TRAFFICKING HADASSAH: AN AFRICANA READING OF COLLECTIVE TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND IDENTITY IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar

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Abstract

Trafficking Hadassah: An Africana Reading of Collective Trauma, Memory and Identity in the Book of Esther and the African Diaspora

Ph.D. Dissertation by

Ericka Shawndricka Dunbar

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This dissertation examines the collective trauma of sexual trafficking experienced by female and eunuch collectives within the book of Esther and by the African diasporic female collective during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Both Jewish and African diasporic identities emerge in contexts marked by colonialism, capture, sexual exploitation, displacement, genocide, ethnic suppression, and the need for cultural persistence in such horrific and hostile environments. My investigation assesses the conditions and processes by which each collective is trafficked and the traumatic impact of trafficking on collective identity and memory.

Methodologically, I employ Africana biblical criticism as a means to place the particularities of Africana life, history, and culture at the center of the interpretative process. I investigate and describe sexual trafficking in both literary and cultural/historical contexts to illustrate that sexual trafficking is a collective, communal issue that disproportionately impacts minority and minoritized groups in both contexts. Further, my

project underscores how gender and racism intersect with many other forms of oppression, including legal oppression, which ultimately result in the sexual trafficking of minoritized groups. I arguethat sexual trafficking constitutes cultural trauma which marks the identity and memories of each collective in often damaging and irrevocable ways. Thus, this project elucidates the relationship between collective trauma, identity, and memory.

As a dialogical cultural study, this project contributes to and expands Esther studies by shedding light on the ancient community's struggle to deal with sexual violence and exploitation. At the same time, it sensitizes contemporary audiences to the wider social and global problem of sexual trafficking. Further, it illumines the complexity, fluidity, and diversity of diasporic identity marked by contestation and negotiation in colonial contexts.

Contents

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Reading Esther 1–2 as a Story of Sexual Trafficking

> With Black women as the starting point, it becomes more apparent how dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis. I want to suggest further that this single-axis framework erases Black women in conceptualization, identification, and remediation of race and sex discrimination by limiting inquiry to the experiences of otherwise-privileged members of the group.
>
> ~ Kimberlé Crenshaw[1]

Trafficking Hadassah is a theoretical and hermeneutical exploration of the intersections between sexual trafficking, gender, ethnicity, and class within the book of Esther and in the experiences and histories of African diasporized girls and women. Many biblical scholars note the role of gender in the sexual exploitation of Vashti, Esther, and the female virgins in the book of Esther.[2] However, not enough attention has been given to the role of ethnicity in contributing to their vulnerability to and experiences of sexual exploitation. Drawing on antecedent scholarship, I want to examine the intersection of ethnicity/race, gender, and class

[1] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,"*University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139–167.

[2] See Randall C. Bailey, "That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!" The Interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther," in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando Segovia (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009), 227–250; Sarojini Nadar, "Gender, Power, Sexuality and Suffering Bodies in the Book of Esther: Reading the Characters of Esther and Vashti for the Purpose of Social Transformation," *Old Testament Essays*, 15, no. 1 (Jan 2002): 113–130; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991); Nicole Duran, "Who Wants to Marry a Persian King? Gender Games and Wars and the Book of Esther," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible*, ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 71–85; Danna Nolan Fewell, "Nice Girls Do," in *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of Our Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 133–195.

within the text, with particular focus and emphasis on sexual trafficking and its implications for the book of Esther. I argue that, and show how, the application of intersectionality and polyvocality opens the texts up, allowing interpreters to explore complex elements and processes of sexual trafficking in Esther.

I came to focus on sexual trafficking in the book of Esther while I was matriculating in the M. Div. program at the Interdenominational Theological Center, located in the heart of Atlanta. According to the International Human Trafficking Initiative, Atlanta has one of the largest sex industries in America. The zip code in which the seminary is located, 30314, has one of the highest rates of sex trafficking in the nation.[3] Noting these high occurrences in the context of where I lived and was engaging in spiritual and theological formation, I wondered how sexually exploited and trafficked Africana [4] girls and women might be impacted by seeing their experiences reflected in a sacred text. I questioned whether they could see beyond the euphemisms and identify the sexual exploitation embedded in the text. I was convinced that their social locations would impact what they saw in the book of Esther and how they interpreted this text.

Commentators often describe the abuse and exploitation of the virgin girls transported to the king's palace as a beauty pageant – in fact, the girls are placed in a project of beautification as part of the process of sexual trafficking. Prior to the work of biblical scholar Nicole Duran, who frames the abuse as a sexual beauty contest, the scope and scale of sexual abuse in this text has been largely ignored or minimized. Duran describes the beautification process as an effort that Esther and the virgin girls make to meet the criteria for the king's

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[3] "The Problem: Sex Trafficking," National Center for Civil and Human Rights, International Human Trafficking Initiative (2018–2021), accessed February 3, 2020, https://www.ihtinstitute.org (site discontinued).

[4] To clarify my use of the term Africana in this project, Africana girls and women are the collective communities of girls and women located on the continent of Africa, an/or who descend from the continent, and/or, who have been displaced from the continent through the transatlantic slave trade or voluntary migration.

beauty contest. Duran, however, does not place the beautification process under the rubric of abuse; instead, she places the abuse under the rubric of beautification, and describes beauty as a "useful" quality that the girls could deploy in order to survive and gain position and security.[5] In contrast to Duran's framing, I will argue that the beautification process is a tool used by king and empire to sexually exploit the girls trafficked into his palace.

There is a tendency by some commentators to disregard the ethnicity of the girls being transported to the palace; alternatively, they limit the exploration of ethnicity to the explicitly named Jews in the text. Such singular focus often diverts attentions from the other victims of trafficking within the imperial project. Thus, although there is no overt identification of the ethnicities of the other virgin girls within the text, geographical references reveal aspects of their ethnic identities. Commenters also oftentimes miss elements of capture and transportation detailed in the text, both of which are mechanisms of sexual trafficking. These ways of reading, advertently (or, in some cases, inadvertently) miss an intersectional framework within the narrative that brings together the categories of gender, ethnic, and class oppressions around a system of sexual exploitation and trafficking. The virgin girls in the text are forced into sexual servitude because of intersectional identities and attitudes toward ethnic girls and women that suggest that they are exploitable.

Some readers, interpreters, and commentators ignore, minimize, and dismiss the wide-scale sexual exploitation against marginalized and minoritized girls in the book of Esther's story world in ways that resonate with the trivialization of sexual abuse and trafficking of minoritized girls and women in contemporary contexts. To focus this analysis and counter this trend, I bring together Africana hermeneutics, trauma theories, and postcolonial analyses to reexamine the text of Esther. I supplement my exegesis with historical accounts of enslavement and research about the transatlantic slave trade in order to illuminate themes and

[5] Duran, "Gender Games and Wars," 77–78.

events in both contexts. These themes and events reveal how ancient and more contemporary communities struggle with a number of factors, including sexual abuse, exploitation, and other enactments of violence and factors which create, contest, and shift diasporic identity. I am not asserting that all Africana females have experienced sexual exploitation; rather, I am assessing enactments of trafficking in two specific contexts. In addition, while the focus of this dissertation is on themes of violence, trauma, and sexual trafficking, these experiences do not diminish the personhood of Africana girls and women. Africana girls and women possess countless strengths and embody commendable resilience.

Methodological and Theoretical Framing of Trafficking Hadassah

This dissertation is designed to contribute to literature on sexual trafficking and Africana peoples as well as to literature on the book of Esther. I define what sexual trafficking is; then I use that definition and other sexual trafficking discourse to outline the occurrence of, and parties involved in, sexual trafficking in the book of Esther. I interpret the text through the lenses of polyvocality and intersectionality to highlight the intersectional constellations of gender, ethnicity/race, and class embodied in the victims. In addition, I underscore that, when the virgin girls are trafficked into the king's palace and kept as his concubines after he chooses Esther as queen, the king makes the remaining girls his sexual slaves. I illustrate the initiation of sexual violence against the female collective (the sexual exploitation of Vashti) and the intensification of that violence in the second chapter (the sexual trafficking of the virgin girls). Attention is given to the roles of kyriarchy, colonialism, legality, and displacement in sexual trafficking systems. Last, I reflect on the material and psychological impact of sexual trafficking on the individual and collective Africana bodies and identities of those trafficked.

In this project, I use Africana biblical criticism and Black feminist, womanist, and postcolonial critical methodologies to place the particularities of Africana life, history, and

culture at the center of the interpretative process. I investigate and describe sexual trafficking in both cultural/historical and literary contexts to illustrate that sexual trafficking is a collective, communal, and cultural issue that disproportionately impacts minority and minoritized groups in both contexts. I understand African diasporic girls' and women's lives, stories, and histories as sacred texts with the capacity to provide information and inspiration. Their lives and experiences are worthy of exploration, investigation, and interpretation. My project is thus a dialogical cultural study that contributes to and expands Esther studies by shedding light on the ancient community's struggle to deal with sexual violence and exploitation. At the same time, it sensitizes contemporary audiences to the wider social and global problem of sexual trafficking and its impact especially on Africana and other minoritized female collectives.

The theoretical and methodological orientation and aims of Africana biblical hermeneutics converge with Black feminist, womanist, and postcolonial hermeneutics to uncover different, non-traditional meanings and implications of sacred texts. Specifically, this orientation enables interpreters to evaluate the Africana presence in the Bible and the impact on contemporary Africana identity of the varied portrayals of, and ideologies promoted about, biblical Africana subjects. The frameworks of these critical methodologies not only provide opportunities to contextualize and nuance Africana experiences of exile and diaspora more concretely, but they also provide interpretative space to explore how histories of collective diasporization and other distressing experiences such as gender-based violence contribute to and impact experiences of collective trauma and corporate identities. Collectively, these hermeneutical lenses center discussions on Africana activities, struggles, and suffering while challenging mainstream interpretations and rationalizations in both ancient and contemporary contexts. In addition, their focus and function are to critique structural oppression, domination, and exploitation. There is a deep sensitivity to who Africana people are

collectively, culturally, and ethnically and to how Africana identity is impacted by non-Africana and often colonizing subjects. Moreover, these methodologies foreground embodiment, especially the embodiment of gender and ethnicity up against dominant axes of difference and the somatic imprint of exploitation and traumatization on Africana bodies. There is a recognition that the embodiment of trauma impacts material bodies and that, coded in these material and cultural bodies, there are not only stories, but histories and identities shaped by traumatic events.

This multi-methodological approach to biblical interpretation is attentive to the cultural identity, politics, and economics of Africana people. It affords the opportunity to foreground Africa and Africana subjects' presence in the Bible. Further, it affords an interpretative space from which I identify and critique ideologies regarding Africa/Africana peoples and the gendered colonial language and imagery that is presented throughout the book of Esther. One ideology that stands out in particular is the inferiorization and subjugation of Africana peoples, which dehumanize such peoples, destabilize their identities, and function to justify their oppression and exploitation. In addition, by reading the Bible alongside other texts, I am able to interrogate and challenge how the Bible has been used to perpetuate violence through colonialism, sexual terrorism, and symbolic and physical abuse. Such intertextual analyses will particularly take the form of Africana hermeneutics as storytelling.[6] That is, I will situate myself as the storyteller in dialogue with scholarship within the broader fields of biblical studies, psychology, and ethics in an attempt to propose reading methods that seek to make meaning and justice at the interface of the biblical text and the history of Africana girls' and women's lives.

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[6] See Funlola Olojede, "Storytelling as an Indigenous Resource in the Interpretation of Old Testament Ethics and Religion," *Scriptura* 113 (2014): 1–9.

Storytelling is universal and thus relatable across cultures. In this project, I treat the book of Esther as a story. When read alongside indigenous stories of the lived experiences of Africana girls and women and other stories offered by diverse scholars, these multiple and varied stories hold the promise of shedding fresh light on practices of meaning making and understanding. This method of interpretation explains manifestations and mechanisms of sexual trafficking in colonizing and patriarchal societies and the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual impact on Africana females' bodies, psyches, spirits, and identities.

Storytelling as a methodology is not primarily concerned with history but rather allows individuals to express what happened to and among them and to explain the meaning and impact of these events. The creators of and participants in storytelling assert subjective points of views that are vested in meaning. The story, characters, plot, and events are all central to both individual and collective identities; Storytellers assemble fragments of experiences and memories into the plot and reveal how these fragmented experiences that often result from a traumatic event shape their understandings of the world, who they are, and how they came to be.

Not only does storytelling offer knowledge from invested and attached participants and observers, but it challenges and calls listeners to respond and act—to raise voices of protest to the traumas represented in the stories. It challenges recipients of the story to assess how they may either contribute to or counter the moral and ethical challenges that are presented throughout the story. In this way, there is an interactive exchange between the stories, the communities that produce the stories, and the recipients of the stories that expands and diversifies meaning making and knowledge. This project includes knowledge resources from peoples across disciplines, which encourages readers to analytically and creatively embrace new ideas and knowledge and take part in creating sustainable solutions to issues

such as sexual trafficking; gender-based violence; intersecting gender, racial, and class oppressions; and colonialism, among other pervasive, systemic problems.

Summary Claim

The major claim of this dissertation is that sexual trafficking is represented in the second chapter of the book of Esther when the king's imperial court—in consultation with his servants—conceptualize and implement the following policy:

> Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. And let the king appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; let their cosmetic treatments be given them. And let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.[7]

The book of Esther details gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and horror: virgin girls are kidnapped and displaced multiple times. After displacement from their homes and provinces, they are shuffled from one harem to the king's bedroom then to another harem, as their bodies become object/abject for the king's sexual pleasure. The king and his officials represent Persian colonial powers that orchestrate and implement a sexual trafficking system, whereby virgin girls are brought across national boundaries within Ahasuerus's empire for his sexual consumption and pleasure. Sexual trafficking is therefore embedded within gendered movement and the movement of especially racialized, minoritized gendered bodies.

This hermeneutical framing takes on particular significance in light of the traction and momentum that the #MeToo movement has gained in recent years, as it sheds new light on the sheer ubiquity of sexual abuse and exploitation. The #MeToo movement is a timely response to enduring issues of gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and sexual trafficking. Invisibility and silence around sexual harassment, abuse, and exploitation, especially of minority and minoritized women, is what precipitated the global #MeToo

[7] Esth. 2:2b–4a (NRSV).

movement founded by Tarana Burke. Burke, who works with victims of sexual abuse, noted the debilitating trauma caused by gender-based sexualized violence as she listened to women's stories and recognized her own failure to respond. Reading the book of Esther with particular attention to and emphasis on the sexual trafficking of Africana girls highlight the longstanding ideologies, stereotypes, and actions that constitute, undergird, and perpetuate the types of abuse and sexual exploitation that the #MeToo movement challenges and resists; and it expands the theoretical and interpretative space of biblical scholarship seeking liberative ends.

Defining Sexual Trafficking

Sexual trafficking is a form of human trafficking that is conceptualized as a modern form of enslavement. A short definition of sexual trafficking is "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbor, or receipt of people, by coercive or abusive means for the purpose of sexual exploitation."[8] Sexual trafficking is a global phenomenon and geopolitical issue that lacks a comprehensive framework for understanding and evaluating structural and cultural factors that create and support its manifestations. Operated as an underground enterprise, sexual trafficking thrives on silence, invisibility, and heightened vulnerability of victims. Reporting is further complicated by dynamic global events and a lack in uniformity of reporting structures.

The International Labor Organization reported that, in 2016, at any given time, 40.3 million people were enslaved and that one in four victims of enslavement were children. Moreover, women and girls are disproportionately affected by forced labor, accounting for 99 percent of victims in the commercial sex industry and 58 percent in other sectors.[9] According

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[8] US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (Washington, DC: US Department of State Publications, 2014), http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2014/index.htm.
[9] International Labour Organization, *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage Report* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2017)

to the Polaris Project, which focuses on the US context, reports of trafficking increase yearly but are still underreported. This reflects global trends as well. Although unable to provide a full picture of the scope of trafficking, the Polaris Project notes that the majority of persons who are trafficked (in whatever form) are from vulnerable populations such as the oppressed or marginalized, the poor, and undocumented migrants; these populations are often composed largely of minority and minoritized people of color. The 2016 Polaris Project Statistics report reveals that, of the 7,572 cases reported to their trafficking hotline, 77 percent were sexual trafficking and sex- and labor-related trafficking cases. Of the 8,542 survivors, 7,128 were females. Of the 3,116 survivors that reported their race/ethnicity, 2,447 were Latino/a, Asian, African, African American, Black and multi-ethnic/multi-racial. Even with tremendous underreporting, this gives us a small snippet of the scope and scale of global manifestations of sexual trafficking and its impact on minoritized children and women. Duren Banks, Chief of the Prosecution and Adjudication Unit at the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and Tracey Kyckelhahn, Senior Research Associate at the United States Sentencing Commission, note in their analysis of data collected from 2008–2010 that, while Black girls and women constituted only 7.2 percent of the total US population, 40 percent of all confirmed trafficking cases involved Black girls and women.[10] Similarly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime released a Global Report on Trafficking in Persons that is based on information gathered from 155 countries. This report reflects trends found in the report by the Polaris Project: The most common form of human trafficking globally is sexual trafficking (79 percent), and victims are predominantly girls and women.[11]

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https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_575479/lang--en/index.htm.

[10] Duren Banks and Tracey Kyckelhahn, *Characteristics of Suspected Human Trafficking Incidents, 2008–2010* (Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2011), https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cshti0810.pdf.

[11] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons* (New York: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes, 2009),

The Polaris Project also summarizes sexual trafficking as situations in which threats, manipulation, lies, debt bondage, and other forms of coercion are utilized to compel children and women to engage in commercial sex acts against their will. There are various lengths of times in which victims are involved in trafficking, which can include days, years, or for the duration of their lifetime. Similarly, there is variation in the ways that traffickers insert persons into sexual trafficking and in the conditions such persons face in trafficking systems.[12] Some conditions include physical, sexual, and emotional violence; physical restraint; and intimidation. All the conditions of trafficking, however, are exploitative and contribute to damaging bodies, psyches, and identities. In addition, there is a complex web of dependence that prevents victims from escaping these systems.

In this project, I will draw on the foregoing analyses to outline the representation of sexual trafficking in the second chapter of Esther and connect it with experiences of sexualized violence in histories of Africana girls and women. Of particular focus is the capture, transportation, and enslavement of millions of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean, otherwise termed the Maafa,[13] to various "new" lands that were also exploited, plundered, and stolen by colonial forces. The enslaved became property of slave owners, who had control over their bodies, physically and sexually. Cultural historian David Davis notes that, not only did slave owners have sexual access to slaves, but their sons and overseers coerced and raped the wives and daughters of slave families as well.[14]

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https://www.unodc.org/documents/Global_Report_on_TIP.pdf.

[12] "Understanding and Recognizing Sex Trafficking," Polaris Project, accessed October 20, 2019, https://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/sex-trafficking.

[13] Maafa is term coined by Marimba Ani, to represent the history, genocide, and enduring effects of slavery and anti-Black racism and discrimination in the African diaspora. The term is an appropriation of the Swahili word meaning "disaster or catastrophe." It has resonances with the term Shoah, which denotes the Jewish Holocaust. See Dona Marimba Richards, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora* (Trenton: Red Sea Press, 1994).

[14] David B. Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World 1882* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Our understanding of sexual trafficking in contemporary contexts can illuminate instances of sexual trafficking in the ancient sacred text and context. Brown and Black girls in contemporary contexts are disproportionately vulnerable to and targeted by traffickers. Similarly, in the book of Esther, the narrator reveals that the virgin girls who are abducted and brought to the king's harem in chapter 2 are transported from provinces which span from India to Ethiopia (1:1). On that account, the girls in the narrative world are taken from provinces that, in our contemporary contexts, are inhabited predominantly by brown and Black minorities. It is therefore necessary to assess and examine the physical, economic, legal, and religious conditions and traditions that enable and sustain economies of sexual trafficking. The research undergirds claims that African diasporic and other minoritized females are and have historically been intergenerationally and culturally victimized and traumatized by these exploitative trafficking systems.

Intersections between Sexual Trafficking and Slavery

Intersections between sexual trafficking and slavery necessitate my theoretical focus on Africana identity in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade. Sexual trafficking is recognized as a practice of modern-day slavery because it creates a slave class whereby victims are abducted and/or coerced and subjected to violence and shame, just as labor slaves were likewise treated during the transatlantic trade. Many victims of sexual trafficking are transplanted into new and often foreign locales as strangers; this is similar to the way enslaved African persons were transported to and trapped in new locales along the trade route during the transatlantic slave trade. Historical and cultural sociologist Orlando Patterson defines slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons."[15] This definition includes persons who are alienated due to, and for the

[15] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 13.

purposes of, sexual trafficking. In fact, the United States Congress has recognized that slavery and sexual trafficking are comparable and thus created a Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, which recognizes the links between sexual trafficking and slavery. Both victims of enslavement and victims of sexual trafficking experience abduction, transportation to a strange country, and the erasure of identity, language, customs, and culture and well as prolonged exposure to sexualized violence and traumatization with no means to defend themselves.

Slavery, sexual trafficking, and exploitation of the vulnerable, poor, and marginal have been deeply rooted and, sadly, stable enterprises throughout human existence and history. From ancient to contemporary times, sacred texts and other historical narratives and artifacts, written and oral, reflect practices of slavery and exploitation of the vulnerable. Esther attests to practices of enslavement in the ancient context when she says to the king, "For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace" (7:4–5a). This statement reflects the normalization, acceptance, and even preference of enslavement over death in the biblical text.

Cultural practices of enslavement endured and persisted into the nineteenth century CE and beyond. Many argue that instances of human trafficking, including sexual trafficking and the New Jim Crow (also known as mass incarceration) constitute modern forms of slavery.[16] Patterson draws further parallels between experiences of persons enslaved during

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[16] See e.g. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2011); Orlando Patterson, "Trafficking, Gender and Slavery: Past and Present," in *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*, ed. Jean Allian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 322–359; Kara Siddharth, *Sex Trafficking: Insider the Business of Modern Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Stevie J. Swanson, "Slavery Then and Now: The Trans- Atlantic Slave Trade and Modern-Day Human Trafficking: What Can We Learn from Our Past?" *Florida A & M University Law Review* 11, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 127–158; Orlando Patterson and Xiaolin Zhuo, "Modern Trafficking, Slavery and Other Forms of Servitude," *Annual Review*

the Maafa and victims of trafficking, noting experiences of homelessness, isolation, and disconnection from their new living spaces. Both victims of slavery and trafficking are abducted, dislocated, and forced into sexual exploitation industries. Davis's statement captures the dehumanization that both victims of labor slavery and sex slavery experience: "This absence of a past and a future, of a place in history and society from which to grow in small increments, made each slave totally vulnerable. This may be the very essence of dehumanization."[17] Patterson adds that African slaves were the ideal tools for traffickers due to experiences of alienation, detachment, and deracination.[18]

Other Contributors to Sexual Trafficking

Social conflict, displacement, little if any legal ramifications for sexual exploitation, globalization, both forced and non-forced migration, domestication, patriarchal culture, and racist stereotypes exacerbate the problem of sexual trafficking and increases victims' vulnerability to it. Writing about human trafficking, the broader umbrella term that sexual trafficking falls under, political scientists Natividad Gutiérrez Chong and Jenny Bryson Clark note that, in the last twenty years, human trafficking has become a global problem, growing exponentially to unforeseen proportions and affecting every country in the world, regardless of socioeconomic status, history, or political structure. Further, because of globalization, many countries have become a source, transit point, and destination for victims of trafficking.[19]

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of Sociology 44 (2018): 407–439; Julia O'Connell Davidson, *Modern Slavery: The Margins of Freedom* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015).

[17] Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 37.

[18] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death,* 7. For more about the deracination of enslaved Africans, see Love Henry Whelchel, *Hell Without Fire: Conversion in Slave Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002); Love Henry Whelchel, *The Genius of the Black Preacher* (Atlanta: L. H. Whelchel, 2009).

[19] Natividad Guitiérrez Chong and Jenny Bryson Clark, "Introduction: Trafficking in Persons," in "Trafficking in Persons," ed. Natividad Guitiérrez Chong and Jenny Bryson Clark, special issue, *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 35, no. 2 (2014): 124,

Chong and Clark broaden our understanding of the role of globalization in this complex trafficking phenomenon:

> Globalization, with its accelerating flow of products, and people within an expanding world economy have been a huge impetus for human trafficking. The economic and demographic disparities between the developing and developed nations caused by globalization, free trade, greater economic competition, and a decline of state intervention in the economy have all contributed to the marginalization and impoverishment of countless numbers of peoples. Structural adjustment and austerity programs imposed on many nations have compounded the problem with people plummeting further from relative poverty to absolute poverty. Structural poverty has resulted in increased movements across borders and increased internal migration from rural areas to urban centers. In response to increased migration, governments have imposed stricter immigration policies leaving many migrants vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers.[20]

Although current understandings and manifestations of globalization are not congruent with representations of globalism in the book of Esther, empires in antiquity functioned as mini globalizations, which involved political, economic, and cultural dimensions that had enduring effects on civilizations and surrounding cultures. Empires are contributors to waves of globalism as they create social institutions and engage in networks of trade. This is evidenced in the book of Esther; the king (who is located in Susa, the empire's center) politically, economically, and culturally integrates provinces throughout his Persian empire that spans from Africa to India. The setting reflects unequal power among his colonized provinces, which enables him to capture female virgin girls under his rule. In addition, empires participate in the transformation and globalization of knowledge into various areas through local technologies and traditions, i.e. decrees and edicts. Imperial commands disperse ideologies and understandings when they are circulated and appropriated by ancient communities. This is why the king utilizes edicts as a strategy to capture the girls for his sexual pleasure. By legalizing his action, he promotes the understanding of ethnic, colonized

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2014.886168.

[20] Chong and Clark, 24–25.

virgin girls as sexually exploitable and disperses that knowledge to all the people throughout his provinces.

In addition, patriarchal culture prevents victims of sexual trafficking from defending themselves; this, in turn, makes them more susceptible to sexual exploitation. Chong cites domesticity and traditional culture as contributing factors to indigenous females becoming victims of sexual exploitation because of expectations of obedience, submission, silence, complicity, social alienation, and lack of resistance – all duties that are expected of females in traditional patriarchal cultures. Also included in these expectations are that girls and women refrain from seeking help or refuge from the brutality of men in both domestic and sex trafficking environments. Last, justice is a privilege afforded primarily to men in patriarchal cultures, thus the well-being and interest of males are preserved. These cultures often prevent and stifle any efforts of females to denounce their experiences of trafficking.[21]

Similarly, migration contributes to and helps sex trafficking thrive. Whether voluntarily or involuntarily, migration is central to many victims' experiences of sexual trafficking. Many victims voluntarily migrate to look for new opportunities, while others are unwillingly dislocated. Important to note, migration results from conditions similar to sexual trafficking, such as poverty, discrimination, family breakdown, and opportunities for mobility. These conditions contribute to victims' increased vulnerability to and lack of protection from sexual trafficking. What ties these contributing factors together is the global colonial culture, which affords men the power and authority to define gender norms and boundaries, the power to force movement and migrations, and the authority to transgress bodily boundaries of females without penalty.

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[21] Natividad Guitiérrez Chong, "Human Trafficking and Sex Industry: Does Ethnicity and Race Matter?" in "Trafficking in Persons," ed. Natividad Guitiérrez Chong and Jenny Bryson Clark, special issue, *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 35, no. 2 (2014): 208.

Role of Diaspora and Exile in the Book of Esther and Contemporary Manifestations of Sexual Trafficking

Many commentators consider the book of Esther to be diaspora literature because of the traditional view that it is written by authors living outside of their native land who are reflecting on how to live and survive away from home.[22] The term "diaspora" has a Greek etymological origin from the word, *diasporá*, meaning "a dispersion or scattering." Martien Halvorson-Taylor distinguishes exile and diaspora writing:

> The difference between exile and diaspora may lie in a book's attitude toward the homeland and toward the migration. Exile emphasizes the forced nature of the migration and the freshness of the experience of leaving the homeland; exile is not neutral and exiled peoples usually possess a single-minded desire to return to their homeland. Time is also a factor: exilic literature may be written during the Babylonian exile of the sixth century B.C.E., when the experience and memory of it was still vivid.
>
> In contrast, living "in diaspora" may assume a certain accommodation to living away from the homeland—and a sense that it is possible to survive and even thrive in the adopted country. Diaspora implies a more neutral or even a more positive view than exile does. Diasporic literature may be mindful of the ancestral native land, but the nostalgia for it has lessened, if not disappeared. And diasporic literature is, moreover, engaged by the possibilities of the new location. Finally, it may be written well after the Babylonian exile by Jews who chose not to return. Diasporic living stops short of assimilation because the community still maintains its distinctive identity and its status as a minority people.[23]

While I identify Africana girls and women in the book of Esther as diasporized, it is important to highlight that they too are exiled by experiences of forceful capture and transportation from their homelands. In addition, because of the biblical narrator's failure to

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[22] Esther as diaspora literature is a more traditional view upheld by many scholars. Elsie Stern challenges this view, suggesting that the book may have been written in Yehud to critique diaspora Jews. Stern argues this position on the following bases: The majority of the text is written in Hebrew with the exception of a few Persian words, whereas most diasporan texts are bilingual; Esther would be the only post-exilic text included in the Hebrew canon; and there are stylistic and narrative differences between the Masoretic and Greek versions of the text. See Elsie R. Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, no.1 (Winter 2010): 25–53.

[23] Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor, "Diaspora Literature," Bible Odyssey, accessed May 4, 2019, https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/people/related-articles/diaspora-literature.

narrate their wills, there is a gap in the literature about their attitudes towards their homelands or their experiences of forced exile and migration. Historically, Africana girls and women have been subjected to displacement and foreign domination, which constitutes both exilic and diasporic identities.

In modern society, persons of the same ethnic background and who share similar cultural traditions as the virgin girls in the book of Esther are often ideologically framed as dangerous or a threat; consequently, many are marginalized, minoritized, alienated, and forcefully dispersed into hostile living environments away from their homelands. This analogizes well with the girls described in the ancient context. Exile and diaspora, therefore, play a part and assist in the processes of sexual trafficking, as dislocation contributes to increased poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, and increased vulnerability of those dislocated. Diaspora literature reflects practices and cultures that produce and sustain sexual trafficking, such as physical separation, cultural genocide, mass persecution and violence, and sexual exploitation. Because of the identification of overt and covert commonalities experienced by those exiled, diaspora literature is a good construct to summarize, investigate, and interpret the intersecting oppressions of African diasporized girls and women in relation to sexual trafficking. Diaspora literature further exposes ideologies and experiences that contemporary readers tend to understand as limited to ancient contexts, and it aids in our ability to identify the prevalence and problem of these experiences in current contexts.

Leslie James, professor of religious studies and director of the Black Studies Program at DePauw, writes,

> The forced migration, or dispersion, of millions of Africans into the crucible of the modern Atlantic plantation economy as cheap labor is pivotal for understanding Africana biblical interpretation. … The Bible, a central text of Western civilization, engaged in a process, played a central, though contested role, in structuring the unequal relations between master and slave in the Americas."[24]

[24] Leslie James, "The African Diaspora as Construct and Lived Experience," in *The Africana*

Moreover, the same sacred text became a source for comfort and resistance while Africana peoples envisioned and worked to embody an alternative, liberative future. As such, James maintains Africana biblical hermeneutics is a dialectical relationship with the struggle to ascend slavery.[25]

Moreover, diaspora is often characterized by forced dispersion of Africans from their homeland and experiences of exile, slavery, disjunction, loss, alienation, and social death.[26] Sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines diaspora as identities that are "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference."[27] James theorizes that the experiences of diaspora function in the following way:

> Diaspora knowledge, or consciousness, is the African Diasporic power to revise the First Testament; to remap, to re-narrate the environment and the world-as-we-know-it. It is the power to enter into a genuine dialogue of conversation with the texts, with slavery, exile, terror, tempests, hurricanes and storms (Ivan and Katrina), identity, contestation, plurality, complexity, diversity and globalization; to re-cast those texts, or discover within those texts, some more than others, the power to confront reality in the process of self-representation.[28]

One aim of my research is to have dialogue with the text and simultaneously create dialogue with not only biblical scholars but with persons across disciplines, and within the academy and beyond, about Africana experiences of exile, diaspora, sexual terror, colonial subjugation, the contestation of Africana identity, and other acts of violence perpetrated against Africana peoples. In doing so, I am embodying and exercising the power to resist the stereotypes and ideologies that have been used to justify the abuse of this cultural group. I am re-mapping and re-narrating the environment from a suppressed yet contextual, candid, creative, passionate, particular, and powerful position that opens the world to the realities, struggles, and strivings

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Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora, ed. Hugh R. Page, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 11.

[25] James, 11.

[26] James, 12–15.

[27] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference,* ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 235.

[28] James, "African Diaspora," 17.

of a resilient and culturally persistent collective. After all, context shapes not only what we read but how we read.

Dance between Culture and Religion

The dance between religion and culture [29] is underscored in Hugh Page's opening statement in the preface of the Africana Bible. Page writes, "culture and life circumstances affect the way people read sacred literature."[30] In other words, both the text and the context of the reader shape identity, values, culture, memories, and histories. Religion and sacred texts impact culture and interpretation of those texts; at the same time, culture similarly shapes sacred texts and textual hermeneutics. Vincent Wimbush summarizes the interrelatedness and mutual impact of culture and biblical interpretation in this way: "Sacred texts are as much determined by society and culture as society and culture are determined by (among other things, to be sure), sacred texts."[31]

We order much of our lives around sacred texts and traditions that infiltrate all aspects of culture and life. Similarly, ideologies and laws produced by culture shape and govern our practices, livelihood, and social and religious identities. Attention to elements and productions of culture, cultural differences, cultural impacts, and cultural imperialism aids in our ability to understand hermeneutical differences, divisions, conflicts, abuses, and

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[29] Clifford Geertz defines culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied by symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which (persons) communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life." Understanding religion as a cultural system, Geertz further argues that "sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral an aesthetic style and mood—and their worldview—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order." See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 89.

[30] Hugh R. Page Jr, "The Africana Bible—A Rationale," in Page, *Africana Bible*, xxv.

[31] Vincent Wimbush, "Interrupting the Spin: What Might Happen If African Americans Were to Become the Starting Point for the Academic Study of the Bible," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 52, nos. 1–2 (1998): 71.

oppressions in religious contexts, and vice versa. Consideration of these matters also aid in our ability to understand and navigate social, religious, and cultural diversity. Culture and religion impact social attitudes, advocacy, and action. The fusion of these two phenomena has the potential to illuminate the traumatic impact of a specific cultural phenomenon—sexual trafficking—on cultural collectives. Attention to the connections between religion, culture, and sexual trafficking schemas can reveal the layered and simultaneous impact of each of these phenomena on individual and collective identity.

Interrupting the Spin

Religion and cultural studies scholar Vincent Wimbush posits, that when we foreground African Americans in the academic study of the Bible, and I would broaden this to include African diasporic subjects outside of America as well, we have a radically different orientation in the discourse.[32] According to Wimbush, this type of foregrounding "forces readers to come to terms with and see the full complexity of American history and the full range and complexity of human emotions, foibles, risings, and fallings through the experiences of African Americans."[33] It also necessitates and allows for a "*different site of interpretation and enunciation*, with the necessary correlative *different presuppositions, orientations, and agenda*."[34]

Wimbush avers that biblical scholarship has a legacy of Western cultural domestication and containment, which he identifies as the "Europeanization of the Bible that the separation of the past from the present has fostered and made evident."[35] He writes, "This past that is deemed so different from modern times is nevertheless to be held recoverable, accessible, responsibly translatable," but he critiques preferred "traditional" interpretations,

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[32] Wimbush, 61.
[33] Wimbush, 62.
[34] Wimbush, 64 (italics original).
[35] Wimbush, 64.

noting they are offered "only through certain appropriate interpretative methods, strategies, and approaches ('exegesis'), only understood by an elite core of shaman-like figures." In other words, Wimbush argues, there is a "tendency to think that the Bible was written for, speaks to and can be appropriately and authoritatively interpreted only by Europeans, that the ancient cultural streams that it represents flow directly into European settings." This propensity ultimately leads to what Wimbush deems as the "fetishization of a certain class-specific cultural text interpretative practice."[36]

Wimbush argues that the connection of the past to the present can be made through a radically different orientation. He notes that the dominant hermeneutical orientation is one that cultivates silence and containment, thereby limiting biblical engagement. He advocates for "an interruption—of the silence and of the grand hermeneutical spin that the silence facilitates."[37] This interruption, or spin, centers and represents African American experience in academic biblical studies, thus materializing a more consistent, intense, and critical focus on the modern world and the present; a more consistent, intense, and critical focus on social-cultural formation and sacred texts; and a more consistent, intense, and critical focus on the Bible as manifesto for marginal existence.[38] This spin also helps to focus on the many social tears in the fabric of Africana life and identity, including slavery, sexual exploitation, the loss of land, and the loss of cultural memory. It enables us to see how, through survival, African diasporic peoples persisted and adapted by assembling "cultural pieces from shattered social-cultural experiences, from rupture and disconnection,"[39] thus forging an identity for themselves.

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[36] Wimbush, 65.
[37] Wimbush, 67.
[38] Wimbush, 67–75.
[39] Wimbush, 68.

Foregrounding and framing cultural stories allows cultural collectives to represent their trauma while bridging the past with the present, and to do so from their "own site, apart from the demands, the gaze and authority of whites."[40] It enables them to shift back and forth between the past and the present, making connections between texts and contexts and identifying analogous ideologies, rhetoric, stereotypes, and practices that are mirrored in both societies and cultures. Wimbush argues that this process illuminates how "African Americans represent a rather fascinating window into the psychosocial ramifications, power dynamics, including infra politics involved in a social formation in general and biblical-social formation in particular."[41] By engaging in this type of scholarship, Wimbush maintains we are studying "the complexity of social dynamics as social textu(r)alization," that is, how society and culture are inspired by the sacred text that has been inspired by a society and culture that has been textualized.[42]

Intersectionality and Polyvocality: An Interruption to the Spin

I argue that another critical spin that must be employed in biblical hermeneutics is the application of intersectionality and polyvocality. Kimberlé Crenshaw, professor of law and leading scholar in the areas of Black feminist legal theory, critical race theory, and civil rights describes intersectionality as a framework that asserts and describes how indicators of difference including gender, ethnicity/race, class, and other markers of identity overlap and intersect with one another. Utilizing a legal framework, Crenshaw demonstrates that Black women's experiences were often consolidated with White women's experiences on the basis of gender and Black men's experiences on the basis on race. She notes that, in race discrimination cases, the focus was often on sex- or class-privileged Blacks, while in sex

[40] Wimbush, 73.
[41] Wimbush, 74.
[42] Wimbush, 75.

discrimination cases, the focus was often on race- and class-privileged women. Crenshaw argues that placing the focus of these discrimination cases on the most privileged group members marginalized Black women who were multiply burdened (by virtue of their race, gender, and class) and obscured their claims of discrimination. Furthermore, Crenshaw maintains that this type of focus created a "distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon."[43] The experiences of White women and Black men do not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender within the experiences of Black women. Thus, Crenshaw argues that, "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."[44] This framework provides an alternative strategy of interpretation that allows especially Africana women to consider their social locatedness, understand their identities, consider the interconnectedness of racism, sexism, patriarchy, and colonialism, and organize against routine violence perpetuated against them.

Sociologists Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge expand this understanding:

> Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influences ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender, or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.[45]

Crenshaw, Collins, and Bilge maintain that we cannot and should not elevate one category of social status above any other. Doing so promotes a single-lens focus on assessments of social

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[43] Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection,"140.
[44] Crenshaw, 140.
[45] Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 2.

inequalities. Moreover, social differences are not mutually exclusive but build upon and interact with each other. A major contribution of intersectionality to my project is that it underscores how power is arranged and organized in the book of Esther and in contemporary societies. It elucidates that categories of difference are defined and enforced by hegemonic, kyriarchal, and patriarchal males in ancient and contemporary societies. Further, these categories of difference gain meaning from power relations at the convergence of sexism, racism, and class exploitation. In addition, this assessment exposes that those who organize power relations determine rules, laws, and boundaries as well as to whom these guidelines apply.

Girls and women are disproportionately victims of violence because of continuing practices of discrimination and unjust and prejudicial treatment based on ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, age, and other markers of difference. Moreover, experiences of sexualized violence, namely sexual trafficking, are a by-product of intersectional oppression. The analysis of ethnicity/race of the virgin girls in the book of Esther is underexplored, although attention to ethnicity/race delineates different patterns of social hierarchy. By privileging only gender in our analysis, as many commentators do, we fail to locate victims' intersectional identities and social locations. Gender alone is not at work. Rather, there is an interplay between gender and ethnicity/race, poverty, and colonialism/inferiorism, which heightens victims' vulnerability to sexual trafficking. Africana girls and women experience heightened exploitation due to their layered socio-economic situations and identities. It is therefore imperative to consider the ways that marginalized racialized groups experience intersectional forms of discrimination, oppression, and violence. This hermeneutic underscores that intersectional forms of oppression are systematic, multidimensional, and linked to practices of power and the struggles for power. Further, this type of analysis elucidates that institutionalized power structures are responsible for constructing gender norms and practices

and delineating boundaries for gendered subjects, both of which create opportunities for abuses of power through sexual trafficking.

Polyvocality is a literary device that is characterized by multiple and varied voices and/or perspectives.[46] Similar to intersectionality, polyvocality deepens, expands, and problematizes a single-axis gender analysis. It welcomes reflection on both the multiple spaces summoned and controlled in the narrative and the multiple layers of subjugated, suppressed, and often silenced identity within each individual and within the female collective. Not only must we engage the voices and experiences of the muted, frequently overlooked, and ignored characters within the book of Esther, but by drawing on polyvocality, we can create the space to facilitate conversations with other biblical scholars that either miss or ignore critical elements, cues, and references in the text that identify intersectional oppressions. This literary device allows interpreters to reconsider the framing of the virgin girls' experiences as a beauty pageant and identify it as sexual trafficking. The victims do not exercise volition; they are brought across national boundaries by colonial powers; they are sexually exploited and traumatized; and they remain in unfamiliar locales wherein new, hybrid identities must be forged in order for them to survive.

Furthermore, attention to textual euphemisms, ideologies embedded within the text, and interpreters' ignorance/biases helps readers and interpreters understand what facilitates and enables sexual trafficking to succeed. The failure of readers to identify and/or perceive recruitment, transportation, and harboring of subjects in the biblical text as characteristics of sexual trafficking prevents them from expressing outrage and taking action. Research and advocacy efforts must apply an intersectional framework to evaluate the multiple, complex

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[46] *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, comp. Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, Oxford Reference Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), s.v. "Polyvocality," https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780198841838.001.0001/acref-9780198841838-e-2079?rskey=1dh96K&result=2483.

intersecting systems of oppression, ideologies, and inequities that justify and sustain sexual trafficking.

Collective Trauma as a Hermeneutical Lens for Biblical Studies

Many biblical scholars regard the concept of trauma as a valuable hermeneutical lens, as they recognize that much of the biblical literature reflects social, cultural, and religious collective identity shaped by repeated traumatic encounters and experiences. The term trauma comes from the Greek word for "wound" and refers to physical and emotional wounds.[47] Trauma is defined in various ways; the term is used across disciplines, including psychology, sociology, literary studies, and anthropology, and is expanding into biblical studies. The neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, defined trauma as "any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield" of a living vessel.[48] Defining features of trauma are that it destroys, destabilizes, and often leads to dissociation in both individuals and collectives. Focusing heavily on multiple experiences of exile, especially the Babylonian exile and its effects on the Judean collective, many biblical scholars understand much of the biblical literature as trauma and survival literature produced by the exiled community.[49] David Garber Jr. writes, "The impact of trauma is a significant

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[47] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "trauma (*n*.)," accessed December 27, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trauma.

[48] Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 18:29.

[49] For example, see David Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); David Carr, "Reading into the Gap: Refractions of Trauma in Israelite Prophecy," in *Interpreting Exile: Displacement and Deportation in Biblical and Modern Contexts,* ed. Brad E. Kelle, Frank Ames, and Jacob Wright (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 309–332; David G. Garber, Jr., "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies," *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 1 (2015): 24–44; Samuel Balentine, "Traumatizing Job," *Review and Expositor* 105, no. 5 (Spring 2008): 213–228; David Jansen, *Trauma and the Failure of History: Kings, Lamentations, and the Destruction of Jerusalem* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019); Eve Marie Becker, Jan Dochhorn, and Elsie Holt, eds, *Trauma and Traumatization in Individual and Collective Dimensions: Insights from Biblical Studies and Beyond* vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); Danna Nolan Fewell, "The Work of Biblical

component of the human condition that lies beneath the production of a wide variety of biblical texts."[50]

Theories of collective trauma build upon the concept of psychological trauma. Practitioners of psychology, psychiatry, and sociology began noting social components of trauma, thereby expanding theories of psychological trauma which centered on individual experiences to focus on collectives. By collective, I mean a group of people who share an interconnectedness through axes of differences and/or experiences that bring them together and that are central to their shared identity. Collective trauma is thus a consequence of catastrophic events shared by groups of persons such as families, social units, ethnic groups, communities, societies, countries, and nations. The catastrophic events can be naturally occurring events such as natural disasters or human-initiated events such as displacement, torture, military violence, terrorism, genocide, rape, and ethnic cleansing. These events lead to immense disruptions to the group's consciousness, sense of cohesiveness, and safety.

Sociologist Kai Erikson defines collective trauma and outlines its traumatic impact on collectives in the following way:

> By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with the "trauma." But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. … "I" continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently damaged. "You" continue to

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Narrative," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative,* ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3–26; Philip B. Hesel, "Shared Pleasure to Soothe the Broken Spirit: Collective Trauma and Qoheleth," in *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma,* ed. Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016,) 85–103; William Morrow, "Deuteronomy 7 in Postcolonial Perspective: Cultural Fragmentation and Renewal," in Kelle, Ames, and Wright, *Interpreting Exile*, 275–293.

[50] David G. Garber, Jr., "Trauma Theory and Biblical Studies," *Currents in Biblical Research* 14, no. 1 (2015): 24.

> exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But "we" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body.[51]

Erikson argues that traumatized communities bear similar effects but are distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons. In other words, collectives are not merely made up of individually traumatized persons, but the collective itself experiences communal trauma and traumatic effects. Erikson adds, "sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body."[52]

According to this definition, collectives frequently experience alienation and isolation, which result in diverse reactions among the collective. Some members of the collective are unified through shared experiences of catastrophe, while others experience division within and external to the collective. Collective trauma may also lead to disruptions of socio-cultural structures and discontinuities in both individual and collective identity and memory. Erikson continues that the community thus serves as

> the locus for activities that are normally thought to be property of individual persons. It is the community that offers a cushion for the pain, the community that offers context for intimacy, the community that serves as the repository for binding traditions. And when the community is profoundly affected one can speak of a damaged social organism in almost the same way one can speak of a damaged body.[53]

Erikson thus concludes that trauma can be experienced both individually and collectively and often simultaneously.

Ibrahim Kira, who is a traumatologist and director of Atlanta's Center for Cumulative Trauma Studies, adds that experiences of collective trauma can threaten or shatter a groups autonomy, leading to what he defines as "identity trauma."[54] He outlines two ways that

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[51] Kai Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976), 154 (italics original).
[52] Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 185.
[53] Erikson, 188.
[54] Ibrahim Kira, "Taxonomy of Trauma and Trauma Assessment," *Traumatology* 7, no. 2 (June 2001): 76.

trauma can be transmitted across generations: The first, generational family transmission of trauma, occurs when traumatic practices, such as physical and sexual abuse, and their effects are transmitted within a family system across generations.[55] The second, collective cross-generational transmission of trauma, manifests in two kinds of collective trauma: historical trauma and structural trauma. Historical trauma is "a more a collective complex trauma as it is inflicted on a group of people that have specific group identity or affiliation to ethnicity, color, national origin, or religion," such as the slavery of Black Americans, the Armenian genocide in Turkey, the Jewish Holocaust, and American Indian experiences of genocide.[56] Structural trauma is "multigenerational transmission of structural violence that constitutes extreme social disparities." Poverty, inadequate shelter, inadequate medical care, unemployment, underemployment, and temporary employment are examples of structural traumas that Kira claims are created through deprivation to certain classes within social structures.[57] For Africana females, experiences of sexual trafficking are structural, collective, cultural, historical, and intergenerational traumas.

Structural, cultural, historical, and intergenerational traumas illuminate the impact that suffering has on collective identity and memory. These frameworks stress markers of trauma on communities; the communities' subsequent sense of danger, safety, mobility; and other posttraumatic reactions. Collective memories and histories, or stories that are produced as a result of trauma, give voice to the sufferings and pains of communities and societies. Often, the impact of trauma, suffering, and pain renders experiences unutterable. However, through collective history and memory, those silences that result from various forms of trauma become amplified.

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[55] Kira, 79.
[56] Kira, 80.
[57] Kira, 81.

Structural, collective, cultural, historical, and intergenerational traumas also magnify and sensitize readers and interpreters to systemic dimensions of intersectional oppression, thereby enabling them to see interconnectedness between historical events and literary representations. These theories aid in the ability to perceive trauma's impact on the past, present, and future and the mechanisms that facilitate the group's recovery, resistance, and resilience.

