband, rapper Jay-Z. While exploring the depth and agony of the betrayal, Beyoncé segues into the broader experiences of suffering and oppression among Black women. Beyoncé’s reflections on Black women’s suffering are steeped in religious symbolism and imagery, including those from the Christian tradition. Although Beyoncé is not typically viewed as a religious artist, religious themes pervade Lemonade. In ways that reflect womanist theological approaches, Beyoncé uses religious symbolism alongside images of Black women as a means of re-presenting the sacred through Black women’s bodies.

A key moment in the album’s accompanying film is when Beyoncé features a quote from Malcolm X that describes the Black woman as the most disrespected and neglected woman in the United States. Despite the privileged status Beyoncé holds within the social and cultural landscape, the reference demonstrates Beyoncé’s attempt to stand in solidarity with Black women. However, the solidarity she forges also encompasses aesthetics.

In “Formation,” the first track Beyoncé released from the Lemonade album, she employs the use of a distinctly natural hair aesthetic, singing, “I like my baby hair and afros / I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils.” Here, Beyoncé affirms an aesthetic rooted in Blackness by declaring her preference for “baby hair and afros.” From one perspective, this line is a response to criticism Beyoncé received regarding her choice to leave her daughter’s hair natural, which many perceived as unkempt. On a deeper level, this criticism reflects a preoccupation with White beauty ideals. When Beyoncé refers to Afros as the foremost symbol of an embodied aesthetic of Black resistance, she is highlighting a key mark of Black racial identity: one’s hair. Throughout this visual album, she also wears a variety of African inspired hairstyles as a way of establishing continuity between black cultural traditions of the past and present.

The video for “Formation” was shot in New Orleans and contains references to Hurricane Katrina and images that reflect the Black Lives Matter movement. Beyoncé’s performance of “Formation” during the 2017 Super Bowl featured her backup dancers dressed in all black with black berets and Afros, which is reminiscent of the way members of the Black Panther Party dressed in the 1960s. The politically charged performance caused controversy in part because of the hair aesthetic she employed. For many, an Afro was also tied to prevailing narratives regarding Black women as being aggressive, uncontrolable, and vulgar.

In “Sorry,” another track from Lemonade, Beyoncé alludes to Jay-Z’s infidelity in the now-infamous line “Becky with the good hair.” The line generated much speculation about the individual Beyoncé was referencing. More significantly, however, Beyoncé taps into the binaries of “good” and “bad” hair that remain a part of the African American lexicon while also resisting them. For many young Black women steeped in our media-saturated culture, a part of socialization involves learning that hair texture is a type of currency that determines one’s place in the world. Because of cultural bias, the texture of their natural hair is often deemed undesirable. This can contribute to a sense of fragmentation in their lives that reinforces a sense of never being good enough. When artists such as Beyoncé tap into these dynamics, they are offering a gesture of solidarity to young Black women.
If My Hair is Not Right, I’m Not Right: Pedagogy of Healing

For so many young Black women, repairing the fracture in their personhood that results from their exposure to varying forms of oppression occurs through caring for their hair. This is because the state of one’s hair is fundamentally tied to one’s overall sense of well-being. As one young interviewee aptly put it, “If my hair is not right, I’m not right.” Recognition of this reality forces church educators to contend with how attention to hair and engagement with artists such as Beyoncé and Solange might help to foster pedagogies of healing that prioritize well-being as a central feature within the teaching and learning processes of the church. This is why so many young Black women are expressing an affinity for artists such as Beyoncé and Solange—they use a hair aesthetic not just as an avenue for social resistance but also as a way to become whole.
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