Hallelujah and Amen: the African-American religious aesthetic and black women in the church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day saints in Southwest Atlanta, Georgia

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ABSTRACT

AFRICANA WOMEN’S STUDIES

PAULETTE LAVONNE PAYNE BA PAINE COLLEGE, 1998

Hallelujah and Amen: The African-American Religious Aesthetic and Black Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

In Southwest Atlanta, Georgia

Advisor: Dr. Josephine Bradley

Thesis dated July 2009

This study explores how racial and religious identities are impacted and subsequently reconciled among Black women who join the historically White Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in Southwest Atlanta, Georgia. This study was based upon the premise that the African-American religious aesthetic and the Black Church shape racial and religious identities. Therefore, identity reconciliation among Black LDS women who previously attended the Black church is jeopardized.

A mixed-methods research approach was used to measure Black women’s ability to reconcile their racial and religious identities. The data gathered enabled the researcher to broadly determine the degree to which reconciliation is achieved among Black LDS women.

The researcher found that the diminutive presence of the African-American religious aesthetic in the LDS Church did not considerably influence identity.
reconciliation among Black LDS women. This finding is significant as it will help to inform future studies about identity reconciliation among Black people who join historically White religious institutions as well as the viability of the Black Church as a resource for spiritual and racial identity cultivation among Black people.
HALLELUJAH AND AMEN: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN RELIGIOUS AESTHETIC AND BLACK WOMEN IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS IN SOUTHWEST ATLANTA, GEORGIA

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
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DEPARTMENT OF AFRICANA WOMEN'S STUDIES

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
JULY 2009
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Expressions of gratitude would be incomplete without acknowledging the innumerable sacrifices made by my mother, Mary Jane Woodard Payne, whose love carries me, whose support lifts me when I am discouraged, and whose encouragement allows me to recognize my brilliance and aspire to higher heights. My love and appreciation are also expressed for my dear sister, Alexis Monique Payne, who is my confidant, example and best friend. My gratitude and love are eternal. I also wish to honor my father, the late Alex Payne, whose love and support transcends mortality.

Finally, I would like to thank the founders, Board of Trustees, administration and faculty of Clark Atlanta University for their vision, leadership and instruction. Resultantly, I have identified my voice and I am now able to confidently and boldly express it.

ii
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.................................................................................................................. ii

LIST OF FIGURES.......................................................................................................................... v

ABBREVIATIONS........................................................................................................................... vi

GLOSSARY........................................................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION................................................................................................................................. 1

   The Purpose of the Research............................................................................................................ 1

   Significance of the Research .......................................................................................................... 14

   Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................................. 16

   Methodology ..................................................................................................................................... 20

   Instrument ....................................................................................................................................... 22

   Procedure ....................................................................................................................................... 24

   Research Questions......................................................................................................................... 25

   Limitations of the Study ................................................................................................................ 25

   Organization of the Thesis .............................................................................................................. 25

II. LITERATURE REVIEW...................................................................................................................... 26

   Who Do Men Say That I Am: Black Women and Identity?............................................................ 31

   Rhythms of Spirit: The Birth of an African-American Religious Aesthetic ................................. 47

III. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW.................................................................................................................. 56

   Who’s Report Will You Believe: Joseph Smith’s First Vision? .................................................... 56

   Race In Zion: The African Presence in the LDS Church .............................................................. 62
In Search of Truth: The Basic Tenets of the LDS Church

IV. DISCUSSION: THE LDS CHURCH AND BLACK WOMEN

Demographics

Church Appeal: Why Black Women Join the LDS Church

In Her Own Words: Black and LDS

V. CONCLUSION

Recommendations

APPENDIX A

IRB Letter of Participant Consent

APPENDIX B

Survey Instrument

BIBLIOGRAPHY
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Reconciliation categories among Black LDS Women in Southwest Atlanta..................77
2. Education levels among reconciled and irreconciled Black LDS Women in..................79

Southwest Atlanta
# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLDS</td>
<td>Fundamentalist Latter-day Saints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDS</td>
<td>Latter-day Saints¹</td>
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<tr>
<td>SUV</td>
<td>Saints United Voices</td>
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¹ Latter-day Saints in its correct context always appears with a hyphen followed by a lower cased day.
GLOSSÁRY

**African-American Religious Aesthetic.** The synthesis of spirit, religion, culture and history among persons of African descent in North America. The deliberate intersection of these components supports a religious aesthetic among African Americans that perpetuates the cultural relevancy of African influenced religious expression and fosters an appreciation for that which is sacred.

**Africanity.** A conscious awareness of one’s African ancestry and subsequent expression of that ancestry via social, religious and cultural acknowledgement and inclusion in their lived experiences.

**African Aesthetic.** A process of artistic evaluation which positions Africa at the center of the artistic continuum.

**Black.** A racial identifier for persons of African descent in North America who are consciously aware of their African ancestry.

**Black Woman.** A woman of African descent on the continent, in America and throughout the Diaspora.

**Black Aesthetic.** A cultural revolution, birthed from a place of racial consciousness and cultural pride. The Black aesthetic celebrates the artistic (music, literature, visual arts, etc.) fortitude of Black people.

**Black Identity.** A process by which persons of African descent throughout the Diaspora create a cosmology, which dismantles the cloak of social, economic, religious and political oppression and facilitates positive self-actualization and connectivity among persons of this group.

**Culture.** The “...sum total of African philosophy, behavior, ideas, and artifacts.... Culture can vary over time, but African culture will always be articulated in a similar way.”

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**Cultural Relevance.** A process by which one’s culture is deemed valid, worthwhile and meaningful.

**Cultural/Epic/Race Memory.** A repository in which “...images, symbols and rhythms based upon history and subsequent mythology,” are retrieved; making it possible for the aesthetic to be “reclaimed and re-established.”

**Diaspora.** The presence of African people throughout the world as a direct result of colonization and the subsequent enslavement of Africans.

**Religion.** A system of beliefs, ideals and patterns of worship deemed sacred by the group by whom they are practiced.

**Religious Identity.** An amalgamation of symbols, culture and history, which influences behavior and establishes individual and collective identity among religious practitioners.

**White.** A racial identifier for persons of European ancestry.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

This study explores how the diminutive presence of the African-American religious aesthetic in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) impacts racial and religious identities among Black women who are members of the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta, Georgia. Subsequently, the study examines their ability to reconcile their Black and religious identities in the historically White religious institution. The study was based upon formal interviews between the researcher and Black female members of the LDS Church, many of whom credit the Black Church for cultivating their faith and shaping their religious and social views.

Even though Black voices in the LDS Church continue to resonate throughout what has now become a global Church, many Black members still struggle with their sense of identity and belonging in the historically White religious institution. Challenged by their history in America and the LDS Church’s racist past, despite attempts by the church to disavow its former practices, many Black members are compelled to negotiate and/or surrender their Black and religious identities in order to adopt the cultural standards of the LDS Church. Furthermore, Black members who come out of the Black Church experience feel obligated, by virtue of the religious ethos of the LDS Church, to abandon traditional worship customs that are characteristic of the Black Church and the Black experience, including call and response, the shout and praise and worship.
Therefore, the problem that underscores this investigation is Black women’s ability to reconcile their racial and religious identities as members of the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta.

Steeped in emotionalism and rich in cultural traditions, the participatory worship style of the Black Church formulates an aesthetic tradition, which continues to impact the lives of its former and current members. For Black women in the LDS Church who previously attended the Black Church, relocation to an historically White religious institution can potentially impede reconciliation of their racial and religious identities. To this end, the researcher has established two assumptions, which will help to determine if racial or religious identity is most salient to Black LDS women’s self-identity.

Assumption one posits that Black women who relocate from the Black Church to the LDS Church find religious and spiritual satisfaction and personal fulfillment, notwithstanding the lack of a religious aesthetic which speaks to their culture and history as African descended people in America. Therefore, they surrender the African-American religious aesthetic in order to maintain allegiance to the LDS Church. One the other hand, assumption two suggests that Black women who are members of the LDS Church, whose religious experience is rooted in the Black Church, incorporate elements of the African-American religious aesthetic in their worship experience while embracing and/or assimilating into the religious and social culture of the Church.

Therefore, it is important to note that while the African and Black aesthetics have their roots in the arts, their definitions are applicable to the totality of life among Black people throughout the Diaspora. The aesthetic, as defined by Kariamu Welsh-Asante,
"...draws upon the history, mythology, motif and creative ethos of a group of people by virtue of its reflection of the images and symbols of its own group."¹ The aesthetic then, for many Afrocentrists, is the means by which the totality of artistic expression among Diasporic Africans is defined and expressed.

According to Welsh-Asante, the Eurocentric aesthetic "...has become imperialistic and consequently subverts and subjects all other aesthetics."² thus, eradicating the cultural relevance of African centered artistic [religious] expressions. Conversely, the African and Black aesthetics have been established to reverse what Molefi Asante calls, "...the continuous dislocation of Africans from their own particular and collective centers."³ Subsequently, the Black aesthetic allows people of African descent in North America and throughout the Diaspora to reconnect to their culture and ancestry in a way that honors their struggles and celebrates their triumphs. Given these explanations, and for the purpose of this research, the African-American religious aesthetic is defined as the synthesis of spirit, religion, culture and history among persons of African descent in North America. The deliberate intersection of these components supports a religious aesthetic among Black people that perpetuates the cultural relevancy of African influenced religious expression and fosters an appreciation for that which is sacred.

Religion has consistently served as the conduit through which the faith and spirit of Diasporic Africans has been expressed. From the indigenous religious practices of

² Ibid., 6.
³ Ibid.
Africans prior to and following their forced removal from the African continent, to the highly spirited and expressive worship services found specifically, but not exclusively in the Black Church, religion and spirituality have been, and continues to be, critical elements that shape Black identity in the African-American community and among its people.

Thus, like the aesthetic, symbolism is a vital component in religious practices. Symbols perpetuate the sanctity of religious faiths and serve as critical identifiers for the collective. Furthermore, religious symbols are what Thomas O’Dea considers “...modes of expressing the basic meaning of life and death, sin and salvation, hope and despair...”4 Religious identity is defined as an amalgamation of symbols, culture and history, which influence behavior and establishes individual and collective identity among religious practitioners.

Black identity on the other hand, as suggested by Thomas Parham is, “...rooted deeply in the sense of Africaness or Africanity and that the sense of Africanity is a critical feature in successfully responding, adapting and mastering the challenges of human degradation targeted at Africans by a White Supremacist society.”5 Molefi Asante believes that Africanity “...broadcasts identity and being...”6 and if submerged into a non-African framework can disturb the equilibrium of the African cosmology. According to Joseph Baldwin, the African cosmology, or worldview, eradicates the Eurocentric


cosmology, which is focused on individuality, and fosters a unified worldview among African descended people that supports the advancement of the collective.\(^7\) Black identity then is defined by this study as a process by which persons of African descent throughout the Diaspora create a cosmology, which dismantles the cloak of social, economic, religious and political oppression and facilitates positive self-identity and connectivity among persons of this group.

From a stylistic perspective, the worship traditions among members of the Black and LDS Churches are significantly different. The former is steeped in cultural customs and rhythmic expressions, while the latter is tranquil and subdued. Kariamu Welsh-Asante has posited that rhythm plays an essential role in the lived experiences of persons of African descent throughout the Diaspora. Rhythm, she says is, “...the ntuonic energy and life force that...is paramount in the African self-image as defined in her philosophical conception of the world.”\(^8\) She asserts that the lived experiences of Africans form a cultural memory bank from which expressions and behavioral patterns are withdrawn and become manifest in the lives of Diasporic Africans.\(^9\) She further argues that in addition to rhythm, spirit and creativity are at the core of any discussion about the aesthetic for African people.”\(^10\) In her aesthetic circle known as the Nzuri Model, each of these sources—spirit, rhythm and creativity—are infused with Ntu, or the


\(^8\) Ibid., 12.


\(^10\) F. Elaine De Lancey, “Midnight Morning Musings,” ProQuest Direct Complete 10, no. 1(Fall 2004): 34.
life force or energy that enables the expression of the aesthetic.  

Welsh-Asante says that this, "infinite cosmological energy... permeates all beings and things. Ntu joins everything and flows through everything." In summary, the Nzuri Model suggests that in African cultural expression anywhere, there are commonly manifested characteristics, which expose the fact that African people share a common aesthetic origin. This however, does not imply that all African descended people display the same behaviors. Rather, it means that African people's collective expression tends to reflect common traits regardless of individual preference and location.

The Nzuri Model further proposes three distinct sources in which the seven modes—meaning, ethos, motif, mode, function, method, form—are rooted. Of the three distinct sources of spirit, rhythm and creativity, the most significant to this investigation is rhythm and the role it plays in the African-American religious aesthetic and among Black women in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta. Historically, one of the primary communicators of rhythm for African descended people has been the drum. It was from this percussive instrument that the history and traditions of African people were and are presently communicated. Zadia Ife stated,

Music as well as rhythm has always been an integral part of the traditional African culture. In most societies, if not in all, drum, dance and song were not separated from the daily life of the community. Within the African American continuum the use of the drum, dance and song is also apparent. Though the latter two are obvious within the Diaspora, the former, though taken away during the African’s enslavement, was re-created within the dances, the call and response patterns of the songs, as well as within


12 Ibid.
the language of the enslaved African.13

Thus, if the Black Church worship experience is one characterized by culturally inspired rhythmic expressions such as the shout, holy dance, sermon, and call and response, then the absence of these religious aesthetics in the LDS Church can prove to be daunting as Black women, particularly those for whom these experiences were customary, transition into the LDS Church.

LeRoi Jones explains that, “The “ring shouts” or “shuffle shouts” of the early Negro churches were attempts by the black Christians to have their cake and eat it: to maintain African tradition, however veiled or unconscious the attempt might be, yet embrace the new religion.”14 Shout songs, according to E. Franklin Frazier, “...are so named because they were sung and are still sung while the Negro worshippers are engaged in what might be called a holy dance. This may be regarded as an example of the most primitive and elemental expression of religion among American Negroes.”15 Given that culturally infused worship traditions were important to Africans and their enslaved progenitors creates an opportunity to investigate whether or not these same traditions remain relevant in the religious lives of Black women who join the LDS Church.

Although the current literature about the Black Church and the African and Black aesthetics does not specifically name or define an African-American religious aesthetic,

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W. E. B. DuBois acknowledges, whether intentionally or unintentionally, that one exists when he describes what he witnessed during a “Southern Negro revival”:

...a pythian madness, a demonic possession, that lent terrible reality to song and word. The black and massive form of the preacher swayed and quivered as the words crowded to his lips and flew at us in singular eloquence. The people moaned and fluttered, and then the gaunt-checked brown woman beside me suddenly leaped straight into the air and shrieked like a lost soul, while round about came wail and groan and outcry, and a scene of human passion such as I had never conceived before.\(^\text{16}\)

He concludes explaining how the church of his childhood differed in comparison to that of the Southern revival when he says, “...we were very quiet and subdued, and I know not what would have happened those clear Sabbath mornings had someone punctuated the sermon with a wild scream, or interrupted the long prayer with a loud amen!”\(^\text{17}\)

Although DuBois was not a practitioner of the LDS faith, the account from his childhood juxtaposed with that of the Southern revival illustrates the profound emotive differences in worship styles of the LDS and Black Churches respectively.