Using these lenses to assess and engage the book of Esther alongside other stories enables readers to understand trauma within a theological framework and to assess spiritual and theological implications of multiple types of violence, including sexual abuse. Trauma theory opens pathways that allow us to ask additional questions of the text, to shift focuses in our interpretations, and to transform the discourse around sexual violence and its social, physical, psychological, and theological impact on identity. It creates opportunities to explore the role and function of texts that bear witness to trauma and how communities construct narrative spaces for fostering survival. Collective trauma theory also orients our attention to relationships between the collectives who endure trauma and perpetuators of collective trauma, insidious power dynamics, cycles of violence and aggression, and various forms of marginalization.

Collective Trauma Theory Expanded: Sexual Trafficking of Africana Girls and Women as Cultural Trauma

Sociologist Ron Eyerman argues that African American identity should be explored through the theory of cultural trauma.[58] Echoing Eyerman, cultural sociologist Jeffery Alexander contends that cultural trauma is a collective trauma that occurs when "members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks

[58] Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."[59] Similar to Kira, Alexander notes that religion, race, ethnicity, nation, gender, and class are markers of group identities that can be mediums for inflicting social pain, as with the Africana cultural collective that I identify and assess in this dissertation.[60] The collective trauma that Alexander and Eyerman focus on is that of the enslavement of African peoples. Captured and dislocated, African people endured multiple traumas before, during, and after displacement and enslavement. Eyerman argues that slavery is not an institution or an experience but a collective memory—a remembrance grounded in the identity-formation of a people. As a cultural process, the trauma of enslavement is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory for African people.[61]

Alexander proposes that, for traumas to emerge at the level of collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises, which result in acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity.[62] Africana identity emerged in contexts marked by colonialism, capture, displacement, sexual exploitation, genocide, ethnic suppression, and the need for cultural persistence in such horrific and hostile environments. They experienced displacement and rupture from their native homelands among other physical, sexual, and spiritual abuses and traumatization. There are gaps in their histories, memories, and genealogical records as the result of this rupture and erasure of contact with ancestors, ancestral narratives, memories, and identities. Slavery, displacement, genocide, and sexual exploitation constitute cultural crises that not only resulted in acute discomfort but in cultural

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[59] Jeffery Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 6.
[60] Alexander, 1.
[61] Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*, 1.
[62] Alexander, *Trauma*, 15.

fragmentation, identity dislocation, social disintegration, religious and ideological decentralization, and enduring trepidation.

Psychologists Thema Bryant-Davis, Sarah Ullman, Yuying Tsong, Shaquita Tillman, and Kimberly Smith describe the socio-historical context of sexual assault of African American women, noting the connection between sexual assault and slavery and the impact of both on African diasporic females:

> The sociohistorical context of sexual assault is qualitatively different for African American women as compared to women from other ethnic backgrounds. The United States' legacy of slavery and the unabated commodification of African bodies that ensued have invariably influenced the experience of violence perpetuated by African American women. During the slave era, sexual assault and sexual exploitation were utilized as a means to dominate and oppress enslaved African females; the sexual victimization of African women was legal and deemed justified by their status as property belonging to the plantation owner. Post slavery until about the late 1950s African American women working outside the home as maids and washerwomen were routinely victims of sexual assault and harassment committed by the men in families for which they worked. Although legalized slave labor and the resulting sexual violation of women of African descent has ceased, evidence of its impact still remains today in the form of transgenerational trauma.[63]

These historical accounts illuminate that African diasporic females are increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and other intersecting oppressions due to the convergence of colonialism, racism, sexism, poverty, gender hierarchies, increased stress, little or no education, limited resources, unemployment, forced displacement from homes and homelands, other non-forced migrations, and additional types of gender-based violence.

According to Alexander, cultural traumas are conceived as wounds to social identity, wherein collective actors represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go.[64] Eyerman adds that "cultural traumas are public articulations of collective pain and suffering that requires representation

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[63] Thema Bryant-Davis et al., "Struggling to Survive: Sexual Assault, Poverty, and Mental Health Outcomes of African American Women," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 80, no. 1 (2010): 62.
[64] Alexander, *Trauma*, 15.

through word, sound, and image as well as interested parties to construct and communicate them. These take form as narratives that create and cultivate a unified experience for disparate individuals." He continues, "A cultural trauma is a publicly articulated response to a tear in the social fabric, when the foundations of an established collective identity are shaken and in need of a revised narrative." [65] Stated differently, the collective tries to define and impose meaning on their experiences of trauma through narratives. Eyerman further clarifies that cultural traumas are not "things," but processes of meaning making and attribution, contentious contests in which individuals and groups struggle to define, manage, and control situations. He proposes two important components of cultural trauma: emotional experience, precipitated by what he calls "shocks" that break everyday routines, and an interpretative action. [66] The emotional experience demands interpretation, making room for collectives to make sense out of their experiences while bearing witness to their trauma. The cultural trauma of sexual trafficking among minority and minoritized females, as represented in cultural and religious narratives, are the focus of my dissertation. My goal is to contribute to the interpretative process by bringing to readers' awareness manifestations of sexual trafficking of Africana females both in the sacred text and in contemporary contexts and to illustrate how these experiences shape and contest Africana identity.

Non-sacred and sacred narratives are expressions of culture and cultural groups. They are myths that reflect consciousness, explain worldviews, and recount and describe emotional experiences and understandings of those experiences. These myths define, sustain, and retain identity, and contain histories. As Eyerman and Alexander suggest, narratives are formative for cultural identity as they express causality of events and can illuminate continuity of events and people who survive traumatic events, all of which contribute to defining, maintaining,

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[65] Ron Eyerman, *Is This America? Katrina as Cultural Trauma* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 8.
[66] Eyerman, *Is This America,* 9.

and shaping cultural identity. The function of these types of narratives is to give expression to the past, or to the cultural collective's memories, and how their perceptions of those events and memories shape their realities and identities.

The socio-political structure of the United States was heavily influenced by its "founding" fathers' understandings of their religious identity as a "Christian" nation. This structure has been sustained by ideologies of racial superiority and gender stratification, together with the enactment of genocide, enslavement, cultural disenfranchisement, sexual abuse, and exploitation. This structure has produced institutional racism, sexism, classism, and an inequitable social stratum by which many victims of trafficking are disenfranchised and traumatized. Sexual trafficking, similar to and compounded by slavery, are experiences that have affected and continue to impact the emerging cultural collective identity of African diasporic females. This collective identity is intricately connected to and impacted by collective memories and histories of endemic sexual assaults against African diasporic females.

Social Categorization, Boundaries, and Stereotypes as Contributors to Collective and Intersectional Oppression

Expanding the work and postulations of social anthropologist Fredrik Barth, Old Testament scholar Linda Stargel asserts social categorization is a necessary component of collective identity, as it allows collectives to form and maintain boundaries or boundary markers by grouping together similar people, objects, and events. In doing so, groups are able to represent "us" and "them" so as to distinguish between group members and non-group members. Categories that help to define identity and mark boundaries include race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexuality, and (non-)citizenship status, all of which can make persons more or

less vulnerable to systemic violence, exploitation, and oppression.[67] This process of categorization and representation of the "Other" also leads to the hypervisibility of victims and the creation and projection of stereotypes by one group onto another in order to justify their actions as they blur the identities of the other group.

Barth deduces that identity exists in the midst of social interactions due to the creation and sustainment of boundaries which are situational at times, thus fluid.[68] Similarly, sociologist Richard Jenkins adds that, when a group identifies itself and others through categorization and boundary-making, it is a matter of meaning that always involves interaction. There is always "us" and "them," "minority" and "majority," and "female" and "male"; and the inevitable interactions between both sides of these binaries must be given meaning. Jenkins suggests that both individual and collective identity can be understood as a dialectical interplay of processes of external ascription and internal self-definition.[69] As such, no one group exploits absolute power; rather, the processes of categorization and group definition afford agency to even disenfranchised and abused groups to create, define, and sustain their collective identity.

We see this boundary demarcation happening in multiple ways in both the literary and historical contexts that I examine. In both contexts, colonial forces and their provinces are marked, perpetrators and victims of trafficking are distinguished, and geographical boundaries are marked and crossed. Genealogical data and narrative clues distinguish the Jewish collective from Persians and Amalekites in the book of Esther, while social stratification in contemporary contexts categorize persons based on factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, and power—a process that has historically positioned whites/other

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[67] Linda Stargel, *The Construction of Exodus Identity in Ancient Israel: A Social Identity Approach* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2018), 3–6.
[68] Frederik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1969).
[69] Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2008), 23.

colonial subjects at the top of the stratum and Africana and other minoritized persons at the bottom.

Stargel argues that categorization is moderated by the use of stereotyping, which emphasizes similarities between units of a particular category—people, events, concepts, etc.—while minimizing difference.[70] These differences can be real or imagined, not shared by all, most, or any of the collective. Stereotypes are often shared to reflect one's group's perception of the other group. For example, in the book of Esther, Haman's statement in 3:8 is an example of stereotyping as he describes the Jewish collective: "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them." Not only are there no textual clues to support his claim, but the stereotype he casts results in imminent threat to the "certain people's" safety and livelihood as he petitions and pays the king to issue a decree for their destruction (3:9), which is then granted (3:10).

The use of "certain" in this case is used to identify the Jewish collective as an ethnic Other. Chong notes that the dominant discourse refers to ethnicity as belonging to an inferior culture because the reproduction of features of identity, such as indigenous languages, native origin, rural origin, ethnic ancestry, and the safeguarding of native cultures are often regarded as markers of underdevelopment or backwardness. Not only are ethnic Others cast as underdeveloped and backward, but they are also often described as exotic as well. Political and cultural sociologist Joane Nagel posits that ethnic Others are often framed as exotic, which give men the illusion of experiencing the "exotic." Nagel defines the "ethnosexual frontiers" that consequently become volatile social spaces—fertile sites for the eruption of

[70] Stargel, *Construction of Exodus Identity*, 6.

violence.[71] These frontiers are "the borderlands on either side of ethnic divides; they skirt the edges of ethnic communities; they constitute symbolic and physical sensual spaces where sexual imaginings and sexual contact occur between members of different racial, ethnic and national groups."[72]

Sociologist Mimi Sheller argues that sexual tourism, another form of sexual trafficking, in the Caribbean is vested in the branding of Caribbean islands as tropical playgrounds or paradises wherein perpetrators came come and experience sex with exotic peoples. Sheller points out that Jamaica has been conceived as an ideal place for sexual trafficking/tourism through its landscape, which includes "verdant forests, exotic flora, and tropical greenery," all signifying "Eden" or other primitive garden spaces in the imagination of its visitors.[73] Moreover, Jamaica and other areas in the Caribbean have been marketed as places of "tropical fecundity and excessive fruitfulness, conjuring up utopian fantasies of sustenance without labor." Sheller contends that such depictions of the Caribbean "lent support to the institution of slavery by celebrating its capacity to make wildlands productive."[74] Of eighteenth-century written depictions of the Caribbean, Sheller writes,

> it was through the intertwining tendrils of an Edenic nature, the exercise of mastery, and a proximity to enslaved others that European and North American writers explored the risks and desires of being in the Caribbean gaze. These elements of the imperial gaze have subtly informed the ways in which later tourists came to gaze upon the landscape and experience bodily pleasures of Caribbean travel.[75]

In the nineteenth century, new possibilities for tourism developed in the Caribbean as there was a reinvention of tropical nature in a more romantic genre with the rise of Romanticism.

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[71] Joane Nagel, *Race, Ethnicity and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 56.
[72] Nagel, 14.
[73] Mimi Sheller, "Natural Hedonism: The Invention of Caribbean Islands as Tropical Playgrounds," in *Tourism in the Caribbean: Trends, Development, Prospects,* ed. David Duval (London: Routledge, 2004), 23.
[74] Sheller, 24.
[75] Sheller, 26.

As a result, Caribbean tourism conjured a fantasy of "pleasure islands," wherein tropical nature was linked with intoxication and sexual encounters with exotic "Others." Sexual traffickers and perpetrators sought bare skin and bronze Caribbean bodies (both male and female) against the tropical, colorful landscape and gazed upon children's bodies playing in water.[76]

Sheller argues that "naturalization" of the social and economic inequalities of the contemporary tourist economy occurred in three steps: the objectification of Caribbean people as part of the natural landscape; the equation of that landscape with sexuality and corruption; and the marketing of the Caribbean via imagined geographies of tropical enticement and sexual ability.[77] Further, "objectification of 'naturalized' black bodies became quite explicitly linked to sexual interests in them especially with the spread of sexual tourism in the post-World War II period."[78] As a result, the sexualization of exotic brown bodies has become a standard tool of Caribbean tourist promotion and feeds into the development and sustainment of sexual tourism and trafficking in the region.[79] Sociologist Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor adds that "sexual tourism packages Caribbean people as embodied commodities by turning the long history of sexual exploitation under colonial rule into a 'lived colonial fantasy" available for the mass tourist consumer." She stresses that "a key component of sexual tourism is the objectification of a sexualized racial 'Other.'"[80]

Hiddenness and concealment of victims' identity also intersect with stereotypes to disenfranchise and oppress them. The narrator of Esther fails to mention explicitly the ethnicities and native origins of the virgin girls but discloses only the bracketing provinces

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[76] Sheller, 31.
[77] Sheller, 31.
[78] Sheller, 32.
[79] Sheller, 33.
[80] Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor, "Tourism and 'Embodied' Commodities: Sex Tourism in the Caribbean," in *Tourism and Sex: Culture, Commerce and Coercion*, ed. Stephen Clift and Simon Carter (London: Pinter, 2000), 42.

for the king's geographical dominion from which they were brought. Moreover, the narrator neither gives genealogical references for Vashti or the virgin girls nor identifies the girls' mother tongue or ancestral languages. The narrative and ideological function of the omission of these details is to erase the girls' ancestral and ethnic roots and to present them as inferior, which in turn leads to their exposure and vulnerability to sexual trafficking.

Stereotypes used to justify the sexual exploitation of Africana females, which originated during periods of enslavement and continue to manifest throughout history, have been well researched and documented. Some of these pervasive images include Africana females as promiscuous, seductive, hypersexual, loose, whorish, lustful, and immoral.[81] These stereotypes, along with the failure to ensure legal consequences for the rape and sexual exploitation of Black girls and women, undergird the ideology prevalent throughout much of US history that Black females were "unrapeable." Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins adds that the "Jezebel" image was a powerful rationalization for the sexual atrocities perpetuated against enslaved African women. This image also branded women as sexual temptresses who were responsible for tempting men rather than recognizing these women as victims of sexual violence.[82] Carole Christensen, a psychologist, sex therapist, and pioneer in cross cultural and anti-racist studies, notes the paradox: "The only women to ever suffer socially sanctioned and induced sexual abuse were branded 'loose and immoral.'"[83]

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[81] See Carolyn West, "Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Back Women and Their Implications for Psychotherapy," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice and Training* 32, no 3. (1995): 458–466; Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence and Resistance Ethics* (New York: NYU Press, 1999); Roxanne Donovan and Michelle Williams, "Living at the Intersection: The Effects of Racism and Sexism on Black Rape Survivors," in *Women & Therapy* 25, nos. 3–4 (2002): 95–105; Ella L. Bell, "Myths Stereotypes, and Realities of Black Women: A Personal Reflection," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 28, no. 3 (1992): 363–376.
[82] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
[83] Carole Christensen, "Issues in Sex Therapy with Ethnic and Racial Minority Women," *Women & Therapy* 7, nos. 2–3 (1988): 192.

The oppressive images, stereotypes, and ideologies relating to the identity formation of Africana females have traumatic implications. When these images, stereotypes, and ideologies are imagined and projected upon ethnic minorities, they produce real, material consequences. For example, white slave owners had complete control over Black female's bodies, sexualities, and reproduction. While boundaries and categories help to distinguish collectives or cultural groups, it is the transgression of certain boundaries, in this case bodily and sexual boundaries, and the representation of these transgressions that impact and contribute to the formation of collective identity for Jewish, Africana, and other minoritized females in the Esther text.

Sexual Trafficking as a Form of Cultural, Collective Trauma in the Book of Esther

The book of Esther contains massive occurrences of violence, as its plot consists of one disturbing catastrophe after another. Read closely, this story reflects the woundedness and torture of several collective groups. The story evokes pain, anger, fear, and empathy as the characters are confronted with various horrors, including displacement, subjection under imperial rule, the creation of hegemonic and sexist laws, exploitation through sexual trafficking, the threat of government-sanctioned cultural genocide and the embodied genocide of Amalekites, and torture through hanging. Moreover, the traumatic imagery contained within the text reflects multiple and persistent sufferings, emphasizing the traumatic terror and fright that is woven throughout the story. Imagery such as drunken men sitting around instituting chauvinist laws that negatively impact the female characters, young virgin girls being brought across provinces and sexually violated by the king night after night, the killing of Haman and his sons, the threat to the Jewish collective, and the massive annihilation of Amalekites in the final chapters are all visual representations that reflect the traumatic horrors presented throughout the book.

Religious and gender studies scholar Sarojini Nadar points out that little attention is paid to the king's selection of the female collective in the book of Esther; the narrative quickly shifts from Vashti to Esther, and the result is to erase from our awareness the sexual violence that occurs against the other girls.[84] The failure of readers to understand that recruitment, transportation, and harboring of subjects are characteristics of sexual trafficking prevents them from identifying these processes within the text. Esther and countless other virgin girls are captured from their native geographical surroundings which spans from India to Ethiopia (1:1), then they are brought to Persia and harbored in the king's palace for the purpose of sexual exploitation.[85] I will illustrate in my literature review that many readers miss instances of sexual trafficking in the book of Esther because of the following reasons: (a) a lack of understanding about and /or attention to the characteristics and processes of sex trafficking conceals its presence; (b) predetermined themes, genres, and phrases guide readers to only see certain aspects of the text; and (c) readers focus on individual instances of violence, which obscures the communal dimensions of sexual trafficking.

Readers and commentators rightly note the excessive violence in this text; much of the discourse on the book of Esther focuses on themes of agency, honor and shame, and identity politics and the role of women and eunuchs in the court. These themes are all pertinent to the scholarship and interpretation of Esther, and they illuminate analyses of the multiple genres that inform the story, including historical narrative, Persian court chronicle, diaspora novel, hero's tale, romance tale, and carnival tale. For example, considering the book a hero's tale, biblical scholar Carey Moore writes, "Between Mordecai and Esther, the

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[84] Sarojini Nadar, "'Texts of Terror': The Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church and Society: The Case of Esther 2:1–18," in *African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye,* ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 88–89.

[85] Randall C. Bailey illustrates that the king also sexually exploits the eunuchs who serve as his "attendants," a euphemism for bedfellows (Interse(ct)/(x)ionality," 236–237.

greatest hero is Mordecai, who supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions."[86] Susan Niditch, also a biblical scholar, suggests that "[the book's] heroine is a woman who offers a particular model of success, one with which the oppressors would be especially comfortable."[87] Identification of the hero/ine and focus on heroic agency affords both Esther and Mordecai opportunities for mobilization and status. Yet more is needed to fully explore the intersectionalities and polyvocality of the text, which orient the reader's focus to other aspects of the text that identify and address the sexual exploitation and trauma detailed throughout the first two chapters, the conditions of sexual trafficking, and the experiences that precede the mobilization on the parts of Esther and Mordecai. As a single hero, socially and hermeneutically distanced from her sexually trafficked sisters, Esther is elevated over all the other nameless virgin girls whose experiences and roles in the story are thus minimized and relegated to the background of the narrative. Many girls are gathered and trafficked, and they remain captive even after Esther is chosen as the replacement queen. Consequently, focusing on Esther as heroine minimizes the reader's concern for the trauma and traumatic impact of sexual trafficking experienced by other members of the female collective.

> Deploying the genre as carnivalesque, biblical scholar Bruce Jones maintains that
>
> readers should not object to the way in which women are treated in the book because to do so would be to miss that the objectionable features of the book are deliberate absurdities which the author has used skillfully. The author is not praising the Persian Court but laughing at it.[88]

Such a reading, however, misses the representation and seriousness of sexual trafficking by focusing on humor, farce, exaggerations, and other literary devices that serve to critique the

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[86] Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible 7B (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 133.
[87] Susan Niditch, "Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna,* ed. Athalya Brenner (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 33.
[88] Bruce Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," in *Studies in the Book of Esther,* ed. Carey A. Moore (New York: Ktav, 1982), 437.

empire and patriarchy. Reading the book as a diaspora novel, readers tend to focus on themes such as survival and identity negotiation in diasporic contexts but may fail to identify sexual trafficking as a more widespread trauma that both Jewish and non-Jewish female and male characters endure in the narrative. Many readers have also failed to identify processes of trafficking due to the usage of terms such as “beautiful” and “cosmetic treatments,” which may indicate why they interpret the trafficking of the girls in terms of pageantry. Euphemisms such as “the girls who please the king” or with whom the king “delights” further mask the sexual abuse and trauma embedded in the text. Lastly, readers miss the portrayal of sexual trafficking in the book of Esther because they tend to focus on individual incidents of violence. Except for Jewish collective, there is a tendency to assess and focus on the book’s major characters and singular incidents of violence rather than reflecting on communal enactments of violence against other ethnic collectives. These factors obscure sexual trafficking in the book of Esther.

Although the book of Esther is a story written and constructed centuries ago, it has resonances with the cultural traumas of contemporary African diasporic subjects at the hands of imperial powers. Capture, forced displacement, imperial domination, cultural genocide, ethnic suppression, eunuch-making, and sexual trafficking are experiences that invite dialogue between the two contexts. By reading the book of Esther through the lens of African diasporic experiences of trafficking, I endeavor to illuminate how cultural/ethnic minorities and gendered minorities experience heightened vulnerability to trafficking, which constitutes collective cultural trauma. Both colonial subjugation and forced displacement result in social fragmentation of those conquered and dislocated, which makes Africana bodies susceptible to violation. Africana bodies are relegated and regulated for the sexual pleasure of the imperializing king and to secure the stability of both imperial and patriarchal structures.

The words and experiences written and represented in the biblical text of Esther, especially those in the first two chapters, are embodied by many existing African diasporic girls and women. These are not merely imagined experiences. The words in this text capture and represent the cultural memories and histories of Africana girls and women across time, space, place, nations, oceans, and continents. Esther 2 especially reflects the materialized pain, primping, and pimping of Africana female diasporized bodies across bodies of waters as they traversed the slave trade routes. When read alongside the experiences of Africana girls and women, the words in the story of Esther are made flesh and dwell amongst us, teaching us about Africana materiality, sexuality, and spirituality. It teaches us how colonization and sexualized traumatization marks the bodies, identities, memories, and histories of African diasporic peoples.

A hermeneutical orientation towards collective trauma and traumatization illuminates the relationships between religion and culture, power and exploitation, colonialism and cultural expression/erasure, dislocation and identity, materiality and spirituality, economics and trafficking, ideologies and actions, cultural imperialism and the sacred capital of scripture, and so much more. Sexual trafficking is an overpowering and pervasive industry that shapes the self-perception of Africana diasporized females. In addition, experiences of sexual trafficking have physical, social, emotional, and economic impacts on Africana bodies. Their oppression and exploitation are government-sanctioned and often publicized through stereotypes, myths, and the media.

Uncovering the past gives us a better understanding of manifestations of sexual exploitation in the present. The unmasking further illuminates the lingering impact of colonialism and how Africana diasporic identity is marked and shaped by sexual trafficking. This hermeneutical lens has the potential to provoke meaningful questions about messages from the book of Esther and give new insights into how collective identity is forged in and

through experiences of diaspora and colonization which leads to the manifestation of sexual exploitation.

From collective trauma comes collective wisdom and resilience. One of the aims of this project is to create the space for the assessment of the lives, experiences, and wisdom of Africana peoples and cultures as a means to guide our efforts in combatting the problem of sexual trafficking. In the process, we are recovering, reclaiming, and rebuilding the collective minds, bodies, and identities out from the "amnesia" and erasure perpetrated by dominant histories, narratives, and interpretations. Wisdom from Africana "sacred texts," that is, oral and written utterances regarding the trauma of minoritized victims of sexual trafficking, has enabled cultural persistence and resilience. My hope is that this project will provoke dialogue which will facilitate and produce collective wisdom and galvanize us towards collective action to combat the persistent, expanding phenomenon of sexual trafficking.

Biblical Horror: A More Fitting Genre for the Book of Esther? Another Interruption to the Spin …

One implication of a polyvocal intersectional interpretative spin, as Wimbush coins the term, also raises the possibility of another genre that can be applied to the book of Esther. Because the narrative is one that describes gendered violence, exploitation, terror, and horror, I suggest the book of Esther should be considered as belonging to a genre of biblical horror. The word "horror" comes from the Latin *horrere*/*orur* and the French *orror*, meaning "to tremble" or "to shudder." In English, "horror" is defined as intense feelings of fear, shock, disgust, or dismay.[89] Recently, biblical scholars have begun to analyze how biblical literature reflects the language, concepts, imagery, and storylines of the horror genre, specifically contemporary horror films. Although many films that reflect biblical stories shed light on obsessive

[89] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "Horror," accessed 28 March 2024, https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=horror.

violence, such as the violent acts of Noah, the killings and plagues during the exodus, and the violent and brutal death of Jesus,[90] much of the scholarship on the Bible and horror focuses on how the Bible is featured in and impacts contemporary horror films.[91] In this section, I do not wish to consider the horror as it is depicted or alluded to in films based on the biblical story. Rather, I am highlighting the horrific details presented in the book of Esther as a means of highlighting the outrageous violence perpetrated against the female collective in the narrative world.

Horror as genre enables readers to become more attentive to the processes, practices, structures, and ideologies of sexual trafficking in the book of Esther. There is nothing funny about sexual abuse and exploitation. Although interpreters may recognize humor, farce, exaggerations, and other literary devices used to critique the empire and patriarchal power structures within the narrative, placing this biblical book within the genre of biblical horror can help to identify an even more potent form of violence and exploitation that the story grapples with, namely sexual trafficking as a widespread trauma that many of the female characters (Esther, Vashti, and the virgin girls from India to Ethiopia) in the first two chapters endure. Moreover, we are made to think further about gender roles and how the presence of female and feminized bodies often leads to extreme violence and despicable pain.

The horror genre presents terror and horrifying violence in ways that evoke physical, physiological, and psychological responses from its audiences. It often reflects contemporary social anxieties, focusing on that which is considered dangerous, fearsome, or repulsive.

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[90] See Kevin M. McGeough, "The Roles of Violence in Recent Biblical Cinema: The Passion, Noah, and the Exodus: God and Kings," *Journal of Religion and Film* 20, no. 2 (2016): 1–53.

[91] For example, see Rhiannon Graybill, *Are We Not Men? Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Amy Kalmanofsky, "Israel's Baby: The Horror of Childbirth in the Biblical Prophets," *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008): 60–82; Steve Wiggins, *Holy Horror; The Bible and Fear in Movies* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2018).

According to Tina Pippin, a feminist scholar of religious studies and gender studies, horror has an uncanny edge, presenting what is familiar to us in unfamiliar ways that incite feelings of dread and fear.[92] Pippin asserts that horror allows us to express our worse fears (and possibly our hopes) in literary form, so that we can share our anxieties with others.[93] Moreover, through horror, "present fears and oppressions are visible in the vivid descriptions of the monstrous and its destruction."[94] Read as horror, the book of Esther thus reveals and exposes the unsettling yet familiar phenomenon of sexual trafficking in an unfamiliar way, leaving some readers disturbed and uncomfortable.

Biblical and feminist scholar Amy Kalmanofsky defines biblical horror as a "composite emotional response to a threatening entity or situation comprising the emotions of fear and shame."[95] She identifies two distinct perspectives of biblical horror, both of which induce fear and shame: direct horror, which is the emotional response to a dangerous and threatening entity such as an encroaching enemy; and indirect horror, which refers to the emotional response to the impact of the threatening entity's work.[96] According to Kalmanofsky, in cases of direct horror, the threatening entity provokes both the fear of becoming a victim and the shame of weakness and defeat.[97] We see this process at play in the book of Esther. The virgin girls endure exploitation and abuse at the hands of members of the Persian empire, who represent the threatening entities. Not only does the king encroach upon the girls' bodies, but officials representing the empire induce fear by separating the girls from their families, preparing them for sexual abuse, and continuing to isolate them from their

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[92] Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London: Routledge, 2002), 80. Pippin is citing Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *On Creativity and the Unconscious* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 219.
[93] Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, 79.
[94] Pippin, 80.
[95] Amy Kalmanofsky, "Israel's Baby: The Horror of Childbirth in the Biblical Prophets," *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008): 75.
[96] Kalmanofsky, 75.
[97] Kalmanofsky, 75–76.

families and communities once Esther is chosen to replace Vashti as queen. While details are lacking about their emotional responses to being displaced and raped, readers know that, in patriarchal societies, girls and women are valued and esteemed for their chastity. Therefore, losing their virgin status would subject the girls—*and* their fathers—to societal shame. Sexual exploitation is thus not only a tool to evoke fear in the girls; it is also intended to scare and disenfranchise their families as a means of minimizing resistance to imperial rule. As with the deposition of Vashti and the subsequent law to gather and collect virgin girls for the king's sexual pleasure, "the devastated serve as terrifying reminders for the observers of their own vulnerability and as warnings that they too could suffer a shameful fate."[98]

As well as provoking fear and shame, another key feature of the horror genre is the presence of repeated, outrageous violence enacted on or by abject, gendered bodies.[99] As I have already illustrated, the book of Esther is layered with violence, which serves to provoke both fear and shame in the female collective. The violence is perpetrated against the abject and horrified bodies of young Africana girls as they are transported, incarcerated, and raped. After each girl has had forcible sexual intercourse with the king, she is taken back to another harem—a type of "holding cell"—until such a time as the king calls her back again "by name."[100] Like Vashti, these girls appear to be expendable in the interests of the empire. Thus, Vashti and the virgin girls become the personification of abject horror; they are the characters in this story through whom we, the audience, experience our own sense of horror.[101]

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[98] Kalmanofsky, 76.
[99] Graybill, *Are We Not Men*, 50.
[100] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 35.
[101] For examples of the abjection of virgin female bodies in horror texts and films see Angela Carter's short story "Bluebird" in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *Black Christmas* (1974, 2006), and *Halloween* (1978, 2007). Also see *Very Young Girls* (2007), a documentary following two trafficked teenage African American girls in New York, who are treated by law enforcement as adult criminals.

Despite, or perhaps because of, female bodies being abject objects of horror in Esther, the narrator seems to be obsessed with them. As in the context of horror films, outrageous violence is perpetrated against multiple women and girls representing the interchangeability of female bodies.[102] Moreover, in the first two chapters of the book, these bodies are "opened" in more than one way: they are "opened" to the gaze of others (the king, his noblemen, and servants) and are subsequently forcefully, sexually "opened" by the king when he rapes them. Opened female bodies thus become entirely interchangeable in this process. Initially, it is Vashti's body that the king seeks to "open" for the consumption and voyeuristic pleasure of his party guests. Ahasuerus commands his eunuchs to "bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty" (1:11). It is possible that the king wants Vashti brought forth naked here (and thus utterly "opened"), wearing only the crown.[103] Vashti refuses and so faces violence through her deposition; subsequently, in an attempt to find her "replacement," the violence of abduction and rape is perpetrated against countless virgin girls, stressing the interchangeability of female bodies.

Moreover, as religious studies scholar Rhiannon Graybill has observed, the horror genre often identifies the opened female body as a means of negating and negotiating masculinity. Graybill points out that disturbance to and crises of hegemonic masculinity are intricately linked to the openness of the female body.[104] Stated differently, torture, or the opening of the female body, becomes a way to speak about and around masculinity and masculine performance.[105] For Graybill, openness and torture of female bodies thus reveal that masculinity is contested, problematized, and renegotiated in complicated—if not violent

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[102] Graybill, *Are We Not Men*, 51.
[103] See Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther" in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible,* ed. James Dunn and J. W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 330.
[104] Graybill, *Are We Not Men*, 64–65.
[105] Graybill, 52.

or frightening—ways.[106] Masculinity is "unstable, rage-filled, impotent, acting with and acted upon by violence."[107] In the book of Esther, female bodies and masculinity are textual concerns that both set and drive the plot of the narrative. As I have discussed above, the bodies of women and girls in the Esther text are socially situated and regulated by colonizing men in their attempts to negotiate and mitigate their masculinity. As a result, countless female bodies are subjected to outrageous and repeated violence throughout the opening two chapters.

A final feature of horror that is worth noting is its ability to evoke psychological responses within its audiences. Kalmanofsky notes that "audience reactions are essential to the genre of horror as horror is identified by the reactions it elicits from the audience."[108] In other words, a distinctive feature of the horror genre is that, through its portrayals of fright, disgust, and terror, it simultaneously produces the same or similar responses among those consuming it. Audience reactions and responses to the biblical narrative are similar to what philosopher Noel Carroll describes as the "mirroring effect," wherein the terror, disgust, and fear expressed by characters within the horror text serve to provoke similar emotions in the audience.[109] Although the narrator does not directly comment on the fear reactions of the characters, many readers are able to identify actions outlined in the text that would elicit responses of fear, dread, and disgust, thereby potentially triggering similar reactions in them.

In addition, persons that have been victims of sexual and other types of abuse tend to identify abuse more easily than those who have not. Certainly, each time I read the text of Esther, the imagery of repeated sexual exploitation and the stereotyping of Africana girls and women and other persons with subjugated identities terrify me. I am especially terrified when

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[106] Graybill, 58.
[107] Graybill, 68.
[108] Kalmanofsky, "Israel's Baby," 61.
[109] Noel Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 18.

I consider the impact of this text in light of recent trends in trafficking. Another concern is the impact of horror on abused and trafficked girls and women who may be searching sacred scriptures for consolation and hope. Some may wonder if a function of this text was, and in contemporary contexts is, to justify oppression, subjugation, and sexual violence against girls and women. A text that reveals widespread practices of domination and oppression and that could possibly be used to justify the oppression of any human can be appalling to readers and interpreters. A text that reflects the legalization and facilitation of the trafficking and exploitation of girls by the "government" is dreadful and disgusting for some readers. The fact that the girls never leave the palace and become the property of the king is horrendous for many people. Even if the narrator excludes the responses and reactions of the virgin girls, the details alone can trigger reactions of fear, helplessness, and hopelessness, especially among a collective of girls and women whose ancestors endured similarly gruesome conditions. The female collective in Esther comprises of tormented girls and women who experience terror and pain, and who are helpless, overwhelmed, and immobilized by a seemingly unpreventable system embedded within a patriarchal and colonial culture. Girls and women across time and contexts who read the text of Esther seemingly can do nothing but anticipate their woundedness and the inevitable terror that ensues. Their pain seems unpreventable and inescapable.

By reading the book of Esther as horror, we are thus made more aware of the social injustices and violations of human rights that occupy its pages. The first two chapters depict personal and collective experiences of injustice towards the female characters presented therein. Specifically, the book features countless nameless Africana girls and women who contend with and have to cope with experiences of colonization, displacement, and sexual trafficking. They are vulnerable to oppression and sexual abuse for three long years before becoming the king's concubines, which undoubtedly exposes them to further abuse. Their

agency, autonomy, and voices are suppressed, while imperial colonial forces ensure their utter abandonment and isolation. Read as a horror text, the book of Esther invites us, the audience, to share the fear and terror of these trafficked girls. By reading Esther through the lens of horror, the terror within the text is highlighted, urging readers to recognize the deep injustices perpetrated against Africana females in the name of empire, patriarchy, and colonialism, and to challenge these, both within the narrative itself and in our own contemporary contexts. Though graphic as these stories may be, they are a source of knowledge that describes pain, terror, and injustices inflicted and inscribed on the bodies, psyches, and spirits of Africana women and girls in social and cultural contexts of empire.

The #SayHerName campaign aims to raise awareness of the names and stories of Africana girls and women who have been victimized by racist police violence and to offer support to their families.[110] If we could only join the chorus of #SayHerName supporters by uplifting the names of those Africana girls and women impacted by imperial violence in the book of Esther. However, we cannot, because they remain nameless. We can however, as morally and ethically responsible biblical interpreters, bear witness to the plight of these girls and women whose names we will never know. We can stand with those impacted by sexual violence and exploitation throughout history and up to the present day, as we commit to read between the lines, behind the euphemisms, and through the silences and silencing in the biblical text and in narrated stories of Africana girls and women across time and space. In doing so, we may not redeem the biblical text, but we will redeem the stories and dignity of all the girls and women whose voices have too often been silenced.

[110] For further details, see the official #SayHerName website, accessed October 31, 2019, http://aapf.org/shn-campaign.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have identified my project as a theoretical and hermeneutical exploration of the intersections between sexual trafficking, gender, ethnicity/race, patriarchy, and colonialism within the book of Esther and during the transatlantic slave trade. I have laid out the definition and scope of sexual trafficking, outlined the interconnectivity between sexual trafficking and enslavement, and discussed the contributing factors to sexual trafficking, such as displacement, gender, social conflict, patriarchal and rape culture, globalism, and racist ideologies and stereotypes. Moreover, I have outlined the roles of diaspora and exile in both the book of Esther and contemporary colonial contexts in facilitating sexual abuse and exploitation. I foreground Africana experience, culture, and history, utilizing intersectionality and polyvocality as a means to interrupt the spin of dominant white hegemonic biblical interpretation and to bring to the fore of the interpretive process the collective trauma of Africana girls and women in ancient and contemporary contexts. In doing so, I bridge the past and present, revealing historical, collective cultural traumatization of Africana females. Finally, I propose the genre of biblical horror because sexual trafficking represented in the book of Esther reflects terror and horrifying violence.

Placing the book of Esther within the genre of biblical horror can help readers and interpreters identify the gruesome violence, exploitation, and trafficking as a widespread trauma that the female collective endures at the start of this biblical narrative. In the next chapter, I will review significant Esther scholarship that engages themes which are relevant to my interpretation and necessary for understanding the manifestation and complexities of sexual trafficking detailed in the book of Esther. I will also demonstrate how my scholarship builds upon and expands research in Esther discourse through the application of intersectionality and polyvocality.

Chapter 2: "Esther in Scholarship: A Review of Literature"

Introduction

In recent decades, scholarship has become more responsive to social issues as many biblical scholars recognize the power of sacred texts in cultures where social problems such as trafficking exist. This section is not a comprehensive survey of all the scholarship on Esther; rather, it reflects upon ideas connected to what we see in larger trends across disciplines and movements such as the twentieth-century women's movement, twenty-first century #MeToo and #SayHerName movements, and other social justice movements. I explore the interactions and interconnectedness between biblical texts and social problems and consider how each has implications for the other. I endeavor to place myself in this movement of scholarly trends by looking for integrative moments where the biblical text picks up on social issues and where social analysis illuminates concerns within sacred texts.[1] The body of research that I present is thus limited by my concern for the exchange between biblical texts and social issues; therefore, my selection of materials picks up themes relevant to my work.

A survey of literature on Esther reveals that there are diverse interpretations of the book's content, messages, meanings, and implications. Since the book takes its name from one of the major characters, Esther, who becomes queen and ultimately saves the Jewish community from impending genocide, many authors focus on themes such as Esther's heroine status, her agency, and her use of power to cooperate with and/or resist imperial rule. Since Mordecai assists Esther as she maneuvers through gendered, ethnic, and sexual threats, many scholars focus on him, particularly his role in the imminent genocide and his rise to the

[1] See, Marianne Grohmann and Hyun Chul Paul Kim eds., *Second Wave Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019).

status of second in command to the king. Attention to gendered dynamics, which open and run throughout the book of Esther, reveals that male–female relationships are central to the plot of the book; this focus on gender also illuminates ideologies, perceptions, and stereotypes about females in the ancient world. In addition, a schism between Mordecai and Haman and the introduction of the virgin girls in terms of their nationality underscore that ethnicity/race and nationality inflect this gendered storyline.

More broadly, scholars focus on a range of topics, including, but not limited to, power dynamics and agency; sex and gender roles; ethics, laws and legality; wisdom; court protocol; feasts and banquets; life in the diaspora; exile and assimilation; compliance and resistance; the role, functions, and treatment of eunuchs; honor and shame; abuse and violence; and the absence and role of God in the narrative. While this is not a comprehensive list of the themes treated by interpreters, in what follows, I will highlight eight prominent themes discussed in scholarship on the book of Esther to highlight features of life under colonial domination and in the diaspora. In addition, I will delineate how the narrative depicts the Persian empire's constructions of patriarchy and sexual trafficking. The Persian colonial setting allows the sexual exploitation of female characters. Sexual exploitation is presented in the first chapter through the mistreatment of Vashti, and it intensifies in the second chapter when virgin girls are captured and transported across national geographical boundaries to the king's palace in Susa.

While modern interpreters typically consider gender and ethnicity when assessing the main character Esther, hermeneutics of intersectionality and collective trauma enhance interpreters' understandings of how gender and ethnicity intersect with other markers of difference for other female characters with the book. This perspective takes into account the roles of racism, sexism, classism, and nationalism in the treatment and exploitation of Vashti and the virgin girls throughout the first and second chapters. The virgins' ethnicities, gender,

class, and national identities, coupled with silence around their abuse, raise questions about the role of intersectionality in their experiences of sexual trafficking and exploitation. Silences regarding their intersectional identities and abuse also raise questions about how the book is interpreted and to what ends. What do interpreters miss and/or ignore? What is at stake ethically in traditional interpretations of this text? How would ancient communities have dealt with social issues and injustices? What is the role of law in perpetuating abuse and injustice?

Themes of power, agency, law, beauty, pageantry, humor, secrecy, hiding, honor, shame, and violence deserve particular attention in my review of literature. Assessing this constellation of themes together illuminates how the sexual trafficking facilitated in the book of Esther is situated in a broader context of colonialism and is characterized by gender hierarchies, political conflicts, abuses of power, hostility, domination, brutal sexual and physical violence, and the need to survive in these harmful conditions. This intersectional analysis of themes, which has already been explored to some extent by a number of interpreters, offers a new direction in Esther discourse, revealing the systematic establishment and mechanisms of and parties involved in sexual trafficking in the book of Esther.

Power in the Book of Esther

Colonization is characterized by uneven structural power. It is the control by a dominant, more powerful group over another conquered, less powerful group. Notions of and conversations about power are central to the book of Esther, which reflects Jewish life in the diaspora under Persian domination and colonization. It is not surprising, then, that much attention is given to power dynamics, especially in the book's opening chapters. There is a presentation of both personal and political power struggles between women and men, husbands and wives, the king and his eunuchs, Haman and Mordecai, and Amalekites and Jews. Often, these power struggles are negotiated at banquets and feasts and are resolved

through the abuse of power by males/patriarchs who utilize edict-making as a strategy to disenfranchise, displace, destroy, and debase material bodies through sexual exploitation and violent killing.

Specifically, considerable attention is given to the power dynamics between males and females in the opening chapter, which illuminates the perceived threat to male dominance and patriarchal authority through Vashti's refusal to come before the king and his guests (Esth. 1:10–22). Significant attention is also given to the power dynamics between the male ruling class and female lower class, as virgin girls are brought to the king's palace, undergo a year-long beautification process, and then are sexually exploited and abused (Esth. 2). Finally, in Esth. 3, attention is given to the power dynamics between ethnic groups, as Amalekite Haman suggests that Jews are a threat to Persians, thus launching animosity between Jews and Amalekites; this plot drives the rest of the narrative.

In "Diversity, Difference and Access to Power in the Diaspora: The Case of the Book of Esther,"[2] Hebrew Bible scholar, Steed Davidson argues that the book of Esther is a diasporic story that focuses attention on the ultimate power—imperial courts. Davidson foregrounds displacement and dispersion in order to direct readers' attention to Jewish characters' peripheral identity as persons living outside of the cultural norms of their own host country. Within the Persian Empire, the Jewish community has limited power, which necessitates their access to imperial power to survive in a diasporic location. Stated differently, since the ultimate power in the story is the imperial power of the Persian court, the Jewish characters must access and appropriate the imperial power of the Persian empire to survive.

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[2] Steed V. Davidson, "Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power in Diaspora: The Case of the Book of Esther," *Word & World* 29, no. 3 (2009): 280–287.

Davidson outlines power struggles between characters and gender and ethnic groups throughout the narrative, but he specifically hones in on the struggle between Mordecai and Haman, noting that Mordecai, a Jew, slights Haman's authority, afforded by the Persian empire, by refusing to bow before him (Esth. 3:2–6). As the result of this one-off interaction with a single Jewish man, Haman draws on stereotypes to present the Jewish people as a universal threat to imperial Persian power. In his commentary, Haman refers to Jews as "a certain people" (3:8). His failure to name them as Jews, as well as the fact that he emphasizes they are "scattered" throughout the empire, serves to convince the king that their threat to the empire is not localized; rather it is widespread. As Davidson notes, "The king receives advice that exaggerates fears of dissent into potentially destabilizing impacts on the empire."[3]

Davidson points out that the power dynamics between Haman and Mordecai are both personal and tribal, as Haman is an Agagite and Mordecai a Jew, therefore both represent groups with historical animosities. As he maintains,

> Locating the motivation for the fears articulated by Haman in tribal conflict deflects attention away from the capricious and insecure portrayal of imperial power. As long as Haman and Mordecai's conflict belongs to the realm of the tribal, it exculpates the Persian king of complicity for involvement in the eradication of an ethnic group from this kingdom.[4]

Locating the tension between Mordecai and Haman in tribal conflict does not deflect attention away from the portrayal of unpredictable imperial power, nor does it exonerate the king for his involvement in the plot to eradicate the Jewish people. Both Haman and the king are culpable for the harsh and violent treatment of Jews living in the empire. Even though he is not Persian, Haman is a representative of and renders service to the Persian empire through his position. Haman does what the king and empire allow him to do. Haman suggests the genocide, and the king approves it, which requires the king to exercise agency. This portrayal

[3] Davidson, 283.
[4] Davidson, 283.

of their partnership and establishment of systemic oppression is important to note, because in the second chapter of the book of Esther, similar conditions and collaborations produce a system of sexual trafficking into which the virgin girls are brought in and sexually exploited.

Hebrew Bible scholar Randall Bailey asserts that this exchange between the Mordecai and Haman is ironic because it is Mordecai's refusal to bow, not his ethnic affiliation, that upsets Haman, because Haman has to be told about Mordecai's ethnicity. Similarly, the narrator does not present Haman as acting out of his ethnic location and consciousness either. Bailey argues that the importance of ethnicity gets blurred by the ambiguity of the characters' ethics, as Mordecai is part of the group who has historically practiced genocide that is accepted by their deity while Haman is not.[5] Bailey's point moves our assessment of power relations beyond individual agency to see how the infrastructure of power relations is set up to eradicate an entire ethnic collective. This scene underscores how complicated diasporic identity, agency, and power are for multiple ethnic groups in the narrative.

If we apply Bailey's insights to the virgin girls in the book of Esther, we see that their presence in the text resonates with the portrait of the colonized subject as depicted by English scholar and critical theorist Homi Bhabha: "They are 'overlooked'—in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal—and, at the same time, overdetermined—physically projected, made stereotypical and symptomatic."[6] It is in response to this reality that this project foregrounds and examines the experiences of Africana girls and women in Esther discourse—girls and women whose sexuality is frequently disregarded and inappropriately pathologized in contemporary contexts.

Bailey adds that the stereotypical designation that Haman uses to describe the Jewish collective is reminiscent of Bhabha's understanding of what it is to embody an identity

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[5] Bailey, "Interse(ct)/(x)ionality," 231.
[6] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 236.

determined as different, defined over and against the powerful, and marked as unacceptable. For Bailey, "the 'overlooked group' gets 'overdetermined' stereotypically. The fixed nature of their presentation is thus determinative of their status and identity. Thus, they are identifiable by their customs and practices not by their looks, since neither Haman nor the king knows Esther's ethnicity until she reveals it in Esther 7."[7] We see the implications of this dynamic played out throughout the narrative. Haman overdetermines the Jewish collective based on their customs and practices, which he frames as resistance-type behavior and thus a threat to the empire. Thus, identified and overdetermined, the very lives and existence of Jews are threatened. A similar dynamic is at play when the male collective identifies the female collective by Vashti's actions. One female's practices cause the entire female collective to be defined stereotypically.

Bailey also points out that the book opens with interesting geographical and ethnological notations; he stresses that India and Ethiopia are southern configurations that represent an array of territory, which concentrates empire and power in current-day nomenclature of Asia and Africa. Bailey posits that, since this description ignores Europe, this is part of an anti-Greek polemic that calls attention to past superiority of the south over the north. He maintains that these designations are not merely geographical but are also racial-ethnic markers signifying Greece.[8] Both Haman's and Mordecai's interactions and the geographical notations signal ethnic and imperial conflict and power in the book of Esther. This point becomes significant in chapter 2 as it underscores how the virgin girls experience sexual exploitation because of imperial, ethnic, and gender conflicts, among other factors. A disturbing trend is that many trafficking routes originate in Asia and Africa, and there are increasing numbers of girls being trafficked and forced into marriage from these locales.

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[7] Bailey, "Interse(ct)/(x)ionality," 230.
[8] Bailey, 228.

