

The “Good News”

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The “Good News”: How the Gospel of Anti-Respectability Is Shaping Black Millennial Christian Podcasting

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Image 4.01. Collage of Black women podcasters' logos.

ABSTRACT

African American preachers and journalists have partnered throughout history to establish some of the most influential news outlets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This has meant, however, that much of what news audiences read in those newspapers and magazines adhered to the respectability politics of the Black church itself. At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, Black millennial Christian podcasters have reached an editorial tipping point. Gone are the appeals for assimilation. In their place are bold proclamations of anti-respectability, embracing the “ratchet” performance as authentic social justice commentary. But why? In this case study I explore how four leading Black women podcasters are reporting the “good news” in reimagined ways: D. Danyelle Thomas of *Gospel for the Culture*, Candice Marie Benbow of *Red Lip Theology*, and Simone Brown and Seretha Collins of *The Clean Ears Show*.

Keywords: Black church, Black press, Christian broadcasting, journalism, podcasting, ratchet performance, respectability, social justice

Introduction

“Do Black lives matter to God?” asks D. Danyelle Thomas on her blog, *Unfit Christian*, with her characteristic brashness. It is a bold inquisition that Thomas’s readers have, perhaps, come to expect after listening to her podcast, *Gospel for the Culture*. Thomas’s progressive takes on social justice—complete with African American Vernacular English and the occasional expletive—are a far cry from the respectability-politics-laden advocacy journalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And she is not alone in her approach. In this essay I unpack why this editorial turn away from respectability is inevitable in this “golden age of podcasting.”¹

The pulpit and the press have had a long and storied partnership in the history of African American advocacy journalism. Ever since the launch of the country’s first Black newspaper, *Freedom’s Journal*, members of the clergy have teamed up with journalists to establish some of the most influential publications in Black history.² This has meant, however, that much of what African Americans read in their time-honored newspapers and magazines adhered to the respectability politics of the Black church itself. It was not uncommon, therefore, for Black media of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to publish assimilative content, such as instructions on how to behave while Black in public, right alongside moral pleas to end slavery and lynching.³

At the turn of the twenty-first century, however, Black millennial Christian podcasters, who were born between 1981 and 1996, have reached a tipping point. Gone are the appeals for accommodation and assimilation. In their place are bold proclamations of a new brand of anti-respectability, which embraces the “ratchet” performance as authentic social justice commentary.⁴ In this case study, I explored how four Black women podcasters (who double as bloggers) are reporting on the “good news” in reimagined ways. The voices of D. Danyelle

Thomas of *Gospel for the Culture*, Candice Marie Benbow of *Red Lip Theology*, and Simone Brown and Seretha Collins of *The Clean Ears Show* are centered in this study. I interviewed these citizen journalists to investigate why they have turned away from the Black church's old discursive practices.

To appreciate fully how we have arrived at our current paradigm, we must first establish how Black men dominated two of the most formidable cultural forces of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the Black press and the Black church. Doing so will help us appreciate just how rare it was for women to become household names in the realm of advocacy journalism, unless they were working in conjunction with clergymen. This essay follows, therefore, in three parts. First, I provide a historical account of how two prominent Christian denominations—African Methodist Episcopal and Baptist—created Black sub-communities of journalistic influence during the nineteenth century. Second, I explain how the rise of Black radio in the 1930s ushered in the secular “ratchet performance,” which broke from many of the established Black church messages of respectability and temperance. Lastly, the interviewees explain how the current era of podcasting falls into this historic continuum of providing advocacy-based, “uplift”-style news—but with a modern twist. Taken together, this study (1) advances our understanding of the Black press of yesterday as an unofficial arm of the Black church—for better or worse—and (2) helps to explain how the theory of anti-respectability might best describe why edgy Black Christian podcasts continue to grow in popularity with millennials—even amid backlash from elder “saints.”⁵

The AME Church's Influence on the Nineteenth-Century Black Press

As Black slaves and freed men and women gravitated toward the Methodist and Baptist denominations of Christianity in the late 1700s, African American subgroups within the

denominations emerged.⁶ Perhaps the most notable break was Bishop Richard Allen's formation of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1816.⁷ The AME Church grew out of the Free African Society, which Allen formed with fellow cleric Absalom Jones in Philadelphia in 1787 when they faced racial discrimination in St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church. Both Allen and Jones opposed St. George's practice of segregated seating and its ban on Black priests, who were not allowed to address White parishioners. When the pair left St. George's, much of its Black congregation came with them to form the first African American, independent Protestant denomination. By the end of Reconstruction, the AME Church boasted more than 500,000 members, making it the largest Black Methodist denomination in the world—just ahead of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion) and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America.⁸

AME Church Clergy Staff the First Black Newspapers. The AME Church's two-hundred-year influence on Black American life cannot be understated, since it has forged within its lifespan hundreds of theological seminaries, nearly a dozen Historically Black Colleges, and—most germane to this study—numerous Black newspapers. We need only begin in 1827, with the founding of *Freedom's Journal*, to trace this editorial genealogy. Many journalism historians will readily (and rightfully) cite Samuel Cornish and James Russwurm as the founding editors of America's first Black newspaper. Perhaps the lesser-known fact is that Rev. Peter Williams Jr., whose father helped found AME Zion, was a fervent fundraiser for the publication's seed funding.⁹ Rev. Williams then filled the newspaper's ranks with fellow clergymen. Williams knew Cornish from his role as secretary of the Pennsylvania Augustine Society for the Education of People of Color, which opened within the local AME Bethel Church in 1818. Williams tapped AME Bishop Allen also, to pen columns about the abolitionist movement in America for

Freedom's Journal. All of these religious leaders, therefore, knew each other. When they launched publications, they leveraged their professional networks.