While this study makes several assumptions, including the relocation by Black women to the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta equates to greater religious and personal fulfillment, the absence of the African-American religious aesthetic in this religious institution, the researcher theorizes, causes many to negotiate, whether voluntarily or forcefully, new identities once they surrender or submit to the cultural ethos of the LDS Church. Negotiation, or dislocation as Molefi Asante terms it, distorts the African aesthetic and jeopardizes cultural connectivity for Black people in the United States. This


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
research is not intended to imply that because the African-American religious aesthetic has a diminutive presence in the LDS Church that Black women’s religious and worship experiences depreciate after they become members, nor does it seek to question the faith of Black women in the Church. Rather, the research attempts to explain how racial and religious identities of Black women are impacted by the LDS Church experience considering the deficient presence of the African-American religious aesthetic therein. Furthermore, the study seeks to determine whether or not Black women are able to reconcile their identities as members of the historically White religious institution while at the same time maintaining their African-American heritage.

While there are numerous denominations that comprise the Black Church, this research will not provide a delineation of each. However, the study presents an overview of the Black Church and the religious aesthetic that is indicative of the people and culture from whom it was established. In many respects, the Black Church serves as a symbol of resistance and freedom among Blacks, particularly among those enslaved Africans who were forced to accept the religion of their European captors. According to Eugene Genovese:

. . . the whites of the Old South tried to shape the religious life of their slaves, and the slaves overtly, covertly, and even intuitively fought to shape it themselves. . . . The religion of the slaves manifested African “traits” and exhibited greater continuity with African ideas than has generally been appreciated. But it reflected a different reality in a vastly different land and in the end emerged as something new.18

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Thus, the establishment of what had become known as “invisible institutions,” which allowed enslaved Africans to create a worship experience that was familiar and more accommodating of their cultural customs and beliefs, further supports the idea of a religious aesthetic that is distinctively African centered. Robert Anderson, born into slavery in Green County, Kentucky, in 1843, provides an account from his memoirs that substantiates the thesis that enslaved Africans resisted the religious parameters set forth by the slave master and established their own distinctive style and mode of worship.

He states:

> Our preachers were usually plantation folks just like the rest of us. Some man who had a little education and had been taught something about the Bible would be our preacher. The colored folks had their code of religion, not nearly so complicated as the white man’s religion, but more closely observed . . . . When we had our meetings of this kind, we held them in our own way and were not interfered with by the white folks.

In addition to inheriting custodial rights of the history and traditions of African descended people, the Black Church also further defined the culture and nurtured the identity of Black people in America.

The vestiges of the African aesthetic, which Asante posits, is “. . .the conscious aesthetics of a people of African descent who are aware of participating in some African tradition. . . .” managed to survive the Transatlantic Slave Trade and Middle Passage,

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"...it did so under severely hostile conditions."\(^{22}\) The forced relocation of Africans then, "...guaranteed distortion and corruption of the original idea of the African aesthetic as developed in various African societies."\(^{23}\) Therefore, the new religion of which Genovese speaks confirms Asante’s claim that the African aesthetic became diluted after Africans were forced from their native land. Subsequently, Black people, who are not conscious of participating in some form of African tradition in any aspect of their lives, become vulnerable to the guise that European culture presents which further perpetuates the silencing of the African aesthetic.

Hence, because the worship traditions of the LDS and Black Church are polar opposites, Black people who relocate from the latter to the former are compelled to assimilate and adopt the worship traditions of the LDS Church. However, the research posits that Black people can be culturally centered and religiously expressive while fully engaged in the religious and cultural traditions of the LDS Church. According to Liston Pope, the Black Church is “the oldest and largest institution in the Negro community...,”\(^{24}\) however, the power of this religious institution asserts Daniel Collins, has “within the last thirty years...diminished and can no longer be said to speak for the Black masses.”\(^{25}\) He further suggests that, “Blacks have [forsaken] the traditional Negro

\(^{22}\) Ibid.

\(^{23}\) Ibid.


church experience for different modes and structures of religious expression."26

Location, or relocation, then, becomes an important topic of investigation among Black women who join the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta. Perhaps the Black Church is no longer spiritually, religiously and, perhaps, culturally and socially relevant among this group.

While this research is concerned with the Black female presence in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta, their collective devotion to the Church exists in congregations throughout the United States with some congregations having a greater Black presence than others based upon geographic location. One such congregation is The Genesis Group, an auxiliary group of the LDS Church, which was established on October 19, 1971, in Salt Lake City, Utah, to "...meet the needs of Black members, many of whom were descendants of early pioneers, with the hope of reactivating those who had left the Church and of supporting new converts of African descent."27

Although The Genesis Group does not exist in every city or province where there is an LDS Church, the establishment of the Group further supports Asante’s location thesis, which states that, "...the person closest to the center of a culture is better able to utilize all of the elements of that culture for the presentation of an idea. . .our culture is most appropriate to our historical experiences and there is nothing more aesthetically correct for our creations than centeredness in our own history."28 Stated differently, the

26 Ibid.


geographic location in which the LDS Church is headquartered, Salt Lake City, Utah, and the demographic makeup of the same, is significantly different in comparison to that of Atlanta, Georgia. According to the US Census Bureau, “Utah’s 2007 population of about 2.6 million includes a higher percentage of whites [and] a lower percentage of blacks...than the nation as a whole.”29 That White people make up 93.5%30 of the total population in Utah, and Blacks 1%31 is stark in comparison to that of Georgia where 65.8%32 of the total populous is white and 29.9%33 is Black. Because of the aforementioned variance, it can be assumed that the retention and perpetuation of culturally centered worship practices among Blacks in religious institutions where there are larger concentrations of persons from this racial group are more prominent than in areas where they have a diminutive presence. Equally assumed is that the religious aesthetic among Blacks is muted in religious institutions where there are greater populations of white people.

Based upon records maintained by the National Council of Churches, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the second-fastest-growing church in the


30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.


33 Ibid.
United States.” To date, there are 13,508,509 members of the LDS Church throughout the world, 74,644 of whom are members in Georgia. Membership among Africans throughout the Diaspora contributes to the overall rise in Church membership. The population in Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana alone totals 174,710 with Nigeria’s population totaling 88,374, South Africa’s 48,112 and Ghana’s 38,224. While membership among Blacks in the United States is increasing, it is impossible to determine the exact number because membership records do not delineate racial nor ethnic demographics.

Unknown to the larger society, the African presence in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has existed since the 1800s. Though like American history, the countless contributions made by early Black pioneers including Jane Manning James, Elijah Abel, Green Flake and others have not received the same treatment as their White counterparts until recently. With the publication of Darius Gray’s and Margaret Blair Young’s trilogy *Standing on the Promises*—a collection of stories about the faith, history, trials and triumphs of Black Latter-day Saints—and the recent documentary “Nobody Knows: The Untold Story of Black Mormons,” the experiences of Blacks in the Church have now been given an affirming voice.

**Significance of the Research**

This investigation is significant for a variety or reasons. Firstly, based upon the available research, this study appears to be the first of its kind to be conducted by a Black

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35 Ibid.
female member of the LDS Church that employs an Afrocentric paradigm to advance the investigation. Its utilization illuminates the impact location and the absence of the African-American religious aesthetic have on Black women's ability to self-identify in a traditionally White religious institution. Secondly, while research has been conducted about Black people in the Church, particularly oral history projects that focus on their perception and/or interpretation of the Priesthood ban among Black men, most of these projects have seemingly been void of providing a framework that offers any level of clarity regarding identity development or reconciliation among Black people and the cultural costs incurred as a result of their membership in the LDS Church. This investigation provides such a framework, which attempts to determine which, if any, of the identity development stages postulated in William Cross's Nigrescence Model is most applicable to identity development and reconciliation among Black LDS women in Southwest Atlanta. Thirdly, because the visibility of Black women is continuing to increase in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta, it is imperative to pursue this research in order to illuminate the cultural relevance and validity of Black religious worship, particularly among those for whom this style of worship was practiced. Finally, the research may compel Church officials to examine more closely the impact Black religious culture has on the retention of its Black members in order to determine why Blacks leave the LDS Church for other modes of religious expression.

Although the researcher does not discredit the current body of literature that has been written about Black membership in the LDS Church, it is necessary, however, to understand what causes Black women in Southwest Atlanta, and Blacks elsewhere, to relocate to the historically White religious institution and remain active members despite
the absence of a religious aesthetic which speaks to the culture, history and spirit of Black people in North America.

**Theoretical Framework**

William Cross’s Nigrescence theory on Black identity development provides the theoretical framework for this investigation. Molefi Asante’s location thesis is also employed to discuss the cultural impact incurred by Black women who adopt religious traditions not reflective of their culture and history. Asante posits that location “...is essentially a process of explaining how human beings come to make decisions about the external world which takes into consideration all of the attitudes and behaviors which constitute psychological and cultural place.” 36 To this end, location theory illuminates the impact relocation and/or dislocation has on ones racial and religious identities. Dislocation, Asante says is, “...the movement of Africans from position in the sense of philosophy, art, culture, religion and values [and] represents the most serious challenge to understanding the African aesthetic.” 37 Central to location theory is the forced relocation of Africans from the continent to North America and throughout the Diaspora. This relocation Asante suggests, “...guaranteed distortion and corruption of the original idea of the African aesthetic as developed in various African societies.” 38 If Asante’s location thesis is meaningful, then Black women who join the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta voluntarily surrender the traditional worship customs developed by their enslaved


37 Ibid., 54.

38 Ibid.
ancestors for emotive expressions contrary to the experiences and cosmology of African descended people.

Similarly, Cross posits that the dictatorship of white patriarchy, “sought to control the political and cultural socialization of blacks in order to (a) increase the probability of deracination and false consciousness, which in turn would (b) decrease the probability of the development of individuals and, more importantly, collective awareness around issues of culture and class.”

Cross’s assessment of cultural oppression affirms Asante’s thesis about the dislocation of Africans, which impedes identity reconciliation among African descended persons throughout the Diaspora.

Cross postulates a theory which is concerned with identity development among persons of African descent as a result of their history in North America. Birthed out of the contemporary Black social movements (Civil Rights and Black Power movements), Nigrescence, or “the process of becoming Black,” assumes that identity development among Black people encompasses five stages: Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization and Internalization Commitment, all of which causes its subjects to rethink and reengage Blackness.

The pre-encounter stage is characterized by the subject’s desire for affirmation by the dominant race. It is in this phase that complete allegiance to the assimilation process is subscribed. Cross contends, however, that individuals in this phase, “do not deny being Black, but this “physical” fact is thought to play an insignificant role in their everyday lives. Being Black and having knowledge about the Black experience have little to do

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with their perceived sense of happiness and well-being, and Blackness contributes little to their life."

Geneva Gay, like Cross, suggests that the encounter stage is characterized as, "an experience or event that shatters a person’s current feeling about ethnic self and group... a conscious negative confrontation with one’s ethnicity...," causing individuals to deliberately contemplate "their ethnicity for the first time in their lives, or [rethink] their existing beliefs and values about their ethnic identity and group membership." This phase assumes that the individual’s first identity, or the one they were socialized into accepting, is surrendered for a newly shaped one.

Described as "a period when everything important must be relevant to Blackness..." the immersion-emersion stage of Black identity development causes its subjects to seek after all things Black, i.e., literature, music, art and history. Beverly Vandiver et al. contend that, "Immersion into Blackness...is the first step on the journey toward an “internalized” Black identity." During this phase of development, individuals begin to search for a positive identity concept. They are open to reconsidering the significance of their Blackness and take steps to fully engage the process of “becoming

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42 Ibid.


44 Ibid.
Black.” Cross suggests that the individual “begins to demolish the old perspective and simultaneously tries to construct what will become his or her new frame of reference.”

Following the immersion-emersion experience, individuals begin to internalize and embrace their new identity. Confident expressions of “I’m Black and I’m Proud” become bold articulations of identity and community. This stage is characterized by a shift from imposed notions of identity to a more racially and culturally centered mode of being. According to Cross:

The shift is away from how your friends see you and toward confidence in your personal standards of Blackness; from uncontrolled rage toward white people to controlled anger at oppressive systems and racist institutions; from symbolic, boisterous rhetoric to serious analysis and “quiet” strength; from unrealistic urgency that can lead to dropping out to a sense of destiny that can sustain long-term commitment; from anxious, insecure, rigid, pseudo-Blackness based on the hatred of whites to proactive Black pride, self-love, and a deep sense of connection to, and acceptance by, the Black community.

Finally, Cross’s Nigrescence Model culminates with the internalization/commitment stage, which addresses the need for long-term interest in the sustainability of Black identity. While some Black people devote the remainder of their lives to the cultivation of blackness, there are those who abandon former ideals of Black pride and essentially become comfortable in “being” rather than continuing the development process. Utilizing the Nigrescence Model for this study will help to explain which of the stages postulated by Cross is most applicable to Black women who join the LDS Church.

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46 Ibid., 210.
Methodology

Located on the Southwest side of Atlanta, Georgia, the Atlanta Ward (parish) is unique due to its significantly large Black population. According to congregant and historian Ken Driggs, "half of the group is black and half is white," which is a peculiar statistic compared to most LDS congregations in North America, which are predominantly white. The Atlanta Ward says Driggs, "...is an interesting mix of Georgia Tech and Georgia State University students, inner-city families, some high-tech professionals, a few military families, recent immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa, and a few lawyers." To date however, the indigenous Black population, primarily those individuals from Africa and the Caribbean, is relatively small based upon the current number of active Black members who attend Sunday worship services and social activities.

The Ward currently has at its leadership helm a Black male bishop who has two counselors (or assistants), one is Black and the other is White. However, prior to June 9, 1978, men of African descent were denied the Priesthood, which is the highest ecclesiastical right for men in the LDS Church. As such, this group was not entitled to the opportunity of holding the office of Bishop or any other leadership position in the Church. Additionally, Black men according to Cardell Jacobson, "could not function as priesthood leaders or perform priesthood functions...This included, among other things, passing and blessing the sacrament...[and] giving priesthood blessings...Furthermore,


48 Ibid.
married Black men and women were not permitted entrance into the temple to be sealed to each other through the ordinance of eternal marriage nor were they allowed to stand in as proxies to perform these ordinances for others. The Priesthood restriction was abolished in 1978, thereby permitting Black men the opportunity for the Priesthood as well as other leadership positions.