Davidson surmises a relation between resistant action and imperial power: "That the queen's refusal to be displayed by the king will set off a chain of dissent that will ultimately undermine royal rule not only exaggerates the threat but reveals the extent to which imperial power views itself as susceptible to even the smallest threat."[9] Similarly, Sarojini Nadar argues that the symbolism of power is personified in the king and the advisers' actions, thereby outlining the power of the male ruling class.[10] The first chapter outlines how the male ruling class deals with those who dare to disobey male authority while the second chapter outlines how the male ruling class exercises and abuses power by using sex/sexuality and displacement as tools of oppression. If the king's response signals irrational fears against the stereotyped female collective and poses a "small" threat to his power as Davidson suggests, the threat is potentially significant because it represents resistance to the king, his empire, and its construction of patriarchy and sexual trafficking.

Many biblical interpreters readily recognize that the opening chapter introduces a problem of gendered relationships, as Vashti is deposed for resisting the king. Hebrew Bible scholar Dorothy Bea Akoto, for example, notes that the vanity of the Persian court is portrayed by the opening festivities, which culminate in the divorce of Queen Vashti, who refuses to satisfy the male egocentric agenda.[11] Akoto, who specifically addresses gender and power issues, asserts that the book of Esther addresses existential issues of identity, survival, and cultural preservation by a diasporic minority against the majority. She maintains that the story illuminates how patriarchy is entrenched through court/royal disputes, in which queens/females are used to achieve the agendas of males; thus, the book must be read through a gender-sensitive lens.[12] This gendered problem is one wherein the personal is intertwined

[9] Davidson, "Book of Esther," 283.
[10] Nadar, "Gender, Power, Sexuality," 119.
[11] Dorothy Bea Akoto, "Esther," in Page, *Africana Bible*, 270.
[12] Akoto, 268.

with the corporate and political, as evidenced in the speech given to the king by Memucan, a nobleman of Persia and Media:

> Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, "King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come." This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath![13]

Two claims are made in this speech: first, Queen Vashti's resistance is framed as "wrong," or an offense, not only to the king but also to the king's officials and to "all the people," signifying both those males who are gathered at the king's party as well as those who are throughout his provinces. Second, as espoused by Memucan, one of the king's sages, the male characters fear that that one woman's action will inspire resistance among the entire female collective, an insurrection that will become a problem for the entire male collective. Thus, Memucan frames this singular instance and issue of resistance, not as a personal issue that will impact only the king and queen, but as a public and political issue that will affect the relationship between all husbands and wives. He suggests that the king write an edict stating, "All wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small," (1:20). "Great and small" could signify age or social standing. The king's edict is worded differently from what Memucan proposes. He commands that "every man should bear rule in his own house and that it should be published according to the language of every people" (1:22). The male collective take action against the female collective to prevent any other female from following Vashti's lead. Memucan's speech illuminates that gendered relationships are not only significant within the Esther narrative but drive its entire plot. Because the king publishes his edict in the language of every people, interpreters must assess ethnicity as a marker of difference that contributes to the intersectional oppression of the female collective.

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[13] Esth. 1:16–18.

Akoto points out that this scene ridicules patriarchy and reveals the insecurity of the courtiers while mirroring the cause and effects of extreme tensions between different genders/classes/ethnic groups in African contexts and in the African Diaspora.[14] She claims the book of Esther raises and addresses issues pertinent to current realities and the impact of colonialism of African cultures, in which "extreme anger and bitter local, ethnic, regional, tribal communal and other jealousies are fanned by political or imperialistic tendencies."[15] Akoto adds that, while many African contexts are characterized by ethnic feuds, extreme hatred, pride and minority/majority conflicts, African queens and mothers in current contexts can, like the character of Esther, play vital roles in mobilizing, organizing, and strategizing.[16]

Hebrew Bible scholar Danna Nolan Fewell asserts that the power relationships in Esther 1 describe the "fragility of male sovereignty."[17] Vashti's refusal emphasizes how fragile male power is. Moreover, the law that the officials create presents power, masculinity, and dominance as unstable. Consequently, they take legal measures to reassert and guarantee sovereignty. Religious studies scholar Timothy Beal adds that this scene exposes the "vulnerability of the patriarchy that it is presenting."[18] However, as Nadar points out, the instability of the Persian court and the male ruling class makes the situation even more dangerous for the females.[19] This is evidenced in the law created at the close of chapter 1, and the subsequent trafficking of the virgin girls at the beginning of chapter 2. As theologian Karen Bloomquist explains, "If one's identity is rooted in exercising control over another, one is tempted to go to any lengths to assure or reassert that control."[20] This is what happens

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[14] Akoto, "Esther," 270.
[15] Akoto, 270.
[16] Akoto, 271.
[17] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, Resistance, and Transformation," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (1987): 83.
[18] Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16.
[19] Nadar, "Gender, Power, Sexuality," 121.
[20] Karen Bloomquist, "Sexual Violence: Patriarchy's Offense and Defense," in *Christianity,*

when the king and his officials gather virgin girls for the king to engage in sex with each night. The males collectively take part in reasserting control over females because Vashti has previously resisted being controlled.

The centralization of political power in the Persian empire blurs the divide between public and private spheres, negatively impacting the entire female collective as illustrated throughout the first two chapters of Esther. African females whose placement is at the bottom of the socioeconomic stratum are prevented from personally and/or politically determining or negotiating their identities and experiences under colonial regimes in both ancient and contemporary contexts, similar to the way Vashti is prevented from negotiating her own identity.

Power is ambiguous in the book of Esther, and its use is tied to both personal and political motivations. It is neither neutral nor disinterested but exercised and appropriated for certain ends. As Davidson notes, not only does the imperial power have fears and insecurities about outsiders; the targeted Jews in the narrative also embody fear. He writes, "Diasporic Jews fear the vagaries of imperial power that hold the possibility of either physically eliminating them (the case of Joseph and Esther) or forcing assimilation (the case in the book of Daniel)." He concludes that the concern of the book of Esther is not about dismantling or eradicating imperial power but for Jews accessing power to "assert their presence in the kingdom and to achieve relief from their difference being regarded as a liability."[21]

Rev. Tsaurayi Mapfeka argues that power dynamics have a decisive effect on both the way the Bible is read in general and how Esther is read specifically. Mapfeka writes,

> The power of the colonizer, the authority assigned to the Temple in Jerusalem and the question of how to negotiate gender relations are three elements that recur in certain biblical texts with some frequency. The power dynamics at the core of all three may also have been instrumental in terms of shaping biblical traditions and I consider the

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Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 62.

[21] Davidson, "Book of Esther," 286.

> hegemonic tensions wrapped up in these elements to be clearly manifest in the book of Esther.[22]

Further, Mapfeka attests to how colonization in two different contexts, the book of Esther and nineteenth-century Zimbabwean colonization, operate within a carefully circumscribed gendered context. She notes that, in the book of Esther, the directionality of gendered oppression is perpetrated by powerful males on less powerful females. Within the context of Zimbabwean colonization, racialized gendered oppression was perpetrated by powerful British men on indigenous people and there was no room for women among the colonizing settlers or the colonized indigenous people. Nor was there room for the celebration of women's accomplishments in either context.[23] For example, she details how many contributors to Esther studies exalt Mordecai as the hero by downplaying Esther's efforts. Mapfeka claims that this marginalization and commodification of women, specifically the vilification of Esther in Esther studies, is a pattern set by colonialism. As she maintains, "The perception of Esther playing a secondary role to Mordecai is influenced in part less by what the text actually states than by the dominant understanding (including in colonial discourse) concerning power balances between the sexes, which is tilted to favor males."[24]

Additionally, Mapfeka asserts that the decision to replace Queen Vashti through a comprehensive and empire-wide search and the gathering of all virgin women is an effort and expression of the empire to assert absolute imperial power, authority, and control.[25] Similar to Davidson, Mapfeka maintains that the "empire's over exertion of power, as demonstrated in the Persian overlord's exercise of complete dominance, became imaginable and

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[22] Tsaurayi K. Mapfeka, "Empire and Identity Secrecy: A Postcolonial Reflection on Esther 2:10," in *The Bible, Centres and Margins: Dialogues between Postcolonial African and British Biblical Scholars*, ed. Johanna Stiebert and Musa W. Dube (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 80.
[23] Mapfeka, 81–84.
[24] Mapfeka, 84.
[25] Mapfeka, 86.

internalized."[26] In other words, access to the dominant political imperial power provided possibilities of subversion for multiple subordinate groups including disempowered Jews and other non- Jewish girls and women.

Agency in the Book of Esther

Conversations about power and identity politics in Esther discourse often lead to assessments of characters' agency. One of the major debates in scholarship on the book of Esther is whether the character Esther plays an active or passive role in the narrative. Questions are raised about whether she is an object or becomes a subject who exercises power, agency, and authority. There are competing views on Esther's role and function in the narrative. On the one hand, some scholars argue that Esther conforms to gender roles, values, and expectations, thereby reinforcing patriarchal ideologies of gender and power. For example, feminist scholar of Near Eastern and Judaic studies Esther Fuchs argues that Esther personifies the reinstitution of patriarchal order and reinforces the status quo.[27] Similarly, Old Testament scholar Alice Laffey describes Esther as a non-active sex object. Interestingly, both Fuchs and Laffey draw contrasts between Esther and Vashti. Fuchs argues that, in comparison to Vashti, Esther is meek and selfless.[28] Laffey asserts that Vashti defies her husband's commands, thus resisting patriarchal ideologies, while Esther represents "a stereotypical woman in a man's world."[29] In other words, Esther acquiesces to normative gender roles and does not subvert gender expectations. Jewish Rabbi Bea Wyler contends that Esther conforms to patriarchy but notes that Esther is doubly disadvantaged because of her gender and ethnicity. While Wyler commends Esther for her role in the emancipation of the Jewish collective, she claims that

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[26] Mapfeka, 88–89.
[27] Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 84.
[28] Fuchs, 84.
[29] Alice Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 216.

Esther does nothing to advance the liberation of women due to her blindness about her situation as a woman. Wyler concludes that Esther's emancipation is therefore one-sided and incomplete as she remains bound to the decrees of men.[30]

On the other hand, scholars such as Old Testament professor Carol Bechtel view Esther as a political agent who exercises agency and power to transform the political structure. Bechtel argues that, during and after exploitation, Esther takes opportunities to exercise her will, and she uses wisdom, self-control, and caution as she navigates the Persian court.[31] Bechtel writes, "She has learned to think and act for herself, and is no longer content taking orders from Mordecai without carefully considering her wisdom first."[32] Biblical scholar Rebecca Hancock points out that a primary reason for this view is Esther's political effectiveness through persuasiveness. Esther mitigates bloodshed by transforming political predicaments into personal matters to win her case before the king.[33] Hebrew Bible scholar Sidnie Ann White upholds this position, claiming that Esther is not a passive character but takes steps to place herself in the best possible position and uses her influence to enhance the position of her relatives.[34] White maintains that the power that Esther, a model exilic survivor, exerts through her femaleness is analogous to the type of power that diaspora Jews are implored to use within the foreign court.[35]

Notions of agency and power are often complex and constrained for victims of trafficking, especially in colonial contexts. African biblical scholar Itumeleng J. Mosala

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[30] Bea Wyler, "Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 132.
[31] Carol Bechtel, *Esther, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 33.
[32] Bechtel, 48.
[33] Rebecca Hancock, *Esther and Politics of Negotiation: Public and Private Spaces and the Figure of the Female Royal Counselor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 13.
[34] Sidnie Ann White, "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1989), 167–168.
[35] White, 164.

reflects upon the ambiguity and complexity of agency amongst contemporary Africana women. He writes,

> Contemporary African women are products of pre-capitalist semi-feudal, colonial and settler-colonial monopoly capitalist racist social systems, on the one hand, as well as of heroic anti-sexist, anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalistic struggles in South Africa, on the other hand. At different times and in different ways in aspects of these processes and struggles were dominant or subservient in determining who African women were and how they would wage their struggles.[36]

Mosala reminds readers that their interpretations should not be simplistic and urges interpreters not to continue sacrificing gender struggles to national struggles, which he claims the book of Esther does.[37] Intersectionality and polyvocality enable interpreters to not only realize organized powers and conditions that produce systemic injustices such as sexual trafficking; these frameworks also empower interpreters to be critical of existing ideologies, histories, and gender, ethnic, and class hierarchies that minimize females' agency in ancient and contemporary contexts.

Unfortunately, focusing on the two major female characters and contrasting their behaviors can further obscure the recognition of trafficking and other traumas that members of the wider female collective endure. By failing to direct attention to the parallel experiences of sexual exploitation between Vashti, Esther, and the virgin girls, the discourse remains centered on gender roles/dynamics, agency, and resistance; it therefore fails to address their collective experience of sexual trafficking. Instead of assessing the characters individually and setting Vashti and Esther up as binary opposites (as many scholars have done), we need to assess the female characters as a collective; in this way, it becomes clearer that they share experiences of violation, sexual exploitation, marginalization, degradation, and often silence and anonymity, all of which are features of sexual trafficking. By focusing primarily on

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[36] Itumeleng J. Mosala "The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa," *Semeia* 59 (1992): 132.
[37] Mosala, 136.

Vashti and Esther, the other virgin girls remain hidden and silent, as do the eunuchs—the other victims of sexual exploitation in the book. Trafficking flourishes on invisibility and silence. Therefore, it is important to assess the collective trauma to avoid perpetuating the silence that enables trafficking thrive in various contexts. Because there are gaps in the biblical story, readers are not privy to evidence of the virgin girls' agency in the story world; but a lack of evidence does not suggest that the girls and women lack agency altogether. The narrator does not document the actions, decisions, and responses of the virgin girls. But Vashti's and Esther's actions, decisions, and responses illustrate that both girls and women in the story world have and exercise agency to resist sexual abuse and other oppressions. Similarly, in more contemporary contexts, girls and women who are sexually abused and trafficked exercise agency and take some control over their lives.

This project is not meant to minimize, judge, or further marginalize those affected by sexual trafficking. Neither do I argue that all Africana girls are women have been sexually abused and trafficked or have limited agency. Rather, I provide evidence that colonizers targeted and trafficked African(a) girls and women in the book of Esther and particularly during the transatlantic slave trade. I provide a nuanced analysis of the contexts that apparently render girls and women sexual slaves with restricted agency and power. I also illustrate that sexual trafficking and abuse is an event/experience central to the collective history and memories of Africana girls and women who are living in the African diaspora.

Although some readers and interpreters deem the girls and women powerless in the story world, again the actions of Vashti and Esther shed light on how people with seemingly little agency and power engage in practices that liberate them from oppressive structures. Esther uses sex and sexuality (5:1–8) to persuade the king to allow her to approach him and speak. Though her agency and power are restricted, she negotiates within structures of subordination, patriarchy, and colonialism in ways that do not render her an essentialized

victim. It is therefore critical to be careful how we label those affected by sexualized violence. Although many scholars use the term "victim," perhaps victim-survivor is a more useful term to underscore and emphasize their agency, power, and resistance. This will help the readers avoid one-sided interpretations of women's agency and power and prevent vicarious objectification.

Law in the Book of Esther

Vashti is presented as a degenerate woman because of the threat she poses to the empire. She refuses to be paraded before the drunken king and his inebriated officials and ministers and is deposed and replaced. Vashti defies and threatens the laws and order of the masculine/patriarchy, disturbing their identity, power systems, and stability. Consequently, Vashti is isolated, deposed, abandoned, violated, punished, and degraded; she lacks support, solidarity, and comfort. A law is created and used as a tool to assert and reassert male control and dominance over the female collective after Vashti's refusal to comply with her husband's demands. The judicial sentencing, that "every man be master in his own household," is made in retaliation for Vashti's refusal to come when she is summoned and in order to send a warning to other women who might be inspired by her resistance (1:17–18). It matters not what socio-economic status the man has; his wife must honor him. The law is written "so that it may not be repealed" (1:9). In addition, the king's dismissal of Vashti ultimately leads to a situation wherein girls are legitimately sought, gathered, held in custody, subjected to a year-long beautification process, and sexually abused and exploited by the king (2:1–9).

Law plays a significant role in the institution of trafficking in the book of Esther, as the law proposed by Memucan is created as a tool to reassert control and dominance over the female collective after Vashti's refusal to obey. In fact, the institution of the law at the close of chapter 1 both leads to and legalizes the trafficking of the virgin girls in the story world. Both the law and the institution of sexual trafficking at the opening of chapter 2 are

impressed upon the female collective as an articulation of the enormity and consequences of disobedience and resistance to constructions of masculinity, patriarchy, and empire because of Ahasuerus' position as both the king and Vashti's husband. Not only do these laws sanction the trafficking, but like other laws in the Hebrew Bible, as Old Testament scholar Cheryl Anderson points out, they also "inscribe a patriarchal ideology that constructs masculinity as dominance and, correspondingly, female subordination… (which is) inherently a form of violence."[38] Anderson adds that biblical laws' gender-role pattern of male dominance is prevalent and affirmed even in our current milieu.[39]

The laws created by the male collective invoke horror, terror, shock, and suffering within the female collective. To ensure male dominance and secure patriarchal stability, the king and his officials use shame, horror, and sexual exploitation as a means of correction and of gendered and social control. In this way, edict- or law-making becomes a trope that drives the violent plot of the narrative, commencing with the sexual exploitation of females in the first two chapters and culminating with the brutally violent murders throughout the rest of the text. The first two chapters of the book of Esther specifically elucidate how colonizers abuse power to set up and legalize systems of sexual trafficking.

Old Testament scholar Kathleen O'Connor notes that, in the book of Esther, the Persian government always does things "according to the law." She writes, "The government's scrupulosity in making all its actions legal is a smoke screen, what J.C. Scott calls 'rationalizing exploitation,' that disguise oppression as something else—in this case, as lawful government action for the good of the empire."[40] O'Connor also emphasizes that the

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[38] Cheryl B. Anderson, *Women, Ideology, and Violence: Critical Theory and the Construction of Gender in the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomic Law* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 98.
[39] Anderson, 99.
[40] Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Humor, Turnabouts and Survival in the Book of Esther," in *Are We Amused: Humour about Women in the Biblical World*, ed. Athalya Brenner (London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 58.

laws are unalterable, and notes that they are proclaimed with speed and proper thoroughness, as they are written and sent to every province in the script and language of the people of those provinces. She argues that the detailed procedures of the promulgation of the laws reveal hierarchal communication systems that both glorify the laws and underscore their frenetic urgency.[41]

Beauty and Pageantry in the Book of Esther

Within its traditions of interpretation, the events of Esther 1–2 are predominantly understood as some form of beauty pageant, which obscures the violence of sexual trafficking inherent in this text. For example, Michael Fox describes the king's selection process of Esther as a competition, wherein the girls are judged according to their beauty and sexual expertise. He notes that "the first stage is not a contest—the desirable girls are *simply gathered* with no regard to whether they proposed themselves for the honour or whether they were offered by their fathers."[42] While Fox acknowledges here that the girls may not come to this contest voluntarily, he focuses instead on the honour that will eventually be bestowed upon the contest winner. To become Xerxes's new queen, he suggests, is more desirable than the alternative of "a barren life of imprisonment in the discarded concubines' seraglio."[43] Fox suggests that the real competition commences a year after the girls undergo cosmetic treatments, when they are judged on who can best "please,"[44] or as Randall Bailey phrases it, "sex" the king.[45] As Fox also points out, "nothing but attractiveness to the king and sexual skills will, in this legendary account, determine who will become queen of Persia."[46]

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[41] O'Connor, 59.
[42] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 27 (italics original).
[43] Fox, 28
[44] Fox, 28.
[45] Bailey, "Interse(ct)/(x)ionality," 237.
[46] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 28.

Duran likewise frames the sexual exploitation of the virgin girls in terms of a competition: "Young women from far and wide come to compete for the hand of a rich and powerful man … and the powerful man *seems to rule* the proceedings which are set up for his benefit and amusement."[47] Here, Duran ignores two descriptions in the narrative that suggest these girls do not "come to compete" voluntarily. First, the king's servants say, "Let beautiful virgin girls be *sought* out for the king. And let the king appoint commissioners in all of the provinces of his kingdom to *gather* all of the beautiful young virgins to the harem" (2:2–3; italics added). Second, the narrator reveals that, when the king's order and edict is proclaimed, many young women were "gathered" in the citadel of Susa, and Esther was "taken" into the king's palace (2:8). These girls do not appear to be acting on their own volition; rather, they are repeatedly acted upon, being "sought," "gathered," and "taken."

Yet elsewhere, Duran seems to recognize the potential for violence within these narrative events. As she notes,

> The fact that sex is part of the competition and the virgins, win or lose, are no longer virgins once they have been in the competition lends Esther's story a scarier tone … [T]hese women—more like girls—are *forced to compete*, and in a society where virginity is a girl's only ticket to respectable adulthood, the losing contestants stand a great deal to lose.[48]

Duran describes the gathering of the virgin girls into the king's harem as a form of kidnapping, observing that "Esther is in the court not because she wants to be but because the king is in search of an obedient wife … she is "gathered" (2:8) with the rest of the maidens—this is part of the king's privilege, to have his choice of the populace for his wives."[49]

Defining the exploitation of the virgin girls as a "beauty contest" ignores the elements of capture, captivity, and forced displacement which constitutes trafficking and ultimately prevents the analysis of such experiences as exploitative. Carol Bechtel notes that this

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[47] Duran, "Gender Games and Wars," 71 (italics original).
[48] Duran, 73. Italics original.
[49] Duran, 77.

definition is highly misleading, as contestants in beauty contests typically exercise volition.[50] Bechtel also calls attention to the fact that, unlike contemporary beauty contest participants, the girls who are not chosen by Xerxes to be his new queen would have been unable to return home. The remaining girls become the king's concubines or sex slaves and remain secluded in the king's harem indefinitely. Therefore, once raped and exploited in the narrative, African and other ethnic girls, including Persian girls, are narratively silenced and erased, similar to the way Vashti is exiled. Sexual violence and exploitation therefore begin and end with narrative and vocal silencing and suppression. The African girls are victims of patriarchy and colonization, becoming the property of the empire; and with the exception of Esther, all disappear into the narrative world, never to be mentioned again.

Mapfeka notes that the decision to replace Queen Vashti with young virgin women through a comprehensive and empire-wide search shows the empire's desire to assert absolute imperial power, authority, and control over its female population.[51] More than this, however, the king's approval of the plan to expand his harem is nothing less than a royal sanction of sexual trafficking. Sexual trafficking is defined in contemporary US law as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbor, or receipt of people, by coercive or abusive means for the purpose of sexual exploitation."[52] These processes are evoked within the book of Esther, although they are not always recognized as such by the reader. Nadar points out that "little attention is paid to the king's selection process—the narrative quickly shifts from Vashti to Esther—and the result is erasure from our awareness that sexual violence against females occurs."[53] Moreover, it often goes unnoticed that this violence takes place over four years—

[50] Bechtel, *Esther, Interpretation*, 31.
[51] Mapfeka, "Empire and Identity Secrecy," 86.
[52] US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (2014), 9.
[53] Nadar, "Texts of Terror," 88–89.

from the time of the royal edict, when Xerxes had reigned for three years (Esth. 1:2) until his eventual marriage to Esther during the seventh year of his reign (2:16).[54]

Readers may likewise fail to see the significance of how the girls get to the king's palace in the first place. Esther and countless other virgin girls are abducted from their native lands which fall under imperial rule, spanning from India to Ethiopia (1:1). They are transported to Persia, apparently without their agreement (2:3,8), and held captive in the king's harem until they receive a year of beauty treatments (2:12). After this process is over, they are taken to the king so that he can have (non-consensual) sex with them until he determines who best satisfies him sexually (2:4, 8). These elements of abduction, transportation, and captivity are all common stages in the process of sex trafficking. Recognizing this process as it unfolds within the narrative exposes the inherent violence and horror of this biblical text.

There are three elements of trafficking: the act/process, the way/means, and the goal, all of which are detailed within the king servants' speech (2:2–4). By imperial and patriarchal decree, virgin girls are to be sought out and transported to the king's palace. That is the act/process. Once the process is suggested by the servants and approved by the king, the tactics or way/means are carried out by the king's commissioners. Young girls are gathered by the commissioners and brought to the king, which is a strategy of disempowerment for the purposes of sexual exploitation, which is the goal.

Stated differently, the virgin girls are violently separated from their natal homes, further subjected to a beautification process which includes pampering and perfume for a year, then are shifted from one harem to the king's bedroom, then to another harem as, night after night, the king sexually exploits each girl. After Esther is chosen to replace Vashti as queen, the girls remain alienated and silenced and are rendered invisible in the king's palace

[54] Nadar, 87–88.

indefinitely. These processes reflect a system of sexual trafficking that includes partnerships and organized crime; the recruitment and abduction of victims; transit, control, and retention of victims; and wide-scale sexual abuse.

Moreover, sex trafficking typically involves four key parties—the perpetrator, the vendor, the facilitator, and the victim[55]—whom we can likewise recognize within the book of Esther. King Xerxes is the perpetrator, who sexually exploits the victims. The king's servants play the part of the vendors, who extend the services and capital that make sexual trafficking possible. The officers in the provinces of the king are the facilitators, expediting the victimization process. Finally, the victims of sexual exploitation are represented by all the virgin girls who are brought to the king's harem. Recognizing these different roles within the narrative allows us to identify the events taking place as an explicit instance of sexual trafficking. Furthermore, traffickers can be sole individuals or work in networks as we see played out in the book of Esther. The king, his servants, and officials are all willing participants and contribute to the sexual trafficking of the virgin girls. Attention to both the process and parties involved in trafficking foregrounds the sexual trafficking of the virgin girls and the eunuchs in the narrative world. The interconnectedness of this structure implies that sexual trafficking—as a form of extraction and abuse—emerges as an urgent category of study in postcolonial and empire studies.

Humor in the Book of Esther

Humor is another prominent theme in Esther scholarship. Scholars note multiple anachronisms, exaggerations, inaccuracies, and hyperboles throughout the narrative and comment on how the story has rife dramatic reversals and inversions of power. For example,

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[55] Nancy Beyer, "The Sex Tourism Industry Spreads to Costa Rica and Honduras: Are These Countries Doing Enough to Protect Their Children from Sexual Exploitation?" *Georgia Journal of International & Comparative Law'*29 (2000): 308.

biblical scholar Adele Berlin refers to the book as "comic entertainment."[56] Creative writer and publisher Celina Spiegel suggests that there is a carnival spirit throughout the book of Esther that critiques the Persian government, its representatives, and laws and envisions a world remade.[57] Similarly, Kathleen O'Connor observes that the book of Esther is downright hilarious but in a very serious way. Noting ironies, grotesque exaggerations, and sharp turnabouts, she argues that Esther's humor is at the expense of the Persians and functions as "a work of political satire, a survival tactic and an act of hope."[58] O'Connor posits that exaggerations and ironic reversals of situations shame and humiliate Haman specifically and the Persian government more generally. For example, Haman expects and demands honor from Mordecai, and has hugely proportioned gallows constructed to hang him on, but these become the gallows upon which he himself is hung. O'Connor also claims that other violence within the book is exaggerated, a feature of the tragicomic genre of the book which represents reversals of fortune. The violence within the book therefore "telegraphs the plot reversals as the weak overcomes the strong and the humble put down the arrogant."[59]

O'Connor further reflects on the mockery of the king and the government, noting that Ahasuerus is incapable of thinking or making any decisions for himself. His actions and all his royal decisions are prompted and directed by other characters: his officials, eunuchs, Haman, Esther, and Mordecai. Focusing on Esther, she writes that, more than once, Esther manipulates the "royal buffoon." For, she continues,

> to survive within a system of domination requires calculation, manipulation and trickery. These are highly developed skills of people with no other way to affect the

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[56] Adele Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no.1 (2001): 2–14.
[57] Celina Spiegel, "The World Remade: The Book of Esther," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 202.
[58] O'Connor, "Humour, Turnabouts and Survival," 52–53; For more on Esther as social and political satire, see Kenneth Craig, Jr., *Reading Esther: A Case for Literary Carnivalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).
[59] O'Conner, "Humour, Turnabouts and Survival," 55.

> course of events. They are the diplomatic strategies of any people with no power and one of the strategies at which women have excelled. They are not to be scorned.[60]

These are tactics that Esther has to use to subvert what O'Connor calls "immovable power."[61] O'Connor concludes that humor functions as a political weapon, an act of survival, and a scathing critique of the Persian empire and all of its constituents; humour turns situations upside down and reverses expectations and situations, which, she argues, implies an open future for the Jewish collective and promises life on the other side of sorrow and pain.[62] However, O'Connor's analysis ignores the sexual exploitation of the virgin girls. She is not concerned about their abuse or survival but rather that of the Jewish collective.

Duran claims that the dismissal of the book's explicit foray into gender politics interests her for two reasons: It effectively silences a certain discussion of the text's political implications, and it reflects the cultural rootedness of interpretation that any portrayal of men as actively asserting their supremacy ought to be read as humorous. She notes that, historically, "any prominent woman showing evidence of being able to function without a man is still considered threatening not only to patriarchal but also to family and social structures."[63] This may be why Vashti is deposed. According to Akoto, Vashti's actions show women's power at work in the empire and court.[64] Duran rejects the role of humor and laughter in her interpretation and claims that humor and laughter mute and color gender politics in general and the stories of Vashti's replacement and the abuse of the virgin girls specifically.[65]

In "Nice Girls Do," a carnivalesque Purim spiel, Danna Nolan Fewell underscores the comedy and violence woven throughout the text as well as orienting readers' attention to the

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[60] O'Connor, 58.
[61] O'Connor, 58.
[62] O'Connor, 62-64.
[63] Duran, "Gender Games and Wars," 74.
[64] Akoto, "Esther," 270.
[65] Duran, 74.

heteroglossic features (the multiple and often competing voices and vantage points) presented in the text. Fewell's piece has an all-female cast of characters who are preparing for a Purim festival by discussing the story of Esther. Fewell highlights issues such as sex and gender roles, gender bending, gender oppression, interfaith dialogue, adoption, secrecy, child enslavement, dismemberment, pageantry, racism, color associations with evil, sexual promiscuity, sexual abuse, the role of parents and churches in perpetuating and ignoring abuse, wisdom, humor, and the historical trauma of the Holocaust. In a comedic or humorous way, Fewell allows the characters to assess and address critical issues with which both female characters in the book of Esther and females in contemporary contexts are confronted.

This presentation allows for critiques of ideologies, institutions, and practices that perpetuate exploitation and other forms of injustice. In this way, the gender politics are not colored or muted and the sexual abuse is foregrounded in the story. In addition, Fewell foregrounds ethnic politics and oppression in contemporary contexts, which nudges readers to consider the ethnicity of the girls in the ancient text. In doing so, Fewell's interpretation raises questions about the roles of ethnicity, race, and geography in the ancient world and particularly racialized places—Africa and Asia—where the kidnapping and capture commences.[66]

Although humor has a serious purpose in postcolonial discourse as it creates the space for marginalized and minoritized voices to raises critiques and rebellion against colonial forces and colonial legacies, it can often reinforce the colonialist values being resisted. In addition, those who employ humor often write in ways that cause characters to conform to imperial values, as we see played out in the book of Esther. Written in a diasporic context to critique and challenge the Persian empire, the story's two major characters, Esther and Mordecai, not only coopt power to resist the empire's oppressive regime but also gain

[66] Fewell, "Nice Girls Do," 133–195.

prominent positions and enact violence against other groups, just as the empire had done to them. They are engrafted into the official state that they endeavored to upturn. Instead of mocking the culture that they endeavor to critique, they mimic the violence and oppression, which is a result of internalized oppression.

Writers utilizing humor often mock that which is ridiculous and/or exaggerated. However, as ridiculous and exaggerated as the story of Esther is, sexual trafficking represented therein has not been recognized. Indeed, it is often overlooked or missed altogether. The trafficking of an untold number of young virgin girls is not being identified or called out by readers and interpreters as ridiculous, exaggerated, or humorous; nor is it identified as ugly, vile, and senseless or as an act of corruption on the part of the Persian empire. Although countless girls being held captive by traffickers might seem like an exaggeration in the biblical narrative, this type of widespread abuse is prevalent even today. For instance, in 2013 and 2014, Boko Haram, known as the world's deadliest terrorist group, seized, imprisoned, and abused thousands of girls in Nigeria. Haram leaders raped and impregnated countless girls, forcing some to marry fighters in their camp. Thinking about this contemporary story of cultural trauma alongside the Esther narrative brings to light the damage to the integrity of Africana female bodies and spirits, and it articulates horror about all the victims who experienced kidnap, were held hostage by terror groups/colonial powers, and were exposed to brutal, and in some cases fatal, violence.

Interpreting this narrative through the lens of humor, many readers focus their attention on the threat of violent killings towards the Jewish population and the violent killings of their enemies as opposed to the violent systematic sexual assaults that are happening to the virgin girls, including the Africana girls. There are other social-political issues at play at the center of this story, namely how the empire constructs its identity around patriarchy, a gendered hierarchy, and extensive sexual exploitation. This construction of

identity and its by-products are in no way laughable. In her documentary *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am*, American novelist and professor Toni Morrison reflects on growing up in the 1940s and 1950s and her experience of encountering Black girls in books. She recounts, "In every book I read about young black girls … they were props, jokes, topsy … no one took them serious ever."[67] This tradition of perceiving Africana girls' and women's lives and experiences as funny, and of not taking acts of oppression and violence against them seriously, is why I use my interpreter's privilege to assess the biblical text utilizing the more serious framework of biblical horror.

If readers have not identified sexual trafficking in the narrative, how then can this systemic structure and oppression be critiqued and disrupted? We must start considering the psychological impact of not only colonialism but the intersection of patriarchy with colonialism and the sexual trafficking of Africana girls and women. Examining the convergence of these two traumatic experiences illuminates how gender is constructed and policed in colonial settings and how patriarchal cultures contribute to female marginalization and exploitation and support rape and trafficking cultures.

Secrecy and Hiding in the Book of Esther

Themes of secrecy and hiding are also central in Esther literature. Interestingly, both are important in trafficking discourse as they enable trafficking to persist. Mapfeka contends that the explanation for Mordecai entering Esther into the royal beauty contest and his instruction to keep her ethnicity a secret illustrate an irregularity in the narrative. The instructions precede the crises between Mordecai and Haman, a crisis that conjures memories of historical ethnic animosity detailed elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. As Mapfeka points out, when the king becomes aware of both Esther's and Mordecai's ethnic identity, he expresses no disdain.

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[67] Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, dir., *Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am* (New York: Magnolia Pictures, 2019).

There is therefore no clear indicator or explanation why these instructions are necessary. Mapfeka suggests that this element of the narrative points to how Mordecai perceives his need to negotiate life within a powerful imperial hegemony and how he is in such close proximity to the empire's power and glamour that he cannot resist its lure.[68]

Mapfeka writes that "the power of the empire corrupts solidarity in the colonized communities by drawing one part of the colonized community (e.g. the *assimilados*) to its centre and pushing the rest further out to the margins. For the select few 'becoming like the colonizer' confers clear advantage."[69] It is the power of the empire, and perhaps in Mordecai's case, access to colonial power, that corrupts his and the other male family members' solidarity with these virgin girls. Mordecai, however, is one of the select few who gains access to imperial power, then becoming like the colonizer when he ultimately becomes second-in-command in the Persian empire (6:10–11).

Esther is able to conceal her Jewishness from imperial authorities for a year and then gains the approval of the king. While doing so, argues Mapfeka, her level of assimilation must have been consummate. She also notes that Esther's vow to secrecy shows that assimilation alone is not good enough.[70] Esther's vow to secrecy attests to her internalization of the hegemonic insistence on the superiority of the empire and enhanced her chances at winning the contest, which led to her consequently living prosperously in the heart of the empire's power center.[71]

Esther and the virgin girls are not assimilating on their own volition, though. The empire is forcing them to endure a year-long process that transform them into girls fit to be a Persian queen. The girls go through a process of forced assimilation, wherein they are

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[68] Mapfeka, "Empire and Identity Secrecy," 86–87.
[69] Mapfeka, 91.
[70] Mapfeka, 93.
[71] Mapfeka, 93–94.

required to adopt the beauty standards, language, norms, customs, and traditions of the Persian Empire; this process effectively serves to eradicate their own rights, cultures, and traditions. Mapfeka overlooks the role of secrecy and silence in the female collectives' abuse and exploitation. Both secrecy and silence are capitalized upon and weaponized against the girls to facilitate sexual trafficking. It is not Esther's vow to secrecy that enhances her chances of becoming the next queen. Instead, she takes the advice of Hegai of how to sexually satisfy the king best and is chosen to replace Vashti. Her vow to secrecy at the demand of her male guardian enables the trafficking process to flow smoothly without resistance. Although Mordecai is not part of the imperial system that captures and exploits the girls, his instruction to Esther to conceal her identity advances the empire's plan; his participation illustrates how intricately patriarchy and control is woven into colonial and sexual trafficking systems.

Hiding is another theme that is prevalent both in the book of Esther and trafficking discourse. Not only is hiding what enables Esther to maneuver through the king's palace and subvert his power, but it also serves to mask the abuse of the girls presented in the second chapter. After the king's officials remove the girls from their homes, they are brought to his palace and hidden in harems away from family, friends, and the general public. They remain there at his disposal, as there is no indication in the text that any of these girls are ever reunited with their families. In fact, the text hints that virgins are gathered a second time even after Esther is chosen as the replacement queen and a banquet is given in her honor (2:19).[72]

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[72] This verse causes text-critical problems that have not been solved. One interpretation is that the verse is a parallel statement of 2:2–4; see Carey A. Moore, *Esther: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible, (New York: Doubleday, 1998). Another interpretation is that a second set of virgins are gathered after Esther was chosen as queen; see Elizabeth Groves, "Double Take: Another Look at the Second Gathering of Virgins of Esther 2:19a," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard Greenspoon (London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 91-110. Reference to a second gathering is absent in the Greek version of the story. although this verse is problematic and the interpretation of it uncertain, both interpretations reflect the

These girls remain hidden, not only in the king's palace but in the story world too; neither they nor Vashti are ever mentioned again.

Timothy Beal discusses the concept of hiding to critique gender roles and expectations; he applies to the text modern experiences of coming out to illuminate how individuals are marked and "Othered" so that hegemonic males can assert their own masculinity as superior. Beal asserts that the dynamics of hiding and revealing are key to political transformation in Esther, especially in relation to the modern tropes of closeting and coming out. He argues that the dynamics of hiddenness and coming out mark a sense of ambivalence with regard to what Jewishness is in the diaspora as opposed to what it was in Judah. For Beal, Jewish identity is debatable, porous, and mutable. Thus, he maintains Esther's coming out is a disclosure of identity convergences that are mutually incompatible and socially impossible.[73]

Honor and Shame in the Book of Esther

Biblical scholars Timothy Laniak and Lillian Klein assess the text through cultural views of honor and shame which characterize the context of the book of Esther. Laniak understands honor and shame as public categories of reputation that are to do with respect, status, and substance. He argues that one's honor and shame are impacted by one's (male) behaviors or the behavior of one's dependents, which would include wives, children, slaves, and property. Laniak maintains that the opening chapter reveals the king's honor is challenged by Vashti's disobedience;[74] it is not restored until Esther is made queen, as she becomes material capital

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king's ability to collect and exploit girls without resistance and his desire for a continuous supply of sex slaves.

[73] Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[74] Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, SBL Dissertation Series 165 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 41.

for him.[75] In his analysis of the first two chapters, Laniak focuses on the status, sovereignty, and superiority of the king. While Laniak notes that there is a relationship between honor and shame and social role obligations, his exclusive focus on Vashti's transgression ignores how Vashti, Esther, the virgin girls, and the eunuchs are transgressed and dishonored through sexual exploitation. Both Laniak and the ancient biblical society prioritize the honor and shame of men in power and minimize or overlook the shame of those under these men's authority. Further, Laniak argues that "to be good in the eyes of" and "to please" the king conveys emotional affect and worth.[76] He does not address the sexual implications behind these terms, nor does he consider how the loss of virginity leads to disgrace for the girls and the loss of their economic value.

Klein frames honor and shame in terms of sexual autonomy. She notes that, in many social structures of antiquity, only men can be fully autonomous and worthy of honor. Women can only achieve honor through shame, characterized by "deference and submission to male authority, docile and timorous behavior, hiding nakedness, sexual exclusiveness and modesty in attire and deportment."[77] Klein writes, "The modesty code of feminine shame requires discriminating women to deny sexual interests and to avoid men who are not kin, by not allowing themselves to be seen by men and acting and dressing to avoid drawing attention to their beauty." Klein points out that Vashti can relinquish her claim to honor in two ways: by abandoning her modesty and appearing in masculine spaces or by defying her husband's authority. She chooses the latter, asserting autonomy which undermines the king's autonomy and authority, thereby protecting her shame. Esther, on the other hand, reveals her beauty, which Klein emphasizes is not in accordance with her Jewish values. Klein points out that no

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[75] Laniak, 43.
[76] Laniak, 63.
[77] Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 96.

one questions the exposure required in the contest, because obedience to one's patrikin is more preferable in established communal values. Her overall analysis explores the shame of some female characters, thus moving beyond Laniak's analysis. However, Klein's analysis centers primarily on the major female characters. Similar to other scholars, she refers to the sexual exploitation of the girls as a beauty contest, and she minimally addresses the shame of the other virgin girls and the eunuchs, the latter of whom she describes as "feminized, nonautonomous 'males.'"[78] As feminized non-autonomous males, the eunuchs embody shame in their honor and shame culture.

Concerning the virgin girls, Klein writes, "The honor/shame of life in the king's harem may excuse the loss of shame the virgins suffer and even justify unchaste sex for a Jewess living in exile."[79] This observation reflects trends in modern trafficking, wherein certain places serve to entice victims of trafficking and validate their abuse, as the perception is that victims receive access to a better life. Both the palace in the narrative world and America in historical accounts of exploitation and displacement of African diasporic persons are perceived and articulated as resourceful places with opportunities for mobility. But, as Bechtel emphasizes, harem life is a poor substitute for freedom, home, and family for these girls.[80]

Sidnie Ann White Crawford suggests the palace is a place of security from which Esther leaves to confront danger. Asserting that the palace is a place of security ignores the fact that the palace has become the hub for the king's trafficking, which exposes victims to danger and abuse. Crawford also notes that Esther leads a secluded life in the royal harem.[81]

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[78] Klein, 102–103.
[79] Klein, 103.
[80] Bechtel, *Esther, Interpretation,* 31.
[81] Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther and Judith: Contrasts in Character," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard Greenspoon (New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), 65.

While she is sequestered along with the other virgin girls, she is not completely secluded from family, however, as Mordecai is able to communicate with her through messengers. None of the other girls' family members gain this type of access. Furthermore, only Esther has access to mobility and increased status. The other girls lose economic value; they are secluded from their families and kept in the harem after the king makes his selection, and, like Vashti, they are erased from the rest of the story. Similarly, during periods of enslavement, many African diasporic girls and women were raped by and became the property of their masters; they were separated from their families, and their stories were erased and excluded from historical accounts.

Honor and shame culture is a by-product of and exacerbated by colonialism. In the context of empire and diaspora, males often gain honor through the exertion and abuse of power and the facilitation of violence. Specifically, males and females in the book of Esther must navigate a nexus of honor and shame that is resolved by the subjugation, humiliation, and subsequent sexual exploitation of females. Notions of honor and shame are thus a source of conflict for males and females in imperial contexts. Males receive honor because of their ability to dominate females and other males and to exercise their power over them in order to control them. Males gain honor because of their embodiment of strength and their ability to define, govern, lead, and rule. They experience shame through resistance to their patriarchal domination and authority. This illuminates that shame and violence are inextricably bound together. Vashti and Esther produce shame for the king, his officials, and all the men when they resist. In our current context, many readers would interpret their resistance as honorable. But in their cultural milieu, Vashti's resistance in particular has horrendous consequences. The backlash for her resistance is the establishment of an exploitative system whereby of all the virgin girls throughout the king's provinces are sexually trafficked. Because their context is one that embodies colonial, patriarchal, and honor and shame cultures, there is an inherent

proclivity to have concern for the plight of the dominant males, not the female or eunuch collectives.

Violence in the Book of Esther

Finally, violence is a prominent theme treated in Esther discourse because of the blatant threat of violence to and enacted by the Jewish characters in the text. Many scholars focus on the violence of genocide and annihilation: the threat of genocide for the Jewish collective, the killing of Haman, his sons, and the killing of enemies of the Jewish community. Haman directs and pays for the annihilation of Jews in the empire after Mordecai refuses to bow to him. The king blindly allows an edict to be written, detailing their genocide. Later, after Esther reveals Haman's plot, the king allows her to create an edict that will enable the Jewish people to defend themselves. There is some debate around whether this edict allows the Jewish collective to defend themselves or permits them to proactively annihilate and destroy the "Other"—the attackers who "might attack them" (8:11). It is not clear if there is any real threat posed to the Jewish community or if the edict allows Jews in the empire to "stand their ground" in response to a potential threat. In the latter case, it can be argued that Jewish characters Esther and Mordecai appropriate imperial power and use it to abuse their enemies.

Bechtel maintains that Esther and Mordecai's preference would be the revocation of Haman's edict, "thus obviating any need for violence"; but since that is not an option, the counter edict ensures a fair fight. In addition, Bechtel claims that the second day of killing is to address a safety concern. She concludes that the massive killing of 75,000 people (Esth. 9:16) does not reflect violence on behalf of the Jewish collective; rather, it speaks to the amount of people in the empire who hated them.[82] Her assessment underscores that the story and many interpreters focus on anti-Jewish violence. In Bechtel's analysis, there is little space

[82] Bechtel, *Esther, Interpretation,* 74, 80.

to focus on violence directed at any other subject. This narrow lens in Esther scholarship causes us to continue to ignore and/or minimize violence perpetuated against other subjects, such as Vashti and the virgin girls in the text. In doing so, we violently erase their stories and histories.

Holocaust and genocide scholar Henry Knight calls attention to the legalization of violence in Esther and other parts of the Hebrew Bible. Specifically, he draws readers' attention to the "divinely sanctioned genocide"[83] of the Amalekite community in I Samuel. He notes that the law to kill Amalekites prevents us from identifying with them and gives us a license to continue to attack them. Knight argues that the mythic dimension of Amalek demonizes the Other, with whom we interact, and causes a misleading dichotomization that we must resist because it leads to the undoing of creation and the destruction of others' lives without remorse.[84]

Biblical scholar Francisco Javier Ruiz-Ortiz challenges the notion that the book of Esther glorifies violence and revenge. He argues that the book does not justify violence; rather, it shows the purpose of it. Ruiz-Ortiz highlights the characters' feelings and actions and how such feelings and actions interact with and manifests violence. He also emphasizes that all aggression is intentional and regulated by law. Further, Ruiz-Ortiz concludes that each act of violence has cumulative effects, resulting in the massive violence at the book's close.[85] My project illuminates that there is relentless violence throughout the text against multiple and ethnically diverse subjects who are often overlooked because interpreters tend to focus

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[83] Henry Knight, "Coming to Terms with Amalek: Testing the Limits of Hospitality," in *Confronting Genocide: Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Steven L. Jacobs (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 226.
[84] Knight, 223–236.
[85] Francisco-Javier Ruiz-Ortiz, *The Dynamics of Violence and Revenge in the Hebrew Book of Esther* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 229.

their analysis on the Jewish characters. Especially alarming is the objectification of and sexual violence against the non-Jewish females in the book.

Timothy Beal notes that gynocide, as well as genocide, is prevalent in the book of Esther.[86] Gynocide refers to the social and cultural phenomenon of killing girls and women. While the narrator does not mention the physical killing of Vashti or any of the other girls and women in the story world, the female collective may experience a metaphorical death when their agency is diminished and they "lose their life" by becoming prisoners and sexual slaves of the king. Ruiz-Ortiz does not critique the gender-based sexualized violence experienced by the virgin girls. Rather, he focuses his attention on the threat of cultural genocide experienced by the Jewish collective and other enactments of violence experienced by their enemies. Indeed, the book of Esther showcases the purpose of sexualized violence: capitalistic patriarchy, colonialism, and kyriarchy. A goal of this dissertation is to underscore that the aggression of this male-dominant class is intentional and regulated by law and has cumulative effects on the female collective. These effects are not limited to the characters represented in the text, but the narrated violence often elicits a response in contemporary readers of the story, especially members of the cultural/ethnic groups referenced in the text. The story can serve as a reminder of the sexualized trauma that members of the Africana cultural/ethnic collective experienced in more contemporary contexts at the hands of capitalistic, patriarchal, and colonial groups. It is important to note that there are diverse responses to violence and sexualized trauma. Not all responses are numbing or debilitating. For some readers, this story offers possibilities of hope and resistance to the painful reality of widespread sexualized and gender-based violence.

