Madea's Family History: A Critical Analysis of the Stage Plays and Films of Tyler Perry

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Abstract- Madea’s Family History: A Critical Analysis of the Films and Stage Plays of Tyler Perry

This thesis investigates the films and stage plays of Tyler Perry through a comparative analysis of his works, specifically, Diary of a Mad Black Woman, Madea Goes To Jail, and Madea’s Family Reunion. African American theater and film director, writer, and actor, Tyler Perry has become an international Black cultural phenomenon primarily through his infamous loud-mouth, gun-toting, irascible character that he plays in drag, Mabel “Madea” Simmons. Although widely recognized for his films, many people criticize Perry for the use of negative tropes and stereotypes in his stage plays and films. In this, my examination takes into consideration enduring stereotypes and tropes of African American peoples such as the Mammy, the Tragic Mulatta, and the Buck figures that I argue are complex figures within Perry’s work. I propose that there are significant differences between Perry’s work in theater and Perry’s work in film in text and plot. I also introduce a new theory of African American performance based off of Henry Louis Gates’s idea of intertextuality, which I call intermediality, the repetition and revision of performance between different mediums. Through my examination, I discover the multifarious layers that exist within Perry’s stage plays and films that impact the African American community both positively and negatively. As I argue, Perry’s work remains very popular within the African American community and, therefore, there must be more critical scholarship on his works as well as additional work on the theory of intermediality within African American theater studies.

Keywords: Tyler Perry, Madea, Chitlin Circuit, theatre, African American, Black film
MADEA’S FAMILY HISTORY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE STAGE PLAYS AND
FILMS OF TYLER PERRY

By

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Introduction

“We trust him. It’s not about being black—though it’s nice to see yourself in a Hollywood movie once in a while. I know I can take my kids. I know that there will be a good message. Critics can say whatever they want; he’s the only one making movies about people trying to live right.”

—Tenisha Hart, Atlanta Parent

“I want to be successful. I want a whole lot of people to see my movies. More black people. More white people. I want to make that connection. I just don’t want to lose my own connection with home doing it.”

—Tyler Perry

On a street in New Orleans, LA lived an African-American family going through hard times. Emmitt Perry Sr., a carpenter, lived with his wife, Maxine, two daughters, and two sons, one named Emmitt Perry Jr. As a young boy, Emmitt Jr. witnessed an abusive father who would continually beat his mother, his brother and sisters, and also Emmitt Jr. Family drama was something constant in young Emmitt Jr.’s life and growing up in poverty only added to the family’s hardships. Eventually the physical abuse of Emmitt Sr. became so tragically violent that Emmitt Jr. considered killing his father and eventually considered killing himself. Deciding that he could no longer take the abuse of his father on his family, Emmitt Jr. left home. The domestic violence that occurred in his youth empowered him to find his own voice as a man and eliminated the shadow of his father’s image: “Once a bad thing has happened to you, you can be completely ashamed of it and it can destroy you, or you can take the power out of it by using it as
a teaching tool to help others” (Perry). He began this journey by changing his name to the man we know him as today, filmmaker, dramatist, and producer Tyler Perry.

This thesis will focus on exploring the stage plays and films of Mr. Tyler Perry. Through my research I seek to analyze Perry’s multilayered and complex work, which centers on the contemporary life experiences of African-Americans. My analysis will center on a multitude of films by Perry including: *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), *Madea’s Family Reunion* (2006), and *Madea Goes To Jail* (2009), which were all originally produced as stage plays throughout theaters that served an African-American demographic that scholars have called “Urban Theaters” in the United States. Most of these films and stage plays include and feature the character that Perry is most famous for, Madea, who is typically described as a loud-mouth, pot-smoking, gun-toting grandmother, and is always played by Perry himself. My research will look at the differences between the writing and performance of the stage plays and the films (all of the same name).

When I first watched a stage play on DVD by Tyler Perry, *Madea Goes To Jail*, I responded the same way that most African-Americans responded when watching one of Perry’s films: I thought the man was funny. As an African-American male, I was able to relate and identify with the work strongly and was ecstatic to see my race depicted on stage. In 2009, Perry turned this stage play into a movie by the same name. I was excited to go and see the film version of the stage play that had introduced me to Perry’s work. However, when I viewed the movie I saw something that puzzled me. The film was almost completely different from what I had seen in the stage version.

This difference instantly stimulated my interest. Why were the characters of the stage play different when transported to film? Why was the plot tweaked and reworked? If Perry’s
stage plays were so successful in the context of the theater, why make them into movies? Why add particular or new characters to the film version and eliminate characters that were in the stage play?

These are some of the framing questions that I will investigate in my analysis of Perry’s films and stage plays. My research objective will be to look at the differences in these stage plays and films of Mr. Perry as well as examining other complexities within his works. I will engage and find a way into his work through the history of African-American stereotypes and tropes. I will carefully explore the characters in Perry’s stage plays and films and how these characters connect with historical tropes and stereotypes of African-American figures that scholars have identified. I will argue that through Perry’s mass distribution of his films, he presents both significant and problematic constructions of these historical representations to a wider audience.

Many critics of Perry’s work have spoken negatively of Perry’s filmmaking and the images in his films. For example, in a review of *Why Did I Get Married* (2007) in *Variety*, the reviewer observes that Perry has broad contradictions in his films: “The work of Tyler Perry, with its wild mood swings between near-Shakespearean extremes of broad farce and intense melodrama, its sudden bursts of song and/or religious fervor, has been both hugely successful and critically questionable” (Scheib 32). In another commentary on National Public Radio of a recent film premiere, *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (2009), commentator Jamilah Lemieux challenges Perry to find a new voice in his films: “You have built an empire on a foundation of love and Christianity, Mr. Perry, but that is also mired with the worst Black pathologies and stereotypes. I beg of you, stop dismissing the critics as haters and realize that Black people need
new stories and new storytellers” (Lemieux). While Perry clearly has his critics, neither critics nor scholars can deny his impact on African-American theater and film.

Perry has written and directed over ten stage plays in the past decade. Although his first stage production, I Know I’ve Been Changed, landed him in bankruptcy as well as homeless, he has since produced stage plays that have become wildly popular on the urban chain of African-American theaters known as the “chitlin circuit” (Gates 6). His first film, Diary of a Mad Black Woman, was made with a five million dollar budget and ended up grossing over 22 million dollars in its first weekend alone (TylerPerry.com). Since then he has written, directed, produced, and acted in eight films. He also expanded his work into television by launching the shows Tyler Perry’s House of Pain and Meet The Browns. In 2008, Perry opened his own studios in Atlanta, GA, where most of his films are shot and produced. With this, he has become the first African-American to own his own film studio. In addition, Perry’s first book Don’t Make A Black Woman Take Off Her Earrings: Madea’s Uninhibited Commentaries on Life and Love, was at the top of The New York Times best seller list for eight weeks.¹

Perry has become a cultural phenomenon and practically the leading voice of the Black film community akin to the status of August Wilson in African-American theater. Critic Edward Crouse goes as far as pointing to Perry’s impact by positioning his work in relationship to that of August Wilson’s: “As the canniest, least macho black filmmaker working in America this minute, is Perry, per Oprah’s prediction, spawning ‘a whole new genre of black films?’ Or, as August Wilson demanded, ‘creating art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America”’ (4). However, despite his worldwide success scholars have failed to produce serious investigations of Perry’s work and its implications for Black cultural production. With such an explosion into contemporary Black culture, this thesis aims to illustrate the complexity of Perry’s

¹ This fact is noted in the biography section of Tyler Perry’s commercial website: www.tylerperry.com
work and its effects on and representations of African-American culture. This project does not aim to create a definitive binary between Perry’s films and stage plays, and by no means is this study meant to position Perry’s filmmaking in categories of “good” or “bad” in terms of filmmaking. Rather I believe it more productive to examine how Perry’s films draw on contemporary and historical aspects of African-American culture and how Perry’s plays and films negotiate, instantiate, surmount, or reconfigure popular African-American stereotypes and tropes in his work.

Critical Analysis: The Signifyin(g) Monkey

How should we look at the intricacies and complexities of Tyler Perry’s work? Critical analysis of Perry’s stage plays and films provides the grounding to my complex research question and subject. African-Americans have had their own rich historiographical context of culture and literature. In other words, there are particular ways in which African-Americans have chosen to communicate that are unique to our culture.

In his classic book entitled, The Signifying Monkey, Henry Louis Gates argues for a unique way of looking at African-American literature that differs from the Western tradition: “The Signifying Monkey explores the relation of the black vernacular tradition to the Afro-American literary tradition. The book attempts to identify a theory of criticism that is inscribed within the black vernacular tradition and that in turn informs the shape of the Afro-American literary tradition” (Gates 19). Gates develops this critical theory by looking at different types of African-American literature and using a comparative analysis to come up with the theory of “the signifying monkey.” The figure of the “signifying monkey” is one of the two African tricksters that Gates finds connections within African-American literary traditions—the other is the Esu-
Elegbara trickster from the Yoruba tradition (Gates 21). Gates identifies the relation between these two tricksters, who come from two separate African cultures, and shows the similarities they share between them. He then applies this to the broader aspects of his Signifyin(g) theory by demonstrating how Black literature comments and theorizes about itself:

Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms, from paintings and sculpture to music and language use. I decide to analyze the nature and function of Signifyin(g) precisely because it is repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. Whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in this identifiable black Signifyin(g) difference. (Gates 24)

The core of the theory of signification is that signifyin(g) means to repeat and revise and this repetition and revision can be differentiated between Black authors depending on what they choose to repeat and revise.

A central method of my study will be the application of Gates’s literary theory for my critical analysis of Perry’s theater and films. Gates provides the concept of repetition and revision or signifyin(g): “black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms” (Gates 24). Repetition and revision has been a major part of most African-American work especially that of playwright Suzan Lori-Parks in which she literally repeats lines or scenarios in her drama to differentiate meaning. This is a fundamental principle to some of the additional tools that Gates extrapolates to identify signification or meaning. Thus, in the movies and stage plays of Perry I will inspect the types of repetition that Perry makes inside his work not only between his stage plays and films but also in relation to the larger canon of African-American culture.
Gates also frames his argument and theory by stating explicitly that he does not wish to necessarily critique African-American literature and create distinctions:

Theory can serve to mystify what strike some readers as fairly straightforward matters of taste and application, of representation and reference, of denotation and meaning. I have tried to define a theory of Afro-American criticism not to mystify black literature . . . but to begin to suggest how richly textured and layered black literary artistry indeed is . . . I hope to enhance the reader’s experience of black texts by identifying levels of meaning and expression that might otherwise remain mediated, or buried beneath the surface.

(Gates 20)

Henry Louis Gates provides an excellent framework for analysis of African-American literature. However, scholars in African-American studies have expanded his theory to other outlets of African-American cultural production. In particular, Theater Studies scholar Harry Elam Jr. applies Gates’s theory to theater and suggests how signification can be used within African-American theater. Elam comments in his article “Signifyin(g) on African-American Theatre: ‘The Colored Museum’ by George Wolfe”: “According to Gates, through the process of signifyin(g) African-American literature is able to theorize about itself . . . still, Gates writes only of African-American literature. He does not apply the theory of signifyin(g) to the theatre” (Elam 292). By using the play *The Colored Museum* by George C. Wolfe, Elam demonstrates how signification can be an effective tool of analysis for studies in drama and performance. He uses the theory of the signifyin(g) monkey to show that the principles of repetition and revision (as well as Gates’s other concepts on African-American literature) also operate in the *performance* of repeated ideas and not only the writing of them. As Elam argues: “Applying
Gates’s theory of signifyin(g) to The Colored Museum highlights the intertextual relationship between . . . [this play and] earlier works of African-American theatre” (Elam 302).

While Elam succeeds in utilizing Gates’s ideas for theatre, I believe that both Gates’s and Elam’s scholarship could be extended to explore the intertextual relationship between theater and film. I would like to push the boundaries of Gates’s signifying theory. For their studies, both Gates and Elam stay within particular genres to explore the concepts that Gates outlines. While their analysis focuses on signification within the genres of African-American literature and theatre respectively, my analysis will look at a concept that I will call intermediality as well as intertextuality with the work of Tyler Perry. The concept I introduce of intermediality functions much like Gates’s idea of intertextuality except intermediality probes the ways in which different forms of African-American texts “talk” to each other across different media. My analysis not only takes the signifying theory to the medium of film but also concerns itself with two types of genres. I will show how signification can occur between mediums and how different mediums begin to “talk” to each other and revise what another medium says and does.

Although Gates’s theory of the signifying monkey will be important to my analysis and research of Perry’s work, it is not the only methodology that my thesis will use and build upon. My thoughts on the work of Perry originally began by thinking about Black stereotypes that I learned about in my African-American theater class. As I studied particular stereotypes and tropes in African-American theater, it occurred to me that most of Tyler Perry’s films had originated in the theater. I also noticed that the signature character in Perry’s films and stage plays was a stereotype that has been a staple in African-American culture and theater. Perry’s signature female character, Madea, originally appeared in his second play, which was recently turned into the film, I Can Do Bad All By Myself (TylerPerry.com). In the role of Madea, Perry
dons make-up, wigs, and prosthetic breasts to play the infamous loud-mouthed grandmother that he is known for today. The name Madea is in fact a historical name specific to Black culture in that it is a shortened version of “Mother Dear.” However, Perry’s cross gender portrayal draws upon a character that has been seen in American theater and film for over a century: the mammy.

The second part of my research will build upon previous studies of African-American stereotypes and tropes in order to show how a range of complex historical images apply to Perry’s stage plays and films. As stated earlier, one of the critiques that Ms. Lemieux, an African-American woman, gave of Mr. Perry was the fact that the images in his films are mired in Black stereotypes (Lemieux). Ms. Lemieux is not alone in her criticism, as many critics that review Perry’s films have made the same accusations. However, in my research I look to flush out and build upon the normative stereotypes that scholars have touched upon. In this aspect of my research, I analyze the stereotypes that appear in Perry’s stages play, but I also examine how these stereotypes change when adapted into film. I seek to highlight stereotypes, both positive and negative, for the sake of cultural analysis not to assess whether this makes Perry’s stage plays and films good or bad or creates positive or negative images of African-Americans. By looking at the images and stereotypes that Perry uses in his films, I aim to look at the shifting history of African-American representation and to suggest and theorize about the consequences and implications of the revival of such stereotypes and tropes.

Historical Images and Representations of African-Americans

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The history of the representation of African-Americans has its roots in performance long before the invention of film. Representation and images of African-Americans are rooted in the pre-Civil War era. Most scholars point to minstrel shows that took place in the Antebellum South that solidified the negative portrayals of Blacks. These shows were performed by whites who portrayed African-American stereotypes while wearing Blackface (Williams 4). Representation is a powerful tool and was used to counteract most of the anti-slavery propaganda that took place in the North. An important text in forming the representations of African-Americans before the Civil War was the novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. This widely popular book, considered one of the many sparks that ignited the Civil War, told of a slave named Tom and his life’s journey through the terrible trials of slavery. In time, the novel was turned into dozens of different adaptations for the stage. Although both the novel and play featured African-American characters, African-Americans did not perform these roles; African-American roles were performed by whites in Blackface (Williams 2). This caused a dangerous penetration of already preconceived notions about Blacks throughout 19th century America.

