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“Are you Getting Angry Doctor?”:

Madea, Strategy and the Fictional Rejection of Black Female Containment

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“Are you Getting Angry Doctor?”:

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by

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Report

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“Are you Getting Angry Doctor?”:

Madea, Strategy and the Fictional Rejection of Black Female Containment

by

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Within the scope of this thesis, I provide close textual and visual readings of director/actor/producer Tyler Perry’s most well-known character, Mable “Madea” Simmons - a performance he does in full female drag attire – focusing on his mainstream hit film, *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009). My reading of the character of Madea veers against the common narrative her existence being just another recycled trope of men disguised as women only to perform in stereotypical and demonizing behavior. I argue Madea represents what I refer to as a “trans*female character”, within the space of Perry’s popular film that feature her. Read through the lens of being trans*female character, I propose this shift in analysis and critique of cinematic displays of drag helps to transgress beyond male/female binaries of acceptable and possible visual gender representations. More in-depth, using the theoretical concept of Gwendolyn Pough’s “bringing wreck”, I make the argument that while ostensibly representing the “angry black woman” stereotype, Madea’s characterization and actions within the film represent strategies and efforts to not be contained within hegemonic ideals of black female respectability politics and the law efforts to put her behind bars. By “bringing wreck”, Madea’s fictional acts of violence and talking back are read as a strategy that reflects a historical trend of misrecognition that renders black women’s concerns and discontent with marginalization as irrational anger.

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“I got my feminism from my mama, even though she doesn’t know it. And my grandmother. And my aunts. They had a feminism that would fight back and hide behind the mask of smiles or scorn. My mama’s feminism was wrapped up in God and respectability politics she could never live up to. My grandmama’s feminism was housed in her meanness and caution. She carried it with her for emergencies and for protection, like the cigarettes in her pocket and the gun in her bra. My aunts held their feminism in their laughter and occasional anger. They used it to cover up pain. They didn’t know they were feminists. They didn’t mean to pass it on to me but they couldn’t help it.” – “Mama’s Feminism” rboylorn¹

Introduction

Mable Simmons, more commonly known as “Madea,” is director/actor/producer Tyler Perry’s most popular and controversial fictional character. Tyler Perry has written, produced and directed over seven feature length commercial films starring Madea – a black, elderly, southern female character he performs in full female drag attire. According to *Forbes*, in 2013 Perry earned \$78 million dollars from his various projects ranging from television shows to product endorsements, making him #22 on the *Forbes* annual list of 100 Richest Celebrities.² However, for all of Perry’s successes and accolades, his work rarely garners any cinematic praise, especially from many within feminist and academic circles.

Russell Scott Smith notes several movie critic reactions to Perry’s first mainstream and number one debut film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), reflecting, “‘Downright awful,’ ‘an absolute mess’ and ‘one of the worst pictures in ages,’ critics wailed. Salon’s Stephanie Zacharek called it ‘the sort of movie that’s so bad, you just wish it would go away.’ Roger Ebert was offended by the movie’s star, a ‘Big Momma’s House’-style granny named Madea, who smokes reefer, keeps a pistol in her purse and slices up furniture with a chain saw. This ‘Grandma from Hell,’ as Ebert called her, was played in drag by the film’s 6-foot-5 writer-producer-mastermind, Tyler Perry. ‘All blame returns to Perry,’ Ebert wrote. ‘What was he *thinking?*’”³

As critical studies scholar Todd Boyd contends in *Entertainment Weekly*, "All of his productions demonize educated, successful African-Americans ... It's a demonization that has long existed in certain segments of the black community."⁴

There has been an emerging body of work that explores the gendered, classed and representational failings of Perry's Madea character within the last three years. These critiques have been fruitful in helping me to understand my own conceptualization of Perry's directorial and production implications for black popular culture and media consumption. These readings speak with pointed attention to the ways in which the consumption and readings of black life through Perry's films create meaning making for both black and nonwhite consumers; sometimes with failing results while receiving praise in others. It is my intent to add to this body of work and give attention to analysis of Madea's characterization as my point of investigation within this exploration.

By analyzing her characterization as a queer deviant subject through the use of "bringing wreck", I will illuminate how Madea actively resists being the angry black female stereotype she is often accused of portraying. I argue that Madea's acts of resistance are housed in a reflection of real life efforts and strategies many black women have had to use in order to avoid being misrecognized under threats of silencing and containment. Additionally, I read the character of Madea as a trans*female character who is viewed within the narrative of the film as a biological female. This reading does not attempt to articulate Madea as fully or wholly embodied of being a black female; rather, this reading of Madea opens a more dynamic and broad evaluation of her character through the lens of black womanhood, even if only within the fictional space of the film. This analysis provides a transgressive (re)visioning of Perry's most polarizing personality

that renders the male/female binary of visual drag presentation as an insufficient mode of more contextual and complex readings of the Madea character.

Literature Review

Brittney Cooper, a once self-noted fan of Perry's work, found that she was unable to continue to watch his films after reflecting upon the ways in which she views his productions as habitually casting educated black women as villains and in need of "Jesus and dick" to be helped. This frustration led Cooper to post a piece entitled "Tyler Perry Hates Black Women".⁵ Cooper, in what she refers to as "an unexpected twist", received a call from Perry in response to the piece, which led to a discussion about work. Reflecting on the conversation Cooper shares,

...one by one, Perry listened as I brought up film after a film...in which a woman had been punished, sometimes to the point of violence, for being assertive and ambitious. He simply reasserted that in his art, he had to tell the stories that were true for him. I challenged many of his truths, particularly about elitist, cold, calculating middle-class black women, but in each instance he brought out examples from his own life to support his artistic choices. ...he told me that the one thing that had stuck with him was this challenge from me: "Is it possible for you to elevate one group of people in your films – say, working-class black women, whom he loves – without throwing the other group – often educated black women — under the bus?" He said that question was "profound," and that he would mull it over. We amicably ended our call.⁶

Cooper's dialogue with Perry helps to illustrate the particular attention I analyze within the scope of this work. Perry's use of drag to play Madea and his seemingly unrelenting use of anti-black stereotypes within his various productions are two of the most dominant critiques of Perry's Madea films. This dialogue highlights some of the shared frustrations of Perry's work amongst

some of his critics and viewers alike, while also taking seriously black artistic freedom and real lived experiences as a particular space of analysis and critiques that seek to elevate black media productions. The unrelenting exploitative use of anti-black stereotypes within mainstream media has often shown itself to being a stable barrier within some critical circles to having this kind of sustained dialogue around stereotypes and black life. Specifically noting the academy, black culture critic Nelson George highlights, “Comedy and stereotypes go hand in hand”...”That's why intellectuals have a hard time with humor.”⁷ Madea oft cited characterization as an “angry black women” is a primary example of this tension.

Some of the stereotypes Madea has been accused of representing include the mammy, the angry black woman, and even a coon. Dahleen Glanton of the *Chicago Tribune* notes her discontent at Perry’s seemingly unrelenting imperative to showcase black women as always angry and confrontational, stating,

The angry black woman is an old standby that is often used to pitch a product in the fifteen to thirty seconds allotted to commercials. She's an easy target, [Geraldine] Henderson says, because there's no need to waste time on her back story. We know her already. I'd like to see her retire, but if she won't go away, maybe it's time for a makeover. Instead of focusing on the buffoons, let's talk about black women who've found a positive outlet for their anger.

As Glanton infers, the angry black woman stereotype marks black women as one dimensional, void of any meaningful intimate ties to family or love. I put forth that the Madea character, while not perfect, is one makeover to the angry black woman stereotype. As a trans*female character, Madea’s displays of indignation do not always come out in a positive manner; however, while not necessarily “positive” in nature, her acts do help us to situate a better understanding how her

“angry” behavior can be read as acts of black female resistance, standing in direct opposition to efforts that misrecognize and attempt to contain.

Timothy Lyle provides a layered critique of Perry’s use of drag in his article “Check With Yo’ Man First; Check With Yo’ Man’: Tyler Perry Appropriates Drag as a Tool to Re-Circulate Patriarchal Ideology” (2011). Lyle argues that Perry employs an ostensible feminist approach in his films to promote a type of (black) female empowerment narrative. However, according to Lyle’s analysis, Perry ultimately fails by (re)inscribing patriarchal norms into the fabric of his stories that often rely on black women being silenced, victims of violence, spoken down to and in need of a “good man” by the films conclusion (2011, 943-6). Read as a trans*female character, Madea often acts as the foil to many of these issues; giving support and advice to men and women alike and promoting a sense of self-worth and self-respect.

