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Publication Date

2009-02-01

*Lion and Lamb—The Strong Black Woman Gets Abused:
“Afflictions of Specialness” in Post-Feminist and Post-Civil Rights Film*
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Black women are an endangered species. An endangered species is defined as “anyone or anything whose continued existence is threatened.”ⁱ In both American society and popular culture, this definition holds true for African American women. If a Black woman goes missing, she will rarely, if ever, be the topic of a primetime news special. Displaced from social discourses, Black women’s assault in popular media’s hegemonic narratives is peripheral and often unnoticed.

Hollywood cinema’s (dis)engagement with Black women assault narratives is evident in the lack of films that can be considered depictions of intimate partner violence/domestic violence against Black women. Hollywood and American “independent” cinema rarely depicts intimate partner violence against Black women as crimes. Instead, the physical, emotional or verbal abuse heaped against them, has only served to reify the image of them as the strong Black woman in film. But just as in reality, the strength of Black women promoted on the big screen as a positive attribute is the very shackle that keeps her bound from gaining liberation from the recognition of her pain. bell hooks states “when people talk about the ‘strength’ of black women they are referring to the way in which they perceive black women coping with oppression is not the same as overcoming oppression, that endurance is not to be confused with transformation.”ⁱⁱ Cinema appropriates such a comprehension of “strength,” loving the image of the enduring, strong Black woman’s struggle and strife. This affair has become so torrid in Hollywood films that struggle and suffering have become Black women’s cinematic constant, and it is only time that changes. And as cultural discourses have shifted to include the contemporary and dangerous post-feminist and post-civil rights rhetoric, both discourses are problematic in dealing with Black women’s strength predicament and images of intimate partner violence against Black women.

In looking at how films about intimate partner violence dialectically address the Black feminist concerns of violence and abuse against Black women, the paradox, not only of the images but of the conceptualization of Black female strength, can be interrogated. Often the films’ ability to not create, but tap into, the vestige of a Black female legacy (and continuation) of suffering, allow for the continued transference of Black female idioms of strength without transformation or plausible forms of redress. Just as Michele Wallace was and is concerned about Black women’s visibility but lack of voice in popular culture,ⁱⁱⁱ I am concerned that Black women are merely visibly reconstructed on screen out of the rubble of their own violent shattering, allowing for them to be both the lion and lamb and for their (in) visible race/sex/class oppression to continue. In interrogating and critiquing Tyler Perry’s *Madea’s Family Reunion* (2006), Perry uses the narrative of domestic abuse to re-construct and reify the paradoxical image of the strong Black woman/abused Black woman and highlight the necessity of Black male patriarchal rule and female absolution. Perry’s film exploits the contradictions of post-feminist^{iv} and post-civil rights^v rhetoric in order to caricaturize the suffering/strong Black female; marginalize male and communal responsibilities; and articulate abuse as an “affliction of [the] specialness”^{vi} of the strong Black woman.

Following *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), *Madea’s Family Reunion* is the second film and directorial debut for writer, producer, and actor Tyler Perry. In this melodrama,

comedy, drama, Black women's picture, family and social-uplift film, *Madea's Family Reunion*'s storyline is a multifaceted circus with over-the-top scenarios. On the horizon of a family reunion, the fiery and fearless (because she totes a gun in her purse) Madea is the axis by which familial issues are brought to light. One such issue is regarding a family of women, each of whom are holding secrets and hurts that are tearing them and each other apart. Lisa (Rochelle Aytes) is engaged to be married to the successful Carlos (Blair Underwood) but hides the fact that he beats her. Her sister Vanessa (Lisa Anderson) is a single mother of two who has sworn off men and has a horrible relationship with her mother Victoria (Lynn Whitfield). Victoria, who is the epitome of Black bourgeois, tries to control her daughter Lisa and resents Vanessa. Both Vanessa and Victoria harbor the secret that Lisa's father (Vanessa's step-father) sexually molested his step-daughter for many years. As all three try to gain control over their lives, their story is supplemented with the crazy antics of Madea, who is forced to take in a foster child named Nikki (KeKe Palmer), and the up-coming family reunion. Ending in *black fashion* with the ceremonial electric slide at the wedding reception of Vanessa and knight-in-shining-blackness Frankie (Boris Kodjoe), Lisa reclaims her life after leaving Carlos and Victoria makes steps for amends with Vanessa.