Nurses Janette Taylor, JoAnne Banks-Wallace, and Toni Tripp-Reimer propose the use of storytelling by nurse professionals to treat female survivors of abuse and intimate partner

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[86] Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 49.

violence, since health professionals are typically the first point of contact after abuse. They use the story of Vashti to teach about violence against women and the role of culture regarding the recognition, acceptance, and prevention of violence against women. The authors' focus is limited to Vashti's experiences of physical and emotional violence. If it is expanded to include an assessment of Esther and the virgin girls, Taylor, Wallace, and Reimer could also advocate to prevent sexual violence and teach about the impact of sexualized trauma on personal and communal health.[87]

Other scholars take up the sexual violence that is outlined in the text. For example, Old Testament scholar L. Julianna Claassens and political scientist Amanda Gouws utilize the book of Esther to discuss how patriarchal societies are responsible for multiple levels of sexual violence victimization in South Africa. They explore the relationship between patriarchy, violent masculinities, and the sexual exploitation and abuse of females.[88] Specifically, they acknowledge the sexual and psychological victimization of thousands of nameless girls in the book of Esther and the normalization of the violence enacted against females in ancient and contemporary contexts. They note similarities between the figures of King Ahasuerus and President Jacob Zuma, the latter of whom was accused of and tried for rape before he was elected as president of South Africa. The authors contend that hegemonic masculinities of all race groups employ violence as a resource. Further, they suggest that male sexual entitlement and control of women's sexuality is an inherent feature of dominant constructions of masculinity, which justifies and promotes rape culture.[89]

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[87] Janette Taylor et al., "Storytelling and Violence Against Women," *Association of Black Nursing Faculty Journal* 12, no. 2 (2001): 28–31.
[88] L. Juliana Claassens and Amanda Gouws, "From Esther to *Kwezi: Sexual Violence in South Africa after Twenty Years of Democracy," International Journal of Public Theology* 8, no. 4 (2014): 471–487.
[89] Claassens and Gouws, 485; Traci C. West highlights and critiques Jacob Zuma's problematic attitudes about rape, sexuality, and his victim-blaming statements during his trial for rape. She notes that Zuma's statements were reinforced by Christian doctrines, and he was ultimately acquitted. West argues that Zuma's victim blaming and the misogynistic

Conclusion

Throughout this section, I have illustrated that a considerable amount of scholarship on the book of Esther focuses on and assesses major characters such as Esther, Vashti, Mordecai, King Ahasuerus, and Haman. Sometimes characters are assessed as doublets to show convergences and divergences, but little attention is given to whom most people consider the minor characters: the virgin girls. Readers and interpreters have been conditioned to read over the virgin girls' plight, traumatization, and erasure from the rest of the narrative. They remain relegated to the background.

The many, often disparate, themes outlined in this chapter now invite a sustained consideration of how they interconnect and converge to expose the establishment and dynamics of sexual trafficking in the first two chapters of the book of Esther. The Persian empire exercises and abuses power to establish cultural and gender norms that socially, physically, and psychologically disenfranchise and displace females and ethnic minorities. The empire legally reduces both individual agency and the collective agency of female and ethnic groups when the king and his officials create laws to establish female inferiority, institute sexual trafficking, and order the cultural eradication of the Jewish collective. In addition, sexual exploitation through trafficking is masked through the use of euphemisms in the text and cover-up translations by interpreters, many of whom frame the abuse as a beauty pageant. While humor is a tool to mock oppressive regimes, many interpreters focus on the exaggerations in the text and the violence enacted by the Jewish collective against their enemies, while simultaneously disregarding the violent sexual exploitation of Esther, the virgin girls, and the eunuchs represented in the text. Sexual trafficking is further concealed by

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extremism by some of his supporters prolonged the trial, which was centered on gender-based violence. However, following Zuma's acquittal, various activist groups were galvanized into action in order to combat gender-based violence and rape-culture. See, Traci C. West, *Solidarity and Defiant Spirituality: Africana Lessons on Religion, Racism, and Engendering Gender Violence* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 170.

requirements of secrecy and hiding and is perpetuated by the honor and shame culture that is a characteristic of the ancient context in which the story takes place.

Much of the scholarship reflecting the female collectives' experiences of sexual exploitation and abuse focus almost exclusively on gender, giving little or no attention to the role ethnicity plays in their vulnerability to abuse. Sole focus on gender and gendered dichotomies encourages readers to evaluate gender expectations and deviations from these. It enables readers to determine how patriarchy relegates females and males to constrictive social spheres. More ample analysis is called for. Other biblical critical- methodologies expose the violence and exploitation of vulnerable subjects within the text but mainly focus on the Jewish collective as an ethnic group, as well as Vashti and Esther as the main female characters. In addition, some commentators have a tendency to ignore, silence, or marginalize the sexual exploitation as they opt to focus on the beautification process which they interpret as part of a contest. Attention to the intersections between gender, ethnicity, and class illuminates social and gender hierarchies that increase or diminish one's access to power, agency, and status, depending on one's placement amid the social strata. It also reveals that these types of intersecting oppressions make minoritized females in particular more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

These minoritized girls' experiences of trafficking and trauma will remain muted if we, as readers and commentators, continue to minimize and/or ignore their experiences in our various interpretations. Attention to intersectionality and the many voices of the characters in the book of Esther (even the silenced ones) affords a fresh interpretation that details the sexual trafficking of Black and brown girls. The application of intersectionality and polyvocality, specifically foregrounding ethnicity, clarifies the role of intersectional identity and intersectional oppression in sexual trafficking. Further, attention to the scope of the king's provinces and where the virgin girls are gathered from illuminates the intentional

targeting of African girls for sexual trafficking by the Persian empire. This parallels the intentional targeting, displacement, colonization, and sexual exploitation of Africana females that has been practiced throughout history. Experiences of sexual trafficking at the hands of colonial forces across time and space and in various ancient and contemporary contexts reflect collective cultural traumatization for Africana females. These repeated instances of dehumanization through sexualized trauma impact the collective identity, history, and memories of this group and even changes the very DNA of surviving generations. Not only do colonial powers determine and transgress geographical, bodily, and sexual boundaries but they contest and personally, collectively, politically, and psychologically alter ethnic and gendered identities by asserting superiority, repressing difference, and enforcing dependence.

I hope that the findings of this dialogical reading resonate with interpreters and illuminate the mechanics of sexual trafficking at the intersections of colonialism and patriarchy on a more conscious level. Utilizing hermeneutics of collective trauma and horror to read Esther allows for an ethically responsible and holistic interpretation of the biblical text, one that aids our ability to identify sexual trafficking in ancient and contemporary contexts and can galvanize us towards collective action that will critique gender hierarchies, patriarchy, and colonialism; resist biased laws that criminalize victims of sexual assault and exploitation; and resist rape culture and dismantle sexual trafficking systems around the world.

In the next chapter, I will outline how masculinity and femininity are constructed and contested across three types of bodies in the book of Esther: anatomical, socio-cultural and geopolitical/spatial bodies. I discuss the role of patriarchy and kyriarchy in constructing and enforcing masculinity and femininity. I then clarify how sexualized violence against Vashti in the first chapter intensifies in the second chapter when the virgin girls are captured and taken to the king's palace for the purpose of sex. Intensified sexual abuse and the institutionalized

and legalized gathering and exploitation of girls illustrate the collective and systematized nature of sexual trafficking. Finally, I situate my analyses of the book of Esther in a wider context of sexualized gendered bodies and gender-based violence in the prophetic materials of the Hebrew Bible.

Chapter 3: The Female Collective as the "Other" in the Book of Esther and the Feminization of Israel

> The whole of feminine history has been man-made. Just as in America there is no Negro problem, but rather a white problem; just as anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem, it is our problem; so the woman problem has always been a man problem.
>
> ~ Simone de Beauvoir [1]

Feminist and social theorist, political activist, and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir posits that women represent the quintessential expression of otherness. Because women represent the opposite of men, men differentiate and discriminate against women. Beauvoir writes, "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other."[2]

Beauvoir's observation illustrates how gender and gender differentiation are decisive factors in the male constructions and characterizations of the "Other"; she underscores that the demarcation of women as "Other" is a perception and assertion of male privilege, which itself is constructed. Beauvoir asserts, "one is not born, but becomes a woman."[3] Gender is a socially constructed and assigned aspect of identity. Men's self- definition and differentiation requires a contrast to another that devalues the Other relative to them. Philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler expounds on Beauvoir's formulation and argues that gender is the cultural meaning and form that the female body acquires and the variable modes of that body's acculturation. Stated differently, gender is a cultural construction imposed on identity

[1] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 144.
[2] Beauvoir, 18.
[3] Beauvoir, 301.

by "a personified system of patriarchy and phallocentric language which precedes and determines the subject itself."[4] Patriarchal societies and systems define and constrain norms that dictate and influence females' attitudes and actions and endeavor to prevent gender fluidity and freedom. The norms created and enforced by those embodying hegemonic masculinities alienate women, rendering them not only "other" but the subjugated, controlled other. Thus, gender is unnatural and polarizing.[5]

Focusing on women's bodies, Beauvoir further maintains that female embodiment has advantages and disadvantages. The female body is an ambiguous site as it embodies both oppression and freedom simultaneously. Women are simultaneously the object of society's gaze, oppressed by society, and free subjects. Consequently, women use their bodies as vehicles for freedom but also feel oppressed by them.[6] These observations become significant when considering the role that gender plays in the formulation of the "Other" in the book of Esther and in Ancient Near Eastern culture.

In this chapter, I will outline how gender is socially, culturally, and politically constructed and enforced throughout the first two chapters in the book of Esther by assessing how feminization and masculinization[7] are defined around three types of bodies in the text:

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[4] Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir's Second Sex," *Yale French Studies72* (1986): 36.
[5] Butler, 35.
[6] Beauvoir, *Second Sex*.
[7] Masculinity and femininity, often defined in relation to one another, describe gender relations, practices by which persons perform gender roles, and the effects of those performances on bodies, identities, and cultures. The modern concepts of femininity and masculinity are anachronistic when applied to the biblical world. However, a discussion of these concepts is relevant to understand the plot of the book of Esther and especially the bearing that these terms have on female collective identity. Attention to masculinity and femininity in the text clarifies the expected social roles that were ascribed to males and females. Neither of these terms are fixed but can become diversified as standards and norms around gender shift, as evidenced throughout the text. Analysis of these terms illuminates that hegemonic masculinity, which often intersects with colonialism, race, and national identity, occupies the hegemonic position in the pattern of gender relations that are exhibited in the book of Esther. This assertion of power associated with hegemonic masculinity has dire physical and psychological consequences for subordinate groups that fail to perform

anatomical bodies, socio-cultural bodies, and geopolitical/spatial bodies. I will show that, through imperial, patriarchal, and kyriarchal culture, males embodying hegemonic masculinity define, limit, and enforce gender roles and rules that position females as the subordinate "Other." Patriarchs/kings constitute a social-political body (institution) that delineates the power and agency that both males and females have over their bodies and actions in both private and public spheres. In addition, expanding on the notion of kyriarchal power, coined by biblical and feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, I will outline how patriarchs and other males embodying hegemonic masculinity also exercise power to define and control the bodies of non-hegemonic males, specifically eunuchs and the foreign family members of the virgin girls who were corralled and sexually trafficked. I will illustrate that males embodying hegemonic masculinity, that is patriarchs, kings, and other members of the king's court, organize and socially produce bodies that they then coerce to do what they define as socially acceptable. In this way, patriarchy and kyriarchy become the institutionalization of male dominance over women, children, and other gender-bending persons.

Defining Patriarchy and Kyriarchy

Patriarchy means "rule of the father"[8] and reflects the historical tradition of fathers ruling in all sectors of society encompassing the personal and political in both private and public spheres. Patriarchy is thus an impression of sexual differentiation that privileges males over females. Feminist biblical scholar Alice Laffey writes, "Patriarchy, closely associated with hierarchy, is a way of ordering reality whereby one group, in this case the male sex, is

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masculinity and femininity according to how it is constructed by those setting the standards.
[8] *A Dictionary of Gender Studies*, comp. Gabriele Griffin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), s.v. "patriarchy," https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191834837.001.0001/acref-9780191834837-e-287?rskey=JXCMBo&result=288.

understood to be superior to the other, female sex" and is characterized by subtle oppression.[9] Laffey also points out that sex-role stereotyping, or the delineation of roles that females can take on, makes certain attitudes, types of behavior, and occupations stereotypically acceptable for females while denying to women other behaviors considered appropriate only for males.[10] Feminist biblical scholar Carol Meyers adds that patriarchy as the social structure of ancient Israel is also echoed in texts from ancient Greece and Rome; she asserts that fathers were all powerful, controlling everything and everyone.[11] Meyers, however, also argues that patriarchy is not an accurate description of ancient Israel, and she argues for a move beyond patriarchy to heterarchy—the notion that concedes the existence of hierarchies but does not examine them in linear terms wherein Israelite women were dominated by males in all spheres of life.[12]

Biblical passages throughout the Old Testament reflect that women contributed to and held limited household, economic, and political power,[13] as evidenced in the book of Esther. Both Vashti and Esther have access to material resources and power as queens. They are both able to make decisions, yet they are not equal to the males in Persian society. Male characters in the text dictate and control the activities and actions of Vashti, Esther, and all females. Further, severe and detrimental consequences accompany the assertion of female agency, especially when asserted in resistance to male desire and male-dictated laws. Vashti, Esther, the virgin girls, and the king's other wives and concubines are not only gendered bodies;

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[9] Laffey, *Introduction*, 2.
[10] Laffey, 2.
[11] Carol Meyers, "Patriarchy and the Hebrew Bible," Bible Odyssey, accessed September 29, 2019, http://www.bibleodyssey.org/passages/related-articles/patriarchy-and-the-hebrew-bible.
[12] Carol Meyers, "Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 1 (2014): 8–27.
[13] See, for example, the capable wife of Prov. 31:10–31, Deborah (Judg. 4), Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11–12; 1 Kings 1), Queen Sheba (I Kgs 10; 2 Chron. 9, the midwives, sister and mother of Moses, and the Pharaoh's daughter (Exod. 1–2).

Esther and the virgin girls specifically are highly fluid ethnic and social bodies sexualized under the tutelage of patriarchy and empire. In fact, the first two chapters of the book of Esther, written from a male perspective, reflect males' experiences, fears, and shame, while females are ancillary characters who cause or have the potential to cause shame for males, as noted by Memucan, a male representative of the imperial court (Esth. 1:16–20).

Meyers further notes that patriarchy focuses on gender, which obscures other inequalities including race/ethnicity, social class, and/or age. Schüssler Fiorenza, who understands gender as both a sociopolitical institution and ideological representation, notes that structures of domination are not only patriarchal but kyriarchal. Schüssler Fiorenza posits that the intersection of ethnic, class, gender, colonial, and heterosexual relations of domination make up these domination structures.[14] Defining kyriarchal power, Schüssler Fiorenza describes and differentiates power in terms of the status of freeborn lord (*kyrios*) or lady (*kyria*) and in terms of class, colonial, and racial status. She notes the institutionalization of kyriarchy as an empire or a democratic political form of ruling that excludes all freeborn and slave wo/men from full citizenship and decision-making powers.[15] Therefore, colonization, race, and class are intersectional modes of domination and oppression and thus foregrounded in kyriarchal power, unlike in analyses of patriarchal power.[16]

Intersecting factors such as placement at the top of the social strata, hegemonic masculinity, race/ethnicity, class, and colonialism afford the Persian empire the power to dominate and oppress the female collective throughout the entire book of Esther, especially in the first two chapters. Not only do males who embody hegemonic masculinity and represent the empire dominate and oppress the female collective, but the king uses his authority and

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[14] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Congress of Wo/men: Religion, Gender and Kyriarchal Power* (Cambridge: Feminist Studies in Religion Books, 2016), 43.
[15] Schüssler Fiorenza, 50.
[16] Schüssler Fiorenza, 49.

power to subjugate, marginalize, and sexually exploit the eunuchs and family members of the kidnapped girls. Alpha males, or those embodying hegemonic masculinity, dominate males exemplifying non-hegemonic masculinity within social, political, and economic systems.

The Persian colonial system represented in the book of Esther reflects a hierarchy whereby those who are freeborn and embodying hegemonic masculinity (the king, his officers, ministers, officials, military personnel, governors, nobles, sages, commissioners) are at the top, followed by the eunuchs, other colonized males, then females. Colonizers disenfranchise, marginalize, and emasculate other males and nations through subjugation. For example, Mordecai, who represents Israel, exercises agency and exerts some level of power and authority over Esther. However, the king legally requires him and all other males to bow before Haman (3:2–3). The requirement for colonized males to bow before Haman is evidence of their subjugation and marginalization. Mordecai's refusal to comply results in Haman's plot and pronouncement of cultural genocide against Jews.

Because of their emasculation through castrated genitalia, eunuchs are often perceived as embodying an "in-between" gender. In the story world, they function as intermediaries, those whose role is to serve in-between the males embodying hegemonic masculinity and the females. The eunuchs are brought to the palace to attend to the king. Their transport to the palace is a form of subjugation and emasculation, since "attending to" is a euphemism for serving as the king's bedfellows. Similarly, the virgin girls are taken from their parents' and guardians' homes and are forcibly brought to the king's palace to sexually attend to the king. Both the eunuchs and Mordecai struggle to navigate the intersections of kyriarchy, patriarchy, and empire in ways that resonate with but are still also fundamentally different from the female collective.

In addition, those embodying hegemonic masculinity suppress the ethnic identities of eunuchs and females, either by choice or force. On one hand, the narrator conceals the ethnic

identities of the eunuchs. On the other hand, Mordecai instructs Esther to conceal her identity (2:10). Narrative concealment of ethnicity materializes in other ways throughout the story. First, there is no reference to the ethnicity of Vashti. Second, there is a reference to geographical locations from which the virgin girls are taken (from India to Ethiopia, 1:1) but this is not repeated when the narrator introduces the girls at the beginning of chapter two. The narrator simply reveals that the commissioners gather the virgin girls from all the king's provinces (2:3). However, the narrator's failure to reference the names of those locales makes it easy to gloss over them as ethnic markers.

Further, class status both contributes to and results from kyriarchal oppression. Vashti is a queen, yet she is not exempt from the king's domination, control, or sexual exploitation. In fact, not only does the king dominate and control Vashti, but other members of the male collective contribute to determining her fate after she asserts her agency. The same is true for Esther when she replaces Vashti as queen. The same set of males and the laws promulgated by males govern Esther's agency and actions. In addition, the narrator associates Vashti and Esther with the best places in the king's palace, given their social standing within the sexualizing and trafficking infrastructure. The narrator reveals in 2:9 that, because Esther pleases Hegai, he advances her to the best place in the king's harem and provides her cosmetic treatments, her portion of food, and seven chosen maids, thus evidencing her upward mobility. It is interesting that Esther receives enhanced social status and shifts to the best location in the harem before the king sexually exploits her and she becomes the replacement queen. One would ask why or how Esther pleases the eunuch. What does she do to please Hegai, and receive this treatment? Does her beauty alone please the eunuch? Or could this shift in Esther's social and economic status signal that, even though the eunuchs experience emasculation by full or partial castration, they can manipulate authority and power to exploit the virgin girls sexually as well? One must wonder whether the virgin girls

experience multiple acts of sexual exploitation since Esther pleases Hegai (2:9) and wins the favor and devotion of the king such that he sets the royal crown upon her head (2:17). It is in this highly sexualized space that Esther and the virgin girls gathered from India to Ethiopia come to embody another exiled community as an empire generates a trafficked ethnic-gendered-classed collection of bodies who are all struggling to survive.

Last, Schüssler Fiorenza notes that language is gendered and works to socially position persons. Thus, females are doubly invisible in gendered language systems. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that biblical interpreters must consciously deconstruct the language of imperial domination so as not to re-inscribe anti-wo/man language and language of domination, control, and subordination. This language is performative and historical; it informs perceptions and actions, and it exerts power over females in its expression. Schüssler Fiorenza maintains, "The intersection of race, class, sexuality, nation, and religion construct what it means to be a 'wo/man' differently in different sociopolitical and cultural contexts."[17] I will now turn to assess how masculinity and femininity are constructed and contested within the narrative context of the text. Attention to the embodiment of gender helps us understand how notions of gender are employed, contested, and dislocated in diasporic and imperial settings.

Masculinity and Femininity in the Book of Esther

The assertion of male as subject and female as object, and thus "Other," reflects the norms of the social milieu of the book of Esther. In fact, issues of gender confront the readers in the very first chapter, as it opens with the narrator revealing that males and females gather at different banquets separated by gender. The narrator gives elaborate descriptions about the king and his officials while giving briefer details about Queen Vashti and the other females at

[17] Schüssler Fiorenza, 49.

her banquet. The narrator introduces the king and offers details of his vast empire. Ahasuerus rules over 127 provinces, is in the third year of his reign, and gives a 180-day banquet for all of his officers and ministers, who also embody hegemonic masculinity. The narrator provides further details about the social status of king's guests—army men, nobles, and governors—and the king himself: the "great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty" (1:4). After 180-day banquet culminates, a shorter seven-day banquet begins, wherein all the men in Susa are present and permitted to drink without restraint. In addition, the narrator gives elaborate descriptions of the interior décor of the king's palace (1:1–8). These descriptions reflect the embodiment of masculinity: the ability to rule, control, and dominate; elaborate material possessions; and the ability to drink excessively.

Conversely, the narrator introduces Vashti in one verse (1:9), revealing her name, her status as queen, and her decision to host a banquet for the women in the king's palace. Although the narrator relegates Vashti's identity to only one sentence, the details reflect that Vashti may represent multiple gender/feminine embodiments—physical, social, and geopolitical—as the host of her own separate banquet and therefore uncontrolled and free, as Beauvoir notes about female embodiment. Vashti lives, acts, and moves inside the king's palace, but she functions as an independent person, a position that is audacious and dangerous for a female in this highly hegemonic masculine space. It is therefore possible that Vashti, a gender-bending person, embodies an element of masculine fragility which elicits such a strong response to her assertion of independence and later resistance.

The narrator also reveals that the king hosts all the men in Susa and discloses the names of the seven eunuchs and the positions of all the other males in the story world. However, the narrator fails to give readers any details about Vashti's background, family, or other aspects of her identity, including her ethnicity. The lack of personal information functions to narratively erase Vashti before the king legally erases her later in the narrative.

The lack of details also functions as a foreshadowing of Vashti's fate. Two other examples of narrative erasure illuminate the commitment to patriarchy and kyriarchy on the narrator's behalf.

While the narrator lists the names of all the king's eunuchs and sages, the females at Vashti's party remain nameless. And while multiple men are given voice, Vashti never speaks. Thus, the text constructs Vashti and the other women's gender status through narrative silence and erasure, which serves as the first step towards the sexual exploitation that follows in chapter 2. Sexual and sexualized violence thus begins with narrative silencing and includes a sexualized gaze, whereby the majority of the females are detached from named and articulate communities.

As the plot unfolds, that narrator reveals that the king commands seven eunuchs to bring Vashti before him, a command with which she refuses to comply. He summons her to show off her beauty because she is fair to behold (1:11). We learn only from the narrator that Vashti resists being put on public display; she does not voice her resistance (1:10-12). I juxtapose this with the vocalization of the king's official Memucan, who speaks while Vashti, the queen, remains mute throughout the first chapter.

Vashti refuses to come when the king demands for her to do so. Her actions enrage the king, denoted by the Hebrew *chemah ba'ar*—she causes his anger to burn within (1:12). As a result, Memucan proposes that the king create an inalterable royal decree to banish Vashti, no longer referencing her as the queen, and to give her royal position to one "better than" she. At first reading, the meaning of "better than" appears ambiguous. One may interpret that "better" indicates one more beautiful that Vashti, since it is her beauty that the king desires to show off when he demands Vashti to appear before his audience of males. But since the conversation is about disobedience, we can conclude that Memucan means to give Vashti's royal position to someone who will obey the king and accept her subordinate position to men.

The Hebrew word *tov* means “pleasant” or “agreeable.” Therefore, Memucan is suggesting that the king replaces Vashti with someone who will agree with him and not buck up against him or, perhaps more importantly, against the collective of males in this kyriarchal system of domination. Memucan frames Vashti’s choice and agency as both personal and political disobedience, punishable by law. The expectation that females acquiesce to the demands of the king and other male subjects is not natural, however. It is legislated and promulgated by inebriated men, which reflect that the expectation and subsequent law is a product of fraudulent and distorted masculinity.

Anatomical Bodies

The story presents male anatomical bodies as strong bodies that forcefully gaze upon and control female and feminized bodies. Although there are no physical descriptions of male bodies, we can infer that the physical bodies of the hegemonic males in the text are not castrated like the eunuchs. The narrator describes those embodying hegemonic masculinities more so in terms of their social and cultural positions and roles. These males embody more traditional roles in the story world; they have access to, and are in closer proximity to, the king than the eunuchs and the females. The narrator describes females, however, as having “beautiful” or “fair” bodies: Vashti is fair to behold which is why the king summons her to show the men her beauty (1:11); the servants of the king suggest gathering and bringing beautiful young virgins to the harem (2:2); and Esther is fair and beautiful (2:7) and admired by all who see her (2:15).

Although we do not know the age of Vashti, the other females foregrounded in the second chapter have adolescent virgin bodies. Based on the servants’ speech, the girls are captured because of their virginal, ethnic, and gendered statuses. Moreover, the speech implies that many of the girls who are gathered are colonized, thus they have a lower-class status than the males facilitating the sexual trafficking. On two separate occasions, there is an

isolation of female bodies. In the first chapter, there are two separate banquets based on gender. In the second chapter, after the virgin girls are brought to the palace, girls are women are sequestered into different harems based on their status as wives or concubines. Although the females' anatomical bodies are held in separate spaces that are further away from the king and his male counterparts, in both chapters, there is a desire by the males to gaze upon the females' beautiful, sexualized bodies. That desire precedes and leads to the establishment of sexual trafficking.

There is limited information about the anatomical bodies of the eunuchs in the text. The term "eunuch" generally refers to a male whose body has been defaced through genital mutilation. They are either fully or partially castrated. The narrator reveals that the seven named eunuchs (1:10) function as intermediaries between the males and the females, while the seven sages are "next to" the king (1:14). Therefore, spatially, the eunuchs' bodies shift between immediate vicinity to and further distance from the king as they go back and forth between the king's quarters and the quarters of the women. Two other eunuchs, Hegai and Shaashgaz, are in charge of the wives and concubines, who are situated in harems away from the king's primary residence. Bigthan and Teresh guard the king's *saph* (2:21), which is translated as "threshold" in the NRSV; this Hebrew word also signifies a sill, doorpost, or gate.[18] The narrator reveals that Mordecai is at the king's gate when he learns of Bigthan and Teresh's plot. Whether at the gate, a doorpost, or other threshold, the eunuchs are described as being further from the king spatially than his sages, who are described as "those next to him" in 1:14. Because of their socio-cultural roles, the anatomical bodies of the eunuchs are not as physically close to the king as his army men, officials, minister, nobles, governors, and sages.

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[18] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, James Strong, and Wilhelm Gesenius, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), entry 5605. (Hereafter, I will use the abbreviation *BDB* when citing this lexicon.)

However, the king orders the anatomical bodies of both females and the eunuchs to be brought closer to him when he desires their bodies for sexual pleasure. Therefore, he perceives the anatomical bodies of the female and eunuch collectives as exploitable bodies for the consumption of imperial and patriarchal subjects.

Socio-cultural Bodies

As the plot develops, masculine imperial subjects set the expectations and norms for masculine and feminine behaviors. When Vashti refuses and resists the king's exploitation, the king consults sages who are well versed in the law. Memucan, in particular, cites Vashti's disobedience as an affront to the king, to all the officials, and to all the men in all the provinces of the king (1:16). In addition, Memucan claims that Vashti's behavior will incite an insurrection amongst the other women and cause them to look upon their husbands with contempt. The males in the story perceive Vashti's unwillingness to come at the king's command as disobedience and a threat to not only the king and his empire but to the entire male collective. Their actions toward Vashti define and assert that those who are constructed as feminine are to be submissive to the demands of the king and other males/masculine subjects.

The narrator and Memucan condition readers to know Vashti by her deed: her resistance and her potential to threaten, disobey, and dismantle patriarchal and imperial rule. The story is silent on other aspects of her identity. The narrator presents Vashti without a voice and gives no other identifying information such as her genealogy or history. However, the narrator gives identifying details for the king, disclosing how many provinces he rules over (127), the geographical scope of those provinces (from India to Ethiopia), that his throne is in Susa, and that he is in the third year of his reign (1:1–3). The narrator further details many officers and eunuchs by name and their roles in service to the king. Throughout the first chapter, the king hosts (1:3), speaks/commands (1:8, 10), seeks counsel (1:13, 15), and

creates laws (1:22). While readers learn of his actions mostly through the narrator, he speaks in 1:15: “According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?” Throughout all this, Vashti speaks no words at all.

In a separate feminine space, Vashti is inaccessible to the men and denies them access to her by refusing to enter the masculine space/banquet to which the king summons her. Vashti therefore poses a threat to masculine, patriarchal, imperial, and kyriarchal hegemony. The men perceive that they have lost ownership of Vashti and their ability to dominate and control all women because Vashti undermines the king through disobedience before an audience of women by asserting her right to control her body and sexuality. Her resistance illustrates bodily and sexual autonomy, which Memucan perceives will inspire other women to rebel. Memucan sees her actions, not as a personal issue between a husband and wife, but as a public and intentional act of resistance against the entire male collective. He draws on emotions to influence the actions of the other men, especially the king, suggesting Vashti’s actions present a universal threat to men that will cause the women to look at their husbands with contempt (1:17).

The Hebrew term for contempt, *bizzayown* appears in the story of David and Queen Michal in 2 Sam. 6, where the narrator describes Michal as “despising” David for dancing in a public space in the city, in front of his handmaidens. Queen Michal describes David’s dancing as vulgar and chastises him for his actions. In addition, the narrator reveals that Michal does not have children until the day of her death (2 Sam. 6:16–23). In both narratives, not only do males create spaces for a sexualized gaze, but these two stories illuminate intersections between contempt, female audiences, and female resistance. On the one hand, Memucan fears that female resistance and insubordination before an audience of other females will lead to contempt and further resistance. On the other hand, David’s dancing

before a female audience whom Michal refers to as “his servant’s maids” (2 Sam 6:20) causes her to both look upon him with contempt and resist his control and domination. In addition, Michal seemingly refuses to have a baby, which is one of the greatest sources of honor for women in this ancient society. She, like Vashti, shakes and shames the king through her assertion of bodily and sexual autonomy as she refuses to follow and embody the gender scripts and roles determined for her by males.

In both narratives, males occupy open spaces while women occupy private spaces. Ahasuerus is in the garden's court in his palace (Esth. 1:5) and David is in the open city (2 Sam. 6:16) while Vashti and the women are in Ahasuerus’s palace (Esth. 1:9) and Michal is inside of David’s palace (2 Sam. 6:16, 20). These details expose ideologies that women should be relegated to private contexts and spaces such as the home, where they fulfill domesticated roles, even though both Michal and Vashti are queens. It further asserts men belong in public, open spaces, directing the course of events and enforcing difference. While Ahasuerus summons Vashti to become the object of the male gaze, David is the object of not only Michal’s gaze but also the gaze of his handmaidens and all the people in the city. Even though Michal is not the object of David’s male gaze, she and Vashti have the same fate because of their resistance: narrative erasure. The author writes Michal out of the story similar to how the author of Esther writes Vashti out of the book. Ironically, the next female that enters David’s story is Bathsheba, who not only becomes the object of David’s gaze as he stares at her bathing from his roof, but she experiences sexual exploitation much like the virgin girls who follow Vashti’s banishment and erasure. David notes that Bathsheba is beautiful, then he sends messengers to fetch her and has sex with her (2 Sam. 11:1–4). The parallels between the two stories are striking and illuminate the role that kyriarchy plays in the sexual abuse and exploitation of females; these parallels further highlight forced sexual interactions between patriarchs/kings and girls and women with lower social status.

We should juxtapose how the narrator introduces Vashti to readers with the introduction of the male characters. The narrator describes Vashti with limited markers of her identity, notes that she is hosting an independent banquet, and describes her resistance to male dominance. More detailed information is provided for the male characters. The narrator describes their titles, which emphasizes their embodiment of status power, reports the king's great wealth and splendor, notes that some men are well versed in law and custom, and details their proximity and access to the king.

In addition, those embodying hegemonic masculinities demarcate and regulate performances of masculinity and femininity. This is especially clear in the first chapter. Memucan, one of the king's sages, assumes that Vashti's defiance of her husband's command will inspire contempt among the other women. He suggests that the king depose Vashti to prevent the other women from rebelling against their husbands. In this example, not only does Memucan advise the king about how he should respond, but he simultaneously instructs the king on how perform masculinity (put the woman in her place/displace her) and how to make women perform femininity (obedience to males). Memucan's assertion of an assumption and the subsequent recourse of the king prove exceptionally dangerous for the girls and women in the story world. Memucan's projection of contempt on the female collective produces consequences, not only for Vashti but also for the virgin girls who are captured and sexually exploited in the second chapter. The lesson of obedience is reinforced in chapter 2, as Hegai advises Esther about what she should do when she "goes in to the king."

Memucan's reaction leads to violent erasure. Because he convinces the males to perceive Vashti as a problem, agitator, and nuisance who brings shame and embarrassment upon the entire male collective, the king banishes her, erasing her through legislation. Memucan proclaims, "If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be

written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she" (1:19). She is and presents a problem that must be solved and corrected. The male collective publicly critique and punish her behavior, quickly demote her socially, and exile her altogether. They displace her from a familiar context, with its resources and wealth, to oblivion. Vashti appears comfortable in her body; therefore, she resists the exploitation of it. Her act of resistance makes the males uncomfortable in their bodies, causing them to experience a sense of threat that exposes the fragility of their masculinity. Vashti's actions illuminate Beauvoir's observation that females co-exist simultaneously both as free agents and as bound by occupying the position of object of the male gaze. Although Vashti is traumatized through silence, exploitation, and expulsion, her punishment frees her from the exploitative gaze of the men. After banishment, we can only hope that she is free to define and embody femininity as she chooses.

Esther's character is constructed as passive. Mordecai takes her in as a daughter because her parents are deceased; the king takes her—through his commissioners and by placing her under the care of Hegai— as a sex trafficking victim. In addition, Esther receives instructions from Mordecai to conceal her Jewish identity and is advised by Hegai what to take into the king's bedroom to win his approval. That Esther is exiled, orphaned, Jewish, and female reflects her status as an object who, like Vashti, becomes exchanged by males within the story world. Even after Esther is chosen as queen, the king gives a banquet in her name to all his officials and ministers who are males, grants a holiday, and gives out gifts. But the banquet that bears her name and celebrates her elevated status as queen seemingly excludes Esther (2:18). Moreover, Esther's first speech to the king is in the name of Mordecai. She too is a means of identification and communication between the king and another man, bringing them closer together, as did Vashti.

Because there is no threat to the Jewish collective at this point in the narrative, it is unclear why Mordecai instructs Esther to hide her ethnic identity. The narrator reveals Esther's Jewish name, Hadassah, but references her only by her Persian name, Esther, throughout the rest of the narrative. Mordecai sees ethnicity as a liability and gender as an exploitable asset. As a result, he instructs Esther to divest herself of her ethnic otherness. Esther's identity confluence in the Persian story world is parallel to Moses's identity confluence while in Egypt. Similar to the book of Esther, Moses's story is one that reflects the plight of exiled Israel under colonial rule. Ethnic confluence under imperial domination may be necessary to survive imperial violence and exploitation as a member of an ethnic-cultural group. Whatever the reason for Mordecai's instruction, the international gathering of ethnic exiled bodies (2:6) ensures that questions of gender and ethnicity becomes paramount in the intersection of patriarchy and empire.

Analogously, the beautification process that Esther and the virgin girls endure serves to strip away ethnic difference, transforming them into "Persian" women. They are legally forced to embody good hygiene, undertake a year of perfume and oils along with cosmetic treatments, and please the king sexually. Biblical scholar Anne Mareike Wetter posits that the beauty treatments the virgin girls undergo are *rites-de-passage*, wherein the girls' social statuses are irreversibly changed. Through these rites-de-passage, the empire disconnects the girls from an earlier point in the social structure and puts them into a liminal, ambiguous state where formal social ties are dissolved; the girls are then transformed and stabilized by the new social structure, the empire.[19] The empire designed the beautification process to cut off all prior social ties and prepare the girls for life in the royal harem, where they are expected to be passive and obedient.[20] Wetter writes,

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[19] Anne Wetter, "In Unexpected Places: Ritual and Religious Belonging in the Bookof Esther," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36, no. 3 (2012), 323.
[20] Wetter, 326.

> I would argue that something similar is the case in the book of Esther, and that the whole cosmetic extravaganza just constitutes the trimmings of a process that goes much deeper—so much deeper, in fact, that it creates new persons. The girls are participants in a ritual that involves 'only' their bodies but ultimately changes their identity. Both on the level of content (an extended period of time, minutely prescribed treatments, the impression that the girls are part of a 'mass product', highly regulated proceedings regarding the encounter with the king, and finally the irreversible move into the harem) and on the level of language (complex sentence structure, repetition of verbs of movement one place to another), there are strong indications that the treatment of the girls can be understood as a rite-de-passage.[21]

According to this argument, the mechanics of sexual trafficking are ritualized and legalized in the text. To become queen, Esther has to align herself with the empire's selfhood, embody Persian-ness, and display proper humility and reverence for the Persian king and his empire. It is not until she undergoes this rite of passage that she is transformed into a proper "Persian queen." She obeys the sexual advice that she receives from Hegai, gains the favor and devotion of the king, and becomes his wife while the other girls become his concubines, eternal slaves to his abuse, control, and sexual exploitation. The presentation of the males and females throughout the first two chapters of the book of Esther uphold female dependence on and inferiority to men. As socio-cultural bodies, feminine bodies are regulated by males, silenced, and must give honor to their husbands. All the female characters are controlled and dominated by the king and his male counterparts: Vashti, Esther, the virgin girls, and his other wives and concubines. They are subjected to the authority of the king and his officials and commissioners (1:13; 2:3) and to the charge of eunuchs Hegai (2:3) and Shaashgaz (2:14).

In addition, females either have suppressed or silenced voices and are regarded for their beauty, virginity, and/or chastity. The virgin girls, specifically, are valued and sought because of their adolescent virgin (therefore economically valuable) bodies. Their bodies are orphaned and adopted bodies, displaced and exiled bodies. Some females have higher socio-economic class statuses: Vashti and Esther are queens; there are noblewomen of Persia and

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[21] Wetter, 326.

Media (1:18); and the king has other wives and concubines. Other females, such as many of the virgin girls, are from a lower socio-economic class. No matter their socio-economic status though, the male collective treats all females like a subordinate class. Certain females may have some degree of power and agency, as noted by their social class, their position as queens, and their ability to make choices. But that agency and power is often trumped by male power. In addition, there is often backlash when a female exercises her agency and uses her voice, because in the ancient and narrative context of the text, females should not cause psychological or emotional injury or bring shame upon their male counterparts.

Besides being subjected to male control and domination, females often inhabit private spaces where males are absent. Vashti is in a private space (hosting her own banquet) inside the king's palace until the king commands the eunuchs to bring her to his banquet. His guests are exclusively male and gathered in the open garden court. In the second chapter, the commissioners bring the virgin girls to the king palace and tuck them away in the harem where they are passed back and forth between the harems and the king's bedroom—all private, secluded spaces in the king's home. They all become the sexual property of the king and exist almost only to have sex with/please him. Not only are the females presented as inferior to the males, but they must also depend on the eunuch Hegai to gain insightful information on how to please the king and advance in the palace. Their experiences of sexual exploitation are a result of, and function as, a catalyst for power struggles between males and females. The female collective's treatment by males, especially Vashti's punishment, serves as a symbol of defeat and rejection. Similarly, the virgin girls are dismissed from the king's bedroom and, if not called back, experience another form of rejection: they are sent to the harem of concubines after the king selects Esther as queen. The king's love for and devotion to Esther more than all the other women and virgins (1:17) compounds the physical rejection experienced by the other females.

Males embodying conventional masculinity regulate the bodies of females and eunuchs. Throughout the first chapter, males have inebriated, vocal bodies that dominate and control feminine and feminized bodies. Persian and other ethnic male bodies are all gathered in one place. They are males of higher socioeconomic standing: the king, army, nobles, governors, sages, all the men in Susa. They are members of the ruling and elite class. They represent military prowess and potency—the ability to dominate and defeat. Once assembled, the king commands the body of Vashti be brought to him, also forcing the bodies of eunuchs to escort her so that other hegemonic males can gaze upon her. The king, his servants, and his commissioners all conspire and institutionalize sexual trafficking when they gather and collect virgin girls for sexual exploitation. The king can solicit help in this process, a benefit of colonial authority, whereas the entire female collective remains helpless throughout the entire story. No one comes to their defense.

Not only do these males hold physical and psychological power and control over the female collective, but they embody legal authority as well. The sages know (1:13) and create laws (1:19–22) that disenfranchise feminine bodies. They are organizers and advisors; they are wise, dominant, autonomous, controlling, and even hold the power to determine the grounds for and implement the king's divorce. The king and his officials exert dominance over women and the eunuchs. We should therefore associate them with violence, especially sexual violence, and conquest. As Timothy Beal writes,

> In all this, Vashti is treated exclusively as an object of exchange between men: she is to be brought by the eunuchs and looked upon by the king and the other men for pleasure. She is a means to identification between the king and the other men, bringing them closer together and providing their subjective position in the center with even greater definition. They require her as object obliged to enable one another.[22]

[22] Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 20–21.

As Beal notes, the king/male subject requires a special object to bounce off to remind him of how solid he is; however, Vashti's willful absence and refusal "throws a wrench" into his masculine machinery.[23] As a result, Vashti becomes abject, that which "disturbs identity, system, and order [and] does not respect borders, positions or rules."[24] Neither subject nor object within the social and symbolic order, she is repulsed and pushed outside of its boundaries to restore proper gender hierarchy.[25] Similar to Vashti, the virgin girls are objectified and exchanged between men. They are taken from their fathers and/or guardians and their homes by commissioners, at the request of eunuchs, and brought to the king's palace where they are placed in the custody of another eunuch until such time for them to advance to the king's bedroom. Afterwards, they are sent into the custody of another eunuch. But unlike Vashti, the virgins cannot protest or resist because their abuse is legalized and regulated by the threat of male backlash to their actions.

Not only do the males exhibiting hegemonic masculinity in the text hunt and conquer females, but when the girls and women slight or challenge masculinity, the male response is to avenge or retaliate. Men protect their honor at any cost, even if that means disparaging, deposing, devirginating, debasing, displacing, or defiling all the females under the king's imperial rule. The text delineates that the embodiment of masculinity further includes the expression of anger and outrage, strength, legal authority, vocality, the ability to control one's own body, physical and sexual domination, and the ability to preserve one's honor. The king becomes enraged when Vashti refuses to come before him and his guests (1:12). As a result, he turns to his sages to create a law that will show his legal strength and ability. The king and sages engage in a conversation that concludes with the decision to banish Vashti irrevocably

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[23] Beal, 21.
[24] Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. L. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.
[25] Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 24.

and legally. In doing so, they perceive that they can control Vashti's actions and choices and help the king regain his honor. The concern for male dominance and the preservation of male honor cause the king and his officials to create several gender-biased laws that reflect sexualized violence: the banishment of Vashti for refusing sexual exploitation; the mandate for male domination and domestic mastery; and the gathering and transport of virgin girls for the purpose of sex with the king, which reflects sexual trafficking.

Finally, eunuchs function as in-between genders. They transgress and embody both masculine and feminine traits and performance. Some eunuchs perform masculinity in their roles as advisers and officials for the king. Others perform roles that are feminized— they are "keepers of the women" and guards of thresholds, which puts them in greater proximity to danger and death. Beal notes that the king sends the eunuchs across to the women's banquet to carry out his desire and bring Vashti back to him.[26] These roles are feminized compared to the roles that the king's other officials take on: military personnel, sages, commissioners, governors, or other person holding office in the kingdom. Unlike the other males in the first two chapters, eunuchs do not contribute to the affairs of the empire.

The eunuchs and the females, dissimilar to the king and other males that embody hegemonic masculinity, lack security and the ability to defend themselves against physical and sexual assault and exploitation. Eunuchs are impotent, in terms of physicality, sexuality, and power. They operate merely as intermediaries between females and those who embody hegemonic masculinity. They are the king's pawns, separated from their families and unable to have children or families of their own due to genital mutilation. Narratively, some eunuchs are perceived as dangerous, as noted in Bigthan and Teresh's endeavor to kill the king, which positions them as threatening entities. When one looks at the construction of masculinity in relation to spatial location, one realizes that those who embody hegemonic masculinity are

[26] Beal, 21.

inside the palace and are in closer proximity to the king, physically. The eunuchs who guard the women and thresholds seem further away. They are not described as being next to the king like his other officials who advise him about legal matters. As Beal points out about women, some eunuchs are "neither totally outside nor totally inside, both inside and outside, they are not totally in his control. Yet since they are not entirely outside, they cannot simply be dismissed as beyond his concern either."[27]

As noted before, if the king desires to sexually consume the bodies of females and eunuchs, he brings them closer at his discretion and discards or rejects them when he is done. This is the privilege that is afforded to him as king of the Persian empire. The king has no concern for the eunuchs' or females' well-being or health. Rather, his concern regards access to and domination of their bodies. Eunuchs embody femininity when they are emasculated through castration and through penetration by the king. In fact, there is an overlap in the feminization of the females and the feminization of male eunuchs. For example, female bodies are subjected to the male gaze and objectification similar to how male bodies are objectified and castrated by those embodying hegemonic masculinity.

Geopolitical/spatial Bodies

In chapter 1, the narrator opens by giving details about the king and his vast empire and the events taking place at the king's palace. The reference to the king's vast empire moves the story spatially from inside the palace to the geopolitical space. As noted by the narrator, the Persian empire is expansive. It includes 127 provinces that span from India to Ethiopia. There is a gendering of the geopolitical space as well. Persia is masculinized in its representation as the dominant geopolitical body that controls feminized and subordinate locales between India and Ethiopia. As the dominant geopolitical body, Persia impacts the power relations in the

[27] Beal, 20.

international relationships that span from India to Ethiopia. Persian colonizers impact the gender, racial, and class climate of those under their rule. They control who occupies what land by displacing people from their homelands and they direct and dictate movement across national and international borders for sexual exploitation and the king's consumption.

Persia also controls both transportation, evidenced in the movement of the girls, and communication, evidenced in the dispersal of the laws. Even though the laws are written in everyone's language and script, it is the legal authority of Persia that is being disseminated. In this way, Persian authorities make up the legal authority ensuring the transportation of goods (that is, the virgin girls) and serving as security in this global transnational trafficking system. Acting as the power center, the king and his officials prevent any threats of resistance as they smuggle these girls into the king's harems. The power system is imbalanced. All the power is located/situated among Persians and Medes, noted by the repeated references to Persia and Media. The king's officials influence him to exercise his power to both authorize and legalize an expedition wherein they militantly gather virgin girls for the king's sexual pleasure. These same Persian imperial officers dictate and control the trafficking routes and thus the mobility of the virgin girls. In doing so, they assert their ability to build and expand empire using the bodies of ethnic women, thus declaring themselves as a global, dominant presence.

Expanding empire by dislocation and exploitation is not a new concept in the Old Testament. Abraham and other patriarchs built kingdoms through the exploitation of African women. For example, Abraham goes to Egypt and barters Sarah for Hagar and other female slaves. In fact, twice he barters Sarah for material goods including male and female slaves (Genesis 12:10–20; 20:1–18). Moses is critiqued by Miriam and Aaron for marrying a Cushite wife (Numbers 12:1), and Solomon has several African wives for whom he barters in his role as king to ensure solid alliances with foreign nations (I Kings 11:1–3). Black and brown females in both biblical texts and modern contexts become bodies that emerge as sites

of inscription. Empires impress upon Africana girls and women understandings of inferiority, deviance, and evil. They cast African girls and women as persons embodying troubled and threatening difference and identities in need of regulation. The Persian empire inscribes meaning into these females' gender, ethnicity, skin color, class, chastity, and foreign status and the geographical settings from which the empire takes them. Consequently, Black and brown bodies become canvases for imperial officers to mark up and draw on, engraving meaning that is interpreted not only by the females who become objectified as canvases but also by those who gaze upon and transgress these bodies, accepting the biased, manipulative, and dehumanizing script.

These inscriptions are iterated and sustained by the social discourse espoused within the first chapter; then, they are reiterated through the Persian cultural practices and decrees that the king circulates throughout the entire empire. First, the ethnic female bodies are legally separated and alienated. They then undergo a beautification process and receive sexual coaching by the eunuchs. Finally, they are violated by the king and again alienated in the harem away from the rest of the society. In this way, the empire fixes their bodies in this socio-spatial context and modifies these bodies to their satisfaction. In addition, the girls' natural ethnic bodies are contested and politicized when the Persian empire forces them to embody colonial culture, aesthetics, and representation. In this way, the girls' ethnic bodies are not only sexualized but disciplined, constrained, regulated, and controlled through trafficking and rape. The social scripts and the violence perpetuated against ethnic females impact their social status, violate their human and sexual rights, and thwart their agency and opportunities for mobility, thus exposing kings' and patriarchs' notions of ownership of these bodies.

In the narrative world, Persians and Medes outnumber all other socio-political and ethnic groups represented. In addition, the setting is a location that proves viable for them to

exploit and in which to exercise power over minoritized, ethnic females. The Persians in this narrative capitalize on the environment that they have physically and meticulously built to produce global power structures that result in violent transgressions and transformations of local and gendered power. This emphasizes a relationship between space and power. Those who have power control spaces and use that power to transform spaces and transgress spatial and bodily boundaries within those spaces. Imperial representatives not only control and dominate the physical bodies of the girls they take from these geographic locales, but they dominate the territories from which they take these indigenous bodies. In the same way that there is an interest in the "virgin" bodies of the girls captured, there is a framing of Ethiopia and India as "virgin" feminine lands that masculine Persians must occupy and exploit. In this way, the colonial territories that belong to King Ahasuerus are gendered, and the colonization of both feminine lands and feminized bodies become Persia's imperial mission. This illustrates a strong intersectional relationship between gender, imperialism, and nationalism, which results in the domestication and exploitation of minoritized female bodies and geographical locales from whence these bodies come.