An important source of scholarship that analyzes different representations of Blacks in 19th century America is Judith Williams’s study “Uncle Tom’s Women.” In her article, Williams explains and looks at how the women in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* have shaped stereotypes and tropes of African-American women:

> Although early black images appeared before those depicted by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. . .in her depiction of black female characters Stowe repeated the tropes of black female representation already developing in the nineteenth-century imagination, and the

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4 Many theater studies scholars mark the adaptation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* into a performance as a significant moment in the development of Black stereotypes in addition to minstrel performance. See Errol Hill and James Hatch’s *A History of African-American Theatre*. 
enormous stage caricatures that emerged were...the mammy, the tragic mulatto, and the Topsy figure. (Williams 2)

Williams’s article uncovers how these three stereotypes have come to dominate the ways in which African-American women have been represented and continue to be represented today.

In Perry’s work I will primarily look at his central character, Madea, and how she both enacts and reinvents the mammy stereotype. The mammy figure, according to Lisa Anderson in her book, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen*, is characterized physically by her large size, a kerchief and apron, as well as her big lips and nose (Anderson 10). She has been the classic figure of Black motherhood and is usually seen as sexless. She takes care of white children and is one of the only figures that can exert any sort of power over whites (Anderson 11).

The tragic mulatto is another figure that both Judith Williams and Lisa Anderson touch on in the representation of African-American women. The tragic mulatto is a woman that is usually typified as pure and innocent. She is beautiful and *almost* passes for white. However, she has at least “one drop” of Black blood, which restricts her access to the white world and is therefore considered “tragic” because she is caught between two worlds (Anderson 46).

Anderson further explains that there can be two kinds of tragic mulattos:

There is also the bad tragic mulatta; she, like the good girl, passes for white. She grows to despise her race and her family and seeks to use her skin color to escape the life that would otherwise be her destiny. She is mean, occasionally angry, as well as bitter, sullen, shadowy, and untrustworthy. ...she too must die whether by her own hand or someone else’s. (Anderson 46)
I believe that Perry’s films and stage plays also portray the tragic mulatto, and I will explore different heroines that are represented in his plays and films in order to analyze how these characters reinvent this trope.

The final figure in Black female representation that I will examine will be the Topsy figure or the jezebel. This figure grew out of Stowe’s novel but changed significantly when portrayed onstage. Instead of Topsy portrayed as a young woman, Williams finds that most actors who played Topsy were older white women dressed up in Blackface. Originally in the Stowe novel, Topsy is a young girl, but on stage, acted out by a grown woman, her actions became more sexually charged (Williams 6). This alteration changed the ways in which African-American women were considered: as sexual deviants who were loose and untamed.

To inform my study of Perry’s representations of Black masculinity, I will draw analytical models from Riche Richardson’s recent book, Black Masculinity and the U.S. South From Uncle Tom to Gangsta (The New Southern Studies) in which she explores Black masculinity and the social, political, and geographical effects that the South has had on Black male representation. In terms of Black masculinity, Richardson describes three primary stereotypes of African-American males: the Uncle Tom, the Black rapist, and the “gangsta” figure. Considering that most of Perry’s films take place in the South, particularly Georgia, this study proves quite useful for my examination of Perry’s representations of Black masculinity.

Richardson argues that several filmmakers, including Spike Lee, have created an “urbanized” Uncle Tom for contemporary culture. This figure in African-American culture represents the Black man who remains loyal to the white man. He does not complain and is completely fine in his situation as long as he is appeasing the white man (Richardson). As I will argue, we see this version of Black masculinity in several of Perry’s films with his lead male
characters. While Perry’s male characters portray different aspects of an Uncle Tom figure, they are also a mix of different figures that Richardson examines such as the Black rapist and the gangsta figure.

Another figure that will be looked at will be the Black rapist. Richardson argues that this figure appeared in response to white men’s belief that white masculinity (and thus white women) was threatened by the sexuality of the Black man. This figure is lustful and full of sexual hunger and will stop at nothing to conquer a white woman (Richardson 36). In this, he is similar to a third figure that will be examined, the contemporary “gangsta.” The main difference between these two stereotypes is that the Black gangsta is able to regain and have power as a criminal, instead of the weakened stance of the Black rapist figure (Richardson).

All of these stereotypes serve as important historical representations and precedents for my analysis of Tyler Perry’s characters. My critical analysis will primarily show how these stereotypes and representations both emerge and then change between Perry’s stage plays and films. My objective with this analysis is not to determine if the tropes or stereotypes are good or bad, positive or negative, but instead to let the work of Perry speak for itself in order to see how these stereotypes and representations function within his canon of work.5

Chapter Outline

My thesis will address a lack of critical scholarship on Tyler Perry’s ever-growing body of work and its importance to African-American studies and theatre studies. KB Saine’s recent scholarship, “The Black American's Chitlin/Gospel/Urban Show: Tyler Perry and the Madea Plays,” suggests that Perry’s work should receive greater scholarly consideration:

5 Again the idea behind this form of analysis comes from Gates’s method in The Signifying Monkey where he aims not to criticize the work he analyzes but rather critique the relationship between its form and content.
We are left to debate not the authenticity of Perry's work but its place in the current, as well as historical, canon . . . The first task of scholars is to recognize and document this touring phenomenon as it continues to reach an American demographic largely unaffected by the more traditional foci of theatre history studies. (Saine 115)

Saine makes a very valid point. As an emerging scholar I believe it is my job to thus take the leap that Saine suggests and begin the investigation of his work. A high priority in the tasks of this thesis is to finally have something appear when students go to search about Tyler Perry in an academic database.

The first chapter composes an in-depth analysis of Perry’s most infamous character, Madea, across the various films and stage plays that feature her and Perry’s drag performance. I analyze the structure of Madea’s character and performance by fusing my reading of Madea in terms of the historical stereotype of the mammy as well as in terms of the cross gendered performance of Perry as a Black man who portrays a Black woman. This chapter also analyzes and critiques Madea’s performance in terms of Madea performing the actions of an African-American male in the guise of an African-American female. This chapter will also provide a critical foundation to how Madea operates and develops within Perry’s film and stage work and the impact that Perry’s performance has on the representation and portrayal of Black males.

The second chapter concentrates on Perry’s first major film release, Diary of a Mad Black Woman. The film tells the story of a woman whom her husband throws out of their house. She looks to her family and God to help rebuild her life. This film contains many of the stock characters that populate Perry’s other works and serves as a helpful introduction to his dramaturgy. This leads me to examine additional forms of representations in Perry’s stage plays. I investigate how particular characters have shifted between the stage play and the film. This
includes finding characters that appear in the stage plays and not in their film versions and vice versa as well as examining certain stereotypes such as the tragic mulatto to see how they transform between genres. I read these plays as formulations of Gates’s concept of “speakerly texts,” a formulation of narrative style that I suggest also appears in the films. By analyzing the trope of “speakerly texts” in African-American culture, I discuss my idea of intermediality and its use between the plays and films of Perry to other mediums of work by African-Americans.

In my final chapter I highlight my concept of intermediality and how intermediality functions within Perry’s work in the formulations of cultural memory within African-American culture. This chapter explores the variety of ways in which Perry not only performs signification of performance between his stage plays and films, but also how Perry signifies upon other Black cultural products within the African-American community. I will use my viewing of Tyler Perry’s most recent stage production, Madea’s Big Happy Family, in order to examine how intermediality works in a live stage setting with a predominately African-American audience.

Throughout each of these chapters I will also theorize how Perry has recreated Black representation in his plays and films and possibly created new Black stereotypes (most especially through his film work), which are nevertheless rooted in past representations of African-American peoples. In examining these representations, I will argue that they suggest and frame contemporary conditions surrounding African-Americans.

This thesis pursues the task of looking at the films and stage plays of Tyler Perry. The tools used by previous scholars such as Gates’s signifyin(g) monkey, as well as the historical work of stereotypes and tropes combined with my own critical theory, will help to unlock the complicated and elaborate work of Tyler Perry. Perry has made the claim that he is providing a service and message for African-American families and culture in general: “I’m not sure why no
one wants to admit there’s a viable audience out there that believes in God and wants to see a
movie with their family. The demand is there. The supply is not” (Bowles). This thesis will
hopefully make the work of Tyler Perry more critically acceptable and will entice scholars into
further inquest and exploration of his work.
Chapter One:
Mannish Madea: The Functionality of Madea as a Cross Gendered Masculine Performance

“Cross-gender performance requires an actor to think: Who am I and Who am I not.”

—Rhonda Blair, “‘Not . . . but’/ ‘Not-Not-Me’: Musings on Cross-Gender Performance”

“That’s my problem with Tyler Perry movies . . . drop in that plot and then sprinkle a large Negro in drag and you’ve summed up the entire anthology of his work.”

—Corey Richardson, Blogger on Tyler Perry

When I was a young man in high school, my father took my mother and me to New York to see the Broadway musical *The Color Purple*. Based on the novel by Alice Walker, the play tells the story of a Black woman named Celie who overcomes the violence and abuse of her husband Mister, in order to discover her own identity and worth. After we saw the show, I asked my father what he thought of the musical. He remarked that he did not enjoy it and said to me that he “did not like how the story still portrayed Black men.”

At first I did not know what my father meant by this. I thought that he was insensitive to Celie’s conquests over the insensitive and cruel Mister. But as I became aware of my identity as a Black man, I began to see why my father was concerned. As I grew older, I paid more attention to images of Black men as violent, criminalized and hypersexual, and I became disturbed by how people expected me to behave as a Black man. The way Mister was performed affected how other people perceived me and other Black men.
Yet I would also see moments of repetition of Mister’s actions in a new form when I became older. In high school when I ventured on a trip with my high school classmates, we entertained ourselves by watching a film while on the road. The film was actually the recordings of a stage play in which the main character, an African-American woman, was put in jail for disobeying the law. The woman, who was thrown into a woman’s prison, worried about the possibility of having sexual advances from the other women in the prison and continually threatened the other women in the prison in order to exert her strength with her stature being over six feet with broad and built shoulders. This woman happened to be Tyler Perry dressed in drag in order to portray the character of Madea. However, what was more intriguing about Perry’s performance was that Madea, who would be quick to pursue physical confrontation and violence, exhibited the characteristics and actions of a Black male rather than a Black female, which was the intention of the cross gendered performance. This performance allows me to investigate how society views the not-so idealized Black man, which seems exemplified in Madea’s performance.

In this chapter, I will investigate the performance of Tyler Perry’s most infamous character within his work, Mabel “Madea” Simmons. I argue that within his canon, Perry composes his characters and structures his stories around stereotyped notions of Black masculinity as aggressive, violent, criminalized, and overly sexual. I also argue that Perry builds the character Madea, who has become a staple of his stage work, as a performance of Black masculine stereotypes. The version of Black masculinity that Perry performs in his work offers a safe and non-threatening portrayal that reinforces tropes of violence, aggressiveness, and criminality.
For my examination, Madea becomes a site of interrogation that presents a multiplicity of complexities and serves as an examination of the uses of contemporary cross-gendered performance. Madea presents a cross-gendered performance that offers insight that helps to question the implications of the performance of African-American males. Madea will be a continuing topic throughout the analysis of Perry’s stage and film work. Yet I find it best to first thoroughly and carefully deconstruct the layers that are present in Madea’s performance. Madea represents a new version and gestus of how the African-American community defines strength and masculinity.

The Birth of Madea

In 1998, Perry wrote the play I Know I’ve Been Changed in which he invested $12,000 and rented a 1200 seat theater. However, the show was a flop with only 30 people showing up (Bowles). Perry ended up broke and was forced to sleep in his car. Yet he picked the play back up after talking with churchgoers and opened it in the House of Blues in Atlanta, and Perry was a hit. From there Perry developed even more fame when in 2000 he dressed in drag to portray the grandmother character of Madea. In a blog entry entitled, “Spike Lee Blasts A Hole into Tyler Perry,” Keith Josef Adkins, who has seen many of Perry’s plays and films, notes how Perry has become a cultural phenomenon within the theater: “Tyler Perry has a knack for bringing black folks to the theater and making them laugh at big-breasted mammy style Black women” (Adkins). The “big-breasted mammy” whom Adkins mentions is Madea, yet she is no ordinary grandmother. Portrayed by Perry, a six foot six inch man with a rather large build and dressed in drag, Madea is a wise cracking, gun-toting, no nonsense matriarch who is quick to use violence.
I would argue that Perry’s performance gives new life to the stock character of the mammy, which was first made famous during the antebellum Civil War period through blackface minstrelsy and has been maintained in popular American culture through film and television. Since 2000, Perry has made a trademark performance out of Madea who makes appearances in the stage plays *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (2000), *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2001), *Madea’s Family Reunion* (2001), *Madea’s Class Reunion* (2003), and *Madea Goes To Jail* (2005).

As Adkins indicates, Madea proves to be a popular character in contemporary Black theater. The character has attracted millions to Perry’s theatrical and cinematic work in cities across the U.S. because of the character’s wit and humor. She proves to be a particularly charismatic and entertaining character because of a strange juxtaposition of Perry’s large stature and hypermasculine demeanor clothed in the guise of a campy and overblown form of drag, which is not meant to be an authentic portrayal of a woman (Bullough and Bullough 246). Audiences look forward to seeing Madea perform crazed acts of violence or use searing humor in an attempt to provide guidance and wisdom to her audience. She has also managed to reach many audiences within their own homes through distribution of recorded live performances of Perry’s stage plays sold on DVD—an unusual practice for theater makers, Black or white.

With the character of Madea, Perry’s work has garnered attention and fame on a national and even international scale. For example, a review of *Madea Goes To Jail* (2009) remarks on why audiences love Perry as Madea: “Watching him [Perry] go to town in Madea’s housecoats, frocks, knee high socks, and silver wig can be entertaining. Perry seems so free of himself” (Morris). Part of this humor stems from the fact that Madea is portrayed as an elderly woman...
who reverses the audience’s expectations of her femininity and age as she responds to conflicts in the manner of a stereotypically violent and volatile young Black male.

**History Performs Itself**

Perry’s Madea functions within a sphere of work that focuses on African-American characters and culture. Yet Perry’s cross-gendered performance of Madea relies heavily on several of the masculine performative tropes of minstrelsy. The images and performances of African-Americans trace back to the foundation of the United States as a country. Since the importation of slaves in 1619, the popular discourse about blacks in this country was distinctly negative. In a selection from *Prison Masculinities*, Mark Kahn notes how colonial settlers and newly endowed Americans viewed African-American males: “Many of the founders saw black males as inherently impassioned and incorrigible. They viewed them as oversexed creatures whose uncontrollable desires threatened to pollute and debase the white race” (Kahn 29). The Black man was a product of popular ideology and resentment that even the Founders of the United States viewed as a threat. Black men posed a threat because of their supposed hypersexuality and the danger of this sexuality becoming uncontained. Khan also finds descriptions from the Founders about Black men as being coarse and threatening to incite racial violence against whites (30). The ways in which a very elitist group of men, the Founding Fathers, portray and view Black men in terms of hypersexuality and violence would continue to shape the ways in which a threatening Black masculinity was overemphasized.

