religions

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Ain't I a Woman? A Look at the Beauty of Blackness Amid the Internalized Body Politic of Genteel Whiteness

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Abstract: *Ain't I a Woman?* This question was raised by activist and self-emancipated former slavewoman Sojourner Truth, who validly questioned the body politic of identity when contextualized to perceptions of female personhood. Essentially, what Truth challenged were presumptions about the standards set to revere female bodies through markers of genteel Whiteness, while the worth of embodied Blackness, precisely the beauty of Black women, is reviled. In this article, I seek to raise awareness about factors of patriarchy and societal ramifications. Patriarchy is a systematized phenomenology of norms privileging the male gaze. The White male gaze, particularly in strongholds of power, influences the body politic of communal identity. Black women tend to lean on their faith to embody strength, yet patriarchy also encumbers the gendered body politic in religious spheres. As a womanist scholar, my analysis considers the intricate roles that patriarchy holds in the cultural production of a genteel, pretty woman image, wherein the aura of Whiteness grounds a body politic that deems Blackness as other. Despite the influences of prevailing macrosystems, I propose a theoethic of self-love to push against negatively biased identity boundaries by affirming ways to embrace Black beauty with a subversive imperative to love oneself regardless.

Keywords: body politic; patriarchy; gentility; pretty-ness; gender identity; womanist; theoethics; Black beauty; power

Citation: Miles-Tribble, Valerie. 2024. *Ain't I a Woman?* A Look at the Beauty of Blackness Amid the Internalized Body Politic of Genteel Whiteness. *Religions* 15: 1196. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101196

Academic Editors: Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, Neichelle Guidry and Angela N. Parker

Received: 7 August 2024
Revised: 13 September 2024
Accepted: 26 September 2024
Published: 30 September 2024

1. Introduction: Recollection and Reflection

Some years ago, as a young, professionally successful woman, I was informed by a male suitor that I was not pretty, yet attractive. As we shared a window table with a magical view from a sunset-lit aerie overlooking San Francisco Bay, Robert's declaration felt like a balloon dart, and the moment's magic dissolved like a dream suddenly disrupted. Quite assured in his rationale, he voiced his litany of indicators for what constituted a pretty woman. While he offered numerous examples of my attractiveness, my psyche (read: my bruised ego) was stalled by his distinctions at a traffic sign that read "Stop–not pretty".

In our ensuing discourse, after probing Robert for recognizable examples, I was struck by the almost arbitrary and elementary criteria this educated, well-traveled man used as he glibly named female personalities that he deemed pretty. Most were tallish women with honed (read: bi-racial) features, whether or not they were of mixed heritage, along with a few non-Black women as a plumb line for "diversity" comparisons. Accordingly, my male suitor (yes, African American) listed his observed characteristics of pretty women, with descriptions of physical facial features such as nose, lips, eyes, and body profile. According to Robert, these features were enhanced if women had finer-textured hair types with length and style frequently visible in Hollywood images. He declared, "Many Black women are attractive, but not pretty," while waxing on a fashion magazine sense of sensuality garnered by the "right mix" of skin tone or lighter complexions as part of the pedigree to command attention.

Some years later, I reflected on how that discourse unveiled racialized yet socialized perceptions that were more common than not. I since gleaned how an aura of pretty-ness was fabricated by male fantastical imagery, ranging from the perceived softness of genteel

femininity that leaned toward the mystique or untouchable appeal of the exotic (read: erotic). The term "exotic" is a typology that often captures body imagery of continental Asian women or lithe Saharan African and Ethiopian women, deemed very slender with chiseled features. These women are also objectified by their "foreignness" among a swath of international cultures beyond the stereotypical tropes of Black American females. Thus, I admit to raising my eyebrows with heightened sensitivity and, to be honest, self-consciousness, since I was a short and voluptuous, yet toned, woman with naturally kinky, albeit corporate-appropriate, permed straightened hair. I admit that I never did and would not fit the images shown on fashion runways, music videos, or the pages of popular-style magazines. These trend gurus hit the newsstands and mailboxes monthly to set the image bar for global women to pursue beauty or fashion, but provided only a rare sighting of a Black woman in the features except for *EBONY* and, later, *ESSENCE* magazines.

Sharing a somewhat vivid recollection here is an admission that I obviously internalized Robert's opinions with subsequent personal questions about my self-image precisely because of his male-ness. I also admit to the process undertaken to develop a raised sense of consciousness, as well as the effort and heartache, as I navigated my own identity for a time. I felt confronted suddenly by a new gender acceptability barrier, like proverbial stairsteps to success that kept getting steeper. In my familial household, careful pride in one's identity was embraced. I can never forget key words from my mom's mantra that refill my mental crevices, "Don't you ever leave this house with pink rollers in your hair, fuzzy slippers on your feet, or without the good sense God gave you. Remember you carry the Miles name–don't embarrass us, (which meant) be your best." In my familial socialization circles, our parental warning was less about class snobbery, since we were just as poor as the next; rather, the caution to me and my sisters about outward decorum warned us that appearance might generate prejudicial assumptions about our character. Aristocratic noses or air-brushed makeup did not supersede communal expectations to maintain high grades, do household chores, adhere to cleanliness, and, most of all, comply with decorum as an ingrained measure of ethical behavior. Hence, somewhat tongue-in-cheek at this writing, I can attest that my mother's emphasis on decorum must be why I refrained from hurling an ice-cold drink at the conveyer of beauty standards who sat near me, perhaps totally unabashed or genuinely unaware of the offense. Why else then, in the embarrassing moments of being sized up as not pretty enough, did I lose a silent grip on my self-esteem as though my familial grounding and my personal steps to maintain my personal health and beauty regime had morphed into a slippery downslide at a kiddy park, all because a man whose opinion I giddily thought mattered had just declared that I did not.