All of the leading Black newspapers of the 1800s that were based largely throughout the Northeastern region of the US sprang to life as a result of powerful AME alliances too.¹⁰ The *Christian Recorder*, for example, became the official organ of Bishop Richard Allen's AME Church in 1852.¹¹ The *Colored American* superseded *Freedom's Journal* in 1836 when Cornish and Russwurm split, leaving the former editor to partner with Phillip Alexander Bell and Bennett Ray.¹² Ray was a Methodist minister and "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, often providing safe passage for escaped slaves in his home throughout the 1830s.¹³ Even Frederick Douglass's *North Star* newspaper, which debuted in 1847, owed much to the AME Church as a cornerstone of the Northern, free Black experience. While Douglass was the face of the *North Star*—and although it later bore his name as *Frederick Douglass' Paper*—the unsung co-founder of the publication was Martin R. Delany.¹⁴ Delany grew up in Pittsburgh and took advanced science classes at his local Trinity AME church.¹⁵ With the clergy's support, he went on to become one of the first Black men to be admitted to Harvard Medical School in 1850. Delany had to stop his schooling in Cambridge, however, after White students at the university protested.

An AME Church-Affiliated Editor Fights for Freedom. In the role of a newspaper editor Delany accumulated more power than he may have ever enjoyed as a physician. He had the ear of President Abraham Lincoln, for example, proposing an all-Black regiment of Union soldiers, led by Black officers, in 1865. Delany impressed Lincoln. The president named him a commissioned major that year, making him the first Black line field officer in the US Army and the highest-ranking soldier throughout all of the Civil War.¹⁶ In one of Delany's most famous

military campaigns, he marched into Charleston, South Carolina, with Robert Vesey, son of Denmark Vesey, who almost led the largest slave revolt in US history before his plot was revealed. I mention this to highlight that Denmark Vesey was a founder of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston—the site where Dylann Roof, who is White, walked into a mid-week Bible study and shot nine Black congregants in 2015.¹⁷ It is chilling to think that the AME church Vesey helped establish in 1817—and that Delany frequented and defended during the Civil War—still was not safe for Black people more than a century later. The fact highlights, however, that the AME Church has remained an enduring cultural fixture in American history.

A Voice from Canada Emerges. Our current list of AME leaders and affiliates who influenced nineteenth-century journalism would be incomplete without mention of the first African American woman newspaper editor. Mary Ann Shadd Cary launched the *Provincial Freeman* in 1853.¹⁸ In its pages she urged African Americans to emigrate to Canada—a century before Robert Abbott inspired the Great Migration through his *Chicago Defender* newspaper.¹⁹ Cary was one of the earliest evangelists of respectability politics, which would come to dominate twentieth-century Black woman organizing. Cary’s biographer, Jane Rhodes, has noted that she published so-called “temperance songs” in the AME Church’s *Christian Recorder*, which urged women to cling to faith and family as the drivers for social change.²⁰ She even sang these tunes before delivering her lectures. At the time it would have been incredibly uncommon to see a Black woman on the front lines in this way, in a space that was dominated during the same time period by cultural juggernauts such as Richard Allen and Frederick Douglass. Cary had an edge, however, since her father worked for William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*. (Garrison attributed his lifelong abolitionism to an 1833 book, *Letters on American Slavery*, which was written by yet another member of the clergy: the Presbyterian Rev. John

Rankin.²¹) Shadd Cary would have grown up perhaps listening to her father and Garrison discussing the *Liberator's* editorial content. Cary's activism pre-dated (yet ushered in) the women's club movement of the early 1900s, which saw groups of Black women band together for the first time to advance racial and economic equality in America.

Black "Clubwomen" Articulate Their Aims through the AME Church. During Reconstruction, Black women organized into dynamic clubs, which functioned to improve the lives of newly free Black people. More than one hundred of these local groups dotted the US landscape, while two leading national organizations took center stage.²² Gloria Wade-Gayles has noted accordingly:

No one can study the black press of this period without becoming familiar with the success of *The Woman's Era*. Established in 1894 in Boston, this publication was the official organ of the National Association of Colored Women; and in 1895, with the founding of the National Federation of Afro-American Women, it became the major publication of the movement throughout the nation. As a paper dedicated to organizing "colored women" of the country for systematic work for the uplifting of the race, *The Woman's Era* was a beckoning light for many women journalists.²³

Still, it was the crossover from these Black women-centered publications to the more general AME Church-affiliated outlets that provided more reach for African American women journalists.²⁴ Activists such as Mary Church Terrell, who was the founder and first president of the National Association of Colored Women, published regularly in the *AME Church Review*, for example.²⁵ In one of her most famous columns, which ran in the January 1900 issue, she wrote: "The purification of the home must be our first consideration and care. It is in the home where woman is really queen, that she wields her influence with the most telling effect."²⁶ With these lines, the seeds of respectability politics were planted. The Baptist Convention helped it to flower and grow.

