HOLY VERNACULAR: FORMAL HYBRIDITY AND THE INTERSECTIONAL PARADOX IN JACKIE HILL PERRY'S *GAY GIRL, GOOD GOD*

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Abstract

This article examines the formal hybridity and intersectional paradox structuring Jackie Hill Perry's memoir Gay Girl, Good God (2018). Departing from the secular feminism shaping much contemporary African American women's literature, Perry advances conservative Christian morality and complementarianism as an alternative ground for Black womanhood. Drawing on Gates's theory of Signifying and Hurston's account of Black expressive form, this study argues that Perry fuses vernacular Black idiom and hip-hop cadence with puritanical theological rhetoric, producing what this paper terms a "Holy Vernacular." This hybridity generates an intersectional paradox: Perry rejects intersectionality as secular even as her narrative enacts a lived intersectional position as a Black, formerly queer woman within white evangelical spaces. Read through Saba Mahmood's theory of non-liberal agency, this paradox emerges as a deliberate challenge to secular theories of liberation, not a failure of self-awareness. Methodologically, the study is a text-centered literary analysis proceeding by close reading of passages from that memoir.

***Keywords** : formal hybridity, intersectional paradox, complementarianism, vernacular expression, religious agency.*

Résumé

Cet article examine l'hybridité formelle et le paradoxe intersectionnel qui structurent le récit de Jackie Hill Perry, Gay Girl, Good God (2018). S'éloignant du féminisme séculier qui caractérise une grande partie de la littérature afro-américaine contemporaine, Perry défend la morale

chrétienne conservatrice et le complémentarisme comme fondement alternatif de la féminité noire. S'appuyant sur la théorie du Signifying de Gates et sur l'analyse de Hurston concernant les formes d'expression noires, cette étude soutient que Perry fusionne l'idiome vernaculaire noir et la cadence du hip-hop avec une rhétorique théologique puritaine, produisant ce que cet article qualifie de « vernaculaire sacré ». Cette hybridité engendre un paradoxe intersectionnel : Perry rejette l'intersectionnalité comme séculière, tout en incarnant, dans son récit, une position intersectionnelle vécue en tant que femme noire, anciennement queer, au sein d'espaces évangéliques blancs. À la lumière de la théorie de l'agentivité non libérale de Saba Mahmood, ce paradoxe apparaît comme un défi délibéré lancé aux théories séculières de la libération, et non comme un manque de conscience de soi. Sur le plan méthodologique, l'étude est une analyse littéraire centrée sur le texte : elle procède par lecture rapprochée de passages tirés de ce récit.

***Mots-clés** : hybridité formelle, paradoxe intersectionnel, complémentarisme, expression vernaculaire, agentivité religieuse.*

Introduction

For decades, the vibrant landscape of contemporary African American women's literature has been deeply intertwined with progressive, secular, and intersectional feminist liberation movements. From the foundational womanist frameworks of A. Walker (1983) and A. Lorde (1984) to the raw, unfiltered poetry of modern voices like M. Parker (2017), the canonical trajectory of Black female authorship has consistently associated true freedom with the dismantling of heteropatriarchal and Eurocentric institutions. This dominant literary narrative faces a striking, deeply personal disruption in the work of Jackie Hill Perry. Her memoir, *Gay Girl, Good God: The Story of Who I Was and Who God Has Always Been* (2018), steps decisively

away from the secular consensus: instead of following a path of progressive emancipation, Perry swims against that current, championing conservative Christian morality, biblical complementarianism, and the necessity of spiritual submission.

The primary subject of this study is Perry's autobiographical and lyrical prose, which documents her transformation from a self-identified "stud" within urban Black queer subculture to a conservative evangelical writer, wife, and mother. Rather than framing this journey as an oppressive loss of autonomy, Perry represents her conversion as a therapeutic reclamation of the self through the authority of scripture. This trajectory raises the central question of the study: how does the formal hybridity of *Gay Girl, Good God*, its fusion of vernacular Black idiom and hip-hop cadence with puritanical theological rhetoric, construct an alternative, non-liberal model of Black womanhood, and what intersectional paradox does this construction produce within conservative evangelical spaces? Two related sub-questions organize the analysis: first, how does Perry deploy formal hybridity to construct this model of Black womanhood? Second, how do the resulting aesthetic and theological choices expose an active, dialogical intersectional paradox within conservative evangelical spaces, and what does this paradox imply for secular theories of liberation?