Similarly, as Nagris Fontaine’s study “From Mammy to Madea, an Examination of the Behaviors of Tyler Perry’s Madea Character in Relation to the Mammy, Jezebel and Sapphire Stereotypes”, argues, Madea’s domestic and social life within the early films and theater performances are analyzed alongside major characteristics that define the mammy, jezebel and sapphire stereotypes. Fontaine concludes that Madea’s sociality and physicality within Perry’s theater productions are clear and resolved anti-black stereotype representations of black womanhood. Perry’s performance as Madea lacks any substantial depth to be a true homage to the “strong black women” who help stabilize and maintain black communities that Perry espouses his character to represent (2011, 40-44). Within this work, I take seriously an analysis of the epistemological reality of Perry’s upbringing around “strong black women” that informs his characterization of Madea.

According to preeminent cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, in his book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (1997), he defines stereotypes as such:

“Stereotypes get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity” (258).

Stereotypes, according to Hall’s definition, are static and never allow for more open readings of the subjects they restrain. Moreover, because of their imagined and inscribed simplicity, stereotypes often are hyper-visible and ubiquitous, permeating through all social spheres of society, easily graspable as supposedly representing the totality of a person or groups existence. Stereotypes effectiveness are in their ability to quickly and generally connote a sense of representing that which is “other” – those people/groups/ideas who do not fit within the normative hegemonic order of a particular society.

Ed Guerrero, in his text *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (1993) reminds us that within the media imagination, the necessity and display of this black “other(ness)” has been a staple since blockbuster films began and are exhibited in different ways, asserting, “...images of racial otherness range from the ideologically obvious (who else is Willie Horton but the political progeny of ‘Gus’, the black rapist of *The Birth of a Nation*?) to cinematic eruptions of socially repressed forces of sexuality that carry the threat of a dreaded primordial ‘blackness’” (41).

My argument focuses on a visual and textual reading of two specific scenes from Tyler Perry’s most successful commercial film to date, *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009). While all of the Madea films showcase examples of Madea resisting or fleeing from arrest, getting into physical

fights, making threats, shooting guns and refusing to back down from an altercation, I have chosen to focus on this film in particular due to the focus Perry creates around Madea's interaction with lawful attempts to arrest and counsel her. While Madea's run-ins with the law are well documented in other films, this is the only film in which we are shown an extensive view into how Madea manages to avoid jail time for her illicit actions. In the first scene of the film, a group of prosecutors debate who will take on Madea's case. Her prior charges are listed during the decision making and include - assault, insurance fraud, illegal gambling and even attempted murder.

However, despite the title, the story of Madea's stint in jail is secondary, but nonetheless significant to the overall plot of the film. The storyline revolves around two former college lovers, Candice (Keisha Knight Pulliman) and Joshua (Derek Luke) who end up taking different roads in life— Candice drops out of college and becomes a drug addicted prostitute while Joshua becomes an assistant district attorney — and eventually meet again. Joshua and Candice struggle to reconnect and understand each other's different worlds throughout the film. Joshua's fiancé, Linda (Ion Overman) views Candice's arrival back into Joshua's life as a potential threat which in turn pushes her to devise a hodgepodge scheme that eventually ends up putting Candice in jail for a crime she didn't commit. What interests me with this film is Perry's attention to how black women are implicated and misread when engaging with the sphere of law and containment.

Theory and Method

In terms of methodology and my theoretical framework, I employ thoughts and models from a variety of black, queer, feminist, visual media and performance studies scholars who share a host of conflicting and common theoretical grounds that transverse around media representation through the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality. While a character

and textual analysis are my primary modes of investigation, I also interject other areas of consideration, including, but not limited to, feminist theory, black pathology creation, gender performance, black epistemologies of pleasure and resistance, and hip-hop aesthetics.

While I utilize these varied sources and scholars to support my argument, I will most closely follow the concept of “bringing wreck” as my theoretical model for understanding the characterization and performance of Madea. In her work exploring the often complex and unspoken relationship between black women who live and consume hip-hop culture and black feminist criticism within the public sphere, Gwendolyn Pough theorizes “bringing wreck,” as a strategy and performance that black Americans, more specifically, black women invoke to reject and unsettle stereotypes and irrational philosophies about their existence as a means to navigate the patriarchal, capitalist, sexist and power driven terrain that is corporate mainstream hip-hop.

As Pough details, “Bringing the wreck, for Black participants in the public sphere historically, has meant reshaping the public gaze in such a way as to be recognized as human beings – as a functioning and worthwhile members of society – and not to be shut out of or pushed away from the public sphere” (17). “Bringing wreck” can be deployed through violence, manipulation, trickery, and even choosing to be silent and unresponsive. Pough notes this concept as rhetorical in nature in one regard, stating

“...the wreck I...focus on can best be described as a rhetorical act that can be written, spoken, or acted out in a way that shows resistance. Bringing wreck has close ties to various other speech acts that are often linked to black womanhood: talking back, going off, turning it out, having a niggerbitchfit or being a diva. Each of these actions has simultaneously been embraced by Black women as a marker of unique black womanhood and renounced as the stereotypical black women stance by others (78).

Pough sees bringing wreck as a viable space to think through the progressive potential of black cultural productions by black women in the public sphere. However, for the worth of this potential, Pough also does not see bringing wreck as a complete and faultless strategy, pointing out “Bringing wreck does not always change the world, but it is capable of making small and meaningful differences” (77). Even small and meaningful changes that seek to contribute to a more layered and dynamic understanding of black media, black everyday life and ever constant connection between the two are important to explore.

I use the concept of “bringing the wreck” to theorize and explore the strategic methods Madea uses in order to get over on whoever she may deem as potentially threatening her freedom and personal well-being. Central to the plotline of the film, *Madea goes to Jail*, Madea is repeatedly in some type of confrontation with the law and her own immediate family’s desires for her to avoid getting arrested. Madea is commonly known to break laws when she deems it necessary to protect herself or when she sees it as the most sensible situation within the films plotline. A central element of Madea’s characterization is her use of what my mom calls “common sense.” In the first scene, I explore Madea’s exaggerated and contrived black Christian respectability performance and testimony of salvation during a court arraignment in order to gain sympathy and mercy from the sentencing judge. Within this scene, I note how Madea employs “bringing wreck” in a vacillated manner, switching between feigned acts of respectability, giving overt attitude, and through braggadocio.

By contained, I am specifically and broadly concerned with what I argue are the concerted efforts of Madea’s family, the public sphere, and the law to style or force Madea into the imaginary mammy-like elderly, ideal black female citizen – obedient, religiously dedicated, a pillar of womanhood proper and most of all, not angry. In the second scene, I explore the

effectiveness of Madea's rhetorical use of "bringing wreck" when pitted against famed psychologist Dr. Phil. Madea is ordered by the judge to attend anger management for fighting the police officers who arrest her. I am interested in the way Madea is characterized as "angry" and "upset" by a white male psychologist within the film's narrative and how Madea effectively manages to avoid being contained by a presumably pathological narrative by cleverly outwitting and frustrating the doctor in order to avoid continued sessions.

Before I proceed into the readings of Madea bringing wreck in the film, I will clarify my choice to focus my analysis of Madea as a representative of a trans*female character as opposed to an analysis that gives specific attention to Perry, a cisgender male, performing in female drag attire, representing a particular image of black womanhood and the implications of this attention.

My use of the term trans*female character is elicited from use of trans* as an term and identity for individuals who do not fit into cisgender and normative categories of male and female. As Hugh Ryan more clearly explains, "...the * is used metaphorically to capture all the identities—from drag queen to genderqueer—that fall outside traditional gender norms." Additionally, Ryan notes the use of trans* as opposed to transgender, elucidating, "by removing -gender, which instinctively brings to mind images of men or women, trans* might help transcend the gender binary and provide more space for people who are in the middle, who move back and forth, or who don't identify with the binary at all."⁸ My reading of Madea recognizes the physical and biological reality of Perry maleness co-existing alongside Madea's own fictional female existence. I use the term trans*female character to work through some of the possibilities and broader readings of the Madea character beyond just concerns about Perry's use of drag and disguise, but rather I focus on Madea's subjectivity and characterization within the films plot. I use the term trans*female character to discuss Madea as a way to critique character within a

range of modalities that reflect real life and often complex issues reflective of the particular black female existence she embodies. The term is not without its limits and failings, some of which I will note more in depth, shortly. However, the term does allow for a more progressive conversation about black female representation that is not securely bound to physical gendered specificities that fit squarely into male and female, accurate and inaccurate.