The Baptist Church's Influence on the Twentieth-Century Black Press

As the club movement took off in the early 1900s, Black women seized the opportunity to define themselves as ladies—not property. With the period of post-Reconstruction underway, these women had a keen awareness that achieving racial equality in America would mean they first had to convince many White Americans that Black women were worthy of protection and honor, just like White women.²⁷ This was the first generation of Black women, after all, that had a chance to reclaim the humanity stolen from their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, or sisters during the more than two hundred years of American slavery. Brittany Cooper explains in *Beyond Respectability* that “race women took it as their political and intellectual work to give shape and meaning to the Black body in social and political terms, to make it legible as an entity with infinite value and social worth.”²⁸

Respectability Politics Emerges. Mapping humanity onto the Black woman's body prompted a set of rules of engagement for Black women activists, historian Evelyn Higginbotham has argued. Between 1890 and 1920, the Black Baptist church became a cultural nexus for resistance. Its women, in turn, imbued their values into their political campaigns. Higginbotham wrote of the Women's Convention of the National Baptist Convention, “Their religious-political message was drawn from biblical teachings, the philosophy of racial self-help, Victorian ideology, and the democratic principles of the Constitution of the United States.”²⁹ This melding of socially conservative ideologies gave rise to what Higginbotham has called the “politics of respectability,” which “emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations.”³⁰ The Women's Convention urged its members to be living contradictions to racist

stereotypes of Black women, which dominated much of the early twentieth-century media landscape. By adhering to manners and morals, Higginbotham has explained, Black Baptist women sought to create counter-discourses of Blackness through “adherence to temperance, cleanliness of person and property, thrift, polite manners, and sexual purity.”³¹

The rise of the women’s club movement ran parallel to the rise of the Baptist Convention, and created new spaces for women to become prominent journalists—especially if they were churchgoing women who touted the politics of respectability as virtue. Teresa Zackodnik has noted, for example, that the National Association of Colored Women’s 1896 convention was held at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church of Washington, DC, and eight of its fifteen national meetings from 1901 to 1930 were held in Black churches.³² Wade-Gayles has explained also that about one-third of the dozen Black women journalists who became Black household names during the early 1900s got their start in Baptist church publications. She wrote: “Mary Cook, whose pen name was ‘Grace Ermine,’ entered journalism through an article she wrote for *The American Baptist*. At the time of the writing of the article, she was secretary of the Baptist Woman’s Educational Convention and simply wrote in that capacity.”³³ Similarly, Lucy Wilmot Smith, who was one of the most prolific writers in the group, controlled several church paper columns because she was on the staff of the Baptist Convention. Alice E. McEwen likewise began her career as an associate editor of a leading church paper that was tied to her father’s ministry. She went on to write for the *Spelman Messenger* and *The Montgomery Herald*. And Josephine Turpin Washington became a sought-after reporter after her column that protested selling wine at church fairs “went viral” in *The Virginia State* in 1883. Her message of temperance aligned well with that of the powerful Baptist Convention, which circulated the piece widely.³⁴

Respectability Politics Relegates Many Black Women Journalists. While the women of the Baptist Convention had the best of intentions—to highlight their sisters as human beings worthy of love and respect—the tidy boxes into which one had to fit in order to be considered “respectable” actually marginalized them. The Baptist Church’s chauvinism also seeped into its political communication practices, promoting the charismatic male Baptist preachers over the many Black women who held up the church as its administrators, record-keepers, and organizers.

These dual cultural forces—of assimilating into imagined, respectable norms of genteel White womanhood, and of “submitting” to Black men, according to Baptist Church doctrines and practices—led to Black women’s gradual relegation from the front lines as prominent clubwomen. By the mid-twentieth century, Black women formed an unsung, supporting cast of tactical and logistical laborers during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.³⁵ It is no wonder that Baptist ministers of this time period, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Jesse Jackson Sr., became international celebrities: their communiqué and visibility were backed by the full force of the Baptist Church—just as Bishop Richard Allen’s affiliation with the AME Church had made him a towering political figure in the 1800s. The fact that Black Christian women journalists today have begun to reclaim some of this editorial influence is remarkable, considering the more than two hundred years that Black men led both the Black church and the Black press. Perhaps what is even more interesting is that, rather than print journalism, they have taken up podcasting as their medium of choice, which, quite literally, centers their voices. What they say now may be shocking to church elders, yet significant to Christian millennials who have been waiting for their turn.

The Rise of the Ratchet Performance

“I never understood how people could refuse to go to church and still believe that they

were fully functioning in their Christianity . . . until I became that person,” D. Danyelle Thomas wrote on her blog, *Unfit Christian*, in May 2017.³⁶ In a post entitled “Exodus: Why Black Millennials are leaving the church,” she surmised:

Perhaps the greatest undoing of the relationship between the church and Black Millennials is the dire absence of evolution in political engagement from the pulpit. For us, there is a longing to see the church . . . that was not afraid to position itself at the front lines to fight against systemic oppression. Instead, we are left with a church that runs on the residue of its glory years as the center of the Black community, a reality that couldn’t be further from the truth.³⁷

Thomas’s allusion to this culture of complacency in the Black church is central to our analysis of the impact of the Black millennial Christian podcaster. If the Black press of the 1800s and early 1900s was the unofficial arm of the deeply influential Black church—and if the church persisted with assimilationist messaging even as its members were turning to more radical forms of activism, such as the Black Power Movement or the eventual Black Lives Matter Movement—then it stands to reason that both the church and its like-minded organs would decline together.³⁸