To understand the weight of Perry's disruption, this study draws on two adjacent bodies of scholarship: literary and historical work on Black women's religious self-

fashioning, and the theological literature that frames the doctrinal tradition Perry herself claims. A. Butler's historical work (2007) demonstrates that Black women within conservative American holiness movements have used strict moral codes and rigorous language not as passive submission but as active tools of dignity and self-protection within hostile social hierarchies; her later study (2021) complicates this picture by tracing how the politics of morality within white evangelicalism have simultaneously maintained racialized hierarchies that such women had to navigate. J. M. Braxton (1989) and S. Smith and J. Watson (2010) extend this insight into autobiography studies specifically, arguing that Black women's life writing functions as a site of linguistic self-determination, where dominant cultural and religious codes are actively manipulated rather than simply inherited. E. D. Gault's more recent ethnographic study (2022) picks up where these historical and literary accounts leave off, showing that young Black women in digital and physical religious spaces today continue this tradition by moving fluidly between hip-hop aesthetics and institutional religious discourse. Gault's study is, to date, the only scholarship to discuss Perry's memoir directly, briefly situating it within this broader pattern. Read together, these sources establish a critical throughline: that Black women's engagement with conservative religious language has historically been a site of agency rather than its absence.

None, however, offers a sustained literary analysis of a single text. This article addresses that specific absence: beyond Gault's brief treatment, *Gay Girl, Good God*

has received no sustained literary-critical attention, despite functioning as a rich case study for exactly the dynamic this scholarship identifies. At the same time, the doctrinal tradition Perry claims is itself contested from within Black theological scholarship: where J. Piper and W. Grudem's foundational complementarian volume (1991) defines the gender theology Perry adopts, womanist theologians such as K. B. Douglas (1999) have argued that traditional Black church teaching on sexuality and gender has historically constrained rather than protected Black women. This study treats that unresolved tension as part of its subject rather than something to set aside, reading Perry's text not merely as theological testimony but as a sophisticated literary and rhetorical performance staged within a live doctrinal debate.

This article argues that Perry deliberately constructs an alternative model of Black womanhood through what this paper labels a "Holy Vernacular." Rather than relying on traditional, Eurocentric sermonizing, Perry blends street-level African American vernacular idiom and hip-hop cadence with puritanical theological rhetoric. Consequently, her work reveals an intersectional paradox: she rejects intersectionality in the name of an identity defined in Christ (Perry, 2018, pp. 94-96), while her lived, embodied reality as a Black, formerly queer woman navigating historically white-dominated evangelical structures serves as a vivid manifestation of an active intersectional crossroads. This study reframes that tension: rather than arguing that Perry simply "fails to escape" intersectionality, it argues that her text enters into a

dialogical friction with secular critical theory, challenging intersectional studies to expand their borders and recognize agency within traditional religious frameworks. Throughout, this paper uses "anti-feminism" as an analytical label for Perry's positioning against what she calls "the self-proclaimed 'liberated woman'" (Perry, 2018, p. 74), rather than as this study's endorsement of that position.

To reveal this dynamic, this article relies on two major theoretical frameworks. First, it uses Formal Hybridity as a literary lens, grounded in H. L. Gates, Jr.'s (1988) theory of *Signifying* and Z. N. Hurston's (1934) analysis of Black expressive characteristics, to analyze how subcultural urban language syncretizes with rigid, dogmatic theology. Second, it utilizes the Intersectional Paradox as a socio-theological lens, in conversation with S. Mahmood's (2005) post-secular feminist theory of non-liberal agency, to examine how a minority author negotiates the margins of race, gender, and former sexuality while advocating for a conservative structure that has historically marginalized those very identities. Through these approaches, this article explores how Perry's formal hybridity provides her with a distinct literary agency to subvert modern secular definitions of liberation.

The method is text-centered, interpretive, and descriptive, and it proceeds in two steps. First, a close stylistic reading attends to prosody, syntax, register shifts, and vernacular idiom, guided by the Formal Hybridity lens described above. Second, the socio-theological lens described above is applied to the same passages to examine

how the narrator's voice and self-presentation position her between secular and religious worlds. Historical and ethnographic scholarship (A. Butler, 2007, 2021; E. D. Gault, 2022; K. B. Douglas, 1999) serves as context for this reading, not as its object. The memoir does not use the terms "intersectionality," "feminism," or "complementarianism"; they are the study's analytic categories, applied to passages in which Perry addresses identity (Perry, 2018, pp. 94-96), womanhood (p. 74), and marital submission (p. 112). References to Perry designate the narrating and authorial voice constructed by the text; the study does not assess the memoir as testimony for its doctrinal or clinical validity, and it takes no normative position on complementarian theology or secular feminism. Its claims are therefore interpretive and bounded by the passages examined. The article unfolds in three chapters: The first one examines the formal hybridity of Perry's prose, the second the intersectional paradox it stages, and the third the reconfiguration of liberation and agency that follows, before the Conclusion.