In the book of Esther, colonizers displace females and eunuchs many times over. Persian colonizers take them from communities, homes, cultures, and nations and bring them to Susa. Not only are they displaced, but they are enculturated into Persian culture, exposed to Persian language, and implanted in the heart of Persian land—the Persian capital of Susa. The females undergo a beauty transformation whereby they are literarily and physically made up and then narratively erased. But ironically, the sites that Persians construct as sites for transgressing racialized, minoritized feminine bodies (Susa, the palace, the king's bedroom and harems) are also sites that females use to transgress male dominance, patriarchy, kyriarchy, and sexual exploitation. Both Vashti and Esther are inside the palace in Susa, transgressing spatial and legal boundaries to resist and dismantle kyriarchy and colonization.

Both are in spaces where they can be gazed upon and/or can interact with other wives and concubines in the palace. Not only do they transgress, but there is the potential to materialize the very fear that Memucan expresses—to inspire other women, high and low, to join in their efforts of disassembling the fragile masculinity and kyriarchy that attempts to define and limit their femininity, agency, and power. Separation of gender, then, also creates the space for females to collaborate in their resistance efforts. There is a relationship between social settings, placement/positionality, and gender that allows and enables females to plot their resistance to their male counterparts, develop their own thought processes unencumbered by maleness, and define and express femininity in their terms. Masculine-defined assemblages fortify hegemonic masculinity, but at the same time, they allow political space to be transformed by assembling women together, who then collaborate and produce their own power structures behind the scenes. These gendered assemblages thus enable females to embody a femininity different from that which the king and other males embodying hegemonic masculinity endeavor to impose on them.

The Intensification of Sexualized Violence in Esther 2

Besides being deposed and erased from the history of the empire, Vashti is mentioned only once again in Esth. 2:1. She is then narratively erased from the remaining chapters of the book of Esther. At the opening of the second chapter, the narrator points out that the king remembers Vashti's actions and his punishment against her. In the history of how this passage has been interpreted, scholars have differing views as to the function of the king's remembrance of Vashti. It is ambiguous because the narrator does not reveal how the remembrance impacts the king. Rather, the storyline shifts to the servants' recommendation to collect beautiful young virgin girls. On the one hand, medieval French rabbi and

commentator Rashi asserts that the king misses Vashti's beauty and is saddened.[28] If it saddens the king, it may explain why beauty is a requirement for the virgin girls being collected. Jewish philosopher and commentator Ibn Ezra similarly suggests that, after the king's anger is abated, he remembers Vashti fondly, misses her, and regrets his punishment of banishment.[29] The Midrash Esther Rabbah (XXX.ii) maintains that, after the king's anger abates, he feels remorse because what she had done was proper and what he had decreed was improper. Religious scholar Susan Niditch argues that the king does not miss Vashti as a person or for her personality but for how she functioned.[30] Stated differently, he misses her for what she used to do—her sexual performance.

Beal, to the contrary, maintains that the king is still troubled by Vashti.[31] In fact, he suggests outlining the king's displeasure in the following way: 2:1 presents the problem that the king remembers, which is Vashti; 2:2-4a states that the king's servants' recommend a procedure for replacing the queen that will lead to forgetting Vashti; and 2:4b outlines the king's pleasure with the recommendation and his decision to follow it.[32] In this way, the king's memory of Vashti is a negative memory that provokes a response by the servants to ensure that he does not have to experience the conflict that he faced with Vashti again. The narrative in chapter 2 is connected to the narrative in chapter 1, in that the king's servants suggest collecting beautiful young virgin girls whom the king can master and control; the last verse in chapter 1 is the law instituted by the king, that "every man should be master in his

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[28]Rabbi Shlomo Yitzcjaki (Rashi), "Rashi on Esther 2:1," in *The Metsudah Five Megillot*, ed. Avrohom Davis and Yaakov Y. H. Pupko (Lakewood, NJ: Metsudah Publications, 2001), https://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Esther.2.1?lang=bi.

[29] Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on the Book of Esther*, ed. Joseph Zedner (London: David Nutt, 1850), 2.2.1, https://www.sefaria.org/Esther.2.2?lang=bi&with=Ibn%20Ezra&lang2=en.

[30] Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 133–134.

[31] Timothy K. Beal, "Esther," in *Ruth and Esther*, ed. David W. Cotter, Berit Olam (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1999), 17.

[32] Beal, "Esther," 17.

own house" (1:22). Sexualized violence against a singular female, Vashti, in chapter 1 is connected to, intensified, and institutionalized by the legalized enactment of sexual exploitation of the collective of virgin girls amassed and trafficked into the king's palace in chapter 2. The empire frames the gathering and sexual exploitation of the girls as a way of mastering females who, married or not, become the king's property once gathered and transported to his home. The king's memory of Vashti thus intensifies the institution of sexual trafficking.

Stated differently, Vashti's act of resistance conjures a memory for the king that precedes the promulgation, legalization, and institutionalization of sex trafficking. The memory of Vashti's resistance reminds the king that women can be independent and resistant, therefore his servants plot to gather young, disenfranchised, and displaced girls to minimize the chances of future resistance. These girls are valued and sought because they have adolescent virgin bodies. The king and his representatives assume that the girls will accept imperial and patriarchal control. They presume these beautiful young girls will submit to the king's domination, unlike Vashti, an older married woman, who resisted his rule. To assure the girls are obedient, the king subjects them to his authority, to his commissioners' authority (2:3), and to the charge of the king's eunuchs Hegai (2:3) and Shaashgaz (2:14). Each person who exercises control over the girls plays a role in the sex trafficking process, including preparing the girls for their "one night with the king." Once displaced, the girls are forced to undergo a beautification process. They are given access to the resources of the empire and stripped of their cultural and ethnic identities. The goal is to mold them into an ideal submissive and obedient Persian queen, characteristics that Vashti refuses to embody.

Additionally, males direct the course of events in public and private spaces in the narrative world. They define and enforce difference, applying pressure towards gender conformity. In the first chapter, difference is enforced and reinforced by separation. Males

and females are separated spatially by gender. When Vashti refuses to conform to the gender norms as established by the males, difference is reinforced by yet another separation: she is separated from everyone in the kingdom when she is expelled. Separation intensifies in the second chapter when the virgin girls are gathered; separated from their homes, families and communities; and sexually exploited and oppressed based on intersectional differences—their youth, beauty, virginity, and lower class. The king also separates his wives and concubines into distinct harems based on differences in class status (2:3, 14). Willa Johnson adds that "an extensive study of women in the empire makes clear that it is unlikely that anyone other than a Persian woman would have ascended to such a position of royalty."[33] Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones writes that many of the foreign captive women who became royal concubines came from families of high social status.[34] The king's directive to search for non- Persian girls, specifically girls from Africa and India, who could not rise to become queens may indeed reflect the perception that these particular ethnic and minoritized bodies were sexually and politically exploitable with impunity.

Accordingly, it is noteworthy that there are important differences in how and for whom Vashti and the virgin girls are exploited. For instance, the king summons and attempts to display Vashti before all the other men gathered at his banquet, but she resists. Conversely, the king has the virgin girls gathered for his consumption only and ensures they *cannot* resist. Vashti's resistance to the king's sexual exploitation was a great source of shame for him. Therefore, he works to prevent further shame by ensuring that the virgin girls cannot resist him as Vashti could do in the public arena. His team works to ensure that he does not

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[33] Willa Johnson, "Esther," in *The People's Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Curtiss Paul DeYoung, Wilda C. Gafney, Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz, George "Tink" Tinker, and Frank M. Yamada (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 615.
[34] Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, "Harem: Royal Women and the Court," in *King and Court in Ancient Persia 559 to 331 BCE* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 96–122. Llewellyn-Jones notes that in later (Muslim) harem traditions, girls from poor families were routinely collected.

experience public shame again by running a sex trafficking enterprise within his home where he can do what he wills because he wields absolute power as king. These dynamics make girls who are young, ethnically other, virginal, beautiful, and from the lower classes a prime target because they and their families are physically, socially, politically, and financially disenfranchised, minoritized, and geographically displaced by the empire which inhibits and limits their ability to resist. Dislocation, outsider status, and sexual exploitation thus become central tenets of feminized identity throughout the first two chapters of the book of Esther.

The process for capturing and transitioning the young virgin girls becomes more elaborate and detailed in the second chapter than the punishment and deposition of Vashti in the first. The process for Vashti's punishment is brief: "And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she" (1:19b). In fact, she is banished before the king and the male collective can determine how to replace her. There does not appear to be concern about having a replacement queen as soon as they depose Vashti. As Beal points out, the description "After these things" (2:1) shows that some time has passed before they even think about a replacement queen.[35] Going a period without having a queen may also function to boast the power and authority of the empire and patriarchs who can grant or withdraw marital and enhanced socio-economic status to girls and women. Besides the establishment of the law, a period without a queen doubles as a threat to all the women: this is what happens when you "look with contempt upon your husband" (1:17). It is a form of terrorism and intimidation.

While Vashti's punishment is not as physically or explicitly violent as the sexual trafficking of the virgin girls, the male representatives of the empire inflict violence on the female collective through means of physical and cultural erasure; they also reinforce that erasure through legislation. But Vashti is narratively erased as well. Once the king chooses

[35] Beal, "Esther," 17.

his “ideal” replacement queen, the other girls have the same fate as Vashti; they experience narrative erasure. They enter the cohort of nameless concubines housed in one of the king’s harems and are never mentioned again. This illuminates the horrific relationship between law, narrative silence, and gender-based violence.

The process for apprehending the potential replacement queen in the second chapter is much more detailed. It includes specific details about the desire for young, physically beautiful, and virginal girls’ bodies and specifies the process, means, and goal of the seizure of such girls. These details get lost in Beal’s outline above. While I agree with him that Vashti and the remembrance of her action is the “problem” that the king remembers, it is necessary to detail the “procedure” to illuminate the violent, traumatic nature of this proposed solution. Beautiful virgins are gathered, put under the custody of a eunuch, given cosmetic treatments, and forced to sexually “please” the king (2:2–4a). While this process might have led to the king forgetting Vashti, it nevertheless foregrounds the memory of Vashti for the virgin girls. The memory of Vashti’s treatment and banishment for resisting sexual exploitation is directly connected to their current reality of enduring sexual trafficking. Further, it is a manifestation of power and privilege for the king to “forget” Vashti, while the girls experience forced traumatization and realities that directly result from the king’s initial memory of Vashti and her resistance. The trafficking that these girls endure is not episodic; rather it is institutionalized. And, as Beal notes in his outline, in 2:4b the king is “pleased” with the recommendation for institutionalizing sexual trafficking and so he follows it.

The importance of attention to narrative erasure and the collective memory of sexualized violence experienced by Vashti takes on contemporary significance when considering the #SayHerName movement, which challenges and corrects the narrative erasure of minoritized women who often endure sexualized violence by racist police. #SayHerName is embedded within the larger global #MeToo movement that sheds a new but

timely light on the sheer ubiquity of gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and sexual exploitation. Tarana Burke founded the movement in 2006 to raise awareness of the prevalence of sexual violence in contemporary society. During her work with sexual abuse victims, she listened to women's stories and recognized the debilitating trauma caused by sexualized violence. She recognized her own and others' failure to respond to this trauma and found it striking.[36] Yet, as with other resistance movements, minoritized girls and women became marginalized in the #MeToo movement, particularly after actress Alyssa Milano used Burke's slogan in 2017 to encourage women on Twitter to reply to her tweet with "me too" if they had ever experienced sexual assault or harassment.[37] #MeToo has certainly spread awareness of sexual violence[38] and is causing a cultural shift in discussions of gendered

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[36] See Tarana Burke, "#MeToo Was Started for Black and Brown Women and Girls. They're Still Being Ignored," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/11/09/the-waitress-who-works-in-the-diner-needs-to-know-that-the-issue-of-sexual-harassment-is-about-her-too/; Cristela Guerra, "Where Did 'MeToo' Come From? Activist Tarana Burke, Long Before Hashtags," *Boston Globe*, October 17, 2017, https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/2017/10/17/alyssa-milano-credits-activist-tarana-burke-with-founding-metoo-movement-years-ago/o2Jv29v6ljObkKPTPB9KGP/story.html.

[37] Alyssa Milano (@Alyssa—Milano), "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet," Twitter, October 16, 2017, https://twitter.com/alyssa_milano/status/919659438700670976?lang=en.

[38] See Casey Quackenbush, "Women Are Boycotting Twitter for the Day to Protest Harassment and Abuse," *Time*, October, 13, 2017, https://time.com/4981081/women-boycott-twitter-sexual-harassment/; Hilary Weaver and Katey Rich, "Galvanized by #MeToo and a Year of Trump, the Women's March Returns to the Streets,"*Vanity Fair,* January 21, 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2018/01/womens-march-2018#:~:text=On%20the%20Streets-,Galvanized%20by%20%23MeToo%20and%20a%20Year%20of%20Trump%2C%20the%20Women's,year%20of%20the%20Trump%20era.

violence.[39] In the process, however, Burke has been overlooked as the founder of the movement.[40]

Nevertheless, many women of color and their allies have begun to stress the necessity of an intersectional approach to the #MeToo movement, ensuring that the experiences of Black, Latina, Asian, and other girls and women of color are not silenced further. The #MeToo movement focuses primarily on contemporary enactments of gender-based violence against girls and women. However, reading the book of Esther with particular emphasis on the sexual trafficking of Africana girls highlights the longstanding ideologies, stereotypes, and actions that constitute, undergird, and perpetuate the types of abuse and sexual exploitation that these movements challenge and resist. The multiethnic dimensions of #MeToo also suggest intersectionality across narrative genres in biblical texts that grapple with gender and sexual violence.

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[39] See Tarana Burke (@TaranaBurke), "It's beyond a hashtag. It's the start of a larger conversation and a movement for radical community healing. Join us. #MeToo," Twitter, October 16, 2017, https://twitter.com/taranaburke/status/919704949751255040?lang=en; Sarah Jaffe, "The Collective Power of# MeToo," *Dissent* 65, no. 2 (2018): 80–87; Laura Rosche, "Beyond a Hashtag: Considering Campus Policies in the Age of #MeToo," *Composition Studies* 46, no. 2 (2018):186–238; Mille Cecillie Andersen, "Getting to the Root of #MeToo—Through the Fourth Wave of Feminism" (Master's thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2018); Elizabeth C. Tippett, "The Legal Implications of the MeToo Movement," in *Minnesota Law Review* 103 (2018): 229–278; Tanya Serisier, "# YesAllWomen and Heroic 'Silence Breakers': Online Speech, Collective Stories and the Politics of Belief," in *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics* (Cham: Palgrave McMillan, 2018), 93–116; Hannah Mikkelsen, "How Has the #Metoo Movement Contributed to Changes in Attitudes, Awareness and Understanding of Sexual Harassment in Icelandic Banks?" (PhD diss., University of Reykjavik, 2019); Daphne Simone,"#MeAfterToo—The Hashtag That Toppled Hegemons? A Feminist Narrative Case Study Of #MeToo" (Master's thesis, Royal Roads University, 2019).

[40] See Burke, "#MeToo"; Charisse Jones, "When Will MeToo Become WeToo? Some Say Voices of Black Women, Working Class Left Out," *USA Today*, October 5, 2018, https://www.heraldmailmedia.com/story/news/2018/10/05/when-will-metoo-become-wetoo-some-say-voices-of-black-women-working-class-are-left-ou/116617368/; Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "What about #UsToo: The Invisibility of Race in the #MeToo Movement," *Yale Law Journal* 128 (2018): 105–120.

Sexualized and Gendered Bodies in the Prophetic Materials: The Casting of Israel as the Feminized Other throughout the Old Testament

Throughout the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, narrators often depict Israel as the feminine Other. A common representation of Israel is as an unfaithful wife or adulterous woman who falters in her loyalty and devotion to her husband, represented by God. For example, Hosea uses the image of a promiscuous, unfaithful wife to condemn elite priests and kings for exploiting finances and to denounce their alliances with foreign nations. Hosea 1:2–9 thus feminizes Israelite men and, through the metaphor, castrates and shames them for their failure to uphold their allegiance to God. Similarly, Ezekiel portrays Jerusalem as an unfaithful wife. He calls out feminized Jerusalem for "trusting in her beauty," playing the whore because of fame, lavishing her whoring on passers-by, and playing the whore with, making jewelry for, and sacrificing her children before idols (Ezek. 16:15–22). In a second polemic, Ezekiel (23:1–49) describes Jerusalem and Samaria as sisters Oholibah and Oholah, respectively, who play the whore in their youth and continue after marriage to Yahweh. Both Oholibah and Oholah lust after other men/nations/idols and are called out and punished for adultery. Jeremiah uses this violent metaphorical imagery and rhetoric as well (cf. 13:20–27).

Besides metaphorical castration, Israel is subjected to sexualized, feminized violence in the form of threats and actualized violence. In the book of Hosea, the deity instructs Hosea take a "wife of whoredom" and have "children of whoredom" (1:2). Hosea marries Gomer and the deity further instructs him have three children whose names reflect the deity's rejection of Israel. Nomenclature becomes a social commentary on sexualized violence: Jezreel, meaning "I will punish the house of Jehu and put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel"; Lo-ruhamah, meaning "I will no longer have pity on Israel or forgive them. But I will have pity on the house of Judah and save them"; and Lo-ammi, meaning "you are not my people, and I am not your God" (Hos 1:2–9).

Hosea 2 then outlines Israel's infidelity, punishment, and restoration. Her husband incorporates her children into her punishment. He puts them in the middle of a nasty separation, making them plead to their mother and telling them she is no longer his wife nor is he her husband (2:1–2). In addition, he tells the children that he will have no pity on them because they are children of whoredom and were conceived shamefully (2:4). He further instructs her children to call her out as a whore and adulterer, and then he threatens her with sexualized violence: stripping her naked, exposing her, killing her through thirst and starvation, confusing her by building a wall against her so she cannot find her path, hedging her way with thorns, and taking away her pay so she has no means to survive (2:3–13). After outlining his wife's infidelity and punishment, Israel's/Gomer's husband describes her redemption in an abusive manner. He describes luring his estranged wife through sweet talk and promises to reverse the horrific and trauma-inducing pronouncements and judgments. He vows to control her behaviors and prevents her idol worship and infidelity; he also promises to take her as a wife forever and have pity on her children, but only if she obeys him (Hos 2:14–23).

Ezekiel pronounces similarly sexualized violence as punishment on Jerusalem and Samaria. In chapter 16, the punishment includes the uncovering of the unfaithful wife's nakedness before all of her ex-lovers; her judgment as a "woman" of adultery and bloodshed; and her deliverance into her ex-lovers' hands so they can throw down her platform and lofty places, loot and burn her houses, take her clothes and beautiful objects, leave her naked, mob her, stone her, and cut her up in pieces; these things are to be executed "in the sight of many women" (16:35–41). The deity claims that he takes these actions because of his wrath and jealousy. In Ezek. 23, the deity subjects Oholah and Oholibah to deliverance into the hands of their lovers and the exposure of their nakedness. Oholah is made into a prostitute, and Oholibah, who is allegedly more corrupt than her sister, endures various punishments:

exposure and the amputation of her nose and ears; her children are seized and devoured by fire and the sword; she is stripped of her clothes and jewelry; and all of her resources are taken and devoured. Further, she is made to take her sister's punishment, to drink from a cup of horror and desolation wherein she drinks scorn and derision, becomes drunk and sorrowful, and is then instructed to tear out her breast (Ezek. 23:9–35).

As if these horrific punishments are not enough, at the close of the chapter the deity proclaims:

> Bring up an assembly against them and make them an object of terror and of plunder. The assembly shall stone them and with their swords they shall cut them down; they shall kill their sons and their daughters and burn up their houses. Thus, will I put an end to lewdness in the land, so that all women may take warning and not commit lewdness as you have done. They shall repay you for your lewdness, and you shall bear the penalty for your sinful idolatry; and you shall know that I am the Lord God.[41]

Not only are these girls subjected to horrendous violence, but the deity clarifies that their punishments send a message to all women so they will not mimic what the sisters have done: embodying unfaithfulness and non-submissiveness as wives. This mirrors the scene from the first chapter of the book of Esther. Males mark females as the Other, actions occur that threaten or resists hegemonic masculinity, and masculinity strikes back, putting all females in a subordinate place through gendered and often sexualized violence. The metaphors used in the prophetic material not only present females as whores and unfaithful wives, but there is a familial aspect to the polemic: the writer of Ezek. 23 conceives of female sisters as whores, and the addressee of Ezek. 16:44–47 is like her mother and sisters, all depicted as whores:

> See, everyone who uses proverbs will use this proverb about you, 'Like mother, like daughter.' You are the daughter of your mother, who loathed her husband and her children; and you are the sister of your sisters, who loathed their husbands and their children. Your mother was a Hittite and your father an Amorite. Your elder sister is Samaria, who lived with her daughters to the north of you; and your younger sister, who lived to the south of you, is Sodom with her daughters. You not only followed their ways and acted according to their abominations; within a very little time you were more corrupt than they in all your ways.

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[41] Ezek. 23:46–49.

When we assess these passages in light of the conversation about women as Other, some fundamental components of feminine otherness become apparent: non-submissiveness, unfaithfulness, arrogance, sexual assertiveness, lust, beautification for the gaze and consumption, openly flaunting nakedness, building platforms, making lofty places, receiving gifts from strangers and receiving strangers themselves, paying for sex and receiving payment for sex, pride, excess food, prosperous ease, and haughtiness. Many of these themes are evident in the book of Esther. Instead of being paid for sex, however, the king imposes sex on the female collective. Esther, once she becomes queen, builds her own platform but does so using sex and seduction as she puts on her royal robes and stands at the entrance of the king's palace to gain the king's attention (5:1).

Not only is Israel represented by females and rendered the feminine Other in relation to the male deity through this prophetic metaphor, but the community is described using gender-specific language and in stereotypical ways that condemn females for sexual looseness, deviant sexuality, bodily impurity, and focusing on and exploiting their beauty. The punishments Israel endures include gendered, sexualized violence that shames females for exercising sexual agency and simultaneously sends a message to "all" other women, including feminized Israel, who would dare try to mirror these reprehensible behaviors. Ancient writers feminize Israel to punish females for infidelity and unfaithfulness to Yahweh. In doing so, they assert masculine superiority and domination while calling Israel's maleness into question by casting the nation as a sexually loose female. This reflects and asserts the ideology that males control females and feminized males' sexuality as evidenced in the pornographic demands and work of the male deity in the prophetic corpus and the Persian king in the book of Esther. Males embodying hegemonic masculinity create and regulate these highly sexualized public and private spaces to which they subject females. The act of feminization occurs through symbolic emasculation which is also a form of sexualized

violence. The feminized imagery and metaphors not only critique Israel for failing to demonstrate masculine capabilities and sensibilities but also teach females not to publicly display or sexually assert themselves. These are actions reserved for the masculine collective.[42]

Womanist Hebrew Bible scholar Renita Weems describes these explicit provocative metaphors in Hosea, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah as images of power and punishment which espouse the ideology that the dominant male partner has the right and power to discipline and punish the subordinate female partner when the terms of their relationship are breached.[43] Weems also emphasizes that the metaphor reflects reality and reinforces certain values, such as gender hierarchy and authority that are non-negotiable. The metaphor also asserts that the burden of the relationship rests upon the subordinate feminine partner. She must conform to the rules/laws established by the dominant male partner and the "unspoken expectations" that frame the relationship so as not to bring shame upon the dominant partner. Weems writes,

> The image of the incorrigible, promiscuous wife played on the male fantasies and fears of women's sexuality. It is based on a way of thinking that sees women's bodies as mysterious and dangerous and perceives women's sexuality as deviant and threatening to the status and well-being of men.[44]

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[42] For more on the feminization of Israel in the Old Testament and gendered violence, see Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Gale A. Yee, ed. *The Hebrew Bible: Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018); Athalya Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Amy Kalmanofsky, "The Dangerous Sisters of Jeremiah and Ezekiel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 2 (2011): 299–312; Amy Kalmanofsky, "The Monstrous-feminine in the Book of Jeremiah," *Lectio Difficilior* 1 (2009): 1–21; Chris Franke, "Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (October 2009): 876–878; Caroline Blyth, Emily Colgan, and Katie B. Edwards, eds. *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, and Religion: Biblical Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

[43] Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 13–14.

[44] Weems, 41.

The metaphor promotes the idea that Israel/women are getting what they deserve for infidelity: sexualized violence that takes the form of a woman's rape, the public exposure of her genitals, and the disfigurement of her body.[45] Weems further argues that, by feminizing Israel as an adulterous wife, the prophets insist that feminized Israel/females are social reprobates, responsible for their actions and deserving of their punishment.[46] She concludes that these metaphors make rape, mutilation, and sexual humiliation defensible forms of retaliation against wives accused of sexual infidelity because language, even metaphorical language, influences readers' thinking about what is true, real, and possible.[47] These metaphorical images therefore have the potential to reinforce/enforce violence against women.[48]

Both Beauvoir and Beal pick up the comparison of the political situation of women and Jews. Beauvoir maintains that women, like Jews, often represent immanence and earthiness whereas men represent transcendence.[49] Specifically honing in on the intersection between women and Jews in the book of Esther, Beal writes,

> This parallel between the two discourses (on the Jew as other and the woman as other) is certainly evident in Esther where, as my reading shows, there are many convergences between projections of the other woman and the other Jew, as well as between the two subjects who project these two others and mark them for oblivion as such. In Esther, as we shall see, sexual politics is ethnic politics is national politics. Representations of the other in terms of gender are inextricably linked to constructions of the other in terms of ethnicity.[50]

In addition, Beal suggests that converging Mordecai and Vashti results in a "feminization" of Mordecai as ethnic Other and a "Judaization" of Vashti as gendered Other, similar to the feminization of Jews throughout European history. This strategy marks the Other or "not-

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[45] Weems, 41.
[46] Weems, 65.
[47] Weems, 109.
[48] Weems, 115.
[49] Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, xxviii, 57, 248.
[50] Beal, "Esther," 13.

self" in order to shore up a universal masculine identity (unambiguous, non-ethnic, untainted by the feminine). He writes, "The other woman Vashti and the other Jew Mordecai, along with the collective identities represented by them, are marked off in order to shore up certain identities in the realms of both sexual and identity politics."[51]

Beal also posits convergences between Mordecai and the two eunuchs Bigthan and Teresh, who are ambiguous regarding their sexual identity. Representing a "third sex," the eunuchs transgress boundaries between the sexes.[52] Experiences of emasculation contributes to trafficking processes and the theme of hiddenness serves to further mask exploitation and abuse against gender nonconforming and/or gender-bending persons. Should we read the eunuchs' offering of the virgins as resisting their own sexual exploitation, as Randall Bailey suggests?[53] Similarly, Cheryl Anderson correlates how Esther and African Americans chose to conceal aspects of their identities to gain access to privileges and opportunities. She notes that, in the post-civil rights era, some African American gay men and lesbians hid their sexual preferences, passing as heterosexual, and some light-skinned African Americans hid their ethnic identities, passing as white, similar to the way that Esther passed as non-Jewish to avoid discrimination and violence.[54] These intersecting themes may be helpful to explore how queerness and gender nonconformity are aspects of identity that make certain gendered bodies more vulnerable to trafficking in both ancient and existing contexts.

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[51] Beal, 111–114.
[52] Beal, 115.
[53] Bailey, "Interse(ct)/(x)ionality," 237.
[54] Cheryl B. Anderson, "Ruth and Esther as Models for the Formation of God's People: Engaging Liberationist Critiques," in *Focusing Biblical Studies: The Crucial Nature of the Persian and Hellenistic Periods Essays in Honor of Doulas A. Knight*, ed. Jon L. Berquist and Alice Hunt (New York: T&T Clark, 2012) 148–149.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined and examined how gender, ethnicity, and class intersect to play a major role in othering and oppressing minoritized, marginalized females, and gender nonconforming males in the book of Esther. The social and political systems represented in the book of Esther are not merely patriarchal. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes, these societies portray kyriarchy, a governance whereby kings and patriarchs exclude freeborn, colonized, and enslaved wo/men from full citizenship and decision-making powers. This form of governance enables the king and members of his imperial court to socially construct what it means to embody masculinity and femininity; to define and demarcate females and gender-bending males as the Other; to legalize male superiority and female inferiority; to banish Queen Vashti for her resistance to hegemonic masculinity and its imposed definition of femininity; and then to collect and sexually exploit girls and women and to dispose of or seclude them indefinitely in the king's harem.

I draw attention to the fact that the sexual exploitation of Vashti initiates and intensifies the process of sexual trafficking outlined in the second chapter. Moreover, I focus on how the Persian empire collects virgin girls from across the king's provinces, which span from India to Ethiopia. Because there are explicit references to Esther and her identity as a Jew, and references to geographical locales from which the virgin girls are gathered and taken, it becomes clear that ethnicity intersects with gender (among other aspects of their identities) to render the young, beautiful virgin girls as Other, in contrast to the Persian empire/males. Rendered Other, the empire determines these gendered ethnic girls are exploitable and rapeable. They thrust the ethnic, marginalized, and minoritized girls into a legalized system of sexual trafficking, which is demanded by, condoned by, and of benefit to the male Persian king.

The strategy of defining females as the quintessential, subordinate Other destigmatizes the commodification, exploitation, and violence enacted against the ethnic virgin girls, normalizing their pain and suffering. Defining ethnic females as the subordinate and subservient Other is immensely dangerous and poses high risks for displacement, physical and sexual assault, and other types of abuses and traumatization. Masculine, patriarchal, and colonial subjects use displacement to render females vulnerable and as a tool of punishment for insubordination. If societies are to transform cultures that undergird sexual trafficking, all members, but especially male members, of societies should deconstruct and dismantle hegemonic masculinity which preserves and promotes inequalities. Deconstruction and dismantling include discarding metaphors that serve to objectify and commodify femininity and to scare females into submission through violent rhetoric, imagery, and threats. This process of deconstruction should also include decentralizing kyriarchal power and authority so that sexual exploitation through trafficking cannot be authorized, legalized, and ritualized. If males embodying hegemonic masculinity hold fast to their power, privilege, and positions, kyriarchal systems will continue to exploit, displace, and disenfranchise females. Transformation of systems of exploitation and injustice, therefore, requires intersectional analysis and transformation of traditional hegemonic masculinity.

In the next chapter, I will outline and discuss various definitions of sexual trafficking, emphasize sexual trafficking as a form of sexual enslavement, and outline intersectionality and polyvocal hermeneutics. I propose that sexual trafficking constitutes cultural trauma for Africana girls and women. I will outline the mechanisms of sexual exploitation, specifically the trafficking of Africana girls and women during and after the transatlantic slave trade. This type of kyriarchal/colonial sexual violence obscures agency, results in individual and collective traumatization and other physical/bodily/health consequences and produces shame for the victims.

Chapter 4: Sexual Trafficking: Foregrounding Intersectional Polyvocal Africana Hermeneutics

> Texts like Esther can impact women living under the triple oppression of race, class and gender in a very direct and pervasive manner.
>
> ~ Sarojini Nadar[1]

> So if a black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from discrimination from any or all directions.
>
> ~ Kimberlé Crenshaw[2]

Definitions of Sexual Trafficking

Sexual trafficking is a multifaceted, complex phenomenon that continues to grow in scope, presenting a global threat to already vulnerable and often marginalized persons. Sexual trafficking is one of many forms of human trafficking and one of the most profitable forms. Recognized as organized crime, sexual trafficking is "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbor, or receipt of people, by coercive or abusive means for the purpose of sexual exploitation."[3] It takes the form of forced sexual slavery, forced marriage, child prostitution, or child pornography.[4] Moreover, high occurrences of sexual exploitation among girls and women assures sexual trafficking is associated with, or recognized as a form of, gender-based

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[1] Nadar, "Gender, Power, Sexuality," 113.
[2] National Museum of African American History and Culture (feat. Kimberlé Crenshaw), "A Peoples Journey: African American Women and the Struggle for Equality,", YouTube video, 2:58, August 29, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=19&v=X5H80Nhmn20&feature=emb_title.
[3] US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (2014).
[4] Linda Davis and Rika Snyman, *Victimology in South Africa* (Pretoria: Van Schiak, 2005).

violence. Gender-based violence includes physical, sexual, and psychological violence inflicted upon individuals or collectives and is connected to gender norms and unequal power.[5] The pervasiveness of this global phenomenon challenges scholars of sexual trafficking as well as medical and public health practitioners to consider the mechanisms of trafficking, how to approach the problem, its impact on victims, cultural perceptions and attitudes, and economic and societal factors involved in its perpetration.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, rooted in the Thirteenth Amendment of the US constitution, outlines that there are several forms of human trafficking. Among those forms, child sexual trafficking is where profitable sex acts are induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained eighteen years of age. This act was passed to combat trafficking in persons (the victims of whom are predominantly women and children), to ensure just and effective punishment of traffickers, and to protect the victims.[6]

The U. S. Department of State's 2018 Trafficking in Persons Report defines child sex trafficking as when a child under the age of 18 is "recruited, harbored, transported, provided, obtained, patronized, or solicited for the purpose of a commercial sex act." This delineates that force, fraud, or coercion is not necessary for the offense to be recognized as a crime; this contrasts with what is outlined in the TVPA of 2000. The United Nations Convention on Transnational Crime article 3a further delineates that human trafficking is

> the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud or deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at minimum, the

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[5] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Sexual and Gender Based Violence," accessed April 4, 2019, https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/sexual-and-gender-based-violence.html (site discontinued).

[6] Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, Public Law No. 106–386, § 102(a), 114 Stat. 1464, 1466, https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/house-bill/3244/text.

> exploitation of prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.[7]

According to this protocol, trafficking is controlling another individual for the purpose of exploitation through force, coercion, or deceit which obscures and removes consent. There are many issues with the concept and role of consent in definitions of sexual trafficking, including challenges in determining when a person, especially a child, can grant consent. Other challenges posed are that consent is often obtained through improper, coercive, or deceitful means, or consent at one stage does not provide consent for all stages of the process of trafficking. In some situations, girls and women consent because they perceive they have no better options.[8] These challenges elucidate ambiguity in notions of consent and the complex and problematic nature of sex trafficking. British lawyer Helena Kennedy adds that law is gendered, and consent within legal frameworks is based on a sliding scale proportionate to gender, ethnicity, race, class, and economic worth.[9] Furthermore, the stereotyping and vilification, especially of ethnic girls and women, often undermine their credibility and consent.

Criminologist Caitlin Jade van Niekerk adds that feminist approaches to trafficking allow for the establishment and necessity of "gender" as a critical category of analysis, which she claims other psychological and social theories do not allow.[10] She writes, "Feminist-abolitionist discourse argues that the trafficking of women is a violation of human rights,

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[7] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime" in *United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto* (New York: United Nations, 2004), 42, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html.
[8] United Nations, "The Issue of Consent," in *Toolkit to Combat Trafficking: Global Programme against Trafficking in Human Beings* (New York: United Nations, 2008), 5–6, https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/HT-toolkit-en.pdf.
[9] Helena Kennedy, *Eve Was Framed* (London: Random House, 2005).
[10] Caitlin Jade van Niekerk, "Interrogating Sex Trafficking Discourses Using a Feminist Approach," *Agenda*, 32, no. 2, (2018): 17–27.

thereby suggesting that sexual exploitation is a manifestation of men's power over women, violating their physical integrity and subordinating their sexuality."[11] It is however, necessary to recognize that females also abusively exercise power over other females, violating the subordinate female's body and sexuality. This is evident in the many instances where white women appropriated and exploited the bodies and sexual and labor powers of Africana girls and women during and following the transatlantic slave trade to maintain colonial culture, to please their husbands, and to feed, nurture, and teach their children. These experiences are similar to what the biblical character Hagar experiences at the hand of Sarai (Gen.16). Black feminist and womanist scholars contend that a framework of intersectionality is a key component to analyzing systematic oppression because it illuminates the inextricability of gender, race, and class and the asymmetrical sexual relationships between colonizing males and Africana females that have been foundational to colonizing cultures. The application of intersectionality also enables readers and interpreters to see how Africana girls and women are often made invisible and marginalized, and their sexuality sometimes pathologized, in these blatantly gendered and politicized spaces.[12]

Sexual Trafficking as a Form of Enslavement

Definitions of sexual trafficking reveal an undeniable relationship between sexual trafficking and enslavement. Orlando Patterson defines slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons."[13] Patterson's definition underscores that

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[11] Niekerk, 18.
[12] See, Evelynn Hammonds, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 93–104; Kimberly Cleveland, "Appropriation and the Body: Representation in Contemporary Black Brazilian Art," *Journal of Black Studies* 41, no. 2 (November 2010): 301–319; Emily West and R. J. Knight, "Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History*, 83, no. 1 (2017): 37–68.
[13] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 13.

trafficking and enslavement are both exploitative experiences characterized by displacement, domination of subjugated classes based on ethnicity/race and gender, shame, and perpetual violence. Sexualized gender-based violence is especially dishonorable and shameful in patriarchal and colonial societies that value female sexual purity, such as the society represented in the book of Esther. This high valuation of purity is underscored by the narrator's repeated references to the virginity of the girls gathered for the king's sexual pleasure.

Argentinian Supreme Court Justice Carmen Argibay argues that sexual trafficking is a form of enslavement wherein a person exercises power to attach his or her self to the right of ownership of another person's body and sexuality.[14] She writes, "Sexual autonomy is a power attaching to the right of ownership of a person, and controlling another person's sexuality is, therefore, a form of slavery."[15] Therefore, when a perpetrator reduces or minimizes the victim's sexual autonomy, that perpetrator eradicates the victim's sense of agency and freedom, subjugating them and rendering them a sex slave. Sexual slavery is a form of bondage wherein persons are forced into a life of sexual servitude; it is the premeditated raping of persons in brutal and calculated ways. The enslaved may or may not be paid and are subjected to rape and other forms of violence. In many cases, there are mass abductions of girls and women for institutionalized and militarized rape.[16]

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[14] Carmen Argibay, "Sexual Slavery and the 'Comfort Women' of World War II," *Berkeley Journal of International Law* 21 (2003): 375. See also Angella Son, "Inadequate Innocence of Korean Comfort Girls-Women: Obliterated Dignity and Shamed Self," *Pastoral Psychology* 67 (2018): 175–194; Yoshimi Yoshiaki, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

[15] Argibay, "Sexual Slavery," 375.

[16] Another term for sexual slavery is servile marriage. Sexual slavery is a universal problem and manifests differently in different contexts. To Cite several diverse examples, Korean "comfort women," exploited by Japanese invaders, Ghanaian *trokosi*, Indian *sati*, and the sexual enslavement imposed by Islamic State on Yazidi women of Iraq.

Before passing the TVPA, US Congress gathered extensive research about the impact and implications of sexual trafficking; they concluded that trafficking is analogous to the slave trade and that the conditions of sexual trafficking are like those of enslavement. Senator Sam Brownback provides insights to the parallels between sexual trafficking and slavery in the following statement:

> International sex trafficking is the new slavery. It includes all the elements associated with slavery, including being abducted from your family and home, taken to a strange country where you do not speak the language, losing your identity and freedom, being forced to work against your will with no pay, being beaten and raped, having no defense against the one who rules you, and eventually dying early because of this criminal misuse.[17]

In addition, Dr. Laura Lederer maintains that, not only is sexual trafficking a modern form of enslavement, but the current number of trafficked women and children "may soon be on par with the African slave trade of the 1700s."[18] Dr. Lederer's comments elucidate that sexual trafficking is a gendered enterprise that builds upon other gendered inequalities, such as poverty. Moreover, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime 2016 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons reveals that girls and women are usually trafficked for marriage and sexual slavery, while males are often exploited for labor.[19]

Trafficking in every form is starting to be recognized as the practice of modern-day slavery. Sexual trafficking specifically creates a slave class, whereby victims are abducted and/or coerced and subjected to violence and shame just as labor slaves are. Many victims of sexual trafficking are transplanted to new and often foreign locales and regularly trapped in

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[17] International Trafficking in Women and Children: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, 106th Congress, second session, February 22 and April 4, 2000, statement of Senator Sam Brownback, para. 72.
[18] International Trafficking in Women and Children: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, 106th Congress, second session, February 22 and April 4, 2000, statement of Dr. Laura J. Lederer, Director,The Protection Project, The Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, para. 34.
[19] US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2016), https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/258876.pdf.

these places. These experiences are parallel to ways that enslaved Africana persons were displaced and trapped in new locales along the trade route during the transatlantic slave trade.

Definitions of sexual trafficking and enslavement also enable readers to recognize how sex trafficking patterns and mechanisms are detailed in the book of Esther. The Persian colonizing king uses his political power to recruit, transport, and sexually exploit countless virgin girls. After he chooses Esther as the replacement queen, he keeps the girls, making them his sexual slaves. The force by which he possesses the girls eradicates their freedom and sense of agency; he dominates their physical and sexual autonomy. The occurrences of the sexual trafficking of Ethiopian and other Africana girls in the book of Esther are analogous to the experiences of Africana girls and women during the transatlantic slave trade. Africana female collectives in both ancient and contemporary contexts experienced abduction; transportation to a strange country; erasure of identity, language, customs, and culture; and prolonged exposure to sexualized violence and traumatization with no defense. Historically, sexual trafficking and the transatlantic slave trade are institutional practices that produced collective and traumatic identities: sexual victim and slave. At the intersections of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender oppression, layers of traumatic experience developed for Africana girls and women, which constitutes historical and cultural collective trauma.

The use of sexualized violence as a tool to subjugate and terrorize females is clearly illustrated throughout the first and second chapters of Esther. The king and his male officials control Vashti and the entire female collectives' sexuality through the creation of a law that enforces and normalizes male supremacy and sexualized violence. Because one male, Memucan, fears and projects that fear on the entire male collective, he suggests the deposal of Vashti, an act of subjugation. The purpose of her deposal is to intimidate and terrorize the rest of the females into compliance with male dominance and control. The king approves and not only obliterates any possibility of gender equity, which had been implied by Vashti's

concurrent banquet, but also legalizes the process of female subjugation. The empire's treatment of Vashti is only the beginning of sexual exploitation. Brutality is exacerbated when the virgin girls are trafficked into the kings' palace. The female collective becomes the subjugated outsider, in terms of gender, who can be legally violated for any reason a male determines. However, Vashti and Esther are made insiders within the patriarchal and imperial structure of marriage and nation respectively. That the king traffics females living in, captured, and gathered from the nations that are under his imperial control reflects that sexual trafficking happens to persons who have both insider and outsider statuses.

In contemporary contexts, girls and women are disproportionately victims of the types of violence that are outlined in the book of Esther because of continuing practices of discrimination and unjust and prejudicial treatment of persons based on their ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, age, and other markers of difference. Sexual trafficking and other forms of sex exploitation and gender-based violence are being used today to intimidate and terrorize females. These tactics are used to invoke dread and fear, to scare Africana girls and women back into their "place" as the subordinate sexualized Other. The cumulative traumatization of such violence and intimidation that many Africana girls and women endure throughout their lifetimes have negative psychological impacts on Africana female collective identity.

In the next section, I will outline how intersectionality and polyvocal hermeneutics expand and problematize analyses that focus solely on gender oppression in the book of Esther. I will then outline the experiences of Africana females during the transatlantic slave trade in order to detail aspects of Africana girls' and women's collective cultural traumatization. By applying the frameworks of intersectionality and polyvocality to assessments of sexual trafficking in the contemporary context, readers are able to identify more clearly sexual trafficking in the book of Esther and how it is facilitated in a

transnational, globalized Persian imperial context. As well, we shall see that the mechanisms of sexual trafficking represented in the book of Esther are parallel to the apparatuses of the transatlantic slave trade, both of which capitalize on the violent sexual exploitation of Africana females.

Intersectionality and Polyvocal Hermeneutics

Polyvocality and intersectionality advance our analysis and understandings of persons' identities and social locations, as well as the exploitative and oppressive systems within which they find themselves lodged. A framework of intersectionality enables readers to see markers of difference as mutually constitutive and contributing to personal and social oppression and privileges. This type of expanded analysis in biblical studies has the potential to deepen, expand, and problematize dominant analyses that fail to identify intersectional oppression that leads to the institution of sexual trafficking in the book of Esther.

Kimberlé Crenshaw cites Black women's race, gender, and class as contributing to their disadvantage and discrimination, which she argues leads to harsher consequences.[20] Intersectional analyses of violence allow readers and interpreters to address adequately the particular ways that Black women are oppressed, subordinated, and discriminated against.[21] Moreover, it enhances our ability to see and interpret the sexual exploitation of the virgin girls in the book of Esther as sexual trafficking. Crenshaw endorses discarding single-axis frameworks that reflect "uncritical and disturbing acceptance of dominant ways of thinking about discrimination." This credulous lens of analysis distorts the multidimensionality of Black women's experience, which leads to the theoretical, methodological, and practical erasure of Black women and collapses Black women's experiences under the collective

[20] Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection," 140.
[21] Crenshaw, 140.

experiences of other ethnic women.[22] Intersectionality further enhances appreciation and assessment of the "unique compoundedness of their situation and the centrality of their experiences to larger classes of women and Blacks."[23]

Crenshaw's multi-axis, intersectional framework privileges the complex lives and experiences of Black women, whom she identifies as "multiply-burdened." Placing Black women's lives and experiences as the starting point of theoretical frameworks and analysis illuminates the intersections of race, class, and gender oppressions, which reflect the multiple disadvantages[24] of Black women. In addition, this positioning stresses that intersectional oppression is "greater than the sum of racism and sexism."[25] Centering my analysis on the nameless, virgin girls taken from Ethiopian and other African jurisdictions is therefore an intentional move rarely made in traditional assessments of the book of Esther. My focus on the Ethiopian girls who are silenced and marginalized in the narrative and on Africana females in contemporary contexts illuminates how ethnicity, gender, and class intersects with silence and invisibility in Esther discourse and in contemporary accounts of Africana history and memory.

Far too many treatments of the book of Esther focus primarily on the Jewish girl Hadassah and on the plight of the Jewish collective, even though the narrative reflects the experiences of multiple cultural and ethnic groups. In as much as the story is about its main character, Hadassah, it likewise reflects Africana girls' experiences, as there is an explicit reference to Ethiopia and an implicit reference to girls being gathered and transported to Susa from Ethiopia and other African territories.[26] Many interpretations reflect incomplete and

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[22] Crenshaw, 139.
[23] Crenshaw, 150.
[24] Crenshaw, 145.
[25] Crenshaw, 140.
[26] See Figure 5.1 in chapter 5 under the section of "Spatial: Circuits and Hotspots". The king's provinces include other locales on the northeastern coast of Africa including Egypt.

limited perspectives and assessments of sexual exploitation by focusing mainly on Vashti and Esther's experiences of exploitation, reflecting the interpreter's privilege and/or a lack of a full appreciation for the story's impact on material bodies across the empire.

Attention to textual polyvocality—the narrative's multiple and varied voices and/or perspectives[27]—deepens, expands, and problematizes this single-axis gender analysis. Polyvocality encourages diverse readings and interpretations of texts rather than a preferred dominant interpretation. Polyvocality is also spatial and layered: it welcomes reflection on the multiple spaces summoned and controlled in the narrative and on the multiple layers of subjugated, suppressed, and often silenced identity within each individual and within the female collective. The text recounts the experiences of a diverse set of girls from varied ethnic backgrounds and different geographical locations. A framework of intersectionality and polyvocality thus sheds light on how Africana girls and women are continually rendered invisible in the reception history of Esther. By failing to address the experiences, abuse, and traumatization of the Africana girls in the book of Esther, interpreters inadvertently uphold ideologies that Africana girls and women cannot be violated. This ideology is rooted in notions that persons of African descent are not fully human, that the rape of Africana girls and women is non-existent, and that they do not have to be protected from oppression.

Polyvocality not only provides a glimpse into Africana females' lives and experiences in the narrative world, but it affords me, an Africana researcher and writer, the opportunity and space to reflect upon their plight as an insider and express more experientially how we Africana girls and women understand ourselves. I explore how exploitation, displacement, marginality, colonial domination, and other traumatic events impact our identities, histories, and memories as well as our relation to other people in general and other females and colonial forces in particular. My scholarship provides increased voice and representations of

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[27] *Dictionary of Media and Communication*, s.v. "Polyvocality."

Africana females' experiences of sexual trafficking and trauma. This methodological move counters the theoretical invisibility and erasure of Africana girls and women caused by single-axis analysis; it affords Africana female bodies visibility in an effort to break cycles of and silences around sexual trafficking. To not apply the lens of intersectionality would further render Africana girls and women invisible and perpetuate historical, systemic, and cultural oppression.

The failure of readers and interpreters to identify and/or perceive the recruitment, transportation, and harboring of subjects in the biblical text as characteristics of sexual trafficking prevents them from expressing outrage and from taking action. In fact, sexual trafficking has thrived mostly because it is a hidden crime, and there is little data on how it manifests and operates. What stands out to me in prioritizing and foregrounding intersectional polyvocal Africana hermeneutics is that the girls in the narrative world are taken from provinces that are inhabited predominately by brown and Black minorities in our contemporary contexts, India and Ethiopia. Analogously, brown and Black females are disproportionately vulnerable to and targeted by sexual traffickers in current societies. As I create a bridge between the biblical world and the contemporary world, I contend that understanding sexual trafficking in contemporary contexts illuminates sexual trafficking in this ancient sacred text. Furthermore, attention to interpreters' ignorance/biases, to ideologies embedded within the text, and to textual euphemisms helps us to understand what facilitates and enables sexual trafficking systems to thrive. In the next section of this chapter, I will assess the sexual trafficking of Africana girls and women during the transatlantic slave trade and argue that the intentional capture, enslavement, and sexual exploitation of Africana females in both ancient and contemporary contexts constitute collective cultural trauma.