With an all-star cast of Black women and a narrative surrounding their lives, Perry's film masquerades as a Black woman's picture. Much the way post-feminism and post-civil rights discourses displaces Black women, Perry's film uses the visual façade of Black women to articulate Black male desires. In the film's distribution, the title reads "Tyler Perry's *Madea's Family Reunion*," making the concept of male possession grammatically and symbolically embedded into the film's headline. Moreover, the central and returning character of Madea is Perry in drag. Perry's act of gender performativity is not only gender biased but racially problematic. As writer, director, producer, and star of the film, Perry's Black male perspective is "made-up" to visually be that of a Black woman's. By having respected Black stars including Cicely Tyson, Maya Angelou, and Lynn Whitfield speak his words, Perry successfully paints the subjectivity of a Black man as an authentic Black women's outlook. By making men the center of the story, the film's post-feminism co-opting of feminist language removes feminist struggles. For example, one female character states that the Black woman's motto is: "We don't always do what we want to do but we always do what we have to do." Instead of interrogating this axiom of the conflation of gender and race based struggles, the film's narrative focuses on Black male redeemers. However, these Black men aren't asking for forgiveness but are the ones for which Black women must ask for redemption. In this case, Black women's specialness comes from their abilities to sacrifice themselves at the altar of patriarchal control. Lastly, the film uses images of strong/suffering Black women and the narrative trope of intimate partner violence to marginalize a collective Black female community. By creating a race-less society where Black women's problems are personalized by their relationships to men, the film depicts the female characters' specialness as either victims or victors based upon the weakness or strength of the Black men around them.

The film begins its dialogue with intimate partner violence in its opening. The opening scene between Lisa and her fiancé Carlos attempts to allude to the problems of their relationship. Despite the visual romance in the scene, the audience gets the feeling something is off. The non-diegetic song used in the credits and slightly carried over to the scene is not a love song. The lyrics of Chaka Khan's "Keep Your Head Up" become a masculine warning: "Remember these words a preacher said to me/ He said/ Keep your head up don't say you love him/ Walk away

from all this is hurting/ Find your power, you know you're strong/ Make that step and it will help you along” [emphasis added]. In addition, Lisa’s body language in the scene when Carlos tells her he drew the bath to help with her soreness is off-putting. This feeling carries over when Lisa goes to a day spa with her sister Vanessa and friend Donna (Tangi Miller). Lisa’s paranoia about leaving her phone at home becomes warranted when a few scenes later the audience witnesses the first of her assaults.

Perry’s film makes it very clear in its depiction that not only is Lisa being abused by Carlos, but that Carlos and his actions are evil. In the first scene of violence, the audience watches Carlos go from Dr. Jekyll when Lisa is around her sister and friend to Mr. Hyde after the two women leave. Striking her in the face, Carlos berates Lisa. Blaming Lisa for his violent actions, the scene frames Carlos in a low-angle shot, towering above her as she huddles in a corner. Through such a power structure, Carlos is seen as a two-faced batterer who phantoms reasons of provocation. The scene does much to remind the viewer that no one provokes abuse, expressing that Lisa’s actions may be his excuse but are not the reason for his act of violence.^{vii} In another scene, Carlos is out to dinner with Lisa and another couple. Inciting his rage by yawning, Carlos asks Lisa to dance and chastises her behavior. Lisa attempts to fight back by requesting he hit her in front of everyone and tries to walk away from him. However, Carlos pulls her back and warns her that if she tries to leave her, he will “love [her] to death.” Carlos’ deadly warning comes to ahead in a following scene between the two. Thwarted in her attempt to run away, the scene begins showing Carlos apologizing to Lisa for his actions. He explains that he fears she will leave him just like everyone he has ever loved and tells her he will get counseling. Despite his plea, Lisa says those actions are not enough and that she wants to leave. Enraged by her words, Carlos grabs Lisa as she tries to make a dash for the car keys. Carlos drags her to the balcony door of the bedroom kicking and screaming. Fearing for her life, Lisa acquiesces and tells him she won’t leave. Like a child, Carlos demands that she tell him she loves him. His actions not only make it clear that the threat against Lisa’s life is real, but it also reinforces his weakness as a male character. Despite his violent aggressions, Carlos’ actions frame him as an emasculated character that beats up nonexistent problems.