In this article, I use reflection and investigation to raise awareness about societal factors that connect the imagination about females to a patriarchal body politic and its ramifications. As a womanist scholar, my theological and ethical analysis considers the intricate role that patriarchy holds in the cultural production of a genteel, pretty woman image in which an aura of Whiteness grounds a body politic that deems Blackness as other. In this writing, I can admit that my focus and purpose for reflecting here is more about reckoning with how easily I and other women might internalize our sensitivity to another's opinion about our identity and why.

First, what connotes "pretty-ness" and the gentility of "pretty" as feminized Whiteness? Second, how does the system of patriarchy undergird sociocultural standards that become internalized as conceptualizations of a normative "body politic"? Third, in what ways do historically racialized tropes center a gendered body politic and develop into caste-prone measures of self-worth? And lastly, how does one break a pernicious cycle of intra-racial and gendered group hierarchies?

Ain't I a Woman? This question was raised by the activist and self-emancipated former slavewoman Sojourner Truth, who validly questioned the body politic of identity when contextualized to perceptions of female personhood. Essentially, what Truth challenged were presumptions about the standards set to revere female bodies through markers of genteel Whiteness while the worth of embodied Blackness, specifically the beauty of

Blackness, is reviled. The early twentieth-century emergence of justice and Black liberation voices included Black male writers, further expanded by Black feminists, womanists, and diverse political justice scholars. Intercultural and gendered voices informed lessons I subsequently learned to distinguish between façade and substance as an embodied choice one makes, whether assessing the self or being judged by others.

Now, as a Black woman of experienced maturity, I like to think that my points of reference over the years about beauty distinctions have evolved to address and deconstruct the common presumptions of a historically racialized body politic. I embrace intergenerational discourse and critical self-reflection, from which I gain greater awareness about how I have been conditioned to perceive my worth by social parameters in a body politic that undervalues looking too "ethnic". While I can now question why I was so affected by disappointment then, I also realize that I am not alone among women who experience an awakening to begin a meaningful journey toward self-love. Despite the influences of prevailing gender-biased macrosystems, I propose a theoethic of self-love to push against negatively restrictive identity boundaries. By tracing the body politic, women can affirm ways to embrace Black beauty with a subversive imperative to love oneself regardless.

Director Ava DuVernay's recent film, *Origins*, opens on the large cinematic screen to capture an insightful and personal cultural story about grounded research by the African American author Isabel Wilkerson. It draws popular media attention to the controversial institutionalization of intersectional caste systems that Wilkerson contends were codified with the founding of America by Eurocentric White men. While Wilkerson's full investigation is beyond the purview of this article, she argues in her book that the codes of structural caste systems subsume within them the presumptive dynamics of racialized supremacy, which require deeper investigation of the ways that identities are conscripted within global societal body politics (Wilkerson 2020, pp. 22–24, 68–70). As one example, she noted the following:

> Dehumanization is a standard component in the manufacture of an out-group against which to pit an in-group, and it is a monumental task. It is a war against truth, against what the eye can see and what the heart could feel if allowed to do so on its own. To dehumanize another human being is not merely to declare that someone is not human. . . It is a process, a programming. . . Dehumanize the group, and you have completed the work of dehumanizing any single person within it. (Wilkerson 2020, p. 141)

Admittedly, I resonated with Wilkerson's passionate arguments as she researched, and, in the film, addressed how a collective body politic can become normalized by negative consciousness and subconscious behavioral values.

Complicating the issue of identity are dehumanizing social stigmas that are multiplied by religious constructions of genteel appropriateness with patriarchal expectations for women's appearance and behavior, as in the Christian church, writ large, when biblical scripture is excerpted to proclaim how a woman is to exist and look (1 Peter 3:1–6 and Proverbs 31 about the virtuous woman) while potentially castigating those who don't comply (1 Timothy 2:9 or Proverbs 7:10–12 imaging a painted harlot). Perhaps some underpinnings in a religious body-politic of conformity to the doctrinal norms and belief systems are often used to undermine inclusivity by creating criteria to reinforce the in-group and the out-group imaginings, justified by power groups' use of scripture and dogma (Ephesians 5:22 about submission or 1Timothy 2:11–15 against women speaking or leading in the church body politic of the congregation). When read literally, adherence to the provisions oppressively legalizes a gendered caste system of hierarchy in religious spheres where denominations and religious traditions still seek to regulate women's appearance—makeup, hair, and attire (read: no pants).

2. What Constitutes "Pretty-Ness"? The Gentility of "Pretty" as Feminized Whiteness

As I recall, long after my interest in Robert ended, I continued to reflect upon the ways that Black women's melaninated beauty is questioned when perceived by the dehumanizing

societal standards of patriarchal neoliberalism that impact the self-imagery of generations of African-rooted women. In her book, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, womanist ethicist Emilie Townes examined the stereotypes of racialized, classist images, ranging from lazy, shiftless "Topsy" to a loud, emasculating, or strong-willed "Sapphire" (Townes 2006). In our contemporary era, the rise of entertainment industry accessibility and the subliminal messaging of ad promotions generate a proliferation of beauty contests, fashion, film, and visual cues in social media imagery that become part of the cultural socialization process. Women are urged to invest in and reach for elusive signifiers of pretty-ness; hence, the demand for elective surgical alterations continues to increase. Images of pretty-ness are typologies of the imaginary that are funneled through mediums designated for specific purposes and shown to broader audiences; thus, the adage, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," signifies that physical amendments are viewed as outward signs of privileged beauty regimes afforded in the stratified echelons of attainment.