1. The Aesthetics of Formal Hybridity: Constructing the "Holy Vernacular"

1.1. Blending African American Vernacular Idiom and Puritanical Rhetoric

One clarification matters before proceeding: Perry's prose does not consistently deploy the grammatical features linguists associate with African American Vernacular English proper (habitual "be," copula deletion, negative concord) so much as it draws on a broader vernacular sensibility: the

idiom, imagery, and oral cadence of Black urban and church culture. "Vernacular" is used throughout in that broader, culturally rooted sense, not as a claim about dialectal grammar.

In *Gay Girl, Good God*, Perry's literary style refuses to choose between the colloquial language of her cultural community and the formal vocabulary of her religious faith. Instead, she welds them together to create a distinct stylistic space where vernacular Black expression exists alongside rigid, puritanical theological rhetoric. In American religious publishing, conservative systematic theology has almost exclusively been delivered through Eurocentric, academic English, establishing a cultural norm where serious religious discourse implicitly requires a dominant, white register. As E. D. Gault (2022) observes, creative Black women within modern religious contexts often work out deep bodily and spiritual dissonance by fluidly moving between secular subcultural aesthetics, such as hip-hop, and strict institutional spaces. Perry disrupts these expectations from the opening pages of her memoir, demonstrating that her native idiom is fully equipped to serve as a primary vehicle for orthodoxy.

To theorize this linguistic synthesis, we can turn to H. L. Gates, Jr.'s (1988) concept of *Signifying*, the trope of a double-voiced Black discourse that plays upon and subverts dominant linguistic forms. Perry's stylistic play represents a contemporary, theological form of Signifying: she does not merely adopt white evangelical theology but signifies upon it, using the linguistic resources of her urban community to

inhabit and re-author orthodox dogma. This move aligns with Z. N. Hurston's (1934) foundational account of the "Characteristics of Negro Expression," particularly her attention to "angularity" and "adornment," the practice of taking established cultural materials and embellishing them with distinctive flourishes. When describing the weight of human sinfulness or the pull of worldly temptation, Perry frequently draws on the syntax and idiom of Black vernacular speech, shifting from urban colloquialism to scriptural phrasing within a single sentence. Rather than filtering her narrative through a detached academic register, she anchors ancient religious absolutes in modern, Black conversational language, producing a semantic blending in which righteousness, temptation, and repentance are explained through metaphors rooted in hip-hop culture, urban geography, and Black domestic life.

In her study of conservative American holiness movements, A. Butler (2007) demonstrates how Black women within the Church of God in Christ historically used strict moral codes and a rigorously disciplined language not as passive submission but as active, self-protective tools of dignity within hostile, predatory social hierarchies. Teaching puritanical moral values through an idiom historically marginalized by white evangelical spaces, Perry's writing becomes a site of cultural resistance that de-centers whiteness within conservative American theology. As S. Smith and J. Watson (2010) argue, the testimonial memoir is a space where personal narrative actively redefines the boundaries of gender norms and communal belonging. Merging street-level idiom with strict doctrine, she

demonstrates that vernacular Black expression is fully capable of carrying conservative Christian dogma, allowing the Black female subject to occupy a space of theological authority without erasing her cultural heritage. This blending establishes a unique sonic texture in her writing, one that stems directly from her background in oral performance and translates naturally into the rhythmic structure of her written sentences.

1.2. Spoken-Word Cadence and the Rhythmic Prose Structure

The text of *Gay Girl, Good God* is shaped by Perry's background as a poet and hip-hop artist who performed at poetry events (Perry, 2018, pp. 8, 63-64). Rather than abandoning the sonic and rhythmic qualities that define African American oral traditions, Perry deliberately imports these elements into her written prose, transforming her memoir into a dynamic performance on the page. As E. D. Gault (2022) notes, creative Black women within modern religious contexts draw on the rhythmic and aesthetic frameworks of hip-hop and poetry to articulate complex personal narratives across rigid institutional spaces. This rhythmic structure allows Perry to bypass the detached register often associated with Western theological texts, giving her conservative message an immediate, oral impact.

Throughout the memoir, Perry's sentences operate with an internal meter that mirrors the flow of spoken-word poetry, relying on internal rhyme, consonance, and rapid syntax changes to create a sensory reading experience. Recounting the turning point of her conversion and her

decision to leave a same-sex relationship, she writes, "She was both my woman and my idol. An unqualified god without an ounce of deity. She was the eye Jesus said to gouge out and the right hand He commanded me to cut off" (Perry, 2018, p. 70).