Central to this research were Black female members of the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta. It was initially believed that approximately 48 women whose ages ranged from 18 – 80 would participate in the investigation; however, after contacting respondents, twenty-four were found to either not be members of the Church or were not interested in participating. Those who did participate in informal conversations with the researcher were representative of the age group. Respondents’ socioeconomic, professional, educational and religious backgrounds, varied, however, most expressed prior experience in the Black Church. The size of the sample was low due in large part to the absence of racial and ethnic statistics in the Church’s census records. Therefore, the researcher was not able to identify the total population of Black women in the Atlanta Ward. However, respondents were selected based upon known Black LDS women in the congregation. Invitations were then extended to other Black female members based upon referrals from participating interviewees. Black women were selected as the primary subjects for this study because of their noticeable presence in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta and because of their former affiliation with the Black Church. Their

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selection was intended to illuminate Black women’s ability to reconcile their racial and religious identities as members of the historically White religious institution.

**Instrument**

In order to determine the degree to which Black women in the LDS Church reconcile their racial and religious identities, the researcher employed a mixed methods research approach. This method facilitated a holistic and scientific approach to collecting and analyzing data, which included a survey, focus group interviews and participant observations in order to explain how Black women reconcile their Black and religious identities in the LDS Church.

Firstly, the survey was composed of three sections—demographic, religious and identity. The demographic section contained seven questions that elicited data about race, marital status, age, educational level and socioeconomic status. Responses from this section allowed the researcher to examine demographic similarities that may have influenced women’s choices to join the LDS Church as well how their decision to join impacted their ability to reconcile their racial and religious identities. All data was self-reported.

In order to measure the subjects’ satisfaction with their worship and social experiences in the LDS Church, a section of the survey was devoted to religion. Subjects were asked to address seventeen questions regarding their perceptions about: worship styles and religious culture of the Black and LDS Churches, their church attendance, and appeal of the LDS Church over their former religious faith. Questions included, “What is it about the LDS Church that appeals to you?” and “If you attended another church before joining the LDS Church, do you miss the worship experiences that you had in your
former church?” To better assess how Black women identify racially, a series of seven questions regarding identity were incorporated in the last section of the research instrument. For example, women were asked, “How do you define yourself as a Black woman?” Responses included dress, hair, language, culture and history. Additionally, they were asked to determine the level of importance placed on expressing their Blackness as well as how they identify as members of the LDS Church. Responses to the latter included African-American Mormon, Child of God, Black Mormon and African-American. These items, coupled with Cross’s five stages of Black identity development, or Nigrescence, allowed the researcher to evaluate the degree to which Black identity is reconciled among the investigated group. Although the study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, and the researcher was unable to specifically delineate which of the five stages were most applicable to each woman over time, survey questions did allow the researcher to broadly categorize respondents and their level of Black identity development and reconciliation.

Secondly, as a participant observer, the researcher observed the women in their religious environment in the LDS Church. This process helped to determine whether or not retentions of the African-American religious aesthetic were perpetuated in the selected LDS Church. Moreover, the holistic research approach enabled the researcher to study how the subjects interact and navigate their religious environment and their level of comfort and activity in the Church. Subjects were observed primarily during the Fast and Testimony portion of the worship service which allowed the researcher to gauge whether or not retentions of the African oral tradition were expressed by the participants.
Thirdly, focus groups allowed for a discussion of the experiences of the subjects as they were articulated and validated in their own voices. While questions presented during the focus groups and on the survey were similar in nature, the former intended to elicit responses to open-ended questions for which responses occurred organically. For example, during the focus groups subjects verbally shared their level of satisfaction with the social climate and worship style of the Church, whereas in depth responses were not as prevalent on the survey. Additionally, respondents were encouraged to discuss how they reconciled their Black and religious identities in the Church, what the LDS Church offered them that the Black church did not, and how they recovered the African-American religious aesthetic in the traditionally White church.

**Procedure**

The initial phase of the process was the survey, which was administered onsite prior to each focus group. The initial intent was to mail the surveys in advance, however, to ensure surveys were returned in a timely manner, the researcher chose to administer them onsite. This also facilitated an opportunity for respondents to gain clarity about items on the survey. Responses from each survey were tabulated using the SPSS software.

Focus groups took place over a two-week period, which required subjects to be divided into four groups. Two of the 24 respondents were unable to attend the focus groups but were interviewed individually. To ensure accuracy and to maintain the integrity of the responses, interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Analysis of survey and interview responses, along with the findings from the SPSS tabulations facilitated an opportunity to determine if Black women retain the African-
American religious aesthetic in the LDS Church. Additionally, the analysis enabled the researcher to gauge the degree to which Black women reconcile their religious and racial identities based upon Cross's Nigrescence Model for Black identity development.

**Research Questions**

1. What does the LDS Church offer Black women that the Black Church does not?
2. In what ways does membership in the LDS Church impact Black women's identity?
3. How do Black women recover the African-American religious aesthetic in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta?

**Limitations of the Study**

Primarily, this research is limited because the LDS Church does not record statistics pertaining to race, except in areas where people are largely or exclusively of African descent. Therefore, the researcher was unable to determine the number of Black women who are members of the LDS Church.

**Organization of the Thesis**

The research is presented in five chapters. Chapter I includes the introduction, purpose of the research, statement of the problem, significance of the research, theoretical framework, methodology, research questions and limitations of the study. Chapter II offers a review of selected literature related to Black women's identity and the African-American religious aesthetic. Chapter III provides a historical overview of the LDS Church. Chapter IV presents the findings, data analysis and discussion, while Chapter V provides the conclusion and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been numerous texts and articles written about race among Black women and their ability to fully access racially specific White spaces. Furthermore, these texts address the social, political and economic marginalization of Black women in relation to their White female counterparts. However, based upon the engaged texts, there appears to be a deficiency in literature regarding the impact the intersection of race and religion have on identity reconciliation, or non-reconciliation, among Black women in religious institutions where the demographic is predominately White.

Rooted in the Black experience, and subsequently the Black Church, the African-American religious aesthetic was fashioned by enslaved Africans and their American descendents who sought religious, social and racial freedom. The African-American religious aesthetic, then, enabled them to create a religious cosmology based on spirituality, culture, faith and liberation. Although current literature by Latter-day Saint scholars addresses the presence of Blacks in the LDS Church, the literature is anemic in its discussion about the significance of Black religiosity in the lives of Black members in the historically White church. For instance, while Jessie Embry’s text, *Black Saints in a White Church*, captures a brief history of “African American Churches,” substantive discussions about the historicity and legitimacy of the African-American religious aesthetic, its relationship to Black culture and its role in shaping Black identity.
Primarily worth noting is the profoundly deficient integration of an Afrocentric paradigm into the current literature about Blacks in the LDS Church. Its absence perpetuates the questioning of Afrocentric theory as a viable social, psychological and spiritual model from which to evaluate the lived experiences of Black people. Without this integration, the connectivity between the African-American religious aesthetic and Black identity continues to be absent from the discussion regarding Black religiosity and self-identification among Black people, women specifically, in the LDS Church and in other predominately White religious institutions. That said, however, Embry does present a robust discuss about the experiences of Black people who join the LDS Church.

Utilizing “LDS Afro-American Oral History Project” interviews and the “LDS Afro-American Survey,” Embry was able to articulate the level of comfort Blacks experienced in their new religious environment. The study found that among the 224 participants surveyed, 61.3% said they strongly disagreed that they had to give up their Black identity in order to be a member of the Church. The other 24.6% said they disagreed. Additionally, 50.8% (half) of the subjects said they have never felt that they had to surrender their blackness in order to be accepted as a member of the LDS Church. However, 18.9% said they sometimes felt they had to surrender while the other 9.7% said they felt they had to very often. Furthermore, when asked if they ever felt the need to leave the LDS Church because Blacks do not fit into the social and cultural experience

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2 Ibid., 203 – 204.
of the Church, 63.2% said never, 21.4% said seldom. It appears from her study that Black participants in the study had a high self-identity concept and were not dramatically influenced by the Church’s former racist practices nor the cultural environment in which they were now members. However, as previously mentioned, the study would have been more impactful if an identity model were employed as well as Afrocentric thought to explain how Black members engage racial identity reconciliation as well as to understand what compels Black people to forsake the religion of their culture and history. Doing so would explain more clearly what Black identity is and how culture and history shape and define it.

Existing literature about Blacks in the Church relies heavily on intentional discussions about the Priesthood ban, the catalyst for its implementation and subsequent lift, and the perceptions of Black members about the LDS Church’s legacy of discrimination. For example, O. Kendall White, Jr.’s and Daryl White’s article “Integrating Religious and Racial Identities: An Analysis of LDS African American Explanations of the Priesthood Ban,” offers one of the most compelling and comprehensive discussions about the impact the Priesthood ban had on the intersection of racial and religious identities among Black Latter-day Saints and their ability to self-identify, however, it does not specifically address the cultural costs incurred among Blacks for whom the Black Church was their religious foundation. Furthermore, a concise delineation of identity development among Black people as well as Black centered social theories are not addressed in the article. This absence further advances the narrow discussion about Black membership in the LDS Church.

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3 Ibid., 207.
While the article is anemic in the areas outlined above, the authors do address how Black members of the LDS Church come to terms with their racial and religious identities. Using what psychology terms the cognitive dissonance model, the authors were able to determine how Black members examined and subsequently identified with the LDS policy of Priesthood restriction. Utilizing data from the “LDS Afro-American Oral History Project,” the authors found that participants’ acceptance of the Priesthood ban varied. For example, on one end of the continuum were those who accepted the traditional ideology that Blacks were responsible in the pre-existence for the Priesthood restriction. Likewise, these respondents were more inclined to esteem their religious identity over their racial identity. In other words, being a member of the LDS Church was more important than being Black. On the other hand, however, respondents who did not accept the traditional premise of Blacks being less valiant in the pre-existence and therefore forfeiting their right to the Priesthood valued their racial identity over their religious identity. The authors found that the salience of religious and racial identities varied among the group.

Whereas literature regarding the Priesthood ban is essential to the discussion about Black identity in the LDS Church, which is why it is has been incorporated in the literature review, it presents a limited purview about reconciliation among Black people in the LDS Church. Like Kendall’s and White’s examination of racial and religious identities among Blacks in the LDS Church, the current literature limits identity reconciliation to one specific event. Agreeably, the “ban” has a significant influence on

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identity reconciliation or non-reconciliation among certain Black members and can serve as one springboard from which to launch additional research about Blacks in the LDS Church. There are, however, other issues including the diminutive presence of Black people in LDS publications, artwork, films and commercials, and stories about LDS pioneers which impact Black identity. Additionally longitudinal studies about Black children who grow up in the LDS Church appear to be void from the current literature. These types of research projects would greatly impact the discussion about identity reconciliation among the LDS Church’s Black population. Unfortunately, however, the available engaged literature does not appear to offer a discussion about these issues, rather the focus is primarily on the Priesthood ban and its interpretation or acceptance among Black members.

Although this literature review does not seek to cover the aforementioned topics, it will provide a review of selected literature about Black women’s identity and the African-American religious aesthetic, all of which have implications on the discussion and analysis about identity reconciliation or non-reconciliation among Black women in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta. These texts will further illuminate the void that exists in the current literature about Black identity in the LDS Church specifically, and in traditionally White religious institutions in general.

It is the researcher’s intent to present this information in a way that will compel academicians and sociologists to rethink Blackness in the LDS Church and to offer a more elevated discussion about issues, aside from the Priesthood ban, that impact their identity. This review is presented in two sections. Section one provides a review of selected scholarly writings about Black women’s identity in America while Section two
addresses literature about the African-American religious aesthetic. Both sections establish a foundation upon which a thoughtful analysis about Black LDS women’s ability to reconcile their identities in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta.

Section I
Who Do Men Say That I Am: Black Women and Identity?

Basic to identity, self-image, and being in the physical world is the body, a source of conflict for black women whose ownership of its beauty, pleasure, and potential has been complicated where it has not been denied. Decried as unnatural, ugly, bestial, and unfeminine, the black female’s person was excluded...from the nineteenth-century Cult of True Womanhood.

—Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson, Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representation by African American Women

Is there some place I can go and be seen and be heard as a human being, just as a human being? Can my humanness be heard while you’re looking at a Black woman?

—Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America

By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women, but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so.

—Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment

Black women have encountered a plethora of issues throughout their tenure in North America. Voicelessness, invisibility, and gender and racial oppression have challenged their ability to expressively define themselves and their experiences. From a historical perspective, the colonization of the African continent commenced and perpetuated the denigration of the African cosmology. Resultantly, Africans were
inhumanely transported from their indigenous home to lands not accommodating of their culture, religion and tongue. Their captors forced African women to populate slave plantations, rendering their wombs factories from which capitalism was built. Carla Peterson asserts:

As dominant ideologies devalued the African soul, spirit, and inner being, they came to emphasize the body. . . . Within both economic systems of slavery and free labor, the black body was made to perform as a laboring body, as a working machine dissociated from the mind that invents or operates the machine. . . . In slavery in particular, the black woman not only carried out the physical labor demanded by plantation economy, she also performed the sex work that satisfied the slaveholder’s lust as well as the reproductive labor of breeding that ensured the replenishment of his slave stock.5

Black women were rendered domesticas and labored in the homes of White families as maids, cooks and caregivers. White patriarchy’s incessant disregard for Black women’s personhood further jeopardized their ability to self-identify and hindered their advancement. Race contributed to social, economic and political inequality while oppression overshadowed identity and humanity. To further advance Black women’s subjugation, while simultaneously impeding self-identification, the American patriarchal structure required Black women to adopt European constructs of womanhood, which regards Black identity, culture and womanhood as irrelevant and therefore, inferior. Geneva Gay and Willie Baber posit:

Throughout most of their history, Afro-Americans [women] have experienced a barrage of negative ethnic image propaganda, laws, and customs. An essential function of slavery, cultural imperialism, assimilation, and racism has been the deliberate attempt to convince Blacks that there is something innately inferior about their ethnicity,

lifestyles, and customs, simply because of their Blackness.  

Unlike their White counterparts, however, Black women have had to deliberately combat negative and controlling images, which seek to contain and render them voiceless. According to Patricia Hill Collins, imposed identifiers such as, “...mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture. . .negative stereotypes have been fundamental to Black women’s oppression.”  

The intersectionality of race, class and gender has consistently perpetuated the subjugation of Black women, and further reminds us, according to Collins, “...that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice.”