One of the most palpable ways in which Black masculinity and African-Americans were composed and constructed to white standards was through the minstrel show. Minstrelsy has an infamous and painful history in helping to promote how African-Americans were both performed
and constructed in the popular mindset. In her book *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture*, Patricia Turner explains the use of minstrelsy in the 19th century: “Before the Civil War, white male minstrel entertainers crossed race and gender boundaries by darkening their faces and wearing women’s clothes in order to entertain their audiences with the supposedly authentic music, humor, and dance ostensibly common on Southern plantations” (Turner 44). The “authenticity” that was portrayed consisted of “Blacks” content with their lives on plantations. Minstrelsy included tropes and stereotypes such as the sambo, coon, mammy, and an urban figure known as Zip Coon. These brutish and simple performances of Black men and women in plantation life were done for a very concrete reason. The portrayal of happy and content slaves on stage provided one of many avenues through which the institution of slavery could be publicly defended against the abolitionists. As film and cultural studies scholar Robert Jackson offers: “It was during the period of enslavement that Whites developed many of their greatest fears and anxieties toward Blacks, particularly toward Black males, and established safeguards for rationalizing their vulnerability and unacceptable activities as slave owners” (Jackson 16). These safeguards were established partially through the use of performance and the stereotypes and tropes that are specific to Black males are similar to the descriptions given by the Founding fathers of Blacks being uneducated and less than human. Jackson identifies tropes of Black males that identified them as hypersexual, insensitive, and aggressive and offers that these were developed in popular performances as fictitious constructions made by white performers (Jackson 39).

These negative traits have implications beyond minstrel performances of the antebellum South through their use in theatrical and cinematic depictions as enduring tropes of Black masculinity. Very broadly, one of the most damaging tropes that defines Black masculinity is
the trope of the Black man as brute. Jackson defines the trait of the brute, which he gains from a study by film scholar Donald Bogle:

Another figure in Bogle’s (1996) pantheon is the brute who was almost always a tall, dark-skinned muscular, athletically built character and often either bald or with a short haircut. The brute or buck’s primary objective was raping White women. He, essentially, refused to even attempt to control his insatiable sexual desires and urges; hence the Black body of the brute was scripted to be nothing less than an indiscreet, devious, irresponsible, and sexually pernicious beast. (Jackson 41)

The way in which the brute is characterized has become an essential definition of Black masculinity and signifies the earlier performances of Black men rooted in minstrelsy and the Jim Crow era. The brute is constructed as a dangerous racial Other to whites, but in terms of the gendered Other, the brute is defined in terms of the white female. Thus Black masculinity becomes a direct threat to white women through fears of rape and violence and an indirect threat to white men through these hypersexual tendencies.

The most salient and perhaps most damaging portrayal of the brute or buck was in the film *Birth of a Nation* where the brute, Gus, would come to be portrayed by a white man in blackface as sexual and violent. This portrayal, Jackson argues, would come to be the defining performance and imagining of Black men in theater and film: “*Birth of a Nation* set out the racial imagery of the first fifty years of [black performance]. Blacks were to be mostly invisible; when seen, they would perform for whites. If they made themselves visible, they would become immediately threatening, sexually so if they were male” (Jackson 45). The idea of this racialized
imagery was ingrained in the cultural minds of whites as the expectations of Blacks in both performance and in society.

The characteristics of Black men through the brute or buck trope and image will be important in evaluating and critiquing the performances of Perry’s characters. The traits of the brute as violent, criminal, aggressive, and promiscuous will be major factors in how we interpret Madea in terms of staged masculinities. An additional trope that will also be discussed is the mammy trope that arises from similar beginnings of the brute and buck stereotypes, which have become salient throughout Black performance.

Perry’s portrayal of Madea has been accurately described as a “Mammy” by stage and film critics alike. Madea signifies the historical trope of the mammy in her costume as well as in her actions. The character trope of the mammy originated in Harriett Beecher Stowe’s 19th century novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The mammy kept the master’s house and took care of his children and family in sacrifice of her own kin:

> In the antebellum period the mythological mammy had power within the household, which she purportedly ran. She held the keys, an important symbol of status, and answered only to the plantation mistress and master. Because of her power, mammy could not be crossed by either the white or black member of the household. (Thurber 102)

In many ways Madea signifies these very traits of the mammy, and I argue that the Madea character performs similar acts of aggression and control. She also recalls Hattie McDaniel’s Academy Award winning performance of the mammy in the film *Gone with the Wind* (1939), as McDaniel also portrayed the mammy as violent and domineering over the household she served (Thurber 52). In her dissertation, Karen Sue Warren Jewell discusses the implications of the
mammy’s performance as powerful and dominating: “In order to be considered ‘bad’ in the sense of being a ‘heavy’ or aggressive person who utilizes coercion or threats to obtain desired ends, one must be either masculine or possess masculine traits. Mammy does in fact possess both of these characteristics” (Jewell 41). The historical connection to the mammy with performances in works such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) has been to characterize the mammy as a combative figure who utilizes threats in order to provide comfort for whites. Madea mirrors the classic mammy’s actions in how she responds to children and to protecting her household. If a child dares to talk back to Madea, she is quick to find a belt or threaten the child with sending him or her to the hospital, as in *Madea Goes To Jail*. Madea also does not calmly deal with threats against herself or her family. In *Madea’s Family Reunion* (2001), for instance, when a man threatens one of Madea’s relatives, she quickly produces her gun to prove that she is ready for a fight.

The use of the brute, buck, and the mammy tropes that have been the historical legacy of Black performance relies on the past to inform and analyze the performance of Madea as a masculine character within Perry’s work. By using the traits of Black masculinity as deviant, strong, aggressive, and hypersexual, and viewing the mammy figure as essentially masculine, we come to see the connection of performances from the past that inform the way we approach and consider performances in present day Black artists such as Perry.

Black masculinity has been interpreted through a hegemonic lens in order to subvert Black men. To examine the ways in which Perry constructs Madea in the vein of Black masculinity allows us to observe how these portrayals of Black men affect the ways in which people who watch these performances perceive Black men. As a result, the ways in which
performances are composed have serious consequences in terms of how Black men are treated in the media, popular culture, and everyday encounters.

**Constructing a Myth of Masculinity**

The no-nonsense grandmother character of Madea serves as an example of violence and aggression. In a work by Perry, the audience can see Madea shout at someone who challenges her, wield a gun toward anyone who threatens her family or household, and combat any man or woman who crosses her in a fight. The character of Madea in Perry’s work is not someone whom many people want to challenge. In reviews of Perry’s films and stage plays, critics seize upon the violent tendencies of Madea: “For the uninitiated, Mr. Perry, who is neither old nor female, has made a closet industry out of playing an irascible grandmother . . .” (Genzlinger). Critics acknowledge Madea as an entertaining character whose irritability and anger play well with Perry’s audiences. In a review of the stage play *Madea Goes To Jail* (2005), another critic observes that Madea: “Knows where the belt is hidden; talks out of turn and makes up her own rules” (Wilkinson). Even before a performative analysis occurs, critics already have some indication of the masculine qualities that Madea possesses that stem from the brute and mammy tropes. These tropes emerge from Madea as a representation of a Black woman and yet are further complicated when Madea is performed by a Black man. Moreover, when Madea mixes these tropes in performance, Perry revitalizes for his audience two stereotypes that continue to damage and weaken the view of Black masculinity.

The way in which the critics figure Madea constitutes the context in which this character can be read as a masculine presence. The repeated description of Madea carrying a gun indicates the way in which she operates as a criminalized figure. Before even entering the theatre, an avid
fan of Madea can anticipate her pulling a gun (or several) out of her purse. For instance, in the play *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2001), Madea receives information that her granddaughter Helen has been kicked out of her house by her heinous husband Charles. In her first entrance in the play, Madea runs into Helen’s house and dashes up to the bedroom, gun in tow ready to shoot Charles. Madea yells: “Where he at, girl? Where he at?” (“Diary” 2002) Madea runs back downstairs, waiving her gun with her ridiculously large breasts bouncing up and down, her wig flying through the air, and her tall, bulky frame barreling towards the front door: “I thought I saw something moving, I thought I saw something moving” (Perry “Diary”). In this sequence Madea clearly wants to protect and avenge her granddaughter. However, Madea’s insistence on utilizing her gun and her aggressive demeanor play off popular stereotypes about African-American men and *not* characteristics typically associated with Black elderly women. For the audience, Madea fills a space in which the tropes of violence and aggressiveness in Black men can appear in the guise of an oversized woman who is much too agile for her age. Madea signifies characteristics that would be expected of criminalized Black males—who are assumed to commit violent crimes or acts in order to establish their manhood to other men.6

Prison becomes a site where Black men express a strong hegemonic masculinity.7 Black men who are in prison are assigned by popular portrayal the most heinous of crimes, such as murder or rape. Yet this presumption becomes prevalent in order for hegemony to remain safe in its assumptions about Black men. In the eyes of the dominant public, prison has become associated with brutality, criminals guilty of the most horrific crimes, and people who are unwelcome in society any longer, as prison scholar Yvonne Jewkes affirms: “The stigma

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6 *See Captive Audiences: Media, Masculinity, and Power in Prison* by Yvonne Jewkes

7 In *Captive Audiences: Media, Masculinity, and Power in Prison* Jewkes asserts that prison becomes a place where a hegemonic construction of maleness is performed and reperformed for the public.
attached to being a prisoner, [is that] they have no positive common social identity” (34). I believe, as Jewkes asserts, that prisoners are not viewed favorably by the majority of the public. People assume that those who come out of prison are dangerous people who are unfit to reenter society. They are outsiders, as prisoners cannot apply for jobs easily or even vote without acknowledging their crime. Yet the traits of hypermasculinity stem from African-American men having to overcompensate and over perform masculine actions in order to establish their masculinity with others. One of the ways in which to do this is to prove a Black man’s toughness by committing a crime or violent act in order to prove to fellow Black men that one has the capability of performing masculinized actions. Perry plays on these parameters within his play, *Madea Goes To Jail*.

Perry’s portrayal of Madea relies heavily on stereotypes of criminalized and violent Black men. In the stage play of *Madea Goes To Jail* (2005), Perry takes the audience to a very concrete example of a venue where hyperbolic traits of masculinities exist when Madea finally lands in jail. After shooting at people, damaging property, murdering a dog, and threatening to kill many of her neighbors and family members in four previous plays, Madea finally becomes a subject of the criminal justice system. Perry accommodates our notions of Black masculinity by putting Madea in the topological placement of jail, where Black men are traditionally assigned the most extreme and negative connotations.

When Madea finally appears before the audience in this play, her large stature protrudes into the jail wearing a bright orange prison jumpsuit. The costume of the orange prison jumpsuit over her usual flower dress and heels ties Madea to Black men’s

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8 In many of the stage plays as well as films, Madea consistently brags about her ability to escape from the police as well as criminal prosecution.
traditionally imagined masculine traits and often seen representations: she dresses in an outfit in which we all too often see on Black men in the media through the negative connotation of prison. When Madea enters, she intimidates even the male prison guard who is responsible for her. She reproaches him and backs him into a corner ready to beat him down. In fact, she appears to have more control over the jail than the prison warden. She sits down to explain to her nephew—who works in the prison—how she ended up in jail, offering that she was buying gas and drove off from the gas station without paying: “I was mad as hell. I cussed everybody out in the gas station . . . and then I drove off and they got mad . . . I was not about to go to jail in Conyers” (Perry, “Goes To Jail”). Madea openly defies the law by driving off as well as running from the police who are set on capturing her, and in this, she exhibits “Black masculine” assigned traits of bravery and toughness by running from the law, and in her rage, she yells at everyone around her. Acting fully in the role of Black masculinity’s constructed behavior, Madea’s aggressive anger poses a threat to gas station patrons.

While we may laugh at her for this uncharacteristically “motherly” and “feminine” behavior, Madea also imposes serious implications about the audience’s expectations of Black men and criminality. We expect Madea to perform these aggressive acts of cussing people out and running from the police because Perry has consistently scripted Madea according to these masculine characteristics. In this, the expectations of Black men that are performed by a man in the guise of a woman are funny precisely because they are safe. However, the masculine traits at which we choose to laugh at would be highly problematic if these same actions were performed by a Black male. When Madea mixes the traits of the brute and the mammy to become an overly
violent figure, the actions of Madea become ridiculous and melodramatic. In reality, the hyperbolic bravery that Madea portrays is not how most African-Americans would respond to the police force. The law is a force to which many African-Americans submit because they have historically been mistreated and abused by the law (Kahn 30). A Black audience can laugh at this reaction because Madea’s resistance to authority takes a brash and arrogant form that individuals in most over-policed communities would not dare to attempt. Her behavior functions as an alternative discourse, an imagined release, a portrayal of unfulfilled wishes. By performing such overtly improbable actions of gun shooting and fighting, Madea allows the spectator to imagine a new toughness and power that African-Americans do not get to experience.

The aggressive danger of these actions—as performed by the *female* Madea—allows an audience to feel comfortable and safe due to her “feminine” body performing these damaging masculine tropes. An audience never buys into the fact that Madea is an authentic woman, instead, they recognize that Madea is always Perry in drag. Furthermore, Madea never suffers any true consequences for her outlandish, decidedly male actions. She always seems to escape her punishment by using wild and outrageous tactics. The audience can accept the way in which Madea acts because we recognize that her actions would not be acceptable in society. Yet the audience also faces the contradiction of Madea speaking from a woman’s perceptive and a woman’s actions that are clearly being performed by a man. The gender displacement causes the audience to laugh at Madea because of the knowledge that her actions are not an authentic portrayal of a woman; they are the subversive enactments of the decidedly Black and male Tyler Perry.
While Madea spends a few nights behind bars, we see her take control of her territory and expose her strength to the other women in jail. Madea does not handle threats passively. When two women (who are behaving more like stereotypes of male prisoners than female ones) approach Madea, they declare her “fresh meat” which demonstrates an attempt of performing some form of power or dominance over newcomers. This type of narrative figuration is decidedly drawn from male prison stories. Madea responds aggressively: “If you don’t back the hell up off me, I’mma beat you like the dude you look like” (Perry, Goes to Jail). Not only does Madea mark the women’s male behavior and presentation, she also asserts her place at the top of the hierarchy of power within the prison through her threat. She must prove her ability to be strong and tough in a setting where presumably violence dictates the social order, which is another popular stereotype of men’s rather than women’s prison systems. Prison scholar Yvonne Jewkes postulates that there is a kind performance within the prison in order to survive: “All forms of masculinity inevitably involve a certain degree of putting on a ‘manly front,’ and it therefore seems reasonable to consider the outward manifestation of all masculinities as ‘presentation’ or ‘performance’” (Jewkes 52). The masculine way in which Madea performs herself in prison, which is akin to how she performs herself in daily life out of prison, becomes a way to affirm her strength. But the reaffirmation of strength also reinscribes the spectators’ stereotypical thoughts about many women in prison presenting themselves as “butch” or masculine figures. Perry’s portrayal of the female Madea in prison serves to fortify the connection between Black masculinity with criminality and violence. Perry does not attempt to undermine our assumptions about Black men, but instead uses Madea as a way to perform already preconceived notions about them in prison.
In his article, “Homophobia, Hypermasculinity and the U.S. Black Church,” Elijah Ward provides a helpful description of how hypermasculinity operates within African-American culture:

Current dominant U.S. constructions of masculinity include the following characteristics: a degree of mastery over one’s environment, the display of avid interest in sports, competitiveness, independence, being strong/tough, suppressing feelings, and aggressive/dominant control of relationships. (Ward 496)

However, can these same masculine traits truly be applied to Perry’s character of Madea? After all, Madea typically wears a flowing, flowery dress, a gray-haired wig of displaced curls, glasses that would befit an elderly woman, and heels. But the outer costume of Madea, akin to that of a kindly grandmother, does not match her very mannish performance or the large, more youthful man’s body underneath the clothes. Yet Madea performs and ascribes to most if not all of the dominant, U.S. American white ideals about Black masculinity that have been constructed historically and performed for white audiences in the past three to four hundred years.

