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# practicalmatters

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## *Going Live: The Making of Digital Griots and Cyber Assemblies*

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### ABSTRACT

In this essay I make explicit my own positionality as a black woman who preaches and as a practical theologian who studies the connections between digital worship, gender, performativity and preaching. I examine how religious hybridity informs my preaching practice from unconventional pulpits. I assert that ritualized speech—preaching—in sacred digital space—specifically on social media livestreams—intentionally disrupts the popular religious and everyday landscapes, where marginalized bodies are disembodied. Situating myself as a digital griot and those whom frequent my weekly Facebook livestream as a cyber assembly, I offer a thickly described case study of the digital worshipping community Pink Robe Chronicles (PRC). I conclude that alternative mediated pulpits and religiously fluid cyber assemblies are spaces where interlocking cycles of freedom occur. Interlocking cycles of freedom are used, therefore, to remember the sacred worth of black lives and repair the connection between the mundane and the spiritual realm by bearing witness to communities that are strong enough to hold the truth of their members. The impact on current practices is this: through alternative pulpits and consecrated key strokes the practitioner/scholar offers to the community the ability to experience spiritual and cultural freedom in self-determining ways and to the fields of religious practices and practical theology a fresh vantage point from which to observe and be observed.

**G**oing Live is an autoethnographic account that examines how a theologically progressive and religiously hybrid black preaching woman utilizes livestreaming on a social media platform to preach in multifaceted ways while creating brave, ritualized and inclusive space. I am guided by

three formulative queries: how do forward thinking black preaching women circumvent traditional spaces of religious authority to achieve trans-marginality—the ability to ascend hegemonic powers reinforced by imposed margins? Moreover, what is the role of digital interactive media in this circumvention? Situated at the intersections of gender, digital interactive media, performance, and preaching, *Going Live* builds on existing scholarship that locates preaching within the black griot tradition and communal survival within African American hush harbor rhetoric. Hence, I theorize a forward-thinking black preaching woman as a digital griot and the livestreams I deploy as a cyber assembly. Here, a digital griot is “an intervening figure who unites the past, present and future, refuses the divide as a barrier to black [sacred] engagement with technology and utilizes specifically African American rhetoric.”<sup>1</sup> In this case, I am the digital griot. Autoethnography allows me to do what Robin Boylorn explains, “examine my lived experience through a cultural lens using creative writing techniques and research methods to interrogate my experiences while making sense of cultural phenomena.”<sup>2</sup> To this end, I offer a thickly described case study of Pink Robe Chronicles (PRC), a cyber assembly I convene weekly on Facebook Live. Cyber assemblies, also known as digital hush harbors, are “alternative rhetorically and ontologically liberated transformative spaces—spaces for agency creation not simply agent expression.”<sup>3</sup> I assert two claims. One, livestreaming is an important category of critical analysis, a complementary practical theological model for preaching and a new mode of inquiry for qualitative research methods. Two, livestreaming, a religious and digital technology, is both reparative and disruptive. When certain black preaching women proclaim the value of black life by going live on social media platforms they intentionally disrupt the popular religious and digital landscapes where they are frequently silenced and disembodied. I conclude that ‘*going live*’ counters interlocking systems of oppression by tendering disregarded flesh as salvific, creating interlocking cycles of freedom in its place.

### ***NAMING MYSELF, FOR MYSELF***

In *Deeper Shades of Purple*, womanist ethicist Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas posits radical subjectivity as the first tenet of womanism. Providing a three-part definition Floyd-Thomas defines radical subjectivity as the moment black women understand our agency as a tool of resistance, powerful in naming our own experiences and foundational to our identity politics.<sup>4</sup> In a 1982 address delivered at Harvard University entitled “Learning from the 60’s,” prolific writer Audre Lorde declared, “There are no new ideas, just new ways of giving those ideas we cherish breath in our own living.”<sup>5</sup> As Lorde further pondered about living fully into her intersectional identity, she concluded that self-definition was not negotiable. She stated, “If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies of me and eaten alive.”<sup>6</sup> The complexity of humanity is not new. Similarly, the struggle to name one’s self for one’s self is also not novel. Who we are and how we identify has largely to do with either how we’ve been socialized to feel about ourselves or the development of our own self-interventions. This makes subjectivity elusive and objectivity a never-ending obstacle in the process of knowledge validation. In the tradition of radical subjectivity and the type of ethnographic work black women scholars and practitioners of religious practices and practical theology have conducted for decades, I commence by identifying my social location as it is pivotal to my position as both researcher and researched.<sup>7</sup>