The anaphoric repetition of "She was" establishes a spoken-word line structure rather than an ordinary prose sentence, while the two closing images, "the eye Jesus said to gouge out" and "the right hand He commanded me to cut off," mirror each other in syntactic weight and land on hard, monosyllabic verbs ("gouge," "cut"), producing the percussive stress pattern associated with slam-poetry delivery rather than expository prose. One passage cannot carry the whole claim, and a fuller prosodic survey of the memoir remains for future work; what it shows here, at minimum, is that the patterning is not incidental.

During moments of historical reflection, Perry's sentences expand into sweeping, lyrical description that echoes older Black storytelling traditions, as when she traces her ancestral lineage, describing a foremother who "had a slave's eyes, a stolen African's cheekbones, and a European's last name" (Perry, 2018, p. 18). This variation in pacing ensures that the act of reading evokes the auditory experience of live testimony. By prioritizing oral cadence within a written text, Perry subverts the Eurocentric norms of the American religious memoir, which traditionally treats standard, detached prose as the marker of spiritual maturity, demonstrating instead that the aesthetics of performance poetry can coexist with the strict boundaries

of orthodox Christian theology. This insistence on structural musicality validates the artistic traditions of Black urban culture within the historically exclusionary space of American evangelical publishing, and grants Perry a distinct authority to reconfigure her past and present identities, a stylistic syncretism that functions not merely as performance but as a literary tool for self-determination.

1.3. Stylistic Agency: Linguistic Syncretism as a Literary Tool

Through this process of linguistic syncretism, Perry exercises a distinct form of literary agency that allows the Black female subject to claim authority within American religious writing, a genre whose rhetorical tools and biblical exegesis have long been gatekept by white, male-dominated institutions. By fusing secular street language with sacred scripture, Perry does not dilute her conservative theology; she instead uses this hybridity to carve out a distinct space of authority. As J. M. Braxton (1989) argues, Black life writing has long served as a site where marginalized subjects manipulate dominant codes to claim personhood and secure spiritual and physical survival. In *Gay Girl, Good God*, this manipulation takes the form of an intentional literary syncretism that positions the vernacular on equal footing with the divine.

This stylistic agency is evident in how Perry renders abstract theological concepts through vivid, embodied imagery rather than detached doctrinal exposition. Discussing the grip of sin prior to her conversion, she writes, "In a body without the Spirit, sin is an unshakable king under

whose dominion no man can flee" (Perry, 2018, p. 58). The image draws on Paul's language of enslavement to sin in Romans 6, but Perry does not simply cite the doctrine; she personifies in as an "unshakable king" and describes the body it holds as captive to a "pathetic master," before turning, a few sentences later, to a plain-spoken gloss on freedom: "isn't that what freedom is supposed to be? The ability to not do as I please, but the power to do what is pleasing" (Perry, 2018, p. 58). This move exemplifies the Holy Vernacular at the level of a single passage: inherited biblical language is not simply repeated but re-voiced through her own idiom and immediate, first-person address. Applying H. L. Gates, Jr.'s (1988) concept of *Signifying,* Perry translates the abstract principles of Western theology into a concrete, personally inflected register, a hermeneutic move that aligns with A. Butler's (2007) historical account of Black women in conservative holiness movements using rigorous moral language to establish boundaries and command respect.

The syncretism displayed in *Gay Girl, Good God* is ultimately an act of literary self-determination: Perry refuses to allow her identity to be fragmented by the competing demands of her Black urban heritage and her conservative evangelical faith, forcing these two worlds into a deliberate, poetic collision. This formal hybridity does more than establish her literary voice; it sets the stage for a deeper, structural conflict within the text. The very linguistic and cultural tools she uses to defend her conservative beliefs bring her into direct conflict with the

political frameworks of the modern world, leading directly into a complex intersectional paradox.

2. The Intersectional Paradox: Navigating Black Conservative Womanhood

2.1. The Crossroads of Identity: Black, Formerly Queer, and Evangelical

In the second movement of her memoir, Perry moves from the formal aesthetics of her writing to the complex realities of her personal identity, placing the Black female subject at a tense structural crossroads where race, gender, former sexuality, and conservative religious faith constantly collide. These identity markers rarely overlap smoothly in American religious and cultural life; they represent deeply divided social and political worlds. By choosing to live as a conservative evangelical, Perry enters a space historically dominated by white, patriarchal power structures, while simultaneously distancing herself from the secular Black and queer subcultures that had offered her community in her youth. As E. D. Gault (2022) observes, young Black religious women who navigate modern evangelical spaces often find themselves caught in a complex web of visibility and marginalization, forced to constantly negotiate their cultural belonging against rigid institutional boundaries.