Famed sociologist E. Franklin Frazier was the first scholar to make this link, claiming that Black newspapers and magazines of the mid-1900s catered only to what he called the “Black bourgeoisie,” who could afford to purchase the aspirational fares that the publications peddled.³⁹ Frazier noted also that Black magazines like *Jet* and *Ebony* moved away from their activist roots in the late 1960s and 1970s to adopt a more tame voice after the Civil Rights Movement ended. Black publishers thought this would court largely White advertisers, rather than alienate them. One by one, however, some of Black America’s most iconic presses either stopped rolling or transitioned to “digital only” editions by the end of the twentieth century.⁴⁰ What showed no sign of slowing down was the “ratchet” aesthetic, however, which embraced the very things that

would make the Black clubwomen of the 1900s cringe: “no desire to participate in narratives of racial progression or social uplift; [and] instead . . . a desire for individuality regardless of the ideas and wants of a putative collective . . . A ratchet performance, in other words, is an exercise in anti-respectability.”⁴¹

The word “ratchet” first appeared in a 1992 UGK rap song, “I’m So Bad (Too Hard to Swallow.” In 2004, a new generation was introduced to the word when rapper Lil’ Boosie recorded “Do the Ratchet.” His producer, Earl Williams, added the following definition for the word in the liner notes of the album: “n., pron., v, adv., 1. To be ghetto, real, gutter, nasty. 2. It’s whatever, ‘bout it, etc.”⁴² Some linguists believe “ratchet” is eye dialect for the word “wretched.” Kristen J. Warner has explained that ratchet-ness is “a disposition characterized by foolery that is more tacky than ghetto and more world-worn than camp.”⁴³

One knows “ratchet” when one sees it today. It is in the unapologetically loud trilling that rapper Cardi B emits when she utters her version of the word “okay.” (Think: “Okurrr!”)⁴⁴ It is in the purple braids and nose rings of Black Lives Matter activists who interrupted presidential candidates in 2016.⁴⁵ It is in the brash sparring that Black women do on reality TV shows, such as *Love and Hip-Hop*.⁴⁶ The ratchet performance, in short, does not care about the White gaze. It does not desire to be relegated or marginalized. It does not pretend to be exemplary. It is free to be whatever it wants—no matter whom it alienates. And, the ratchet performance pre-dates rappers and reality TV.

The Origin of the Ratchet Performance. Early ratchet performances were found in the post–World War II “Chitlin’ Circuits.” This historic term refers to the entertainment venues that allowed African Americans to perform on their stages during the Jim Crow era of segregation. These enclaved spaces, which were sprinkled throughout Black America, allowed entertainers to

perform various versions of Blackness away from the White gaze. Many Black art forms, such as jazz and the blues, were born on Chitlin' Circuit bandstands, which did not have to be respectable. Preston Lauterbach has explained that even legendary Black comedians, such as Richard Pryor and Redd Foxx, and avant-garde Black playwrights, like August Wilson and Tyler Perry, got their start on the Chitlin' Circuit. Its speakeasy quality allowed Black performers to experiment with lowbrow material that would not have been acceptable in many Baptist or AME churches on Sunday morning—although a good portion of the congregation likely did attend the show the night before. Chitlin', after all, was short for “chitterlings” or pig intestines, which were given to Black slaves as scraps leftover from their White master's hearty ham.⁴⁷ What was meant as trash, however, was transformed into a culinary coup. Chitlin' Circuit ratchet performances were regarded in this same light—as cultural scraps that Black people dared not throw away because they provided some sort of sustenance.

Ratchet-ness Comes to Radio. Media historians have observed that many Chitlin' Circuit ratchet performances eventually went mainstream as Americans embraced jazz, blues, and rock-and-roll music from the 1920s to the 1950s on their radio airwaves.⁴⁸ These sounds of anti-respectability ran alongside respectable Black talk radio programs. The first African American disc jockey, Jack Cooper, for example, launched a show called *The All-Negro Hour* in 1929. He pulled from his experiences as a vaudeville actor to include lowbrow comedy, Chitlin' Circuit-inspired music, and current affairs read from Black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Cooper's near thirty-year domination of Black radio created a cultural blueprint. The total number of radio stations that broadcast Black programming jumped from twenty-four to six hundred between 1946 and 1955.⁴⁹ The combination of Black news and “ratchet” music grew audiences around the country, in both rural and urban areas.

Ratchet Radio Reincarnated in the “Golden Era” of Podcasting. Podcasting today is enjoying a bit of a renaissance after a slow start in the early 2000s. Early twenty-first-century podcasting was cumbersome. Listeners had to check back frequently for new episodes on Apple iTunes, for example, then download them to a computer and upload to an MP3 player. Now, one can subscribe to a podcast that will update automatically and appear on one’s smartphone, thereby connecting broadcasters and listeners in an even faster and more intimate way. Sarah Florini has noted that this relationship has created a “digital Chitlin’ Circuit,” which eschews the “polished and tightly formatted character of most mainstream corporate media, opting instead for an informal, flexible approach that allows for free-form conversation and embraces a range of Black vernaculars and regional accents.”⁵⁰ Florini added, “The podcasters often promote one another, appear as guests on each other’s shows, and share a heavily overlapping fan base.”⁵¹ This is not unlike the AME Church bishops and Baptist Church reverends of yesteryears, who swapped editors and bylines regularly. Something has shifted, however, in terms of the editorial tone of many of these Black podcasts—especially in terms of Christian broadcasting.