By tracing my concerns surrounding this difference, I will provide a more contextual and pointed understanding of my intended scene readings. Additionally, Perry's performance of Madea gives us a chance to reimagine the limits and possibilities of (re)thinking about visual black gendered performances that disrupt the male/female binary of acceptable gender representation.

Looking Beyond "It's a Man in a Dress": Madea as a Trans*female Character

The type of visual drag performance Perry often conjures up in the public imagination has often been analyzed through the kind of sub-film genre that Chris Straayer refers to as "temporary transvestite films" (TTFs). Straayer details this drag performance as a set of conventions that negotiates opposing likes and wants from the audience that might be considered taboo, but are contained and negotiated within the fictional knowledge and voyeuristic space of the film. Straayer also notes that some important elements of the TTF include; "adoption of a character of the opposite sex's specifically gendered-coded costume"; the simultaneity of the films characters believability of the drag characters sex as actual and the audience's awareness of its unbelievability. Straayer also makes the important note that within TTFs, characters disguised in drag undergo an "unmasking" by the films conclusion and eventually enter into a heterosexual relationship (44).

Martin Lawrence's successful film franchise *Big Momma's House* is a contemporary example of this type of film and performance starring a black primary actor. Lawrence stars as Malcolm Turner, an FBI agent who, under a set of random circumstances, comes to don a female fat-suit disguised as "Big momma" - an older black grandmother-like figure who is known and beloved by many pockets of the black community - in order to go undercover to catch a high-ranking criminal boss. Popular domestic films such as *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) and *Juwanna Mann* (2002) follow the TTF script to box-office success: straight cis-gendered men within the films plot find themselves "forced" into a circumstance where getting into drag is seemingly the only means to achieve some end goal - usually to save the day and obtain the female love interest, in that order. This is precisely what happens in *Big Mommas House* and with a few twists, the subsequent sequels.

While the figure of the big momma has real life ties to black communities, in this film, she is used merely as a gutted and lifeless trope of black female domesticity used for Malcom's expenditure in order to get elevated to the role of masculine hero and to eventually sleep with Nia Long's character; an act intended to restore Malcom back to his real man status after wearing a dress and wig. Unless uncomfortably and visibly forced, Malcom's big momma disguise never ventures beyond a flat caricature of a devoted Southern Baptist grandmother who sits on the Mother's Board and has a bible always within 20 feet of her vicinity. This use of drag in this film never moves beyond the "man in a dress" narrative and fails to give any subjectivity to the character he embodies.

Lyle, who along with seeing Perry's use of drag as a method to undermine black womanhood and re-inscribe patriarchal norms to his audiences, also recognizes the difference between Perry's unique use of drag and that of Lawrence's use of drag as Big Momma. Although

Lyle does credit this difference stating, "...Perry does not include the act of becoming Madea into his stage play plots. Additionally, he does not double himself as a male character in a male plot in the fictive world either" (947), he does go on to still find reservation of thinking beyond Perry's drag performance as anything other than a recycling of the same tired trope, calling it a type of "subversive confusion" for audiences and further stating

When many of the mainstream treatments of drag do so much to expose drag as an act of dress up and to include a safe male plot, they are ultimately ensuring that audiences are never thrown into a crisis of categorization, and their epistemologies and belief systems are never questioned. Thus, drag acts are never truly troubling to the viewer or reader.

The status quo is often maintained (948).

While my particular objective for this article does not specifically address an analysis of audience reception theory, Lyle's connection here is noteworthy and raises important question worth considering in discussion around the subject of black male drag and its impact on audiences (un)awareness and the operational limits and possibilities of men to female drag performances in general.

Lyle's aforementioned critique may gear towards a suggestion that when (black) people watch TTF films, their ways of knowing the world are rendered static, or possibly non-troubled, during the duration of the performance. Perhaps it is the "crisis of categorization" that is disconcerting here to the discussion of male to female drag in film. By placing Madea within the limits of the TTF drag model, explorations of Madea as a trans*female character are foreclosed upon. From the start of every Madea film, the character is understood and constructed as wholly representing a woman and never shifts between genders. Madea is never "exposed" during the films duration as Perry underneath the wig and dress. I would suggest that while traditional TTF

drag acts certainly maintain the fixity of heteronormative ideologies of the film drag – straight man forced to wear a dress, hates it, but has to be done -- Madea, understood as a trans*female character, moves beyond this model. To throw the audience into a crisis of categorization would mean the character would have to function outside of the TTF model. How can these two drag performances that are intended to represent two different and distinct representations of black womanhood –one as costume, one as biological -- both maintain the status quo Lyle suggests?

The particular practice of black men in TTFs have often been deployed for the primary purpose of economic profits and comedic capital that openly denigrate black women and rewards them for doing so. This is not an issue I would like to dismiss or gloss over.

In an interview with the entertainment blog site *PopEater.com*, Lawrence discusses his latest film installment, *Big Momma's House 3: Like Father, Like Son* (2011) with Nicki Gostin. After reading Lawrence's first few responses, what becomes clear is that Lawrence is motivated to do drag strictly for comedic and monetary capital:

Gostin: Why is it so funny to see a man in women's clothing?

Lawrence: If a guy can dress up in women's clothing and have you believe that he's really a woman and the situation is funny, that's where all the humor comes from.

Gostin: Yeah, but it just doesn't seem to work the other way round.

Lawrence: It can work if the situation is funny. If a woman pulls it off, where she makes you really believe she's a man and the situation is funny, it can be hilarious.

Gostin: Did you come up with the idea?

Lawrence: No, they sent me a script, and the director, John Whitesell, pitched the idea to me and wanted to see if I liked the direction they were going in, and I said yeah, I enjoyed it,

Lawrence goes on to claim he will continue to dress in drag, “Until the wheels fall off.” Lawrence clearly identifies himself as an actor who is committed to donning drag as a costume only to the point of and as long as his audiences find his drag films entertaining and the act remains economically viable.

Conversely, Adam Howard of *TheGrio.com* challenges the very foundation of what is deemed comedic by black straight men in drag. Howard questions, “...why so much hostility towards black women? There have been enough cruel and insensitive interpretations of black women on the big screen from the early days of mammies and pickaninnies, why would these films, all starring and often conceived by black men, revel in making black women look like gun-toting psychopaths?”¹⁰ Howard’s query about the seemingly unyielding fascination of black male drag performances that mock black women is a serious question that deserves continued and more critical discussion. While rooted in the observation that accurately points to the overt and subtle ways black women and their lives are sourced as the joke for others entertainment by TTF drag, Howard’s statement also points to the dangerous slip of only critiquing through the lens of the TTF drag characterization

It is precisely the pervasive observance of male to female drag as always and only making fun of black women, namely when concerning successful mainstream outlets, that makes it difficult for other viable considerations of black female representation that transgresses beyond a male/female binary. Given the proliferation of TTF model films that have proven to be successful in mainstream cinema, Perry’s use of drag as way to express his own particular performance of womanhood cannot be expressed through the TTF model, which only allows the use of drag performances use for mockery and exploitation. Additionally, Perry’s use of drag as connected through the TTF model does little to advance any discussion that may give a critical

consideration to how Madea may ostensibly fit the visual image of a “gun-wielding psychopath”, but whose characterization and performance may function on more multifaceted levels.

As Straayer notes, the TTF model helps to clarify the distinction between what he classifies as transvestites and cross-dressing. Referencing Ester Newtown’s distinction between the two, Straayer notes that the cross-dresser is understood to be me a man who wears women’s clothing within the films narrative with an exaggerated flair, proving to be “obviously and inadequately disguised” (47). Within the TTF plot, it is possible that an actor can be both a “temporary transvestite” as well as a cross-dresser depending on the situation the character is involved in at various moments in the film. Both the terms “cross-dresser” and “temporary transvestite” fail to consider, more broadly, the possibilities of how a character like Madea functions as a trans*female within the films narrative. Not only is Madea constructed to be understood by the audience and within the world of the film as being as a biological female character, as mentioned previously, there are never moments of “unmasking,” implicit gender-coded exaggerations nor an imperative to keep a “true” sex from being discovered. These particular ventures in the characterization and function of Madea steer her away from Straayer’s TTF formula as well as the colloquial “Man in a dress” description.