Sexual Trafficking as Cultural Trauma: Sexual Trafficking of Africana Girls and Women During the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Collective Memory

Collective memories are communal representations and reconstructions of a group's past that are based on common identity.[28] These memories help groups to organize and articulate memories of the past that impact and are central to the group's cultural, ethic, national, gendered, and/or religious identities. Through cultural memories, groups are able to identify common themes that are crucial to the formation and sustainment of their identities. This is advantageous because it enables the particular group to represent their perspectives and the particularities of their experiences and traumas from their own viewpoints.

According to sociologist Jeffery Olick, collective memories are publicly available symbols maintained by groups in order to preserve the past. These symbols are visual cues to aid the remembrance of events. Olick maintains that remembrance is an act of reconstructing the past through the interactions of that which is internal or in persons' heads and external environments. Therefore, persons and groups cannot remember without symbols or visual cues that interact with bodily remembrances. Recognizing the interactions between internal neurological and cognitive factors and external environments ensures the recognition of the psychological dynamics of remembering.[29]

Collective memory[30] is therefore communal, requiring communication between persons that share similar experiences; it is also a social initiative and a type of memory that

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[28] Laurent Licata and Aurelie Mercy, "Social Psychology of Collective Memory," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 4:194–199.

[29] Jeffery Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy, eds, *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[30] Other terms used to describe collective memory include public memory, social memory, cultural memory, and/or racial memory.

is fluid. It is the accumulation and articulation of individual and personal histories and memories that are shaped into collective public memories. Group members communicate not only about what they have experienced but also about how they have experienced events and how to best represent those experiences in ways that will preserve their past. This act of recalling and localizing collective memories also has the potential to transform societies by galvanizing members of different and even wider collectives to challenge actions that have negatively impacted their collective identity.

German Egyptologist Jan Assmann and John Czaplincka posit that there are two types of memory: communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory relates to the diffuse transmission of memories in everyday life through orality, whereby individuals compose memories that are socially mediated and related to a group. According to Assmann and John Czaplincka, communicative memory constitutes itself in communication with others and lasts only between eighty to a hundred years into the past, which equals approximately three to four generations.[31] As a form of polyvocality, communicative memories provide the group with opportunities to produce cultural historical knowledge of how the group came into being and how that identity continues to morph historically. Conversations help enhance knowledge and therefore transform collective memories. In addition, communicative memory formalizes that which was been considered informal, especially a subjugated ethnic group's histories and memories. Both oral and written communicative memories invite and enable diverse perspectives and insights of the group's experiences. The process of creating communicative memories is thus dialogical, affording members of the group opportunities to share diverse memories and perspectives as opposed to relying on a singular narrative or speaker. Consequently, members of the collective are able to engraft new memories through

[31] Jan Assmann and John Czaplincka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique*, 65 (Spring–Summer, 1995): 127.

their social interactions. Additionally, they are able to create their own knowledge and narratives that supplement and often challenge dominant narratives about how their group came into existence.

Assmann and Czaplincka maintain that cultural or collective memory refers to objectified and institutionalized memories of culture that can be stored, transferred, and reincorporated throughout generations across millennia. Although both types of memories construct identities, cultural memories are formed by symbolic heritage in texts, rites, celebrations, objects, landscapes, sacred scriptures, and other media that serve as mnemonic triggers to initiate meanings and crystalize collective experiences of the past. As such, collective memories turn into collective history.[32] Assmann and Czaplincka theorize that,

> just as the communicative is characterized by its memory by proximity to the everyday, cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday. Distance from the everyday (transcendence) marks its temporal horizon. Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. The fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, and observance). We call these "figures of memory."[33]

According to Assmann, cultural memory is the "faculty that allows us to build a narrative picture of the past and through this process, develop an image and an identity for ourselves."[34] Identity in this sense is a notion of belonging, individually and/or collectively, and is culturally defined and constituted. Cultural memory is therefore the means by which persons build their identities and affirm themselves as part of a group based on shared past experiences and heritage. Thus, to belong to a certain cultural group, one has to hold certain events and memories as foundational for the group's inception and collective identity.

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[32] Assmann and Czaplincka, 128.
[33] Assmann and Czaplincka, 128–129.
[34] Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memories: The Geographical Point of View*, ed. Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Edgar Wunder (New York: Springer, 2011), 15.

Assmann further outlines the following characteristics of cultural memory: the concretion of identity wherein cultural memory preserves the stores of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its distinction and unity; the capacity to reconstruct and relate knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation; formation, or the crystallization of communicated meaning and collectively shared knowledge as a prerequisite of its transmission in the culturally institutionalized heritage of a society; organization, or a formalized communication specialized by bearers of cultural memory; obligation, or a normative self-image that delineates a clear system of values and differentiations in importance; and finally, reflexivity, wherein common practices are interpreted through proverbs, maxims, or rituals that the group draws on to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, criticize, censure, control, and reflect upon its group self-image through a preoccupation with its own social system.[35]

Experiences of sexual exploitation through trafficking are crystalized into the collective consciousness and memories of Africana peoples living in the African diaspora. Africana girls' and women's bodies store simultaneous experiences of rape and enslavement, forced impregnation, and other forms of sexualized violence. These unforgettable memories of sexualized traumatization comprise and detail a collective history that informs and impacts the social, physical, economic, and psychological health of the collective.

Both collective and communicative memory are helpful for groups to reflect on their identities and to articulate and challenge ideologies, stereotypes, and actions utilized to justify enactments of oppression and brutal violence against those collectives. The creation of collective and communicative memories is highly significant for Africana peoples because, during periods of European colonization, Africana people were not afforded opportunities to include their collective memories in texts or express them through formal rites or

[35] Assmann and Czaplincka, "Collective Memory," 130–132.

celebrations. Such denied experiences are another aspect of the cultural and collective trauma that Africana peoples endured—the suppression of their histories and memories by dominant cultural collectives. Communicative and collective memories enable the Africana female collective to express the painful experiences of colonial government-sanctioned sexual enslavement. Such memories not only produce knowledge but also document the pervasive issue of sexual trafficking, break the silence that has enabled trafficking to thrive, and challenge the cultural amnesia and silence and resulting stigma and shame.

Collective Memory as Collective History

One such "figure of memory" for African diasporic girls and women are experiences of enslavement and sexual exploitation during the transatlantic slave trade. The Maafa was a commercial and economic enterprise that lasted approximately four centuries, victimizing African women, men, and children. The conditions were vicious and inhumane. The treatment and dehumanization of African peoples was horrifyingly cruel and exploitative, both physically and sexually. The slave routes included several regions and continents, including Africa, the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Indian Ocean.[36] These locales comprise the circuit by which African labor and sex slaves were moved.

[36] UNESCO, "Transatlantic Slave Trade," accessed July 7, 2019, http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human- sciences/themes/slave-route/transatlantic-slave-trade/(site discontinued).

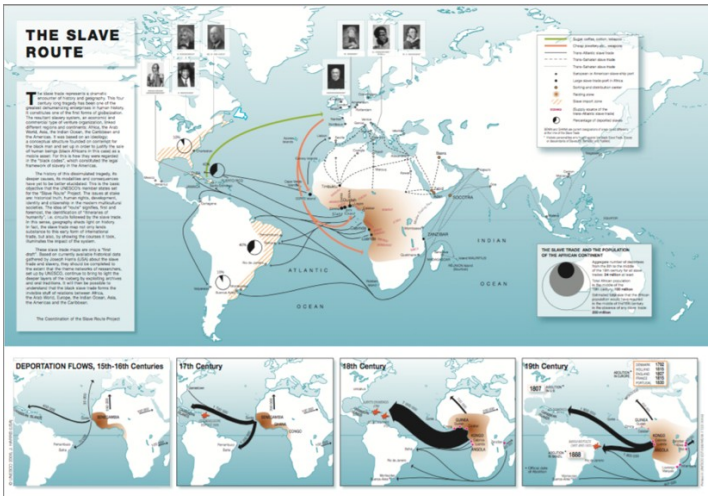

Figure 4.1. Slave Trade Routes © UNESCO, 2006[37]

This system of trading and exploitation is regarded as the biggest deportation or forced migration in history, with millions of Africans being torn from their homes, deported to unknown and unfamiliar places, and subjected to horrendous abuse. It is estimated that between 25 to 30 million people were displaced from native homes, families, and cultures; this does not include those who died on the ships in transit or in wars or raids connected to the trade. The circuit lasted approximately eighteen months, and in order to transport the maximum number of slaves, the ship's navigation was regularly moved. French historian Jean-Michel Deveau espouses that the trade and enslavement of African peoples constitute one of the "greatest tragedies in the history of humanity in terms of scale and duration."[38]

African girls and women in particular were multiply burdened during the Maafa. They were not only uprooted and displaced from their communities and separated from their families (including parents, spouses, and children), but they also experienced ferocious

[37] The above image is a visual representation of the routes by which Africana people were transported and traded, accessed July 7, 2019, http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CLT/pdf/MapSlaveRoute.pdf (site discontinued). Also found here: https://minio.la.utexas.edu/webeditor-files/hemispheres/pdf/slave_map.pdf

[38] UNESCO, "The Slave Route," accessed July 24, 2019, http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/slave-route/transatlantic-slave-trade/(site discontinued).

organized sexual abuse during the slave trade; vestiges of such practices continue into the twenty-first century. The sexual exploitation and assaults of Africana females were not deemed rape and were consequently rationalized as acceptable sexual relations. Political activist and radical legal scholar Angela Davis describes these experiences as sexual terrorism.[39] African diasporic girls and women were trafficked along the ship routes and other routes, and once the ships docked at land, they were sexually abused by sailors, slaveholders, overseers, their children, and whoever else their owners permitted.

Many Africana female slaves were raped as the result of a desire by white slave owners or as a means for the owners or overseers to punish their Africana husbands. Physical and sexual assaults were often perpetrated in view of the women's enchained husbands and brothers, who could do nothing to prevent or protect them from these nefarious attacks.[40] In addition, many African girls and women were subjected to forced breeding to produce children who could contribute to the slave owners' economic enterprise. Often, the children who were conceived by rape were separated from their mothers. Sometimes the raped Africana girls and women were looked upon with contempt by the slave owner's wife. These experiences represent more psychological traumas, as both their humanity and reproductive rights were controlled and denied. In addition, colonizers gained sexual gratification through physical pain and mental control, which worsened victims' trauma.[41]

Psychologist Patricia Gay writes of African girls and women's emotional experiences of sexual exploitation during periods of enslavement:

> Because their first experience was likely by rape, girls acquired a knowledge of degradation, humiliation, shame, and brutality at an early age. The law protected

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[39] Angela Davis, "Rape, Racism and the Capitalistic Setting," *The Black Scholar* 12, no. 6 (November/December 1981): 39–45.
[40] Patricia Gay, "Slavery as Sexual Atrocity," *Sexual Addition & Compulsivity* 6, no. 1 (1999): 5–10.
[41] David Geggus, "Slave and Free Colored Women in Saint Domingue," in *More than Chattel: Black Women and Slavery in the Americas,* ed. David Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 265.

> perpetrators of violence while making it a crime to be virtuous and dangerous to resist. Slave women had to submit to any White man who made advances, at times conceiving the children of sexual predators, and had to make decisions about giving birth to children who were destined to be slaves. Not only could the husband not protect his wife or children from sexual abuse, but also wives, children, and sisters were required to view their men being publicly tortured by castration for minor offenses.[42]

These conditions are similar to the way sexual abuse is deployed in the book of Esther. Colonizers weaponized and used sexual exploitation against Africana girls and women to assert power and domination. Vulnerable enslaved African girls and women like those represented in the book of Esther were placed in compromised positions and rendered powerless against their colonial owners. Analogous to how Ahasuerus treats the Africana virgin girls in the book of Esther, white slave owners had power and control over Africana females' bodies and were able to assault them at their discretion. Female slaves became sexual victims of white slave owners and traders as part of toxic colonial and patriarchal cultures of abuse. The debasement, degradation, commodification, and exploitation of Africana female bodies are thus a key tenet of enslavement and sexual trafficking, which were facilitated simultaneously in both ancient and contemporary contexts. With no legal protection, Africana girls and women were susceptible to rape and other horrendous conditions that led to grave mental and bodily torture and anguish. Interestingly, during the Maafa, Africana girls' and women's living quarters on slave ships were often located below deck near the officers' accommodations, thereby granting officers easy and unrestricted access. This institutional setup echoes the narrative setup in the book of Esther: colonizing perpetrators of abuse and exploitation ensured that girls and women were in hidden quarters, accessible to abusers, and isolated from persons who could protect them, namely their family members.[43]

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[42] Gay, "Slavery as Sexual Atrocity," 7.
[43] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 241, 265.

In 2011, at a United Nations Panel Discussion on "Women of African Descent," Verene Shepherd, a member of the Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, provided an overview of the experiences of African women who suffered under the European-directed trade of enslaved African captives across the Atlantic and of African women and their descendants brutalized and traumatized by enslavement. Shepherd writes,

> There were four essential lines of historical human trafficking that included women and girls: the internal, domestic trade in Africa; the trade dominated by Western Europeans across the Atlantic, the Arab trade in enslaved Africans across the Sahara to northern Africa and Southern Europe and the Indian Ocean and East African trade towards India. The under-reporting, the destruction of records, the smuggling even after the official ending of the trades, the attempts to downplay the magnitude of the atrocity—all help to explain why it is almost impossible to arrive at any accurate figure of the quantitative dimensions of what is increasingly being called the Maafa or African holocaust. But it was wrong and a crime against humanity, whether it involved 1 or 100 million.[44]

Shepherd argues that, in addition to the arduous physical regimes and severe whippings, enslaved women were subject to great sexual abuse. She further elucidates the treatment of African girls and women:

> Neither colonial statutes nor slave codes invested enslaved women with any rights over their own bodies, but rather, transferred and consolidated such rights within the legal person of the enslavers. Male enslavers thus claimed violent access to enslaved women's bodies, and male and female enslavers to their productive labor. Not only did laws not allow the enslaved to refuse these sexual demands made by their enslavers, but they allowed for unrestricted punishment of those who, nevertheless, refused to give in.[45]

Shepherd's comments also reveal the centrality of Africa and India in the slave trade. In two separate contexts, Africa and India are geographical locales from which females are targeted, transported, and sexually exploited. This illustrates the geographical scope and scale of the

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[44] Verene Shepherd, "Women, the Transatlantic Trade in Captured Africans and Enslavement: An Overview," panel discussion on "Women of African Descent," IYPAD, United Nations, New York: October 19, 2011. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Racism/WGEAPD/WomenVerenePresentation.doc (site discontinued).

[45] Shepherd, "Women."

atrocious violence perpetuated against Africana peoples. In addition, the forced movement of ethnic bodies as a means of sexual exploitation characterizes Ethiopia/Africa and India/Asia as vulnerable geographical bodies that house vulnerable material bodies, targeted for capture, transport, and exploitation.

Harriet Jacobs, a formerly enslaved African American woman who escaped enslavement and became an abolitionist, gives a personal account reflecting on the common terror that she experienced in the form of sexual harassment and rape:

> But now, I entered on my fifteenth year—a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl. My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt … But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property: that I must be subject to his will in all things.[46]

Excluded from legal defense and marked for sexual degradation and abuse, no female was exempt from colonial sexual exploitation. Jacobs also recounts the collective traumatization of Africana females by detailing how rape stripped her sister of her childhood. Jacobs writes, "The flowers and sunshine and love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink."[47] Jacob's memories of her and her sister's experiences of sexual abuse shows how pervasive the issue of sexual enslavement was and how it robbed little Africana girls of their innocence, freedom, and peace and challenged their sacrality.

Saartjie Baartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus, is another example of the commodification and trafficking of Africana girls' and women's bodies. Baartman was a South African woman, born in 1789. Considered one of the first known Black victims of sexual trafficking, her body was transported, carnivalized, and put on display as an attraction

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[46] Harriett Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 44–55.
[47] Jacobs, 48.

in nineteenth-century Europe, thus becoming London's most famous curiosity. She was exploited and made famous for her physique, especially her large buttocks, which were stared at, touched, pinched, stripped, mocked, and worshipped. In addition, her body became the object of scientific and medical research which undergirded many stereotypes and ideas about Black women's sexuality. Even after her death, her body parts, namely her sexual organs, brain, and skeleton, remained on display until 1974.[48] Baartman is perceived as the tragic figure of the colonized body par excellence.[49] Coupled with sexual exploitation, her body became souvenir, museum, and research project, objectified for consumers' gaze, consumption, and dissection.[50]

Figure 4.2. Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus © British Library/Science Photo Library, 2020.

[48] Rachel Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman:Born 1789—Buried 2002* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).
[49] "History, Saartje Baartman, The Hottentot Venus: The Figure of the Colonized Body," *The Funambulist*, January 4, 2014, https://thefunambulist.net/editorials/history-saartjie-baartman-the-hottentot-venus-the-figure-of-the-colonized-body.
[50] See Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Rosemary Wiss, "Lipreading: Remembering Saartjie Baartman," *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 3 (1994): 11–40.

Yet another example that sheds light on the culture of sexual exploitation during this era is detailed in the diary of Thomas Thistlewood, a British citizen who migrated to Jamaica and became a slave owner and plantation overseer. In 1762, Thistlewood purchased a young girl named Sally who was aged sixteen, and he raped her thirty-seven times before selling her later that year. On numerous occasions, Sally attempted to escape, running away after being raped. As a result, Thistlewood raped Sally again as punishment when she returned or was caught. He also raped Sally as punishment for stealing and, between raping her, he also invited other men to rape her too.[51] The experiences detailed above illustrate how the routine sexual exploitation of girls and women was central to the enslavement of African peoples: Africana girls and women were raped as punishment, put on display for scientific purposes or entertainment, and abused as sex slaves. Their bodies have become texts that bear repeated references to abuse and torture.

Though white colonizers attempted to wipe away the collective cultural knowledge, consciousness, and histories of those captured, the multiple forms of Africana females' sexual exploitation have become institutionalized cultural memories that have been collected, transmitted, and reincorporated throughout generations. These stories not only showcase the many instances of sexualized violence against Africana girls and women but also recount how some were able to circumvent oppressive structures in order to survive and advocate for protections against such vile acts. These actions of resistance and resilience prove that those who experience sexually trafficking are more than victims: they are survivors, abolitionists, and change makers.

Although cultural memory, according to Assmann and Czaplincka, is characterized by its distance from the everyday, the historical struggles and trauma of Africana females are

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[51] Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750–86* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 1999).

linked to the treatment of Africana girls and women in contemporary contexts. One legacy of past abuse is that it is linked to modern-day experiences of extreme discrimination and sexualized traumatization; therefore, cultural memory is distant yet still experienced in different ways in the present. While evoked in the present, collective memory refers to histories of the past and, at the same time, expresses hope for transformation in the future. As such, collective memory connects three temporal dimensions. Collective memory is not merely fixated on the past but is necessary for groups looking to build and enhance their futures, especially by preventing catastrophes and traumatic events experienced in the past.

Collective History as Collective Trauma

Trauma is broadly defined as an experience or enduring conditions that are overwhelmingly stressful and inhibit an individual's ability to cope. Psychologists assert that it is the subjective experiences of objective events that constitute trauma. In other words, the more a person believes they are endangered by conditions, the more traumatized that person becomes. Moreover, trauma manifests in varying forms, and the traumatic effects are often cumulative. Clinical psychologist, victimologist, and traumatologist Yael Danieli asserts that multigenerational transmission of trauma is an integral part of human history, often transmitted verbally, through writings, in body language, and even in human silence.[52] Sadly, far too many marginalized and subjugated people bear witness to multigenerational trauma in their written and oral testimonies of lived experiences. Consider, for example, African diasporic slaves in colonial territories, natives in a land conquered and exploited by colonizers, survivors of the Jewish Holocaust, and sexually exploited Korean "comfort women," to name only a few.[53]

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[52] Yael Danieli, "Introduction: History and Conceptual Foundations," in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, ed. Yael Danieli (New York: Springer, 1998), 1.

[53] Angella Son created the term "*comfort girls-women*" *t*o replace the traditional, wider-used

Daniel Smith-Christopher reads Esther and Judith as comfort women who sexually service men in the midst of foreign, military, and economically dominant imperial contexts. Although he hints at intersectional identities as contributing to the abuse of Esther, Judith, and the comfort women sexually exploited by the Japanese military during World War II, his analysis focuses more on notions of agency. Smith-Christopher proposes that Esther sees her chance and seizes the day, which suggests clear agency. He reflects on the possibility of Esther intentionally using sexual prowess as an expression of agency and to forge a collaboration with the empire. His analysis is concentrated on the women's collaborative efforts as a strategy to resist oppression, as opposed to the psychological impact of intersectional oppression on girls and women who are forced into servitude. [54]

Angella Son's article, on the other hand, explicitly names the intersectional oppression that comfort girls-women endure; she recognizes that girls-women from various ethnic and national backgrounds were made sexual slaves, identifies the multiple traumas in comfort girls-women's personal accounts and histories, and pinpoints the various physical, psychological, economical, and sexual implications of this horrific cultural trauma. In addition, Son proposes that the horrific experiences of sexual enslavement under the Japanese military caused intense and lasting shame for Korean girls-women both individually and collectively. She defends the girls-women's innocence and argues that the enactments and memories of sexualized violence against Korean comfort girl-women continue to be inadequately recognized. Son's analysis is more congruent with the arguments that I am

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term of "comfort women." Son's use of "comfort" signifies the sexual enslavement of the victims; the inclusion of "girls" underscores the young ages of the victims; and the use of "women" reflects the long period of time that the victims endured their situation without a satisfactory resolution. See Son, "Inadequate Innocence."

[54] Daniel Smith-Christopher, "Sleeping with the Enemy? Reading Esther and Judith as Comfort Women," in *Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Katherine Southwood and Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 99–127.

making about Africana girls and women in the book of Esther and during the transatlantic slave trade.[55]

Because girls and women constitute a high percentage of sexual trafficking victims—minoritized girls specifically—Africana girls and women experience what Orlando Patterson has termed cultural trauma. This cultural trauma is characterized not only by collective and intergenerational sexual exploitation but also by a loss of personhood and cultural identity.[56] When members of the Africana female collective were made sexual slaves, they lost physical, personal, and sexual autonomy. In addition, white slave masters forced them to learn new languages and appropriate European customs and culture.

Psychologists Thema Bryant-Davis, Heewoon Chung, and Shaquita Tillman affirm the psychological impact of intergenerational cultural injustices against Africana females in their research, "From the Margins to the Center: Ethnic Minority Women and the Mental Health Effects of Sexual Assault." They stress that the trauma of sexual assault is intensified for many ethnic women due to the interlocking experiences of societal traumas such as racism, sexism, and poverty. In other words, the socio-historical context of intergenerational trauma in the lives of ethnic minorities is a part of the context for the contemporary experience of sexualized violence.[57]

According to Orlando Patterson, sexual trafficking and the exploitation of children constitute modern forms of slavery, which have social, economic, cultural, and psychological consequences. The resulting effects of this cultural, intergenerational trauma manifests into what Joy DeGruy has termed Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and

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[55] Son, "Inadequate Innocence.".
[56] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.
[57] Thema Bryant-Davis, Heewoon Chung, and Shaquita Tillman, "From the Margins to the Center: Ethnic Minority Women and the Mental Health Effects of Sexual Assault," *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 10, no. 4 (2009): 330.

continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today.[58] DeGruy emphasizes that PTSS is a syndrome—a pattern of behaviors brought on by specific circumstances. In this case, the circumstances are multigenerational sexualized violence and continued oppression, both of which constitute trauma. In other words, the suffering of Africana girls and women during the Maafa has become the inherited suffering of present African diasporic girls and women. Scholar and activist Randall Robinson adds that the history of sexual slavery and colonization which Africana people experience results in a "spirit injury" that leads to the loss of self-esteem, pride, and sense of belonging. He argues that the collective's whole memory is crushed under the remorseless commerce of slavery. In addition, America's perpetuation of racialized myths and social stigmas promote Africana people as being without worth or history. This leads to a resignation of self and identity from centuries of enslavement and oppression.[59]

Unfortunately, many contemporary Africana girls and women endure similar experiences of sexualized trauma in the twenty-first century. DeGruy notes that diasporic descendants of enslaved Africans continue to experience unrelenting violence and harassment.[60] She avers that, after nearly four hundred years of physical, psychological, and spiritual torture, those traumas continue to leave their mark on Africana people.[61] Racialized and gendered social hierarchies, ideologies, stereotypes, and discrimination continue to impact Africana culture and souls. Not only were the traumas often not addressed, argues DeGruy, but the traumas never ceased.[62] DeGruy argues that the consequences manifest in the survivor's behaviors and belief systems, exhibiting the typical symptoms associated with Post

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[58] Joy DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing* (Portland: Joy DeGruy Publications, 2005), 125.
[59] Randall Robinson, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (New York: Penguin 2001), 11–14, 26–28.
[60] DeGruy, *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, 110.
[61] DeGruy, 113.
[62] DeGruy, 119.

Traumatic Stress Disorder.[63] These behaviors include vacant esteem, present anger, and racist socialization.[64]

Whereas subsequent-generation victims of sexual trafficking are differentiated from first-generation victims, recognizing and naming the cultural memories of sexual trafficking experienced by the Africana female collective allows members of the collective to be personalized and humanized after centuries of depersonalization, dehumanization, and marginalization. Historically, certain subjects and institutions have had political control over the narration of slave and sexual trafficking stories and the ways that sexual exploitation is represented in those stories. In taking the dominant narrative position, offenders and their descendants controlled the representation process (DeGruy calls this process "un-sanitizing history") and further perpetuate what many scholars term "the conspiracy of silence" against victims of trauma—yet another mode of depersonalization. In doing so, the perpetrators generate more traumatic violence by silencing groups already trying to process profoundly complex and layered sexualized violence. This silence is exacerbated by reactions of society, including indifference to and avoidance, repression, and denial of victims' experiences; victim-blaming; narratives that are often too horrifying to believe, which results in disbelief or denial; or the myth that survivors actively or passively participated in their own sexual traumatization.[65]

Therefore, a feature of cultural memory is for the impacted group to preserve and relate knowledge themselves. Africana females should produce their own collective memories since they embody the painful experiences and memories of sexualized violence. Collective memories and histories about the sexual enslavement of Africana females produced by dominant cultures ignore crucial details about sexualized violence; this proves

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[63] DeGruy, 123.
[64] DeGruy, 125.
[65] Danieli, "Introduction," 4.

that the act of collective remembering can be a highly racialized process of elites producing knowledge about events to uphold colonial agendas and ideologies. Institutions and cultural groups exercise power and privilege to downplay the experiences of marginalized groups and focus on material and economic culture as opposed to the impact of enslavement and trafficking on material Africana bodies. Collective memory is thus a way to challenge contemporary forms of sexual slavery and sexual trafficking and to confront racism and ethnic-gender-class-based sexual oppression.

Patricia Gay maintains that the descendants of enslaved and sexually exploited African women continue to live with the psychological consequences of the institutionalized sexual violence of enslavement. She emphasizes that the sexual violence against Africana females is not a singular occurrence that happened at a specific point in time; rather, it began with enslavement, and subsequent generations of an entire racial group continue to experience various forms of sexual trauma.[66] Gay notes, however, that, as a means to initiate the healing process and affirm the group's sense of its collective self, the Africana female collective engage in the collective remembrance in the following way:

> Slavery included sexual trauma that has been institutionalized and, thus, continues to injure African American women. The trauma is dealt with in the African and African American spiritual tradition of testifying to, and witnessing of, our history and experience. Though continuing to struggle with the psychological consequences of racism, the collective testimony and witness combined with social action is self-affirming and the beginning of healing.[67]

Members of the collective connect, collaborate, and communicate to produce a shared framework of reference that shaped and continues to shape their identity. This process enables them to create community and solidarity.

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[66] Gay, "Slavery as Sexual Atrocity," 5.
[67] Gay, 5.

Stereotypes and Social and Cultural Attitudes Regarding the Africana Female Collective and How These Attitudes Contribute to Sexual Violence

Discrimination and exploitation are exacerbated by social and cultural attitudes that encourage bias and violence. Crenshaw maintains that another benefit of intersectionality is that it can be used to expose and critique the stereotypes, ideologies, sex-based norms, and laws that justify the maltreatment of Africana girls and women.[68] Experiences of sexualized violence and trauma are often justified and undergirded by stereotypes about Black sexuality. For example, not only were Africana girls and women reduced to the status of chattel, considered subhuman, and differentiate from other races to justify their enslavement, but many colonizers also claimed that they were sexually exotic, lewd, and aggressive, which contributed to their abuse.[69]

For example, the "Jezebel myth" is a pervasive stereotype that frames Africana females as sexually loose and seductive. This myth is modeled on the mischaracterized biblical Jezebel, who came to be a symbol of symbol of lust, sexual impurity, and wickedness.[70] "Mammy" is another figure who performed domestic duties with little or no financial compensation. One emphasis is on her work, strength, and caretaking responsibilities, which reinforced that Africana females are strong and happily seek multiple roles instead of assuming them out of necessity. This image is associated with the matriarch stereotype, which symbolizes strength, self- sufficiency, independency, and resilience without assistance, all characteristics that can be associated with the culture of silence.[71] Another

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[68] Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection," 155–159.
[69] Karen E. Bravo, "Black Female 'Things' in International Law: A Meditation on Saartjie Baartman and Truganini," in *Black Women and International Law: Deliberate Interactions, Movements and Actions*, ed. Jeremy I. Levitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 289–326.
[70] Cheryl Nelson Butler, "A Critical Race Feminist Perspective on Prostitution and Sex Trafficking in America," *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 27, no. 1 (2015): 127.
[71] Shaquita Tillman et al., "Shattering the Silence: Exploring Barriers to Disclosure of African American AssaultSurvivors," *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 11, no. 2 (April 2010): 63–

emphasis of the Mammy figure is on her physical features, which influenced Africana females' beauty regimes and eating patterns. These images present Africana females as self-sacrificial, able to withstand anything, and as willing to selflessly meet the need of all others.[72] Lastly, the "Sapphire" stereotype represents a hostile, nagging, iron- willed woman who is treacherous toward Black men. In other words, she is the angry, hostile Black woman characterized by unnecessary assertive behaviors. This stereotype problematizes expressions of anger and rage, both of which are experienced as the result of sexual traumatization. The stereotype is employed to condemn expressions of emotionality that could help victims process their traumatization.[73]

These social myths assert that Africana females have an insatiable appetite for loose sex, embody an emasculating brashness, and show mammy-like devotion to white domestic concerns.[74] The stereotypes and myths designate Africana girls and women as sexual deviants and targets of sexual abuse.[75] In addition, pornographic depictions show violence and torture as forms of erotica. Bryant-Davis and Pratyusha Tummala-Narra emphasize that

> racialized stereotypes of sexual availability immorality, promiscuity and animalism, and eroticism based on pain and subjugation, and a belief that some subgroups of women and girls exist for the purpose of men's sexual pleasure and/or domination over them have informed the creation of pornography, promoted objectification, and proscribed sexual roles of ethnically diverse women.[76]

Psychologist Carolyn West adds that the internalization of these negative, disaffirming images and the efforts to invalidate them can exact a tremendous toll on Black women.[77]

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[72] Carolyn West, "Mammy, Sapphire and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women and Their Implications for Psychotherapy," *Psychotherapy* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 459–461.

[73] West, 461–462.

[74] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 50.

[75] Cheryl Nelson Butler, "Racial Roots of Human Trafficking," *UCLA Law Review* 62, no. 1464 (2015): 1471.

[76] Thema Bryant-Davis and Pratyusha Tummala-Narra, "Cultural Oppression and Human Trafficking: Exploring the Role of Racism and Ethnic Bias," *Women & Therapy 40,* nos. 1–2 (2017): 155.

[77] West, "Mammy, Sapphire and Jezebel," 463.

Tillman et al. affirm these consequences, highlighting that persons who internalize these distorted and unhealthy stereotypes may experience a state of embarrassment and fear of rejection that outweighs the perceived benefits of reporting their sexual assault.[78] Cheryl Nelson Butler, professor of law and legal studies, adds that stereotypes reflect a culture of "racialized gender," or oppression based upon the intersection of race and gender. She notes that children of color are stereotyped as sexually aggressive, deviant, and predisposed toward risky behavior. In addition, Black children are stereotyped as dysfunctional misfits whose inherently sexually promiscuous nature undermines the moral standards of mainstream society. Butler concludes that the perceived hypersexuality of teens and women of color is regarded as a social threat which contributes to their sexual exploitation.[79]

Stereotypes not only contribute to the creation and shaping of identity but also influence the ways Africana females understand themselves and how they relate to others. Many girls grow up to believe that a heightened sexual persona is central to their sexual identity as Africana girls.[80] Bryant-Davis, Chung, and Tillman maintain that silence and stereotypes are simultaneous weapons used against Africana girls and women.[81] They delineate the impact of stereotypes in the following way: "Cultural beliefs that devalue women while making them responsible for male sexual behavior and cultural beliefs that honor the silent sacrifice of the self for the assumed honor of the family or community can be devastating or detrimental."[82] Bryant- Davis and Tummala-Narra further postulate that stereotypes are created and perpetuated to feed into the desire and justification for persons to purchase and exploit racially and ethnically marginalized persons. Therefore, racial and ethnic stereotypes, which describe ethnic minorities as animalistic, facilitate objectification

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[78] Tillman et al., "Shattering the Silence," 64.
[79] Butler, "Racial Roots," 1485.
[80] Butler, 1487.
[81] Bryant-Davis, Chung, and Tillman, "Margins," 331.
[82] Bryant-Davis, Chung, and Tillman, 339.

and dehumanization, both of which precede other discriminatory and exploitative acts.[83] Consequences of these stereotypes are that they endorse racism and sexism while at the same time promoting socially reinforced cognitive distortions specifically about women of a particular cultural group as compared to the male members of the same group.[84]

Ethicist Traci C. West's work illustrates the relationship between stereotypes and violence against Africana women in the twenty-first century. In "A Moral Epistemology of Gender Violence," West writes about the ties between communal moral knowledge and the endangerment of Black women. She notes that lawmakers and representatives of religious institutions and community resources—community members who are in positions to protect, serve, and/or grant other resources to Black female victim-survivors of violence—make crucial judgments about whether Black girls and women have moral worth. Many of these community members are informed by devaluing attitudes about Black racial identity, preconceived moral assumptions, and behavioral norms regarding Black women. These attitudes frequently lead to a reluctance to respond to reports of violence against Black women or other behaviors that endanger them. She cites as an example the failure of police to prioritize investigating reports of violence made by Black women and/or their families.

Additionally, writing about the intersections of religion and violence against Black women, West underscores that some clergy members reinforce morally distorted understandings of marital obligation and sex/gender norms, for example, the assertion of clergy and religious leaders that "good Black women" or "good Black Christian women" are faithful to their husbands and endure spousal abuse. West urges representatives of these institutions and also activist groups to investigate and challenge the competing and

[83] Bryant-Davis and Tummala-Narra, "Cultural Oppression," 154.
[84] Bryant-Davis and Tummala-Narra, 154–155.

demeaning moral truths attached to poor women's Black racial identities so as to ensure safety for women impacted by violence.[85]

African diasporic girls and women are part of a cultural history marked by numerous traumas, including dislocation, displacement, colonization, sexual traumatization, and stereotypes. According to Gay, stereotypes serve as an additional mechanism of oppression and persistent re-traumatization.[86] Many Africana girls and women were taken to foreign lands, commoditized, and used against their wills for the purpose of sexual pleasure, as attested in the book of Esther and in historical accounts of the Maafa and other slave accounts. The psychological presence of trauma negatively impacts Africana girls, women, and subsequent generations in unhealthy and psychologically harmful ways.

Many Africana girls and women resort to silence as a result of such substantial traumas. Others are silenced by perpetuators of the trauma through oral and written "histories" that distort or ignore the record of such traumas. Nevertheless, the physical, spiritual, psychological, and emotional scars speak, revealing trauma that is often silenced or that cannot be articulated in words. Trauma, shame, and history live in Africana females' bodies and memories. In fact, the body language of many Africana females reflects what the field of epigenetics is beginning to uncover—scientific proof that trauma is being absorbed into people's DNA. Children are not merely repeating learned behaviors as the result of watching wounded generations respond to trauma. There are, in fact, genetic ramifications for intergenerational transmissions of trauma.

Sociologists Bridget Goosby and Chelsea Heidbrink outline some genetic ramifications of intergenerational and collective traumatization. Conducting research that

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[85] Traci C. West, "A Moral Epistemology of Gender Violence," in *Ethics That Matters: African, Caribbean and African American Sources*, ed. Marcia Y. Riggs and James Samuel Logan (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 171–186.
[86] Gay, "Slavery as Sexual Atrocity," 8–9.

utilizes the bio-psychosocial model of racism, Goosby and Heidbrink argue that structural and interpersonal racial discrimination are key factors and salient mechanisms perpetuating the health disparities of Africana peoples and their offspring. These health consequences are transmitted generationally through the body's biological memory of harmful experiences and are influenced by physical and social environments. In other words, racially discriminatory harmful practices and the embodiment of inequality are transmitted through epigenetic influences. Chronic pain and acute distress alter mothers' and their progenies' genetic expression, which often results in overactive physiological responses, including deterioration and increased vulnerability to disease.[87] If any further damage to Africana females' bodies, psyches, and souls is to be curtailed, polyvocal intersectional analysis is necessary in our assessment of sacred texts and other historical documents. In addition, more robust interdisciplinary assessments of the comprehensive and cumulative impact of sexual trafficking against the Africana female collective is crucial.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined and discussed definitions of sexual trafficking and argued that sexual trafficking is a form of sexual enslavement. In addition, I have assessed sexual trafficking through the frameworks of polyvocality and intersectionality to reflect on the issue of sexual violence against Africana females during the transatlantic slave trade. Attention to this historical representation of the sexual trafficking of Africana diasporic girls and women elucidates the convergence of ethnic, gendered, class-based, legal, and other oppressions as characteristic of sexual trafficking and colonial cultures. In addition, this chapter reveals the

[87] Bridget Goosby and Chelsea Heidbrink, "Transgenerational Consequences of Racial Discrimination for African American Health," *Social Compass*, 7, no. 8 (August 2013): 630–643.

role of intersectional oppression and sexual violence during the Maafa in shaping many subsequent experiences and relationships of Africana females.

Diminished legal status, stereotypes, discrimination, immense violence, and sexual trafficking constitute collective traumas that have been engrained into the collective consciousness, identities, and memories of Africana people. Specifically, these inequities and injustices created conditions and contexts that made the sexual trafficking of Africana girls and women legal and uncontested. I have illustrated that communicative and collective memories are tools that provide a link to the past, present, and future with a specific focus on traumatic experiences and attacks against Africana female bodies and identities. The communication of these collective memories is a form of polyvocality that gives voice to and allows their experiences of institutionalized rape to be represented and challenged. It affords members of the collective opportunities to address past and present challenges and needs so that they can both process the many acts of trauma that they continue to endure and transform the imposed stigma and shame into productive energy that will enable them to continue to survive and thrive as a collective.

In the next chapter, I will apply a polyvocal intersectional framework to the book of Esther in order to demonstrate comparable experiences of sexual enslavement for the Africana female collective represented in the book. I will utilize the definitions of sexual trafficking to establish how sexual trafficking is represented in the ancient context. In addition, I will draw comparisons between the experiences of the Africana girls in the ancient context and the Africana girls and women in the contemporary context in order to substantiate my claim that the sexual trafficking is a collective cultural trauma for Africana females that has and continues to have detrimental impacts on their identities.

Chapter 5: "One Night with the King? Sexually Trafficking the Female Collective in Esther 2"

> Suffering bodies are indeed high on the agenda in the book of Esther.
>
> ~ Sarojini Nadar[1]

In this chapter, I utilize sexual trafficking discourse to illuminate the manifestation and mechanisms of sexual trafficking represented in the book of Esther. As an Africana biblical scholar, I engage in a polyvocal intersectional interpretation of the book of Esther and read it dialogically alongside the context of the transatlantic slave trade in order to reflect on issues of sexualized violence against Africana girls and women by imperial and kyriarchal governments. Both the book of Esther and the context of the transatlantic slave trade offer multifaceted portrayals of Africana life under imperial domination. More specifically, these stories illuminate the ways that kyriarchal colonizing societies are responsible for perpetrating various types of victimization and exploitation against Africana females.

Introduction of my social locatedness as an Africana Biblical scholar/interpreter

I do not contend that the ancient and contemporary contexts I assess in this project are identical; nor do I assume the situations Africana females endure in each context are precisely the same. Rather, I observe that the specific aspects of Africana females' experiences across the two contexts are analogous. Comparison of the ancient colonial context and more contemporary colonial contexts affords readers the opportunity to engage in cross-cultural comparison and elucidates an undeniable link between the two contexts. When read dialogically, it becomes clearer that the prevalence and injurious impact of the current sexual

[1] Nadar, "Gender, Power, Sexuality," 113.

trafficking of Africana girls and women is connected to and impacted by historical patterns represented in the book of Esther.

As someone personally invested in social justice, I endeavor to give voice to Africana girls' and women's perspectives and experiences and to produce knowledge that bears witness to Africana females' historical collective traumatization and its bearing on their identities and their resilience. In addition, I endeavor to expose the link between the past and present, with specific focus on Africana female group identity in order to envision and actualize a future free from sexualized trauma. It is my desire that this dissertation invites and affords members of the Africana female collective to collaborate and communicate about the individual and collective impact of historical sexualized violence on the group's identity. Another aim of this approach is to illustrate how to read through a hermeneutic of intersectionality and trauma, a feature not prominent in dominant interpretations. This dissertation showcases how to identify ideological claims and stereotypes and to assess embodiments of difference that undergird and justify the sexual exploitation of Africana females.

It is essential for me to produce knowledge about Africana experiences of sex trafficking because Africana females in the book of Esther are silent and often silenced by narrators of biblical texts. Similarly, in more current contexts, Africana females' voices and their experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation are often minimized or muted in dominant historical accounts of the transatlantic slave trade and, more broadly, in historical accounts of Africana presence in America. As I stated in my introduction, my ability to perceive the first two chapters of the book of Esther as a story of sexual trafficking resulted from learning that the context in which I chose to relocate to pursue an M. Div. has high occurrences of sexual trafficking among Africana girls and women. Because I understand my individual identity as being tied to phenomena happening in the world, I chose to engage in a reading that exposes

historical ideologies and practices that negatively impact the identities of members of my community of accountability in physical, economical, psychological, spiritual, and theological ways.

A conceptualization of how Africana identity is impacted by sexual trauma enables us to see and interpret new meanings in the text; moreover, engagement with Africana females around the presentation of sexual trafficking in the book of Esther affords a dialogical conversation between ancient and contemporary contexts. In such a dialogical exchange, first-hand experiential knowledge that is articulated helps to reveal the manifestations and detrimental impacts of intersectional oppression and sexual traumatization. A polyvocal Africana hermeneutic therefore illuminates some of the ways Africana females may be adversely impacted by the residual legacies of kyriarchy, enduring patterns of colonialism and patriarchy, and harmful ideologies espoused in sacred/religious texts.

Memories are always socially and culturally informed. Collective memories are social processes that are constituted by intentional narrative reflection of the collective's self and how it came to embody different markers of identity. We remember not only by recounting our own stories but by engaging stories that shape our thoughts, actions, worldviews, spirituality, and memories. The dialogical conversation that takes place in my dissertation affords Africana interpreters the opportunity to collectively remember and narrate those seminal events that impact our sense of self and make our identity distinct, both individually and collectively.

In undertaking such a project, I have been able to embody polyvocality, allowing the different voices, perspectives, and experiences of multiple Africana women to inform and impact my interpretation of the first two chapters of the book of Esther. Reading against dominant interpretations, I refute the framing of the sexual violence outlined in Esther 2 as a beauty contest, which ignores elements of capture, displacement, and non-consensual sex—

all mechanisms of sexual trafficking; I also illustrate the intensification of sexualized violence from Esther 1 to Esther 2, which culminates in the legalization of sexual trafficking.

In this chapter, I will outline topographies and characteristics of sexual trafficking to illuminate the portrayal of sexual trafficking in the second chapter of Esther. First, I discuss and identify the parties involves in sex trafficking enterprises and the three elements of trafficking before moving on to point out where these elements are embedded within the text. I then discuss the role of movement, migration, and boundaries in sex trafficking in order to illuminate that Africana females experience forced migration and displacement as they are transported to the king's palace so that he can sexually exploit them. During their exploitation, the king transgresses geographical, bodily, and sexual boundaries. I then present terminologies and characteristics of sexual trafficking that elucidate the manifestation of sex trafficking in the text and explain how intersectional oppression constitutes and contributes to collective traumatization.

Intensification of Sexual Trafficking in Esther 2

In the previous chapter, I noted that sexual trafficking is defined in contemporary US law as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbor, or receipt of people, by coercive or abusive means for the purpose of sexual exploitation."[2] These processes are evoked within the book of Esther, although they are not always recognized as such by the reader. Sex trafficking routes are how Esther and the virgin girls enter the story world as they are transported from their native homes to the king's palace for the purpose of sex. The king's officials indicate to him that virgin girls will be gathered by appointed commissioners in all the provinces of Ahasuerus's kingdom and brought to his palace in Susa:

> Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. And let the king appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch,

[2] US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (2014).

> who is in charge of the women; let their cosmetic treatments be given them. And let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.[3]

Outline of the Mechanisms of Sexual Trafficking in Esther 2

Three Elements of Trafficking

There are three elements of trafficking: the process, the means, and the goal. Foremost, the process involves recruitment, transportation, harboring, transferring and/or receiving. Second, the means is through threat, force, fraud, coercion, abduction, deceit, or deception. Finally, the goal is either sexual exploitation, prostitution, pornography, slavery, forced labor, debt bondage, and/or involuntary servitude, among other physically embodied outcomes. Economic mobility is also a goal of human and sexual trafficking. According to the US Department of State, only one element must be present in order to constitute trafficking.[4] If the goal is sexual violence or exploitation in any form, that represents sexual trafficking. Consent or the lack thereof are not sufficient means for identifying victims of sexual trafficking because consent is often obscured by other situations of vulnerability, including but not limited to gender discrimination, oppression and violence, forced displacement, poverty, wars, and lack of options and/or opportunities.

The process, means, and goals of sexual trafficking are detailed within the king servants' speech, whereby they extend the services (2:2–4). The virgin girls are sought out, transported (process), and forcibly gathered (means) for the purposes of sexual exploitation (goal). The servants advise his officials to seek out and recruit the virgin girls throughout the king's provinces. The officials comply, facilitating the abuse by rounding up the girls. They gather many girls (*na'arot* is translated as "young women" in the NRSV, obscuring the fact that these are children), transport them to Susa, and place them under the custody of Hegai,

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[3] Esth. 2:2b–4a.
[4] US Department of State, "Human Trafficking Defined," last modified June 4, 2008, https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2008/105487.htm.

the king's eunuch (2:8) in preparation for sex, which is the stated goal. Stated differently, in addition to those who live in Susa and across Persia, countless virgin girls are abducted from their native lands, which span from India to Ethiopia (1:1); they are then transported to Susa and held captive in the king's palace so that he can engage in sex with each of them until he determines which one "pleases" him best. More frankly, he determines which girl sexually gratifies him most. That these vulnerable girls are kidnapped, brought against their wills, and are sexually exploited by the king in his palace all constitute sexual trafficking.

Parties Involved in Sexual Trafficking

As well as seeing the processes of sexual trafficking echoed in the opening chapters of Esther, we can also identify characters who fulfil the four key roles typically found in trafficking organizations: the perpetrator, the vendor, the facilitator,[5] and the victim.[6] The king is the perpetrator who sexually exploits the victims. The king's servants play the part of the vendors, extending the services and capital that make sexual trafficking possible. The officers in the provinces of the king are the facilitators, expediting the victimization process by organizing the abduction and forcible transportation of girls to Susa. Finally, the victims of sexual exploitation are represented by all the virgin girls who are brought to the king's harem. Recognizing these different roles within the narrative allows us to identify the events taking place as an explicit instance of sexual trafficking. Moreover, the king does not act alone. His servants suggest that he solicit the assistance of his commissioners to gather and transport the girls to his palace. Their legally authorized collective efforts demonstrate that the sexual

[5] Other terms synonymous with "perpetrator" include "john," "buyer," "client," and "customer"; terms synonymous with "vendors" and "facilitators" include "daddy," "interested party," "manager," and "gorilla/guerilla pimp" who controls victims through violence and force, and "Finesse or Romeo Pimp" who controls victims through psychological manipulation. See Neha Deshpande and Nawal Nour, "Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls," *Reviews in Obstetrics & Gynecology* 6, no. 1 (2013): e22–e27.
[6] Beyer, "Sex Tourism Industry," 308.

trafficking of the beautiful young virgin girls is an institutional strategy whereby the tactics for exploitation are suggested by the king's servants and implemented by his commissioners.