By identifying the actions of Madea as a modern construction of hypermasculinity, we can further analyze and deconstruct how Perry uses masculine traits. As I will argue, Perry uses hypersexuality as another way to compose Black masculinity, which I will explore in order to further deconstruct how Perry reinforces dominant assumptions about Black masculinity.

**Do All Men Dress the Same?**

While there is an established pattern of how Perry constructs masculine traits through Madea, there also needs to be a consideration of how these tropes of masculinity can be decoded
and unmasked. Where they manipulate the expectations of Black men there is also a way in which the men deconstruct gender and sexuality within their performances of Black masculinity. In order to achieve this, I use Judith Butler’s theories on gender construction in her book *Undoing Gender* in which her study of the societal construction of gender calls into question how to observe what society defines masculinity and femininity: “Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized” (Butler 10). Butler makes an important point about where to begin an analysis of gender roles and how we deconstruct those roles. We must observe the larger context in which the artists construct gender as well as the notions and assumptions upon which gender is performed. This allows for an observation of the range of masculinities that Perry constructs on stage and how Black masculinity can in one way remain the same with Black men being assigned to characteristics that are static and do not shift such as being aggressive and sexual while another subverts and attempts to change our expectations of Black men that do not ascribe to being violent and dominant.

For this site of analysis, I will turn to the stage play *Madea Goes To Jail* and decode a scene between Madea and her nephew Sonny. By this time in the play, Madea has been released from jail and returns to her house where she learns that Sonny has recently divorced his wife because he caught her cheating with another man. Madea decides to give Sonny advice during his time of grieving. She starts to talk to Sonny about how Black men cheat: “If you’re asking a man a bunch of questions and he jump stupid, ‘What the hell you all up in my face for, you ain’t got to be askin me all these questions’ that’s a dead giveaway something is goin on” (Perry, *Goes to Jail*). By this point in the scene Madea is not so much talking to Sonny about his issues of
cheating but instead speaking directly to the audience. By addressing the spectators through the guise of speaking to Sonny, Madea explicates the hypersexual tendencies of Black men because Madea chooses to directly to the audience. However, Madea also begins to slowly reveal to the audience the different ways in which Black men go about their sexual adventures: “You got the kind of man he wanna know where you going . . . it ain’t cuz he love ya that much. Its ‘cause he don’t wanna run into you while he out doin what the hell he got to do” (Perry). Madea implicates Black men as the stereotypical bucks who live for self-centered pleasure and never question the ethics of their actions. The gender lines between Madea (the woman/the character) and Tyler Perry (the man/the actor) become blurred through the course of this direct address speech to the audience. Is Madea speaking from the perspective of a woman or is Perry speaking to spectators as a man simply dressed as a woman? Madea talks about Black men as the essential “Other” whom Madea constructs in opposition to her “femaleness.” However, if Madea is being played by a man, and one of the essential traits of cross gendered performance is to consider how to perform the “Other” (Blair 291), then in this particular moment, it becomes unclear whom Perry defines as the “Other.”

This problem of who is constructing whom, Madea constructing Black men or Perry using Madea as a way to construct Black men from a “female” gaze, becomes complicated in the most unlikely of ways during the performance. Madea continues to build our construction of Black masculinity by highlighting the hedonism that Black men pursue by being cheaters. She continues to explain the idiocy of Black men and their promiscuity until she builds to this ultimate moment: “And if you ever wanna know if a man is cheating ask him to give you one thing. If he give it to you he ain’t cheatin’” (Perry, Goes to Jail). With an enormous escalation of expectation, Madea prepares to reveal a huge trait of masculinity. She has shown us the
variety of signs that men have to indicate that they may have cheated on their partner. This shows the repetition of hegemonic male markers that define what a Black man is and reinforces how Black women view Black men. Yet at this moment in the play, Madea stops. She takes a sigh of breath and says: “I was getting ready to tell ya, but I can’t. I wanted to but who I am is conflictin with this dress I got on” (Perry, Goes to Jail). At this moment where Black men’s sexual actions could have been definitively interpreted, Madea stops to reveal herself as nothing more than Perry in a dress at this moment. Perry cannot bring himself to betray his fellow Black men. Perry does not let his cross gender performance continue and must temporarily step out of character as Madea in order to speak as Perry: “Naw, Tyler spoke up just then ‘Come on bro. Come on. Too far. Too far. You goin too far’ ” (Perry, Goes to Jail). This action of breaking blurred gender lines authenticates to the audience that Madea speaks and acts as a man. Thus Madea’s construction of Black men when we read Madea as a masculine character only reinforces masculine stereotypes. Where Perry could present an alternative Black masculinity, he instead chooses to characterize Black men along hegemonic lines: as criminals and philanderers.

By revealing himself as a man, Perry reaffirms that Madea is not an authentic female character. We come to recognize that Perry is a man that performs and dresses as a woman in order to perform a public version of Black masculinity. Furthermore, this moment of Perry revealing himself to the audience becomes a way in which Perry encourages the audience to feel comfortable that Madea is being performed by a Black man. This allows the audience to become at ease with Perry’s performance and recognize that Perry is performing an overdramatic and oversimplified version of masculinity. While Madea’s intrigue as a character stems from a presentation of Black masculinity in the vein of a drag performance, the cross-gendered
performance only upholds masculine stereotypes of the brute and buck. While cross-gendered performance can be used to critique and question our thoughts on gender roles, when Perry breaks character to speak out in a voice he calls Tyler, he acknowledges that he instantiates dominant portrayal of Blacks exactly where Madea could potentially be used to undermine and subvert hegemonic thoughts about Black men.\(^9\)

Perry’s cross-gendered performance has the potential to subvert our expectations of Black men, but his technique does not bring about an alternative to the characteristics of Black men as aggressive, hypersexual, and violent. Instead, Perry reinforces stereotypes about Black masculinity and leaves the audience with a version of Black masculinity that is safe and non-threatening when he plays within normative assumptions. Perry uses white constructions of the buck, brute, and mammy as a basis for building up our expectations of Black men.

Conclusion: What Is for Us, by Us, and About Us?

Perry authors and performs Black men in terms of hegemonic constructions and the ways in which Black masculinity is connected with criminality as well as hypersexuality. Perry’s performance of the character of Madea as a criminalized Black man indicates a performance of Black men in a way that is melodramatic, artificial, and exaggerated. The character of Madea also uses caricatures of Black men as hypersexual in order to allow her/Perry’s audience to laugh and be at ease with portrayals of Black masculinity.

We should consider from Perry’s portrayal of Black men the larger implications of what kinds of performances audience members endorse. In mainstream American theater, minority playwrights, actors, and directors rarely get a slot in the season of a regional theater company.

\(^9\) See *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* by Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, 246.
Black performance does not receive as much attention as white performances, and thus, when a Black playwright is produced, the production is interpreted as though it speaks for the entire African-American community. While a play by an author such as Tracy Letts or Neil LaBute does not represent all the experience of white people, a play or film by Tyler Perry suddenly, and problematically, sums up all African-Americans. We have to find the courage to rebel against the manner in which Black men are being scripted along the lines of hegemony and dominant portrayals. The performance of Black men should not be reduced to stereotypes; they should acknowledge the various multiplicities that come with being a Black man.

I believe that when I spoke with my father about the Broadway musical version of The Color Purple, he wanted me to recognize that I do not have to accept what someone labels or assumes about me just because it can be attributed to another Black man. Overall, we must be willing to shape and morph our perceptions of Black men to encourage new variations in African-American performance so that we do not have to settle for the ways in which contemporary plays “still portray Black men.”
Chapter Two: *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*

The Multiplicities of Female Stereotypes and Tropes and an Introduction to Intermediality

“As African-Americans we have a history, a future and a daily reality in which a confrontation with a White ruling class is a central feature. This really makes life difficult. This reality often traps us in a singular mode of expression. There are many ways of defining Blackness and there are many ways of presenting Blackness onstage. The Klan does not always have to be outside the door for Black people to have lives worthy of dramatic literature.”

—Suzan Lori-Parks, *Elements of Style*

“I’m not bitter. I’m mad as hell.”

—Helen, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*

In Atlanta, Georgia, a young African-American couple lives the clichéd “American Dream.” They have been married for almost 18 years and are on the verge of celebrating their 19th anniversary when Charles McCarter receives Atlanta’s Attorney of the Year Award. Charles has become a top rated attorney in a major city and has amassed wealth that ascends him into upper class America. He has obtained a large house in Atlanta’s wealthy suburbs, drives a Rolls Royce, and to top it all off, he has his beautiful and faithful wife, Helen McCarter. Charles and Helen attend a ceremony in Charles’s honor for his distinguished award. The crème de la crème of Atlanta are in attendance as Charles and Helen enter the ballroom. On the outside, they are seemingly the perfect upper class, African-American couple. However, the private lives of Helen and Charles will reveal that a darker reality lies within their marriage—things are not as
they appear. These are the opening images of Tyler Perry’s film *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. The movie was the first of Perry’s stage plays adapted for the screen and follows a similar storyline as the play yet also contains crucial differences that I intend to explore.

*Diary of a Mad Black Woman* chronicles the failure of Helen and Charles’s marriage. Appearances of contentment aside, Helen finds herself in an extremely unhappy marriage with Charles. On the night of their wedding anniversary Charles reveals that he has been having an affair with another woman. Charles’s revelation forces Helen to pick up the pieces in her life when he proceeds to remove Helen from his life completely. Helen turns to her grandmother, the famous, gun-toting, no-nonsense Madea played by Perry in drag, to help heal the wounds inflicted by Charles’s betrayal. While finding new meaning in her life, Helen meets Orlando, a working class man who treats her with kindness and respect, unlike Charles. However, Charles interrupts Helen’s blissful relationship with Orlando when he becomes paralyzed. In the end, Helen must make a choice of whether to stay with her current beau Orlando—a gentleman and symbol of Helen’s revived hope in Black men—or forgive Charles and return to him and salvage their marriage.

This chapter will discuss and analyze the array of female characters in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* in order to demonstrate the historical complexities of African-American female tropes and stereotypes in Perry’s work and investigate how these historical caricatures resurface in his contemporary film work. In my inquiry, I will carefully discuss the implications of the Black female stereotypes of the tragic mulatto and the Topsy figure to suggest how these stereotypes are being reshaped and reimagined in Perry’s work in both positive and negative manners and effects. To address this examination of the tragic mulatto and the Topsy figure I will investigate both the stage play and film of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* focusing
particularly on reading and unpacking initial images and representations of the characters in both
genres. I will also discuss the concept of the “Speakerly Text,” an idea formulated by African-
American Studies scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and its functions within the context of both the
film and stage play to demonstrate how the use of the Speakerly Text adds another layer of
complexity to Perry’s work. I will also reintroduce the concept of intermediality and provide a
preliminary view of this idea built upon Gates’ theory of intertextuality.

**Helen Survives the “Tragic Mulatta”**

When I first viewed the filmed stage play of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* with some of
my friends in high school, we all had an enjoyable time and laughed until we cried. We could all
relate intimately to a majority of the situations and the inside jokes that were displayed and
played out for us. We watched characters such as Brenda, “the friend” who is a little too close to
Helen’s husband. There was also Charles’s father, Daddy Charles, who always found out
everything going on in the family. And, there was Helen’s wise mother, who stood by her
daughter’s side to offer guidance and advice. At the end of the stage play there was an intriguing
revelation from some of us: we were highly familiar with these Black characters. The
characters’ actions and motives resembled many of our friends as well as people within our own
families.

As I began to study representation in college, there proved to be much scholarship about
the representation of African-Americans in theater, film, and television. I could not help but take
a critical eye to the diverse embodiments of African-Americans. Moreover, when examining
Perry’s work with an eye for representation and meaning, I began to observe the presence of
historical, African-American stereotypes that are inbred in the both the movie and the play of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*.

Helen, the central character in the film and stage play of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, functions as an initial site of investigation of a historical trope in Perry’s films. After a long life of middle-class comforts, she must leave her lavish home in the Atlanta suburbs with no financial support from her husband Charles. In effect, she has no source of income or job. Previous to her marriage, she has signed a stringent and unreasonable prenuptial agreement that cut her off should their marriage dissolve, leaving her no access to Charles’s money or spousal settlement. In both the stage play and film Charles appraises Helen in a callous and vicious manner. He accuses her of being an ungrateful wife to him: “What makes you think you can question me about anything I do? Woman, this is my house. I pay the bills. You need to know your place” (“Diary” 2002). Charles insists that Helen’s position as a woman correlates with his economic position as a Black man. He uses Helen’s female gender to oppress her position within the household: she is not allowed to work. He also scolds Helen for being lackadaisical because she “sits around Charles’s house,” instead of attending various social events and gatherings that would help him continue to rise in their class position.

Helen lives in what could be figured as a tragedy since she demonstrates in these moments that she faces a major fall and crisis in her own life. She does not have any sense of agency as Charles’s wife, despite the couple’s wealth and status. Her situation could in fact be considered what Lisa Anderson and Judith Williams suggest of another stock Black female figure in circulation, the tragic mulatta: “One of the elements of the tragedy surrounding the mulatta is her lack of access to power and her essentially female position. Her racialized state puts her in a position that, in a racist culture, equals powerlessness . . .” (Anderson 46). Skin
color plays a crucial factor in the tragic mulatta’s circumstance as it does for Helen. In the film version of the play, although Helen is not light-skinned enough to “pass” for white—as is the case with the stock mulatta stereotype—she is not portrayed by a dark skinned actress. Instead, the African-American actor/character’s skin color hovers in the middle of this pigment spectrum, leaning more towards light (white) significations against the background of the film’s many darker-skinned Black actors. Therefore, with these significations of whiteness, Helen has enough resonances to evoke sympathy about her mistreatment because of her somewhat “light skin.”