Florini has suggested, “Many of the podcasters assert podcasting allows them to provide content unconstrained by corporate gatekeepers and that they and their listeners consider less contrived and more authentic.”⁵² What if these gatekeepers include religious—and not just corporate—old guards? What would disrupting a historically respectable, Christian news voice sound like? What would less contrived and more authentic mean? I asked these questions of D. Danyelle Thomas of *Unfit Christian*, Candice Marie Benbow of *Red Lip Theology*, and Simone Brown and Seretha Collins of *The Clean Ears Show*. Their responses revealed a deep appreciation for the Black press’s legacy of communicating Black America’s concerns. Still, the women expressed varying levels of resolve to buck tradition and discuss taboo topics that they

believe should be pushed to the fore. In the final portion of this essay, therefore, I analyze how a desire to reinvent Christian podcasting via anti-respectability became a popular approach for Black women millennial journalists. Gone are the days that women must work their way up through the ranks of church-affiliated publications to rise to prominence. All they need now is one microphone.

Methods

I used two established African American standpoints to guide the development and refinement of my interview map: James Cone's "Black liberation theology" and Brittney Cooper's concept of "embodied discourse." Cone once wrote that a researcher could not study the lived experience of being Black without first establishing the subject's religious value system. Black people who believe in God, after all, are in a constant state of negotiating their faith in a world that does not wish to see them alive, Cone argued. He explained: "The black experience is the atmosphere in which blacks live. It is the totality of black existence in a white world where babies are tortured, women are raped, and men are shot."⁵³ He added:

The black experience forces us to ask, "What does revelation mean when one's being is engulfed in a system of white racism cloaking itself in pious moralities?" "What does God mean when a police officer whacks you over the head because you are black?" "What does the church mean when white churchmen say they need more time to end racism?"⁵⁴

This reckoning informs much of the ratchet performance that can be seen in today's millennial Christian media, I hypothesized. I sensed in their podcasts an urgency to have justice right now, rather than in the afterlife. To investigate whether this was true, I asked the participants questions that were steeped in eschatology. In the Christian faith, eschatology is the branch of theology that deals with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the human soul. Some of my questions centered, therefore, on whether the participants believed today's Black

church, and its respectability politics, was still a potent force in the fight to end systemic Black oppression and untimely Black death. I asked also how the women reconciled the earthly judgment they received from church elders when they strayed from the journalistic scripts of their ancestors. Had any head of clergy, for example, told them that their reportage was sinful, shameful, or otherwise unbecoming of one who wished to enter heaven? Lastly, I asked whether the women intuited their work as part of God's plan for them. In other words, did they believe that *not* speaking up about social justice issues in their chosen editorial tone was even more disgraceful than breaking the centuries-old journalistic norms of the Black press?

Another layer of my inquiry acknowledged that all of the interviewees' lived experiences would be informed not only by Black liberation theology, but by Black feminism too. All of the women have companion websites for their podcasts and touted this positionality proudly. I incorporated Brittney Cooper's concept of "embodied discourse," therefore, to enrich my interview map. Embodied discourse, as Cooper defines it, "refers to a form of Black female textual activism wherein race women assertively demand the inclusion of their bodies and, in particular, working-class bodies and Black female bodies by placing them in the texts they write and speak."⁵⁵ Embodied discourse, therefore, disrupts the "politics of respectability as the paradigmatic frames through which to engage Black women's ideas and their politics," since respectability as a communication method sought to make Black women's bodies "as inconspicuous and as sexually innocuous as possible."⁵⁶

Embodied discourse instead invites observers to regard the full corporeality of a womanist protestor, to consider how her race, class, and even sexuality might converge to shape her activism.⁵⁷ In terms of this case study, this meant examining (1) the Black woman podcaster's stated purpose for evading traditional communication models of respectability; (2)

whether she intuited that her style of reportage was contrary to historic Black press tropes of temperance, manners, and morals; and (3) how she believed her voice impacted the broader image and messaging of millennial Black Christians. Taken together, Cone’s wrestling with the meaning of God for marginalized Black people—and Cooper’s reimagining of Black feminist activism through the lens of anti-respectability—challenged me to view these podcasters as journalists who are bringing intersectional identities into the booths with them when they broadcast.

Meet the Participants

Simone Brown and Seretha Collins of the four-year-old *The Clean Ears Show* represent the conservative end of the “ratchet” spectrum.

“We have real conversations with young adult believers, tackling life from a Christian perspective,” their podcast mission statement reads, adding, “We’re all about the new and innovative movements in the Christian world.”

Their content pushes the editorial envelope, but not sacrilegiously so. Headlines such as “On wrestling with God” and “Metamorphosis” dot the podcast homepage.⁵⁸ While both women are wont to discuss relationships, music, and social issues in ways that may raise elder churchgoers’ eyebrows, they do incorporate biblical Scriptures into each broadcast. The duo relies also on personal anecdotes from their church experiences to explain their worldviews. Simone Brown is a native of Kingston, Jamaica, who grew up in Atlanta, GA. She said that she “values transparency, facilitating honest conversations, and encouraging people to articulate their feelings and struggles in the safety of God’s presence.” Seretha Collins refers to herself as a “California girl” who was raised in the Bay Area. After college she moved to Atlanta, where she rededicated her life to God and eventually met Brown at church. Both women served within their

ministries as Bible study teachers, youth leaders, and small group discussion facilitators prior to launching *The Clean Ears Show* podcast.