Women in any social group are subject to attain the standards of pretty-ness set by a group of male-dominated economic beneficiaries. Womanist clinical psychologist Chanequa Walker-Barnes contends that the "iconic standard of beauty has been a White woman with fair skin, blue eyes, and long, blond, straight hair. All women, regardless of race, wrestle with this standard to some degree" (Walker-Barnes 2019, p. 92). In other words, non-Black women can also be body shamed by the so-called "pretty-ness" standards. Yet, the intersections of identity are more complex for Black and possibly Latina women, who are judged by race, gender, and class amid the dynamics of structural patriarchy in a caste system. In contrast, Black women are more often beauty-shamed for being full-bodied or are subjected to negative portrayals that are sexualized or markedly more aggressive than the genteel trope of femininity—yet, on many social media threads, other Black women or men are some of the venomous critics. For example, the 2012 debate about Black women's hair began with social media criticism about the competing athletic Olympiad Gabby Douglas' natural hairdo and appearance. Her short ponytail that did not stay neatly in place overshadowed her athletic victory, as expressed by complaints about the styling issues of unkept hair; moreover, the debate centered on what I call "shame-blame" by critics, including some Black women on social media and White beauty media as publicity fodder.

> It's no coincidence that hair, one of the most visible markers and symbols of Black women's difference in a White-dominated culture, has become a focal point of Gabby's story. The media must forever make an issue of our difference, even in moments of triumph, but never in a way that engages with critical analysis of power and oppression. (Ebony 2012)

A closer look at specific gender typecasting reveals how the subtle and not-so-subtle signifiers of pretty-ness get linked to promoting products that "sell" consumers on the tools required to be pretty. Perusals of industry marketing and trend reports confirm that Black women are closely watched for the dollars spent, yet under-prioritized for health risks and the product safety of chemicals or side effects of beauty products. For example, product trend consultants Circana Advisors reported on the overall consumer behavior in varied industries, noting that in 2023, the United States prestige cosmetic beauty industry reached USD 31.7 billion at a growth rate of 14% over 2022, as compared to the mass market beauty sales annual increase of 6% (Circana 2024). Notably, a subgroup that was tracked as a mass market industry included retail brands distributed at a lesser cost and on a larger scale in neighborhood drug stores or through department stores and supermarkets. Marketing researchers Sia-Partners stated that the global cosmetics industry includes European and Asian markets, which reached USD 451 billion in 2023 (Sia-Partners 2024).

Some reports indicate that Black women spend nine times more on beauty products than other United States consumers. While I acknowledge that discerning women can and should be motivated to be equally deserving of access to quality beauty care regimens and products, the use of so-called premium products translates into considerable dollars of purchasing power directed to purveyors like MAC, ULTA, Sephora, and other boutique

brands that want our patronage but may not value our needs. In addition, industry researchers Nielson IQ (NIQ) reported that Black female consumers spend the most of all American consumers on beauty products, making up 12.5% of the total beauty dollars or USD 9.4 billion spent in 2023 on cosmetics and nails, facial skincare, and hair products (NIQ 2024). Tiffany Burns and Kristi Weaver, who are industry consultants at McKinsey & Company, report that "more than 11 percent of all beauty customers are Black—and yet, Black brands account for a mere 2.5 percent of total beauty industry revenues" (Burns and Weaver 2022). For the most part, Black women did not see themselves on the beauty pages. Black models did not appear in the mainstream media until the start of *Ebony* magazine in 1945, thanks to John Johnson and his family legacy, that launched a national and global business pioneering Black models on high-fashion runways and on printed pages to support Black-owned beauty products. As marketing venues changed, however, *Ebony* succumbed to financial woes and buyouts. Yet, a recent documentary attests to a growing census of GenX and younger generations of Black male and female entrepreneurs in business, finance, real estate, and the beauty/cosmetics industries who accumulate wealth and represent a communal sense of values for excellence and the support of their Black communities (TDF 2019).

Nevertheless, I apply the term "pretty-ness" as a euphemism for the troubling intersections of identity associated with discriminatory values that are not as openly discussed. On the one hand, some families socialize "pretty-ness" expectations such as "marrying right, not marrying down; avoiding too dark-skinned women," while emphasizing the familial social station, outer appearance, or looks. Broaching the unwritten protocols of "belonging" is like wading into sensitive waters of intragroup biases where hidden riptides exist but often go unacknowledged until some courageous soul shares a lived experience that prompts nodding heads of familiarity. As my testimony, on two different occasions that I am aware of in college, and later as a post-graduate career woman, I was invited to meet-the-family visits where I endured the faux-civility of the ubiquitous "interview" (read: interrogation), then investigation, and the subsequent rejection of my suitability because the verdict was that my parents were blue-collar workers, not ivy leaguers with pedigree. This verdict of insufficiency hurt more because it came from people within my racial ethnicity, albeit higher on the class strata.

In each case, I watched the patriarch assume the falsely benign role to appear quite erudite and patronizingly charming since the guise of deflection to the matriarch's role as the judge still upheld his expectations to sort, hunt, and protect, like lionesses in the pride. One charming father's words still ring clearly in my memory: "We really like you, so please don't be offended that *she* would want anything less for her son" (emphasis mine to mark the man's inference to his wife as the cause of my final visit). Although I could not articulate what defense would have been appropriate, my added heartbreak in each of these experiences was the reticence of my beau (read: the patriarch-in-formation) to profess his love and advocate for my personhood, rather than the eventual compliant abandonment for the sake of family loyalty. Thus, I witnessed how slyly patriarchy can deflect socialized expectations to lay the blame at the feet of women for causing situations that pit females against one another like a sparring match while being used to execute expectations. As I struggled with a sense of smallness (read: resentful anger) that I felt in each instance, I did not direct my animosity toward my family background. Instead, I learned the hypocrisy of a siphoning process instigated by patriarchal classism and racism amid the public rhetoric on unification and ethical calls for equity.