Helen also evinces attributes that meet other aspects of the tragic mulatta’s definition. In both the film and the play, Helen exemplifies a woman who does not have any access to power except through her husband Charles. As she begs of Charles when their marriage falls apart: “Tell me what I need to do and I will do it” (“Diary” 2005). In another moment of the play, Helen asks Charles if there is something that she needs to change about her attitude or appearance to gain his affections (“Diary” 2005). Helen thus represents a woman who is devoid of any means of power as well as access to her own Blackness. In return, Charles’s hypermasculinity forces Helen to conform to what Charles wants her to be. Through Charles’s reinforcement of patriarchal standards of marriage, Helen cannot become who she wants to become.

The characters of the play and film consistently comment upon Helen’s powerlessness—most especially Medea. They note that Helen handles her situation in a different manner from that of a “Black woman.” For example, in one scene from the play, Charles yells at Helen and tells her to go to her room, and Helen proceeds to do so obediently. Daddy Charles comments on Helen’s frightened and subordinate response: “Girl you run up them stairs like a white woman.
A Black woman would’ve ran to the kitchen for a butcher knife” (“Diary” 2002). Daddy Charles’s thoughts about how a white woman acts in comparison to a Black woman’s response affirm how Helen’s performance of whiteness reverses the expectations of the performativity of Blackness. As in the tradition of the tragic mulatta’s performance, Helen’s situation is not only tragic but her actions of response are weak. Whereas white culture portrays Black women as weak, helpless, or as victims, African-American cultural production equates the performativity of whiteness in any sense as weakness. Thus, in African American cultural production, the portrayal of a Black women’s strength is placed in opposition to the negative portrayals of Black women by white people. Whenever Helen refuses to fight and take some form of vengeance on her own behalf, she exemplifies what other characters consider a performativity of whiteness. The film and play seem to suggest that Helen cannot lift herself out of her “tragic” plight as long as she continues to perform the actions of “white women.” In many ways, this contemporary version of the tragic mulatta shows that not only has she has fallen from her state of grace but that she has been pushed out of Blackness for not behaving like a proper, perhaps more authentic “Black” woman. She is not strong or outspoken, but instead residual, passive, and submissive. A Black audience appears to take pity on Helen because she cannot assert herself—perform—as a Black woman. In this, a Black audience therefore is urged to mark her as a white woman until she performs the qualities of a strong Black woman.

As a result, Helen faces a primary challenge in the film and stage play that drives both of their stories: she must find her own voice, her role as a Black woman, to become an agent of her own change. In order to do this, she must take some sort of action to arrest Charles’ power over her as well as express the rage she has hidden and stored for the sake of middle-class propriety
and wifely seemliness. To accomplish this transformation—and thereby overcome her tragic
state, she decides upon vengeance against her husband.

Yet another tie to proper Black womanhood escapes Helen: her inability to conceive
children. Charles constantly harasses her about her failure to produce children, and makes
consistent references in the play and film that Helen has not reared him a son. This failure
allows him to subordinate her not only as inferior but also as incapable of performing her
primary role a woman. In the beginning of the film version of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*,
Charles accosts Helen, who pretends that their marriage can continue, and uses her failed
sexuality to render her useless to him. Charles blames his lack of sexual attraction to Helen to
imply that her inability to have children has caused his disinterest in her. Helen’s biological
incapacity to have a child furthers the “tragedy” of Helen’s representation as a tragic mulatta.

Childlessness becomes an intense subject for Helen when she finally attains the
opportunity to enact revenge upon Charles. In the film, Charles becomes disabled when a client
shoots him. Charles’s injuries leave him as a quadriplegic and confine him to a wheelchair.
Furthermore, Charles can no longer provide for the lavish lifestyle of his mistress Brenda.
Brenda leaves Charles, and Helen bears the burden of caring for her estranged husband at the
expense of her new relationship with Orlando. The situation of primary caregiver—Charles has
been abandoned by all his connections—presents Helen the opportunity to demonstrate her anger
and enact a reversal that will eventually empower her, moreover, she will use this reversal to
“become” a Black woman and escape her “tragedy.”

Helen arrives to the couple’s former home to serve as Charles’ primary caretaker, and she
begins to abuse him: she doesn’t feed or bathe him regularly. As Helen tells Charles (in the film
version of the play), she will now enact vengeance upon him in the same manner that Charles
treated her. She also connects her childless state to his failure to act responsibly as a husband: “I wanted children, Charles, and had you not been with those whores, we would have them. You got me all stressed out, my hair falling out, my weight up and down, can't keep anything down, TWO MISCARRIAGES. You took life from me, and you never even said ‘I'm sorry’” (“Diary” 2005). This reveal, as well as similar actions that occur in the stage play, signifies Helen taking of power to surmount her hurt and pain. The cruelty and anger she expresses towards and enacts over Charles allows the tragic mulatta to break out of powerlessness that is inhabited by the performativity of whiteness and transforms her into a strong Black woman. Unlike the tragic mulatta of history, Helen does not die as a result of her frustrated state. Instead, she exacts revenge and, in this, gains agency to live. In this reconfiguration of the stereotype, Perry confounds and complicates the representation of the tragic mulatta and creates a revised representation of Black women in direct contrast to the long-standing image found in white representations.

Revising “Topsy”

*Diary of a Mad Black Woman* also adduces the historical Topsy figure, as Judith Williams calls this Black female representation, or the jezebel, as referred to by Lisa Anderson. In the both the film and play the character of Brenda exemplifies the Topsy or jezebel figure. In the play, Brenda works in Charles’s law office and is a powerful figure who also befriends Helen. In the stage play a dark skinned Black woman portrays Brenda, but in the film version, Brenda has a lighter skin tone than Helen and looks closer to being read as a white person. Brenda’s lighter skin tone reads as the figure of lighter skinned woman—who looks closer to a white woman—that threatens to break up a Black family. This plays out due to the intracultural
conflict of colorism, which has been an important and primary issue within the Black community. More specifically, women have had to confront the issue of the dichotomy of light and dark skinned politics (Anderson 67). As a result, the reading of the Topsy figure changes significantly between the two mediums of film and live theater.

Anderson’s study of the jezebel or Topsy figure suggests another complexity to this trope: “The icon of the jezebel contains several different meanings. Sometimes the jezebel represents dangerous sex; falling prey to her charms means trouble to her and her male victim . . . usually, the man’s inability to resist her brings her downfall as well as his” (Anderson 89). In the film and play, Brenda’s actions conform to Anderson’s analysis of the jezebel trope. For example, Brenda uses her sexual appeal to seduce Charles, which ultimately leads to their affair. As well, when Brenda first enters in the play, she wears a short tight skirt that accentuates her curves and plays up her sexuality. Daddy Charles notices the extremely suggestive apparel and articulates how this connects her to sexual promiscuity: “That was a hoe that just walked out that door” (Perry). In the movie’s opening, Brenda and Charles exchange a sexually suggestive look between them that implies there is much more than just mere acquaintance and friendship between them. The camera bolsters this conclusion as it focuses on Charles’s gaze to Brenda as well as Helen’s gaze to hint at an intimate interaction between the two. Brenda attacks Helen in both versions, accusing her of not knowing how to “take care of her man.” In this accusation, Brenda implies that Helen does not take care of Charles in a sexual manner. Brenda also informs Helen that Charles talks with her about the way Helen treats him. In this display and manner, Brenda’s performance reads as the dangerous and disruptive sexuality of the Topsy figure, and thus Perry’s repetition of the Topsy figure’s stereotype suggests that the way to treat a Black man
comes from how a Black woman primarily utilizes her sexuality for the attainment and containment of a relationship.

The sexual interaction between Brenda and Charles in the film and play calls into question the ways in which Black women are expected to perform for Black men specifically through this implementation of the Topsy figure. In the film, for example, Helen scolds Charles for his unfaithfulness to their marriage with Brenda, who she points out does not genuinely care for him, only for his wealth and status. Brenda responds to Helen in anger: “I’m a woman who knows how to get and keep her man” (“Diary” 2005). Her response indicates that she believes Helen has not done “enough” to please Charles with a strong implication that Brenda contains Charles through her fervent sexuality. In the play Brenda makes a similar comment to Helen about the proper way to care for a man: “Helen you don’t know how to treat this man” (“Diary” 2002). Through this invocation of the Topsy figure, I believe that Perry attempts to denote the problematic patriarchal structure within the African-American community. He uses Brenda as a configuration that suggests both women’s submissiveness and, in turn, the competitiveness between them is used to win the favor of Black men, which then damages and ultimately troubles relationships in the Black community. Despite the history of the Topsy figure’s complexities, Perry nevertheless resurrects this figure to evidence how hypersexuality confines and imprisons the representation of Black women. The jezebel or Topsy figure, as rendered through Brenda, uses her position as the hypersexualized Black woman to exert power over both Charles and Helen as well as define a problematic Black womanhood and manhood.

Brenda not only comprises a dangerous threat to Helen and Charles’ marriage but also to the Black community as a whole. Anderson explains the threat that the Topsy figure presents to the Black family: “The sexual black woman is deemed dangerous because she appears capable
of undermining the patriarchal notions of family on which the country was based. Her self-sufficiency makes it seem that her only need for men must be sexual” (Anderson 88). I would suggest in Perry’s representation, you could very well call Brenda the middle-class, “professional,” and modern figuration of Topsy or jezebel. Brenda, in the play at least, does not have a need for a rich and powerful man; she is an independent woman who works as a lawyer at the same firm that Charles does. In her independence, she makes enough money to support herself without a husband. I would offer that rendering Brenda as a self-sufficient professional woman makes the Topsy figure more attractive and devious for her contemporary incarnation. What makes Brenda quite threatening is that she has access to power through her profession as a lawyer. This power makes her a more attractive woman to Black men like Charles who seek women with power to help them climb social and economic ladders. Brenda adventures to hoard a rich man in order to increase her status and power even further, as she states in the play, with no care about destroying a family’s home and marriage in order to achieve her goals. Brenda as a Topsy figure is in full force in Perry’s work, yet the Topsy figure looms in his other works as well.

What makes this Topsy appearance in our modern day context important is what I will figure and name as the “intermedial space” between her portrayals in the two versions of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. More specifically, she maintains ties more closely attached to a white identity rather than a Black one. Thus she is placed in a position between the film and the play that creates space for signification. Signification always involves a sort of revision in its manifestation—whether for the purposes of critique or homage. Perry’s work presents a careful look at how signification functions between works by the same author and director.
We would expect for both the stage play and the film to be very similar to each other. But as with any adaptation, elements and aspects change within the mediums for the benefit of a form’s audience. My interests target the smaller changes made from the presentation for a majority Black live theater audience to a now Black cinematic audience, which also includes a prominent mix of white audience members as well. I argue that the changes made from the adaptation of the stage play to a major film are in effect “talking” to the Black audience that Perry first performed for on the urban Black theatre circuit. So for example, in the discussion of the Topsy figure, one of the important elements of Brenda’s skin tone transforms into how Brenda performs in the stage play as opposed to how she performs in the film. Perry changes Brenda’s racial scoring in the film not only for the dominant audience but also for the African-American community as well. In traditional dominant cultural production, the Topsy or jezebel would be the symbol of breaking down the white American family as well as appeasing expectations of a white viewing audience. While Brenda’s representation as a dark-skinned woman in the play portrays the same symbol, the larger implications of Brenda’s light skin appearance in the film, her “whiteness,” instills the Topsy figure with attachments and connections with the white community as well and represents another reversal of the dominant. This reversal between the play and the film is another important example of intermediality.

Through all these refigured historical images of Blackness, many people may see Perry as simply relying on historical stereotypes for humorous effects in his cultural production. However, when composing analysis with a more critical and informed eye, we see that Perry in fact has incorporated new revisions of the traditional stereotypes found in American popular culture. However, he also incorporates a liberal amount of reversals to these figures that reconfigures how dominant culture would traditionally portray these ingrained representations of
African-Americans. I believe my analysis of other works by Perry that follows will also expose
the reversals and complexities of minority representations Perry produces and how these
figurations counter the adverse effects of the dominant as well as have problematic implications
as to the performance of Blackness.

The Return of The Talking Book

Throughout the stage play and film of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* I have seen the
presence of a narrative trope that I believe has not been seen in a long time in Black Cultural
Production: The Speakerly Text. This trope was first studied by renowned scholar Henry Louis
Gates, Jr. in his seminal work *The Signifyin(g) Monkey*. Dr. Gates articulates the concept of the
Speakerly Text in terms of the work of Zora Neale Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching
God*. In his work, Gates explains the function of the Speakerly Text in Hurston’s novel:

Hurston’s narrative strategy seems to concern itself with the possibilities of
representation of the speaking black voice in writing . . . Hurston’s text . . . reflect[s] a
certain development of self-consciousness in a hybrid character, a character who is
neither the novel’s protagonist nor the text’s disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an
emergent and merging moment consciousness (Gates xxv-xxvi).

The function of the trope known as the Speakerly Text is to have the presence of a Black
narrative voice in the form of text as Hurston does with the main character in her novel *Their
Eyes Were Watching God*. Gates notices that African-American writers are fascinated by the
tonality and musicality of the Black voice speaking. As emphasized in his informative
introduction, the purpose of Gates’s study intends to see how African-American authors
“signify,” which is the process in which African-American authors repeat a particular trope while
also critiquing or revising that trope in order to create meaning. As an example, Gates further suggests in his work that author Alice Walker uses “signifyin’” in her writing of the famous and breakthrough novel, *The Color Purple*:

> In the slave narratives . . . making the white written text speak with a black voice is the initial mode of inscription of the metaphor of the double voiced . . . in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, the double-voiced text assumes the form of the epistolary novel in which revision manifests itself as a literal representation of a protagonist creating herself by finding her voice, but finding this voice in the act of writing (Gates 131).

The original literary device in *The Color Purple* was a series of letters—an epistolary novel—that the main character, Celie, wrote and addressed to “Celie” and to God. As Gates points out, the expression of the writing act allows Celie to find her voice in the form of her written letters. She writes herself into an agent identity.