This structural friction is vividly illustrated when Perry describes the isolation that can accompany conversion for someone navigating same-sex attraction inside a conservative church community. She writes that "being an SSA Christian can seem like a solitary walk," and that "the

isolation imagined to be more present than bodies discourages the Christian into assuming themselves alone" (Perry, 2018, p. 99). This is a narrower claim than a full double-exile: the language describes a felt, internal isolation within the church rather than a symmetrical estrangement from a secular world she has already left. Even so, it names a genuine structural position, belonging fully to neither the secular queer community she has departed nor, by her own account, straightforwardly to the community of faith she has entered. This dual alienation resonates with the historical findings of A. Butler (2007, 2021), who notes that Black women in conservative religious movements have long had to maintain an exceptional degree of moral and cultural vigilance. A. Butler (2007) shows how holiness women protected their dignity from racial prejudice outside the church and gender discrimination within it, while her later work (2021) outlines how the politics of morality in white evangelicalism often function to maintain racialized hierarchies.

Perry's position at this identity crossroads exposes the limitations of standard American social categories. She refuses to simplify her narrative to fit the expectations of either secular progressivism or white religious conservatism. As S. Smith and J. Watson (2010) argue, Black life writing is at its most powerful when it exposes how marginalized individuals are forced to inhabit multiple, conflicting realities at once. By documenting her life at the intersection of being Black, female, formerly queer, and evangelical, Perry invites the reader to consider a deep institutional tension, one that extends beyond personal isolation to reveal

an apparent contradiction between her rejection of modern critical theories and what this study reads as the intersectional reality of her everyday life.

2.2. Ideological Rejection versus Ontological Reality of Intersectionality

The central tension of *Gay Girl, Good God* lies in the sharp division between Perry's explicit theological ideology and her lived experience. Her memoir never names intersectionality, but it consistently subordinates social and identity categories to identity in Christ: "our ultimate identity is very simple: We are Christians" (Perry, 2018, p. 94). This study reads that position as a rejection of critical frameworks like intersectionality, which treat those categories as constitutive of the self. A literary and socio-theological analysis of her text, however, suggests a genuine irony: the narrative structure of her memoir can be read as a demonstration of an intersectional matrix. As S. Smith and J. Watson (2010) note, the Black memoir is inherently a site of multi-layered vulnerability where an author's ontological reality often complicates or resists the neat ideological boundaries they attempt to draw. Rather than treating this as a logical or intellectual failure, this study frames it as dialogical friction: Perry's rejection of intersectionality can be understood, at its core, as a critique of the secularized, progressive presuppositions embedded within modern intersectional studies. Her text does not simply fail to escape intersectionality; it challenges secular academics to expand the theory to accommodate the complex agency of conservative religious subjects.

One qualification matters here, since it bears directly on how much weight this argument can carry. *Gay Girl, Good God* rarely names race explicitly; Perry's own vocabulary of embodiment is organized far more insistently around sexuality, gender, and the memory of childhood sexual abuse than around Blackness as such. The intersectional reading this section proposes therefore rests on a narrower textual basis than a first-glance reading of the memoir's themes might suggest, and the paradox is better described as operating primarily along the axes of gender and sexuality, with race present, but understated, as a layer beneath rather than a foregrounded term in her own account. What the text does offer, directly, is a resistance to a purely spiritualized account of salvation.

Reflecting on her engagement and on what God was doing in her ahead of her wedding, Perry writes that "God had and was saving all of me. He wanted my mind and my emotions. My purity and my peace. My body and my battles" (Perry, 2018, p. 88). This is a claim about the whole embodied person, mind, emotion, body, refusing the very mind/body or spirit/flesh split a purely doctrinal reading might expect, and it is this insistence on the body as a site of ongoing struggle, rather than a spiritual abstraction, that keeps the memoir's account of salvation tethered to lived, physical experience. Combined with her earlier acknowledgment of an inherited history, a foremother's "slave's eyes" and "stolen African's cheekbones" (Perry, 2018, p. 18), the text gestures toward, without fully theorizing, the layered position this study is describing. This more modest formulation aligns with E. D. Gault's (2022) broader observation that

contemporary Black women in conservative spaces face a double consciousness, constantly defending their cultural authenticity to religious peers while defending their religious orthodoxy to their cultural community, a dynamic this study argues is present in Perry's text primarily by structural implication rather than explicit statement.

This friction elevates the memoir from a simple religious testimony to a complex, layered text. Perry attempts to subvert secular critical theory by claiming that her only true identity is found in God (Perry, 2018, p. 94), yet her narrative choices repeatedly bring the reader back to the weight of gender and, more obliquely, race in America. She may ideologically reject intersectionality as a political tool, but on this reading, she remains positioned within it as an ontological, lived reality, a struggle that shapes how she experiences her physical body and paves the way for her use of biblical submission to reconfigure past trauma.