While the experience with Robert came later, I gained insight to the fact that inbred indoctrinations begin in closed cliques and intragroup biases, not unlike the lengths that wealthy White families undertake to keep "old money" in place. Moreover, to direct a media lens to the public sphere of high-profile sports, business, or entertainment, the optic of "pretty-ness" is further complicated by personally shared testimonies from Black women who grapple with a sense of being at the margins when Black males, as high-income earners, are more attractive to cross-cultural females who also might be viewed as

preferential partners depending on the prestige level of the male's economic or education attainment. Townes, Walker-Barnes, and Wilkerson each discuss aspects of the physical and economic biases of patriarchal socialization used to separate the bourgeoise or elite from the poor ordinary Joe or Judy.

To an extent, negative misappropriations of the "talented tenth" concepts espoused by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903a) support a socioeconomic caste system and the privileging of patriarchy. If I need to clarify, my remarks are not intended to detract from his brilliance or his writing. Yet Du Bois embodied the patriarchy of his time and used the talented tenth as an identifier to signify the hopeful effects of Black men with higher education and training. The aim for male attainment at a ratio of the emancipated Black population set a theoethical appeal to be exemplars of leadership excellence. Du Bois urged that selected men contribute to "developing the Best [*sic*] of this race that they may guide the Mass [*sic*] away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races" (Du Bois 1903b, p. 33). In Du Bois's words, a talented tenth represents higher standards that are acceptable to the White gaze.

> Do Americans ever stop to reflect that there are in this land a million men of Negro blood, well-educated, owners of homes, against the honor of whose womanhood no breath was ever raised, whose men occupy positions of trust and usefulness, and who, judged by any standard, have reached the full measure of the best type of modern European culture? Is it fair, is it decent, is it Christian to ignore these facts of the Negro problem, to belittle such aspiration, to nullify such leadership and seek to crush these people back into the mass out of which by toil and travail, they and their fathers have raised themselves? Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character? (Du Bois 1903b, pp. 44–45)

So, what does Du Bois have to do with Robert's claims regarding pretty-ness? If we are honest, the internalized cultural codes of color-shaming and stratified class labels exist within Black and White ethnic circles. Under the guise of a "pretty-ness" construction by patriarchal socialization, an ideology of Whiteness easily permeates classist consciousness with misguided strivings for the genteel pinnacles of acceptability. Thus, the criteria in Robert's definition of pretty-ness mirrored the characteristics of gentility delineated by Du Boisian constructions of educated Black men in a class strata identified as the talented tenth and purposed to reach "*the full measure of the best type of modern European culture*" (emphasis in italics, mine; words, Du Bois 1903b, p. 44).

3. Patriarchy: Who Sets Sociocultural Criteria in a Body Politic of Power?

It might be helpful to examine structural systems of patriarchy in our socioeconomic landscape while exploring the gendered constructions of pretty-ness. As I flashback, Robert's self-assured views (read: arrogance) unmasked for me the gendered privilege of the male gaze that held limited concern for how dehumanization gets perpetuated. I realize now that he also seemed to lack conscious realization that his internalized views were conditioned by the macro-societal elements of patriarchy and a body politic of power. In other words, the dynamics of societal patriarchy influence economic standards and the imaginary by perpetuating a supremacy of Whiteness in the body politic that still works against Robert and the female bodies he objectified. As one example, one can witness these dynamics in the strategic crafting of TV advertisements in which a competing product is satirically imaged to cast public doubt upon its suitability while amplifying the benefits of the key product. While the viewer audience might chuckle at these ads, women recognize that there are similar dynamics at play in certain comedic displays of typecasting womanhood, such as the buffoonery of characters in the popular Madea plays, movies, and TV network spinoff series produced by Black entertainment magnate, Tyler Perry (Manigault-Bryant et al. 2014). Black women are negatively caricatured while relegated to the bottom rung of the social hierarchy.

From a composite of research, a consensus emerges to suggest that patriarchy exists as a systematized phenomenology of norms privileging the male gaze, particularly the White male gaze, controlling the strongholds of power in the body politic. Townes analyzed patriarchy's societal conjuring and use of stereotypes, behavioral imagery, and body narratives as labels comprising what she terms a "fantastic hegemonic imagination" that infuses institutions and the psyche of communal identity (Townes 2006). The prevalence of White male domination is derived from monetary controls directing economic policy, as well as the appropriation of cultural commercialism. Meanwhile, the self-interests of the self-described mainstream get elevated by key attributes to justify, even extol, a central agenda to direct the public imagination. Townes warns about the tendencies in which the formation of warped, racist, and sexist biases underlay tropes, such as feminine prettyness, that appear to be normative. Intentional image optics are erected to maintain the dehumanization of ethnic groups, gender roles, and "outsider" groups, including targeted immigrant groups in the political economy, all at work to indoctrinate the spirit, with or without subtlety, in television shows and promotions, or transmitted in social media and political rhetoric. Take the 1980 administration of President Ronald Reagan, whose political soundbites introduced the label of "welfare queen" with fabricated images of Black women as a targeted polemic against poor Black women that still endures. Since then, research data have shown that White people outnumbered Black people on welfare at the time; furthermore, research also connected the 1980 patriarchal scaffolding of power structures to directed appeals using the imagery at work to maintain control of a political economy under the rubric of Reaganomics (Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor 2016, pp. 51–52, 93).