In the stage play and film of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, we see signification appear in the form of the diary of Helen. At the beginning of both the stage play and the movie, we do not meet the character of Helen as a physical performing body. We are introduced to Helen through the text of her diary entry engendered in the film through the use of voiceover. In the play version, we are also introduced to much of the exposition through Helen’s diary entry which Helen relays as a voiceover before the lights come up on the opening scene:

> Dear Diary, here’s another page in my never ending saga . . . Charles came in the house for the 116\textsuperscript{th} day without saying a word to me. I wish I didn’t love him so much. Then maybe this wouldn’t hurt so bad. But as my Father in heaven knows, I love this man with all my heart. I wish I could figure out how to get inside of his head. Men are so difficult. Maybe I should become a lesbian . . . I’m a hopeless heterosexual who is in love with one
man. But going through this is making me mad and bitter. I don’t know how long I can take this. Signed, A Mad Black Woman. (“Diary” 2002)

The disembodied text above manifests a clear signification to both Hurston and Walker’s narrative strategies, most particularly as it appears in the novel *The Color Purple*. Helen expresses herself through her written narrative in her diary. In her writing, Helen makes a reference to God indicating that the diary functions as a way to talk to God as Celie talks to God in her letters throughout *The Color Purple*. This repetition and revision of the trope of the Speakerly Text allows the audience to immerse itself into Helen’s character and state of mind as well as determine how she signifies with other Black female protagonists from such well known Black cultural expressions such as Hurston and Walker’s books. We hear Helen’s inner thoughts and consciousness as a way into the preface of the play. As we soon find out, Helen, like Celie, does not have her own voice or ability to speak—she does not have agency. In the film, a similar action happens as when Helen makes commentary and expresses her thoughts through her diary: “August 30. Dear Diary, Some random thoughts for you. . . I keep waiting for him [Orlando] to change to be this evil person but it hasn’t happened. I didn’t know a man could be so thoughtful. It’s like second nature” (“Diary” 2005). Helen expresses her thoughts about her beau Orlando through the disembodied voice as well as the disembodied past. These are actions that we do not see acted out as Helen only writes them, which the audience is read, and in this way they are informed about her through her writings. Again, Helen cannot express her thoughts about Orlando except to herself and her diary, and the audience that has a secretive look into her inner thoughts through that diary.

Thus the device of Helen’s diary serves as a unique example, a form of homage to Hurston and Walker’s watershed novels of Black literature. The trope of the Speakerly Text,
vis-à-vis Helen’s diary, allows her voice to speak for her in the present and past where she cannot speak due to her constricting marriage. Just as Celie cannot speak of her circumstances because of her constrained relationship with the abusive Mister, Helen can only express herself in a literary form that can be spoken and performed, not simply read. The Speakerly Text in this sense allows for a piece of writing and thought to become active and engage with the audience on a performative level. While Gates’s writings talk of this trope as it appears in literature, I use Perry’s work to materialize that the Speakerly Text now performs itself in stage and cinematic work. In the film, Helen communicates and connects with the audience through her thoughts in her diary, which she cannot express without becoming disembodied from the plot of the movie or the stage play. Helen must shift out of the conventions of the stage play and film, setting into her own voice that does not speak with her body. We can only have access to Helen’s true thoughts through a “written” voice as she attempts to find her “active” voice. As Helen comes closer to her own freedom of self-expression, the voice of Helen-as-diary begins to disappear and the voice of Helen as an embodied and fully realized personage appears. The Speakerly Text becomes a strategic storytelling device to allow a certain form of access to the mind and intentions of Helen and show the character’s transformative change.

As Gates points out, employing the Speakerly Text allows a character to have a bifurcated presence:

*The Color Purple* is replete with free indirect discourse. The double voiced discourse of *Their Eyes* returns in the text of Celie’s letters. Celie, as I [Gates] have said, is the narrator and author of her letters. The narrator’s voice, accordingly, is the voice of the protagonist . . . because of the curious interplay of the narrative past (in which Celie is a
character) and a narrative present (in which Celie is the author), Celie emerges as both
the subject and object of narration. (Gates 249)

As *The Color Purple* is inundated with what Gates calls “free indirect discourse,” *Diary of a
Mad Black Woman* functions and makes effective use of this narrative technique as well as when
Helen continues to chart her journey from fallen grace as she works as a waitress in a restaurant
in the film: “April 18th. Dear Diary, every day I wake up I take my mother’s advice. Most days
I don’t want to get out of bed but I do. Some people say ‘one day at a time.’ Seems too long for
me. Most days all I can do is moment to moment. The good thing about being this low is that
there’s nowhere to go but up” (“Diary” 2005). As Helen explains her own story and struggles,
the film audience views Helen in the present action of the film, living her new life. In other
words, we never actually see Helen “writing” in her diary. As the audience views a montage of
scenes in Helen’s day to day, they also hear how Helen’s voice exists in the past and yet also
writes about her present. We see a literal interpretation of what Gates postulates as the narrative
past and present as Helen continues to “write” herself throughout the film. Furthermore, this
form of signification is not simply a repetition of a trope from Hurston and Walker. The use of
the Speakerly Text symbolizes that perhaps Perry attempts to engage a younger audience by
taking the functions of Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston’s novels and putting them into use
with significant revisions through the films and plays that he produces.

The use of the trope of the Speakerly Texts in *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* recalls
Black cultural production’s past to help it find a form in the present and in new media for a
younger generation who may not have been exposed to the works of Walker and Hurston.
Hence, the use of the Speakerly Text operates as a tool that lifts Perry’s work from a state of
simplicities—where most critics place his work—into a much more byzantine location where text and performance are actively involved together in the in the creation of meaning in his work.

The trope of the Speakerly Text is unique to Perry’s film and stage play. Yet this function of the Speakerly Text is also carried from the stage play to the movie *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. This could be considered what Gates defines as intertextuality. But I believe that something more is occurring between these two texts that extends beyond an intertextual relationship, which usually only describes literature.

**Conclusion**

The images and representations of women discussed thus far in Perry’s work have shown that there are many similar versions of the habitual tropes and stereotypes of the jezebel or Topsy figure and the tragic mulatta. Their representations in Perry’s work advance and disrupt the binaries of these tropes that have appeared throughout history in dominant culture as well as offer some problematic performance strategies in the portrayal of African-American women. In this, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* serves as an excellent analytical lens to see not only how these historical representations behave in the context of contemporary works for the stage and cinema but also for the larger African-American community as a whole.

The stage play and film also offer a new utilization of the “talking book,” or in the case of a contemporary context, a play and cinematic script. With the use of the Speakerly Text that Gates employs as a tool of analysis, we see how the Speakerly Text serves as homage to authors such as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. Yet Perry also conforms to stereotypical portrayals from the past and also reinvents them between the film and the stage play. Despite its modern day story of Black, middle-class life, the historical figure of the tragic mulatta is well
represented in the play and film of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*. Perry shows similar parallels with the Topsy image through the character of Brenda. Using both of these stereotypes as a base, Perry’s work shows that there are repetitions and revisions between the manners in which these characters are portrayed for *two separate* audiences. The revisions are made between the two because of the demographic that Perry’s work aims to reach: a decidedly Black spectatorship.

Observing the ways in which historical representations and the Speakerly Text are performed between Tyler Perry’s stage play and film of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* serves as an initial introduction to the concept of intermediality and the intermedial properties of Perry’s work. Theater’s performative nature allows for a specific tropological analysis that focuses on the presence and absence of performance and the repetition and revisions of that performance. In the case of *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* as play and film, intermediality allows for performative analysis to take a more critical eye to the ways and means that performance shifts between mediums and audiences as well. These initial sites of intermediality and fluctuations between stage and film serve as a basis for establishing an alternate tool in performance theory that illuminates some of the negotiations and sacrifices that are made when adapting a performance to different mediums and venues.
Chapter Three: Signifying as Cultural Understanding — Intermediaity and the (Re)Presentation of African-American Culture

“We do not invest in cultures randomly; cultural exchanges, desires, appropriations, and affinities always speak to already existing relationships, conscious and otherwise—those we want to reinforce, transform, deny, embrace. The cultural traffic in blackness is part and parcel of a legacy of race, even as myriad, dynamic, and hopeful new paths are being forged. No matter how lightly we hope to travel, we’ve always got baggage of some sort or another, from trips past.”

-Tricia Rose, *Black Cultural Traffic*

“He [Tyler Perry] always seems to touch the lives of so many who are going through similar situations, and will leave you with solutions either funny or realistic. Even if you are not going through that particular situation, you always seem to feel the characters joy and pain. Tyler’s work is like church in an entertainment form and I love it.”

-Jacquelyn Payne, Blogger on Tyler Perry

One of my consistent goals as a researcher has been my passion to understand what I analyze in connection to the practical and performative nature of theater. I am not intrigued by the dead texts of history. Instead I am invigorated by how the layers of history, culture, and contemporary performance weave together like a quilt. More specifically, contemporary performance, especially African-American performance, has frequently commented on and used instances of the past to inform the present.
In the summer of 2010 I attended a research program where I further developed my work on Tyler Perry. I was invited to present at my first academic conference to mark the end of the program. Since I was researching theater and Tyler Perry I wanted to show my audience that I could synthesize my scholarly thoughts as well as embody the subject that I was critiquing through small performances. I decided that I would impersonate Madea during my conference presentation and some of my fellow participants suggested that I go so far as to don a wig, dress, and heels like Madea. However, as my presentation proved, the wig and dress were not needed for the audience to recognize Madea. The conference audience (who were majority Black) could readily recognize the performative gestures of Madea, which to me proved the widespread impact of her figure in African-American culture. The conference audience laughed in response to most of the performance but was also engaged in an academic conversation about the consequences of Madea’s performance concerning Black masculinity.

Yet, in the same way that I embodied Madea as a product of African-American cultural consciousness for the purposes of an academic conversation, a similar event occurred when I viewed a live performance of Tyler Perry’s latest play, *Madea’s Big Happy Family* (2010). The play came to Tallahassee, Florida for a one night performance with several star performers who have garnered fame through Perry’s plays and films. What I observed in this performance in several moments was the way in which African-American culture and history carried a strong presence within Perry’s latest play. In one moment Perry, enacting the role of Madea, began to ridicule one of the characters on stage. Madea makes fun of a younger character named Joyce because she has an Afro hairstyle. Madea further insults Joyce by comparing her to an image of Michael Jackson from his famous *Off The Wall* album cover. The audience bursts with laughter

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10 Stars of the play included Cassi Davis, Cheryl Pepsi Riley, and Chandra Currelley who have all either performed in a stage play or film by Tyler Perry. Cassi Davis is a regular star on Tyler Perry’s television show *The House of Payne*. 
at this reference. But what I began to realize as the show continued was that somehow the audience was able to connect and engage with Perry’s work in these instances because these references were a way of remembering African-American historical markers that were now embodied in this moment on the stage.

This chapter will explore and investigate the way in which Perry’s work embodies the cultural history of African-Americans. In Perry’s work, there are a variety of examples of how this shorthand functions within his stage work. The character of Madea points to important cultural signifiers that she capitalizes upon. The complexity in Perry’s work thus becomes a question of how Perry uses signification not only between his own works, but also between other images, genres, and representations in Black culture and their shared cultural memory for Black audiences. The performance of collective cultural memory and history will be prominent in this chapter as I analyze and critique my viewing of the play *Madea’s Big Happy Family* and its representation of several Black cultural products. This particular play explores the necessity of African-American cultural memory, context, and history as well as raises issues and questions about African-Americans in a society where white media dominates the imagery that exists about Black life.

*Madea’s Big Happy Family* also adduces challenges to the concept of intermediality that I am attempting to articulate in this thesis and how the concept of intermediality serves as an intricate level of analysis useful for unpacking Perry’s stage plays and films. In this chapter, I will continue my discussion of intermediality and how African-American history plays an important role in shaping the strategy of repetition and revision seen in Perry’s stage work. As discussed in this work’s introduction, my theory of intermediality examines how different cultural texts “talk” to each other through repetition and revision and specifically how the
performativity of a text “talks” to other works by African-Americans. As I suggest, Perry’s work uses *performance* to signify upon the works of other African-American cultural producers. I will relate these cultural repetitions to ways in which African-American culture uses modalities of Black church performance to retain important aspects of Black culture that Perry’s work promotes.

The way in which the African-American community recognizes and responds to the representational methodology of cultural references impacts the way in which we remember and (re)present our own history on the live stage. Using intermediality as a new way of examining performances allows a reader of culture to recognize both the richness of signifiers and also the problematic structures of the Black performative body.

**African-American Culture: Meanings and Signatures**

African-Americans have an extended history of a unique aesthetic. There are ways in which the aesthetic values that Blacks relate to are markedly different from the dominant culture: However deformed, incorporated, and unauthentic are the forms in which black people and black communities and traditions appear and are represented in popular culture, we continue to see, in the figures and the repertoires on which popular culture draws, the experiences that stand behind them. In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a
discourse that is different — other forms of life, other traditions of representation. (Hall 27)

As the article, “What is the ‘Black’ In Black Popular Culture,” by Cultural Studies scholar Stuart Hall argues that the use of music, counternarrative, and attention to the popular and local issues of the Black community mark the ways in which Black culture is inherently different in how we produce cultural products to our community. The Black community’s response to cultural products seems to stem from experience and memory that the community shares within a specific cultural dialogue.

The concept of memory and experience appears to be the metaphorical “glue” that holds us all together. Hall, in his quest to unpack the meaning of Black popular cultural, proposes that perhaps the experiences that the Black community shares must be constantly rewoven and reshaped:

Always these forms are impure, to some degree hybridized from a vernacular base. Thus, they must always be heard, not simply as the recovery of a lost dialogue bearing clues for the production of new music (because there is never any going back to the old in a simple way), but as what they are — adaptations, molded to the mixed, contradictory, hybrid spaces of popular culture. They are not the recovery of something pure that we can, at last, live by. In what Kobena Mercer calls the necessity for a diaspora aesthetic, we are obliged to acknowledge they are what the modern is. (Hall 28)

As Hall offers, the hybridity of African-American culture plays a significant role in understanding the Black community’s connection to different works of Black cultural products, including Perry’s work. Impure cultural products suggest that African-Americans are always adopting and changing the meaning of Black culture even as they work upon particular
“vernacular bases.” Hall suggests that this activity of building upon our own cultural past, through transforming, changing, tweaking, and adjusting allows Black culture to be in constant flux as well as in constant conversation and dialogue with both the past as well as the present. I would argue that in this way cultural memory and experience are shared and repeated as a form of communication across time and between communities.

African-American culture functioning in a non-static way has its roots in the history of Blacks in America and the aesthetic within the African Diaspora. Although there are various cultural modalities in which I could focus on, I would like to pay close attention to the influences of elements of the Black church upon the cultural signification within Black performance specifically because of Perry’s (re)presentation of Black church traditions within his performances.