2.3. The Counter-Cultural Dynamic of Religious and Secular Subcultures

The structural tension in *Gay Girl, Good God* intensifies as Perry navigates the friction between mainstream secular society and the white-dominated evangelical establishment, two subcultures that stand in near-total opposition, each demanding absolute allegiance from the individual. By refusing to align neatly with either camp, Perry's narrative develops a counter-cultural dynamic: she stands as an outsider in both worlds, using her literary voice to critique the moral compromises of secularism while simultaneously exposing the cultural blindness of white evangelical spaces.

As A. Butler (2021) observes, Black women within conservative American religious movements have historically had to maintain an exceptional degree of cultural independence, frequently forced to defend their spiritual legitimacy against racial prejudice from coreligionists and secular critique from their own communities.

This dual alienation is visible less in an explicit critique of racial assimilation (the memoir does not make that argument directly) than in how carefully Perry distances her model of womanhood from a specific, racially coded image of domesticity. Working out what her new faith requires of her as a woman, she writes that the vision she found in scripture was "not the 1950s Polaroids of white women baking cookies while talking loud enough to be heard and quiet enough to not call attention to their intellect" (Perry, 2018, p. 74). The line does real work: it explicitly rejects a white, mid-century domestic ideal as her model even as she embraces theological conservatism, refusing to let her submission to a complementarian structure collapse into an assimilation to whiteness. The same passage also refuses the opposite image, that of women "jaded and committed to speaking at men like they were negligent children" (Perry, 2018, p. 74), so the rejection is double and not aimed at whiteness alone. This distinction, conservative in theology but self-consciously not white in its cultural referents, is closer to what the memoir actually argues than a claim about external policing by white evangelical peers, and it aligns with E. D. Gault's (2022) observation that young Black women in modern evangelical spaces must constantly

negotiate their cultural authenticity against institutional expectations.

Perry's text becomes, in this sense, a site of dual subversion: she uses the moral standards of her faith to condemn what she perceives as the hyper-sexualization and moral decay of secular culture, while using the authenticity of her Black urban heritage to disrupt the complacent whiteness of her religious peers. As J. M. Braxton (1989) points out, the power of Black autobiography lies in its ability to expose how marginalized subjects create alternative spaces of belonging when traditional institutions fail to fully accommodate them. Operating within this counter-cultural friction, Perry suggests that her commitment to a traditional moral code does not require a surrender of her racial identity, a fierce independence that sets the stage for her final, most contested argument: the reconfiguration of female liberation through the lenses of biblical complementarianism and anti-feminism.

3. Anti-Feminism and the Reconfiguration of Liberation

3.1. Complementarianism and the Subversion of Secular Feminist Norms

In the final movement of her memoir, Perry addresses female liberation directly, shifting her focus from identity mechanics to an explicit defense of complementarianism, the theological position, systematized in J. Piper and W. Grudem (1991)'s influential edited volume, that men and women hold equal worth but distinct, divinely ordained roles within marriage and the church. Mainstream feminist movements,

by contrast, define liberation as the elimination of patriarchal authority, the deconstruction of traditional gender roles, and autonomy over the female body. Perry contests these secular norms by presenting true freedom for a Black woman as lying not in self-determination but in voluntary submission to biblical gender roles and divine hierarchy.

To ground this argument theoretically, this study turns to S. Mahmood's (2005) post-secular feminist framework in Politics of Piety. Mahmood argues that the standard liberal feminist definition of agency, which equates it exclusively with resistance to relations of subordination, is fundamentally limited; she instead theorizes a non-liberal form of agency in which self-cultivation of religious virtues such as modesty, piety, and submission, within traditional structures, is itself a mode of agency. Under this view, Perry's embrace of complementarianism can be read not as a passive surrender to patriarchal domination but as a conscious, agentic self-cultivation of Christian obedience.

This reading does not require setting aside the tradition's contested history. Womanist theologian K. B. Douglas (1999) has argued that Black church teaching on gender and sexuality has often silenced Black women and constrained, rather than protected, their bodily and sexual autonomy, a critique that applies with real force to complementarian theology generally, and one this study does not treat as resolved by Perry's account. What Mahmood's framework allows is a narrower and more precise claim: that within Perry's own narrative, submission functions as a

chosen practice of self-cultivation rather than an imposed silence. This is a claim about the internal logic of Perry's text, not a verdict on complementarian theology as such, and the tension between the two readings is left deliberately open rather than resolved.