Yet within its traditions of interpretation, the events of Esther 1–2 are often framed in ways that obscure the violence of sexual trafficking inherent in this text. Defining the exploitation of the virgin girls as a "beauty contest" ignores the elements of capture, captivity, and forced displacement that constitute sexual trafficking and ultimately prevents the recognition of such experiences as exploitative. Sexual trafficking is grounded in the transportation of girls' and women's bodies, especially racialized and minoritized bodies, as in the book of Esther. While many biblical interpreters point out that the virgin girls are gathered because of their gender and beauty, this requires further nuancing. Specifically, because India and Ethiopia are explicitly mentioned, these girls are sexually abused and traumatized because of their intersecting identities of ethnicity and social standing, as well as their national and geographical locatedness within the socio-political landscape of Persian imperial rule. The foreign Africana ethnic girls in the story world are eroticized, exoticized, glamorized, sexualized, diasporized, and violently traumatized through sexual trafficking by Persian colonizing forces. This is similar to the ways that Africana girls and women were treated during the transatlantic slave trade; indeed, they are publicly exoticized, glamorized, objectified, and traumatized by European and other colonizing forces in the twenty-first century.

In the opening chapter of Esther, Vashti is presented as a degenerate woman because of the threat she is considered to pose to the empire. By refusing to be paraded before the drunken king and his inebriated party guests, she defies and threatens the patriarchal order, disturbing their identity, power systems, and stability. Consequently, Vashti is deposed, abandoned, and degraded; she lacks support, solidarity, and comfort. A law is created and employed as a tool to assert and reassert male control and dominance over the female

collective after Vashti's refusal to comply with her husband's demands. The judicial sentencing, that "every man be master in his own household," is made in retaliation for Vashti's disobedience and in order to send a warning to other women who might be inspired by her resistance (1:17–18). This law is written "so that it may not be repealed" (1:9), thus sealing it into imperial legal codes in perpetuity. In addition, the king's dismissal of Vashti ultimately leads to a situation in which girls are legitimately sought, transported, held in custody, subjected to a year-long beautification process, and then sexually abused and exploited by the king (2:1–9).

Both the law at the close of Esther 1 and the sexual trafficking of the virgin girls in the subsequent chapter are imposed upon the female collective, articulating the enormity and consequences of women's disobedience and resistance to masculinity and patriarchy. Both laws evoke terror and suffering among the women and girls whose lives they touch. To ensure male dominance and secure patriarchal stability, the king and his officials use shame, fear, and sexual exploitation as a means to correct and sustain gendered social control. In this way, law-making becomes a strategy that drives the violent plot of the narrative, commencing with the sexual exploitation of women and girls in the first two chapters and culminating with other brutal murders that occur in the closing chapters of the text. The first two chapters of the book of Esther thus elucidate how imperial colonizers abuse power to set up and legalize systems of sexual trafficking and other forms of imperial violence.

Not only are the virgin girls seized against their wills, but they are also transported from their homes and home provinces, harbored in the king's palace, subjected to a beautification process which includes pampering and perfuming for a year, and shifted from one harem to the king's bedroom, then to another harem as night after night the king sexually exploits each girl. These processes reflect a system of sexual trafficking that includes partnerships and organized crime; the recruitment and abduction of victims; transit, control,

retention of victims; and wide-scale abuse. Girls are taken from their social environments which includes their families, homes, communities, and culture and are forced into a system whereby a complex network of perpetrators, vendors, and facilitators co-conspire to sexually exploit them. This interconnected system of abusers and manipulators capitalize on the girls' social, economic, and political marginality to exploit their bodies. The abuse of power by the king and his imperial network along with the exploitation of the virgin girls' vulnerability are central to the understanding of sexual trafficking as licensed and accepted sexual abuse because neither the abuse of political power nor the sexual exploitation of the girls are met with resistance by any of the characters in the story world.

Attention to both the processes and parties involved in trafficking exposes the violence and horror of this text. Although the book of Esther is often read as comical, or as a celebration of a beautiful and clever heroine that ascends to queen, such a reading does not tell the whole story: it obscures, suppresses, and condones the casual mention of large-scale abuse which includes the sexual exploitation of Vashti, the sexual trafficking of virgin girls, and the threat of genocide and actualization of mass murder at the book's close. Even more alarming, all of these acts of violence and oppression are legalized through the use of imperial edicts. Law-making thus becomes a trope that drives the violent plot of the narrative, commencing with the sexual exploitation of females in the first two chapters and culminating with the brutally violent murder of Haman, his ten sons, and the enemies of the Jewish collective. A hermeneutical lens of sexual trafficking thus illuminates how colonial subjects use sexual exploitation, displacement, and imperial edicts to perpetuate and justify violence against vulnerable subjects.

Role of Movement, Migration and Boundaries in Sexual Trafficking

Many scholars have romanticized the book of Esther and the process by which Hadassah becomes queen. However, if we read the narrative utilizing the lenses of intersectionality and

collective trauma as an interpretative framework and with consideration of how African diasporic females were exploited through sexual trafficking during the transatlantic slave trade, we might understand the process as far from ideal. In sexual trafficking systems, girls and abusers are linked through boundary flows and movements. Sexual trafficking involves flows and travels across national or international borders to engage in sexual activity; it is a moving epidemic. The flow of sexual trafficking can be bi-directional. There can be a flow of adult offenders across borders to engage in sexual activity, and sexual trafficking can include a forced flow of illegally facilitated national or international border crossings by non-consenting and often underage children. In the story world, instead of the perpetrator traveling to the victims, the virgin girls are brought across geographical boundaries to the king's palace, a privilege that results from his colonial power. This flow and movement are ordered by the king and simultaneously legalized by his imperial edict (2:8).

Sexual trafficking discourse reveals that movement, migration, and boundaries play significant roles in sexual trafficking. Sexual trafficking is predicated on the transgression of sexual boundaries most often facilitated through the transgression of spatial boundaries. This can be through volunteer or forced migration and/or displacement. In many cases, but not all, migration is an integral part of victims' experiences of sexual trafficking. Although transfer and transportation are cited in definitions of sexual trafficking, spatial movement and migration are not necessary to eventuate sexual exploitation. They are, however, key features of the representation of sexual trafficking within the book of Esther. Forced migration and frequent movement may serve to isolate and prevent Hadassah and the other virgin girls from making connections with each other and with the king's other wives and concubines who are already sequestered in his palace. The girls are in continuous movement from the time that they are taken from their homes and home provinces until right after Esther is chosen as queen. Attention to the movement patterns in the book of Esther exposes boundaries that are

transgressed during passage; it also highlights how movement is a tool of the oppressor, namely the Persian king, to inhibit support and solidarity efforts amongst victims, which unquestionably obstructs any attempts of resistance.

There is a nexus between movement, boundaries, and sexual trafficking that illuminates the impact of the transgression of the bodily, spatial, and geographical boundaries. Migration, in particular, results from conditions similar to sexual trafficking: poverty, discrimination, unemployment, lack of education, lack of access to health care, wealth inequality, family breakdown, political breakdown, economic dislocation, and better access to opportunities in more developed countries.[7] These conditions contribute to and increase females' vulnerability to sexual exploitation and other unsafe conditions and locations. In addition, migrants often lack the rights and privileges of citizens, which make them more susceptible to abuse and exploitation. As already stated, sexual trafficking is a global problem. Large numbers of persons constantly migrating, both voluntarily and forced, makes it harder to detect sexual trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

Boundaries also play a significant role in sexual trafficking systems as the movement across boundaries is a strong component of that exploitation. The movement of female bodies (in the book of Esther, it is specifically "virgin" female bodies) are essential for the implementation of sexual trafficking. Movement and boundary crossing takes place in three steps. First, the girls' bodies are taken from their homes within their indigenous provinces and are transported across geographical boundaries to the king's palace. Second, once inside, they are taken across other spatial boundaries as they are transferred between harems and the king's bedroom. Finally, when the girls' bodies cross from the women's harem to the king's

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[7] Mike Kaye, "The Migration-Trafficking Nexus: Combating Trafficking Through the Protection of Migrants' Human Rights," Anti-Slavery International, November 2003, https://www.antislavery.org/reports/the-migration-trafficking-nexus-combating-trafficking-through-the-protection-of-migrants-human-rights/.

bedroom and then to the concubines' harem, the king transgresses the girls' bodily and personal intimacy boundaries.

To understand such transgressions requires a refusal to focus merely on spatial and geographical borders. We must attend to bodily incursions as well. Anthropologist Vania Smith-Oka and biochemist and molecular geneticist Megan Marshalla explain the relationship between intersectional identity, power, exploitation, and bodily boundary transgressions in their research. Smith-Oka and Marshalla note that bodies connect with other bodies across multiple boundaries: physical boundaries of the skin; social boundaries of ethnicity, class, and gender; and sensory boundaries between bodies.[8] Bodies therefore become useful instruments for understanding the reproduction of inequalities, as bodies connect or create distance, cross boundaries as allowed through social scripts, and have the capacity to either damage or heal other bodies. Bodies are not only objects but are central to the creation of knowledge and the housing of knowledge; consequently, they are sites for intellectual inquiry.[9]

Smith-Oka and Marshalla note that the bodies of persons occupying the highest positions in social hierarchies are afforded certain privileges to transgresses the bodily boundaries of those lower on the social hierarchy. For example, in the book of Esther, Persian males occupying the highest positions in the social hierarchy established by their colonizing society and culture have power and privileges to transgress the bodies of colonized ethnic female bodies of lower social standing. Smith-Oka and Marshalla further maintain that interactions between bodies and the crossing of boundaries produce a knowledge that can bring to bear some troubling perspectives and practices while, at the same time, blurring

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[8] Vania Smith-Oka and Megan K. Marshalla, "Crossing Bodily, Social, and Intimate Boundaries: How Class, Ethnic, and Gender Differences Are Reproduced in Medical Training in Mexico," *American Anthropologist* 121, no. 1 (2019): 114.
[9] Smith-Oka and Marshalla, 114.

boundaries between agentive and vulnerable persons.[10] The depiction of the sexual interaction between the body of the colonial king and the bodies of Africana and other minoritized girls and the legalization of this unauthorized bodily boundary crossing promotes ideologies that Africana and other minoritized girls are rapeable and do not deserve protection, and that boundaries that Black and brown females produce should not be maintained. Not only is this knowledge produced, but it is dispersed as edicts are sent (in every one's own script and language) throughout the king's provinces, thus ensuring all know that his authorization of spatial/geographical/sexual boundary crossing destabilizes the girls' physical bodily boundaries.

Powerful, privileged Persian male colonizing bodies that act in this narrative embody agency, supremacy, control, and authority. They transgress the bodily, intimate, and personal boundaries of ethnic, virgin, female bodies that are acted upon. The king's rank and power afford him the privilege to arrange bodies and cross any boundary that he desires. His male agential body crosses various boundaries in ways that map and reproduce bodily and social differences and injustices and reinforces the gendered social hierarchy set up in the first chapter of this text. This boundary transgressing process exposes how certain bodies with a constellation of identifications, specifically Africana bodies, are viewed and treated by society, especially due to their ethnicity/race/social standing. The female bodies that are acted upon are constructed as socially and economically vulnerable and disenfranchised.[11] Because they are female, ethnically minoritized, and impoverished, they are viewed by those with privilege and power as having no, few, or more permeable and breachable boundaries. There are fewer social rules attached to their vulnerable bodies.[12]

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[10] Smith-Oka and Marshalla, 115.
[11] Smith-Oka and Marshalla, 115.
[12] Smith-Oka and Marshalla, 122.

Attention to these types of boundary crossings unveil various troubling frameworks, structures, ideologies, principles, and values of the society that enables the exploitation and abuse of these vulnerable bodies.[13] The manifestation of social inequalities and hierarchies that lend support to these types of bodily transgressions provides a sobering reminder of the ties between colonialism and sexual violence. That a large number of girls are rounded up and transported to the king's palace without resistance reflects the powerlessness of the girls and their families to repel the authority and power of the king.

Seeing and being seen and touching and being touched are conditioned in particular ways by those involved in the sexual trafficking economy.[14] The king selects his new queen in a visible manner, gathering the girls after sending edicts across his provinces. The written edicts provide all the people in the king's provinces access to the knowledge that the girls are being taken into his palace; the recipients are able to see both the edicts and the girls being gathered and transported. The ordering of sexual trafficking is thus communal knowledge. Moreover, the king conditions the people in his provinces to accept his ordering of sexualized violence when he legalizes the trafficking process. The process of trafficking the virgin girls follows Vashti's public deposal for refusing to be objectified through voyeurism. Each time a female is seen, whether Vashti or the virgin girls, it is because the king orders it by summoning her. The male fixation on these minoritized bodies is central to the story, as evidenced in his collection of these vulnerable foreign ethnic bodies as his royal property. Once in the palace, the girls are separated from their families and communities and made invisible to all outsiders, with the exception of Esther. They are even isolated from each other based on their virginal status. After the second chapter, they are completely removed from the narrative.

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[13] Smith-Oka and Marshalla, 122.
[14] Smith-Oka and Marshalla, 115

In this process, the king and his officials legislate migration: they control and facilitate how and when these girls enter Susa; they set the criteria for their entry (beautiful, young, virgins, female, within the king's provinces); they facilitate travel; they establish guidelines for a beautification process that commences once the girls are transported to and secluded in the king's palace; and they determine that the girls will remain in Susa indefinitely where they become sexual slaves of the king after Esther is chosen queen to replace Vashti. These decrees legalize sex trafficking, enabling the king not only to facilitate the smuggling of Africana and other ethnic bodies across national boundaries but also to transgress all personal and bodily boundaries established by the girls when he forces them to have sex with him. He does this as a means to assert his imperial authority and concretize patriarchy after both are threatened by Vashti's resistance. The imperial presence embodied by the king and his officials in this story is intrusive and disruptive, sanctioning the exploitative treatment of vulnerable girls and constructing a reality marked by multiple traumas, namely the traumas of displacement, objectification, sexual exploitation, and enslavement. Recognizing this process as it unfolds within the narrative exposes the inherent violence and horror of this biblical text.

During the process of sexual trafficking, the virgin girls are touched by the king at his discretion. The narrator reveals each night a girl goes in to the king but does not go back into his bedroom unless the king delights in her and calls her by name (2:14). One can imagine the traumatic revulsion at being lined up for selection. These actions serve as social cues to the girls that seeing and being seen and touching and being touched is dictated by the king and by those he appoints over them. For example, Hegai conditions Esther how to be touched in ways that will enable her to advance with the king (2:15). She obeys Hegai and wins the king's favor, devotion, and ultimately the royal crown (2:17). The female collective is therefore conditioned to be seen and touched by men and when men order it. Both Vashti and

the virgin girls lack the agency to define or choose how they are seen and touched. This sexualized sociopolitical process of boundary crossing therefore reveals the hierarchical position of colonial and patriarchal males to determine boundaries and define how they are crossed.

Although many diasporic contexts are governed by patriarchal and imperial forces, girls and women have a right to uphold bodily, sexual, intimate, and personal boundaries. The girls in the text are uncovered, touched, and violated when the king penetrates their bodies, exploring their "anatomical geographies" and exposing the hidden terrain under their clothes and skin.[15] His touch is objective, detached, horrific, and unacceptable. The king's boundary crossing violates physical, sexual, intimate, personal, and social boundaries in ways that disrupt the girls' sense of identity and safety. His actions suggest that neither their bodies nor their boundaries matter. These somatic transactions not only reflect social inequalities but lead to psychological symptoms, including fragmentation, guilt, self-doubt, inability to establish other interpersonal relationships, and disassociation that provides a way to escape or attempt to handle the overwhelming fear and pain. Disassociation enables victims to shut down their feelings in an attempt to protect the psychological self when they are treated as object, abject, and the degraded other.

In patriarchal and colonial societies such as the one reflected in the book of Esther, bodies are not only valued for their labor potential; virginity, too, is an asset that increases a female's value. In essence, because the king gathers countless virgin bodies and brings those vulnerable displaced bodies to his palace, he gains capital. Each evening, a girl goes in and has sex with the king, and in the morning, she is dismissed to go to the second harem for the concubines. The girls, no longer virgins, lose economic value as they are sent to holding cells in the event that the king finds sex pleasurable with them and calls them back to his bedroom

[15] Smith-Oka and Marshalla, 115.

again. Biblical scholar Michael V. Fox argues that these holding cells, the harems, create the space for imprisonment because they have oppressively regulated atmospheres with a regimen that prepares them for someone else's pleasure.[16] The girls do not have a chance to go back in to the king unless he "delights" in them and calls them back "by name." The implication is that these girls have no worth, not even to be called by name, in the eye of the king unless they prove that they are good at having sex with him.[17]

Bringing the virgin girls to Susa is an economic strategy to further disenfranchise the people within the king's provinces. In addition to the obvious physical and mental exploitation, the girls' rapes also constitute an exploitation of the region's resources and capital. By making this observation, I do not intend to reduce the girls' value to their virginal status, but it is nevertheless true that their lives and bodies are valuable to the communities in other economic ways. The king recognizes their capital potential and uses it to disenfranchise their communities. In fact, in the contemporary context, a common reason cited by those who support the continuation of sexual trafficking is that sexual trafficking leads to wealth creation and economic gains.[18] In ancient and contemporary colonial contexts though, the gains and wealth rarely goes to the victim. They may receive some compensation, but colonizers usually find ways to exploit and diminish any benefit that could be accrued.

As we are attentive to forced migration in the ancient context, it becomes clearer that national, home, and bodily borders are transgressed when the girls are transported from their native provinces to Susa; from their homes to the king's palace; and from one harem to the king's bedroom and then to another harem as the king sexually exploits them each night over the course of several years. We are able to understand that movement, migration, and

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[16] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 35.
[17] Fox, 35.
[18] Thema Bryant-Davis et al., "Millennium Abolitionists: Addressing the Sexual Trafficking of African Women," *Beliefs and Values* 1, no. 1 (2009): 72.

boundaries play significant roles in sexual trafficking. Sexual trafficking is predicated on the transgression of sexual boundaries, which are most often facilitated through the transgression of spatial/geographical boundaries. In many cases, but not all, migration is an integral part of victims' experiences of sexual trafficking. The girls are in continuous movement from the time that they are taken from their homes and home provinces until right after Esther is chosen as queen. Attention to these movement patterns expose the multiple boundaries transgressed during passage (bodily, spatial, and geographical) and also highlight how movement is a tool of the oppressor to inhibit support and solidarity efforts amongst victims, which unquestionably obstructs any attempts of resistance. In the next section, I will outline terminology within sexual trafficking discourse to further illustrate how sexual trafficking is denoted in the book of Esther.

Terminologies of Sexual Trafficking

Spatial: Circuits and Hot spots

The series of cities, states, nations, or continents among which victims of trafficking are moved is referred to as the "circuit."[19] In the book of Esther, the circuit is established in the first two chapters. The king's vendors indicate that virgin girls are gathered by appointed commissioners in all the provinces of Ahasuerus's kingdom. The scope of his kingdom is revealed in the first verse of the first chapter: he rules 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia with Susa as the power-center, the residence of Persian kings. The circuit of this trafficking system and the market for the girls is the king's 127 provinces.

[19] "Trafficking Terms," Shared Hope International, accessed April 3, 2019, https://sharedhope.org/the-problem/trafficking-terms/

Figure 5.1. Map of the Persian Empire. © Society of Biblical Literature, 2018 [20]

Once drawn into the system, victims are transported from their homes and countries of origin, across boundaries within the circuit to trafficking destinations also known in modern societies as "hot spots" or brothels.[21] Hot spots are sexual encounter establishments.[22] They can be houses, apartments, trailers, business facilities, etc. Within these establishments, victims have little if any control over the conditions of their lives and living situations. In the book of Esther, the hot spot is the king's palace. It is the place where the king's officials gather the virgin girls for the king's consumption and pleasure.

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[20] Persian Empire map retrieved from Bible Odyssey, accessed May 26, 2019, https://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/map-gallery/p/persian-empire. Note that Ethiopia and India are not listed on the map above although they are both represented on the map and identified in the book of Esther. The map is symbolic of the type of narrative erasure that Africana and other minoritized women experience daily.

[21] Other names for these establishments are "whorehouse" and "cathouse." See "Trafficking Terms," Shared Hope International, accessed April 3, 2019, https://sharedhope.org/the-problem/trafficking-terms/; the Middle English word "brothel" means "worthless man, prostitute" related to the Old English brēothan, "degenerate, deteriorate." It is interesting that the definition reflects the worthlessness of the male; however, when girls are trafficked that sense of worthlessness and shame is shifted to female victims.

[22] Melissa Farley, "Prostitution, Trafficking, and Cultural Amnesia: What We Must Not Know in Order to Keep the Business of Sexual Exploitation Running Smoothly," *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 18 (2006): 132.

Criminologists note that hot spot establishments often have security measures to prevent victims from escaping and to protect victims from outside attacks of other criminals.[23] In the book of Esther, the narrator reveals that two eunuchs function in the role of guards to the virgin girls: Hegai is "in charge of the women" (2:3) and Shaashgaz is "in charge of the concubines" (2:14). The Hebrew term *shamar* translated as "guard" in the NRSV means "to guard, protect, or attend to."[24] When the virgin girls are first brought to the king's palace, they are put under Hegai's custody due to their "virgin" status. Then, once the king debases and devalues the girls through nonconsensual sex, the girls are then transported to a second harem where the king's concubines are housed under the custody of Shaashgaz.

Victims are sometimes kept in hot spots for extended periods of time or are rotated to other locations in shorter time frames to ensure their safety from outsiders and/or to prevent the perpetrators from being caught by legal authorities. This is evidenced in the text when the girls are rotated to different locales within the king's palace and kept there indefinitely. Unfortunately, in the ancient context, there is a conflation of imperial and legal authority. The king and his officials construct and enforce the laws. The girls are trapped as no outside entity can protect them from the governmental/imperial-commissioned and sanctioned sexual trafficking.

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[23] In trafficking discourse, the term "hot spot" also indicates routes or circuits where higher concentrations of sexual trafficking take place. For instance, coastal cities, interstates (i.e. I-95 and I 20), Caribbean islands, and locales with large and often international airports are places where sexual trafficking thrives. In criminological and legal terms, hot spots denote places with higher concentrations of crime. Criminologists are shifting the focus from "hot spots" to "harm spots" as a means to illuminate the impact of crimes not only on place and space but also on human subjects. This shift in focus from the crime to the impact of the crime aids our ability to understand the geospatial, economic, and social impact of sexual trafficking on victims and the communities from which the come and are implanted in. See Cristobal Weinborn et al., "Hotspots vs. Harmspots: Shifting the Focus from Counts to Harm in the Criminology of Place," *Applied Geography* 86 (2017): 226–244.

[24] *BDB*, entry 8104.

Hegai and Shaashgaz are primarily responsible for ensuring that the virgin girls, wives, and concubines are safe while they are in the harem. However, a later scene reveals that the king has the capacity to protect his property when there is an outside threat. When the king perceives that Haman tries to assault Esther, seeing he has thrown himself on the couch where Esther is reclining, the king commands for Haman to be hung upon the gallows that he has prepared for Mordecai (7:8–9). The king does not order Haman's execution as the result of Esther exposing his plot to kill her people, but because he perceives Haman as an outside threat to his wife, Queen Esther, whom he had chosen for his own sexual pleasure.

Another feature of sexual trafficking is that, while at hot spot locales, traffickers instill fear in their victims, confiscate personal goods and identification that would enable them to escape, and isolate them from their families. The narrator fails to detail any interior feelings of the girls while they experience movement from their homes to the king's palace or motion within the palace. However, one can imagine the fear a child endures being removed from her home, her parents and/or guardians, and everything that she experiences as familiar, as well as the fear of being transported to a place where so much is unknown and uncertain.

In contemporary contexts, children frequently have items such as blankets, clothing, and toys that give them a sense of familial and cultural identity and which they cling to strongly during their childhood. These items provide them with a sense of belonging and security, as do their parents, family members, and other loved ones. The narrator does not detail whether the girls bring any personal belongings to the king's palace. In fact, the only reference to possessions is what the girls ask for and are given to take with them from the harem to the king's bedroom (2:13). These girls are children. Rather than being given child-appropriate toys, they are given sex toys. To remove children from their homes and not allow them access to age-appropriate artifacts that sustain their identity may constitute a double loss and multiple traumas. In many cases, access to these items during abuse can ease the pain and

anxiety of separation which is why many perpetrators provide them.[25] This is another example of how perpetrators and abusers manipulate and control victims.

Similarly, in modern contexts, after a child has been rescued and removed from sexual trafficking systems, many support organizations collect and gift "comfort items" such as toys, stuffed animals, and blankets to reduce stress and help children cope with the multiple traumas they endure, such as separation from families and communities, removal from the home, movement from place to place, and physical and sexual abuse.[26] It is important to note that, although these items can serve as a source of comfort and security, helping to facilitate a healthier sense of self and well-being for child victims, they could also possibly trigger memories of abuse and exploitation if they are used during and incorporated into the abuse.

Another mechanism of sexual trafficking is victim isolation. The text offers details of the virgin girls' isolation from their families. With the exception of Esther, all the other girls remain secluded in the king's harem. After Esther pleases Hegai and wins his favor, he expeditiously provides her with cosmetics, seven chosen maids, and the best place in the harem (2:9). Moreover, when the girls are gathered, Mordecai is sitting at the king's gate (2:19) and walks around the front of the court of the harem every day to learn how Esther fares (2:11). When Mordecai learns about Bigthan and Teresh's attempt to assassinate the king as he sits at the gate each day, he relays it to Esther who discloses it to the king in his name (2:22). These details show that Mordecai has access to Esther, unlike family members of the other victims. He is able to check on and communicate with her through a proxy. Undoubtedly, he can do so by building a relationship with the eunuchs who guard the

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[25] Kenneth Chinn, "Human Trafficking and Victims of the Sex Trade Industry in California and the Implications for Korea," *Regent Journal of International Law* 10 (2013): 117.
[26] "About Us," The Child Advocacy Center of Niagara, accessed May 26, 2019, http://cacofniagara.org/about-us/how-can-i-help/; "Saving Innocence: Crisis Response and Support for Children," Thorn, accessed May 26, 2019, https://www.thorn.org/blog/saving-innocence-crisis-response (site discontinued)

threshold. Obviously these two eunuchs' allegiance is not to the king as evidenced by their plot to assassinate him (2:19).

Traffickers isolate victims from their homes and families in order to create dependency and control them. By denying access to the victims, perpetrators minimize attempts of resistance by both victims and families and thwart familial efforts to rescue the victims. Because Esther is not fully isolated from her family, she and Mordecai are able to co-collaborate on saving the Jewish community once the threat of genocide is made. However, Mordecai apparently does nothing to help Esther escape the sexual exploitation she endures in the palace. The other nameless girls who are brought in are isolated with no hope of returning to their families or communities. Like many other victims of sexual trafficking, they are cut off from their families and the outside world indefinitely.

How Victims Name and Are Named

In the book of Esther, Hadassah is the only victim who is named. In fact, both her Jewish and Persian names are disclosed. Hadassah is her Jewish name and Esther is her Persian name (2:7). This is important because females are rarely mentioned by name in the Bible. Only two have books named after them: Esther and Ruth. In the book of Esther, the narrator reveals that the king summons a girl by name if he delights in her, but none of their names are ever disclosed (2:14). The nameless virgin girls are narratively depicted in ways that are similar to other Africana female characters in the Bible and contemporary victims of sexual trafficking. For example, Potiphar's wife, Moses's Ethiopian wife, Solomon's wives, and other unnamed sexual slaves/concubines in Israel's history have peculiar sexual histories. Many are depicted as nameless, rendered invisible, portrayed as powerless, subjected to gruesome situations, and unable to control their fates.

Namelessness and silence around sexual exploitation are features of sexual trafficking that should not be ignored. In many cases, victims of sexual trafficking are rarely addressed

by their legal names. They may be identified by derogatory slang terms such a bitch, whore, trick, or hooker, which, as an intentional process, robs them of personhood and contributes to their dehumanization. This process of un-naming prevents victims from knowing, understanding, and developing self-identities, and this can result in self- detachment. Children, especially when they encounter stressful events such as sexual abuse and exploitation, dissociate as a means to escape psychologically when they cannot do so physically. If the child is exposed to prolonged or severe abuse, the part of the self that escapes psychologically may develop its own identity separate from the conscious and accessible identity.[27]

Similarly, namelessness and invisibility (facelessness) along with constant movement prevents the identification and tracking of victims. These features enable traffickers to operate systematic rape under the radar and prevent getting caught. The virgin girls are not the only females that are nameless in Esther 2. The wives and concubines under the custody of Hegai and Shaashgaz are nameless as well. Although the narrator does not reveal how many wives and concubines the king has, readers can assume that he possesses an incalculable number of females based on his ability to gather all the girls in his vast kingdom. To give some context to how many women might inhabit the king's harem, biblical historian Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones notes that the number of women that constitute a royal harem could be in excess of 400 at any time.[28] Moreover, that there is a distinction between wives and concubines further underscore that class status is a contributor to the type and extent of abuse

[27] Lisa Cruz, "The Connection Between Dissociative Disorder and Sex Trafficking," Shared Hope International, accesses June 20, 2019, https://sharedhope.org/2016/08/15/connection-dissociative-identity-disorder-sex-trafficking/.
[28] Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, "Eunuchs and the Royal Harem in Achaemenid Persia (559-331 BC)," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond,* ed. Shaun Tougher (London: The Classic Press of Wales, 2002), 31.

one is subjected to and the level of agency certain classes of females are afforded by imperial power.

Wives, although limited by the patriarchal and kyriarchal social order, tend to have more voice, agency, power, and resources than concubines and other non-married females. This may be why Vashti and Esther speak and act while the other virgin girls fail to. What is interesting, though, is that Esther is granted resources and is advanced by Hegai even before she becomes the queen. Contemporary victims of sexual trafficking are frequently deprived of food and other resources. If Esther becomes queen because she is able to sexually satisfy the king best, denoted in the text by the word "please," is she then afforded these resources because she sexually "pleases" Hegai as well? (2:9). If so, it appears that the king is not the only perpetrator. Perhaps, Hegai sexually exploits Esther as well.

A deeper exploration into the meaning of Esther's names further elucidates her experiences and interactions with imperial powers. Hadassah is derived from the Hebrew *hadas* meaning myrtle or pleasing of scent.[29] Myrtle trees have white flowers that are used to create perfume and are a symbol of love and marriage. Myrtle trees are also used to make wreaths in wedding ceremonies.[30] The name Hadassah therefore foretells her fate as the replacement queen. Hadassah receives her cosmetic treatments, including the perfume, before the other girls do, as though in preparation for her marriage. Her Jewish name thus reflects her status as honored and favored in this diasporic setting, evidenced by her gaining the favor of both Hegai and the king, and by her subsequent ascension as queen.[31]

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[29] *BDB*, entry 1918.
[30] Chana Raizel Zaklikowski, "What does the Name Hadassah Mean?" Chabad, accessed May 26, 2019, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1769366/jewish/What-Does-the-Name- Hadassah-Mean.htm; "Wedding Wreaths," *Harper's Weekly*, 46 (1902): 446.
[31] In Zechariah, myrtles are also associated with righteousness (1:8). The sages in midrash suggest that Esther is good to Mordecai who is portrayed as righteous throughout thenarrative (Esther Rabbah 6:5).

Esther is Hadassah's Persian name. It means "star" and is associated with Ishtar, the goddess of war and sexual love. It too reflects and foretells Esther's experiences of violence through sexual exploitation as the king weaponizes sex against her and the other virgin girls during the process of sexual trafficking. Ishtar is characterized as young, beautiful, courageous, and impulsive, which corresponds to descriptions made of Esther in the text. Moreover, one of Isthar's legacies is that she is a protector of prostitutes. She is described as having priestess-prostitutes, who in later times were virgins who were not permitted to marry.[32] Esther may serve in this capacity of protector of the other females under the king's authority since she is coerced into becoming the protector of the Jewish collective and fulfills the task successfully.

The name Esther also corresponds to the Hebrew *hester*, which means "hiddenness."[33] In the text, Esther conceals her ethnic identity from the king. Conversations about hiddenness in the book of Esther usually correspond with the hiddenness of the face of God in the text. Yet, it is congruous with the hiddenness of the virgin girls, trafficked into and concealed in the king's palace. Hebrew Bible scholar Rachel Adelman maintains the wordplay between *hester* and Esther defines Esther and her world as embodying the terror foreshadowed in the biblical verse: in her time, God hides God's face. (Deut. 31:17–18).[34] Not only is God's face hidden, but the virgin girls' names and faces remain hidden. After the second chapter, they completely disappear from the story. The virgin girls and Esther's experiences of sexual trafficking and many other aspects of their intersectional identities are masked as well.

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[32] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, s.v. "Ishtar," modified February 14, 2018, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ishtar-Mesopotamian-goddess.
[33] *BDB*, entry 5641
[34] Rachel Adelman, "'Passing Strange'—Reading Transgender across Genre: Rabbinic Midrash and Feminist Hermeneutics on Esther," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 2 (2014): 89.

Jo Carruthers, professor of literature and the Bible, suggests that Esther is the name of the queen and Hadassah is the name of the maiden girl.[35] By making this distinction, Carruthers illuminates her dual identities that operate in different social settings. This observation may provide evidence of a psychological split of self-identity as the result of trauma. Hadassah/Esther is constantly negotiating multiple identities. This is compounded by Mordecai instructing Hadassah to hide her ethnic identity and pass as Persian. Not only does this contribute to Hadassah/Esther's dual identities, but it fosters ethnic suppression and invisibility as well.

Naming in Contemporary Contexts

Although contemporary victims of sexual trafficking are isolated from biological families, families of origin, and/or adopted families, many are able to cultivate relationships with other victims based on shared experiences of isolation, exploitation, and traumatization. Attention to other terms that describe victims of sexual trafficking sheds light on how victims of trafficking are defined and understood by perpetrators and other persons in power, and how victims understand themselves and their relationship to other victims. There are various terms used to describe victims controlled by the same pimp. These terms reflect both societal and cultural views about victims as well as victims' views and understandings of themselves and other victims. One term that picks up on the inferiority and dehumanization of females is "stable," which signifies a group of women under the control of a single pimp. This term symbolizes the ways that girls and women are marked and treated as chattel or animals in contemporary contexts. Stables are establishments wherein livestock such as horses are housed, kept, and trained.[36] These girls are brought into hot spots, kept, and trained how to be

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[35] Jo Carruthers, "Writing, Interpretation, and the Book of Esther: A Detour via Browning and Derrida," *Yearbook of English Studies* 39, nos. 1–2 (2009): 66.
[36] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "stable," accessed April 3, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stable.

sexually exploited by perpetrators. The book of Esther reflects this concept. The virgin girls are brought into and kept in the king's palace. Moreover, there is an explicit reference to Hegai advising or training Esther on what is to happen in the king's bedroom (2:15a).

"Family" and "folks"[37] are terminologies used by victims to describe other individuals/victims under the control of the same pimp. These terms reflect the victims' understanding of their relationship to other victims. When victims are cut off from their families of origin, they forge new kinship bonds with others with whom they are forced to share experiences of trafficking. They experience some of the worst conditions together, which facilitates bonding even when they cannot protest against those conditions.

Similarly, girls and women under the control of the same pimp may call each other "wifey," "wife-in-law," and "sister wife."[38] In present day sexual trafficking systems, polyamory among sub-communities of trafficked women and girls and their pimps is normalized as it was in patriarchal and colonial contexts of antiquity. Consequently, girls and women in contemporary settings acknowledge their shared statuses and identities as wives and/or concubines. By calling each other "sister-wife," modern victims may acknowledge their roles and relationships to their perpetrator and to each other. In the latter, they forge kinship bonds that were stripped away during the processes of abduction and isolation.

In contemporary contexts, many victims are able to create bonds based on their shared experiences of oppression and exploitation, as noted in their articulations of other victims as family and folk. Sometimes, however, cultural and language barriers prevent the development of bonding. In the first chapter of Esther, the narrator reveals that the people across the provinces speak diverse languages when noting that the king sends letters "to all the royal provinces in its own script and to every people in its own language" (1:22). In fact, the

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[37] "Trafficking Terms," Shared Hope International, accessed April 3, 2019, https://sharedhope.org/the-problem/trafficking-terms/.
[38] "Trafficking Terms."

narrator confirms on multiple occasions that the people throughout the king's provinces do not speak a common language by indicating the empire sends edicts to groups that maintain their own scripts, languages, and culture (3:12; 8:9). Language barriers such as those identified in the book of Esther may prevent victims of exploitation from understanding what is happening to them, supporting each other, and reaching out for help.

Although some girls in the story world may have been able to relate to and communicate with each other from the same province and/or racial/ethnic/cultural background, diverse language can contribute to victim isolation and inhibit attempts of victims' collective action. While cultural and language barriers do not prevent victims from perceiving each other as family or bonding with each other, these barriers do limit the ways and extent that victims can bond and further develop kinship ties. In fact, Adelman notes three aspects of an authoritarian regime: the role of dressing up (or in the case of Vashti, undressing) to be objects of desire in others' eyes; the consequent exile of self and identity; and the subversion of language for the oppressed community.[39] The king and his officials thus operate as an authoritarian regime throughout the first two chapters.

Adelman also emphasizes another issue concerning language by pointing out that Vashti's mother's tongue is forbidden in her own home, thereby rendering her silent.[40] This demonstrates another layer of complexity regarding experiences of sexual trafficking—the erasure of ethic and cultural identity markers. Victims are often able to preserve aspects of their identities through languages because their beliefs, values, and worldviews are embedded within language. If, once Esther becomes queen, she is made to abandon her mother tongue and appropriate the imperial language, this contributes to her identity crisis. Loss of language is not just a loss of culture and identity but also a loss of subjectivity as it transmits

[39] Adelman, "Passing Strange," 87.
[40] Adelman, 86.

experiences, traditions, and knowledge.[41] When a language is erased, so are the ethnic histories and cultural heritages that accompany it. Erasure and suppression of language is a form of ethnic cleansing often practiced in colonial contexts.

Even though the females in the text are identified by their roles in relation to men—wives, concubines, and virgins (potential wives and concubines)—the female collective is not marginal. In fact, they are characters whose existence and treatment are central to the plot. When interpreters prioritize the female characters and read the narrative through the lenses of intersectionality and collective trauma, the young women's experiences of sexual trafficking are brought to the fore of the interpretative process. Instead of understanding the abuse as a beauty contest, interpreters may be able to perceive that these girls are subjected to much more horrendous encounters of sexual exploitation. The namelessness and invisibility of the Africana and other virgin girls make them stand out even more when juxtaposed with the admiration of Esther by everyone who has an opportunity to see her (2:15b). Attention to the nameless, faceless Africana girls in the text makes visible what has been historically rendered invisible and silent—that is, the proneness to and prevalence of Africana girls and women in sexual trafficking. At the same time, attention to Africana girls in the story world allows interpreters time to analyze the mechanisms that produce such invisibility and silence.

Intersectionality and polyvocality spotlight the trauma of Africana girls and women who are embedded in the story of Israel's past. The gender, social, and cultural restrictions experienced by Africana characters who live in an intertwined world alongside other minoritized and exploited girls and their oppressors are brought together in the book of Esther. In addition, the book of Esther and histories of sex trafficking of Africana girls and women during and after the transatlantic slave trade unfold how the above restrictions and

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[41] See Julia Borossa, "Identity, Loss and the Mother Tongue," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 21, no. 3 (November 1998): 391–402.

other complex issues such as forced migration and sexual trafficking shape the lives of Africana girls and women. This dissertation, accordingly, depicts multiple stories that narrate how the lives of Africana girls and women across contexts, time, and space are linked together through experiences of sexualized trauma and violence. It can become a source for Africana girls and women endeavoring to make sense of their past.

Attention to Time in the Book of Esther

Another issue often under-discussed by commentators in the Esther narrative is how the narrator marks time or utilizes time to reveal the duration of certain traumatic encounters. Time plays an essential role in the development of the narrative. The narration of time reveals how the characters, specifically the virgin girls, may have experienced time. For example, Esther 2:12 states that each girl undergoes twelve months of "regular cosmetic treatments": six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics.

Biblical and gender studies scholar Sarojini Nadar emphasizes a four-year lapse from the time that Vashti is deposed by the king and when Esther "wins his favor." Readers are told in 1:3, "In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet" wherein Vashti is deposed. In chapter 2, the narrator discloses that Esther is taken to the king in his royal palace "in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign" (1:16). We are told that one year is spent preparing the virgins with cosmetic treatments. Thus, the process of sexual exploitation takes place for a period of three years.[42]

Revealing such details about the lapse of time underscores the longevity of the abuse and possibly the intensity of the traumatic encounter. One can only try to imagine how traumatic it might be for a child to anticipate and, at the same time, endure a year-long preparation for rape and exploitation followed by a three-year period of persistent abuse and

[42] Nadar, "Texts of Terror," 87–88.

imprisonment in multiple harems—conditions that certainly produce overwhelming trauma. What intensifies the trauma is that sexual trafficking is not merely a violation of their bodies, but the cosmetic treatments lead to repression of their identities and violations of the self which often result in fragmentation of the mind into different parts of the self. Both experiences force the girls to adapt to colonial identities and landscapes, much like how Africana subjects were transported to, dispersed throughout, and forced to adapt in various new colonial landscapes.

Other Factors that Contribute to Vulnerability

Many factors contribute to the children's vulnerabilities to being trafficked, including age, poverty, weakened family structures, desire to migrate, political instability, socioeconomic status, lack of community resources, fear of violence, taboos against talking about sex, early exposure to sexual activities, childhood sexual abuse, family pressure for girls to sacrifice themselves for the survival of their families, cultural norms including gender role ideologies, traditional beliefs about marriage, and respect for authority; all of these things operate in various ways to obscure and justify acts of sexual assault.[43] Even today in major cities throughout Africa, girls are often pressured into sex trafficking in order to eat, live, survive, and secure protection.[44] These factors are especially prevalent among minoritized girls and women, rendering them more vulnerable to sexual trafficking. In fact, internationally, a large number of persons trafficked are of African, Asian, and Latin-American ancestry.[45] The 2018 Trafficking in Persons Report reflects the root causes of the crime of trafficking are "deeper that any one of its facets and relate to larger systemic conditions such as poverty, forced migration, racism, discrimination, among many others."[46]

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[43] Bryant-Davis et al, "Millennium Abolitionists," 69–78.
[44] Bryant-Davis et al, 81.
[45] Bryant-Davis et al, 71.
[46] US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report* (Washington: US Department of

In addition, children and youth have higher rates of sexual victimization than women and men. Criminologist and licensed mental health counselor Joan Reid points out that

> the young age of victims and their commensurate lack of psychosocial maturity cast doubt on their ability to detect exploitative motives or withstand manipulation of sex traffickers or recruiters. Due to inexperience and naiveté, minors are especially susceptible to sexual coercion and entrapment in juvenile sexual trafficking.[47]

Because they have limited options, homeless and orphaned children are more endangered. Traffickers prey on vulnerable victims. Therefore, children who are in foster care or orphanages, who are runaways, or who are caught up in juvenile justice systems become prime targets for sexual trafficking. In fact, many children are vulnerable to trafficking because of experiences of isolation and abandonment. Perpetrators exploit these vulnerabilities to lure children and further isolate them from their families and communities. In Esther 2, the narrator reveals "Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the girl was fair and beautiful, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter" (2:7). Mordecai *'aman* (supports) Hadassah, a female Jewish exile orphan, as her foster parent since her parents are deceased. As her guardian, he provides care and upholds her. This detail sheds light on Esther's vulnerability to trafficking.

Living as foreigners in a diasporic community, Mordecai and Hadassah are descendants of captives carried away from their home in Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (2:6). This detail provides insight to their cultural and familial vulnerability to violence, as it recounts experiences of displacement and weakened family structures which, coupled with Hadassah's age, gender, and orphan status makes her prone to further exploitation. Although she is not completely defenseless in terms of family dynamics, both

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State, 2018), 3, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/282798.pdf.

[47] Joan Reid, "Entrapment and Enmeshment Schemes Used by Sex Traffickers," *Sexual Abuse* 28, no. 6 (2016): 492.

she and Mordecai to a certain extent are defenseless because they are members of the inferior religious-ethnic-cultural group captured by the Babylonians and dominated and subjugated by the Persians. Immersed in a patriarchal social setting, Hadassah is dependent on Mordecai's protection as her sole guardian, but he may not be able to protect her from being injected into this horrendous system of sexual trafficking due to his own disenfranchisement and helplessness. Family members sometimes lack the cultural and financial capital to resist imperial violence and oppression, but many traffickers threaten to kill or harm the victims in other ways if the perpetrator perceives the victims' families as a threat.

Like many Africana girls and women vulnerable to exploitation through sexual trafficking, Hadassah is at a disadvantage because of her liminal status outside of normal kinship structures. Helpless, she requires not only personal protection but legal protection from risks that threaten her livelihood and survival. However, she is failed because of patriarchal-sexist ideologies that promote rape culture and state-sanctioned exploitation. Hadassah has an economic dependence on her offender and exists in a socio-historical context of legalized physical, economic, and sexual oppression of ethnic minorities. These conditions may have bearings on her guardian's participation in her oppression as a means to survive. Very similar socio-historical conditions exist for African diasporic girls and women currently living in the African diaspora. Therefore, reading the story of Hadassah and the unnamed Africana virgin girls in light of contemporary manifestations of sexual trafficking illuminates collective memories and identities grounded in socio-historical realities wherein Africana diasporic females' bodies are repeatedly and frequently exploited, abused, and unprotected.

Characteristics of Trafficking/Traffickers

In contemporary societies, children are often drawn or lured into sexual trafficking systems because of their youth and other factors that render them vulnerable. Some have previous

experiences of child sexual abuse, physical abuse, and abandonment. These experiences, coupled with the need for better living conditions, often lead children to search for ways to escape and create better lives for themselves.[48] Similarly, in many present situations, families sell children into trafficking structures as a means to escape poverty and other hardships. Traffickers take advantage of these conditions and often present themselves as empathetic and willing to help children escape harsh living conditions or abusive homes.[49] Some victims are abducted and forced into trafficking. At other times, traffickers may use recruiters to search for needy youth who are easily exploitable. Recruitment and transportation are usually facilitated by a familiar person, often a family member or friend, but these processes can be facilitated by a stranger, which might heighten experiences of fear and traumatization. In many instances, recruitment is facilitated by people unknown to the victim, including persons who are/have been subjected to sexual trafficking themselves. Abduction is the method utilized in the book of Esther. The Persian empire gathers, displaces, and sexually exploits young, colonized girls whose disenfranchisement due to their intersecting gender, ethnicity, and class identities makes them easily exploitable.

Recruitment and transport of victims is not always straightforward. Non-forced recruitment is also prevalent during sexual trafficking. Persons who are trafficked sometimes respond to economic pressures. Others may perceive that they are dependent on traffickers because of multiple vulnerability factors. Yet others may trust recruiters or perceive that sex for sale is an appropriate job because it is profitable. As with notions of agency, notions of consent and recruitment are complex and complicated by power dynamics and structures. Circumstances and opportunities are context specific; therefore, more nuanced analyses of contexts and enactments of sexual trafficking are necessary.

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[48] Reid, 492.
[49] Reid, 492.

Methods of Luring

According to the Polaris Project, traffickers can include family members, migrant workers, gangs, taxi drivers, and other strangers who often make false promises aimed at addressing and fulfilling the needs of their targets in order to lure them in. They promise access to love, safety, attention, education, good jobs, citizenship in a foreign country, false marriage proposals, and other exciting opportunities in order to exploit victims' vulnerabilities. There are various methods employed to lure victims into trafficking systems. Methods include, but are not limited to, seduction and romance, false job advertisement, bullying, abduction, sale by family, lies about education and travel, and recruitment through former trafficking victims.[50] The most common form of luring is debt bondage, wherein victims are forced to pledge personal services in order to repay a form a debt such as living expenses, transportation to foreign country.[51] Most relevant to the book of Esther are seduction and romance, sale by family and debt slavery, and recruitment by former trafficking victims such as sexual slaves.

Seduction and Romance

The method of seduction and romance includes a highly deceptive form of grooming and abuse. Traffickers, also known as "lover boys," form romantic relationships with victims which become emotionally, psychologically, physically, and sexually abusive in nature. Romancing includes giving the prospective victim a lot of attention and showing off wealth by buying the victim gifts and spending money on them to make them believe that they are in love.[52] The "lover boy" also uses violence to intimidate their victims into compliance. In the

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[50] "Human Trafficking," Polaris Project, accessed July 9, 2019, https://polarisproject.org/victims-traffickers; Reid, "Entrapment and Enmeshment Schemes," 492.
[51] D. R. Hodge, "Sexual Trafficking in the United States: A Domestic Problem with Transnational Dimensions," *Social Work* 53, no. 2 (April 2008): 143–52.
[52] Reid, "Entrapment and Enmeshment Schemes," 497–98.

book of Esther, after the king abducts the girls, he utilizes seduction and romance as a grooming method to prepare the girls for a sexual encounter.