In the moderate range of the ratchet spectrum is Candice Marie Benbow of *Red Lip Theology*, which was founded in 2017. While her reportage often does not incorporate Scripture, it does reflect embodied discourse in its utmost form, encouraging women to be in tune with their bodies in order to do the work of activism in the Black church and beyond. Headlines from her homepage declare “I am a black feminist Christian” and “[I am] Depressed and still saved.” Benbow discourages Black women from toiling and suffering in silence. Her podcasts emphasize how a Black woman who is focusing on her inner and outer beauty can become a tour-de-force in whatever field she chooses, rather than being altruistically invisible. Benbow is not afraid to divulge, however, that the path to becoming this indomitable Black woman can be laced with systemic racism. As a former divinity student at Princeton University, she is candid about how she believes the institution mishandled her mental illness after her mother’s death. She was dismissed from her PhD program after several bouts of depression caused the once star student to fail classes. Benbow brings that pain and loneliness, of being the sole African American student in her competitive cohort, to each podcast. Her public admissions of outrage are in direct opposition to the stoic respectability that church elders would have advised her to put on. Instead of “just praying on it,” Benbow said she instead exposes White supremacy and anti-Black feminism, picks it apart, and even shouts at it. She is based in New Jersey.

On the very liberal end of the ratchet spectrum is D. Danyelle Thomas of *Gospel for the Culture*, whose podcast has promised since 2016 to deliver “the shot of Henny [Hennessy] in your communion cup.” The program’s companion website is equally irreverent in its tone. Headlines on the home page include “Jesus loves hoers, this we know: Sex work, faith and the

cross” and “It’s time to stop projecting your bullshit on Cardi B.”⁵⁹ These sex-positive feminist topics resonate with her audience, since they know she has renounced so-called “purity culture,” which encourages women to remain abstinent until marriage. Thomas also tackles social justice issues with the same tongue-in-cheek quality. Her Black Lives Matter–themed content incorporates James Cone’s Black liberation theology in its headlines: “When White supremacy is bigger than God,” “Your prayers aren’t enough: Faith, police brutality and Black Death,” and “Even Jesus flipped tables. Why are White Christians silent?”⁶⁰ Thomas undergirds these clickbait headlines with a keen understanding of the Bible that makes her raunchy approach forgivable to many Black millennial listeners. She is just as likely to cite Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as she is to quote Scripture.⁶¹ Thomas is a self-proclaimed “PK” or preacher’s kid who says her late father made peace with her style of reportage before he died. Her mother, whom she describes as formerly “hyper-religious,” supports *Gospel for the Culture* too. Thomas is based in Atlanta, GA.

Results

In interviews that ranged from twenty-two minutes to ninety-one minutes, Thomas, Benbow, Brown, and Collins shared three central ideas. The top three narrative themes that emerged were a desire to use podcasting to report relevant Black news while updating the Black church’s (1) topics, (2) tone, and (3) politics. To the first point, they wanted a new “faith dialogue,” as one interviewee put it. All of the women believed that the church should be having different (and perhaps controversial) conversations, which included new and different voices. To the second point, the tone and tenor of these conversations should not be paternalistic, condescending, or aligned with respectability politics, they said. They were disappointed, for example, that many Black churches chided their congregants for daring to discuss taboo issues,

such as gender equality. To the third point, the women said they wanted the Black church to evolve its politics. All of the women believed that doing so would re-establish it as a hub for Black news.

New Topics: Creating an Interactive “Faith Dialogue.” One of the most salient themes in the dataset was a desire for the Black press and the Black church to rekindle their historic relationship, but with new discursive traditions. Simone Brown explained, for example, that the old communication model of the Black press was top-down, traveling from church leadership to Black news audiences. Brown said she hoped *The Clean Ears Show* created more of a lateral engagement, where Black journalists, clergy, and the congregation were equally capable of suggesting news topics around which to engage. She laughed when I asked how that editorial approach was working. She offered: “Gen Y doesn’t really get it . . . but that’s because it’s a podcast, and they think radio.” She explained that many older churchgoers who listened to the podcast expected it to be more polished, like a National Public Radio production. Others did not understand why she and co-host Seretha Collins were cross-pollinating listener comments, questions, and suggestions from Twitter or Instagram followers into the podcast. Yet others felt misled by the show’s frequent explorations of social justice. Brown said: “They [church elders] see women speaking. They think it’s just going to be only about relationships. What they don’t realize is . . . there are other aspects of my life that need the Word as well.” Collins interjected:

We did get some push back from some people about certain things that we said, but I think that’s needed. We don’t feel bad about that because these conversations are still sort of new. Not new in terms of the topic being introduced, but new in terms of us going further with the conversation.

I asked Collins for an example of a news topic that the Black church has avoided historically. She gave the example: “Normally, the conversation on dating is: ‘Don’t have sex. Okay, bye.’” This stance, she said, does not often leave room for discussions on violence against

Black women, for example. In this paradigm, conversations about the #SayHerName campaign might not exist.⁶² Dialogue about the mysterious death of Sandra Bland in 2015, which occurred while she was in police custody, might not happen, Collins said.

This is D. Danyelle Thomas's frustration with the current Black church: it is editorially tone deaf, she said. Thomas added: "I'm where you come when you say 'I'm done with church, but I am not done with God. What now?'"

Thomas said that the podcast format offered her a freedom that she could not have achieved within the Black church. "I believe that people think of this [podcast] space as sacred but not with the same restrictions and pretenses that they would find in a traditional physical church," she said, adding: "Most of us still have a very idea of sacredness when it comes to the physical church. So there are certain things, certain conversations that you won't have in a physical sanctuary."