I am an Afrocentric womanist Christian inspired by the sacred feminine wisdom tradition within the Yoruba religion, Ifa. Afrocentricity as defined by Molefe K. Asante “is a paradigm that enthrones the centrality of the African that is black ideals and values, as expressed in the highest forms of African culture and activates consciousness as a functional aspect of any revolutionary approach to phenomena.”<sup>8</sup> The womanist paradigm privileges the everyday experiences of black women as essential to the knowledge production process.<sup>9</sup> Along with radical subjectivity a womanist perspective is grounded in traditional communalism i.e., “committed to the survival of an entire people—male and female;”<sup>10</sup> redemptive self-love i.e., regaining possession of self-hood; and critical engagement. These methods privilege my lived experience as the focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences. As an ideological paradigm and a methodological approach each privilege black bodies as viable agents that assert meaningful agency in the knowledge production process. An Afrocentric womanist ideological and methodological framework contends that black women must see themselves as subjects in a realm that so often objectifies them. Afrocentrism forces the subject and the object to always consider the history, current experiences and hopes of African diasporic people in contrast or in relation to what is being posited by a hegemonic, colonial and imperialist view. I am an ordained minister in the Progressive Baptist denomination, a ruling elder in the Presbyterian USA denomination, and a member of the Gelede Society, a spiritual work group dedicated to the Iyami—Great Mothers. I am a religious practitioner and a practical theologian with specialized commitments; I fit within what anthropologist Deborah Thomas identifies as a “hybrid category. Somebody who creates in an embodied way and yet is able to think how the body theorizes well.” In short, I am a spiritually malleable black preaching woman. I study and theorize about other spiritually fluid black preaching women. I am particularly interested in the ways we use digital media to combat Christian hegemony and patriarchy by curating brave, new and sacred digital spaces to construct liberating religious identities through personal narratives.

The case I am making is that radical subjectivity offers a different and necessary methodological shift for ethnographic inquiry. In the past fifteen years there has been a movement in social science research methods toward more reflexive and context-centered approaches. These methods allow the researcher to privilege lived experiences in the context of research inquiry. Evidenced in the fields of education, sociology, and communication to name a few, autoethnography is the offspring of this evolution. The revolution and re-imagination needed to mine new directions in the study of religious practice and practical theology in general and innovation in ethnographic methods specifically combines life history, ethnographic methods and digital media. Part ethnography and part autobiography by elucidating the self, one’s personal history/ auto is and must be an integral component of one’s politics, creativity and scholarship. Radical subjectivity, then, connects with methodology as an act of self-authorization. That is, when black women name us for ourselves both as a method and methodology we become what bell hooks refers to as “the spatial location of radical openness and possibility.”<sup>11</sup> In this vein the power is taken from the controlling body i.e., sexism, racism, mass incarceration, poverty, etc. and is redistributed into the community via black women’s lived experiences as a call to liberation. The margin becomes an alternative site of self-definition and self-recuperation because it escapes the knowledge validation process controlled by a dominant white male interest whereby the redistribution of power becomes foundational to collective self-determination.

In *Undoing Fieldwork* Deborah D'Amico Samuels states that "the connections between what we describe as social scientists and who we are personally and structurally need to be part of the way we design our methods as well as the way we analyze our data."<sup>12</sup> This is very much the case for practitioner/scholars of religious practices and practical theology. My interest in the connections between black preaching women's religious identities, ritualized cyberspace and digital storytelling "reexamines knowledge construction from a new orientation."<sup>13</sup> Autoethnography positions the observer also as the observed whereby black women who use digital media to create sacred cyberspace "tell their own story as one has known it and lived it and as we read further even died it."<sup>14</sup> This is significant because "for generations black women have overlooked themselves as they have been overlooked, accepting, without critique the versions of their lives and realities that were offered back to them."<sup>15</sup> Utilizing positionality as a complementary data set and as an interpretive lens redistributes power from perceived dominant methodological sources often endemic of bias toward particular populations. The next section situates my own subjectivity within the phenomena of the black griotic tradition and black women's divine speech. In subsequent sections the autoethnographic accounts appear italicized followed by analysis.

### ***FETCHING ROOTS***

Research in practical theology tends to overlook non-Christian or religiously hybrid God-talk and praxis. Commitments to the Christian enterprise by both scholars and practitioners leave little room for new discoveries to emerge. Within traditional graduate programs both university and stand-alone institutions practical theology concentrations highlight Christian practices like homiletics, religious education (Christian), and pastoral care. Understandably, such practices edify the church and its leadership. What these practices are unable to do is capture the "common heritage and contextual language," of those who identify as Christian and embrace other religious teachings as expansive practices. In my search for new sources and methods of inquiry, I realized that I compartmentalized my personal and research praxis. The reflection surfaced as I researched the roots of the African American preaching tradition and the role of black preaching women played in its development. I had to go back to the source—my sources. It is this reconnection that aids in "addressing and readdressing deconstructing and reconstructing while simultaneously subverting forces"<sup>16</sup> that limit my religious belonging.

June 5, 2018 new Facebook post:

*I preach because, despite what the mired U.S. criminal system posits, I don't have the right to remain silent in the face of savage church and government politics. I don't know how to not raise my voice on behalf of the least of these who are they/us that sit at the dehumanizing intersections of white supremacy, patriarchy and unbalanced socioeconomic class strata. I preach as an act of resistance and acceptance. I resist the backward thinking that relegates women and other marginalized people to the periphery of organized religious proclamation while exploiting and policing our/their bodies. I accept that I am a thinking woman of faith. Because, I know what I know, and it cannot be contained in one religious tradition or flat spiritual trajectory. I preach Oludumare and Yahweh; Jehovah and Nzambi Mpungu; Yeshua and Shango; Mary and Oshun. I preach because it is nefarious*

*not to shout out the worth of black lives, the value of black girl brilliance often referred to as magic and the innovation that is black embodiment. I preach because I was “once a colored girl who considered suicide when the rainbow was enuf.”<sup>17</sup> Then one day “I found God in myself and I loved her, I loved her fiercely.”<sup>18</sup> I learned that within me was buried a deep well, known as Source.*