This defense of traditional gender expectations becomes visible when Perry transitions from her past identity as a "stud" to her present role as an evangelical wife. She rejects the progressive feminist view of marital submission as an oppressive degradation of female power, representing it instead as a holy and theologically grounded discipline. Explaining the doctrine directly, she writes that a wife's submission to her husband is meant to model "the church in Her submission to Christ," something "seen when a wife loved her God enough to submit to her husband alone" (Perry, 2018, p. 112, citing Ephesians 5). Through this framing, Perry strips submission of a purely interpersonal or power-based meaning, repositioning it within a typological structure where the marriage itself is meant to enact a larger theological relationship, an intellectual move that aligns with A. Butler's (2007) account of Black women in conservative holiness movements embracing strict biblical structures not as passive compliance but as a practical shield and a source of order and social protection in a society that routinely denies them structural security.

Perry's embrace of complementarianism can ultimately be read as a counter-cultural critique of modern progressive orthodoxy. She states her position on secular liberation directly, describing the vision of womanhood she

rejects as "the self-proclaimed 'liberated woman,'" a picture she says was "far beyond the picture God cared for me to become" (Perry, 2018, p. 74). This anti-feminist stance is not merely theoretical; it directly informs how she processes her own history of bodily vulnerability and trauma, transforming what secular critics might see as institutional restriction into what she presents as a therapeutic tool for personal healing, a dynamic that shapes her understanding of bodily surrender.

3.2. Body Politics: Healing Trauma Through Biblical Surrender

Within *Gay Girl, Good God*, Perry shifts the conversation surrounding the female body away from political rights and toward the intimate landscape of trauma and restoration. In mainstream American feminist discourse, bodily autonomy is often treated as a sacred right, and any external moral restriction is viewed as an oppressive intrusion. Perry inverts this framework, suggesting that total self-ownership can itself become a heavy burden for a body that has survived severe violation. As J. M. Braxton (1989) points out, Black life writing frequently serves as a site where authors attempt to heal the fractured, traumatized self by voicing bodily and emotional vulnerabilities that larger political structures routinely ignore. For Perry, the path to healing her traumatized body comes not through the celebration of unchecked desire but through the deeply personal act of biblical surrender.

This approach to body politics becomes clear when Perry opens up about the lingering wounds of the sexual

abuse she suffered as a child. Rather than treating the memory as something to be managed through silence, she frames disclosure and recognition themselves as the beginning of healing: "Not remembering trauma doesn't mean we're left without its effect," she writes; "Letting it, and peeking into where it's from, is the path to making sense of ourselves and finding the particular healing we've been kept from having" (Perry, 2018, p. 30). This reading sits deliberately alongside, rather than in place of, clinical accounts of trauma recovery: J. Herman's foundational model (1992) similarly emphasizes that survivors reclaim a sense of safety and authorship precisely through naming and integrating what happened to them, rather than suppressing it, a notable convergence between Perry's theological vocabulary of healing and a secular clinical account she is very unlikely to have been directly drawing on, which suggests that the recovery pattern she describes is more than rhetorical, although a literary study cannot assess its clinical efficacy. This therapeutic orientation also echoes A. Butler's (2007) account of Black women in the holiness tradition embracing rigorous personal discipline as a practical shield against a predatory environment.

Perry's narrative turns the secular understanding of restriction upside down: submission to a strict moral code becomes, in her account, not an institutional prison but a sanctuary that protects and restores the body. This perspective challenges progressive feminist theory by proposing that a marginalized, traumatized woman can find healing and self-ownership through voluntary submission to divine authority rather than through secular self-

determination, a reframing of bodily surrender that this study treats as an artistic and existential survival strategy specific to Perry's account, not a general claim about trauma recovery. This "Holy Vernacular" becomes her primary tool for building an alternative path of empowerment, one that leads directly into how this style defines the contemporary Black female subject.

3.3. The "Holy Vernacular" as an Alternative Agency for Black Female Subjects

The convergence of formal hybridity and anti-feminist theology in *Gay Girl, Good God* culminates in what this study defines as the "Holy Vernacular," a literary space in which Perry constructs an alternative form of agency for the contemporary Black female subject. Within American literary and religious culture, agency is traditionally equated with visible political activism, the subversion of institutional power, and the pursuit of individual rights. Perry rewrites this script. As E. D. Gault (2022) demonstrates, young Black women working within conservative religious frameworks do not simply absorb dogma passively; they actively shape their aesthetic environment to create spaces of spiritual power that traditional hierarchies cannot fully contain. For Perry, this manipulation occurs through a fierce, uncompromising prose that transforms orthodox Christian doctrine from what some critics read as a tool of historical subjugation into a mechanism for self-authorization.