In spite of the “negative ethnic image propaganda” of which Gay and Barber posit, Black women are expected to assimilate into a culture that devalues and disregards their personhood. Although assimilation may present an illusory sense of advancement, it further perpetuates the duality of Black women’s existence in America and throughout the Diaspora. Collins contends:

Black women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as Black women with our objectification as the Other. The struggle of living two lives, one for ‘them and one for ourselves’ creates a peculiar tension

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8 Ibid., 18.
to construct independently self-definition within a context where Black womanhood remains routinely derogated.9 Consequently, Black women find themselves in a precarious place of consciousness; existing in two spheres as it were. W.E.B. DuBois suggests that, “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood [womanhood], to merge his [her] double self into a better and truer self.”10 This precarious place of consciousness has become, in many respects subconscious normalcy for many Black women, thereby, causing them to switch to an institutionalized identity created by White patriarchy without effort. Better stated, Black women are compelled to abandon Blackness in order to be accepted by a society that renders them invisible. Moreover, they become disconnected, many times, from their culture in order to advance in specifically White spaces. According to research conducted by Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden found:

. . . that because of the singular way racism and sexism converge in the lives of Black women, because of the unique status and legacy of African Americans in this society, and because of the hatred, misperceptions, and lowered expectations that bigotry evokes, Black women may have to shift more often and more consistently than most other Americans. They must endlessly compromise themselves to put and deflect the impact of those hostilities on their lives . . . .11

Hence, shifting causes an imbalance in the emotional and spiritual well being among those for whom this behavior is normal. According to Jones and Gooden, “shifting can be profoundly self-destructive. . . . Too often she moves from being in touch with her inner

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9 Ibid., 99-100.


authentic experience to putting all of her attention into creating an outer acceptable façade.”

Consequently, “She may become psychologically or even physically ill... [and] adrift spiritually.” Surprisingly, Black women’s tendency to shift, whether consciously or subconsciously, has manifested in the church. Jones and Gooden believe that, “They’re [women] coerced to shift, to act “ladylike,” to be submissive. They feel subtly, or not so subtly, put down by the church experience despite all of its spiritual offerings.”

Because sexism is pervasive in churches of all denominations, Black women who occupy these spaces must contend with being Black and female in a male dominated religious institution.

While the engaged literature does not specifically address Black women’s tendency to shift in the LDS Church, shifting among Black women in predominantly White churches is a plausible phenomenon. Furthermore, membership among Black women in the LDS Church represents a form of cultural and religious shifting as they move outside of the Black Church which is deemed the epicenter of religious and social culture in the African-American community. Conversion and subsequent membership in these environments necessitate a cultural, social and religious shift and in many respects, assimilation. David Snow and Richard Machalek suggest that, “conversion not only concerns a change in values, beliefs, and identities, but more fundamentally and significantly, it entails the displacement of one universe of discourse by another or the ascendance of a formerly peripheral universe of discourse to the status of a primary

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12 Ibid., 64.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
authority. In other words, the African or Black cosmology, which is perpetuated in
the Black Church is replaced with Eurocentric culture and social engagement. Therefore,
in order to co-exist as a Black person in the LDS, members are compelled, whether
voluntarily or forcefully, to abandon what Asante calls the perpetual disconnect of Black
people from their cultural and collective centers.

From a reconciliation perspective, Black women who join the LDS Church are
submerged into a culture where their primary identity is that of spirit children or
daughters of God. The reality for most Black women in the Church, however, is that
when juxtaposed with societal oppressions, their racial identity overshadows their divine
individuality. Vetta L. Sanders Thompson contends that, “The physical fact of racial
differences, primarily skin color, heightens the awareness of race for African Americans
and the larger society.” For Blacks in the LDS Church, this awareness was heightened
when Black men were forbidden to fully participate in LDS religious life because of their
race.

As previously noted, America’s history is steeped in racial oppression and human
subjugation. As such, scholars and social theorists have conducted extensive research and
engaged in critical debates about race. Many argue that race is a socially constructed
Eurocentric theory that has its roots in the domination of one group over another. As
such, race perpetuates oppression among those who are socially, politically and
economically disenfranchised. According to Howard Winant, “The idea of race began to

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15 David A. Snow and Richard Machalek, “The Sociology of Conversion,” Annual Review of

16 Vetta Sanders Thompson, “A Multifaceted Approach to the Conceptualization of African
take shape with the rise of a world political economy.” He further suggests that “. . . the conquest of the Americas, and the rise of the Atlantic slave trade were all key elements in the genealogy of race. . . .” and that “. . . racial categorization of human beings was a European invention.”17 Similarly, Audrey Smedley asserts, “Race” emerged as a social classification that reflected this greatly expanded sense of human separateness and differences. . . . “Race” developed in the minds of Europeans as a way to rationalize . . . the retention and perpetuation of slavery for imported Africans.” Furthermore, “The creation of “race” and racial ideology imposed on the conquered and enslaved peoples an identity as the lowest status groups in society.”18

In their prolific text, Critical Race Theory, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic suggest race is composed of a series of social ideologies, which are void of biological influences. They, like Smedley et al. view race as a social construct enacted and perpetuated by a dominant group. When used to advance the race agenda, perceived notions of superiority among the dominant group create inferior and oppressive conditions among those less privileged. Delgado and Stefancic insist that, “. . . race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient.”19 While a difficult and unpleasant topic of discussion, the issue of race in America is one that Cornel West believes should

be deliberately engaged in order to heal the wounds that racism has created. In *Race Matters*, West explains that in order to advance:

\[\ldots\] a serious discussion of race in America, we must begin not with the problems of black people but with the flaws of American society—flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes. \[\ldots\]

The implication is that only certain Americans can define what it means to be American—and the rest must simply “fit in.” \[\ldots\] white America has been historically weak-willed in ensuring racial justice and has continued to resist fully accepting the humanity of blacks.\(^{20}\)

The denial of the humanity of Black people and the perpetuation of privilege among the dominant group is what author, scholar and Black LDS convert, Darron Smith, and his colleagues term “whiteness theory.” In his article “Unpacking Whiteness in Zion: Some Personal Reflections and General Observations,” Smith posits:

Whiteness theory is an analytical tool that specifically names and displaces whiteness as a monolithic power structure. It demonstrates the “normalization” of whiteness and white privilege at the center of knowledge production. Whiteness theory affirms that “white” is not a biological distinction, but rather a social construction that benefits whites and those passing as white.\(^{21}\)

Thus, for the LDS Church, the implementation of the Priesthood ban further advanced the “whiteness theory.” The ban prohibited men of African ancestry from full participation in the Church because they were considered descendants of Ham and less valiant than their White counterparts during the pre-mortem existence. Temple worship, which is the crux of the LDS faith, is made possible through the Priesthood authority which Black men were denied. However, their denial extended far beyond what appeared

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to be an exclusive male order. While White women were entitled to worship in the

temple, like Black men, Black women were stripped of the rite to do so, in part because
	only "valiant" (White) men who held the Priesthood and their female companions could

erenter the venerated edifices. This practice did not change until 1978 when the Priesthood

ban was abolished.

According to the LDS Church’s pronouncement about temples, much of the work

is,

cconcerned with the family. . . . Marriage partners who come to the house of

the Lord and partake of its blessings are joined not only for the period of

their mortal lives but for all eternity. They are bound together under

authority not only of the law of the land that joins them until death, but

also through the eternal priesthood of God, which binds in heaven that

which is bound on earth. . . . 22

Until 1978, the implication was Black men and women, nor their union, were worthy of

the eternal matrimonial blessing. For Jane Manning James, however, the implication fell

on deaf ears. The Black “Mormon Pioneer,” who, after arriving in Nauvoo, Illinois, in

1843, resided with and became a domestic worker of LDS founder, Joseph Smith. 23

Desiring to fully participate in her LDS faith, yet realizing the limitations her skin

color presented, James vocalized her disdain about the restriction on numerous occasions.

Nevertheless, undaunted by her futile attempts to petition LDS Church officials for full

rights, James remained a devoted member of the Church until her death on April 16,

22 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Why These Temples?,”

23 Ronald G. Coleman and Darius Gray, “Two Perspectives: The Religious Hopes of “Worthy”
African American Latter-day Saints before the 1978 Revelation,” in Black and Mormon, eds. Newell G.
Binghurst and Darron T. Smith (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2004), 51.
1908. James, like many Black women in America and throughout the Diaspora who are repeatedly marginalized because of the color of their skin, "...refused to acquiesce to repeated denials of her requests and was ever vigilant in trying to obtain what she legitimately believed she was entitled to as a devout member of the LDS faith," according to Ronald Coleman and Darius Gray.

Noted scholar and Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins refers to this notion of being in the Church but not of the Church as the "outsider within status," suggesting that "Afro-American women have historically been privy to some of the most intimate secrets of white society," however, "despite their involvement, they remained "outsiders.""25 Contemporaneously speaking, James's aggressive articulation of identity and expectation for equality has been defined as the angry Black woman complex, however, Collins posits, "By defining and valuing assertiveness and other "unfeminine qualities as necessary and functional attributes for Afro-American womanhood, Black women’s self-valuation challenges the content of externally-defined controlling images."26

As a social theory, Black feminist thought, addresses interlocking oppressive themes of race, class, gender, sexuality and nation, all of which impact identity, its development and subsequent expression among Black women. This revolutionary theory is concerned with creating safe spaces for discourse, self-definition and ultimately resistance to oppression and the dominant institution that created it. Although the United States Constitution grants fundamental rights of equal citizenship and social justice for

24 Ibid.


26 Ibid., S18.
all, the reality for many, however, is that there is a grave disparity in the transfer of those rights because of “race, class, gender, sexuality and citizenship status.” Black women, for whom this has been the experience, dismantle racial and social paradigms of justice and equality posited by white male elitists, when they challenge the social system by voicing their experiences. Collins believes that the, “Concrete experience effectively destabilized seemingly scientific categories when such categories appeared unable to explain Black women’s experiences and when Black women refused to accept the authority of those categories to explain their lives.” Collins obviously supports an epistemological framework in which Black women impose their experiences on Western patriarchal structures; creating an atmosphere conducive to truth telling and the rejection of false and preconceived notions about what their experiences are or should be. Likewise, research like this empowers Black women by allowing them the opportunity to articulate their lived experiences, however positive or negative, as members of the LDS Church.

The Black Church, like other social institutions, has contributed to the marginalization of Black women and their ability to self-identify as agents of religious and social change. Consistent with this idea, Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden contend that while Black women exist in these spaces, the religious message is disempowering and one that relegates them to second class status, compelling them


to "...be quiet and deferential and to yield leadership to men."

Jones and Gooden further argue that Black women are required to "...deny parts of themselves—their ability to lead, to be analytical and critical, to do more than just settle into the pews and follow the flow of a service." Hoover, much like Collins, argues that the intersectionality of race, gender and religion is triple jeopardy for Black women in America. In her article, "Black Women and the Churches: Triple Jeopardy," Hoover maintains that the inequities among Blacks and women compounded with their active engagement in religious life relegates them, in many respects, as parishioners only. Although they comprise 50% of church membership, they are excluded from positions of leadership and authority, thus silencing their voices and decision making abilities.

Historically Black men have carried the mantle of leadership in the Black Church, causing Black women to challenge the oppressive sexist ideology espoused by the religious patriarchal structure. In her book, Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880 – 1920, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham counters this ideology by delineating the numerous contributions made by Black women to the Church during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Higginbotham provides a historical context of the problem of gender oppression, while illustrating the critical role Black women have played in the establishment and perpetuation of the Black Church and its social and political entities. The text argues that groups such as the


30 Ibid.

Women's Convention Auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention offered a framework for examining the impact gender consciousness had on race and class consciousness in the Black community. From this group and others like it, Black Church women became empowered and therefore created spaces that cultivated church and civic leaders, thereby allowing women to become engaged servants and not servants only.

Although positions of authority were held by Black men, Higginbotham posits that, "...women sought to develop their own voice and pursue their own interests, which at times overlapped and at other times contested the men's."32 Likewise, Black Church women consolidated their resources of time, money and skill to ensure the Church was sustained and thrived. If it were not for their fundraising efforts, Church newspapers, schools, social welfare services, etc. would not have survived. These women were not only religious reformers, but social giants in the Black community. Higginbotham has stated that "...black church women were conveyers of culture and vital contributors to the fostering of middle-class ideals and aspirations in the black community."33

Like Collins's insider outsider theory, additional frameworks that seek to explain Black and African women's oppression and power are African feminism and Africana womanism postulated by scholars such as Obioma Nnaemeka, and Mary E. Modupe Kolawole and Clenora Hudson-Weems respectively. Unlike Western feminist thought, Nnaemeka supports a feminist discourse in which African women on the continent articulate their struggles for racial and social power and equality. Unlike Western


33 Ibid., 14.
feminist thought, however, African feminists do not regard men as their enemy; rather allies in the struggle. Nnaemeka explains that while feminist thought encourages a winner-take-all mentality in the quest for power:

...African feminism defines power as an item that is negotiable and negotiated; it assesses power not in absolute but in relative terms—in terms of power-sharing and power ebb and flow. While Western feminist discourse emphasizes the power grabbing that reinforces individualism, African feminist discourse foregrounds the power-sharing that underscores community and humane living...

Therefore, like Africana Womanism, African feminism recognizes the collective struggle among African women and men and invites men as partners in social change.

Furthermore, in her text, Womanism and African Consciousness, Kolawole argues in favor of cultural relativity and the need for a united front among African women and men; the antithesis of Black and Western feminist ideologies. She contends that:

Some issues that are central to radical feminism underscore the question of cultural relevance...Many African women recognize the way patriarchy has been manipulated to put them down...But at the same time, many also recognize the need to unite with men in a concerted effort to reject racist and imperialist subjugation.

She further maintains that in order for African women to challenge oppression, they must impose their viewpoints on the establishment via voice throwing, which when enacted, empowers them to dismantle social frameworks which aid in their oppression. Although African women are cognizant of and struggling against gender injustices, they recognize

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the importance of uniting with African men in order to collectively eliminate racist and imperialist oppression.36

Weems, like Kolawole, supports the cooperative effort among Black women and men to reject and eliminate racial and social oppressions. Grounded in African culture, Africana Womanism counters the idea that Black men are Black women’s oppressors; rather, they are both victims of racial and social inequality. Of this Weems argues, “The Africana woman does not see the man as her primary enemy as does the white feminist, who is carrying out an age-old battle with her white male counterpart for subjugating her as his property. Africana men have never had the same institutionalized power to oppress Africana women as white men have had to oppress white women.”37

The historical implications surrounding feminism, formally known as the Women’s Suffrage Movement, are extremely problematic for the opposers of feminist discourse. Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were key players in the Women’s Suffragist Movement and advocated for the same advancement opportunities and equal rights under the law for White women as their White male counterparts. Following the ratification of voting rights of Black men in 1870, White female suffragists became increasingly more staunch in their quest for equality among White women and White men. Subsequently, feminism and the Suffragist Movement developed a radically different stance; calling for the preservation of Anglo-Saxon values and White

36 Ibid., 13.

Furthermore, suffragists like Carrie Chapman Catt advocated for a united front among White women and men in an attempt to support the idea of joining forces with White men in an effort to outlaw Blacks from voting. Their vote undoubtedly displaced the vote of the other half of the dominant group.  

