

Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture

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***Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture.* Lomax, Tamara. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, September 2018. 288 pp. \$25.95 Paperback. Ebook available.**

Tamura Lomax's *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture* is a call to arms. Throughout the text, she challenges the reader to look for the obvious yet unexpected presence of the Black church whenever discussing Black women and girls. By deploying a critical analysis of the Black church, Lomax highlights the crucial role religion plays in shaping perceptions of Black women's sexuality, outside of the realm of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family, as abhorrent. Further, Lomax offers an understanding of how the Black church seeks to discipline and punish Black women for their sexual practices that threaten the normative Black male body and the patriarchy that it entails.

For those who identify as Black women, myself included, this occurrence should be obvious. The Black Christian church structures not only our childhood weekends, but our moral compass and, most importantly, our sense of self. However, as Lomax aptly points out, for many scholars who traverse the realm of Second-wave Black feminist scholarship, there has been less explicit

engagement with the pressing role of religion in defining Black womanhood (Lomax 91).

In order to correct for this apparent dearth, Lomax traces a historical lineage, beginning with slavery and culminating in the successful careers of Reverend T.D. Jakes and media mogul Tyler Perry. She seamlessly interweaves bible verses, rap music, and references to social media in order to develop a truly interdisciplinary analysis for how the Black church has played a vital role in transforming Black women from deviant Jezebels to contemporary “hos.” This approach sheds light on how Biblical Jezebel, the foreign “whore,” has transformed into the target of both Chris Brown and Pastor Jamal H. Bryant’s aggression when they spout, seemingly in unison, “these hoes ain’t loyal” (38).

Throughout the text, Lomax develops what she deems a “black feminist study of religion” (99), that serves as both a theoretical lens and a methodology. This critical engagement, which is informed by both Black feminism and womanists praxis, stands distinctly apart by not treating religion as a secondary force on the periphery, but as a primary site of analysis (99). Lomax further asserts that this privileging of Black religiosity is required for developing an understanding of how Black women and girls are constructed and theorized within the Black church, and how that process results in making meaning of Black women’s lives, which further dictates how they are imagined (101).

Lomax identifies a disorienting process in which caricatures that reduce Black women to jezebels, hos, matriarchs, and welfare queens, transform into cultural “truths,” which have implications within society at large, but also within the specific realm that Black women find themselves: the Black Church (101). While a black feminist study of religion unearths this process, Lomax also stresses that this theoretical endeavor should be in service to *something* – and that something is unhinging Black women from the clutches of Jezebel.

However, this task does not serve to distance Black women from their sexuality in order to further align them with proper, respectable Womanhood (as defined by the Black church). Lomax disrupts this binary completely and challenges the reader to do the same by making it explicitly clear that the problem is not Black women’s sexuality. The problem is the language offered to Black women for expressing sexual agency, power, and pleasure, which the Black church far too often categorizes as sinful (79).

Lomax’s adherence to the careful balance between challenging the sexualization of Black women while simultaneously celebrating their sexuality is evident by the book’s cover art. The image, titled *Get It*, was created by artist Tschabalala Self. It is a gripping depiction of Black womanhood that seems to simultaneously promote, yet rebuke stereotypical assumptions regarding Black women’s bodies. It simultaneously invites, yet rejects the White Supremacist gaze that is responsible for such depictions. The image depicts Black women as

monstrous, yet stalwart. According to the artist's home page, Self seeks to engage with the often contradictory depictions and iconography of Black women within contemporary culture. Of this endeavor, Self states, "Collective fantasies surround the Black body, and have created a cultural niche in which exists our contemporary understanding of Black femininity. My practice is dedicated to naming this phenomenon. The fantasies and attitudes surrounding the Black female body are both accepted and rejected within my practice, and through this disorientation, new possibilities arise" (Self). It is quite possible that Lomax shares this mission.