While powerfully conveying scenes of abuse, the films post-civil rights and post-feminist structure marginalizes the potency of these images and the significations of abuse. First of which, the film constantly juxtaposes scenes of Lisa’s abuse with scenes of her sister’s Vanessa venture into dating. By juxtaposing both relationships, the film makes it obvious that one is healthy and the other is unhealthy. This combination is problematic because the film’s pathology for what makes a healthy and unhealthy relationship is tied to Black masculinity and class politics. Carlos is unhealthy and his lifestyle of affluence is considered unhealthy in comparison to Frankie’s healthy courtship with Vanessa and bus driver working-class status. Therefore, the film polarizes scenes, people, and economic lifestyles into ideological categories of good and bad. For example, Lisa and Vanessa are structured as opposites whose lifestyles bring binary judgments. While the actions against Lisa are not her fault, her representation as foil to elder sister Vanessa enforces the notion that while Lisa may not deserve to be abused, she was in fact “asking for it” by her life choices and desires. Lisa is coded as rich to Vanessa’s working-poor status. Because of Lisa’s wealth and desire for continued wealth (since her marriage to Carlos would maintain her lifestyle), she is narratively “punished” with an unhappy life. In other words, because she is asking for *more*, she must be, literally, beaten back into her place to desire *less*. On the other hand, because of her hardships and desire for nothing,

Vanessa's Christian re-birth allows for her to gain the happiness unafforded to her sister. Lisa's lifestyle choice, including living with Carlos, becomes representative of her lack of religious re-awakening. However, Vanessa and Frankie's sacrifices—including taking care of their children and decision to abstain from sex until marriage—allow them to have the “healthy” relationship rewarded with a marriage at the end of the film. Despite Lisa and Vanessa's diverging representations, it becomes clear that Perry only knows one-dimensional versions of Black women—fallen until forgiven.

Besides polarizing Lisa and Vanessa, the film creates a false and disconcerting sense of female community and communal help regarding abuse. After the first scene of abuse between Lisa and Carlos, Lisa meets her mother for lunch and confesses that he is hitting her. Instead of help, Lisa is told by her mother to basically tough it out, reminding her that this is something that women have to deal with in order to be comfortable. In addition, the binary between Lisa and Vanessa is reinforced as Victoria reminds her that she does not want to end up like her working-class sister. In other words, privilege has a price. The film opts out of any sort of mother-daughter bond in order to depict Victoria as an evil figure. In another incident of seeking help, Lisa tells Vanessa and Madea about Carlos' abuse. The film marginalizes this attempt for outreach by purporting the rhetoric of individualized self-help as the best answer to an abusive relationship. Madea tells Lisa that no one can help her “friend” who is being hit until she wants to get help. The problem with this conclusion is the apparent dismissal of Lisa's answer that she does want to get out of the relationship. Moreover, the fact that she ran away from Carlos and is asking for help and guidance from her closest female friend—Vanessa—and the only maternal figure—Madea—is evidence of her desire for help. Instead of giving her solid advice, the scene turns comedic as Madea explains the way to stop an abusive man is to “cook him breakfast.” Thus, giving her a description of “grit-ball,” the answer to Lisa's problem is to beat her abuser with kitchen pans. For a man who has threatened her life this idea may seem enticing, but it solves no problem beyond the superficial and uses the male voice (Perry in drag) to disavow female-communal uprising.