The type of drag performance I focus on for this paper deals with heterosexual identifying (black) male actors taking part in what Chris Straayer calls “trans-sex casting”. As Straayer explains, “In a film with trans-sex casting, the actor is already disguised as the opposite sex when first seen by viewers, and during the film’s plot is never restored to the conventional coding for his/her extra-textual sex” (74) Iconic film drag actor, Divine, playing a housewife in John Waters’ *Hairspray* (1983) is one primary example of the trans-sex casting Straayer provides. Unlike the TTF model, trans-sex casting is already embodied as the opposite gender of

the actor within the films plot. Straayer stresses the point of this believability, noting that trans-sex cast performers maintain the "...gestures, behaviors and secondary sex markers are maintained throughout the film" (75). While Staayer's term is helpful in marking the nuanced difference between drag donned as a costume for an end goal (TTF) and drag as sustained embodiment of one gender (trans-sex casting), Madea read as a trans*female moves beyond the considerations of just the costume and disguise aspects of the performance. Within the realm of the film, Madea as a trans*female character takes seriously the ways in which Madea is intended to represent and be understood as being biologically female within the space of the film. I do not read Madea through a trans*female model in order to render the character as a fully operating representative of womanhood – such an endeavor would surly produce a host of failings and issues that would need to be considered. However, such failings are only produced and eventually met with broader possibilities and discussion when an analysis of Madea takes seriously the way in which the character carries a particular subjectivity, agency epistemologies and behaviors unique specifically to the Madea character. Ultimately, while this lens is not without its smudges, I argue an analysis that adopts this concept shifts us away from the TTF model and into more progressive and layered critiques of (black) visual media gender performance politics.

Just Because She Looks Like Mammy...

Given the manner in which Perry has characterized Madea's personality and physical appearance (Perry himself stands 6'5"), one might easily describe Madea as what heralded media scholar Donald Bogle calls, "Mammy-like"¹¹. Whenever I have think about the characterization of mammy stereotype – sassy, bright eyed, loud, heavy-set, southern, elderly, a black woman – I was quick to dismiss the idea that Madea was representative of one. While my general

description of the mammy is a *part* of her portrayal, at the root of this anti-black stereotype and what makes her “fix[ed] without change or development to eternity” as Hall claims, is that the mammy stereotype has always been constituted as loyal, overtly loving and highly protective of white children and white families, even more than her own black family and kin. As Christopher C. Sewell notes

“...the Mammy exemplified the ways in which ... Black woman could truly work with white people. Despite her physical size and difference from that of her slave owner or employer, the Mammy was supposed to appeal like a ‘natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life.’ Her maternal instincts made her the most domesticated and dutiful slave; she embodied the archetype of a protector...the Mammy became the prototype of white domesticity (311)

Furthermore, the mammy is viewed as and behaves in an asexual manner within the confines of her stereotype. Sewell continues to articulate this distinction, stating “[u]nlike the Jezebel, known for her overly flirtatious and sexually explicit nature, the weight of the Mammy and her relatively “normal” look should not appeal to that of the white master: ‘the contrariness of her large body, dark skin and non-angular facial features to the ideal image of Western beauty causes Mammy to pose no sexual threat to white women’” (311) The mammy is always in a state of “singleness” – never having or needing any sexual pleasure or intimacy; permanently in a state of being romantically uninvolved and un-needing of affection. Even the recognition of what can be produced from having an active sexual life, e.g., children, a casual intimate partner, the jaded ex, etc., are denied to the mammy. However, given the proliferation of the mammy stereotype in American popular culture, as black feminist Patricia Hill Collin’s reminds us, one of the consequences of controlling images is they become normalized in the public imagination.

The thought of Madea embodying a mammy, in some ways, helps to note an important aspect of Straayer's TTF concept that aids in articulating in what I read as some of the failures of Madea being read as just portraying "man in a dress". As Straayer argues, the TTF does not transverse into the realm of showcasing explicit sexual acts when the character is in drag with another heterosexual person of interest, claiming the "sexual misidentity" achieved by the character in drag costume eventually becomes that which hinders a potential heterosexual coupling (51-2). Mammy, as a stereotype, is mythologized as being exceptionally talented in raising and caring for white children. Her wisdom is sage-like and in her mythic sense, she even poses the secret of helping young white girls solve the tough questions in life – like how to get rich white men to fall deeply in love with them. Her life and personal desires, sexual or otherwise, are of little concern or to anyone or even herself. We rarely know if mammy is partnered or has had a partner(s) in the past. Mammy is never configured as an intimate and sexual subject in the public imagination and is rarely (if ever) seen in a healthy intimate or romantic relationship on the screen or in advertisements.

Madea is both an exception and adherer to Straayer's statement. Madea's character actively transgresses beyond many of the general characteristics of the TTF drag performance: Madea is a mother of three biological children and possesses a distinct and traceable genealogy. These points I will explore more in-depth in the courtroom section. One of the more distinct breaks from the TTF model, as well as the mammy configuration, is Madea's active sexual sense of self, stated matter-of-factly. The performance of Madea's sexuality moves beyond the castrated mammy confinement of only knowing just enough about birth rearing and love tips, reminiscent of Hattie McDaniel's fussy and attentive Mammy character in *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Madea's sense of sexuality moves her in a space of frank and open engagements about

the subject of sex, sans the Old South sentimentality. These conversations often intersect with topics of class, gender expectations, and desire.

Madea makes it a habit to list – publically and without shame -- her own extensive employment history involving sex(ual) work, such as being as a stripper named ‘Delicious’ in *Madea’s Family Reunion* (2006) and a brothel madam in *Madea Gets a Job* (2011) in order to take care of her children and herself. Madea regularly gives speeches to young couples and single men and women, proclaiming to have a healthy understanding of how a well-functioning sex life should exist for straight couples based often on her own “lived” experiences.

In his engrossing exploration of the interpellations in Cuban identity formations through what he terms an “erotics of self-making”, Jafari S. Allen problematizes the concept of sexuality beyond a consideration of just physical and intimate desires and ideological confines, stating “...to talk about sexuality is to talk not only about the everyday lived experience of the sexual(ualized) body and its reproduction, but also the cultures, histories, and political-economic realities of the nation (region, diaspora, globe), and the historicity, imagination desires and intentions of the sexual(ualized) subject” (59). Read through the lens of being a trans*female figure, Madea occupies a specific representation of black womanhood in which her views and knowledge of sex are not assured merely by its physical boundaries – acts of kissing, intercourse, pregnancy — but also by her realities as a retired black, Atlanta, Georgia born and raised woman in her late 70s.

Unlike the amiable and asexual mammy figure who is understood to know very little, if anything, about sex or the world outside her community, Madea has an abundance of knowledge on the subject which she is quick to share with others, albeit, all discussed in the realms of heterosexuality. Queer people – those people who fit the stereotypical image of the flamboyant

and effeminate male or masculine butch, are used as fodder for mockery in the Madea films. Madea's views on sex are rationalized through a Christian, yet black quotidian working class and heteronormative understanding of sex and relationships. Madea talks and thinks about sex like many everyday black mamas and grandmas talk and think about sex. The conversations are typically housed in traditional Christian sexual norms, such as advocating abstinence until marriage and finding a partner who is materially, physically and spiritually well-off. Madea often promotes the normalcy of heteronormative pairings while viewing queer sexuality and identities as weird and "other".

In 2006, Perry penned *Don't Make a Black Woman Take off her Earrings: Madea's Uninhibited Commentaries on Love and Life*, a *New York Times* bestseller. The book filled with hundreds of pages of Perry, speaking as Madea -- marketed as a type of self-help book -- giving sage-like advice to its readers on topics such as marriage, raising children and proper etiquette, all from Madea's unique "lived" experiences. In the chapter "Madea's Secrets to Romance" Madea shares her thoughts on the topic of girls engaging in casual sex. Madea explains "I had this little girl come up to me and say 'Madea, I have sex with a lot of people because it makes me feel loved.' I told her, I said, 'Baby, having sex with a lot of people don't make you feel loved -- it makes you a ho. And I ain't never met a man who said 'I'm looking for a nice ho to settle down with.' " (27). In this instance, Madea attempt to deliver some well-meaning advice to persuade the girl from equating the act of having "sex with a lot of people" as paralleled to being loved. However, in order to accomplish this task, Madea relies on misogynistic and heteronormative advice.