*I learned that I carried “womanist ase”—spiritual power invoked by black women for our well-being from traditional and unconventional sources to unfetter ourselves and our communities from the vestiges of interlaced oppressive systems.<sup>19</sup> I preach not to save sinners from external forces of evil but to emancipate many from the church industrial complex where souls desiring redemption are on lockdown in pews beholden to tragic theologies; where Jesus is a bearded white man and God is a neo-Nazi moving folks to build walls of exclusion instead of bridges of collective work and responsibility. I preach to set the captive free, even when the captive is me. I preach. We preach. My body preaches through womanish gestures and I wish a ninja would standpoints. My breasts preach sermons of anatomical acceptance when they refuse to be disguised by shapeless and non-pink robes that bear the tried marks of truth telling and wisdom sharing. Instead they stand mostly with assistance to proclaim the acceptable day of God. I am fearfully and wonderfully made! My stomachs, yes plural, preach when they refuse to be subdued by corsets and girdles, all forms of patriarchy, misogyny and respectability. My hoseless thighs preach as they thunder to and fro loosening the shackles of the hoodwinked and bamboozled. We preach. I preach with feet marching to freedom’s land, with my hands lifted up whether I’m yelling hallelujah, “fight the power,” “these is bloody shoes,” or “God’s Plan.” I preach because my momma never told me to be quiet. I preach because my great aunt Susie knew how to “talk the fire out” of people. I preach because my ancestors trust me, and our seeds are counting on me.*

Fetching, a derivative of Sankofa, an Akan term from Ghana, West Africa which means to go back and get what was lost, is an example of circumventing not only traditional spaces of religious authority but methodological hierarchy. Here, fetching is also both a verbal and non-verbal rhetorical Afrocentric philosophical and spiritual practice used to counter interlocking oppressive systems that pose a constant threat to black embodiment. Returning to self and community as subject generates and transmits trans-marginality. As the researcher and researched, one ascends hegemonic power by remembering her narrative. She is the griot going back to get the stories of those who have been silenced in order to share them with current and future generations. Retrieving non-Christian practices also supports this ascension without harming the Christian endeavor. It exposes the sometime duplicitous nature of binaries and counteracts the injurious effects of white supremacy and cultural hegemony present within traditional ethnographic approaches and practical theological models.

Digital media coupled with cognitive agency humanizes and authorizes experiences that traditional religious and academic spaces have not fully acknowledged. Exploring digital media as a new mode of inquiry provides a different kind of ethnographic context for research and experience and illumines black women’s oracular imagination. I define oracular imagination as the capacity to confront and transform people, places and systems via powerful verbal and non-verbal speech. Digital space preserves self-hood by “bypassing traditional systems of legitimation or recognized gatekeepers.”<sup>20</sup> In “Hashtags and Hallelujahs: The Role of #BlackGirlMagic Performance in Spiritual Formation,” Attorney Carla Jackson describes social

media as a “religious surrogate that provides users with access to community healing and ritual all three which are vitally linked with African spirituality.”<sup>21</sup> Jackson contends, “depending on the subject the ideas information shared can be a sort of sacred text for a community of believers.”<sup>22</sup> Bodies dismembered by religious, cultural, political and societal hurdles are validated in curated digital space. Hence Jackson, views cyberspace administered by black women both preaching and non, as a means of spiritual formation through which a particular “cyberspace community can be viewed as a congregation where black women and girls share sacred texts that can encourage us to push through our personal struggles.”<sup>23</sup> It is also true that the curator can be viewed as a digital griot.

The art of black preaching, a form of hallowed storytelling, is rooted in the black griotic tradition. The Griot originates from the West African Mande Empire of Mali in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and “carries the responsibility of preserving the historical narratives and oral tradition of their people from one generation to the next so that the stories may never be forgotten or lost.”<sup>24</sup> Africans who were forcibly brought to the Americas during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade arrived in North America unsure how to make sense of life once separated from their tribal religions and Supreme Being. It was the griotic tradition that maintained the sacred memory of their cultural and religious history. Life was so cruel in the Americas that enslaved Africans turned to the local reigning deity and sought to learn how that deity operated. Out of this spiritual necessity grew the slow and tedious process of creating black North American religions out of the common practices of many African belief systems. The idea that African spirituality in North America was destroyed is erroneous. In fact, the opposite occurred; African spirituality was transformed and became a fluid stream between African/slave religion and orthodox black Christianity.

Religious historian Tracey Hucks proffers, “The tendency among scholars has been to relegate African religious practices in African American religion to the early slave period, thus creating an artificial dichotomy between African/slave religion in the antebellum period and orthodox black Christianity after emancipation and eclipsing the fluid boundaries that have existed and persisted within both periods.”<sup>25</sup> Hucks further explains, “The assumption is that the African “survivals” died out rather early or that practices related to African divinities quickly disintegrated in North America.”<sup>26</sup> Failure to acknowledge this fluidity led to questionable conceptual frameworks in the study of the Black Church and African American religious experience. Faulty conceptual frameworks led to several problematic trends: that Christianity was blindly accepted and is thus the innate faith tradition of all black people and constant deliberation about whether black people had a viable past in Africa or created new practices in the new world. African spirituality in 19<sup>th</sup> century black preaching women’s itinerancy was “transformed but not extinguished.”<sup>27</sup> African spiritual values became submerged in dominant Anglo Christian rhetoric. Even 19<sup>th</sup> century black preaching women “drew from conventions of the Anglo Christian conversion narrative to proclaim their equality and salvation, the cultural origins of their spiritual authority prevailed” wherein traditional African rituals, ideologies, and manifestations of spiritual power would remain part of black oral culture most visible in black preaching.