Both Western and Black feminist discourses are scorned by Weems and Kolawole primarily because of the ideologies espoused by Suffragists like Catt as they suggest that White theoretical discourses speak for all women regardless of race and cultural place. To imply that all women must be subjected to oppressive frameworks is fundamentally racist and breeds an environment for the perpetuation of race and gender domination by White patriarchy and their female counterparts.

...feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class, to name a few—and a commitment to reorganizing U.S. society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires.

Hooks further contends that Black women have a unique and valuable role to play in the reformation of feminist discourse and that it is imperative that, “black women recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to

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38 Ibid., 152.
39 Ibid.
envision and create a counterhegemony." For Womanist Theologian, Jacqueline
Grant however, the feminist movement, regardless of its earlier attempts to extend its
reach to Black women, argues in her text, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's
Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, that the movement’s exclusive
stance for White women’s advancement was overtly racist and oppressive. Of this she
states, “To misname themselves as “feminists” who appeal to “women’s experience” is to
do what oppressors always do; it is to define the rules and then solicit others to play the
game. . . . They have simply accepted and participated in the racism of the larger
American society. . . . This particularly accounts for the negative response which Black
women have had with respect to feminism.” While each of these theorists share
philosophical differences, all are, in essence, concerned with the liberation, visibility,
empowerment and self-naming of women of African descent throughout the Diaspora.

Section II
Rhythms of Spirit: The Birth of an African-American Religious Aesthetic

Separated from the sacred and secular rituals which provided the
foundation and deep structure of their individual and collective lives,
African men and women had been able to survive the horrors of the
Middle Passage and America’s “peculiar institution of slavery” by
developing new modes, new rituals and new linguistic codes; but the
significance in their culture and the power of the (spoken) word remained
an important feature in their new lives and their “new” (transformed
and/or synthesized) aesthetic.

—Carolyn L. Holmes, “Zora Neale Hurston’s Transmutation and
Synthesis of Nommo: Reclamation of a Legacy”

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41 bell hooks, “Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory,” in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of

42 Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and
...the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use. He has modified the language, mode of food preparation, practice of medicine, and most certainly the religion of his new country. . . .

—Zora Neal Hurston, *The Sanctified Church*

Following the tumultuous exportation of Africans to the New World and their inoculation and subsequent assimilation into Western society, the enslaved population became inundated with European constructs of Christianity. While the intent of European invaders was to dismantle the traditional mores and milieus of enslaved Africans, the eradication of African spiritual centeredness was not impinged. Dona Richards argues that, "...Africans survived the middle passage, the slave experience, and other trials in America because of the depth and strength of African spirituality and humanism," and as Asante states while "Oppression and exploitation may dislocate and disorient. . .they can never destroy the archaic, ancient, deep structure of the myths and symbols of aesthetic reality."

Despite the atrocities wrought by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the barbaric treatment of enslaved Africans in the belly of slave ships, the spiritual framework of Africans and their progenitors endured. Albert Raboteau, in *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, suggests, "...African beliefs and customs persisted and were transmitted by slaves to their descendants. Shaped and modified by a new environment, elements of African folklore, music, language, and . . .


religion were transplanted in the New World by the African diaspora.”45 Likewise, Eugene Genovese posits,

. . . the conditions of their new social life forced them to combine their African inheritance with the dominant power that they confronted and to shape a religion of their own. In time they would produce a religion—or perhaps it would be better to say a sensibility on which a religious system could be built—that would help shape the mainstream of American Christianity and yet retain its special aspect of black cultural expression.46

Furthermore, Raboteau believes, “. . . that in the Americas the religions of Africa have not been merely preserved as static “Africanisms” or as archaic “retentions.” The fact is that they have continued to develop as living traditions putting down new roots in new soil, bearing fruit as unique hybrids of American origin.”47

Slave masters and Christian missionaries counted many among the enslaved population as converted Christians, though conversion was met with resistance to what Raboteau calls, “. . . the hypocritical religion of their masters from true Christianity. . . .” which caused many among the population to reject “. . . the slaveholder’s gospel of obedience to master and mistress.”48 In contrast however, the initial intent among slavers was to withhold Christianity from the enslaved because as Amiri Baraka states, “. . . there was no idea at all of converting them. Africans were thought of as beasts, and there was certainly no idea held among the whites that, somehow, these beasts would benefit by


48 Ibid., 294.
exposure to the Christian God,” and “if given Christianity, there could be no real justification for enslaving them, since they would no longer be heathens or savages.”49

Though Africans were taught Christian customs and traditions, which were primarily cloaked in European ideologies of subjugation, Christianity was, according to C. Eric Lincoln, “...a religious conspiracy designed to keep black people accommodated to an economic system in which they were compelled to be the uncompensated instruments of white Christian enrichment.”50

The endurance of African religious traditions such as ancestral worship, incantations, emotive dance, call and response and communal worship were all symbolic representations of the spiritual fortitude of African people. Vestiges of these indigenous practices helped to preserve religious culture and tradition and served as tangible identifiers for a people whose identity was inextricably connected to Africa; the very antithesis of European civility. These vestiges then, laid the foundation for a religious institution, which perpetuated African tradition and shaped the collective identity of Africa’s descendents in North America. Daniel Collins suggests that, “The transmission of the gospels to the slaves...provided a common religious experience and the rudimentary forms for behavior. It established the first internal hierarchical structure to the Negro community...the church became a center of institutionalized social activity.”51

As the African Christian worship experience evolved, the Black Church emerged, which

49 Ibid., 36.


according to Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “...became the domain for the expression, celebration, and pursuit of a black collective will and identity.”

According to noted sociologist W. E. B. DuBois, “The Negro Church is the only social institution of the Negro which started in the African forest and survived slavery.” Nothing can be more obvious than Richard’s assertion that, “The “hush harbors” of the African slaves were the forerunners of the black church service, the penultimate expression of formalized African-American ritual drama.”

Hence, that the African spiritual structure survived the hostile and destructive environment enslavement perpetuated speaks to the fortitude and strength of African spirituality and resistance. Although religion was disguised as a means by which White Christians rescued Africans from spiritual damnation and restored civility among this population, the religion of their captors did not suffocate the faith nor the manner in which they announced spirit and performed the sacred ritual drama. However, spiritually and religion were not emotive expressions alone, rather venerated encounters with deity that transformed suffering into mental and spiritual freedom, which transcended physical, social and political oppression.

Unlike the Christian teachings and mores postulated by slave masters, remnants of traditional African religious expressions and practices were fundamental to the religious


experiences of Africans. Richards notes that it is the African ethos or cultural group collective that is grounded in the spirit ideology, which she deems important to understanding and appreciating the African-American experience. She further comments, “In the profanity of slave existence, the African ethos discovered its own sacred being through vehicles of song and ritual, music and dance.”55 This discovery of the African ethos or the sacred served as the catalyst for the birth of the African-American religious aesthetic, which served to unify, liberate and build the faith of its practitioners.

Through the aesthetic, spirit and rhythm emerge and are manifested in a variety of ways. From spirit possession to shouts from rhythmic gesticulation of the holy dance to praise songs, the African worshiper did not sit idly by waiting for Spirit to make its rounds; rather, they were active participants in calling the Spirit forth. Moreover, DuBois, in his classic 1901 essay entitled, “Of the Faith of Our Fathers,” delineates three characteristics of the religion of Black people, “…the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy…”56 all of which are not intended for the reticent. Of this, E.T. Krueger offers, “The Negro in his religious expression is not bothered with inhibitions; he gives vent to his feelings whenever so moved.”57 Richards insists that, “In African-American ritual drama, there is no passive audience, calling the spirits correctly implies total

55 Ibid., 218.


involvement." Therefore, the ritualistic customs and traditions enable the worshiper to escape from the reality of his oppressive existence.

Hence, escapism in the African ritual drama is, according to Molefi Asante, "...the mechanism/vehicle for transcendence...The transformation of our consciousness enables us to become unified and increases our understanding and perception of our situation. We are thereby able to defeat the threat of chaos with the recreation of order, through the repetition together." Therefore, communal worship affirms the collective identity of the group. Likewise, Richards remarks, "...ritual is a statement of continuity, unity and community...Ritual drama kept us sane and gave us the courage to live...so essential to the Black ethos [it] accounts for the enduring strength and vitality of Africa in North America." In addition to visual manifestations of the Spirit through aggressive body movements of the worshipper, its presence was also audibly apparent by those under its influence. The spoken work was the conduit through which spirit was announced and ritual performed and was essential to the religious customs of Africans on the continent, on the plantation and in the church. The shout, spirituals, sermon and even holy dances not only fostered communication with God and the ancestors, they were also vociferous expressions of faith and resilience. Oral religious traditions deconstructed the realities of

58 Ibid., 219.


life under oppressive conditions and gave Africans the audacity to hope for a better tomorrow. For example, code songs or spirituals, according to Raboteau,

"...sometimes expressed the slave’s desire for freedom in this world as well as in the next."61 Within the oral tradition lies the communicative power of Nommo, or what Molefi Asante defines as, "...the generative and productive power of the spoken word."62 While on the other hand, Howard Thurman offers the notion that life or spirit force in the spoken word carries the "...voice, sometimes strident, sometimes muted and weary, of a people for whom the cup of suffering overflowed in haunting overtones of majesty, beauty and power."63 Thus, Nommo, like the drum, was the communicative tongue of African expression. It transmitted the cry for freedom and articulated the plan of action for collective resistance. Nommo, announced Spirit and inspired hope.

As previously noted, religious worship among Africans is an emotive expression steeped in faith, resilience and tradition. For the African to remain still and mute when the Spirit rhythmically publicizes its presence would be in violation of the African lived experience. Kariamu Welsh-Asante says it more profoundly when she indicates that, "Rhythm is paramount in the African self-image as defined by her philosophical conception of the world. ...it is not only constant but it is essential."64 Not to be confused,


however, Welsh-Asante says, “It is not a question of having rhythm or not having rhythm but how well does one negotiate rhythm in life and in the artistic expressions of life.”65 As one of the critical elements found in the African-American religious aesthetic, rhythm, through song, dance, and shouts, summons the Spirit, and therefore creates an atmosphere that Krueger says, “...lends itself to expressiveness of feeling; [creating] in part, excitement and intensity of mood.”66 However, this form of spiritual and cultural engagement are abnormal in the LDS Church and in other non-traditional Black religious institutions such as The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Therefore, African rhythm and orality are subverted while the dominant traditions prevail.

Thus, the issue for consideration is the value of orality and rhythm and its relevance in religious and spiritual spaces. Perhaps for some, rhythm and expressive encounters with the Spirit are not essential for a true engagement with, and acceptance or acknowledgement of a Supreme Power. Through all of the hardships, the forceful drive for inclusion in religious activities, unlike their indigenous lives prior to slavery, the African descendant has managed to engage in, and create when necessary, a religious experience, regardless of chosen format, traditions and rituals, that become uniquely layered with the African and the chosen religious denomination in which they participate.

65 Ibid.
CHAPTER III
HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

This chapter provides a general historical overview of the Church’s history, purpose, and fundamental tenets. Hence, the framework will be divided into three sections. Section one discusses the events leading up to the commencement of what is considered by the LDS Church as the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is important to note that much of this section will consist of accounts taken from the life history of the LDS Church’s first President and Prophet, Joseph Smith. Section two presents a scholarly discussion about the controversy regarding the history and authenticity of the Priesthood Ban, while section three provides insight into the Church’s ideology and foundational structure.

Section I
Whose Report Will You Believe: Joseph Smith’s First Vision?

The LDS Church espouses the belief that after the death of Jesus Christ and His apostles, ancient gospel truths and priesthood powers, or the authority to act in the name of God, were taken from the earth. Subsequently, a long period of spiritual darkness, or great Apostasy, commenced. During this time, according to the LDS publication Our Heritage, “. . .many honest men and women sought the fullness of gospel truth but were
unable to find it. Clergymen of many faiths preached differing messages and called on men and women to join with them. Although most were honest in their intent, none had the fullness of the truth or the authority of God.\footnote{Our Heritage: A Brief History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996), 1.} What followed some years later would become the physical manifestation of the “restored” gospel in the form of the LDS Church.

The history of the LDS Church begins specifically in 1820 in western New York, where Smith, then a fledgling boy of 14 years, sought to understand the nature of religion and man’s relationship to God. Perplexed by the varying philosophies and ideologies espoused by the churches of his time, Smith engaged in a quest for understanding and truth. As recounted in Joseph Smith History, which is an autobiographical record of the LDS Prophet’s life, the young boy, in his efforts to determine which church was the rightful one, acknowledged with profound thought that, “During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Notwithstanding his partiality to the Methodists, however, he remained distant from all denominations due to the conflicted nature demonstrated by them. Because of the immense uncertainty, he sought direction in the Holy Bible. After reading the first chapter and fifth verse of the Epistle of James, which reads, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be
given him," Smith was compelled to act in accordance to the admonition found in the book of James. He describes this action thusly.

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible. 

Resolved to gain further enlightenment and direction, Smith retired to a grove to inquire of God for guidance. At that moment, he describes being “... seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.” The LDS Church considers this to be the event that would set in motion the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Particularly important in the LDS faith is the belief that the 14-year old boy was visited by two separate beings, God the Father and Jesus Christ. Equally as important to Latter-day Saints is the abiding reassurance that modern day revelation is available to all who diligently inquire. Continuing his account of his experience in the grove, Smith said,

...I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. ... When the light

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3 Ibid., 3.
4 Ibid.
rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!6

After gaining composure and gradually coming to terms with the encounter, Smith inquired of the Lord to determine which of the sects was right and which of them he should join. As it is written, he was instructed to join none of them “for they were all wrong” and “all their creeds were an abomination in his sight,” that they had a “form of godliness,” but denied “the power thereof.”7

Three years following this visitation, or First Vision as termed by the Church, Smith was visited by a messenger of God who would serve as the springboard from which the ancient gospel of Jesus Christ would be restored. According to LDS scripture, the messenger, or the Angel Moroni, provided Smith with further instruction. Of this he writes, “He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do; and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people.”8 What followed has become one of the fundamental precepts of the LDS faith; the re-establishment of the gospel of Jesus Christ via The Book of Mormon, also considered another testament, or second witness of Jesus Christ.

6 Ibid., 1:16-17.

7 Ibid., 1:19.

8 Ibid., 33.
Used in conjunction with the Holy Bible, *The Book of Mormon* is, according to the Church's thirteenth President and Prophet, Ezra Taft Benson, "...the keystone of our religion. It is the keystone in our witness of Christ. It is the keystone of our doctrine. It is the keystone of testimony." Prior to obtaining and subsequently translating the sacred record, Smith was advised by the messenger that "...there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fullness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants." Smith received successive visits by the messenger, who according to LDS ideology, was the last prophet to write on the ancient text. Each visit provided further direction regarding the location of the golden plates. Once received by Joseph, the arduous task of translation was his. After enduring numerous trials during this time, including, but not limited to numerous attempts by local mobsters to steal the gold plates for profit, Smith and his family relocated from Manchester, New York to Harmony, Pennsylvania in order to protect their lives as well as to maintain the integrity of the recently acquired record.