Viewed from the derogatory vantage of being a "ho" --hypersexual, loose, a prostitute -- Madea's shaming of the girl by labeling her expressed sexual desires and interactions as that of a

ho reinforce normative ideals of female chastity and Victorian stylized notions of proper womanhood. Within the heteronormative and Christian ideological world that Perry's characters are emerged in, stepping outside of sexist and misogynistic notions that women who sleep around are less valued than women who are married, abstain or strictly monitor their amount of sexual partners in a common narrative. Madea adheres to the normative idea that women should be chaste and wait until they are married to start having sex and directly implying the girl will be labeled a ho by men if she continues to sleep with multiple people as an act of feeling love. For Madea, telling the girl that she shouldn't be a ho is equated to Madea's act of promoting a sense of self-respect for one's body and sexual reputation.

However, as Allen reminds us, to talk about sexuality is to talk about sex in relationship to particular cultures and political elements of the sexual(ualized) subject. Madea continues on stating, "Now if you're just so hot that you've got to get some, then what the hell is wrong with a condom? I don't understand why these children will walk around in this day and not use something to protect themselves from AIDS and other stuff" (27). Beyond just cautions of unexpected pregnancies or equating one sexual encounter with love, Madea also recognizes the realities of the people in her communities and how everyday people act, consume, and reenact realities such as heteronormative and homophobic discourses.

How might a reading of Madea from the perspective of reading her as a trans*female character differ from that of the similar Big Momma TTF drag character when talking about how they discuss the topic of sexuality? How might readings of Madea discussions about (sex)uality broaden the manner in which the narratives of black women's lives are within Perry's Madea films – for better or for worse – when the story does not rely on the masking and unmasking apparatus of a TTF? I ask these questions to again consider the limits of analyzing and

discouraging the Madea character through the man in a dress rhetoric. Through a trans*female understanding of Madea, such insights seem possible that are otherwise unavailable the TTF lens.

Madea and the Courtroom

In the previous section, I mapped some of the failings and limits of reading Perry's Madea character from the TTF perspective, suggesting that a more fruitful and broadened analysis of the Madea character can be undertaken by thinking of Madea as a trans*female lens. By no means do I intend to suggest that the readings and critiques of Perry's problematic uses of drag should be dismissed from the discussion of Perry's Madea films by using this particular lens. Rather, the perspective I take urges a discussion and consideration of more broad and progressive ways of thinking about not only black female representation in visual mainstream media itself, but also how Perry's specific use of drag moves us away from dominant discourses that traditional TTFs display. This shift in critique helps connect intersectional considerations of conceptualizing gender and drag, understood through the characterization of the performance as opposed merely to the costume itself.

Along with the mammy trope, Madea is often characterized as representing the "angry black woman" stereotype. Madea makes a habit of carrying a loaded gun(s) in her purse and is often in the midst of a physical fight or grapple with someone in the course of the films she stars in. As most commentary on the Madea character will note, her displayed fits of violence and rage will always be a part of the discussion. Indeed, as Tasha Moore of Screenpicks.com writes, expressing her take about the character of Madea as basically "a chain-smoking, weapon-toting, foul-mouthed matriarch who is always presented with a gamut of problems, self-inflicted or not. She then endeavors to solve these problems through outrageous means. Madea resists any

hint of social power bankruptcy as a single black older woman by crashing through store windows, vandalizing private property, and assaulting anyone in her path (including law enforcement officers) to get her aimless points across.” Given Moore’s description of, Madea, is it hard not to fit her into the construction of the angry black woman stereotype in the public imagination – the black female that, no matter where she is located, always has a negative and confrontational attitude. Her points, only read and muted through the expression of her anger, are always rendered “aimless”.

Where I choose to focus my concerns from this point is in exploring how Madea’s aggressive actions might read, ostensibly, as representing the angry black woman stereotype, especially when paired with her propensity to use violence as a means to an end when provoked. Moreover, I read these actions, understood through Madea operating, within the film’s narrative as a trans-sex black female character, as a subversion of the black angry woman stereotype while actively playing on it at the same time as a mode of self-defense and to protect others. Madea brings wreck! By reading Madea as a female in the film’s narrative, Madea’s combative actions can be read as a type of rejection of black female containment.

I focus on discerning how Madea as a trans*female character successfully (and at times unsuccessfully) manages to accomplish not being contained within the angry black woman representation in the fictional sense. Moreover, I am interested in Madea’s rejection of being contained by lawful authority and imposed respectability politics by playing the role of the trickster and bringing wreck. I argue this reading is a way to highlight important and often under recognized strategies that many black women in real life have had to use and continue to in order to stunt acts of misrecognition regularly engraved on black women’s subjectivity.

More specifically, Collin's details the consequences of stereotypes in relation to ones created specifically about black women - labeling these particular efforts as, "controlling images." According to Collin's, images such as the mammy, jezebel, the welfare queen and the angry black woman "are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (69). The stereotype of the angry black female – mean, abrasive and abusive – reduces all lived realities black women experience to this monolithic reading. This is especially pressing when considering the ways in which those real realities that are worthy of anger as a response are often suppressed under the possible threat of being labeled "angry" and thus, losing respectability.

When anti-black stereotypes are performed in visual media, the insidious consumption and the static tropes happen of often reinforce sexist, racist and oppressive thought, guised as mere entertainment. The undermining and exploitation of black women's lives is a grounded U.S. tradition. As Manning Marable states in *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (1983), black women's histories and experiences have been intrinsically intertwined with oppression and capital gain, even within the black community, stating,

From the dawn of the slave trade until today, U.S. capitalism was both racist and deeply sexist. The superexploitation of Black women became an important feature in American social and economic life, because sisters were assaulted simultaneously as workers, as Blacks and as women....To understand the history of all Blacks within the Black majority, the 'domestic Black periphery,' special emphasis is required in documenting the particular struggles, ideals, and attitudes of black women. 70

This "domestic Black periphery" has long placed black women outside the borders of being and imagined as equal and respected citizens of the U.S. In fact, if the domestic sphere comes to

represent the home, the family and the bedroom, then it aligns with characterizations of the mammy and the jezebel stereotypes. Each figure represents a different aspect of the domesticated black womanhood used for the purposes of racist and sexualized subjugation. Within her text, *Ain't I a Woman: Female slaves in the Antebellum South*, Deborah G. White explains this paradigm succulently, detailing,

The myth of Jezebel excused miscegenation, the sexual exploitation of black women, and the mulatto population. It could not, however, calm Southern fears of moral slippage and the 'mongreliza-tion,' or man's fear of woman's emasculating sexual powers. But the mammy image could. Mammy helped endorse the service of black women in Southern households, as well as the close contact between whites and blacks that such service demanded. Together Jezebel and Mammy did a lot of explaining and soothed many a troubled consequence. (29-61)

As White explains, the mammy and jezebel stereotypes worked in tandem to help create conditions that excused white oppression and violation on the black female body. These anti-black stereotypes become fashioned in a way that was meant, initially, for white consumption as Southern whites worked to create images that reflected themselves as more powerful and exceptional than their black counterparts, especially after Emancipation when blacks moved from non-citizens and owned objects to freed citizens, able to work and live alongside their former owners.

This need to proliferate mass anti-black images of recently freed black people was intended to curtail the black labor market and political aspirations of blacks who, by all legal means, were no longer property, were seeking paid employment, the vote, access, and social equity. During this period of an openly, and far too often, accepted hostile and segregated

national environment, the black church became a safe haven for many blacks to plan, organize, be entertained and have communion in their own space. Madea represents a version of the deviant when put in contrast to the traditional churches role advocacy of sober and kind living. Madea actions are typically anything, but. Cathy Cohen, pointing specific to scholars but addressing black folk in general, writes, “despite the feelings of some in Black communities that we have been shamed by the immoral behavior of a small subset of community members, those some would label the underclass, scholars must take up the charge to highlight and detail the agency of those on the outside, those who through their acts of nonconformity choose outsider status, at least temporarily” (28). A part of this undertaking that Cohen suggests is rooted in taking seriously the ways in which black lives are always in the midst of negotiating the boundaries of a still existent color-line and rampant racist pathologies created with the specific purpose of demonizing black existence. Madea’s deviancy is captured in her non-conformity to be a “respectable black woman” and her temporal shifts in attitude, or in other words, “bringing wreck.” Madea’s deviancy through her sexual subjectivity, propensity to be violent and use the system to her own benefit as well as her queerness through her masculine-like physicality, is what I view as a representational response to Cohen’s proposition.