The Black church holds a marked place within the history of African-Americans as a way of instilling and retaining both spiritual and cultural elements in peoples who were once native to Africa. The Black church has an important and distinct history for African-Americans and many of the aesthetics that are present in the Black church stem from African roots:

The cultural traditions and ideals of West Africa are the ultimate source from which the basic concept of a black aesthetic definition is derived. There are many aspects of black American culture, such as folktales, speech patterns, religious beliefs and musical practices, which reveal connecting links to African roots in subtle and sometimes obvious ways. (Williams-Jones 375)

Since the Chitlin Circuit theater signifies primarily from Black church settings, there are many elements from Africa that are inherent within this theater’s dramaturgy. The use of gospel and performative elements from the Black church allows for African-Americans to retain something
unique to themselves in a way that distinguishes them from mainstream culture. Yet the techniques of the Black church that appear in gospel musicals and Chitlin Circuit shows also bring more than just simple church traditions to their make-up. These performative methodologies are transposed to the stage in order to disrupt the traditional binary of the actor/audience relationship that is deeply rooted in Western stage practices. Scholars of African theater such as J.A. Adedeji have described the characteristics of an African theater audience: “African theater audiences do not want to be passive. Oral tradition provides them with the direct means of vicarious participation in the production. They react to lines, often join in the songs, repeat dialogues. . .and sometimes move in rhythm to the action on stage” (141). The African theater audience actively participates and integrates their participation into the performance event. An African-American audience, no matter the venue, also aspires to be an active participant in the making of theater performances and contribute to the specific occurrence of the event. In order to forge their own distinction, African-American theater audiences are more likely to respond to performative modes that allow them to become a part of the theater performance instead of passively viewing and observing stage events.

In Perry’s work these ideas that spring forth from African traditions and the church are integral to his performances’ successes, and they serve as the means in which Perry utilizes and heightens the traditions and performative markers of the Black Church for his audience. They are also made distinctive by analyzing Perry’s work using tools such as intermediality. As a concept, intermediality works beyond the lexicon of the Speakerly Text that Henry Louis Gates and African-American theater scholar Harry Elam have proposed and articulated. As I suggest, intermediality seeks to analyze the intentions of performance and implications of those intentions upon African-American theater and performance. The interests that are explored here within
Perry’s work involve the liveliness of the work that his theater produces. In Perry’s dramaturgy for theater, the theater becomes a place for the resurrection of Black culture and values within the Black community.

In a work by C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya entitled “The Performed Word: Music and the Black Church,” these scholars offer that within the Black church and through church sermons and spirituals, African-Americans have had a tradition and history of adaptation and revision: “Oral transmission meant that spirituals were constantly recomposed and rearranged, so that a single spiritual might eventually have numerous musical and textual variations” (Lincoln and Mamiya 42). The speech and oral tradition that exists within the Black church also resides in the traditions of Chitlin Circuit Theater. Chitlin Circuit theatrical events become a church-like entity that many scholars of African-American theater have explored, and I argue transform into a seminal site for repetition and revision. The Chitlin Circuit incorporates hybridized elements within its form and content. It also utilizes these congregation motifs of the Black church for its own audience as well as historical and cultural signifiers familiar to the Black cultural consciousness. This hybridity in Chitlin Circuit allows us to access numerous examples of repetition and revision within live theater performances.

Perry’s theater and film work exposes a space in which performance becomes a tool to interpret and define the use of intermediality in scholarship. Looking beyond textual discussions allows a reader and observer to interpret and critique the way that performance and the representation of Black culture through embodiment impacts the ways in which Black culture transitions and transforms. A closer observer must question the reasoning and consequences behind the repetition and revision in live performance and how this influences and impacts an

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11 See works by Pearl Williams-Jones, Anthony D. Hill, and Warren Burdine.
audience. In my viewings of *Madea’s Big Happy Family* as well as through popular ethnography, intermediality will be explored and expanded with this intention at hand.

**Cultural Musicality, References, and Intermediality**

The latest play by Perry, *Madea’s Big Happy Family*, came as quite a surprise to me as I researched his work. After directing, acting and writing the feature film *Why Did I Get Married Too* (2009) as well as serving as executive producer on the Academy Award winning film *Precious* (2009), I did not consider that Perry would return to the stage to don the wig and heels in order to once again play Madea. However, Perry decided to write a show in honor of his mother who died of cancer in late 2009. Thus Perry returned to the stage and toured the United States in honor of his mother and to reach back to his fans—who had given him so much success in his cinematic career. The tour of the play began in January with the opening performance in Denver, Colorado.

The first performance that I viewed of *Madea’s Big Happy Family* was in Albany, Georgia on February 23rd, 2010. I was accompanied by two of my friends who were fans of Tyler Perry and his work as well. When we arrived at the theater, one of the first things that I noticed was the sheer amount of people at the stadium, most especially the number of African-Americans that were in attendance. The theater was packed with people from what appeared to be a very small city, and yet they filled the entire half of the stadium that was reserved for audience seating. My friends and I were literally sitting with our backs against the wall of the stadium as people were filling up the seats in front of us. The stage was large and expansive with two giant television screens placed on both sides of the playing space. This was done so

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12 Perry communicates with his fan base through a mail messaging system where Perry will send out personal messages. He announced the tour of his new play in a message on November 30th, 2009.
that the people who were seated outside of good sightlines to the stage could see the stage action, an innovative technique that testifies to the large amount of people that will pay to see Perry’s shows. I went to this particular show to enjoy myself as well as make observations as a scholar about the show’s content and form along with surveying the audience’s participation and reaction. But I thought that it would also be beneficial to see another production of the play in a different city in order to compare the two productions and make further observations.

My next visit into the world of Madea and Tyler Perry was in Tallahassee, Florida on September 27th, 2010 at the city’s Donald Tucker Civic Center. At this production I paid close attention to the demographics of the audience as well as searching for references to Black popular culture that would attribute to my ideas about intermediality. One of the first things I noticed that night, as I had noticed in the performance in Albany, was the large amount of African-American bodies that were in attendance at a theater event. I have heard too many times that African-Americans do not go to the theater; that we were simply not interested in stage performances. But on this night, when Tyler Perry came to town, massive crowds were drawn to the civic center with people decked out in full dress and suits. The streets around the civic center were lined with cars attempting to find a parking space, people crowded into the civic center with tickets in hand—all for a Black theatrical event. I could sense that there was an excitement and joyfulness about going to Perry’s show. I would postulate that many people were just excited to see a production that related to the problems of our community. Moreover, people had paid up to $75 for tickets to this show, and everyone seemed ready to laugh and have a great time. People took pictures with a giant cut out of a Madea display in the lobby and bought slick, large programs that featured Tyler Perry and his cast members in a colorful arrangement. In the
lobby of the civic center, DVD’s of Perry’s plays were also for sale as well as soundtracks of the many plays and films that he has produced.

As I made my way to my seat, I observed that the civic center was packed more than I had ever seen it before. For this performance, I had seats on the floor of the civic center midway back from the stage apron, where again, I saw the two giant television screens set up to project the moments on stage to audience members who were not seated close to the stage. The lights then dimmed and the play began, promptly, at the 7:30 start time, which I would soon learn was an important factor to the event as a whole. The play opened with a song by the entire cast and then the massive set transformed into the interior of the protagonist’s home. Once the expository action was established in this house, Madea makes her first entrance to the story, and the crowd literally cheered at the top of their lungs with her entrance. But when Perry came on stage in full drag as Medea, he immediately began to break stage conventions.

Since the advent of Realism in the late 19th century, western theatre tradition has consistently promoted a binary between the actor and the audience. Perry proceeded to break this convention continually throughout the performance. Immediately after his entrance, Perry as Madea began to chastise and make fun of several audience members for arriving late to the play: he could see them still trying to find their seats, which were located stage center and up close to the stage apron. A full 15 minutes of time had elapsed from the show’s start, and Perry even went so far as to ask one of the audience members why she was late arriving to her seat for the 7:30 performance. The audience member responded that her mother had to use the restroom and that she was returning from this trip. Perry, as the wise cracking Madea, announced this to the entire audience, rebuking the audience member for her disruptive arrival, and he continued to
refer to the late arrival throughout the show: Madea continued to make jokes with the audience about this type of disrespectful audience participation.\textsuperscript{13}

When Perry steps out of character in this fashion, putting Madea aside even as he is still dressed as the character, his work suggests that the acting “style” of his work does not hold steadfast to the tradition of realism in theatre. He interacts with the audience as a means to introduce this welcome set of theatrical conventions and rules, which rely on interaction, to the audience. While the first 15 minutes of the performance were very much about a story that the audience watches in a passive mode, when Madea enters the stage the theatrical rules change and the audience suddenly becomes a part of the play. By allowing Madea to engage the audience and include their presence into the world of the play, Madea makes the theater and the audience become entities that must encounter and acknowledge each other. This is not an instance that simply happened in Tallahassee, but also occurred when I first saw the play in Albany and other cities as well. In a web blog by Jacquelyn Payne where she recounts her thoughts about her viewing of the play in Atlanta, she recalls a similar interactive engagement with Perry/Madea: “Shortly after the play begins Madea enters and the crowd goes wild and of course members of the audience stroll in late giving Madea a chance to ‘go off’ the script - hilarious! Madea is always going to be the one who says just what we all are thinking but may not say” (Payne).

This kind of interaction with the audience allows Madea to develop as a voice that expresses the audience’s thoughts and feelings and it becomes a way for the audience to engage and participate in the play more directly. I believe the strategy makes the audience active by inviting their

\textsuperscript{13} I believe this situation was exacerbated by the fact that the audience member was seated, literally, right by the stage and therefore presented Perry/Madea with a ripe opportunity to draw attention to her theater-going behavior.
participation. Perry’s form of performance such as pointing out an audience member and poking fun at them enlivens the audience to feel as if they are an integral part of the play. It is also important that this happens near the beginning of the play because it helps to establish for his audience that they will not stay passive throughout the show—as they might be during a play relying on American Realism. This also creates a sort of “inside joke” between the audience and the action that happens on stage. With this early precedent, the audience does not feel as if they are intruding upon the action of the play if they react actively to the play.

In the play’s performance, there were also several moments where Madea pulled from the canon of African-American popular culture to include and engage the audience in a cultural exchange. After Madea chats with her relative Aunt Bam, Madea makes a comment about one of her female relatives and her hairstyle. The relative, named Joyce, does not dress to the feminine standards Madea and Aunt Bam deem appropriate for a single Black woman. Joyce wears a plain and dotted white dress and has an Afro hairstyle that appears similar in style and cut to how a man would wear an Afro. This kind of dressing presents a problem with normative gender expectations regarding Joyce and her love life. In the play, Joyce is a very religious woman who loves God and realizes her duty to take care of her aging mother. However, although dutiful, Joyce also does not have a man which Madea, Aunt Bam, and Joyce’s mother are very concerned about. When I first noticed Joyce’s hair, the style reminded me of something from popular musicians of the 70s and 80s such as Al Green or Marvin Gaye. However, Madea compares Joyce’s hairstyle to that of a young Michael Jackson. The specific image that Madea connects Joyce’s hair to is the cover of one of Michael Jackson’s first albums entitled *Off The Wall*. In the photo, Jackson wears a puffy, Afro-like hairstyle. Madea then continues to make

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As this repeated chastisement of late audience members also evidences, it gives Perry an opportunity to ask and thus teach a certain behavior of his majority Black audiences: arrive on time for a cultural event because it shows respect.
fun of Joyce, her hairstyle, and her inability to attract a male admirer by talking with Aunt Bam as well as with the audience about Michael Jackson’s famous dance seen in his video “Thriller.” As she widens out her critique, Madea and Aunt Bam begin to sing parts of “Thriller,” possibly the most famous song by Michael Jackson, as well as start to perform the very well-known choreography of the “Thriller” dance. All the while, the audience—also deeply familiar with the dance and its legacy—roars with laughter at Madea’s performance, all directed at the expense of pointing out Joyce’s unflattering hairstyle.

This reaction between the audience and Madea in response to her performance that invokes Michael Jackson sparks an intriguing examination of Black cultural images. Michael Jackson was at one time the most popular artist in the United States and represented a significant cultural exchange between African-American music and the predominately white popular music of the 1980s as exemplified by MTV (Music Television). The mention of Michael Jackson not only evokes the memories of a variety of Black popular music, but also reminds audiences that he is renown and lauded as the first Black musician to be featured on MTV. This was an extremely important racial milestone for African-American culture as in the early 1980s music videos had begun to become the dominant media for circulating music as exemplified by the song, “Video Killed The Radio Star,” which describes a shift from marketing music on the radio to television. Michael Jackson’s EP *Thriller* was also one of the highest grossing albums of all time (Mittell 14). As Michael Jackson gained popularity in the 1980s and with his recent death in 2009, he remains an undeniable touchstone, indeed, an icon of African-American culture.

So why has Madea performed pieces of Michael Jackson’s most famous song to describe her relative Joyce? I postulate that the answer within the work has to deal with repetition and revision as a form of cultural performance, referencing, and community affirmation. When
Madea uses Michael Jackson as a reference point for making fun of Joyce as well as bringing Michael Jackson into the world of the play, the character encounters her audience on a presumed level of cultural understanding. Perry has extensive knowledge about his African-American audience and their tastes. The conjuring of Michael Jackson brings Madea’s performance to a realm of significations that her audience can relate to, interact with, and laugh together about. She repeats his well-known performance—with a difference through embodiment—in order to invoke the power of his memory. This embodiment of performance becomes an important facet to repetition and revision and intermediality. In this instance intertextuality falls short as a methodology by which to analyze this moment in Perry’s production. Intertextuality incorporates a conversation between two textual elements. However, because Madea performs the famous dance from the music video *Thriller*, Perry does not have a “text” that he is repeating and revising. Instead, Perry envelopes the performances of the “Thriller” dance as his methodology of repetition and revision. Perry lifts the “Thriller” dance from its original medium of television/video and injects this performance into his stage play. This invocation allows the play to include the audience through Black cultural referents and allows the audience to have a collective cultural moment that works to create a communal experience.

Watching the multiple and complex interactions of this moment in *Madea’s Big Happy Family* allowed me to examine my original thoughts about Gates’ ideas of intertextuality. Gates offers that instances of intertextuality are meant to pay homage to a text or revise the text for a new meaning within the work it is re-presented within (Gates 24). Perry’s theatrical work suggests that there is a connection and link between the audience’s response to Black popular cultural signifiers and their performance in liveness. When Madea and Aunt Bam perform the famous “Thriller” dance, the crowd roars with laughter because of the recognizable
significations, and I would argue that this occurs because the repetition of this performance within the performance onstage makes Perry’s work immediately identifiable and relatable to his African-American audience. Perry’s work becomes defined by how Black culture is performed with the signal difference that the performance lies outside of the original medium, which in Michael Jackson’s case is music and music video. By evoking Michael Jackson within the context of the stage play, Perry’s work repeats the performance of Jackson’s “Thriller” dance and the reference to the landmark Off The Wall album with the expectation that there is a communal understanding between the African-Americans in the audience of something that is readily recognizable. Black audiences share in the communal response because Michael Jackson represents an important cultural marker for Black culture. It was not only Michael Jackson’s music, but also his personality, style, and his body that made him a seminal figure. The humor in this moment comes from the transposition of this popular Black male figure upon a Black “female” figure—Perry as Madea. The signal difference in this case, however, is that the medium, form, and context in which the Jackson reference is presented marks the revision aspects of Gates’ signifyin(g) theory. What makes this an element that does not involve an intertextual analysis is that the signification is not only a difference in form and content, but also in the active performance of the repetition. In this way, for Black theater, intermediality becomes a tool that performs Black cultural facets as a sort of living and active cultural history for African-Americans.

