

Introduction

This paper is a work in progress. I open with that as a form of apology. As a scholar who embodies multiple dimensions of privilege, I naturally operate from the single vision of the dominant, not the double-vision Patricia Hills Collins attributes to the marginalized.¹ Uma Narayan observed that “even sympathetic men will often fail to perceive subtle instances of sexist behavior or discourse,” and her critique failure certainly obtains in matters of race and class, as well.² So I undertake this project with what Ilan Kapoor calls hyper-self-reflexivity³ and Anne Carter Walker depicts as a border-crossing identity, a subjectivity that seeks to develop the capacities for self-critical awareness of privilege and empathy with minoritized ways of being and knowing.⁴ I find a modicum of comfort in Audre Lorde’s assertion that it is the non-use of privilege and not privilege itself that is criminal.⁵ This work is an ongoing exercise in interrogating my privilege and its epistemic limitations.

Methodology

My research examines the 2015 movie, “War Room,”⁶ which presents a unique opportunity for inquiry because of its source, focus, and reception: It was written and produced

¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991).

² Uma Narayan, “The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist,” in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 265–66. *Ibid.*, 265.

³ Ilan Kapoor, “Hyper-Self-Reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World ‘Other,’” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2004): 627–47.

⁴ Anne Carter Walker, “Practical Theology for the Privileged: A Starting Point for Pedagogies of Conversion,” *International Journal of Practical Theology* 16, no. 2 (2012): 244, doi:10.1515/ijpt-2012-0016.

⁵ She equates the non-use of privilege to abuse. Audre Lorde, “Unused Privilege Is a Weapon in the Hand of Our Enemies,” *Gay Community News* 17, no. 27 (January 21, 1990). She goes on to note that responsible use of privilege “requires admitting to privilege, requires moving beyond guilt and accusation into creative action.”

⁶ Alex Kendrick, *War Room*, Drama, (2015).

by two pastors ordained in the Southern Baptist Convention who envision their work primarily as a Christian ministry.⁷ It focuses on the domestic life and religious practices of the film's protagonist, Elizabeth, played Priscilla Shirer.⁸ It also depicts the moral failings and redemption of the protagonist's husband, Toney. Notably, the movie was produced for a mere \$3.5 million, earning over \$11 million its opening week and grossing a surprising \$67.8 million to-date in the US. It has clearly found significant support and influence among a conservative religious populace with showings in theaters and churches across the country. Its reception reveals the resonance of its message with the broader culture.

“War Room” is the story of Elizabeth's successful battle to save her marriage through prayer. She learns to pray with the help of an older African American woman, Clara, and “fights” through prayer against the devil, her husband's philandering negligence, and her own struggle to overcome her anger and forgive him. Through her prayers, God makes her husband physically sick to prevent him from following through on an adulterous liaison. She casts Satan out of their household; she forgives her husband and finds joy in submitting to him even before he exhibits any change; Tony apologizes to her in tears when he sees her calm and loving spirit; he becomes a caring, attentive husband and father; and after losing a lucrative job in pharmaceuticals, he finds a more family-friendly job with no significant threat to the family's socioeconomic status.

⁷ “About | Kendrick Brothers,” accessed May 10, 2016, <http://kendrickbrothers.com/about>. The Kendrick brothers' church is part of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which upholds male headship, excludes women from the pastorate and ordination, and advocates exclusive use of masculine pronouns in reference to God: “Southern Baptist Convention > The Baptist Faith and Message,” accessed May 7, 2016, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>.

⁸ The biographical page on her web site is informative. Its text opens with “Priscilla Shirer is a wife and a mom first.” It concludes with “Priscilla has been married to Jerry for 16 years. Between studying and writing, she spends most of her time cleaning up after (and trying to satisfy the appetites of) their three growing boys.” “Get to Know Priscilla,” *Going Beyond Ministries*, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.goingbeyond.com/ministry/biography/>.

In my analysis I engage with intersectionality and feminist poststructuralism in order to highlight the ways the film's white, evangelical, middle-class patriarchy colonizes black experience through its arguably white representations of blackness. In this way I deconstruct⁹ the film's vision and tacit assumptions, connecting them to the recent tendency in American culture to "solve" racial, gender, and class tensions through color-blindness, gender hierarchy, and meritocracy.

Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality as a black feminist in 1989, in order to draw attention to the intersecting dynamics of class, race, and gender.¹⁰ Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge view the compound disadvantages of socially constructed racial, gender, and class identities as a "matrix of domination."¹¹ Their work uses intersectionality as a heuristic tool by which to interrogate the interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural domains (axes) of power.¹² Like the Foucauldian influence in poststructural analyses, their concept of power is essentially relational: "Power is better conceptualized as a relationship, as in *power relationships*, than as a static entity."¹³ It is thus deeply resonant with feminist poststructuralism, which Chris Weedon notes has potential to analyze the "working of power on behalf of specific

⁹ I should, perhaps, add a note of explanation that this paper does not engage directly with Derridean deconstruction, which aims its deconstructive labors at the foundations of Western metaphysics. That is, of course, deconstruction *proper*, and is not unrelated to the current project, as the phallogocentric nature of metaphysics has a direct bearing on hierarchical gender, class, and race relations. However, that connection is a project for another time.

¹⁰ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139–167. Hill Collins argues that interminable efforts to parse the difference between womanism and black feminism can be a political distraction, though the distinction can be important.

¹¹ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 2.

¹² Interpersonal power refers to how people are advantaged and disadvantaged in personal relationships. Disciplinary power refers to how the way social rules are implemented differently for different people, thus making certain options viable for some and out of reach for others. The cultural domain relates to the ideological power to explain social inequalities in such a way as to make the playing field seem level. Structural power refers to how power differentials relate to the organization of the institutions that enact, enforce, and reproduce them. *Ibid.*, 7–12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

interests [and foster] opportunities for resistance” through attention to discursive constructions of subjectivity.¹⁴

Analysis

In harmony with the Southern Baptist Convention’s commitment to male headship the film assumes that female submission to male authority is a divinely ordained standard.¹⁵ Indeed, it implies that any failure to conform to this pattern can have problematic or even disastrous consequences, as when the script implies that Elizabeth’s failure to submit to Tony could be like “stepping on landmines.” Elizabeth’s female co-workers support this paradigm: When Elizabeth confesses that “it’s hard to submit to a man like that,” Beth Moore responds to her in a brief cameo: “Sometimes submission is learning to duck so God can hit your husband,” with the problematic assumption that failing to submit may result in Elizabeth being hit by a divine fist.

Furthermore, submission requires that Elizabeth give up her “rights.” This seems to imply repressing her marital dissatisfaction and anger. After her conversion to prayerfulness, the film never shows her angry or attempting to discuss with Tony her concerns about his behaviors. In her initial prayer of repentance, she apologizes to God for her “sin” of anger. She is then cheerful and relaxed when Tony returns from a business trip which she knew may have involved adultery. Nor is she angry when he loses his job for dishonesty and admits to criminal activity. Similarly, the couple’s daughter, Danielle, never expresses anger toward Tony, but she does challenge her

¹⁴ Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Wiley, 1997), 40.

¹⁵ This commitment to marital male headship is shared by numerous denominations, including some that ordain women and encourage female ecclesial leadership. For instance, the Assemblies of God promotes women’s ordination and involvement at all levels of church leadership but also advocates male headship: “Headship and authority are synonymous. The God-established order is (1) God, (2) Christ, (3) man, (4) woman, and (5) child (Colossians 3:20). And in every case, submission to the higher authority is required, but in no case is authority equated with tyranny.” Robert L. Brandt, “By What Authority? Submission Must Always Be Based on Love, Never on Law,” *Enrichment Journal*, accessed May 8, 2016, http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200004/082_by_what_authority.cfm.

mother directly and tearfully, and Clara challenges Elizabeth about her “judgment” of her husband. The unavoidable implication is that male authority is not to be challenged. Tony, on the other hand, does not repent of anger, despite the obvious contrast between his angry, threatening demeanor and Elizabeth’s sad expressions. The monologue of his repentance involves him confessing simply, “I’m not a good man.”

Elizabeth’s agency is relegated to a walk-in closet in their expansive suburban home that she has emptied into another closet and transformed into a “war room” for prayer. Outside the closet, she becomes cheerfully submissive. In the seclusion of prayer, moreover, she defers agency to a masculinized deity, striving explicitly to “lose against God.” Indeed, her primary volitional act is to yield agency to God and to her husband. God then “hits” Tony by making him sick and getting him fired. God is the ultimate purveyor of male force.