Just as post-feminism uses the language of feminism without linking it to any form of struggle, *Madea's Family Reunion's* cheapens its representation of intimate partner violence by making comedic not just other forms of violence but other texts about abuse. This example is evidenced in Madea's quotation from the film *The Color Purple*, stating: “All my life I had to fight. I loves Harpo but I'll kill him dead ‘for I let him beat me” after beating a teenage boy on Nikki's school bus. The film mimics and mocks the womanist statement of *The Color Purple* and ties it the comedic violence of beating a young boy. The seriousness of Lisa's abuse, the quote from the other film, and the comedy of the situation create a confusing narrative surrounding domestic abuse. Continuing to tread on dangerous ground, the film's post-civil rights and post-feminist contradictory rhetoric haphazardly juxtaposes scenes of Lisa's horrid abuse with “comedic” violence against children. In the supplemental narrative of the film, Madea is court-ordered to become a foster parent to an unruly girl named Nikki. For the majority of the film, their interactions fuse comedy and violence. For example, in court, Madea's refusal to take Nikki to the judge is complimented with her commentary: “I'll kill that little girl. I don't know her. She might be one of them Sandinistas or something.” Their violent exchanges continue after leaving the court house, resulting in Madea beating the girl in the back seat. The images are tempered with Madea's resolution: “Something wrong with the children today. I'm from the old school and I will beat the hell out of you first and ask questions later.”

Interesting enough, Carlos seems to follow that same line of thinking. Thus, the scenes of child-violence between Madea and Nikki are glaringly problematic.

In one scene, Madea waits for Nikki to walk past the room's door where she is ironing and watching TV. The show seen and heard in the background is the Norman Lear classic *Good Times*, specifically the famed child-abuse episode "The Evans Get Involved" starring a young Janet Jackson as Penny. Mimicking the tone of the episode, Nikki is summoned into the room. Just as Penny's voice on the television screen cries out: "Please, I won't be a bad girl," Madea cuts off the television. With life imitating art, Madea begins to beat Nikki with a belt. After the beating ends, Madea finds out why Nikki hadn't been going to school. Nikki explains that she doesn't like school because she isn't smart and her last foster mother said all she would be good for is lying on her back. With such a proclamation, Madea uses the opportunity to teach Nikki a lesson in self-respect. Thus, Madea's violence is coded as a learning tool for young Black woman. The problem here is the way in which some violence is condemned [domestic assault] while other types of violence are championed [child-abuse] as (un)necessary rites of passage for Black women. Both acts of violence are perpetuated by Black men—one an emasculated character and the other in drag. What the film and its star/writer Perry fail to understand is how "isolated" incidents of hitting of Black women growing up can play a huge affective role in understanding why children hit growing up are often hit as adults.^{viii} Moreover, by making some violence "fun" or "funny," Perry displaces the act of violence as a serious problem, making patriarchal and traditionalist conclusions on "instructive" violence.

Additionally, the film's re-constructions of the strong Black woman create harrowing implications for understanding violence. The film shows an array of strong Black women and makes their weakness or suffering paradoxically tied to their strength. For example, Victoria is presented as a self-centered, non-maternal figure who desires to live vicariously through her youngest daughter. By villainizing her desires for economic security, her strong Black female character is masculinized because she encroaches on patriarchal codes of power. Thus, her character's weakness is found in her need for security (read as control). On one account, Carlos tells her that her "horns" are showing, to which she responds "Are you upset because mine are bigger?" Therefore it makes sense that she and Carlos try to control Lisa's life—the male figure is emasculated by the castrating mother—because both are malfunctioning gendered characters. In a flash of depth, Victoria's character briefly explains her own life and victimization, telling her children that her mother was a whore and a junkie who traded her for ten dollars and a fix. The film quickly shifts tone, however, and makes her out to be the villain as she rejects regretting "giving" her eldest daughter to be molested by her new husband. The connection of the cycle of abuse is never made. Instead, the film opts for the recreation of victim (Vanessa), villain (Victoria), and bystander (Lisa).