Perry’s work functions specifically for his African-American audience through this repetition of Black popular culture. His audiences, which are typically majority African-Americans, recognize these repetitions that pertain specifically to Black bodies on stage and their modes of mannerisms, attitudes, and racial/cultural codes. As I observed, this made an important
difference for the audience present. We are taught as theater goers and practitioners, that theater should reflect “human life,” but Perry’s work takes on this meaning in a different way: by making this reflection specifically speak to African-Americans’ lives. Perry’s work reflects Black bodies in space as well as African-American ritual and cultural traditions. I observed this in another important facet of Perry’s play: the musical selections that were incorporated into the play.

In the final moments of Madea’s Big Happy Family, Madea begins to speak about the generation gap between older African-Americans and the younger generation. Madea describes many aspects of the gap, which include: disrespecting the elderly, the loss of chivalry among young men, and the condition of Black love among married couples. As Madea lets loose in a rant—that eventually turns into an extended monologue set in the middle of the second half of the show—about love to her family, she begins to recall the values extolled in “old school music.” She mentions iconic figures in Black popular music such as Earth, Wind, and Fire, Luther Vandross, and Teddy Pendergrass who she claims were artists that knew how to make “good music.” What Madea means by this is that the type of music that the older generation listened to and produced had more meaning to it. She laments that the music of the older generation had strong reasons for the kind of music it produced: love songs meant that you really loved someone. The songs also had a specific style and form that conveyed actual communication to wide variety of people who were experiencing very real problems. Here she refers to their lyrical (singable) nature as opposed to the staccato rhythms of Hip-hop. Madea then goes on to compare the music of the older generation to the music of my own generation. She laments that the music of my generation does not have any depth, mentioning that there is
not any meaning behind the words of many of the songs. To her, love songs of today are all about having sex.

At this point, the play consciously begins to take on a tone of “preaching” about Black music and the values it forwards: Medea in effect stops the play to deliver a sermon. However, the play also seems to turn into a concert of sorts. Madea begins to encourage the characters on the stage to come down center to the stage’s apron and sing older songs about loss and love, and in this way, Madea assumes the role of a preacher who instructs her “choir” to sing after her sermon. The characters oblige her, seeming to break character as this concert begins and each steps forward to sing their own rendition of wildly popular Black love songs such as “If Loving You Is Wrong” by Luther Ingram, “I’m Goin Down” by Rose Royce, and “Cause I Love You” by Lenny Williams. Most definitely these songs are not by popular contemporary artists of our time. But they are widely admired and well known, celebrated songs of Black popular culture. Because of the songs’ enduring popularity, their invocation and full renditions delivered opened an invitation with each song for choral singing. The song choices, the characters taking center stage to deliver the songs, and the narrative of the play coming to a full stop in effect invited the audience into the world of the play to help form its extended community. For example, one of the characters began to sing one of the most popular romantic songs of the Black popular music canon: “Turn Off The Lights” by Teddy Pendergrass. While the character on stage sang his rendition of the song, Madea would instruct the audience to sing the main choral part, which is well known in Black culture: “Turn Off The Lights. Light a candle” (Pendergrass). When the singer paused consciously, specifically so that the audience could join in, the crowd as a collective of several thousand gathered in the civic center immediately jumped in and sang the lyric. All the characters had a “spotlight” moment of this type and each introduced a popular
song, creating between the play and the audience an impromptu concert. As this happened, the audience only needed a few words of these popular romantic songs before they joined in by singing along, and throughout each song, the performer would take the occasion to stop singing and allow the audience to join in to form a collective moment.

What I observed in this setting and during this segment of the play, which occurred toward the end of the play’s second and final act, was a way in which repetition and revision worked in a unique way. Earlier, I mentioned how repetition and revision of popular references within performance functioned as a way to repeat and revise a performance from one medium to the medium of live theater. Perry’s work taps into an integral part of the Black Church: music. The idea of collective singing and memory speaks volumes in his work. Perry knows how his audience functions within society. Many of his audience members are church-going people and are familiarized with Black gospel music as well as popular music. This methodology of singing allows Perry to engage the audience in a collective repetition and revision. Tyler Perry interacts, through the use of song, with the multiple demographics within the audience: the young generation as well as the older generation. The songs are used specifically to recall popular artists who expressed the idea of love and affection in Black music. Although the older generation will easily recognize the songs that were popular in their time, the songs are not completely lost amongst the younger generation. I found myself recognizing the music that the cast began to sing. There were many members of the audience who were around my age due to the proximity of the nearby colleges in the area that also identified with the music as well and joined in the singing.

Perry’s work could not have introduced music to the audience that was unrecognizable because his audience would not identify with such music. However, the music that Perry
chooses has a specific history and meaning attached to it for African-American culture. The lyrics, issues, and rhythms all signify meaning to an African-American audience. The play’s performance not only transposes the songs, but also the historical and cultural collective imagining that the songs bring as well. In this instance, the use of crossing mediums between the music of Larry Williams, Teddy Pendegrass, and others translates into a performative structure through Perry’s actors and stage plays. This is an example of intermediality’s use as a way of repetition and revision through performance that not only pays homage to the music of the past, but also invites the audience to divulge a collective, cultural memory through this repetition and revision of communal song. There are many African-American plays in which the characters burst into their own rendition of popular Black songs. Thus the gospel musical suddenly becomes apparent in Perry’s work, even though his work features secular music.

In her article entitled, “Afro-American Gospel Music: A Crystalization of the Black Aesthetic,” Pearl Williams-Jones explores the use of gospel music within the Black Church to demonstrate the idea of a collective historical connection made by the form:

The consistent and persistent retention in gospel music performance and practice of a clearly defined black identity growing out of the black experience in America is indicative of the indomitability of the African ethos. The process of acculturation and syncretism has done much to alter the social fabric of black life in America. In spite of this fact, cultural ties of the ancestral lineage have been preserved in various forms within the enclave of the black gospel church and its music—black gospel. Black gospel music is one of the new seminal genres of contemporary black culture which continually maintains its self-identity while it nourishes and enriches the mainstream of the world's cultural sources. (373)
The songs and collective singing in *Madea’s Big Happy Family* depend upon this cultural figuration. The music that Perry incorporates within this production—at first Gospel and then secular songs whose Gospel affinities can be felt in their delivery, style, and rhythms—creates an opportunity for collective singing by the audience, and I would suggest transforms the play into a collective remembering of Black cultural aesthetics and identity. These well-known songs were sung originally by African-Americans, they are being performed by African-Americans, and they are being repeated back to the Black performers by a majority Black audience. As Pearl Williams-Jones argues, cultural and collective singing lends toward collective memory and experience through the call and response methods, such as those used in *Madea’s Big Happy Family* and its performers on stage. The repetition by the audience keeps the song in the realm of Black culture as well as forms a hallmark feature of African-American group affirmation:

> Congregational singing is a well-known device for the temporary reduction of social alienation and for the accomplishment of an ad interim sense of community. In the Black Church, singing together is not so much an effort to find, or to establish, a transitory community as it is the reaffirmation of a common bond that, while inviolate, has suffered the pain of separation since the last occasion of physical togetherness. (Lincoln and Mamiya 40)

Based on my observations, I would also argue the common bond being formed by the singing of these Black songs within the audience solidifies the popularity of Perry’s work within theater. Perry’s work uses distinctive cultural practices of African-Americans in order to diverge from the traditional western form of Realism.

I postulate that by using the concept of collective singing by repeating and revising in a different performance medium and modality that is significant to Black culture, the concept of
intermediality becomes operationalized. Intermediality is meant to provide for Black performance an engaging and innovative way to analyze the significance of Black cultural references and of Black cultural history. Intermediality allows the viewer to recognize the cultural fluctuations and changes through revision as well as the retention and collection of history through the act of repetition. This is something that cannot be discovered within a text or within reading, but must be realized through performance: there are cultural markers that make Perry’s work unique to his audience and gather the audience together as a collective whole. Intermediality functions as a way for performance scholars to observe and question the importance of considering the transmission and flow of Black culture to and in the body of work being displayed or performed. Black culture has many facets for African-Americans to hold on to as opposed to white dominant culture, which is so prevalent everywhere that the cultural markers become hard to recognize. In this, I argue that intermediality serves as a function of African-American theater and performance and as an analytical tool.

I was privileged to have observed Perry’s work with a live audience and to see him perform Madea in live theatre. This allows my study to have an ethnographic and more engaged approach because I was able to interact as a participant-observer and watch the play in motion with other audience members. The crowd that Perry brings out through his theatrical work is nothing short of astounding: African-American in its majority and enthusiastic in its participation, it is a rarity for any type of American theatre. I wish that all Black theater could do what his does. What I found fascinating about his work was the fact that I was able to sit back and analyze the performance, but also have fun and enjoy myself at the same time. His work demonstrates that repetition and revision have important roles in theatrical performance for Black spectators and that in fact these devices are vital to the survival of the entire spectrum of
Black culture. Cultural signifiers are essential to the work done in the representation made by African-American artists.

As I left my seat the night of the performance I couldn’t help but have many questions flow through my head as a scholar. But as a patron of the theater, I was delighted that the theater attracted people from many different backgrounds and of many different races as well. Perry even came out on the stage at the end of the show to thank his audience for coming and supporting his work, signaling the importance of performing to a majority people of color audience. As the many successes he has enjoyed prove: the crowds love Tyler Perry, and they love his work. It is a love for a man that is passionate about Black culture being performed on the live stage.
Conclusion

The overall aim of this thesis has been to further investigate and add significant research about Tyler Perry’s works as well as African-American theater and performance studies. I have sought to challenge the ways in which we view contemporary African-American performance through the lens of Perry’s work in stage and film. I achieved this by researching the performance methodologies that whites used in the early formations of American theater in order to subjugate Blacks. This included looking at stereotypes of African-American men and women that were projected into the white American imagination such as the mammy, tragic mulatto, the jezebel, rapist, and buck figures. The purpose of this was to challenge our notions of how these figures still operate in contemporary performances and how they have not only been left unchanged but have also been changed in multifarious ways.

Theater scholars and practitioners have studied and marked important figures in the American theater. Arthur Miller, Eugene O’Neil, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee are just a few theatre artists who have been tirelessly analyzed and considered because of the important work that they have injected into American theater. These playwrights are widely known by the public and heavily admired by dominant, mainstream theater companies where their work can be easily accessed and readily produced.

However, for minority theater writers, directors, and actors, there appears to be a less certain path of accessibility about the way in which these theater artists rise to the status of admiration by mainstream theaters. There have been tremendous successes such as Lorraine Hansberry, the first African-American woman produced on the Broadway stage with the success of her timeless play, *A Raisin In The Sun*. Ntozake Shange took her play, *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf*, from a bar straight to the Broadway stage.
August Wilson infused Black theatrical tradition into mainstream theater with plays such as *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, both of which won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Even plays that are written on the outside of modernity have garnered attention by mainstream theaters such as Suzan-Lori Parks’s challenging works *Topdog/Underdog* and *Venus*. These are the prominent Black playwrights that we have heard about in some form or another. In my college theater program we have studied all of these playwrights and have heard about the scholars and practitioners who have studied or advanced these works as well.

Then we are left with an artist like Tyler Perry, an African-American playwright who began his career in theater and transitioned into the world of film and television where he gained national and international acclaim through the wide variety of work he has produced. Tyler Perry has become, as I argue, one of the most prominent and important theater artists practicing today. It is a bold statement that not many scholars or people within the theater would even dare to consider. Perry primarily produces his work on the Urban Theater circuit that is known as the Chitlin Circuit, which attracts a large number of African-American spectators. Yet he is not someone that you will hear named alongside the likes of August Wilson or Lorraine Hansberry. Scholars have ignored his work, writing, or performances, giving it considerably less attention than the critically acclaimed work of an African-American writer such as Suzan Lori-Parks. In fact in this project, you find that I note little critical work on Perry—other than what popular reception gives us. When the African-American theater canon is thought about, especially the contemporary theater canon, Perry’s work is simply left out of the picture or becomes a footnote, an oddity within African-American theater. But I believe that scholars of American Theater as well as African-American Theater can no longer afford to do this.
I agree with Rashida Shaw, a scholar who recently completed her dissertation on the Chitlin Circuit, that the body of work made for the Chitlin Circuit of Black American theater cannot be left out of the study of African-American Theater. In her article, *Insert [Chitlin Circuit] Here: Teaching an Inclusive African-American Theater Course*, Shaw argues that Chitlin Circuit theater should be, and by necessity, must be included in the conversations that are had about African-American Theater:

For those of us who agree that the circuit is indeed part of the lineage of African-American theatre, should we not make efforts to put it into conversation with its own history, the history of African-American theatre in general, and the practices of its contemporary counterparts in American, African-American, and African theatre? Or do we continue to ignore the circuit’s existence, because we ourselves struggle to understand the phenomenon, resulting in unasked questions . . . and limited examinations within the discipline. (Shaw 73)

Just as Shaw argues that we can’t ignore the existence and practices of the Chitlin Circuit, the same can be said for the work of Tyler Perry, the newest offering of the circuit. Perry’s work cannot be left out of the conversation or simply put down as “lowbrow” theater. Instead, this thesis makes the argument that by examining the performative techniques and strategies of African-Americans theater’s past, we can become more informed about the performative techniques and strategies used in the theater produced today. Tyler Perry represents an unprecedented insight for and expansion of the world of the Chitlin Circuit through the mass production of his plays on DVD, which are then consumed by thousands. His films have also become an important counterpart to his work in the theater, as a majority of his films have been direct adaptations of his stage plays. This phenomenon of an African-American artist who has
transposed himself from theater to film and—even now with his most recent stage play—back to theater, presents an opportunity for scholars to commence looking at Perry’s work and the work of African-American theater and film from new perspectives.

I do not believe that we can ignore Tyler Perry just as scholars cannot ignore August Wilson or Ntozake Shange. The more we embrace a variety of work and styles, the more that we will expand our view of African-American theater studies beyond the microscopic lens of African-American artists who are approved by whites and therefore deemed worthy of study. As well, with the rise of his work, Perry faces the challenge of producing more complex portrayals and questions important to African-American communities for his growing audiences. African-Americans must also be critical of Tyler Perry through means such as scholarship and challenge him, as well as other artists, demanding a more nuanced and complex portrayal of African-American people; we cannot be afraid to challenge Perry precisely because he has become a dominant force in Black cultural production. As this thesis has argued, we have to demand theater and film work that represents African-Americans as a people with a history full of richness and fecundity.

African-Americans have a longstanding tradition of performance strategies that differ from that of dominant, white culture in the United States and American mainstream theater. Scholars need to study Tyler Perry’s cultural production and his impact on African-American theater and performance through the plays and films that he produces. Perry’s performances and works can no longer be deemed simplistic or narrow minded. Scholars have to be inclusive and willing to see the deeper meanings and consequences to a theatrical work that on the surface level may seem foolish and immature. The scholarly community in theater can certainly use him
as a point of critical examination that helps to explore our history and lives as African-Americans.
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