The oracular imagination of early black preaching women often unknowingly and sometimes knowingly used conjure as a subversive tactic to exorcise the white supremacist narratives that remain lethally linked to African American sacred discursive activity. They employed various allegories, imaginative language,

creative imagery, and their bodies to deliver the message. Coupled with intent to redress evil, black preaching women altered reality to deconstruct the conventional oppressive view of black people as soulless and represented a liberating message that affirmed the value of black and women's embodiment. From Jarena Lee to Zilpha Elaw and Julia Foote 19<sup>th</sup> century history is filled with black preaching women's sacred knowledge production and dissemination of Afrocentric epistememes even if done unconsciously. For instance,

Sojourner Truth's and Maria Stewart's reliance on the spiritual power of the feminine to affect change. In 1851 before an all-white women's convention audience, Truth proclaimed, "If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them."<sup>28</sup> In 1879 William Lloyd Garrison published a book of meditations by Maria Stewart. In one of the meditations writes, "O ye daughters of Africa, awake! awake! arise! no longer sleep nor slumber but distinguish yourselves. Show forth to the world that ye are endowed with noble and exalted faculties. O ye daughters of Africa! what have ye done to immortalize your names beyond the grave? What examples have ye set before the rising generation? What foundation have ye laid for generations yet unborn?"<sup>29</sup> In Yoruba cosmology, the capacity to create and transform people, places and systems and issue balance to imbalanced interlocking oppressive forces via formidable speech and divine authority that summons desires into reality is wielded by a concealed power called Àjé. This power is guarded by three Orisha or deities, Oshun, Yemanja and Oya. Each Orisha embodies specific qualities that represent aspects of the Sacred Empowered Mothers. Oshun is the lead guard of the Àjé. Several Yoruba creation stories depict Oshun as the "protector, savior and nurturer of humanity."<sup>30</sup> While there is no empirical evidence to support the conscious connection between Truth and Stewart's witness and Yoruba cosmology it should not be blatantly overlooked. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century also yielded similar examples.

As an evangelist in the Pentecostal church, Rosa Horn countered resistance to her female body in the masculine rhetorical pulpit by subverting it altogether. In 1926 Horn organized the Pentecostal Faith Church in Harlem. While some pulpits remained off limits to women, in 1933 Horn accepted an invitation from the radio station WHN in New York City to commence a ministry. Even with the physical distance created by broadcasting her sermons, male preachers, nonetheless—rejected her preaching activities. Her body was contested. Horn exhibited a remarkable ability to excel despite scant evangelical support. According to Jonathon Walton, "the popularity of Horn's broadcast caused conflict with the ubiquitous ministries of both Father Divine and Elder Micheaux."<sup>31</sup> The radio station sued Father Divine, "accusing the Harlem-based deity of intimidation in attempts to run Mother Horn and her congregation out of Harlem."<sup>32</sup> Their concerted effort to destroy Horn's ministry strengthened her following and resulted in a radio ministry, spanned thirty years. Ida Robinson is another example. In 1919 Robinson was commissioned as pastor of Mt. Olive, a small church affiliated with the United Holy Church denomination. She stressed and preached holiness as a divine requirement, holiness as the work of the Holy Ghost, and holiness as a condition to seeing God. Though she was senior pastor, women in ministry still struggled to gain approval from male ministerial leaders. In 1924 God appeared to Robinson in a series of visions and dreams informing her that she was to be God's instrument and start a church that would allow full clergy rights to women. Later that

year, the State of Pennsylvania granted Robinson a charter for Mt. Sinai Holy Churches of America, of which she became the first presiding bishop. Robinson's church was peculiar because it was conceived to be a space for women to gain equal footing. In her capacity as bishop, Robinson ordained women throughout the United States. Robinson used her body to create uniformity within the denomination by instituting plain dress and forbidding make-up, straightened hair, and finger nail polish. In so doing, Robinson deployed sanctification as spiritual armor to counter the cultural views of Black females' bodies as useful commodity or sexually licentious. Holiness was a symbol of God's presence and was necessary to exude spiritual power. A black woman's preaching body held Divine power that was used to affect spiritual, emotional, and social change. African spiritual values of embodied praxis remain a key component in black Christian cosmology and black women's oracular imagination.