While it is (hopefully) evident to all Black feminist scholars that Black women's sexuality should not dictate the terms of their humanity, this book is not solely for an academic audience, but for the very audience called into question: the Black church. Lomax does not situate the Black church as simply a site of oppression and exploitation of Black women, who are simultaneously its most devout and loyal contingency. She consistently references the ability of Black churches to serve as a site for healing, community, and liberation.

However, she also challenges the violence the Black church can and has inflicted upon Black women, as evident by the successful careers of Jakes and Perry, for whom the Black church has garnered substantial wealth. Lomax's message is clear: in these times of crisis, the Black church is positioned to live up to its promise of liberation and healing, but first, it must do better. It must call attention to the violence Black women and girls experience both at the hands of the state and by the men they love. It must dispel sexism, heterosexism, heteropatriarchy, classism, and erotophobia (200). The Black church must heal itself before it can heal others.

With this approach, I cannot help but think of bell hooks, Hortense Spillers, and Patricia Hill Collins, all of whom Lomax references extensively throughout the book. All of these theorists have similarly embarked on cultural readings that hold all, even those within the Black community, accountable for the abuse of Black women. In this vein, Lomax situates herself within a long Black Feminist tradition that exposes the various forces of oppression impacting Black lives, even when they hit the closest to home.

This book also serves as a challenge to Critical Race Theorists to turn the lens upon our own communities in order to consider how White Supremacy has seeped into our daily practices and assumptions. Lomax strategically places the films of Tyler Perry in direct conversation with the moniker of the "Welfare Queen" in order to highlight the reliance of Perry and Jakes' proclamations concerning Black womanhood on the very tropes and false representations that White Supremacy offers us. In doing so, Lomax makes it perfectly clear, and rightfully so, that the cultural beliefs propagated by Perry and Jakes are not harmless. Lomax provides an understanding for how both the welfare policies of

the Reagan era and the proselytizing offered by the Black church can have the same ramifications: the destruction of Black women (55).

Lomax carefully balances the complexities of Black women's engagement with the Black church and its demonization of Black womanhood. As alluded to before, the Jezebel trope forced upon Black women does not exist in isolation, but is instead placed in stark contrast to the Black "ladies" that are heralded within the Black church (102). Black women do not exist outside of the construction of this binary. It is no secret that Black women are essential to the success of the Black church and the men who profit from it, specifically Jakes and Perry. Lomax problematizes Black women's engagement with the Black church in a manner that cannot be reduced to assumptions of their ignorance or complacency.

Lomax commonly refers to the, although complicated, forms of empowerment and humanization men like Jakes and Perry offer Black women that are often denied by society at large. Perry's movies and Jakes' sermons acknowledge the violence, abuse, and exploitation Black women and girls are subjected to throughout their lives. Further, Jakes and Perry offer a road to redemption and a path for healing, albeit muddled and entrenched in misogyny. It is not that Black women involved in the church have been duped by men, such as Jakes and Perry. It is that the Black church offers a site of humanization that is not available to Black women in just about every other facet of their lives. It is also that Black women are complex, nuanced, have to survive within murky grey areas, and commonly "have to pick and choose which battles are worth fighting" (200).

As mentioned earlier, Lomax situates this book as a rallying cry for scholars and churchgoers alike. Our shared task is to "unhinge" Black women from their false representation as Jezebels, hos, and deviants. Citing Sylvia Wynters, Lomax makes it clear that this is not simply a matter of altering narratives and perceptions, but about undoing the misrepresentations that have been seared onto the flesh of Black women over centuries (133). It is about dismantling the "black male normative body" (165) and the "Black nuclear project" (110), which are so vital for capitalism and neoliberalism, but rests so heavily on Black women's dehumanized bodies (165).

It is not an easy task by any means, but it is an essential one if we, as scholars, want to fully engage with the complexities of Black women and the various forces of oppression that impact their existence. Lomax concludes by saying, "The road between being an 'out of touch' black cultural critic and applicable black cultural criticism is not an easy one. There are no perfect pictures, only crooked views" (200). Lomax provides us with a blueprint and an essential lesson on how to tilt our heads, sharpen our gaze, and push on through.

Works Cited

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