We see Tony manifesting masculine strength in business and workout scenes, embodying the stereotype of black men as athletic, powerful, and vaguely threatening. Elizabeth is visible primarily in a domestic setting. She has a job, but Tony makes four times her income and has the final say on spending.¹⁶ Though the movie does problematize Tony’s hypermasculine character, it does so in racially stereotypical images and resolves his character into a “benevolent” patriarchy in which he retains power. Even during his brief period of unemployment, we see him leading his daughter’s jump-rope team, lifting her into the air, and performing back flips. We see

¹⁶ The movie certainly fails the Bechdel test, particularly when considering the degree to which God is linguistically masculinized. Even in the few glimpses we get of her in a professional context, the scene highlights interpersonal dialogue unrelated to work. See Alison Bechdel, “Dykes to Watch Out For: THE RULE,” *Off Our Backs* 16, no. 6 (1986): 27–27. Bechdel’s comic humorously suggested invoking three hyperbolically simple criteria for determining a movie’s relation to feminism: 1) at least two female characters, 2) who talk to each other, 3) about something other than a man. “War Room” passes on the first two but fails the third.

Elizabeth as an adoring observer of Tony's embodiment of strength. Her salvation is in the return of his masculine strength to her domestic sphere.¹⁷

The racialized gender hierarchy is reinforced by Tony's act of foot washing in the final scene. Like Peter, Elizabeth initially resists Tony's gesture.¹⁸ Her Petrine sinfulness is manifest in offensive foot odor, a problematic trope repeated throughout the movie as a humorous aside but resonant with M. Shawn Copeland's critique of Eurocentric depictions of black women's bodies as "primitive, lascivious, and repugnant."¹⁹ Indeed, the film's identification of Elizabeth with traitorous Peter in this scene despite Tony's anger, adultery, and criminality is a discursive inversion that plays out often in society. Men, even the very worst men, are the Christ-figures. Women yield to their redemptive power. Black men are less so than white men. They are animal and dangerous but still Christ to black women, who are lowest of all, voiceless, vulnerable, and filthy.²⁰

The movie's construction of masculinity and femininity is thus highly problematic. The film constructs precisely what Joan Acker refers to as a set of "images, symbols, and ideologies

¹⁷ Regarding hegemonic masculinity, see Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Polity Press, 2005), xviii, 76-79; R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (December 1, 2005): 829-59, doi:10.1177/0891243205278639.

¹⁸ Narayan's caution applies well to this patriarchal vision of kenosis: "Men who share household and child-rearing responsibilities with women are mistaken if they think that this act of choice, often buttressed by the gratitude and admiration of others, is anything like the woman's experience of being forcibly socialized into these tasks and of having others perceive this as her natural function." Narayan, "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Nonwestern Feminist," 265.

¹⁹ While laying the ideological groundwork for disciplinary control of sexual discourse fostering the "'domination and demonization' of the different Other." M. Shawn Copeland, "Body, Representation, and Black Religious Discourse," in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie Maureen Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 98-99.

²⁰ Copeland finds the etiology of their representation as dangerous linked to "colonization and slavery, as both ideology and practice, not only sustained patriarchy but also initiated black men into, and rewarded them for, a brutalizing mimesis." *Ibid.*, 99. Copeland aptly observes that "black women's bodies, sex and sexuality, minds and culture have been colonized by both white and black communities...black women remain colonized by representative aesthetics in popular culture." *Ibid.*, 100.

that justify, explain, and give legitimacy” to the institutional construction of hegemonic masculinity.²¹ No less an authority than God Almighty demands this construction and threatens judgment on those who violate essentialist roles. Following Althusser, Weedon notes how ideology “hails” the individual through language, causing a response of recognition which is simultaneously misrecognition in that “the individual, on assuming the position of subject in ideology, assumes that she is the *author* of the ideology which constructs her subjectivity.”²² Foucault includes within this construction “scarcely perceivable forms of desire” that function through repressing as well as inciting desire.²³ The film thus “hails” the uncritical viewer into a longing for participation in this power hierarchy, reiterating and reinforcing a dynamic that disempowers women and leaves them vulnerable to the vicissitudes of male power. For the average consumer, this will be largely hidden from view by virtue of its uncritical agreement with the ideological presuppositions of its religious audience.