The black griotic tradition coupled with black women's oracular imagination in digital space unsettles dehumanizing social ordering. In *Digital Religion*, Mia Lövheim posits that "digital media offers new means of constructing religious identities."<sup>33</sup> Lövheim further expounds that as individuals use digital tools to produce and share religious narratives, they perform a certain form of self that is enacted in relation to others.<sup>34</sup> Agency of presentation is mediated by the desire of self-preservation. Nowhere is this more evident than in live occurrences of social media. As a method of analysis "live social media makes it possible to witness injustice as it unfolds because it provides credibility and truth telling."<sup>35</sup> As Claudia Guzan Artwick reports of John Durham's words, "liveness serves as an assurance of access to truth and authenticity."<sup>36</sup> Digital media in general and live social video specifically re-members the sacred embodiment of black lives by capturing and engaging collective concern and giving room for those who have been dismembered to express moral outrage. In a 1973 letter entitled, *To My People*, exiled freedom fighter Assata Shakur said, "It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."<sup>37</sup> The reemergence of Shakur's words in the age of social media make them accessible. For instance, activists and organizers often go live while reciting Shakur's words. Doing so validates the sacred worth of black embodiment in real time and in digital space. In June 2015 a gunman walked in and sat amongst congregants of historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. After listening to the Bible study lesson taught by the pastor and other ministerial leaders, the assailant opened fire killing nine people. His response was that he wanted to start a race war. The surveillance video showed that the perpetrator had a confederate flag license plate on his car. This discovery reignited a tense debate about the history of the confederate flag as a controversial symbol of bigotry and the rightness of displaying the flag on and around public institutions. In response, on June 27, 2015 Newsome's black body affirmed and celebrated the value of black lives through direct action. Newsome boldly scaled a 30-foot flagpole at the South Carolina State Capitol to bring down the confederate flag. When the police motioned for her to come down, Newsome responded, "In the name of Jesus this flag has to come down. You come against me with hatred, oppression, and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today." As she scaled back down the pole, she announced that she was prepared to be arrested. Newsome loudly recited the 23rd Psalm from the Bible as she was being led away by the police. The moment was livestreamed. Livestreaming is the metaphorical incense smoke that

ritually purifies cyberspace with its upfront and authentic truth. Aside from mediating the sacred worth of black lives in cyber space, within the current state of domestic and global affairs, livestreaming potentially counteracts the injurious effects of cultural and spiritual amnesia brought on by this matrix of domination otherwise understood as red hot critical times.

## UNCONVENTIONAL PULPITS AND BLACK BODIES

In *Eight Bowls Full of Life*, Makungu M. Akinyela defines red hot critical times as “those moments that come without warning or compassion for the needs of African Diasporan people.”<sup>38</sup> Since our capture from the West Coast of Africa, our journey across the Trans-Atlantic and our arrival to the Americas, Africans in America have labored for humanization. Despite the physical, spiritual and cultural resistance of many enslaved men and women, the gains achieved by the southern Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and the election of an African American president in 2008 the struggle for black livelihood persists through today. The term post-racial permeates modern American society but, disproportionate numbers of African Americans remain caught within a debilitating grip. In a statement to the United Nations, Rev. Dr. Iva Carruthers, General Secretary of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference

affirms this havoc wrought by such systems. She writes: “The 1955 gruesome murder of Emmett Till and his mother’s courage to show his body to the world became the iconic symbol of white supremacy, racism and terror experienced by African Americans in the United States during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.” Till’s decision to show her son’s maimed and mangled body in the African American owned and operated *Jet Magazine* served as a disruption to a system left unchecked about the worth of black embodiment.

There has been no easing of this tension; only a deafening worsening. Black bodies continue to be compromised in extreme and disheartening ways. Addressing unresolved racial issues Carruthers further illumined that “sixty years after the murder of Emmett Till, the United States is still plagued with killings and murders of black youth with impunity, not only by vigilantes undercover, but by the outright egregious actions of agents of local, county and state governments, police officers sworn to protect and treat all citizens equally.” Much like how the invention of the television brought the inequities between black bodies and white bodies into living rooms across the US and beyond in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, similarly, digital media brings to bear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in real time, with more speed and independently controlled content. In *Social Media Livestreaming: Design or Disruption?* Guzan Artwick affirms that “live visual images increasingly inundate our digital screens.”<sup>39</sup> She explains, “While once restricted to broadcast news going live is becoming ubiquitous fueled by smart phones and social networks.”<sup>40</sup> This phenomenon shifts control from the usual privilege brokers exclusive of television to everyday citizens. Like the Civil Rights era, live social video brings up front and center the unimaginable. This is especially true for bodies deemed as contested and non-human terrain. Where traditional media governed by the politics of difference and a consciousness steeped in capitalistic gain has historically rendered images of black bodies that are antithetical to human dignity, some streamers of live social video serve as both informant and observer by recording in real time the unending plight of *othered* bodies. Those holding cameras become street preachers of some sort, evangelizing in public

digital space, by displaying societal dysfunction and streaming truth to power on behalf of those who cannot breathe because they have been figuratively and literally suffocated under the weight of injustice. What follows are a just a few instances of mobile technology acting as an alternative pulpit.

*On July 17, 2014 a community member videoed New York Police officers place Eric Garner in a highly contested choke hold. Garner succumbed to his injuries but, not before gasping for air while yelling, "I can't breathe." Weeks later, on August 9, 2014, recorded footage of Michael Brown being shot and killed by a Ferguson police officer was uploaded by eyewitnesses onto Twitter and Facebook, both social media platforms. The world watched in horror as his lifeless body lay on the concrete under the late summer sun for four hours before being removed. The video of Sandra Bland's arrest surfaced next. On July 13, 2015 a private citizen captured Bland's encounter with a Waller County, Texas sheriff. Again, social media erupted with righteous indignation because of the brutal nature of what appears to be an unwarranted arrest. She died under suspicious circumstances less than 72 hours later while in police custody. Diamond Reynolds live streamed the shooting of her boyfriend Philando Castille by law enforcement on July 6, 2016. She and her four-year-old daughter would later be placed in the back of police car where they would soon learn that he did not survive.*

*On August 1, 2016 Baltimore County Police went to serve a warrant at the home of Korryn Gaines, a 23-year-old African American woman. Korryn livestreamed part of the five-hour confrontation before she was shot and killed. During the livestream Korryn is heard responding to orders for her to put her weapon down, "put your weapons down and I will put my weapon down, she replied." She was shot five times in the chest, back, arm, wrist and thigh. Korryn was holding her five-year-old son in her arms when she was shot. He was grazed in the face by a bullet but survived. Gaines recorded her own murder.*