Reading Madea as a trans*female who “brings wreck” helps to problematize and more broadly think through some of the slippages in mischaracterization that often occur when reading the Madea character as an angry black woman. Madea does not invoke the black angry woman by merely vocalizing her discontent with authority figures, but rather, employs her use of bringing wreck through code-switching, exaggeration, and even bringing wreck through a contrived act of respectability in order to be seen as a pious and obedient civilian in the eyes of the law.

In an early scene, we witness Madea standing in a courtroom before Judge Mablean Ephriam to discuss her most recent run in with the law – refusing to pull over for cops which lead to a high speed chase on the freeway. The chase culminates with Madea surrounded by 12 police vehicles, helicopters, several guns pointed at her and a total of 4 male cops physically restraining her to the ground after, but not before kneeing and punching several of them in the tussle. At the start of her hearing, Madea tells her daughter Cora Simmons (Tamela Mann) and LeRoy Brown (David Mann), Cora’s father, that “[I]f the Lord gets me out of this, I’m going by the church”, finally giving into the constant berate from the two that Madea should be thankful to prayer and God for allowing her to stand before the judge. As the court starts, the judge expresses her disbelief that Madea is once again in her courtroom, standing before her. Madea breaks out into a spiritual praise session, testifying, “Listen, I done changed my life. I am livin’ for da Lort [Lord]. For the Lort. For da Lort! Haullajueryah [Hallelujah]! I feel him down in my spirit. When I think about the goodness of Jesus and all that he’s done for me, my soul cries out Haullajueryah, thank Gawd (God)!”

The judge sits unconvinced. Madea’s act of playing the fallen woman – repenting for her sinful ways – evading arrest, carrying concealed weapons, destroying public property -- and promising to do better before the eyes of the law and God -- is betrayed by her constant repeat appearances before the court. Madea sins again in the eyes of the law by refusing to be contained, standing in front of the judge, mocking the present and past failed attempts to put her behind bars. As the judge readies to sentence her to jail, she is informed by her lawyer and nephew Brian Simmons (Perry) that she has to set Madea free because she was not read her Miranda Rights by the arresting officers.

Judge: You finished? I don't believe that no more than I believe you will stay out of trouble.

Brian: Your Honor, judge...

Judge: Save it. I saw the video. And I told you that if she came back before me again, she was going to jail. She's going to jail.

Madea: You're a lawyer. You're supposed to be getting me off. You're weak-ass. I gotta get me a real lawyer. Matt Johnson or somebody. You weak-ass lawyer. God Lord.

Brian: Your Honor, there's something...you need to understand.

Judge: There's nothing you can do. She is going to jail this time.

Brian: I don't know about that.

Judge: And why not?

Brian: Our officers forgot to Mirandize her.

Madea: I was waiting for Miranda to come in and nobody came in! That's right. Ain't nobody Miranda me. Miranda wasn't in the room.

When the judge demands to know why the officers failed to achieve such a seemingly simple task, one officer tries to explain that they were “fighting for our lives” against Madea’s refusal to be arrested. The officer makes sure to note Madea’s marked body and gender queerness, noting, “That old woman got the strength of any man”. Madea’s trans*female body moves along with Perry’s own 6’5, 200lb masculine frame throughout the films narrative, marking her as a queer subject by her distortion of normative gendered bodied expectations even within the narrative. Madea is clearly acknowledged as female by everyone in the narrative, however, in order to explain ...

Judge: I've got to let you go.

Madea: You gotta let me go.

Judge: As much as I hate it, I have to.

Madea: Yes, you do.

Judge: But I'm gonna suspend your driver's license indefinitely.

Madea: Gonna suspend my license? My license been suspended. [laughs]

Hell, you ain't doing nothing. I ain't had a license for 38 years. She's gonna suspend my license. What's that gonna do? I got keys.

Judge: I'm gonna order you to anger management counseling.

Brian: She'll take it. Thank you. We appreciate it.

Judge: Go see the clerk. Get the paperwork done and get her out of my courtroom. You're free.

Injured officer: Free? Look at my neck! Hold on. Did you see my eyes?

Madea: Saw your eyes, saw that face too. You're tore the hell up. I'm free to go.

The officers sit in the jury box, visibility battered and bruised while Madea stands coiffed and unscathed during their verbal exchange. Having been released, Madea swaggers out the courtroom, dancing, snapping her fingers and repeating “I’m free to go!” triumphantly. This moment along with Madea declaring that the judges threat to suspend her license means nothing to her, she still had keys, both bring wreck not in the angry black woman who just doesn’t know when to stop talking, but rather she talks back to the system she just got over on. As Pough claims, “Talking back is a challenging of political gesture of resistance to forces that render Black women nameless, voiceless and invisible...Bringing wreck draws on Black women’s speech patterns such as talking back in that it too is concerned with resistance and liberation (80).

As with any anything in life, not all the strategies we come up with work all the time; however, it’s best to always have a backup plan. While Madea’s tactics of testimony and feigned respectability fail in this account, it is her specific choice to bring wreck in the physical sense on the officers that were attempting to arrest her that manages to ultimately keep her from going to prison. The implications and significance of this particular wreck is a topic I will explore in more depth within the next section of this piece. But for now, while I have stated that the respectability

act Madea employed failed on the judge, it does work in another significant sense worthy of some consideration.

Having avoided jail and now headed home, the overtly religious Mr. Brown and Cora remind her of her promise to go to church if she were set free. Madea dismissively refuses, stating “I ain’t going to no church!” Mr. Brown reminds Madea again of her promise to go by the church if she didn’t get jail time. Madea responds in kind “And that’s exactly what we did. We just went *by* the church” cleverly getting out of her word by pointing to the church outside of the car window as they drive by one. While Madea shifts often between looking to Christianity as a way to help her own self and others, this moment points to one of many in all of the Madea films where she displays an understanding and connection to traditional black Christian thought and rhetoric but is not fully invested in act of living as dedicated practicing Christian. As Madea explains in *Tyler Perry’s Madea’s Family Reunion* (2006) “I only go to church on two occasions – weddings and funerals”. Madea’s community and family situate her as always in contact with the space of the church, even if she is not necessarily in it, she is still of it. However, from the singing Baptist pastor to the weed-smoking aunt Bam (Cassi Davis), seemingly everyone in Madea’s universe possesses a distinct connection to Christianity. Madea’s refusal to go to church where her non-law abiding antics, unwillingness to be silenced, and affinity for contumacy all mark her as a queer deviant subject within the space of the traditional black church. This deviancy resists any attempts to be made into the docile and normative black female figure of respectability.

While Madea actively resists against powers of systematic oppression and control that often have her misread as being some type of “unruly woman,” Madea is always intentional and deliberate in her actions. Madea in this scene deploys tactics of the trickster to play both the

innocent role of the submissive, righteous, and kind bible-quoting grandmother figure while concurrently vocalizing her discontent with the law and her family's efforts to keep her in line (or out of further trouble as they see it). E. Patrick Johnson explores a specific aspect of the trickster figure. Johnson explains that the Yoruba deity, Esu Elegara, a high priest/priestess of trickery and masking is well known for his/her ability to be a "duplicitous boundary crosser". Johnson goes on to note that Esu Elegara has the ability to speak out of both sides of his/her mouth, creating a type of double-talk (109). This double talk operates in this scene to shape an image of Madea that reflects her as kind and meek Christian woman who has made a few simple mistakes while simultaneously not having her discontent concerning efforts to confine her go unnoticed. Unlike the stereotype of the mammy, As Melissa Harris explains the angry black woman is typically configured as "shrill, loud, argumentative, irrationally angry and verbally abusive" (87), whereas the mammy only displays a cantankerous attitude when directed towards other black folk.

Any pressing concerns, problems or even acts of excitement and joy black women expressed, when viewed through the lens of the angry black woman stereotype, are often dismissed as rants and lacking substance while at the same time deployed against black women to mark them as exceptionally loud and brash. Harris-Perry sheds light on the primary purpose of this stereotype, clarifying "The angry black woman myth renders many sisters invisible and mute" (85). While this stereotype is still in effect throughout the public sphere, Madea takes these traits and transgresses beyond their negative connotations. Madea must find a way to avoid being lumped into the myth of being an angry black woman without silencing herself under the gaze of the law.