Although credited for restoring the ancient gospel, Smith received assistance during the translation of the golden plates. Oliver Cowdery, a schoolteacher in the area, who, according to *Our Heritage*, was directed to the home of Joseph Smith to serve as a scribe to the Prophet. Cowdery declared of his experience, "These were days never to be

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9 *Gospel Principles* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 53.

10 *Joseph Smith History* 1:34.
forgotten—to sit under the sound of a voice dictated by the inspiration of heaven, awakened the utmost gratitude of this bosom!" He further asserted,

That book is true. . . . I wrote it myself as it fell from the lips of the Prophet. It contains the everlasting gospel, and comes in fulfillment of the revelations of John where it says he saw an angel come with the everlasting gospel to preach to every nation, tongue and people. It contains principles of salvation. And if you will walk by its light and obey its precepts you will be saved in the everlasting kingdom of God.  

During a visitation by Moroni to Smith in 1823, instruction was given regarding the restoration of priesthood authority to the earth. The following declaration was made, "When [the gold plates] are interpreted the Lord will give the holy priesthood to some, and they shall begin to proclaim this gospel and baptize by water, and after that they shall have power to give the Holy Ghost by the laying on of their hands." Six years following Moroni’s instruction about the Priesthood, Smith, accompanied by Oliver Cowdery, received another apparition, but this time from John the Baptist of the New Testament.

Doctrine of the LDS Church postulates both men received the laying on of hands by the messenger and were told, "Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of the Messiah I confer the Priesthood of Aaron, which holds the keys of the ministering of angels, and of the gospel of repentance, and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins." A short time later, both men were conferred the priesthood of Melchizedek, or the highest authority given to men on earth to act for God. According to the teachings of the LDS Church, it was through this authority that Joseph Smith was able to organize the

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11 Ibid., 1:71.
12 Ibid.
13 Cowdery to Phelps, 199.
LDS Church. Throughout Smith’s tenure as president, he and fellow Latter-day Saints faced insurmountable persecution from those who did not share their beliefs. The ultimate price paid for their devotion to their faith was the imprisonment and subsequent murder of their prophet. Smith, along with his brother Hyrum, were murdered June 27, 1844. According to the LDS publication, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith*, “At the age of 38, the Prophet Joseph Smith had sealed his testimony with his blood. His work in mortality completed, the Church and kingdom of God set in place for the last time on earth, Joseph fell to the bullets of assassins.”15 Although his death was mourned, members of the LDS Church continue to revere him as a prophet of God along with those who succeeded him.

Section II
Race In Zion: The African Presence in the LDS Church

And he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; . . . and all are alike unto God.

— The Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 26:33

And now I desire that this inequality should be no more in this land, especially among this my people; but I desire that this land be a land of liberty, and every man may enjoy his rights and privileges alike.

—The Book of Mormon, Mosiah 29:32

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, like many religious and social institutions in America, has practiced racial separatism. Notwithstanding the proclamations made in the aforementioned passages (Nephi and Mosiah), the faithful diligence of many early Black Latter-day Saints was met with denial to fully engage in

15 *The Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 24.
their worship as members of the LDS Church. More specifically, the highly espoused practice of temple worship and other customs, which require priesthood authority, were not available to the Church’s Black members. Notwithstanding the adamant practice of priesthood denial by the LDS Church up until 1978, many scholars, clergy and lay persons have questioned the authenticity and divinity of the ban. Although the Church espouses that the restriction was a revelation from God, some believe Joseph Smith to be the author while others have suggested Brigham Young, who succeeded Joseph Smith as president and prophet. It is believed that Young more than Smith instituted the prohibition due to his views about persons of African descent. Young said, “Any man having one drop of the seed of [Cain] . . . in him cannot hold the priesthood, and if no prophet ever spake it before I will say it now.”16 Because the LDS Church regards prophets as direct messengers of God, many adherents believe Young to have received divine revelation barring Blacks from the Priesthood. In his book, All Abraham’s
*Children: Changing Mormon Conceptions of Race and Lineage*, Armand Mauss suggests that, “Brigham Young, whatever his reasons, made . . . declarations . . . and did so on his own authority, without reference to Joseph Smith or anyone else.”17 The ban then, according to Mauss’s assessment, implies that race alone was the single most factor in prohibiting Black men from receiving the Priesthood.

Many practitioners of the LDS faith, and non-adherents as well, are not aware that men of African descent were given the Priesthood prior to the restriction. In the

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introduction to *Black and Mormon*, Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith criticize two articles printed in *Church News*, an official publication of the church, for its inaccurate and ambiguous accounts of the status of Blacks in the LDS church. According to Bringhurst and Smith, the essay failed to mention that, “Joseph Smith [as founder and leader of the Church] had allowed for the ordination of blacks...that Brigham Young, not Joseph Smith, initiated the practice of denying blacks the priesthood.”18 Alma Allred similarly notes that, “During the lifetime of Joseph Smith, there was at least one black priesthood holder. Elijah Abel was a member of the Third Quorum of Seventy and was called on three full-time missions—two during the administration of Joseph Smith...”19 Mauss further argues that while the origins of the policy are unintelligible, “They almost certainly did not originate with the founding prophet, Joseph Smith, and there is no contemporaneous documentation indicating that they did.”20 According to Mauss, however, Smith did “...[share] with other Americans of the time the belief that blacks were descendants of biblical lineage [Ham] under divine curse, but he does not seem to have connected such remote lineages to ineligibility for the priesthood...”21

While the fundamental belief that Blacks are a cursed and weaker group, did not originate with Latter-day Saints, but rather with the Protestant groups, from which

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21 Ibid.
Mormons converted, the myth about the African lineage still exists among some LDS followers. Mauss asserts that while the racist teachings “died a natural death over a period of time among Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and others,” these myths “. . . have lingered in Mormonsim. . . . The only way to neutralize what’s out there is a public repudiation”\(^\text{22}\) of earlier statements about Blacks.

Despite Mauss’ assertion, however, there are scholars and Latter-day Saints who insist that the Priesthood policy is doctrinally based and evidenced in LDS scripture, specifically verses 21, 22 and 27 in The Book of Abraham, which state,

> Now this king of Egypt was a descendant from the loins of Ham, and was a partaker of the blood of the Canaanites by birth. From this descent sprang all the Egyptians, and thus the blood of the Canaanites were preserved in the land. . . . Now, Pharaoh being of that lineage by which he could not have the right of Priesthood, notwithstanding the Pharaohs would fain claim it from Noah, through Ham, therefore my father was led away by their idolatry.\(^\text{23}\)

Fawn McKay Brodie posits in, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, that the verses not only support the perceived notion that Blacks are a cursed group, but that their curse served as the impetus for and prolongation of Priesthood denial.\(^\text{24}\) Hence, Brodie’s position assumes that the aforementioned verses are doctrinally based. Brodie also suggests in her text a direct relationship between the ban and the slave holding state of Missouri. According to Brodie, Latter-day Saints who migrated to the state chose to


\(^{23}\) The Pearl of Great Price, *Abraham* 1: 21, 22, 27.

adopt a pro-slavery anti-Black position in order to foster peace with their Missouri neighbors. This also included the denial of Black Priesthood.25

Policies and doctrine in the LDS Church are distinguishable entities. Policies of the Church can be changed or discontinued. Conversely however, doctrine in the LDS faith are principles of truth, or absolutes that do not change and are embodied in what is called the Standard Works, which consist of the Holy Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. Considered sacred texts essential to the temporal and eternal welfare of adherent members and to those accepting of the Church’s teachings, the Standard Works also serve as spiritual guideposts by which to govern the affairs of the Church.

Despite Brodie’s position, Alma Allred stresses that, “. . .there is no doctrine in the church that blacks are descendants of Cain. . . .”26 which therefore implies that the priesthood ban is not doctrinally based, but rather, racially biased policies enacted by early leaders of the LDS Church. Former president and prophet of the Church, David O. McKay has stated that, “There is not now, and there never has been, a doctrine in this Church that the Negroes are under a divine curse. We believe that we have scriptural precedent for withholding the priesthood from the Negro. It is practice, not a doctrine, and the practice will some day be changed. . . .”27

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25 Ibid


27 Ibid., 37.
Because of the ambiguity and discrepancies that exist in literature about the history regarding Blacks and the origination of the Priesthood ban, many consider the rhetoric a tainted chapter in the LDS Church’s past. However, Mauss claims that, “Authoritative writings by earlier church leaders, as well as recurring anecdotes at the grassroots level, suggest that some of this residue remains and continues to encumber relationships within the church, even if its impact has diminished on the outside.”

Notedly, Darron Smith, joined the LDS Church for reasons similar to other Blacks who join the Church. Smith says he “chose Mormonism for the beauty of its doctrines, its commitment to healthy family life, and the empowerment inherent in its doctrines of eternal progression.” This, however does not lessen his resolve to speak openly about matters of race and white privilege in the LDS Church, particularly because the Church, he believes,

...participates to some extent in this national avoidance of race talk... Evading race talk is particularly problematic because most members of the church subscribe to the reassuring concept that African American converts, having found “the gospel,” are satisfied and contented, and that “all is well in Zion.”

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30 Ibid., 151.
This illusion, however, says Smith, "is a way for whites to suppress the differential experiences that impact the lives of people of color."\textsuperscript{31} Allan Johnson in, \textit{Privilege, Power and Difference}, suggests that privilege is categorized in systems and when manipulated properly benefit those of the dominant group. Of this he says, "Systems organized around privilege have three key characteristics. They are \textit{dominated by} privileged groups, \textit{identified} with privileged groups, and \textit{centered} on privileged groups. . . . Race privilege happens through systems that are white-dominated, white-identified, and white-centered. . . ."\textsuperscript{32} Johnson further argues that the exploitation of Africans by Europeans for economic gain institutionalized race and perpetuated oppressive environments for non-Europeans.\textsuperscript{33}

Even though more than a quarter century has lapsed since the LDS Church extended the priesthood to all worthy males, many Church leaders do not find it necessary to offer an official repudiation of the former practice. Some, however, including former President and Prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley, now deceased, have petitioned members to relegate racist ideologies to the past and to move forward in unity. During a semi-annual General Conference, wherein members throughout the world assemble in varying locations to hear the words of Church leaders, President Hinckley chastised those who still harbored racist ideologies saying,

Racial strife still lifts its ugly head. I am advised that even right here among us there is some of this. I cannot understand how it can be. It seemed to me that we all rejoiced in the 1978 revelation given President

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., x.
Kimball. . . . There was no doubt in my mind or in the minds of my associates that what was revealed was the mind and will of the Lord.

Now I am told that racial slurs and denigrating remarks are sometimes heard among us. I remind you that no man makes disparaging remarks concerning those of another race can consider himself a true disciple of Christ. Nor can he consider himself to be in harmony with the teachings of the Church of Christ. How can any man holding the Melchizedek Priesthood arrogantly assume that he is eligible for the priesthood whereas another who lives a righteous life but whose skin is of a different color is ineligible?"34

Although this form of open reprimand is noble, it does not substitute, for according to Smith, frank and intentional dialogue about racism in the Church and in America. Race talk, says Smith is "...an opportunity for important discussions, conversations, and dialogue that open the possibility of demystifying race and raising consciousness about the nature of white racism. It is not the aberration that most whites believe, but rather a fact of life central to the American experience."35

Section III
In Search of Truth: The Basic Tenets of the LDS Church

We believe in God, the Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.

—The Pearl of Great Price, The Articles of Faith, 1

We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.

— The Pearl of Great Price, The Articles of Faith, 5

34 President Gordon B. Hinckley on Racial Tolerance

We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.

— The Pearl of Great Price, *The Articles of Faith*, 8

The aforementioned beliefs comprise what the LDS Church calls, The Articles of Faith. These are three of thirteen articles, which outline the foundational belief system espoused by members of the church. As previously mentioned, one of the fundamental principles, from which all other LDS ideals emerge, is in the First Vision. During this time it is believed that Joseph Smith saw God the Father and Jesus Christ and received subsequent instruction about the manner in which the priesthood and gospel of Jesus Christ were to be restored. Additionally, strict adherences to laws of morality, and temple and missionary work are essential to the LDS faith. Known by the Church as the Word of Wisdom, or God’s law of health, followers of the LDS faith maintain that the human body, or temple, is essential to becoming like God and building His kingdom on earth.

In addition to its prohibition against immoral behavior, the Word of Wisdom strongly admonishes against the ingestion of drugs, alcohol, tobacco, “hot drinks,” or caffeinated coffee and tea, and other beverages, which contain harmful drugs. Members are taught:

We should avoid anything that we know is harmful to our bodies. We should not use any substance that is habit forming. The Word of Wisdom does not tell us everything to avoid, but it does give us guidelines. It is a valuable temporal law. It is also a great spiritual law. By living the Word of Wisdom, we become stronger spiritually. We purify our bodies so the Spirit of the Lord can dwell with us.\(^\text{36}\)

Likewise, proper observance of the Word of Wisdom is necessary to members’ ability to worship in the temple. According to *Gospel Principles*, “If we do not obey the Word of

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 193.
Wisdom, the Lord's Spirit may not dwell with us. If we defile "the temple of God" which is our body, we hurt ourselves physically and spiritually.37

Temple worship, now engaged in by all worthy members of the Church regardless of race or lineage, is the quintessential marker of the LDS faith and is believed to be the conduit through which all saving ordinances are performed. Through temple worship, members believe that marriages can be sealed both temporally and through eternity. Likewise, the family unit can be eternally bound. The sole purpose for the erection of temples during Biblical and modern times, is to, According to Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith, "...build unto the Lord a house whereby He could reveal unto His people the ordinances of His house and the glories of His kingdom, and teach the people the way of salvation; for there are certain ordinances and principles that, when they are taught and practiced, must be done in a place or house built for that purpose."38

Today, more than 100 temples have been built around the world with eighteen more announced or under construction.39

In order to perpetuate the continued growth of the Church, a robust missionary program has been designed, which allows men, women and retired couples to teach the three-fold mission of the Church, which is to proclaim the gospel, perfect the saints and redeem the dead. Modeled after the New Testament structure of missionaries serving in pairs, the LDS missionary program affords those who are "called" the opportunities to serve in areas where governments allow the Church to operate. Those who accept their

37 Gospel Principles (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 192.
38 The Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: 2007), 416.
assignment are trained at the Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Provo, Utah, and then sent, many times at their own or family’s expense, to locales not initially known to them. According the MTC website, “Approximately 52,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are currently serving as full-time missionaries. They are called to serve in one of 334 missions in approximately 120 different countries around the world.”  