I could no longer hold my peace. I was swollen with grief. Words that turned into complex compound sentences began forming in my mind and quickly moved to my throat. It felt like I would choke if I did not release them. Void of a physical pulpit and physical congregants, I armed myself with my cell phone and for the first time went live on Facebook. I was now the street preacher standing at the digital intersections of outrage and good news. I realized that my body is its own pulpit, its own raised structure—an interceding and transmitting life force that "sacralizes both human body and spirit," as sites of embodied knowledge that yield a transformative narrative commensurate with scriptural authority. In solidarity with the many black lives met by questionable existence and ultimately certain death, at the hands of law enforcement and so-called vigilantes, I too placed my body in the center of a people seeking and needing something more graceful than often times racist, patriarchal, classist, homophobic and heteronormative religious verbiage tenders. In the weeks that followed, I would continue to go live on Facebook. Donning a worn and dusty rose-pink robe while often in my kitchen cooking breakfast, I poured libations, a ritual ceremony, enacted to unify the spiritual and the mundane and request repair and assistance with life and everyday tasks, I preached, and I prayed with those that were just as weary as I was. I became a disruptor, the following week came, and I again grabbed my phone and began a livestream. In honor of the memory of my maternal grandmother, Annie Inez, I decided to make a dish that was her specialty—chicken and dumplings. While flouring the rolling pin for the dough, memories of lessons learned at my grandmother's kitchen table wafted over me.

Historically male and heterosexist authority has made little room for *'other'* bodies in traditional pulpits. As a researcher of black preaching women and as a black preaching woman my ability to confront and critically engage hegemony is not solely lodged in the pulpit. My grandmother's kitchen table was sacramental. It was at my grandmother's kitchen table, the formidable pulpit in black women's consciousness, that I was introduced to the verbal and embodied lexicon black women exert to stand firm over and against inequitable existence.<sup>41</sup> Black preaching women have always engaged in truth telling from self-authorized spaces without sanction, but not without sanctuary. To circumvent interlaced oppressive structures black preaching women have had to locate alternative spaces to proclaim messages of wholeness and worth. Traditional pulpits are architecturally exclusive and spiritually stoic. They both consume and expose and imprison and stunt. Teresa Fry Brown, Bandy Professor of Preaching affirms, "African American women have preached on street corners, in prisons, by sick beds, in schools, in small groups, in Bible studies, in choirs, in homes, in prayer meetings and in any place, they could say a word for the Lord."<sup>42</sup> Just as black women's kitchen tables serve as agential sites to combat white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, capitalism, and respectability social media livestreaming as deployed via PRC also becomes an alternative pulpit that affirms the livelihood of all bodies. This is true for bodies that have been sanctimoniously disembodied and dismembered from conventional holy spaces. Jé Hooper, an emerging clergy leader within the Societies for Ethical Culture affirms this phenomenon. On World Aids Day 2018, the PRC livestream invited Jé to serve as a guest griot. As a polyamorous, queer, and HIV positive African American male, I asked Jé, also known as the ethical evangelist, to share his story live on Facebook with our cyber assembly of avid viewers. After the livestream Hooper posted a heartfelt reflection about being re-membered.

It's been a while since I have been in predominantly black spaces especially theologically inclusive spirit-driven black sanctioned spaces of love-working...Since I left seminary and theological education, I have had very few black theological colleagues, pastors, and scholars that promote or present my work as significant, specifically in black spaces. Nonetheless, TODAY that changed; Rev. Dr. [Melva Sampson](#) and her Pink Robe Chronicles gave me a new truth, an unthinkable impossible for my intersectionality to be revealed. This creative HIV, pansexual and poly-loving nontheistic-theist from a humanist community was welcomed and affirmed to speak this morning to a wonderful community of love-doers, love-workers, and love-givers. [#PinkRobeChronicles](#), with the aid and the assistance of Melva's ferocious theology cultivated a space for me to be and to speak to the "black community"; they actually heard me as ME.<sup>43</sup>

In many physical spaces of black religious communities there is no place for siblings who are either gender non-conforming or gender fluid. To identify an online community like PRC as a "theologically inclusive spirit-driven black sanctioned space of love working" reveals the power of being re-membered. In real time, Jé preserves his story and his body by sharing it with the online world. As often as Jé and others livestream the intersections of their lived experiences or as often as others go live to capture injustices towards marginalized beings, they proclaim the worth of black embodiment and the utility of the sacred

in cyberspace amidst a sea of value contradictions. Essentially, livestreaming captures the holy in action and does not need to be mediated by the observer because the observed is presented in real time. Further, a livestream becomes an altar of sorts where even the unassuming are laid bare before the community in search of an acknowledged humanity and expressed identity. As an ethnographic tool, livestreaming on social media re-directs the normative gaze. Disrupting the hegemonic, colonialist and imperialist gaze directed toward black, queer and inter-religious bodies provides the observer and the observed with the ability to “mediate against objective truth as an intervention whereby both become subjects in time and space that has often objectified them.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, livestreaming is an innovative disruption and offers a different lens to survey both the veneration and desecration of raced, gendered, classed and sexualized bodies. As both a digital and religious technology, livestreaming is an act of re-membering that ushers in a necessary disruption of exclusionary practices and maintains that disregarded flesh is salvific.