Vanessa's strong Black woman is reinforced by her social standing as working-single mother. The film reinforces how after finding her faith in God, she is able to be an "almost" strong woman. But even that strength is not complete until she has given herself to a man. Therefore even after Victoria's self-revelation of personal abuse, Vanessa disavows the sexual assault connection between her and her mother. Stating that she has found a man who loves her, Vanessa forgives Victoria. This act of forgiveness is not one borne out of a sense of reconciliation or redemption. Instead, the decay is about removing female power, in this case her mother's control, out of her life to make room for what matters—a loving relationship with a Christian, Black man. Female community in the film is purported to be visibly there while all the

ties between women are cut only to be re-attached to men, male perspective, or ideals of patriarchal traditionalism. Thus, for all of her actions, Vanessa is rewarded with happiness, love, and a marriage.

Lastly, Lisa's character is paradoxically the strongest and weakest character within the film's narrative. Lisa constantly shows that she is a strong woman. For example, she tries to leave Carlos even after he tells her he will get counseling. She tries to fight back when she is abused, and she tries to tell her family about the abuse and get help. However, as previously mentioned, Lisa's socio-economic lifestyle is metaphorically linked to her abuse, and, thus, despite all her trying, she is made out to be the weakest character. By making her the weakest character, the film marginalizes her narrative of intimate partner violence. For example in the film, Lisa claims that she isn't strong and tells her sister that she has never had to fight for herself before because someone always did that for her. This claim seems antithetical to the heroic acts the audience has witnessed by Lisa. Her verbal release of her own inner strength is incongruent with her own desires to save herself and the lack of help she is offered from those around her. No one in the film was fighting for her at all; she had always fought for herself. Her character's pretense of weakness makes her struggle against abuse trivial and the triumphs the need for a good Black man.

By rewarding retreatism,^{ix} the film is finally able to show Lisa as a strong Black woman. She beats Carlos in a game of "grit-ball" and confesses to her wedding attendees that she has been abused. The ending of Lisa and Carlos' relationship is problematic because domestic abuse is given no real resolution besides beating your batterer with a skillet and dousing him with hot grits. The very fact that Carlos stated he would kill Lisa if she ever left him are tossed to the wind, and his beating and absence after the fact assume he will merely go away. Thus, by continuing the cycle of violence—he beats her so she beats him—the film creates a dangerous individualistic answer to abuse. By not critiquing a culture that institutionalizes abuse, rape, and assault against women, the film makes such assaults merely personal and not political. Moreover, Lisa's confession to the congregation is not merely a vocalizing of abuse to the Black community but recognition of her punishment for the lifestyle she had chosen. Now that she will be doing things for herself, (i.e. probably finding a job), she is rewarded for being the right kind of Black woman—the working kind. And as a proper example of such a woman, Vanessa is allowed to play Black-Barbie in the gaudiest of weddings.

Madea's Family Reunion is a post-civil rights and post-feminist film that veils its patriarchal positioning under layers of Black make-up. In drag, Perry allows for Madea to be the strongest Black woman of all the film's characters. Even though her actions are controversial, she becomes the place for Black women's strength-rhetoric and catchphrases of empowerment. The Black women's world Perry creates is almost a race-less place despite its Atlanta, Georgia setting. The problems of Black women are not racially structured at all. Thus, a film that grounds itself in the struggles and suffering of Black women does not focus on interracial critique. Instead, it becomes one about intra-racial condemnation of Black women based upon their relationship to men. By not critiquing a racist and sexist Black community, domestic violence is seen as an individualized problem, and, even a more an issue of social mobility. Thus, patriarchy goes un-critiqued within the film. All the Black female characters become both protagonists and antagonists, blaming their transgressions on their disjuncture from Black male sexist codes (control through marriage and religion) of fulfillment. At the helm of the patriarchal and ecclesiastical social paradigms, Tyler Perry's^x numerous incarnations in the production of

the film paint him as the perfect post-feminist man, one who “must (re)take center stage and return to their traditional roles as ‘manly’ saviors in order to fix what women/feminist unwittingly have made inoperable.”^{xi} And return to center stage Perry does, in drag no-less, as a way to put the [Black] ”man” back in woman and emphasize Black male patriarchal hegemonic constructions of Black femininity.

ⁱ Merriam-Webster Online, 2008.

ⁱⁱ bell hooks. *Ain't I A Woman*, 6.