Next, grounding what I call a body politic, a working definition is warranted to explore its roots in political science philosophy that extends to sociocultural and theoethical framing. On the one hand, in the field of humanities, the religious and secular concepts of the body center upon individualized imaging of human functioning, yet often reference a collective corporeal nature of human existence through governance and power hierarchies. Many studies about the body politic refer to historian Michel Foucault's foundational analysis and philosophical lens. Foucault linked relational human engagement with knowledge, imagination, or power to the evolving concepts of political economy and what Foucault called biopolitics in his 1978–1979 lectures (Foucault [2004] 2008). In brief, I surmise that when Foucault describes societal knowledge/power, he refers to the imagination of collective bodies, as found in the dynamics of municipalities, to control groups and fuel dominant politics to prompt selected norms. In a 1979 lecture analyzing American neo-liberal tendencies, Foucault posited that human capital involves intelligence, wealth, productivity, and mobility to gauge non-economic social behavior in economic terms (Foucault [2004] 2008). In Foucault's words,

> This means that we thus arrive at a whole environmental analysis, as the Americans say, of the child's life which it will be possible to calculate, and to a certain extent quantify, or at any rate, measure, in terms of the possibilities of investment in human capital (229–230)... First, the generalizations of the economic form of the market beyond monetary exchanged functions in American neo-liberalism as a principle of intelligibility and a principle of decipherment of social relationships and individual behavior. This means that analysis in terms of market economy, or in other words, of supply and demand, can function as a schema which is applicable to non-economic domains (243)... A wealthy family, that is to say, a high income family, that is to say, a family whose components have a high human capital, will have as its immediate and rational economic project the transmission of a human capital at least as high to its children, which implies a set of investments, both in financial terms and in terms of time on the part of the parents. Now these investments are not possible for a large family. So, according to the American neo-liberals, it is the necessity to transmit a human capital... that explains the smaller size of wealthy families (244–245).

While Foucault seemed concerned with the positive aspects of power, his focus on liberalism as an economic mechanism of the body politic revealed less concern with the individuals marginalized by intended disparities instituted by power groups to perpetuate the subjugation of the other. The assumption that wealthy families can do what poor families cannot grounds the associated value of people when socioeconomic factors are quantifiable as the human capital of worth, or not, to the body politic.

On the other hand, Joelle Rollo-Koster articulates a primarily civic emphasis by describing the term "body politic" as a biological metaphor for systematized governance in the historical overview prepared for *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Rollo-Koster 2017). As such, societal institutions are city–state–federal structures and religious systems that exercise the power of hierarchy to influence and control collective behavior (Rollo-Koster 2017). That is to say, the collective of individual persons and families as citizenry comprises a body that is necessarily stronger than each individual, the proviso being that each contributes to fulfilling the expectations of the whole. In effect, the navigation of expectations and formation of regulations comprise a politic of power with an expectation that there is conformity in the absence of consensus.

Particularly, women of color are marginalized further by ideological biases that typecast poor women as "other" in the body politic. To understand the ways that subliminal messaging infuses the societal perceptions of women, I surmise that a communal body politic in which identity, whether imagined or experienced, is deemed to be detrimental to the whole also gets determined by patriarchal-led power groups who set the criteria. In that way, the body politic is sovereign, though not controlled by a solitary ruler, but rather by a patriarchal collective that operates through the power dynamics of complicit ideologies supporting its hegemonic imagination. Whether examining the logistics of wealth distribution or the legitimacy of identity, the prioritization of socialized factors gets filtered through the prism of power. Political scientists Nadia Brown and Sarah Gershon examined systemic bodies using Black feminist constructions to expand upon Foucault's approach to imagined power. Brown and Gershon note the following:

> Bodies are sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings. Subjecting the body to systemic regimes–such as government regulation–is a method of ensuring that bodies will behave in socially and politically accepted manners. The body is placed in hierarchized (false) dichotomies, for example, masculine/feminine; mind/body; able-bodied/disabled; fat/skinny; heterosexual/homosexual; and young/old. . . For example, governments either choose to recognize the rights for minorities or justify discrimination and marginalization for minorities. . . Citizenship entitlements are not available for bodies that transgress cultural, social, sexual, and/or political boundaries. (Brown and Gershon 2017)

In a 2024 analysis of feminist perspectives, Kathleen Lennon and Clara Fischer discussed how awareness of the physical body and agency evolved as a body politic at the intersections of identity and disposition of women's bodies within gendered discovery and agency.

> Hair straightening, blue-tinted contact lenses, surgical reconstruction of noses and lips are practices in which the material shapes of our bodies are disciplined to correspond to a social ideal, reflecting the privileged position which certain kinds of, usually, white, always able, always young, bodies occupy. . . gendered performances are ones which we act out ourselves and which others act out in relation to us. They are acted out in accordance with social *scripts* prescribing ideals which are unrealizable, but which nonetheless provide the framework for our activities. These dominant ideals reinforce the power of certain groups, e.g., men and heterosexuals, over others. These others–women, gay people, trans and gender non-conforming people, those with differently abled bodies, or bodies differently shaped from the dominant ideal–are treated socially as outsiders, "the abject", and subject to social punishments. (Lennon and Fischer 2024)

At the other extreme, ultra-supremacists' anti-government agendas surface in the current public dynamics of a contentious election campaign cycle and call into question how the body politic gets translated through a legislative hierarchy. Governance frameworks and democratic processes are threatened, albeit for different reasons. Author Chelsea Ebin raised gendered elements in "Threats to Women/Women as Threats" as part of a special issue, *The Body Politic: Women's Bodies and Political Conflict* (Chelsea Ebin 2021). Ebin traced the exponential rise of radicalized male supremacy in the evolution of right-wing, anti-statist movements that deem government public policy as illegitimate threats to liberty. Ebin also notes how the present threat of nullification efforts functions to endanger women's rights, surmising that "it also provides a justificatory schema for refusing to recognize the legal rights and protections afforded to women" (Chelsea Ebin 2021).