Prior to the 1978 eradication of the Priesthood ban, however, missionaries were discouraged from proselytizing in Black neighborhoods and in regions populated by Black people. Today, missionaries serve in all parts of Africa, the Caribbean and South America. The Church is growing exponentially where missions, or geographic regions where governments have approved LDS Church proselytizing efforts, have been instituted. Of the 386 missions that have been established world-wide, at present, Brazil (27) and Argentina (10) tout the largest number (37) of missions among all of the South American countries. On the African continent, missions in Nigeria (5), South Africa (3) and Ghana (2) total 10.  

While missions throughout the Caribbean are low, membership is growing due to the proselytizing efforts of missionaries in those areas.

According to the Book of Mark, Jesus Christ instructed the Apostles to, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every nation.” The LDS Church not only adheres to this admonition through its missionary program, but it also instructs members

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40 Missionary Training Center: About the MTC; Provo, Utah, About the MTC, http://www.mtc.byu.edu/therntc.htm (accessed March 19, 2009).


42 Mk 16:15.
to serve as advocates for the Church and its cause. According to LDS ideology, eternal life is predicated upon the ordinance of baptism by emersion and faithful adherence to the teachings of the restored gospel. Therefore, missionary work is a vital tool by which essential truths of repentance and salvation are taught.

Not to be confused with The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS), once led by convicted felon Warren Jeffs, who is now serving consecutive prison terms for being an accomplice to rape, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is one of the fastest growing churches in the United States. Despite its growing membership however, the former practice of polygamy, observed by the FLDS, continues to be associated with the Church. Once an essential practice among Latter-day Saints in the mid-1800s, polygamy was believed to have been divinely sanctioned; however, the observance of plural marriage was discontinued in 1890. At that time, former LDS President Wilford Woodruff issued a manifesto which declared to the Church and the public at large that the practice of plural marriage would no longer exist. According to a similar declaration issued by President Gordon B. Hinckley in 1998, severe penalties would be imposed upon those found practicing plural marriage. Hinckley posits:

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I wish to state categorically that this Church has nothing whatever to do with those practicing polygamy. They are not members of this Church. Most of them have never been members. They are in violation of the civil law. They know they are in violation of the law. They are subject to its penalties. The Church, of course, has no jurisdiction whatever in this matter.

If any of our members are found to be practicing plural marriage, they are excommunicated, the most serious penalty the Church can impose. Not only are those so involved in direct violation of the civil law, they are in violation of the law of this Church. An article of our faith is binding upon us. It states, 'We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law' (Articles of Faith 1:12).46

Although the Church has issued a denunciation of the former practice of polygamy, it has yet to categorically denounce and apologize for the practice of Priesthood restriction among men of African decent. Both of which were believed to have been inspired by God. While the residue of former polygamist practices and racial separatism still linger, the Church continues to maintain its stance on monogamy and racial inclusion.

46 Ibid.
CHAPTER IV
DISCUSSION
THE LDS CHURCH AND BLACK WOMEN

As discussed earlier, the LDS Church has been a predominantly White religious institution since its inception, despite its world-wide recognition spanning over Europe, Asia, Africa, South America and all points in between. However, owing to the racial composition of Atlanta, the LDS Church congregation in Southwest Atlanta is predominantly Black. Thus, Black women in the Southwest Atlanta church comprise a large percentage of the Black population. Many of these parishioners have reported having had prior membership in the Black Church, the Baptist Church specifically, and have expressed their reasons for joining a religious institution outside of their cultural milieu. These reasons are addressed later in the chapter.

Therefore, this chapter provides the results of data collected from Black women regarding their membership in the LDS Church. Additionally, this chapter offers a discussion about their reasons for joining and those factors which cause them to remain dedicated members of the historically White church. It is also important to provide a contextual demography about the respondents under investigation.

The traditional Black Church has always served as the nucleus of the Black community. With roots in the traditional African community, the Black Church has done much to promote the ideals, world-view and identity of its members and the community
at large. Of particular note, the Black Church has spawned what this research has termed the African-American religious aesthetic, which speaks to the religious soul, rhythm and life of the Black community. The Church continues to promote the fortitude and faith of a people whose history in North America has been rooted in oppression. Song, dance and other forms of emotive expression are indicative of the religious fervor that exists in this environment. Hence, this chapter provides a statistical analysis of religious identity reconciliation among Black women in the LDS Church.

For this research the women are classified into two categories. Reconciled women are defined as women who are not overly fixated on their race. While they recognize and acknowledge that they are Black, their priorities extend beyond race. According to the data, these women appear to invest more time and attention into their families and are more inclined to immerse themselves in the LDS culture. They also appear to be more active in the Church.

On the other hand, non-reconciled women are defined as women who tend to place greater emphasis on their race and find it challenging and sometimes problematic to fully embrace the culture of the LDS Church. Consequently, their activity in the Church appears to be lessened. Based on the data, these women also tend to have fewer children than their reconciled counterparts; allowing them more time and greater access to focus on issues related to race.

**Demographics**

As illustrated in figure 1, 54% were identified as reconciled while the other 46% non-reconciled. Of the race labels listed in the demographic section of the survey, 67%
of all women identified themselves as African-American, 29% as Black, and the
remaining 4% as African. More non-reconciled women (64%) than reconciled women
(0%) chose to identify as Black. This could potentially speak to the prioritization of race
among the former while the latter may desire to identify with a more politically correct
race label. Respondents in both categories range between the ages of 27 and 74.

According to the data collected, women between 41 and 52 tend to be more
reconciled and are older than their non-reconciled counterparts. An equal number of
reconciled and non-reconciled women reported being 27 to 38 and 60 to 74 years of age.
Among the total population of women who reported their marital status, 58% said they
were married. Of this group it appears that more reconciled (62%) women are married
than their non-reconciled (55%) counterparts. However, 18% of non-reconciled women
reported being divorced, which is significantly higher than the 8% of reconciled women
who reported the same. Only one woman said she was widowed.
Family size varied among the respondents. The data show that of all the women, 55% of non-reconciled and 31% of reconciled women reported having two children. While more non-reconciled women said they have two children, only 9% reported having between 3 and 5 whereas 15% of reconciled women fell in this category. Similarly, this group tends to have more children who are members of the Church. For instance, 10% of reconciled women reported having children who are members of the LDS Church unlike 9% of their non-reconciled peers. The implication here is that reconciled women are more likely to be fully immersed in the religious and social life of the Church and therefore create a similar environment in which to rear their children.

Another factor, which can potentially be attributed to the variance is that non-reconciled women may have joined the Church later in life and may have had older children who chose to follow their own religious/spiritual path.

Of all the women surveyed, 79% reported having a college education or above while 25% completed high school or received their GED. According to the data collected, reconciled women are likely to be more educated, as shown in figure 2, than their non-reconciled counterparts. For instance, 62% of reconciled women and 45% of non-reconciled women reported having a college degree.
Although reconciled women tend to be more educated, their non-reconciled peers appear to make more money. Subsequently, the data show that reconciled women make significantly less money than their non-reconciled counterparts. Although 31% of reconciled women make $45,000 and above, unlike 27% of their non-reconciled peers, over all, reconciled women tend to fall in lower socioeconomic brackets. For example, 69% of women in this group earn between $15,000 and $35,000. This is stark in comparison to the 18% of non-reconciled women who earn the same. Unlike non-reconciled women, the data suggest that reconciled women’s time is more likely consumed with home and family finances rather than issues related to race.

**Church Appeal: Why Black Women Join the LDS Church**

Black LDS women in Southwest Atlanta are a group whose educational, familial and socioeconomic experiences vary; however, their religious experiences have taken
similar paths. More than half (63%) of all the women surveyed said they previously attended the Baptist Church. According to the data, more reconciled women (77%) than irreconciled women (46%) reported having former membership in the Baptist Church. This finding is rather surprising considering the Baptist Church, which is one of several Black religious institutions where race pride and identity are perpetuated, was previously attended by reconciled women; a group whose current focus, as members of the LDS Church, appears to be on family rather than race. Perhaps the impetus behind their relocation from the Black Church to the LDS Church stemmed from their search for something that extended beyond race and culture. In fact, many reconciled women attributed their relocation to a desire for greater family cohesion, which is what they believe the LDS Church offers.

For example, reconciled women who completed the survey articulated the following reasons for establishing membership in the LDS Church:

I joined and chose to join the LDS Church because of the gospel principles that are taught. I felt like I was at home and I felt the Spirit leading me in the direction of the church.

Because I know they had more to offer, and I Needed more. it is All about Family and I AM a Family Woman.

I felt comfort there. Be being raised in a bahpist church the LDS Environment was totally different. After attending, and weeks of praying, I still received the same confirmation so I knew this is were the lord ment for me to be (this was real)

Because of its focus on the family being together forever and emphasis on rearing in a family. I also joined because of the priesthood and temple as well as genealogy work. I also liked the missionary work.
Like their reconciled peers, non-reconciled women who completed the survey were found to attribute their membership in the LDS Church to prayer and spiritual growth. Non-reconciled reported the following:

I chose to join the LDS Church because I felt drawn to the sense of peace and structure present in the worship services, and I gained a testimony as to the truth of the LDS Church.

I joined the church because I felt the spirit of what I received from the missionaries. The Lord lead me to the church through the Holy Ghost.

Before I prayed to Heavenly Father Jesus Christ. I first said I want to change my life esp. for my little girl (daughter) because she looks up to me so highly + wanted to do everything she saw me do. So I said if that is the case let it or myself be a positive role model for her.

Thus, the data indicated that women joined the Church primarily because of the principles which guided the lives of it members, especially those more related to family.

Other factors, which account for the Church's appeal among this group include spiritual growth, testifying/witnessing, service and rituals. Of all the respondents who completed the survey, 92% said their spiritual growth as members of the LDS Church appealed to them the most. All reconciled respondents (100%) answered affirmatively while 82% of non-reconciled women answered the same.

Testifying/witnessing ranked second highest in appeal among 77% of the reconciled and 55% of the non-reconciled populations. The Church's service program is another factor that attracted respondents to the LDS Church. According to the data, 67% of the total population said service was one of the areas that appealed to them.

Finally, rituals in the LDS Church, which include the administration of the Sacrament, baptism and temple work, appealed to 63% of all respondents who completed
the survey. Among this population, 77% of reconciled women and 46% of their non-reconciled peers said rituals of the LDS Church appeal to them. As previously stated, rituals in the African and Black communities facilitate identity development and communal sustainability. Because a large portion of the population said rituals of the LDS Church appeal to them further emphasizes the importance of these acts among Black women in this religious institution.

According to the data, Black LDS women involved in the investigation support the religious and social activities of the Church to varying degrees. It appears that reconciled women tend to be more active in the totality of LDS culture than their non-reconciled peers. When asked which of the three primary Sunday meetings—Sacrament, Sunday School and Relief Society—they attend, 58% of the total population said they attend all three meetings on Sunday. Of the reconciled group, 62% said they attend and 55% of non-reconciled women answered the same. The variance among the total population could potentially be associated with reconciled women (69%) holding slightly more callings than their non-reconciled counterparts (64%). These callings include, Relief Society Teacher, Nursery Leader, Sunday School Youth Teacher, and Relief Society Presidency, all of which necessitate Sunday attendance.

Of the three meetings, Sacrament has the greatest attendance among both groups of women. Interestingly, 46% of the non-reconciled population said they attend Sacrament while 31% of the reconciled population said the same. Although the latter tend to be more active, this finding suggests that the former are more inclined to participate in the Sacramental service. There may be one overarching reason for this. Sunday services in Southwest Atlanta begin with the administration of the Sacrament, which does not
necessitate a great deal of social engagement. This finding further supports why they may find it challenging to embrace the social culture of the LDS Church.

**In Her Own Words: Black and LDS**

Based upon the research findings, self-identity among Black women in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta is rooted first, in their spiritual identification, while racial identifiers were least salient among the total population. Firstly, 58% of all respondents said identifying as children of God was most important. Of this population, 62% of reconciled women and 55% of their non-reconciled peers answered affirmatively.

Secondly, 42% of those surveyed said being children of God who happened to be of African descent was important. It is significant to note that 55% of the non-reconciled population identify this way while only 32% of their reconciled peers answered the same. This finding further emphasizes the degree of importance placed on racial identification among non-reconciled Black women in comparison to their reconciled counterparts in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta.

Thirdly, 17% of the population said that being an African-American Mormon was an important identifier. Of this populace, 23% of reconciled women and 9% of non-reconciled women answered accordingly. This finding is interesting in that, while racial categorization is least important among reconciled women, their choosing this particular label suggests that if they decide to identify by race, they do so using politically acceptable terminology. Additionally, as evidenced above, they do not identify by race alone; rather they juxtapose racial and religious identifiers to express who they are. While “Black” was a racial category listed on the survey, none of the reconciled respondents
selected the option; however, 12% of the total non-reconciled populace selected “Black” as an identifier, notwithstanding their primary identification as children of God.

Although reconciled women have been defined as those who are not fixated on race, these women tend to place a significant degree of importance on their culture/history. Based on the data, 77% said they define themselves by their culture, whereas 64% of their non-reconciled counterparts answered the same. It appears that reconciled women may be more concerned with race than they have expressed in their responses both to the survey and in the focus groups. This finding lends itself to further probing and subsequent research. Sixty-four percent of their non-reconciled counterparts said their culture/history defines them.

Very few respondents said they define themselves by their hair, however, two respondents spoke quite candidly on the subject during the focus group. Respondent 6 said, “For me, a part of my heritage is a big part of me and where I come from and I’m not gonna never forget where I come from. The straight hair, that was never my forte. This is my hair, this is me. This is how I am and I do wear the afro sometimes as well. But this is me. This is who I am . . .”¹ Respondent 1 explained,

This [afro] for me is new, less than a year and I think it’s part of my evolving. You know, I’m at a totally different place right now in my life where I am more aware of being a Black member of the church than I ever was before. I don’t know if it’s my age . . . but I used to perm my hair. I used to straighten it . . . but for me, that’s not how I wanted to be identified anymore . . .²

¹ Respondent 6 (All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement), interview by Author, Atlanta, GA, April 19, 2009.