Moreover, it constructs this racialized gender hierarchy with an apparent commitment to glossing over the reality of racial tension. This is telling, since lead male actor T.C. Stallings accepted the role for its positive representation of black families. Having grown up in proximity to inner-city gangs and crime he noted in an interview that “racial tension is dangerous” and expressed concern that media representations often foster the repetition of those conditions.²⁴

²¹ Joan Acker, “From Sex Roles to Gendered Institutions,” *Contemporary Sociology* 21, no. 5 (1992): 568, doi:10.2307/2075528.

²² Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, 30.

²³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Random House, 1990), 11.

²⁴ This problem of mimetic violence is explored in René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Mark I. Wallace and Theophus Harold Smith, *Curing Violence* (Polebridge Press, 1994). Though the volume does not address poverty directly

Stephen Kendrick viewed their casting decisions as a way to foster healing “across racial lines.”²⁵ But note the representation offered, for example, when Tony, a black man, confesses to his boss, a white corporate executive, that he stole pharmaceutical samples. The white man has absolute sway over the black man’s fate and bestows an idealized, Christlike mercy that—importantly—cannot be construed as a free handout.²⁶ The black man is perfectly guilty and perfectly contrite, a model minority, and he subsequently re-joins the perfectly integrated congregation.²⁷

Despite the stated interest in racial reconciliation the film is conspicuously silent about racial tension. It utilizes stereotypical tropes while depicting a community life integrated with almost mathematical precision. Apparently the best way to address racial injustice is by ignoring its causes and results and painting an idealized depiction of colorblind integration. Joseph Winters addresses this inclination to upholding colorblindness as the solution to racial tension, noting that this represses the experiences and cultural memories of many for whom the status quo is harsh and traumatic.²⁸ He notes that the desire among African Americans to see their identities faithfully represented in film often depends on problematic “notions of authentic blackness” that ignore fractures within black identity along class, gender, and sexual lines.²⁹ The fact that the film features an integrated cast and crowd scenes yet fails to so much as hint at the

²⁵ Alicia Hadley, “Faith-Based ‘War Room’ Promotes Healing Through Fervent Prayer,” *NBC News*, August 28, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/faith-based-war-room-promotes-healing-through-fervent-prayer-n417451>.

²⁶ With the strings of a precise *lex talionis* attached, as Tony must repay the company precisely the cost of what was stolen.

²⁷ Another moment of tellingly white representation of blackness occurs early in the film Clara is paying a white boy for mowing her lawn and hands him an extra five-dollar bill, “because I like your haircut.” She continues, “I’m tired of seeing all these young boys with sloppy hair and pants around their knees. A man wears his pants around his waist.” The boy replies respectfully, “Yes, ma’am.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 140–41; citing Valerie Smith, ed., *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

existence of systemic racial injustice reeks of an idealized, white tokenism, which Lorde argues is certainly “not an invitation to join power.”³⁰ It fails to reach inside and, in Lorde’s words, “touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there.”³¹ It glosses over difference completely, thus failing even to merely tolerate it, much less to address it honestly and see it as a potentially redemptive fund for creative, dialectical tensions.³²

Conclusion

In conclusion, by failing to address systemic injustice, War Room celebrates the status quo and upholds a distinctively white vision of racial harmony, a middle class vision that confuses grace and meritocracy, and a hegemonic vision of gendered social hierarchy in which the privileged do not need to confront their privilege or its effects. It upholds the status quo as normative, a status quo tacitly antagonistic to women’s equality, black bodies, and poverty. It offers nothing bravely prophetic or redemptive. Rather, by its discourse, images, and silence it is manifestly complicit in the injustices of the status quo.

I end with a very different example of representation. In the film *Hidden Figures*, Vivian, a white woman played by Kirsten Dunst, addresses Dorothy, a black woman played by Octavia Spencer during Dorothy’s first visit to the newly integrated women’s restroom. It is luxurious compared to the segregated restroom. In an uncharacteristically conciliatory moment Vivian says, “Despite what you think, I don’t have anything against y’all.” Dorothy incisively replies, “I know. I know you probably believe that.” The moment lingers, resonant with an indictment and a

³⁰ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2012), 118.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

³² Lorde, “Unused Privilege Is a Weapon in the Hand of Our Enemies,” 111.

call that reaches through history to current American social tensions and the failure of colorblindness and meritocracy to heal them.

And this, I propose, could stand in perfectly as a dialogue between War Room and those oppressed by sexism, racism, and classism. “I don’t have anything against y’all,” War Room assures us. “I know you probably believe that,” intersectionality replies both to War Room and to the broader culture it represents.

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