Noting the lineage of black women's involvement in black and female liberation, freedom struggles back to the 19th century, Pough gives attention to how black women have always been activist and resistance against powers of domination and oppression. Pough writes that these resistant and intellectual strategies took on a variety of different forms. Pough, who lists women such as Francis E. Harper, Harriet Jacobs, and Zora Neal Hurston, to name a few, who "...spoke out, sang out and at times cried against injustice." Pough marks the power of this resistance, stating,

These women articulated resistance against the stereotype image of both Black women and the Black race, navigating the written and spoken word in order to achieve their goals. They made use of strategy by omitting, displacing, falsifying, and –when the need arose – accommodating. They carved out spaces for themselves and demanded that they be heard. Not only did they voice their individual experience, but they voiced experiences that symbolically stood for the collective whole (49)

This is a well noted paradox that black women continue to navigate presently. Black women are habitually inscribed as combative for expressing themselves or refusing to be silenced. Black women's history is filled with many who found themselves in a predicament of either trapped between the threat of being labeled "angry" if they respond in a tempered manner or choosing to give a purposeful or shamed silence. Harris-Perry theorizes that for many black women in the U.S., they face the exceptional challenge of living their lives in a "crooked room." This concept was developed, post-WWII, when field dependence researchers placed subjects in a crooked chair and crooked room to see what tactics they used to align themselves to a sense of being upright. Harris-Perry connects this concept specifically to black women when confronting issues of race and gender and must "...figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of

their humanity, some black women bend and tilt themselves to fit the distortion” (29). For black women, the “tilting” many undertake in order to be respected or taken seriously in even the most routine realms of life (getting fast food, dancing at a club, watching a movie with friends) is often interpolated as always potentially angry and hostile.

Rather than seeing Madea’s refusal to simply accept punishment for being “too angry”, which further oppress and pathologizes black women’s existence, I read Madea in this scene actively rejecting a desire to “fit” into the distortion, challenging sensationalized hegemonic ideas of black female containment including, but not limited to black women locked behind prison walls, rocking calmly in the church pews or adhering to Victorian ideals of proper womanhood; docile, meek and proper. Madea brings forth wreck as a strategy to protect herself and to represent a resistance to the many factors that continue to have unjust consequences on black women’s lives. Madea’s use of wreck is a bold, unapologetic and unabashed attempt to reject these ideals of black womanhood as they often largely gravitate to the ultimate goal silencing and containment of subjective black female desires, demands and needs. However, such an overt display of wreck ultimately and habitually places the majority of black assertive women who outspokenly find displeasure in their oppression as black women who are just and simply, angry.

Madea does not merely play the angry black women, but rather uses wreck elements such as double-talk and feigned respectability politics to avoid jail more specifically in this scene. However, while Madea manages to avoid being sentenced, she is ordered to anger management. Indeed, just as all strategies have their usefulness, none are impervious to failing. Within this scene, I have discussed the way in which Madea uses wreck to both subvert the traditional black angry woman trope and avoid being contained in jail.

Furthermore, I explored her deviant nature and how it marks her as a queer figure who relies on and rejects traditional black church respectability politics in order to maintain her own sense of autonomy and agency. In the next scene, I consider how Madea uses the trickster trope to undermine white male authority and the continued desire within the narrative to label her as simply “angry”. I consider how Madea both employs and rejects a politics of respectability as a tactic to “get away” from being mandated to attend therapy to make her less angry. I also consider more deeply the impact of Madea’s wreck used on the police that come to mark her as angry. Madea’s trickster like verbal acrobatics and prowess over power the doctors own, showcasing not an angry black woman, but rather as a black female subject who actively redirects her own misrecognition as a folly of the doctors and general society writ large, who have made a habit of misrecognizing the black female emotional repertoire as either angry, strong, and over-reactive.

“What is Wrong with You? Why are you so Angry?”

As I mentioned previously, after Madea has been freed of all charges, the judge orders her to take anger management session. In this scene, a rather farcical and tongue-in-cheek exchange takes place between Madea and the famous television psychologist, Dr. Phil McGraw, or more commonly known as simply, Dr. Phil. The camera shoots to Madea sitting in Dr. Phil’s upscale office, facing him in an armchair, hair pinned up, ankles crossed and looking quite annoyed. Madea begins the session explaining, “I told them I didn't need to come here and see you, okay?” to which the camera then shifts to Dr. Phil, starting from his feet and slowly going up to the unveiling of his face, in which he responds “Well, you know, I don't usually see people individually. But when I saw this tape of you getting arrested...I thought I have got to talk to this woman. What is wrong with you? Why are you so angry?” Immediately, Madea’s statements

about her own mental and emotional state are negated by a declaration of white male privilege and status, establishing a clear sense of superiority and power over her. Dr. Phil then goes on to find a morbid fascination with Madea's anger to which he assigns her the entire blame.

The tape Dr. Phil refers to is helicopter coverage of Madea fighting multiple male police officers as they try to tackle and subdue her to the ground in order to arrest her for refusing to pull over. Madea fights, warding off multiple cops for an extensive period of time before finally having multiple cops pile on top of her struggling and resisting body. Harris-Perry suggests that this type of misrecognition of Madea as angry rather than as in defense of herself can be read as a condition of the angry black woman myth. She writes, "[i]f African American woman's position at the intersection of race and gender makes them uniquely vulnerable to shaming, it may also make them particularly susceptible to the humiliated fury that shame provokes... Anger is an effective, if sometimes destructive, way to accomplish this self-protection." Given this reading, Madea's anger at having to fight police officers who are trying to arrest her while the others point their guns at her, as opposed to simply consenting to being cuffed, is an act of misrecognition by Dr. Phil. Harris-Perry goes on to state, "Not only do black women find themselves in personal rage-shame spirals, but they are victimized by others' anger-based shame management" (123). Dr. Phil views Madea's anger as in need of suppression. Rather than act out in a "humiliated fury," Madea brings wreck to the narrative, delivering a comedic yet effective strategy to transverse the angry woman stereotype she has been locked into. Turning to a performance of respectability and controlled mockery, Madea double-talks the doctor into a corner, cornering him into a position in which he is forced to control his own fits of anger.

In an effort not to dismiss the gravity and reality of the real life ways in which this pathology continues to affect the safety and misrecognition of black women's lives, I would like

to suggest Madea's performance of bringing wreck, situated in the space of Perry's comedy-drama, is used purposefully by Perry as way to showcase often painful realities of black life through using laughter as a way to get through hurt and pain. Before becoming a film in 2009, *Madea Goes to Jail* was a successful off-Broadway theater production. Like many of his plays, Perry's films incorporate Chitlin-Circuit aesthetics as a way to discuss real issues that affect every day black life. According to Henry Louis Gates, the chitlin circuit isn't considered "high-brow" in the slightest. Gates characterizes them as often coarse, loud and over-the-top. However, Gates notes that these plays often speak to poor to middle class black families alike and deal with issues they both are concerned with such as gang-violence, drug addiction, and absent fathers and sexual abuse; concerns that Gates describes as "issues of everyday life, issues that are as close at hand as parking tickets or head colds" (140). Madea's exchange with Dr. Phil is marked in a clear near implausible situation in which a retired black woman fighting a gang of police becomes the sole fascination of a white celebrity male doctor. However, symbolically, the exchange sheds light on how black women are often effortlessly cast into a social pathology that reads their race in gender as a tandem that is always susceptible to behaving as hostile, combative and angry during common interactions -- even when they are simply defending themselves in the midst of a potentially volatile situation. After Dr. Phil has questioned Madea, the two exchange a tact back and forth:

Madea: First of all, ain't nothing wrong with me. Secondly, I'm not angry.

Okay? I'm not angry.

Dr. Phil: You seem angry now.

Madea: No, I'm not angry. This is how I am. I don't have no hostility at all.

Dr. Phil: Well, do you have to be in control all the time of everything.

Madea: I don't have to be. I ain't got no problem with that.

Dr. Phil: Well, then why do you get so angry?

Madea: I keep trying to tell you and that judge that I do not get angry. Somebody do something to me...I do something to them. That's common sense.

Dr. Phil: So you believe in getting even?

Madea: Hell to the yeah.

Dr. Phil: Why do you feel you gotta get somebody all the time? "Get him, get him!" You don't think that's angry?

Madea: If they, "Got me," I gotta get them, get them. That's what it is.