² Respondent 1, Ibid.
Music was the third most selected identifier among the respondents. According to the data, 21% of all women surveyed said they defined themselves by the music they listen to. Of this population, 15% of reconciled and 27% of non-reconciled women answered affirmatively. Additionally, when asked how often they listen to Black gospel music, 57% of the total populace said they listen everyday. It appears that non-reconciled women are more inclined to listen to Black gospel music more frequently than their peers. For example, 70% of non-reconciled women said they listen to gospel music everyday, whereas 46% of reconciled women answered the same. Although reconciled women listen less, the rate at which they do listen seems to support why they place a large degree of importance on culture/heritage. This finding speaks to their internalized need for music outside of the LDS Church, which reflects their religious history and culture. To this end traditional Black religious music is steeped in creative ingenuity. One respondent explained in great detail just how creative her musical experiences were in the Black church during the focus group:

I just grew up in tha church, and the reason why I love the music, they used to take the wooden spoons and the rub boats, cause they didn’t have guitars and stuff like that. They made the music out of uh, uh foot tub, rub boats and wooden spoons an then everybody would sang an de song, dey was sangin, would be like you talkin to God. You know, the old Negro spiritual song, it would be like you prayin in tha song an you talkin to God an dey made dey own music outta de spoon, the rub boat, the foot tubs an uh my brotha nem would take slang shots an pull em an make it doon, doon an when they, everythang come together juss like music. An den dey would be sangin an goin on an dey would just sang an pray. You talkin bout some prayin. Dey would pray so hard to it would make you cry. You could just feel the Spirit. An they didn’t have no guitars or nothing like that. They just made they own music.3

3 Respondent 3 (All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement), interview by Author, Atlanta, GA, April 10, 2009.
Traditional Black religious worship then, becomes extremely important when discussing the worship experiences of Black members in the LDS Church. Although not all women expressed an affinity for Black gospel music during the focus groups, those who did unanimously spoke to the membership of Grammy Award winning R&B legend, Gladys Knight. Formerly a member of the Baptist Church, Knight joined the LDS Church in 1997 and has spoken on numerous occasions in congregations around the country about her conversion to the church. During these engagements, she shares her story through song; a gift once primarily used for entertainment purposes. Of this Knight has said,

I know why I sing. At first I thought it was just to entertain. But now I know this gift from God is a platform from which I am to share His gospel. What an awesome opportunity I have to serve the Lord through music, which has been so dear to me for most of my life. I have always sung for the Lord, but now I get to use more hymns and scriptures to tell the world His story. I just want to do what He has asked of us all, to feed His sheep.4

In keeping with her appreciation for music and the hymns of the Black Church, Knight eventually formed The Saints United Voices Choir (SUV), which consists of members from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Under Knight’s tutelage, SUV performs an array of Black spirituals and gospel hymns, as well as songs of the LDS Church. Knight said, “I do love the music in this Church, but I think some of it could use a little zip! Our congregations are filled with a growing diversity of people from different races and

cultures. I look forward to the day when we embrace their music without feeling uncomfortable."5

The comfort with which Black women in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta are able to express themselves as well as and the importance they place on this expression, became a topic of discussion during the focus groups and is statistically explained here. Of all respondents surveyed, 46% said expressing their Blackness was always important to them. This figure accounts for all non-reconciled respondents (100%) surveyed, as none among their reconciled peers made the same report. On the other hand, 75% of the total population said expressing their Blackness was least important, with reconciled women reporting at a rate of 39%. The total population for whom expressing Blackness was sometimes important was 54%. Of this population, 15% of reconciled women answered affirmatively while none of their non-reconciled counterparts responded.

According to the data collected, reconciled women appear to be more culturally assimilated in the LDS environment than their non-reconciled peers. For example, 69% of reconciled women said they have never felt uncomfortable as Black women in the LDS Church. Furthermore, 85% replied never feeling the need to suppress their Blackness in the Church. On the other hand, however, 55% of their non-reconciled counterparts said they sometimes felt uncomfortable as Black women in the LDS Church and subsequently, 27% said they felt they had to suppress their Blackness.

Obviously self-identification among non-reconciled Black women in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta is an integral part of their religious and social experiences.
as members of this Church. Whether for reasons imposed or assumed, self-
identification among this group is not always easily achieved. For one respondent, being
raised in the Church has presented challenges with race and identity. Respondent I
reported,

I have huge race issues in the church. Um, I think I have a problem with
the fact that I was never ever asked out by a church member and there’s a
huge emphasis put on dating a member of the church, getting married to a
member of the church and being sealed in the temple and I feel like, um,

as a, you know, I went to church every Sunday, did my calling and what
not, as a developed member of the church I was not granted uh, any of
those possibilities I guess, and I know that it’s on the Lord’s time, you
know, but psychologically that does something to you when you’re
growing up and you never ask, at the dances you’re not asked to dance.
You know, and I was, I’m not cocky, but my parents raised all of us,
there’s seven kids, four girls, you know, to believe that we’re beautiful
children, but if you’re not, you know, asked out or anything like that, it
sort of chips away at, um, how you feel about yourself. You know.
Worthy enough to date a member of the church, uh, which I knew I was
but, when it’s not...when you have issues like that you’re not, you know,
approached or asked out, I mean, guys hardly ever talked to me at church,
you know, so that probably was my main issue.6

She further shared,

I think as a little girl watching conference I always wondered why there
were no Black faces up there. You know, and I know that’s also, the Lord
chooses, but I think still in the back of my mind when I watch conference,
you know, I don’t see too many Black faces. I don’t see any Black faces in
the Quorum of the Seventy, the Quorum of the Twelve. Again, I think it
goes back to me just wanting to identify more with the church now, at this
age.7

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6 Respondent 1 (All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by
mutual agreement), interview by Author, Atlanta, GA, April 19, 2009.

7 Ibid.
Some of the women interviewed, however, unequivocally said that the historic racial demographic of the church did not infringe on their ability to self-identify. One respondent stated,

...it don’t matter where you go and what church you in, you do not let nobody make you feel out of place. You are you. You were born here as a child of God and no matter what color yo skin is, you be you regardless of what they think because where I go, I don’t let nobody change me. I’m me and I’m gon be me and I’m not gon let dem change me and they either accept me or they get over it and go on because I’m o’ be me. I don’t let nobody change me and I been to many churches that it wasn’t no black person in there period but me, but I was being me. I did not let them change me. I come to church to worship God and to love peoples and that’s what I do and I don’t let nobody change me regardless of how they act. ...  

As previously stated, more women have been categorized reconciled than non-reconciled. Given this finding, and based upon the available data, William Cross’s Pre-Encounter and Encounter stages of the Nigrescence model are most applicable to 57% of the total population. On the other hand, the Immersion/Emersion, Internalization and Internalization Commitment stages are applicable to the other 33%. Better stated, the data suggests that women in the Pre-Encounter stage are 38% more likely to be reconciled than their non-reconciled peers. According to Cross, Pre-Encountered (reconciled) women have a greater tendency to downplay their racial experiences in the LDS Church in Southwest Atlanta, whereas 29% of the remaining reconciled population may have, as Cross suggests, had a negative confrontation with their racial identity. Subsequently, this group is compelled to rethink the way they racially self-identify, and may surrender any importance placed on race.

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8 Respondent 3 (All interviews were confidential; the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement), interview by Author, Atlanta, GA, April 10, 2009.
Given that 33% of the population is in the Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, or Internalization/Commitment stage, suggests that the Black female non-reconciled population in the Southwest Atlanta church find their racial identity to be inextricably related to their ability to self-identify as members of the church. Unlike Pre-Encountered women, respondents (4%) in the Immersion/Emersion stage tend to be liberated from the idealization of whiteness and consider race to be of importance. However, these women are not yet psychologically committed to Blackness, which means the degree of importance placed on race wavers depending on situations and circumstances they may find themselves in in the Church setting.

Although some non-reconciled women fell into the Immersion/Emersion stage, more were found to identify with the Internalization (17%) and Internalization Commitment (13%) stages than the Immersion/Emersion stage. This finding alone suggests that while some Black LDS women are not yet committed to Blackness, those who are, developed a positive racial concept prior to joining the LDS Church and are therefore more likely not to vacillate. These findings also illuminate the degree of importance these groups place on the African-American religious aesthetic as members of the Church.

Despite having attended the Baptist Church at a greater rate, reconciled, or Pre-Encountered and Encountered women, are more likely to devalue the African-American religious aesthetic than those who were identified in the other three development stages. Therefore, the traditional performance found in the Black Church is trumped by this group’s desire for greater internalized spiritual growth. While women in the Immersion/Emersion, Internalization and Internalization Commitment stages also find
spiritual growth to be important, they value their experiences in the Baptist Church and are more likely to internalize the religious culture that is prominent in these religious institutions, and therefore retain elements of the African-American religious aesthetic.

As discussed earlier, the worship environment of the LDS Church is one characterized as serene, tranquil, reverent and without emotion. The Sacrament meeting, where congregants symbolically partake of the blood and body of Jesus Christ whom they revere and worship as the Son of God, begins each Sunday worship service in Southwest Atlanta. Following the administration of the Sacrament, selected members of the congregation present talks on doctrinal topics previously assigned by the bishop, who presides over the affairs of the Atlanta Ward. Unlike the sacred emotive praise and worship songs, accompanied most times by percussion and bass instruments, that typify many Black Churches, hymns sang in the Southwest Atlanta church are accompanied by a piano.

Following the Sacrament meeting, parishioners attend Sunday School, which is followed by Relief Society and Priesthood meetings, both of which are female and male auxiliary groups respectively that further expound on doctrinal principals espoused by the LDS Church. The Young Women and Young Men programs allow youth ages 12 through 17 to meet for religious instruction, while children ages 4 through 11 meet for Primary. All of the auxiliary groups sponsor social activities outside of the regular Sunday worship service. A characteristic unique to the LDS Church is the institution of a lay clergy, where members who hold callings in the Church do so voluntarily and without expectation of financial compensation.
On the first Sunday of each month, members are encouraged to fast from food and drink for 24 hours. It is the collective belief of LDS parishioners that during this time of physical drought, their spiritual reserve is filled. During the first month’s Sunday meeting, members participate in a Fast and Testimony service where they share what they know to be true about the LDS Church, in addition to experiences they may have had that solidified this knowledge, during the testimony portion of the meeting. Sundays thereafter follow the program outlined earlier. It appeared that some of the respondents recovered elements of the oral worship tradition of the Black Church, which included, “Giving honor to God who is the head of my life and who is my life... While others said “amen” and “Thank you Jesus,” when moved by the Spirit. Still another would raise and wave her hand in agreement, all of which are not customary in the LDS faith.

It appears that vestiges of the African-American religious aesthetic are retained by certain members of the Black LDS female population in Southwest Atlanta. Based upon the observations, however, these expressions are retained primarily by older Black women as oppose to their younger counterparts. This can be attributed to older women potentially having had more experiences in the traditional Black Church than their younger peers, subsequently older women have internalized their experiences to a greater degree.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Based upon the limited literature, there have been no empirical studies that utilize an Afrocentric paradigm to determine the degree to which Black Latter-day Saints are able to reconcile their racial and religious identities in the LDS Church. Although utilizing an Afrocentric paradigm fosters greater insight into the thought and behavior about how Black women engage in reconciliation of their identity, its application in this study seems to have little impact on their reasons for joining the LDS Church and the reasons for which they choose to remain members of the historically White religious institution. However, the chosen Afrocentric paradigm as postulated by William Cross does illuminate the stages at which respondents established a reconciled or non-reconciled racial identity.

Given the historic racial demographic of the LDS Church, whose headquarters are in Salt Lake City, Utah, where the Black population is significantly lower than its White population, and despite the cultural disparities that potentially exit among these groups in congregations throughout the world, Black women in Southwest Atlanta who participated in this investigation were more likely to disregard the racial history of the Church in favor of more defined religious experiences.

It appears that while the majority of respondents previously attended the Baptist Church, most among the reconciled and non-reconciled groups said their spiritual growth
and development in the LDS Church had far more reaching impact than those received in the Black Church. Firstly, the research sought to determine what the LDS Church offered Black women that the Black Church did not. Based upon the collected data, women unequivocally said that they joined the LDS Church because the Black Church did little to impact their spiritual growth and development. In fact, spirituality was one of the primary reasons why Black women chose to join the Church and subsequently maintain their membership.

Additionally, the Church’s emphasis on eternal families and what they described as the fullness of the gospel was said to be the foundation upon which they built their testimonies and acceptance of the Church. Other factors of interest included testifying/witnessing, and service and rituals. These findings support Daniel Collins’s earlier assertion that Blacks have abandoned the traditional Black Church experience for other modes and structures of religious expression.

Secondly, the study sought to explain how membership in the LDS Church among Black women impacted their identity. While the reconciliation of their racial identity varied, according to Cross’s Nigrescence model, their spiritual identity as children of God trumped any credence placed on their racial identity. Therefore, Black women’s racial identity in the Southwest Atlanta church, while important to some, was not dramatically impacted by their membership in the LDS Church. While this is true, there are those for whom culture/history is important, which illuminates why some are more inclined to listen to Black gospel music than others. Although the performance of gospel music in the Black Church was missed by many of the respondents, other evocative worship
expressions such as the shout and holy dance, which were considered disingenuous and boisterous, led to an increased disinterest in the Black Church.

Historically the Black Church has been the center of the Black community and the reserve from which communal and individual identity of this group have been cultivated. Hence, Molefi Asante’s location theory became critical to understanding the reasons why Black women move from a culturally infused religious environment to one outside of their traditional milieu. Location, as posited by Asante, was found to have a greater impact on non-reconciled women’s ability to self-identity as Black women in the LDS Church than their reconciled counterparts. For example, non-reconciled women were less likely to fully engage in the social culture of the LDS Church as compared to their reconciled peers. Additionally, non-reconciled women found the expression of their Blackness to be an integral part of their identity. Reconciled women on the other hand, were least concerned with Blackness and therefore better able to adopt the social and cultural standards of the Church.

Thirdly, the research attempted to explain how Black women recover the African-American religious aesthetic in the LDS Church. The geographic location of the Southwest Atlanta church along with its substantially large Black membership was found to support the retention of the African-American religious aesthetic among those women for whom the aesthetic was important. As evidenced in the observational analysis, older Black women whose religious experiences were rooted in the Black Church had a greater propensity for retaining the African-American religious aesthetic in Southwest Atlanta’s LDS Church. Some observed call and response worship patterns while others used physical space, such as the raising or waving of the hand, to express agreement or
encounters with the Spirit. However, despite the behavior of some, the majority of respondents adapted the calm and subdued worship styles indicative of the LDS Church.

Both assumptions postulated at the outset of the investigation proved plausible during the course of the investigation. Black women who relocate from the Black Church to the LDS Church were found to be more religiously satisfied and personally fulfilled in the historically White Church, despite the diminutive presence of the African-American religious aesthetic found therein. Subsequently, most surrendered worship patterns found in the Black Church. Furthermore, those who did retain elements of the African-American religious aesthetic simultaneously embraced the religious and social culture of the Church.

**Recommendations**

Future studies about the viability of the Black Church among African Americans who engage religious and spiritual institutions outside of their cultural milieu will be important to the discussion about identity reconciliation among this group. Furthermore, additional investigations regarding Black women who leave the LDS Church for more culturally conducive religious environments will broaden the discussion about the salience of race among this group. It will also shed light on why Black members forsake the LDS Church for other forms and modes of religious and spiritual worship. However, the unavailability of racial demographics in the Church’s census records dramatically impedes the pursuit of a national sampling among this group.