Thomas said that her digital sanctuary feels authentic and innovative. "I didn't have a blueprint for what I'm doing . . . there's nothing like *Unfit Christian* on the market." Thomas emphasized that her podcast is supportive of the LGBTQ community. It is sex-positive in its ideologies of female pleasure versus purity also. These tenets—of removing both the clergy and the physical church as barriers to authentic dialogue—are the building blocks of self-actualization, Candice Benbow said. She said her podcast's tagline, to offer Black news with a bit of "love, light and lipstick," is deceptively simplistic. On the surface, while she may be sharing a few beauty tips at the top of the show, she really is inspiring listeners to tap into "Dr. [James] Cone's fierce love of God and Black people." She said that his ideologies form the bedrock of *Red Lip Theology*, in that "he created a faith dialogue for us to understand who we are and why we need to evaluate what we believe."

Benbow added that millennial Black women who are Christian have observed where their ancestors fell short, in terms of visible, political influence. She said that many listeners find that her show delivers not only Black news, but suggestions for bold, personal activism too. She explained: “Black women recognize the limitations of traditional Black Church spaces to meet their needs and encourage real transparency. Grounding theological work in beauty conversations and pop culture moments opens up new terrain that many have found freeing.”

New Tone: Dismantling Respectability Politics. The second most popular theme in the dataset was a desire to talk about Black news in ways that have not always been welcome. All of the interviewees agreed that the politics of respectability once had a place in the Black pulpit-to-press complex. Its time had passed, however, they said. Candice Benbow explained: “So many Black women know that respectability politics and the pressure to be a certain kind of woman is both unrealistic and death dealing.” Benbow said that her editorial tone, therefore, reflects her desire to report on Black life in ways that break from the cultural script of the “Strong Black Woman.”⁶³

“For me, it’s important to show Black women that it’s possible to push back and still flourish in the Spirit. And it’s caused me to be even more honest about the trajectory of my life—the good and the bad—because it helps sisters disconnect the belief that bad things happen to us when we challenge God or the narrative we’ve been given,” Benbow said.

Benbow added that many Black millennial churchgoing women have been socialized nowadays *not* to be disruptive, which is antithetical to the role that their ancestors played in the past. “On one hand, people are disappointed that I could have been as steeped in the church as I was and have this [Black feminism] as my perspective,” she said with a laugh, adding: “Ultimately, I just don’t think the world knows what to do with free thinking Black women—

Black people included.” Benbow said that she is disheartened often to see the diminished role that the Black church plays in the production of a radical Black press. The cultural entities are so separate now, she said, that it is very easy for Black millennials to feel alone when they are fighting against social inequities in America. She admitted:

For years, I struggled with believing that my ideas and concepts didn’t make sense because I wasn’t necessarily in community with people who shared them, or I was in community with them but they were afraid to say anything. I just don’t want anyone to feel as isolated as I often felt as I was figuring it out.

The women of *The Clean Ears Show* added another layer to Benbow’s analysis to explain that respectability politics are not just outdated within the Black church; they have lost most of their appeal to Black millennials within the broader, “unchurched” culture too, Seretha Collins explained. “I think what’s interesting about that is, we want to act like [respectability pamphlets] are a [Baptist] church document, but it’s a political document more than anything. As respectability devolved we just look ‘old-school.’ We look stale. We look uncool. People don’t want to be part of that.” Collins surmised, therefore, that the rise of nontraditional Black Christian podcasting would continue into the next decade, as Black millennials search for affirmative voices and news that align with both their everyday lives and modern American culture.

This includes questioning more than ever before, perhaps, whether the Black church even should be part of the conversation at all, D. Danyelle Thomas asserted. “It’s different for us as people of color than it is for someone who is not part of a marginalized group to imagine what God looks like,” she explained, adding:

We’re carrying the baggage of Trans-Atlantic slavery still. God is a God of salvation, but we went through generations and generations and generations of slavery. How do you add that up? And yet you’re still in the pulpit preaching sermons that are more aligned with my oppressor than with my Savior. So I think it’s definitely not a [Black] millennial thing. Not anymore.

New Politics: Reporting Black News from Fresh Standpoints. Two of the interviewees in the dataset felt very strongly about the Black church's need to return to its activist roots in order for it to influence the world of Black news again. Both D. Danyelle Thomas and Simone Brown said they believe that Black millennials want to use their faith and their media production skills to participate in the change they want to see. They are no longer content to be lectured to passively, the women said. Brown explained: "When it comes to sociopolitical issues, so much of it, especially old church people would say: 'Well, just pray until it gets better.' And we're like: 'Yes, pray, but also do.'"

Thomas added: "We [Black millennials] are very much still trying to find the navigation between the White supremacist indoctrination of Christ and our ancestral tradition. That conversation goes beyond 'God will do it. God will fix it.' Okay, but what needs to be fixed?" Thomas expounded that many Black churches fail to address the real-world, interlocking systems of oppression that keep African Americans in a socioeconomic holding pattern for many generations. Topics such as redlining and mortgage fraud, for example, may not make their way into a Sunday sermon. Instead, Black millennials may be exposed to timeworn platitudes such as "God is my only provider." Thomas explained that over time, sayings such as these lose their power for a generation that is holding on, just barely, to the financial and political progress that its parents made. Thus, she said churches should be communicating, "What is happening within the systems that I'm living in in this world that is keeping me from being financially stable? What intersections of oppression are keeping me from equality on the financial stage or gender equality or sexual equality?"