This alternative agency manifests in the certainty with which Perry addresses her readers on matters of morality and personal discipline. She rejects the secular,

progressive notion that a Black woman must constantly resist traditional structures to be considered free, redefining freedom instead as the capacity for spiritual and moral mastery over one's impulses. She states this redefinition directly, asking of the body the Spirit has set free, "isn't that what freedom is supposed to be? The ability to not do as I please, but the power to do what is pleasing" (Perry, 2018, p. 58). By redefining freedom as capacity rather than as the absence of restraint, Perry turns a foundational term of progressive liberation against the secular framework that usually claims it, a move that exemplifies what J. M. Braxton (1989) identifies as a hallmark of sophisticated Black life writing: the ability to disrupt dominant social scripts through unexpected, counter-cultural definitions of personhood and authority.

The "Holy Vernacular" established in *Gay Girl, Good God* offers an alternative model of empowerment that invites a re-evaluation of Black women's literature in America. Using her spoken-word background to defend a traditional, complementarian moral code, Perry illustrates how a conservative Black female subject can possess significant literary and cultural agency without subscribing to secular feminist frameworks. Her text proposes that submission to divine authority can be articulated not as a retreat from modern life but as a stylistically deliberate stand against it, an innovative blend of artistic modernism and theological conservatism that reshapes the boundary between style and belief.

Conclusion

The critical analysis of Perry's memoir *Gay Girl, Good God* (2018) yields several interrelated results that challenge assumptions within contemporary African American literary studies and the broader study of American religious culture. By evaluating the text through the twin lenses of formal hybridity and the intersectional paradox, this study suggests that adherence to a conservative, anti-feminist moral code does not inherently equate to a loss of literary or personal agency. On the contrary, the primary result of this research suggests that Perry constructs an alternative model of Black womanhood that uses religious orthodoxy as a therapeutic and authoritative resource in the face of what she portrays as the excesses of secular culture.

The first major finding concerns the "Holy Vernacular" itself. Grounded in H. L. Gates, Jr.'s (1988) theory of *Signifying* and Z. N. Hurston's (1934) characteristics of expression, the analysis shows that Perry merges the cadences of hip-hop and spoken-word poetry with the historically white-dominated language of puritanical theology. This formal hybridity produces a sophisticated literary style capable of carrying the intellectual weight of orthodox Christian doctrine, de-centering whiteness from conservative American theology and showing that a Black female author can claim theological authority without erasing her urban cultural heritage.

The second finding explores the dialogical intersectional paradox at the heart of the memoir. While

Perry rejects modern critical theories and secular feminist definitions of liberation, the narrative architecture of her autobiography functions as a demonstration of an intersectional matrix. Her lived reality as a Black, female, formerly queer subject navigating historically white evangelical structures exposes a multi-layered vulnerability that her theological ideology attempts to minimize, elevating the memoir from religious testimony into a subversive counter-cultural text. On this reading, she remains positioned within an intersectional reality even as she subordinates every social category to identity in Christ, a paradox this study reframes as a generative dialogue, one that challenges intersectional theory to recognize and accommodate religious, non-liberal models of self-determination, as conceptualized in post-secular feminist theory (S. Mahmood, 2005).

This study is necessarily limited in scope. It draws on a small set of illustrative passages rather than a comprehensive stylistic survey of the memoir's full text, and a fuller account would extend the prosodic analysis sketched in chapter 1 across additional passages rather than relying on representative examples. Nor does this article resolve the theological debate raised in chapter 3: Perry's account of agentic submission and womanist critiques of complementarian theology remain in genuine tension, and this study has aimed to hold that tension open rather than adjudicate it. Its findings are interpretive claims grounded in close reading; they should not be taken as generalizations about Black evangelical women or as an evaluation of complementarian theology. Future research might extend

this analysis comparatively, situating *Gay Girl, Good God* alongside other testimonial writing by conservative Black evangelical women, to determine whether the "Holy Vernacular" identified here is particular to Perry's spoken-word background or reflects a broader stylistic pattern within contemporary Black evangelical women's life writing.

These results nonetheless invite a re-evaluation of the boundaries of contemporary African American women's literature. Perry's memoir suggests that the traditional binary opposing progressive, secular feminism to regressive, religious submission may be too neat. In showing that a contemporary Black woman can deploy modern, rhythmic literary forms to defend an uncompromisingly conservative moral worldview, Perry's work expands the canonical boundaries of American life writing, illustrating the possibility that, for some marginalized subjects, the most stylistically assertive form of subversion available is not unchecked self-determination but a deliberate, stylized commitment to a different order altogether.

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