### ***REPARATIVE DISRUPTION AND POPULAR RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPES***

Conventional and digital black religious space is in essence a reparative and disruptive technology. Here, disruptive technologies are methods of knowledge production that improve upon the efficiency of a specific function. In this case, the specific function is humanizing non-conforming, gendered, classed or raced bodies by acknowledging them as generators and disseminators of divinity. From hush harbors to institutional African American denominational churches, black religious spaces and black religious practices historically display the mark of what W.E.B. DuBois explains as double consciousness and what Dianne Stewart calls a “polyvalent theory of meaning making.”<sup>45</sup> This two-sided identity performed by a subordinate group within an oppressive society is a mode of survival and resistance discernable in the act of masking. Masking happens when black people across the diaspora force their philosophical, theological, aesthetic and cultural conceptualizations into western frameworks to camouflage the specificity and blunt the sharp edges of what they are protecting while keeping the core intact.

The constant search for humanization yielded to problematic respectability politics wherein some black religious spaces and black theological underpinnings became venomous for black people. So, the relationship between certain black bodies and mainly toxic masculine rhetorical pulpits in African American denominational churches is tenuous.<sup>46</sup> PRC utilizes digital platforms and specifically livestreaming social media as a reparative black religious space to affirm the value and sacred worth of the most vulnerable. While the meditations delivered are not solely for black people, my social location as a black preaching and spiritually fluid woman living in the American south is privileged. My own intersections disrupt traditional understandings of what it means to be a preaching woman and my research methods reveal my view of deconstruction as only one aspect of an on-going reconstruction. Hence, my praxis exposes PRC’s “commitment to survival of an entire community.”<sup>47</sup> To this end, the disruptive nature of PRC livestreaming is reparative.

Bob Franklin, series editor of *Disruptions: Studies in Digital Journalism*, explores the technology of social media livestreaming as a disruption. Franklin contends that “disruptions refer to the radical changes

provoked by the affordances of digital technologies that occur at a pace and on a scale that disrupts settled understandings and traditional ways of creating value interacting and communicating both socially and professionally.”<sup>48</sup> A portion of Jé’s tag team message to the PRC cyber assembly on World Aids Day supports the reparative aspect of livestreaming.

*So, I just want to give my methodology so when people get into my post, they don’t just ask what is Jé doing? What is the conversation today? Today he’s new. Today he just cursed. Like where is he at? You know like today there is no God, today this is God. And it’s beautiful because as you know I work with a humanist congregation. Also, to be the first African American humanist within ethical culture is a really big thing for me. I see such a responsibility to be in a space of white liberals who focus on social justice, social issues, and ethical engagement. It is vital for me in that space to make sure that our people are completely represented. Not just a modern negro exceptionalism- like when we say Black Lives Matter in my congregation, I want to be clear I’m talking about the nigga too, I’m talking about the hoe and I’m talking about the crackhead and I’m saying they all matter. You know no one is exempt. I don’t care what your degree is and everything like that. So, this is my body; living so intersectional with HIV these are the things that honestly need to be in congregational spaces. They need to not only be in congressional spaces but also about community. So, when I go in, I want people to know oh yes, I am HIV positive. And most people in the black community say, “shhhh don’t talk about that. And baby you just believe that God is going to heal you.” And, I’m saying no, no, no, healing comes through community. But that doesn’t happen because you decide- yes, your faith can make you whole, but your faith is a public declaration, not just a secret declaration. It allows for me to understand- I really have to walk in faith when I step out of my door because I take with me the narrative that everything, is already whole. Nothing about my morning is broken, nothing about my day should be dismantled, nothing about the end of my day should conclude, the end it should be the beginning.”*<sup>49</sup>

Jé’s sermon provides an image of a multi-marginalized black body flourishing and thriving. He claims his humanity and the humanity of those who do not fit within the alleged respectable confines of the black religious. Live and in living color yet protected by the barrier of the digital platform Jé fetches his sacred embodiment via a ritual of radical examination. Like me, Jé becomes a digital griot. Jé’s embodiment or performance of aliveness visible in his preaching functions as a liberation strategy that highlights how technology and access to it are vital aspects of the pursuit of creating and understanding black people’s divine autonomy in sacred story.<sup>50</sup>

Pink Robe Chronicles counters matrices of domination perceptible within the intersections of oppressive structures i.e., racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, etc. Providing space for otherwise bodies yields a revolutionary and embodied rhetoric that is intersectional, imaginative, transformational and revolutionary. A commitment to wholistic healing, redemptive self-love and provocative theological reflection, PRC rejects the debasing of the black body by curating a brave and affirming space. As a ritualized and sacred cyber assembly, PRC acts as a digital clearing for those stifled by hegemony. The connections between gender, cyber assemblies, and preaching “bring together the past and the present to serve as form of social connection and historical understanding that can open new approaches in dealing with present challenges of societal inequities.” Remembering and Re-remembering the divine worth of our bodies in red hot critical

times counters prone, expired black bodies. Prone is the position many black bodies died in at the hands of law enforcement or other acts of violence. Their lifeless bodies on display and their humanity ignored. Keystroke by keystroke viewers re-assemble fragile limbs and tend to deep wounds of hurt by asserting their humanity. By creating new spaces of spiritual authority from manumitted landscapes we embrace our intersections, are comfortable in spiritual malleability, and “*love ourselves regardless*” even when larger society refuses to acknowledge our humanity.<sup>51</sup>

## NOTES

1 C.L. Jones (2018) "Trying Free Kansas Only": The Revolutions of Janelle Monae as Digital Griot. *Frontiers*, 39(1), 43. Retrieved from <http://go/library.wakehealth.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.go.libproxy.wakehealth.edu/docview/2025302175?account+ID=14868>

2 Robin Boylorn "Blackgirl Blogs, Autoethnography and Crunk Feminism," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* Vol. 9, No. 2 (April 2013), 74.