ⁱⁱⁱ Michele Wallace. *Introduction: Positive/Negative Images*. 1-10.

^{iv} In the introduction to the anthology Interrogating Post-feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture, editors Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra explicate on post-feminism’s emphasis on the end of feminism. They write that “post-feminism draws on and sustains an invented social memory of feminist language as inevitably shrill, bellicose, and parsimonious. Thus, while feminism is constituted as an unwelcome, implicit censorious presence it is precisely *feminist* concerns that are silenced within post-feminist culture.” The perception of gender equality becomes the front screen for back porch politics of female consumption. Negra and Tasker identify that post-feminism “[assumes] full economic freedom for women” and becomes race-class identified as “white and middle-class by default, anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self.”^{iv} Moreover, by naturalizing aspects of feminism, post-feminism successfully commodifies feminism into a consumer product that champions transformation through capitalistic consumption. In other words, “pussy power” transforms into “pocket-book power” and race or social difference is not critiqued

^v Post-civil rights culture is temporally a bit harder to place. Springer assesses that post-civil rights language began after the 1954 Supreme Court landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* and continued with legislative reforms such as the Civil Rights Act (1946). She also notes that the subsequent rise of the Black middle class, especially in the 1980s, added to this discourse.^v Moreover, post-civil rights discourse is as contradictory as post-feminism. Whether claiming the goals for Blacks have been attained (through legislation, affirmative action, etc.) or that they haven’t been attained (which is the personal fault of Blacks because of all the opportunities afforded through legislation, affirmative action, etc.), the conclusion is that the fight for racial equality on a political level is unnecessary. Instead, any issues of racial injustice are personal matters and any lack of opportunities is the fault of the individual. Post-civil rights codes all Blacks as Black men, pointing to the advancements of Black men as exemplary racial gain and often leaving Black women and their concerns out of the socio-political sphere. hooks explains that the Black liberation movement showed how “black men chose to endorse sexist exploitation and oppression of black women. And in doing so they were compromised. They were not liberated from the system but liberated to serve the system.” Liberated Black power is twisted to mean patriarchal power. Therefore, post-civil rights discourse presumes that Black feminism is unnecessary as the gains of Black people (read Black men) have been and are continuing to be addressed or met in American society.

^{vi} This notion of “specialness” is derived from a statement by Michelle Wallace about Black middle class women,. She writes: “The important this is that after a while, if you survive, you begin to really think of yourself as special. This affliction of specialness takes on even greater proportions if you are a black woman and if you actually manage to do something special, or even not so special... This is what makes me doubt that there will ever be an independent black middle-class women’s movement. Black women seem to have very low expectations for themselves as a group.... Middle-class black women are slow to identify with each other’s problems. We’re all so special” (135).

^{vii} This reasoning is inspired from letter quoted in Martin Del’s Battered Women, 3.

^{viii} This idea comes from bell hook’s *Violence in Intimate Relationships: A Feminist Perspective*. hooks is insight into the under-researched discussions of why women are violent as a challenge “to our understanding of why children who were hit growing up are often hit as adults or hit others” (270).

^{ix} Retreatism is a term and narrative trope that, Kimberly Springer, states in *Divas, Evil Black Bitches, and Bitter Black Women* “[incorporates] fantasies of hometown return in which a heroine gives up her life in the city to take up again the role of daughter, sister, wife, or sweetheart in a hometown setting... The black female heroine goes in one of two directions: she either returns to her family and the black community that she has neglected or she turns to a tight network of sister-friends” (269).

^x It should also be noted the amount that Perry is also a best-selling author whose self-help books include Don't Make a Black Woman Take Off her Earrings. My problem with these kinds of books, besides the fact that it's Perry's alter-ego Madea on the cover, is the fact that he pushes the idea that he has a feminine perspective. In an article with *Essence*, he states "My childhood gave me insight into women that's very rare for a man" and that his knowledge of women is because he is "tuned in." Instead of addressing that he relates to Black women, he appropriates the experiences of Black women without critiquing the fact that they are filtered through *his* Black male eyes.

^{xi} Sarah Projansky. Watching Rape, 68.

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