> Patriarchal traditionalist attitudes, which assert the supremacy of men and code submissive women as "good" and non-submissive women as "bad", permeate anti-statist right-wing movements. As I discuss in the following section, even for those who are coded as "good", patriarchal traditionalism offers a limited and restricted set of roles for women to occupy. For those coded as "bad", the binary and exclusionary logic of patriarchal traditionalism construct a set of very real threats. (Chelsea Ebin 2021)

Trending in media networks is a public manifesto entitled Project 2025 that details key strategies to advance the neo-liberal dismantling of present government support services and civil protections for poor and marginalized groups. Sponsored by a coalition of supporters led by the Heritage Foundation, the alt-right plan would change the body politic with saliency claims from the supporters of Project 2025 to limit public education subsidies, further reduce women's right to make decisions affecting their physical body, and limit access to public resources that were adjudicated to improve the quality of life for Black and Brown poor families (Project2025.org 2023). The neo-liberal, alt-right claims for civil liberties are ironic, since the agenda to dismantle so-called "undemocratic" processes appears instead to impose greater threats to the democratic protections of human rights.

Sociocultural characteristics become benchmarks in a gendered body politic, exercised when religious bodies push for and support the regulation of women's bodies by limiting their right to choose personal health and wellness options. Witness the current tensions in the present religio-political climates of a Christianized body politic, occurring when targeted groups are excluded for non-binary sexualized identities. Some are marginalized for raising inclusion as a justice issue or castigated for behavioral non-conformity to regulatory ideologies. Under the rubric of pro-life, patriarchal regulators of church doctrine proscribe a body politic of gendered controls. Similarly, under the rubric of patriotism, religious appeals in pastoral preaching and regulatory doctrine get infused with *xenophobia*, a fear of "foreigners," whether immigrant groups or people with non-Christian faith traditions or religious practices.

Hence, the body politic of some congregations rejects collaborations with non-Christian religions within community organizing networks despite shared justice aims. With frequency, pastoral leaders have been expelled for so-called biblical non-compliance, such as supporting issues of gender role equality. Black women, finding themselves at lower rungs of the societal ladder, tend to lean on their upbringing or spiritual formation in faith communities to embody the virtues of inner fortitude and strength; yet, in religious spheres, patriarchy often encumbers the body politic to limit the roles of women's leadership, despite utilizing their fiscal support and volunteer services. Thus, like the metaphorical body comprised of many parts with different functions referenced in biblical texts of Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 12, one finds that power is parsed in the societal complexities of a body politic. At the same time, patriarchy influences how and for whom.

Meanwhile, I surmise that the dynamics of capitalistic entities partly set sociocultural criteria as the economic and psychosocial power brokers through the persuasive control of media images and advertising to trend "pretty-ness" as a desirable goal. Billion-dollar industries have vested interests to legitimatize what should be acceptable beauty standards

with carefully curated messaging about what constitutes the female embodiment of prettyness. Mostly, companies that generate profits and create demand are run by individuals or conglomerates comprised of men. From Botox treatments to beauty peels, from hair mousse to hyaluronic acid masks, hair weaves to weaving permanent eyelashes, the public imagination is sparked by the visible optics of a gorgeous female model, often non-Black unless depicted in culturally targeted marketing, while the voice-over or visual innuendo urge women to attempt a similar look with the produced goods or services. Walker-Barnes also surmised that patriarchal expectations for beauty fuel the socioeconomic agendas of a multi-billion dollar industry of cosmetics, yet women need to recognize that such goals are internalized to varied extents.

> While it would be overgeneralizing to state that all cosmetics are designed to approximate whiteness, it is probably safe to assume that many of us are trying to relax, weave, and makeup our way into some section of the hegemonic ideal. (Walker-Barnes 2019, p. 93)

So, what do recollections of my former suitor, Robert, have to do with Foucault? Primarily, Robert and Foucault personify a gendered myopic attitude with patriarchal privileging of the "correctness" of their presumptions. I am mindful that patriarchal privileging is not directly limited to income level, race, class, or binary sexual identity; rather, its link or orientation rests primarily in an awareness that one's credibility lies in the distinctions set apart from the female experiences of marginalizing objectification.

4. Historically Racialized Tropes: Gendered Caste Systems of Worth

Again, Foucault acknowledged the role of the State (read: body politic) to remark on how a fascist State, specifically Germany, used racism to fuel dominant politics and selected norms. Notably, he did not address the ramifications when socialized aspects of racism normalized within the body politic of capitalistic political economies like America work to place targeted groups deemed inferior at risk. Here, I excerpt Foucault's remarks with concerns.

> What in fact is racism? It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die. The appearance with the biological continuum of the human race of races, the distinction among races, the hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are described as good and that others, in contrast, are described as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. It is a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population. . . On the one hand, racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and death of the other that is not a military or warlike relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship: "[T]he more inferior species dies out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I–as species rather than individual–can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate." (Foucault [1997] 2003, pp. 254–55)

The rationalization that Foucault provided was his critical view of the Nazi State as a racist and murderous biopower; moreover, his analysis contextualizes mechanisms in the psychosis of the Third Reich's enacted Nazi agenda of Jewish extermination.