3 Sam Hamilton. *Procedural Slaves: Liberating Digital Classrooms*. Master's Thesis, University of Florida, 2012. [https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/uf/e/04/42/72/00001/hamilton\\_s.pdf](https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/uf/e/04/42/72/00001/hamilton_s.pdf)

4 Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 16.

5 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007) 134-144.

6 Ibid.

7 For more information on other radically subjective ethnographic works that black women scholars practitioners have conducted see the following: Marla Fredrick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Teresa Fry Brown *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003); and Robin Boylorn "Blackgirl Blogs, Autoethnography and Crunk Feminism," *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* Vol. 9, No. 2 (April 2013), 73-82; Francoise, Lionnet-McCumber, "Autobiographical Tongues: (Self-) Reading and (Self-) Writing in Augustine, Nietzsche, Maya Angelou, Marie Cardinal, and Marie-Therese Humbert (Message, Emancipation, Female Textuality, Self-Portraiture, Autoethnography)," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1986 and "Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust Tracks on a Road*," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 382-414; Ruth Trotter White, "Autoethnography and the Sense of Self in the Novels of Toni Morrison," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1992, 12.; and McClaurin, Irma. ed., "Theorizing a Black Feminist Self in Anthropology: Toward an Autoethnographic Approach," in *Black Feminist Anthropology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 49-76.

8 For more on Afrocentricity see Afrocentricity, Molefi K. Asante. [www.asante.net/articles/1/afrocentricity](http://www.asante.net/articles/1/afrocentricity). October 7, 2013

9 Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi  
 Womanist 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. Of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "you trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. 2. *Also*: A woman who

loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black? Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." **3.** Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless.* **4.** Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

**10** Walker, p. xi.

**11** bell hooks, *Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, (Boston, MA: South Bend Press, 1991), 145-154.

**12** Deborah D'Amico Samuels, "Undoing Fieldwork: Personal, Political, Theoretical and Methodological Implications" in *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology of Liberation*, Faye Venetia Harrison, ed. (Association of Black Anthropologist, 1998) 73.

**13** Ruth Reviere, "Toward an Afrocentric Methodology," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 31, 6 (Jul., 2000), 709-728.

**14** Robin Boylorn, *Sweetwater: Black Women's Narratives of Resilience* (New York: P. Lang, 2013), 1.

**15** Ibid, 1-2.

**16** Floyd-Thomas, 78-79.

**17** Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*, (New York: Scribner, 1975).

**18** Ibid.

**19** I first heard this term during a paper delivered by Monica Coleman delivered on the Womanist Approaches to Religion panel at the 2017 American Academy of Religion in Boston, MA. Here, I use the term in similar way as did she, as a container for black women's spiritual power and oracular imagination. While Coleman situates the term as a supernatural aid that assists with overcoming mental differentness, I deploy it as a spiritual power that some black preaching women embody and utilize to maintain not only self but communal flourishing.

**20** Christopher Helland "Ritual" in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. Heidi Campbell (New York: Routledge, 2013) 25-40.

**21** Carla Jackson "Hashtags and Hallelujahs: The Role of #BlackGirlMagic Performance in Spiritual Performance." Paper presented at the American Academy of Religion, Boston, MA, November, 2017.

**22** Ibid.

**23** Ibid.

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- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Elizabeth West, *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011.), 43-49.
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- 30 Bayyinab S. Jefferies, "Yoruba Deities," accessed February 28, 2016, [www.britannica.com/topic/Oshun](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Oshun).
- 31 Jonathan Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 43.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Mia Lövheim, "Identity" in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media*, Heidi Campbell, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 57-71.
- 34 Ibid, 147.
- 35 Claudia Guzan Artwick *Social Media Livestreaming: Design or Disruption?* (New York: Routledge, 2019) 16.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987).
- 38 Makungu Akinyele, "Eight Bowls Full of Life," Accessed August 5, 2019, [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu).
- 39 Guzan Artwick, ii.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 The kitchen table in Black Women's vernacular is the meeting place for intergenerational transmission. Black girls and women gather around kitchen tables to generate, receive and exchange cultural values and spiritual wisdom. Black feminists and womanist use the kitchen table as a metaphor to validate alternate epistemological sites and methodologies. For conversations on how Black women talk about the kitchen table see Teresa Fry Brown's *God Don't Like Ugly: African American Women Handing on Spiritual Values* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 164; Olga Idriss Davis, "In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy through Safe Spaces of Resistance," *Western Journal of Communication* 63(1999):

364-81; Layli Phillips, *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xxvii; Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, "Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981).

42 Teresa Fry Brown, *God don't Like Ugly: African American women Handing on Spiritual Values* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) 10.

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44 Reviere, 710.

45 W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Dover, 1994), 115-125.

46 Roxanne Mountford...

47 Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

48 Bob Franklin in Guzan Artwick, p.iii.

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50 Jones, 44.

51 Walker, xi.