Until social justice issues are addressed as systemic failings, rather than individual shortcomings, Thomas said, Black millennials will find the Black church's political messaging

outdated and irrelevant. Thomas said she believes that this is why podcasting is so important. While she does not want to assume the role of replacing the Black church, she said, “I would hope that, at some point, the majority of Black church institutions would acknowledge the changing world around them and embrace it instead of opposing it.”

Discussion

A Little Chitlin’ Circuit, a Little Church. One of the most surprising things about this case study was the degree to which some African American radio traditions endured in this modern era of Black millennial Christian podcasting. Just as the disc jockeys before them experimented with the right mix of music and news, so too does this generation of Black women podcasters appreciate that its audiences want entertainment and information. Today’s Black millennial news audiences also seem to want programming that is as progressive as they are politically. Thus, if the Black church is to regain a foothold in the world of Black news production, it must be ready to address contemporary concerns—both inside and outside of the pulpit.

Another interesting issue that arose during the course of this study is the degree to which the women are comfortable engaging in the ratchet performance. While *The Clean Ears Show* frames its controversial discussions delicately, for example, *Gospel for the Culture* is unabashedly raunchy and outspoken in its approach to political commentary. It bears further research to see if these extremes in editorial tone mirror the historic Black press. Were there, for example, Black newspapers in the early 1900s that were more radical in tone than others? Or did all of the newspapers of that time speak to the issues of lynching and civil rights with equal urgency? Moreover, to what degree does one’s current relationship with the Black church determine their ratchet comfort level? Could it be, for example, that *The Clean Ears Show* uses

more diplomatic headlines and less gasp-inducing turns of phrase than *Gospel for the Culture* because its hosts, Simone Brown and Seretha Collins, are still “churched”? Does the fact that D. Danyelle Thomas is no longer churched mean that she is freer to perform anti-respectability? If the answer to either of these questions is yes, then perhaps the Black church’s influence on the Black press is not as weak as the interviewees have said it is. In other words, even though the Black church is an institution in need of change, according to the participants, it still may have the power to cause Christian podcasters to self-censor their editorial content and tones. More research is needed to determine whether this is true.

A Growing Digital Congregation? In October 2019, the Pew Research Center reported that the number of Americans who described themselves as Christians had dropped 12 percentage points since 2009, from 77% to 65% of the nation’s adult population. Protestantism—the Christian division to which the African Methodist Episcopal and the Baptist denominations belong—experienced the largest loss of congregants, dropping from 51% of all American adults in 2009 to 43% in 2019.⁶⁴ These statistics reflect a decline of Christianity that does not affect just the Black church. Instead these data reveal a broader national trend, in which the religiously unaffiliated population continues to rise, from 17% to 26% of all adults. Still, Christianity’s influence on Black millennials cannot be understated. This demographic remains more religious than any other ethnic group within the generational cohort. Six in ten Black millennials, for example, told Pew that they prayed at least daily, compared to 39% of non-Black millennials.⁶⁵ And 75% of Black millennials said they were absolutely certain God exists, while just 48% of non-Black millennials declared this.⁶⁶ What is worth further exploration, then, is how this obvious desire to connect to the Christian faith translates to actual podcast consumption. Do Black Christian millennials listen to faith-based news podcasts more often than any other ethnic

group too? And who relies more on a digital congregation to be “fed” spiritually: Black millennials who are churched or unchurched? Black men or women? Lastly, it is worth widening the scope of this analysis to include other Christian denominations, such as Catholicism. Is there a group of Black Catholic podcasters, for example, who are rising in prominence? If so, does their ascendancy suggest that Black Christians of all denominations crave news programming that melds both their political and religious faiths? What would this mean for mainstream news production as a whole? And would the partnerships between the priests and the presses in the Black Catholic community mirror those of the Protestant divisions? All of these questions suggest that there is an untapped area of media studies that resides at the intersection of digital journalism and Black theology.

Conclusion

The four Black women podcasters I interviewed have embraced the “ratchet” performance as authentic social justice commentary, to rave reviews. While many of them remain “churched,” they are not necessarily tethered to those institutions in the ways that previous generations of Black women journalists were. These Black women were not handpicked by a group of influential clergy. They anointed themselves. Candice Benbow, Simone Brown, Seretha Collins, and D. Danyelle Thomas, therefore, bypassed a two-hundred-year-old tradition of working one’s way up through AME- and Baptist-influenced magazines and newspapers to eventual journalistic stardom. Instead, these self-proclaimed Black feminists centered their anti-respectable performances to carve out a new niche in a burgeoning medium. Their work reflects a rich exploration of what it means to be a Black millennial believer in a post-Obama era, which turned out to be *not* so post-racial.

Like Brown, Collins, and Thomas, many Black millennials are still searching for their place in America. They are looking also for spiritual answers to enduring questions of racial inequality. The digital Chitlin' Circuit offers a space to contemplate these things. Candice Benbow explained further: "It's possible to wrestle with the things that have happened to you and still have a very fulfilling relationship with God—one grounded in truth."

Truth, to these podcasters, means speaking in a way that is unapologetically modern, occasionally profane, yet always transparent. That vulnerability is what keeps Black millennial audiences coming back, the women said. They are all learning to love God, and themselves, together. Candice Benbow explained: "I'm not necessarily God's biggest fan every day and, at the same time, I know that I would not have survived the weight of pain in my life without God's consistent and loving presence. Holding that in tension, I believe, is the fruit of a life that is committed to truth and grace."

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