Dr. Phil: Then, what you call getting got is different than what other people call getting got. It doesn't take much to get you, does it?

Madea: When you getting got, somebody got you, then you go get them. Everybody's gonna get got. But if you're getting somebody got you...when they didn't get you...

Dr. Phil: You're getting the gotters, they didn't do anything.

Madea: But if the gotters get me, I'm gonna get my Glock.

Dr. Phil: Yeah, well... But you don't get the Glock when you hadn't been got.

Madea: What I'm trying to explain, I don't care who got me. I'll get them first. Get me, I'll get you.

Dr. Phil: Why is it so important?

As Madea once again makes perfectly clear to Dr. Phil, she does not see herself as angry and knows she is not angry person. She merely responds in return when provoked, but does not carry around an unrestrained and undirected anger. Sitting wide eyed and attentive, Madea continues her back and forth with the doctor with a calm and inquisitive tone. Rather than displaying a physical act of anger at continually being misrecognized by the doctor, Madea's actions turn to acting out a politics of respectability in order to bring the interrogation to a halt. Madea speaks to the doctor like a "lady", smiling and coy shoulder shrugging to indicate vapidness and an air of purposeful misunderstanding. Brandi W. Catanese notes that some blacks adherence to a politics of respectability is not driven by a desire to fit into white and Eurocentric

notions of properness and decency, arguing that “overemphasizing respectability on terms defined outside the black community and its concerns, African American cultural politics have sometimes ended up reproducing and strengthening oppressive hierarchies that in fact damage multiple constituencies, regardless of class position, sexual orientation or gender” (147).

Madea’s refusal to be pigeonholed as simply an angry black woman might be read as an act of embarrassing the black race that observes a black cultural politics invested in an assimilationist ideology. Rather than performing a politics of respectability to induce a kind of self-blame, Madea answers are laden in a saccharine mocking tone of politeness, underscoring the tension of the exchange. Madea is trapped in a crooked room in which she must insist and assert that she is not uncontrollably angry by nature while also not demonstrating an attitude that can mark her as antagonistic in the face of a white male authority figure.

Describing an ethnocentric account of his own grandmother’s trickster like abilities – abilities that heavily mirror the rhetorical structure “bringing wreck” -- E. Patrick Johnson discusses how his grandmother, Mary, worked as a domestic for white families from the 1950s through the 80s; Johnson describes his grandmother as well aware of the “mask” she had to wear while working in white homes. As Johnson’s research summarizes, despite the kindness of the families she worked for, most notably the Smith family, Mary was always aware of her social identity as a black female domestic attached to the image of being mammy in the eyes of her employers. Mary was expected to perform and act as a mammy. Mary not only was fully aware of how she was viewed in white eyes, but purposefully played into the mammy trope in order to secure extra benefits for her family such as food, clothing and furniture and even presents given to her by the white families she looked after. As Johnson explains of this performance, “[Mary] appropriated the ‘white’ construction of mammy and used it to her own ‘black’ advantage”

(132). By wrecking Dr. Phil's expectations to manage her anger within his presence, Madea's feigned respectability is summoned in order to avoid future mandatory sessions with the doctor who maintains both a personal and socialized position that Madea is inherently and irrepressibly angry. By donning a respectable veneer of politeness while calmly vocalizing that she is not an angry person, Madea forces the doctor into a staged back and forth. This ultimately leads to Dr. Phil - the white, rich, professional, respectable male - to come undone by Madea's trickster like pseudo-respectability act.

Indeed, after trying unsuccessfully to get Madea to confess why she is so angry, Dr. Phil switches questions to which Madea, smiling and sitting poised, volleys Dr. Phil's own questions back to him:

Madea: Okay. I'm tired of you asking me these questions. I didn't sign up for this. It's the judge that told me to come here. Everybody wants to get even. Everybody wanna get even.

Dr. Phil: All right, all right. Look, let's just talk about your childhood, okay? Let's talk about your childhood. Talk about yours.

Madea: Let's talk about your childhood. Let's talk about your childhood.

Dr. Phil: Talking about my childhood isn't gonna help us. What was your childhood like?

Madea: What was yours like?

Dr. Phil: Why? Let's talk about your anger. That's why you're here, right?

Madea: I'm not angry. I don't know why.

Dr. Phil: Let's just try another approach, okay? Let's try another approach. Do you sleep well at night?

Madea: Do you sleep well at night?

Dr. Phil: Let's try not to answer a question, with a question. Could we do that? Could we at least do that?

Madea: If we stop asking me all these questions, I won't have to answer with a question.

Dr. Phil: Can you stop? Can you just stop? Can you just stop? Can you just stop?

Madea: Are you getting angry, doctor?

Dr. Phil: Okay. This isn't getting anywhere. This is not getting anywhere. I think I am gonna talk to the judge. This is getting nowhere. We're done.

After the exchange, Madea walks out triumphantly, but sans the swagger she displayed after being let go in court. Madea's daughter Cora sneaks in after the meeting to ask the doctor what happened to which Dr. Phil explains:

This lady is out of control. She is. I can't help her.

Cora: Wait a minute now, wait a minute now. Now, you're the best.

Dr. Phil: Go see somebody else. I'm done.

Madea: (Yelling off screen) Come on, Cora, here.

Cora: Oh, what am I gonna? Nobody gonna be able to help. We ain't gonna...

Madea's syrupy and cunning performance allows her to maintain her posture as not angry while frustrating white male privilege. By bringing wreck in the subdued manner, not outside of the view of the judges familiarity and free to try the respectable approach again, Madea avoids getting further entangled in the justice system by being branded as in need of anger management for her own good. As a living and representational figure of U.S. professional, white affluent, patriarchal privilege represented by Dr. Phil and his role as an agent of the state, hired by the Atlanta District Attorney's office to diagnose Madea's anger problems, all render Madea trapped within the thin margins of the angry black woman myth with little recourse other than to bring wreck. Even as a fictional representation, I am compelled to think of what kind of audience and personal pleasures can be derived from the visual of seeing a black woman being misrecognized getting over on everyone? What pleasures might be derived within black viewing audiences when seeing a black female figure character such as Madea demonstrate many of the same tactics and strategies specific to black womanhood that we recognize in our own mothers and grandmothers? How might our theorizing and criticism account for these moments of Madea's characterization that fall outside of the realm of stereotypes? What are the limits of this pleasure; and at who/what expense?

After only a few minutes of not giving Dr. Phil the satisfaction of letting him “help” her, he labels her “out of control” despite the fact that Madea never raises her voice, never loses her temper nor gets physically violent in any way during their discussion. For the doctor, Madea’s anger is fashioned as incurable because she refuses to accept her own racial and gendered pathology. Madea’s use of wreck initiated through restraint and smiles do not create a mutual and wall shattering understanding of black women’s complex lives between the doctor and Madea within the scene, but even if momentarily, Madea walks away free and can live her life without fear of being contained in prison or forced into further anger management sessions to rehabilitate her.

Conclusion

I have argued for a reading of the Madea character as a trans*female character who “brings wreck” as a way to think more broadly about the ways in which we, as viewers and scholars of Perry’s Madea films, black stereotypes and the use of drag beyond the borders of costume. I make this argument in order to consider how we as scholars and critics of Perry’s Madea films – and black visual media in general - might consider how the application of using black cultural specificities that ostensibly represent an anti-black stereotypes, might help us to avoid some slippages in the expanding body of work that is being done concerning Perry’s other production outside that do not star the Madea character but rely on similar narratives. Given Perry’s insistence that the character of Madea is a tribute and molded reflection of the black mothers and other-mothers in his life, perhaps examining the tactics real black mothers and other-mothers have had to employ in order to reject and deflect negative and oppressive views of their lives.

While this view does not attend to specifically to classed or ability concerns in his Perry's films, perhaps a black folkloric cultural analysis of Perry's work might help us to contextualize his work in ways that provide more fruitful and developed ways of thinking about Perry's work, especially considering the major impact his work has had on the tenor of black mainstream representation for the last decade. I would be interested in how reading the Madea character as a trans*female character may fail to address the ways in which the other female characters within the narratives often lack Madea's own never ending ability to "bring wreck". What might a reading of Madea as a trans*female character within a transnational viewing market say or read as concerning the narratives of black women's lives? I view this project as adding to the already critical and engaging work surrounding the cultural and media impact of the still expanding Perry universe and I look forward to seeing how our critiques of his work can be geared towards an elevation and multifaceted discussion of his work.

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