Today, we witness these dynamics at work again in the 21st century with global upheavals and attacks of war by State powers over territorial holdings with aspersions against specific ethnic groups of people. What I find problematic is that circumstances justifying the elimination of people are still realities in cultural shifts when Foucault lectured and now. Yet, his analysis of a capitalist body politic under the rubric of democracy in America bypassed with only a mere mention to differentiate his remarks from "ordinary racism that takes the traditional form of mutual contempt or hatred between races" (Foucault [1997] 2003, p. 258). The mark of real and present danger is a reductionist risk of noncha-

lance or other modes of denial in a subjugating body politic that dashes hopes for equitable justice amid a domestic landscape of America's racial disparities. For Black people, racism is never ordinary. Since the founding of America and the genocide of Indigenous Native peoples, the evil of power controls fomenting racism is not unlike patriarchal power moves to exercise largely male decisions over women and their bodies. The gender injustice of restrictive controls threatens female rights, thereby threatening human rights.

Accordingly, Townes finds that "hegemony is the set of ideas that dominant groups employ in a society to secure consent of subordinates to abide by their rule. The notion of consent is key because hegemony is created through coercion that is gained by using the church, family, media, political parties, schools, unions, and other voluntary associations—the civil society and its organizations" (Townes 2006, p. 20). Since the founding of these institutions in the new Americas, the societal acceptance of slavery resulted from the hegemonic indoctrination of racial and gender subordination already in place. A Black female African was not viewed theoethically as a human being or as an equally loved child of God, but rather as an owned instrument of procreation for gain to increase the economic production pool of laborers. The African features of broad noses, kinky hair to withstand the heat, along with the physical musculature of wide hips, strong arms, and legs were parodied beyond the fields as comical or freakish, as some female children and women were among those displayed in public zoos or circuses for gazing curiosity. The role of stereotypes or typecasting, therefore, perpetuates a public imagination with characterizations intended to limit, demean, or weaken the credibility of competing interests or what Wilkerson refers to as lower caste systems (Wilkerson 2020).

> It was largely black efforts to rise beyond their station that set off the backlash of lynchings and massacres after Reconstruction following the Civil War, that sparked the founding of the Ku Klux Klan and the imposition of Jim Crow laws to keep the lowest caste in its place. (Wilkerson 2020, p. 228)

In the book *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion & Culture*, Black feminist Tamura Lomax closely examines how Black female bodies are relegated to the fringes by reinforcing patriarchy in present cultural and religious mores (Tamura Lomax 2018). She explicates tropes characterizing "Jezebel the African" in contrast with the distinctions of virtuosity, being lady-like, and a pillar of faith that holds stricter gender expectations for females than for males (2018, pp. 44–53). Focused on Black culture and the church, Lomax unveils many profound insights that I concur have universal applications. Lomax deftly analyzes cultural portrayals and actual religious settings to illuminate uses of sermonic messaging, in which the sermon particularly appears to invite celebration in the Gospel accounts of the wonder-working grace of Jesus, while Lomax notes that the messaging simultaneously might strip female worshipers of options for redemption other than submission (2018, pp. 153–59, 206–9). Such double standards allow ecclesial judgments to castigate women more readily by a yardstick of gentility. At the same time, male boys and men receive a nod, wink, and a slide rule of excuses for infractions in their behavior.

In my book, *Change Agent Church*, I extend a lens to inter-religious faith traditions to raise an urgent call to prepare for public justice witness and urge that many ethnic and religious communities take a hard look first at the disparities and unjust hypocrisy existing within congregational life (Miles-Tribble [2020] 2021). Double standards are normalized to exclude female leaders from pulpit or board roles, demand female submission (read: to men and the church), castigate and expel non-binary identities, and preach the exclusion of saints from sinners (read: anyone other than our ideological type of Christianity); thus, churches are ill-equipped to demand public justice while ignoring the gendered injustices within the church doors. A further complication is the myopic or narrow cooptation of biblical teaching to uphold religio-politics that support further exclusion and targeting of groups in the public square; in such instances, women who believe they are being faithful to the church support the rhetoric, policies, and legislation that further remove their personal and collective gender rights (Miles-Tribble [2020] 2021, pp. 136–40).

Such approaches to the intersections of race, gender, class, and power impact sensory biases as differences, and Black women are often least valued while they are most feared because Black women persist, by necessity, to find resilient means to survive and thrive. African Studies Professor, Gerald David Jaynes, conducted a grounded study to analyze sociological data about the Black familial roles of women to debunk the prevalent stigma about urban and rural families as the working poor and the negative values conveyed by public research reports such as the Moynihan Report of the 1970s. By necessity, many Black women either choose or are compelled to work; therefore, they generate a different kind of social capital that runs counter to Foucault's premise of associating social capital with the privilege of wealth. Jaynes sought to reinterpret the culture of Black poverty while challenging the presumptions of familial dysfunction often attributed to single-head-of-household women as working mothers who utilize the intergenerational communication of values among women (Gerald David Jaynes 2023).

The investigation of reasons for the number of women who are heads of households falls beyond the purview of this writing; still, I suggest that the census of single-head-of-household women is a sociological testament to male vicissitudes with the gender-dominant conditions of wartime service casualties and the adverse impact of the imprisonment census. The cohesiveness of the family often persists through Black women; thus, to deride or weaken the self-image of the Black woman is to undermine the family. A weakened self-image preys upon the individual and, in turn, collective insecurities. Perhaps self-image is pivotal in many ways to explain why commercials, especially beauty ads, often begin with questions to emphasize or call attention to what is "wrong" in order to tout what might be possible and how one's body (read: appearance) could be made to look and feel better.

As a final mention of Robert's image prognosis, I better understand some ways in which indoctrination results from the generational internalization of racialized tropes and socialized views of the impurity of Blackness as compared to White purity as an attribute of gentility. While I cannot presume to speak for Robert, I surmise that perhaps as a business executive, Robert faced the reminders of conformity and subliminal images of Whiteness that ground the measures of pretty-ness. Similar to the sociological studies of Black children choosing their preference of White dolls over Black dolls, the psychology of Blackness is conditioned by reinforcement, requiring greater intentionality to affirm ethnic Blackness as more than a melaninated skin tone, rather as a sensibility of cultural awareness and pride. I believe that Robert was proud of himself and his heritage; nevertheless, patriarchal grooming is more complex in its many modes and avenues of transmission. Black beauty, likewise, needs to be affirmed through diverse modes of transmission, fed and controlled by Black women and women of color for restorative ends.

5. Response: Identity of Black Beauty and Self-Worth

While I have reasons for not assembling a list of de facto characteristics of Black beauty, foremost, it is because I believe that all women's true beauty is not limited to a list or judgments of the beholder; rather, beauty comes from internal virtues that govern how one embodies love. I recall the period when I genuinely began to love myself and the incredible sense of acceptance that grew with my appreciation of each discovery. I embrace my short self, natural hair, and Black woman fullness. Sharing this portion of my journey neither seeks approval nor asks forgiveness for my choices along the way, nor needs to generate voluntary feedback (read: judgment) on the journey I call my lived experiences. Rather, I share my experiences to encourage others to release whatever hinders their positive self-image by articulating publicly, in the safety of a sister circle of support, or the privacy of journal writing. As a practical theologian, I emphasize the applicability of theory and lived experiences to behavioral praxis. I resonate with Walker-Barnes, a practical theologian with womanist wisdom who distinguishes repentance from reconciliation and healing, as follows:

> People of color must learn to love themselves, their physicality, sexuality, and ways of being in the world—without mediating their love through the gaze of

> White supremacist ideals (184). . . the damaged self-identities of people of color in a White supremacist context are a form of psychospiritual sickness that requires healing, not an act of sin calling for repentance and atonement. Without such healing, equity in cross-cultural relationships, whether interpersonal or systemic, is impossible (185).

Womanist Bible scholar Mitzi Smith, in *Womanist Sass and Talk Back*, engages forms of contextual resistance to the misogyny of biblical interpretation by confronting the body politic of patriarchal Whiteness that attempts to subjugate or minimize Black women's bodies (Smith 2018, pp. 30–32). Smith urges that healing begins when women approach the sacred text with agency to discover meaning-making through interpretive engagement of biblical stories with our stories (2018, pp. 44, 54–55). As we read, it is okay to ask: what is transformational–what is problematic? As more eyes are opened about how societal conditioning in a body politic of power controls to preserve caste strata, our collective efforts require the encouragement of all women to consciously choose to embody their authentic identity as a form of resistance to the dictates of such indoctrinations (139). As more Black sisters fiercely help other sisters (and brothers) to do likewise, they are more resistant to the tendencies to closet shame; rather, they move to reconcile and heal despite it, as Walker-Barnes, Smith, Lomax, and Townes urge.

In other words, once an AHA moment reveals that biblical accounts are told through someone's ancient *sitz im leben*—that is to say, sacred texts are situational lenses and ways of understanding God—then each reader is invited to explore. Transformation occurs when we invite the living synergy of the Divine to open lessons and insight from the stories for applicability to our own. In my theoethical view, a shift from a rote emphasis on the legalities of literal textual boundaries opens creativity to infuse relevancy like new insights and self-love moments anew. The living Word reveals more as we grow and mature. Inspiration comes from trusting that God can write words on your heart and make it plain, no matter the religious tradition. I penned these words, entitled "Just be you".

> Feel the beauty in your heartbeat. . . living—
>
> *A rhythm that is uniquely yours, like body music*
>
> Find the beauty in your soft and loud voice even if you can't sing—
>
> *Enjoy that lilt or twang or swag carrying each word to others' ears*
>
> Hear the beauty in your laughter from deep inside the place of hurt—
>
> *Then smile 'cause you were born awesomely made without inhibition*
>
> Take extra time to stroll with footsteps set to explore the intensity of discovery
>
> *Strut instead of tip-toe, and yet go softly if a hummingbird is nearby—*
>
> Taste the sweetness of being thankful—regardless.
>
> *Relish a self-affirmation to being and belonging because you say so*
>
> The older you are, the wiser for it, and hopefully more patient
>
> And then make time to embrace yourself, PRAY for the Creator's creativity
>
> *Feel your own arms that hug yourself first—then somebody else*
>
> Move your lips to say, " *I love me some me*"—only then can you truly love you someone else.
>
> *Then, kiss a child and pet a pet.*
>
> Last but never final step—Be subversive! Find someone to sit with, dine with, join with. Open the spiritual door. . . "You know? I learned to love again today"—
>
> *Encourage them to do the same—then just sit back and listen*
>
> Remember that Black onyx will always be a Black treasure of value—
>
> Your beauty is already real—it's mined from the beginning of ancestral time into the present. . . YES,

Beauty's far deeper than pretty can ever be. Why?
Because pretty is surface, wiped away with makeup or lined with time
Still, whoever you are, wherever you're from—whatever culture you hold
Beauty is deep—breathing inside—revealing the essence of YOU.
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Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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