Moreover, Reid notes that lover boys often use flattery by painting a picture of a wonderful life together, which is intended to isolate victims from their families and communities. Undoubtedly, the narration of all the stately decor and excessive descriptions of the king's palace in Esther 1 reflect the incentives of palace life. The material resources of the king and his kingdom signify grandeur, access to resources, wealth, and power. Once Esther becomes queen, she gains access to the resources and power of the empire that are described in the first chapter. The other girls remain isolated from their families and communities and serve as sexual slaves for the king. They do not gain as much access to resources and power as Esther—if they gain any at all, because as concubines, they fall lower on the social hierarchy. Like Vashti, they are never again mentioned; they are exiled to the harem and rendered invisible and silent throughout the rest of the narrative.

Modern perpetrators use several grooming techniques to entrap girls, including building trust by fulfilling the role of a significant other such as a boyfriend, normalizing sex by exposure to pornography, and disorienting girls by introducing them to drugs and alcohol and constantly moving them from place to place.[53] In the book of Esther, grooming takes the form of a year-long beautification process where the girls receive perfumes and cosmetics (2:12).[54] The narrator details the beauty regimens the virgin girls undergo in order to prepare them for sex with the king. Sidnie White Crawford writes of the abuse as follows: "The contest in 2:1-4 is a sexual one, and the prize is the royal crown. The only qualifications are youth and beauty. The author doesn't comment either negatively or positively about this

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[53] Reid, 493. Also see Helen Brayley, Eleanor Cockbain, and Gloria Laycock, "The Value of Crime Scripting: Deconstructing Internal Child Sex Trafficking," *Policing* 5 (2011): 132–143.

[54] I will expound on the role of beauty in greater detail in a later section titled "The Role of Beautification in Sexual Trafficking."

objectification of women, although to a modern reader it is deplorable."[55] Sexual skill is the determinant for who becomes the next queen, not the girl's youth or beauty. Youth and beauty are a couple of the attributes that cause the girls to be gathered for exploitation and abuse. Once captured, they are required to undergo further beautification as part of their exploitation.

Sale by Families and Debt Slavery

Conditions such as extreme poverty, displacement, forced exile, and diasporic living often lead to desperation. Consequently, families often have to sell their children out of necessity to survive. Nehemiah 5 details the economic difficulties endured among the people of Israel under the Persian empire. Debt slavery was a widespread problem and a common practice in the Hebrew Bible world. People would especially sell their children and hire out their labor to pay off debt as they had no other means to pay.[56] Although both daughters and sons were sold as slaves, daughters were sold before sons because of the son's potential to help with farming and other chores around the family home. Similarly, children were sold into slavery so that their parents could escape famine.[57] Similar to persons in the ancient world, many families today sell their children into sexual trafficking in order to escape cycles of poverty and alleviate the pressures of hardship and struggle. In addition, existing attitudes about sexual trafficking are not always negative. Many families engage in sexual trafficking as a family business. Multiple generations participate and are raised in a culture that deems sexual

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[55] Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha,* ed. Walter Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 692.

[56] E.g. Deut. 15:12–18; II Kings 4:1; Nehemiah 5: 1–19. See Raymond Westbrook, "Slave and Master in Ancient Near Eastern Law," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70, no. 4 (June 1995): 1635; Gregory C. Chirichigno, ed, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993). Joseph whose story is paralleled to Esther's is a kidnapping victim who is sold into slavery abroad (Genesis 37:12–36).

[57] Westbrook, "Slave and Master," 1645.

trafficking acceptable. Health professionals Okonofua et al. performed a study wherein 47 percent of participants believed that there are positive benefits to sexual trafficking, including that it brings wealth to families, improves the standard of living, and provides visibility.[58] Despite how horrendous sexual trafficking is and the toll that it takes on individual's bodies and psyches, because of ambiguities of power, some persons perceive sexual exploitation as having positive benefits for victims especially when there are benefits for their families.

Recruitment by Former Sex Slaves

As current victims adapt to violence and exploitation of trafficking, some internalize the practices as normative and become allies with their abusers. Victims that help perpetrators recruit other victims do so because they have been trained to trust the trafficker over and against others. Of major significance are the roles that eunuchs play in the narrative world and trafficking system. Herein is where the identities of the virgin girls and the eunuchs converge in the book of Esther: both are victims of the king's sexual exploitation and abuse. Bailey illustrates that the eunuchs and servants who "attend" the king are sexually exploited by the king in the same manner the virgin girls are. The verb *šrt* translated as "to attend" has to do with sexual activity.[59] Bailey's exposure of this abuse sheds light on why the servants may make the suggestion to seek young virgins for the king. They too are victims of the king's sexual exploitation. They are the king's sex slaves who become partners with the king, aiding him in gaining access to other vulnerable bodies.

Vern Bullough, a historian and sexologist, notes that eunuchs are sexually ambiguous; through castration, they bear permanent sexual wounds that bind them to socially constructed

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[58] Friday Okonofua et al., "Knowledge, Attitudes, and Experiences of Sex Trafficking by Young Women in Benin City, South-South Nigeria," *Social Science and Medicine* 59 (2004): 1322.

[59] According to Bailey, *šrt* is used in I Kgs 1:4 to describe sexual activity between David and Abishag and in 2 Sam. 13 to describe a sexual encounter between Amnon and a boy. See Bailey, "Interse(ct)/(x)ionality," 237.

identities of shame and exclusion.[60] There are many reasons why men are castrated: control, domination, punishment, and political, religious, sexual, or medical/health reasons. A major reason is control. Cyrus the Great of Persia writes about his rationale for eunuchs:

> For instance, vicious horses, when gelded, stop biting and prancing about, to be sure, but are none the less fit for service in war; and bulls, when castrated, lose somewhat of their high spirit and unruliness but are not deprived of their strength or capacity to work. And in the same way dogs, when castrated, stop running away from their masters, but are no less useful for watching or hunting. And men, too, in the same way, become gentler when deprived of this desire, but not less careful of that which is entrusted to them.[61]

In ancient cultures where males are valued for virility, emasculation symbolizes shame, impotence, and social marginalization. Empires often marks their bodies because they appear as threatening figures or persons prone to escape. In order to minimize the threat, empires sexually colonize their bodies for the purpose of prolonged exploitation.[62] As a result, although they are visible to the king and readers as imperial servants, their sexual abuse and exploitation is masked in ways similar to how the virgin girls' abuse is concealed.

The eunuchs give us hints to their own experiences of violent sexual exploitation; they suggest the girls are gathered, and Hegai advises the girls how to perform in the king's bedroom. Because of their royal positionality and proximity to the king, eunuchs are simultaneously victimized and forced to assist in the trafficking enterprise as they both guard and instruct the girls. Bailey cites historical and social sociologist Orlando Patterson, who argues that not all slavery involves labor exploitation. Rather slavery is a "relation of ritualized humiliation and dishonor."[63] The eunuchs are made into sex slaves in the same way

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[60] Vern Bullough, "Eunuchs in History and Society," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Shaun Tougher and Ra'anan S. Boustan (London: Classical Press of Wales and Duckworth, 2002), 1.
[61] Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 7.5.62–3, trans. Walter Miller, vol. 2. (London: William Heinemann, 1914), 289.
[62] Elaine Heath, *We Were the Least of These: Reading the Bible with Survivors of Sexual Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 89–90.
[63] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 77–101.

that they suggest the girls become sex slaves—through the ritual of sexual trafficking, which results in humiliation and dishonor for both collectives. Both become symbols of abject degradation.[64]

Although eunuchs' royal positionality and proximity to the king grants the king physical and sexual access to them, eunuchs have uninhibited access to the girls and women belonging to the king. As persons of an indiscriminate sex, neither fully male nor female, eunuchs live in a world inhabited by women.[65] They serve in the public and private harems of the kings and are in service not only to the king but to the women and royal families as well.[66] Llewellyn-Jones notes that eunuchs frequently carried towels and ointment jars, which alludes to their roles within the close entourage of the king and women of the harem.[67] This may also allude to their involvement in the beautification process, or at least the maintenance of it.

Further, eunuchs act as a set of eyes and ears that operate outside of the confines of the domestic heart of the palace, relaying official messages between the inner and outer courts as well as unofficial gossip, scandals, and secrets along those same routes.[68] Llewellyn-Jones also claims Hegai's devotions and unfailing loyalty makes him the perfect product of harem society.[69] As a product of harem society, he knows well, experientially, the type and scope of abuse that the king is capable of.

Llewellyn-Jones defines the harem as a physical space or identifiable area of the palace used by women, eunuchs, and privileged men. It is a space that describes something that is "out of bounds" or forbidden. He writes, "by implication, it means a space into which

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[64] Lawrence Willis, "The Depiction of Slavery in the Ancient Novel," *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 127.
[65] Llewellyn-Jones, "Eunuchs," 19.
[66] Llewellyn-Jones, 21
[67] Llewellyn-Jones, 24.
[68] Llewellyn-Jones, 29.
[69] Llewellyn-Jones, 19–20.

the general access is forbidden (or limited) and in which the presence of certain individuals or certain types of behaviors are forbidden."[70] Again, this underscores the role of eunuchs as guards to the king's girls and women because the king does not want anyone else to gain sexual access to them. The connotation for harems, then, is a place of hiding and concealment, which is often necessary to facilitate sexual trafficking. Harem infrastructures in the ancient context are parallel to hot spots in contemporary contexts.

Not only are the virgin girls sequestered and engrafted unwillingly into a sexual trafficking ring in Susa, but Hegai advises Hadassah as to what she should do to win favor with the king. In other words, the male eunuch tells her how to appropriately exploit her body to secure her position as queen. All the men who encounter Hadassah in this narrative exploit her for reasons unknown to the readers. They fail to consider and regard the agency Hadassah possesses as a human being. By forcing Hadassah and the countless other multiethnic and multicultural nameless girls into sexual trafficking, they strip them of agency and rights of protection from exploitation as children, females, and human beings.[71] Similarly, the eunuchs are stripped of agency and honor when the king sexually abuses them. It becomes clear that sexual relationships with eunuchs and females are another aspect of royal practices[72] that are exploitative and comprises an abuse of imperial power. Attention to both collectives is necessary because, as Llewellyn-Jones points out, women and servants, especially eunuchs, too often fade into the background of androcentric Persian royal texts.[73] Llewellyn-Jones suggests that the royal harem may be the battleground of the empire, where great men rise

[70] Llewellyn-Jones, 25.
[71] Adelman claims Esther is taken forcibly three times: by Mordecai as a daughter, then to the king's palace by the officers along with all the other virgins and by the king in marriage reflecting a "unilateral male assertion of the possession of the woman," ("Passing Strange," 87).
[72] Llewellyn-Jones, "Eunuchs," 35.
[73] Llewellyn-Jones, 22.

and fall and are manipulated by women and eunuchs.[74] However, girls, women, and eunuchs are viciously manipulated, exploited, and abused by the empire. Their bodies become the battlegrounds on which imperial wars manifest.

Other Types of Abuse during Sexual Trafficking

Figure 5.2. Trafficking power and control wheel. © Polaris Project, 2019[75]

Power and control wheels are tools that elucidate the various tactics abusers utilize in order to manipulate relationships through control and power. Figure 5.2 details other types of abuse that victims of sexual trafficking endure in contemporary contexts. Inside of the wheel, there are a set of behaviors often considered red flags signaling forms of control, manipulation, and violence. These behaviors include threats, coercion, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, minimizing, denying and blaming, sexual abuse, economic abuse, and using one's privilege to control or manipulation someone. The outer ring represents types of victimization and

[74] Llewellyn-Jones, 23.
[75] "Recognizing Human Trafficking," Polaris Project, accessed May 9, 2019, https://polarisproject.org/is-it-human-trafficking.

trafficking. These patterns can also be identified in the ancient context as well. The king and his collaborators define gender roles and legally enforce female subservience. After victims are baited, traffickers use their privilege to keep their victims under strict control and surveillance. The king does this by appointing his eunuchs as guards over the females in his palace. The male collective objectifies the female victims, forcing them to engage in sex and using rape as a means to control them. Bailey writes, "It is in this act of requiring teenage girls, brought in from provinces all throughout his kingdom, to have sex with him, that the king uses sex and sexuality as a major tool of social control and manipulation."[76] Modern traffickers further leverage the victims' vulnerabilities through strategies such as debilitation, dread, and by creating dependency which make victims controllable and limits their mental and physical capacity to resist. In the text, the king and his officials create dependency upon him and his empire. In this way, sexual violence, exploitation, and trafficking is normalized.

Present day traffickers want victims to gain their trust. They want children to feel that they love and care for them. As such, they exploit the fact that children seek attachment bonds and need care and guidance. Therefore, traffickers frequently engage in cycles of abuse and affection in order to keep children under their control. One way of achieving this is through what is called a "trauma bond," otherwise known as Stockholm syndrome.[77] There are four components to the trauma bond: the victim perceives (a) a real threat of death; (b) the inability to escape; (c) isolation; and (d) kindness by the trafficker. This bond creates emotional attachments, enabling the perpetrator to elicit fear and instill terror in the victim as well as gratitude for being allowed to survive.[78]

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[76] Bailey, "Interse(ct)/(x)ionality," 237.
[77] Deshpande and Nour, "Sex Trafficking.".
[78] Joan Reid, et al., "Trauma Bonding and Interpersonal Violence," *USF St. Petersburg Campus Faculty Publications* (2013), no. 198; see also Donald G. Dutton and Susan Painter, "Emotional Attachments in Abusive Relationships: A Test of Traumatic Bonding Theory," *Violence & Victims* 8 (1993): 105–119; Rosario V. Sanchez, Patricia M. Speck, and Patricia A. Patrician, "A Concept Analysis of Trauma Coercive Bonding in the Commercial Sexual

Additionally, perpetrators habitually force victims to live in a country where the victims cannot speak a common language. In fact, one way that traffickers control and manipulate their victims is by leveraging the victim's lack of familiarity with surroundings, laws and rights, language fluency, and cultural understandings. There is evidence of these tactics throughout the book of Esther. The girls are taken to an unfamiliar location and are isolated, kept confined, and moved around within the king's palace. Extracting the girls from their homes, communities, and cultures not only serves to isolate victims of sexual trafficking but also negatively impacts their experience of trauma and influences their ability to recover from the trauma. Further, the king and his officials minimize and mask the violence of the exploitation by legalizing it through edicts.

Edict-making is a recurrent theme throughout the book of Esther. Not only do royal decrees include the language of violence, but they play an unusual role in the story as they are employed to carry out and justify violence. In fact, the book is bracketed by edicts that sanction extensive, dreadful, and gruesome violence: in the beginning, there is the legalization of female subservience; and near the end of the book, an edict is promulgated to support the celebration of violence with the institution of Purim. Other edicts throughout the text legalize murder and genocide. In fact, the only person who has legal protection under law is the king.[79] This is evidenced by the illegality of his eunuchs' plot to assassinate him and their subsequent deaths (2:21–23). The law ensures the king's inviolability, a privilege not afforded to any other character in the book, especially the Africana girls. Law also serves the interests of the king: it delineates his interactions with females and ensures he is physically guarded, as no one is able to approach him without his summoning them first. He even

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Exploitation of Children," *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 46 (2019): 48–54; Reid, "Entrapment and Enmeshment Schemes," 492.

[79] Craig Stern emphasizes that law establishes the reign and the king's provinces. Craig Stern, "Megillath Esther and the Rule of Law: Disobedience and Obligation," *Rutgers Journal of Law and Religion* 2 (2015): 250 n.14.

creates a law for drinking to be free from the law[80] and settles an intimate personal dispute by turning his wife's punishment into imperial law. Craig Stern notes that law is shaped for utility. It is an instrument used by the king and his advisers to mold the king's realm after his will. The law is not concerned about justice in any regard; only the king's will and social objectives are the business of the law.[81] Persian law is thus a tool of power and domination that enacts unjust violence against vulnerable bodies.[82]

What exacerbates the physical violence that is condoned and promoted through edict–writing is that Persian edicts are irrevocable (Esth. 1:19). The irrevocability and irreversibility of Persian laws produces terror and fright for those whom the laws impact. For example, when females' subservience and inferiority is legalized, it extracts agency and power from girls and women. It renders any alternative mode of being illegal. In addition, females are excluded from the realm of law creation that stands behind most existing social practices. In both contexts, females are often unable to contribute to or contest laws that have negative implications for their lives. Irrevocability and irreversibility further stifle resistance efforts and prevent opportunities of social transformation and equity. Persian officials appear more concerned about gendered and ethnic Others violating their laws than laws violating the Others' humanity.

Equally important, Hebrew Bible scholar, theologian, and Anglican Bishop Richard Treloar underscores the relationship between writing (associated with higher class imperial subjects), power, and violence. He notes, "Writing precedes the unsheathing of the sword, and so to write is to have power."[83] It is important to note that, in addition to written laws, many laws are commanded as well. Imperial subjects not only command, write, and enact

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[80] Stern, 251.
[81] Stern, 267.
[82] Stern, 274.
[83] Richard Treloar, *Esther and the End of "Final Solutions": Theodicy and Hebrew Biblical Narrative* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008), 139.

violence, but through the edict, they force persons under their control to be violent towards others. In addition, Jo Carruthers highlights that edicts are repeatedly sent in the name of the king but are not authored by him. As such, Carruthers argues that royal authority is disembodied from the royal person.[84] Although the king does not construct the edicts, everyone who creates an edict is aligned with and coopts imperial authority to do so. Because the edicts are signed with his seal, his seal functions as a signature, recklessly authorizing the violence proposed. Thus, royal authority is embodied by the king and other royal representatives.

The Role of Beautification in Trafficking

Sexual trafficking is organized crime and organized interpersonal violence. Many biblical interpreters euphemize the exploitation of the "virgin girls" as a harmless, "fun" beauty pageant, as I noted in my literature review. The servants' use of tactics to force these girls into the king's palace and harem is often overlooked and seemingly excused. In this way, the sexual exploitation is framed as a way to a better life, a mode of economic liberation, or a way to escape poverty and become a queen. Defining the exploitation as a "beauty contest," however, ignores the elements of capture, captivity, and forced displacement, which in turn prevents the analysis of such experiences as trafficking, exploitation, and trauma-inducing violence.

The virgin girls are described as *tôb* (usually translated as "beautiful") twice (2:2, 3). In addition, when Vashti (1:11) and Esther (2:7) are introduced, both are described as beautiful as well. Beauty in this sense is not simply physical but reflects that Vashti, Esther, and the virgin girls provide visual pleasure to the males who look upon them. Beauty, cosmetics, and beautification play a significant role in sexual trafficking in ancient and

[84] Carruthers, "Detour," 66.

contemporary contexts. In fact, Polaris outlines that human trafficking manifests in many forms and permeates a range of industries, including but not limited to escort services, pornography, massage, carnivals, and health and beauty services, all of which are related to beauty.[85] The king's servants, like many modern-day traffickers, exploit beauty and beautification processes. Details of the beautification process are outlined the second chapter: "The turn came for each girl to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their cosmetic treatment, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women" (Esther 2:12). While many commentators focus on the beautification process in Esther discourse, several commenters deduce that the scenario is a beauty contest in which the girls are competing to become the next queen. They neglect to problematize the girls' failure to consent or the length of the beautification process. Even more disturbing is that the beauty regimens are legalized, just like the actual trafficking and other enactments of violence. The narrator shows this legalization by the description "under the regulations for the women." The term *dath*, often translated as "regulation," is a royal edict or statute.[86]

Modern-day traffickers regularly take girls and women to beauty salons and shops to ensure that their hair and makeup are done before sexual transactions occur. Unfortunately, many of the women who style victims' hair and makeup are concomitant victims of labor and sexual trafficking. Many are forced to participate in preparing other females to be exploited and sexually trafficked. Other times, women willingly lure, coerce, and discipline other female victims of trafficking. One of these dynamics could be at play in the book of Esther. It is ambiguous who facilitates the perfume and cosmetic procedures. Is this beauty process

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[85] "The Typology of Modern Slavery: Defining Sex and Labor Trafficking in the United States," Polaris Project, accessed January 19, 2019, https://polarisproject.org/typology-report.
[86] *BDB,* entry 1881.

facilitated for and by women? Whether by women or the eunuchs, the virgin girls experience multiple offenses when they are trafficked into the king's palace.

The Hebrew *tamruwq* is translated as purification.[87] Michael Fox points out that these girls are not applying these oils and perfumes themselves; rather, the oils and perfumes would have been in a chemical bath to which the girls' bodies are subjected.[88] Functioning as a detergent, these girls are purified with bodily rubbings, which is ironic since they are virgins who embody sexual purity. Given the value placed on female virginity in the biblical texts, one would expect purification to be necessary for non-virgin rather than virgin girls. The year of preparation is therefore for the king's pleasure. The girls' bodies are being primped, primed, and polished for his consumption and satisfaction, not because they are sexually impure. Sidnie Ann Crawford suggests that references to this year-long cosmetic and beautification ritual hints at the Persian court's decadence.[89] Indeed, the court is corrupt and abuses power to set up an economy of sexual trafficking. The virgin girls are not only forced into the king's palace, but they are not given a choice about undergoing the cosmetic treatments either.

Oil is associated with fatness, anointing, and fruitfulness; and perfume is often linked to sweetness. The oil and perfume thus symbolize things that would grant a female honor and status, yet this obscures the objectification of the girls and conceals how the beautification process contributes to their abuse. The allusion to fruitfulness might point to the prevalence of experiences of unwanted pregnancies and abortions in contemporary victims of sexual trafficking. Similarly, the reference to "purification" signals current implications of sexual diseases and infections caused by sexual exploitation.

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[87] *BDB*, entry 8562
[88] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 35.
[89] Sidnie Ann Crawford, "Esther" in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha. An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael Coogan et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 693.

Ruth, the only other female biblical character whose book title bears her name, similarly bathes, and anoints herself with oil in preparation for a sexual encounter with Boaz. Like Esther, she experiences conditions that make her vulnerable to exploitation and in need of a male provider/protector. She and her mother-in-law are both widowers who have not been claimed by their next-of-kin male. Ruth pledges her allegiance to her foreign mother-in-law Naomi, who instructs Ruth to wash and anoint herself, put on her best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor to meet Boaz, a relative of Naomi's son and Ruth's deceased husband (3:3a). Similar to Mordecai who instructs Esther to conceal her identity, Naomi commands Ruth, "Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking" (3:3b). She further instructs, "When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do" (3:4).[90]

There are several other themes that tie these two narratives together, including food/banquets, drunkenness, poverty, sexual encounters at night, seduction, secrecy, and both the king and Boaz granting their wives' wishes. When interpreters read these stories intertextually, the narratives illuminate that, in ancient contexts, sexual abuse is often minimized or glossed over. Readers are often oriented to focus on the males with higher social status who function as saviors for females who experience unfavorable conditions and the potential for upward mobility. Interpreters frequently miss the roles that guardians of these vulnerable girls and women play in facilitating abuse in order for their particular family unit or ethnic groups to survive. Furthermore, interpreters fail to see gender hierarchies, secrecy, seduction, food/banquets, male intoxication, displacement, and sex as interlocking oppressions that females in both books endure. These are all components and mechanisms to facilitate sexual trafficking in the ancient contexts.

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[90] For more on the character Ruth and the complexity of her life, see Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

Another story picks up on some of the rhetoric and imagery presented with the book of Esther, especially the violence against Africana females. Ezekiel 23 is an oracle is made against two sisters Oholah and Oholibah, whom the Lord claims "plays the whore" in Egypt. The deity judges the sisters for bathing and putting on makeup and jewelry in order to seduce their lovers. Stately décor, food/banquets, incense and oil, drunkenness and beautiful crowns placed upon women's heads (Ezek. 23:40-42)— these are all themes that link this story with the book of Esther and highlight patterns of abuse against the sisters in Ezekiel and the virgin girls in the book of Esther. Female exploitation and sexual violence are the links between the two stories and expose ideologies that necessitate and perpetuate violence against females. When considering the intersections between Esther 2 and Ezekiel 23, one clearly sees a deleterious attack against girls from Egypt (see Fig. 5.1, Egypt is a Persian province in the Esther narrative) and Israelite girls who engage in sexual relationships with Egyptian men. Both are subjected to sexualized violence by colonial forces. The latter endures sexualized violence by a deity as punishment for "infidelity" as well.

Many people celebrate beauty and spa treatments in recent culture. These services provide relaxation and make girls and women more aesthetically appealing. But in contemporary economies of trafficking, these beauty and spa services are a cover-up for traffickers and intended to "cover-up" abuse, exploitation, and pain that mark these victims' bodies in very visible and physical ways.[91] In sexual trafficking, cosmetic treatments are a harmful cultural practice conditioning females to accept objectification and undergo

[91] Karen Francis, "The Face of Resilience: Beauty Brands Come Together in Support of Human Trafficking Survivors," *The Root*, May 8, 2019, https://www.theroot.com/the-face-of-resilience-beauty-brands-come-together-in-1826088559; Elizabeth Brown, "Beauty School Syllabus Now Includes Human-Trafficking Awareness Training," *The Reason*, February 10, 2019, https://reason.com/blog/2016/02/10/beauty-school-propaganda; "A Black Owned Natural Beauty Brand Existing to End Human Trafficking," Melanin and Sustainable Style, December 29, 2017, https://melaninass.com/blog/2017/12/28/ehno3u7gjafzgdlqt89099f4odpn7m.

beautification in ordered to be consumed by perpetrators. To read the text without identifying and critiquing mechanisms of sexual trafficking represented therein and connecting it to historical/cultural representations of sexual trafficking of Africana girls and women, readers and interpreters inadvertently continue to protect (ideologically, culturally, and physically) the sexual exploitation of minoritized girls and women.

Euphemisms and Cover-ups

Certainly, there are several other problems related to gender and sexuality that deserve attention within the book of Esther. According to Bailey, one problem is that there are sexual issues embedded within the book, especially around this "sexual beauty contest" to replace Queen Vashti. Another is that the effects of sexual exploitation in the biblical text are so horrific that we have been conditioned not to see its presence. Bailey argues, on the one hand, the practice of sexual exploitation is so horrific that, rather than being bothered by its presence, we develop a reading strategy of "not seeing what is there." On the other hand, personal biases and opinions have led translators to cover up true meanings of words to conceal the presence of sexual acts and or references to them.[92] Similarly, Nadar implicates contemporary interpreters whom she calls them out as co-conspirators in this "cover up," by their "brushing off" of the girls' rape.[93] Fox asserts these cover-ups by modern interpreters are an injustice to girls all over the world that are currently being abused and exploited and who are used as toys in the sexual games of the powerful.[94]

Because of the focus on terms such as "beautiful" and "cosmetic treatments," many scholars have dismissed or overlooked sexual trafficking within the book. Esther and countless virgin girls are taken to the king's harem; they are not merely entered into a beauty

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[92] Bailey, "Interse(ct)/(x)ionality," 234.
[93] Nadar, "Texts of Terror," 88.
[94] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 36.

pageant but also forced to engage in non-consensual sex that requires extra glamorization to enhance their aesthetic and sexual appeal before being swept into the king's bedroom. Volition is not a factor in the process; rather the empire confiscates and violates these girls' beautiful bodies. The beautification process and soft euphemistic rhetoric conceal the objectification and commodification of the girls. It destigmatizes the exploitation and removes or minimizes hints of sexual violence. The physical, sexual, and psychological violence impressed upon them communicates that they are utterly worthless and socially non-existent except to be exploited by the king. The use of euphemisms and cover-ups masks the cruelty of sexual trafficking as humorous or sexy and consequently negates the injuries done to the girls.

As a weapon of colonial control, sexual trafficking thrives on victims' silence, invisibility, and heightened vulnerability. The silence surrounding sexual trafficking and the hyper-invisibility of victims is pervasive, diminishing victims' agency and allowing trafficking economies to flourish. Yet silence can still be very disruptive. If only we would listen to the quiet screams, the hushed pleas, and petitions to "see me, hear me, protect me, advocate for me!" Attention to the silences in both biblical texts and contemporary contexts can and should disrupt normative modes of interpretation, illuminating the psychological trauma that has gone unvoiced and suppressed for far too long.

There are troubling silences in the book of Esther and in the history of its interpretations. There are things not stated by the narrator, details suppressed through the use of euphemisms, and characters' voices that are simply not heard. In addition, many interpreters choose to focus primarily on the main character, Esther, for whom the book is named, further rendering invisible and silent the other girls gathered and exploited by the king (2:2–4; 2:19). Interpreters fail to notice the intersecting ethnic, gender, and social locations of the virgin girls; the details of capture, displacement, and sexual trafficking; and

the girls' silenced voices. The absence of these girls' voices erases the physical harm and psychological suffering that they must have endured. They are not allowed to protest their sufferings, nor do their male guardians get the opportunity to protest these girls' exploitation. The silencing of protest by the narrator is equally horrifying. Yet, if we pay attention to the words not spoken in the book of Esther, we can see that the silences throughout this narrative presents soundless shrieks and inaudible stutters of throbbing hostility, paralyzing trauma, and terror.

In addition to silence, secrecy is a prominent theme in Esther 2. Esther's guardian Mordecai forbids her from revealing her ethnicity and family background when she is taken into the royal harem, raising questions about the role that he plays in her exploitation and oppression. Indeed, the identities and names of the numerous other virgin girls brought to the king's harem are likewise concealed by the narrator. Euphemisms used to describe actions that the virgin girls are forced to take, such as "the girl who pleases the king" or "with whom the king delights," have further contributed to this silence and secrecy, obscuring the sexual abuse and trauma embedded in the text. Similar to how we see sexual trafficking operating as an "invisible" institution in the text, perpetrators, vendors, and facilitators of sexualized violence and abuse depend on, profit from, and thrive on silence, suppressed voices, secrecy, obscure laws, and underreporting of abuse. These parties weaponize victims' silence and fear, using it to perpetuate the abduction, transportation, and sexual exploitation, particularly of Africana girls and women across national and international borders, and this process is illustrated in both the narrative world of Esther and in contemporary sexual trafficking discourse.

Traci West underscores problems related to gender, sexuality, violence, trauma, and silence in a more contemporary context. In her seminal work, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence and Resistance*, West critiques the misnaming of rape as "consensual sex"

due to generalizations and assumptions that legitimate violence: the assertion that women are liars and their testimonies are unreliable; the belief that women are in need of Black male assaults; and the suggestion that violence at the hands of males is romantic and sexually alluring.[95] These false claims—which West describes as destructive gender and race cultural cues[96]— serve as "cover-ups" for the ideologies, cultural conditions, and dynamics that lead to and keep male violence against Africana girls and women secure in modern settings. These assumptions are analogous to ideas that justify methods utilized by modern-day sex traffickers.

West notes that among contemporary victim-survivors of intimate and sexualized violence, the trauma experience, cultural messages, and other often hidden communal and institutional barriers such as public shaming may cause fear and silence.[97] Sometimes, women may resort to silence; others may transform shame into forms of resistance and survival.[98] West writes that speaking out can constitute a social change on behalf of Black females and demonstrates a resistance strategy to violence perpetrated against them.[99]

Last, West notes that, when Black women reflect on their assault, they struggle between resisting and absorbing the cultural meanings attached to that assault experience, and their trauma is deepened by the diverse depreciating cultural messages that overwhelm them.[100] This dissertation has taken up the task of identifying and critiquing the negative views that lead to the dehumanization of Africana girls and women through violence. In solidarity, I have chosen to reflect upon the assaults of Africana girls and women and our collective, cultural histories and memories of sexual trauma. Like Dr. West, I am committed

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[95] West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 122–150.
[96] West, 5.
[97] West, 138
[98] West, 165.
[99] West, 178–179.
[100] West, 122.

to amplifying the experiences and vantage points of Africana girls and women, to breaking silences and transforming shame around sexual assault and violence, and to persistently challenging the cultural scripts about our worth and dignity, so that we can collectively work towards resistance and healings.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have defined and outlined mechanisms of, and parties involved in sexual trafficking to illuminate the occurrence of sexual trafficking in the book of Esther. I outline how sexual trafficking is facilitated and indicate the roles of the king and his servants and commissioners in the sex trafficking system. I highlight that sexual trafficking necessitates the transgression of bodily, spatial, and geographical boundaries and argue that these transgressions are evidenced in the legal movement of Africana and other minoritized bodies from homes in Susa and from homes in their natal provinces to the capital of the Persian empire. I discuss how and by whom boundaries are mapped and movement is facilitated during sexual trafficking in the book of Esther.

Throughout the book of Esther, females are viewed as second-class citizens. The first two chapters especially embody the fundamental and foundational social truths and norms regarding their placement, roles, and identities in society. Men are willing to surrender females to rigid oversight, restricted social agency, and sexual exploitation to reinforce male dominance and superiority. I understand each of these actions as enactments of violence. Unfortunately, these practices were standard legal practices in Ancient Near Eastern cultures and during the Maafa.

Finally, I identify textual and interpretative cover-ups, which inhibit readers' and interpreters' ability to perceive the objectification, oppression, exploitation, commodification, and traumatization of Africana girls in the text. These euphemisms mask issues of gender and sexuality and soften the presentation of the sexual and gender-based abuse in the text. The

cover ups and failure to read through the lenses of polyvocality and intersectionality frequently prevent readers from identifying elements of sexual trafficking and the intersecting identities of the girls abused. In the next chapter, I will summarize my interpretative findings and offer some implications for my particular, socially located reading of the book of Esther.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications

Intersectional Polyvocal Africana Biblical Interpretation: An Interruptive Spin

This dissertation offers a theoretical and hermeneutical exploration of the intersections between sexual trafficking and gender, ethnicity, and class both in the book of Esther and in the experiences and histories of Africana diasporized girls and women. Many biblical scholars note the centrality of gender in the sexual exploitation of Vashti, Esther, and the female virgins in this biblical book. However, less attention has been given to the role of ethnicity in contributing to female experiences of and vulnerability to sexual exploitation. I argue that applying theories of intersectionality and polyvocality opens the text up, exposing additional oppressive ideologies embedded therein.

I therefore bring together Africana, postcolonial, and trauma theories as a means of engaging in an intersectional polyvocal Africana reading of the book of Esther. Specifically, I employ Africana biblical criticism and Black feminist, womanist, and postcolonial critical methodologies in order to place the particularities of Africana life, history, and culture at the center of the interpretative process. I investigate and describe sexual trafficking in both cultural, historical, and literary contexts to illustrate that sexual trafficking is a collective, communal, cultural issue that disproportionately impacts minority and minoritized groups in both these contexts. I understand African diasporic girls' and women's' lives, stories, and histories as sacred texts, which are worthy of exploration, investigation, and interpretation, and which have the capacity to provide information and inspiration to their audiences. My project is thus a dialogical cultural study that contributes to and expands Esther studies by shedding light on an ancient community's struggle to deal with sexual violence and exploitation. At the same time, it sensitizes contemporary audiences to the wider social and

global problem of sexual trafficking and its impact, especially on Africana and other minoritized female collectives. I consider how patriarchs and colonizers create and utilize trade and trafficking routes to sustain exploitative systems and institutions of sexual violence that impact and fragment Africana girls and women. Specifically, I draw on the theories of intersectionality and polyvocality to highlight the fact that the Africana girls in the book of Esther are oppressed not solely on the basis of their gender but also at the convergence of their gendered, ethnic, and classed identities. In my review of the literature, I show that scholars have addressed several themes that illustrate what life in the diaspora and under imperial domination was like in the ancient context. Specifically, I give particular attention to themes of power, agency, law, beauty, pageantry, humor, secrecy, hiding, honor, shame, and violence. Assessing this constellation of themes together paints a vivid picture of conditions the produce and sustain sexual trafficking in the ancient context. In addition, it becomes clear that the manifestations and mechanisms of sexual trafficking are situated in broader contexts of colonialism and characterized by kyriarchy, gender hierarchies, political conflicts, abuses of power, hostility, domination, brutal sexual and physical violence, and the need to survive in these oppressive contexts.

I examine Vashti's deposition after she resists sexual exploitation in Esther 1, as well as the subsequent intensified sexual violence through the trafficking of countless virgin girls (including Esther) by the Persian Empire in Esther 2. The Persian king and his imperial team target Africana and other virgin girls for sexual trafficking. In its deployment of this political strategy, the text depicts Africana girls and women as expendable, commodifiable, and rapeable. Such intentional displacement, colonization, and sexual exploitation of Africana girls and women are not, however, restricted to the pages of this biblical text, but have been practiced throughout history, leading to collective cultural trauma.

By prioritizing and foregrounding intersectional polyvocal Africana hermeneutics in my reading of Esther 1–2, it becomes clear that many of the virgin girls come from geographical locales predominantly inhabited by Black and brown girls, including Africa and India. Analogously, Black and brown girls and women are disproportionately vulnerable to and targeted by sexual traffickers in contemporary contexts. This observation might help readers to understand why Africa was at the center of and foundational for the Maafa. Colonial forces perceived and promoted ideologies that foreign ethnic girls and women, especially those of African descent, were not fully human; that the crime of rape of Africana girls and women was non-existent; and that Africana girls and women did not need to be protected from oppression. My comments elucidate not only the ethnic hierarchical relationships and abuses of power in colonial and sexual trafficking institutions but also the affinity of colonizers of the "majority" or 'powerful" ethnic group to target, exploit, and justify the violently sexualized abuse of minoritized ethnic groups and bodies. I argue that these experiences of gender-based violence in the form of sexual trafficking constitute collective, cultural trauma that captures the physical, sexual, and emotional experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation in this ancient context. My interpretation emphasizes the traumatic and horrific experiences of the female collective which reflect devastation, gruesomeness, and futility.

By focusing primarily or even exclusively on Vashti's and Esther's experiences of exploitation, traditional interpretations reflect incomplete assessments of the geopolitical range and scope of sexual exploitation in the story. Such interpretations may reflect how the class and social status—the relative and conditional privilege—of Vashti and Esther in the story inadvertently cause interpreters to privilege their experiences over the many other girls and women alluded to in the text. Polyvocal intersectionality allows one to hear the voices

and experiences of the many girls captured and brought to the harem and to engage their subjectivity as part of the collective trauma enacted by the imperial policy.

The opening chapter of Esther introduces problematic gendered relationships between the male and female characters, as Vashti is deposed for resisting the king's demand to display herself before his drunken party guests (Esth. 1:10–12). This gendered conflict is one wherein the personal is intertwined with the political, as the conflict shifts from being a dispute between a husband and wife (Ahasuerus and Vashti) to a situation where Vashti's resistance to sexual exploitation is framed as an offense against the king, his officials, and all the people that live in the king's provinces (1:16). As a result, collective action is taken to prevent any other woman from imitating Vashti's opposition. A law is written, that "every man be master in his own household" (1:22), and it is explicitly stated that this law is written "so that it may not be repealed" (1:19), thus sealing it into imperial legal codes in perpetuity. Accordingly, the king's dismissal of Vashti is only a first step in a more elaborate process of imperially sanctioned patriarchy that also feeds sexual trafficking: girls are legitimately sought, transported, held in custody, subjected to a year-long beautification process, and sexually abused and exploited by the king (2:1–9).

In the third chapter, I outline how gender is socially, culturally, and politically constructed and enforced throughout the first two chapters in the book of Esther by assessing how feminization and masculinization are defined around three types of bodies in the text: anatomical bodies, socio-cultural bodies, and geopolitical/spatial bodies. The king and other males embodying hegemonic masculinity determine the power and agency that both males and females have over their bodies and actions in both private and public spheres. They define females as the quintessential, subordinate Other, which destigmatizes the commodification, exploitation, and violence enacted against the ethnic virgin girls, thus normalizing their pain and suffering. In addition, representatives of the empire exercise

power to define and control the bodies of those embodying non-hegemonic masculinity, specifically eunuchs and the foreign family members of the virgin girls who were rallied and sexually trafficked.

When the treatment of Vashti is assessed alongside the treatment of the virgin girls gathered and collected in the second chapter, it becomes clear that gender and ethnicity along with other markers of identity intersect and play a major role in Othering foreign, minoritized females in the book of Esther. Othered, these foreign ethnic girls are determined exploitable and consequently trafficked.

The actions taken against Vashti, the law passed by the king at the close of Esther 1, and the sexual trafficking of the virgin girls in the subsequent chapter are imposed upon the female collective, articulating the enormity and consequences of non-compliance to femininity, as defined and policed by hegemonic masculine patriarchs and imperial subjects. Both laws evoke terror, shock, and suffering among the women and girls whose lives they touch. To ensure male dominance and secure patriarchal stability, the king and his officials use shame, fear, and sexual exploitation as a means to correct and sustain gendered social control. Moreover, they employ law-making as a strategy to ensure that male dominance is not fractured or resisted. In doing so, they legalize systems of sexual trafficking and other forms of imperial violence.

Sex trafficking routes are how Hadassah and the virgin girls enter the story world as they are transported from their native homes to the king's palace for the purpose of sex. The king's officials indicate to him that virgin girls will be gathered by appointed commissioners in all the provinces of Ahasuerus's kingdom and brought to his palace in Susa. These processes are evoked within the book of Esther, although they are not always recognized as such by the reader. They are transported to Persia, apparently without their consent (2:3, 8), and held captive in the king's harem until they receive a year of beauty treatments (2:12).

After this process is over, they are taken to the king so that he can have (non-consensual) sex with them until he determines who best satisfies him sexually (2:4, 8). After Hadassah/Esther is chosen to replace Vashti as queen, the remaining girls are silenced and rendered invisible in the king's palace and also in the subsequent narrative. These elements of abduction, transportation, captivity, and silence (erasure) are all common stages in the criminal process of sex trafficking. Recognizing this process as it unfolds within the narrative exposes the inherent violence and horror of this biblical text.

Along with recognizing the processes of sexual trafficking echoed in the opening chapters of Esther, we can also identify characters who fulfil the four key roles typically found in trafficking organizations: the perpetrator, the vendor, the facilitator, and the victim.[1] King Ahasuerus is the perpetrator, who sexually exploits the victims. The king's servants play the part of the vendors, extending the services and capital that make sexual trafficking possible. The officers in the provinces of the king and the eunuchs are the facilitators. They expedite the victimization process by organizing the abduction and forcible transportation of girls to Susa while the eunuchs manage the harems. Finally, the victims of sexual exploitation are represented by all the virgin girls who are brought to the king's harem. Recognizing these different roles within the narrative allows us to identify the events taking place as an explicit instance of sexual trafficking.

Within the book's traditions of interpretation, the events of Esther 1–2 are often framed in ways that obscure the violence of sexual trafficking inherent in this text. Defining the exploitation of the virgin girls as a "beauty contest" ignores the elements of capture, captivity, and forced displacement that constitute sexual trafficking and ultimately prevents the recognition of such experiences as exploitative. Sexual trafficking is grounded in the transportation of girls' and women's bodies, especially racialized and minoritized bodies, as

[1] Beyer, "Sex Tourism Industry," 308.

in the book of Esther. While many biblical interpreters point out that the virgin girls are gathered because of their gender and beauty, this requires further nuancing. Specifically, because India and Ethiopia are explicitly mentioned, these girls are sexually abused and traumatized because of their intersecting identities of ethnicity and social standing and their national and geographical locatedness within the socio-political landscape of Persian imperial rule.

The representation of sexual trafficking in the book of Esther is parallel to the cultural memories, histories, and materialized pain of Africana girls and women across time and space, from the Persian empire to subsequent slave trade routes and beyond. My reading of the text illuminates that Africana female bodies have been and continue to be colonized and sexualized, exploited for profit and pleasure, causing adverse physical, mental, sexual, and socio-cultural consequences for the girls and women concerned. For example, chapter four details the horrendous conditions of sexualized violence that Africana girls and women endured during the transatlantic slave trade. Rendered sexual slaves, and perceived as less than human, they had no control over their lives, bodies, or sexuality. Similarly, Saartjie Bartman's story is another example of Africana collective trauma. Though she was born in South Africa, Bartman's body was transported, carnivalized, and put on display as an attraction in nineteenth-century Europe. Even after her death, her sexual organs and other body parts including her brain and skeleton remained on display until 1974. These experiences, as well as the encounter of Sally, an African girl who was enslaved, forcibly moved, and repeatedly raped by her enslaver Thomas Thistlewood, illustrate that sexual trafficking and sexual enslavement of girls and women were core experiences which were central to identities of Africana females. Furthermore, these experiences were justified by racial stereotypes, such as the Jezebel myth, the mammy figure, and the Sapphire figure, as well as social and cultural attitudes that encouraged bias and sexualized violence.

Throughout history, male colonizers and perpetrators of sexual trafficking have envisioned colonized girls and women as a threat to their patriarchal power and identities. Thus, patriarchal and colonial discourses intersect to undergird systems of sexual trafficking. Since men continue to dominate legal systems, laws continue to be made that undermine justice for victims of sexual trafficking. For example, in a number of legal cases in the United States, Africana girls who are victims of sexual trafficking have been charged for killing their abusers and traffickers. Cyntoia Brown, Chrystal Kizer, and Alexis Martin are three women who were exploited in their childhood and whose experiences testify to the continued trafficking of African diasporic girls and women and the forfeiture of justice afforded to them by the legal system. Similar to Vashti's fate, we see that the acts of speaking out and protecting themselves has led to each of these women being criminalized and "put away," further marginalized, silenced, and rendered invisible within their own society. When these women's experiences and stories are read and reflected upon intertextually with the book of Esther, as well as later narratives of slavery and suffering during the Maafa, we are left with a narrative of sexualized violence that shouts out the undisputable damage to the integrity of Africana female bodies, psyches, and spirits. These women and girls are ripped from their families and utterly isolated. Their wills are ignored, and their pain intensified. Their stories thus reflect and articulate the unconscionable and brutal abuses perpetrated by colonial powers against Africana women and girls.

I apply communicative and collective memory theories to illuminate that instances of sexual trafficking like the occurrence represented in the book of Esther and incidents that took place during the transatlantic slave trade inform Africana girls and women's understandings of their individual and group's self and enable the group to reconstruct a past based on common identity. Experiences of sexual exploitation through trafficking are crystalized into the collective consciousness and memories of Africana females living in the

African diaspora. Africana girls' and women's bodies store experiences of rape, enslavement, forced impregnation, and other forms of sexualized violence. These unforgettable memories of sexualized traumatization comprise and detail collective history that informs and impacts the social, physical, economic, and psychological health of the collective. Collective memories are tools that provide a link to the past, present, and future with a specific focus on traumatic experiences and attacks against Africana female bodies and identities. They are helpful because groups are able to reflect on their identities and to articulate and challenge ideologies, stereotypes, and actions utilized to justify oppression and brutal violence against them.

One implication of this polyvocal intersectional interpretative spin is the consideration of another genre to apply to the book of Esther. Because the narrative is one that describes and details gendered violence, exploitation, terror, and horror, I suggest the book of Esther should be considered as belonging to a genre of biblical horror. By reading the book of Esther as horror, we are made more aware of social injustices and violations of human rights in ancient and contemporary contexts. Reading Esther through the lens of the horror genre highlights this trauma further, encouraging readers to name and confront the wounds of both individuals and collectives that are often ignored and suppressed in both sacred and cultural narratives. Identifying the horrific language and imagery in the text challenges us to confront the patriarchal and colonial causes of sexual trafficking and to recognize the impact of such violence on collective identities, histories, and memories.

Intersectionality, polyvocality, and attention to horror enables readers and interpreters to recognize various types of systematic and structural violence. These frameworks open the text up in different and meaningful ways that allow readers and interpreters to acknowledge and address social and cultural complexities arising from living in societies marked by kyriarchy, colonialism, and patriarchy. The two contexts identified and assessed in my

dissertation specifically illustrate that power, status, and wealth are achieved and accumulated by physically and sexually exploiting and oppressing Africana female bodies. The colonizers use laws to their advantage to accomplish their political goals of dominance and global status. They confiscate bodies, lands, and other material resources in violent ways to achieve these ends. Silence perpetuates violence as it does nothing to challenge or dismantle gender, race, and class hierarchies. In fact, silence and erasure stabilizes exploitative systems. When readers can recognize and understand intersectional oppression, they develop empathy for those deeply impacted by these living conditions and might be inspired to use their own agency, privilege, and power to transform the systems and structures in which people find themselves embedded.

As a person committed to justice, I feel that it is necessary that we, as contemporary recipients of this ancient yet relevant text, identify, assess, and critique the intersecting forms of violence that have many times been ignored, regarded, and even celebrated by some individuals and groups. In addition, we must acknowledge the role that religions and sacred stories play in creating and maintaining hierarchies of power. Specifically, those who claim a Christian identity must wrestle with how scriptures and theologies have been misused in the past and continue to be distorted in contemporary contexts to maintain gender, ethnic, social, and cultural inequities. Imaginably, narratives like the book of Esther, read with attention to the horrific events detailed throughout, will invite readers and interpreters to wrestle with their understanding of the sacrality of human life and whether the "sacred" texts that we have inherited and engage in our faith traditions and religious systems create and foster interdependence and a sense of community among all of humanity.

When we read the book of Esther as a horror story, it has the potential to clarify the connections between experiences of trauma and violent acts by victims of traumatic abuse. Terror and horror are logical and strategic. Colonizers use both to enforce/reinforce

hierarchies and domination in the book of Esther. Horror and violence impact and influence people in diverse ways. Sometimes, persons who experience horrific violence internalize violently abusive behaviors as conduct that should be imitated. In this way, violence is a learned behavior. At other times, victims of violence engage in violence as a means to survive. Because the Jewish collective in the story world lived through the experience of having a legal and irrevocable bounty placed on them, they may have internalized the violence that they and other sub-groups (i.e. the virgin girls) experienced. Living in diaspora with limited access to resources, they may have used physical violence in order to survive and resist the debilitating presence and threat of the Persian empire. When people encounter visual and/or audible horror, it is possible for these representations of horror and violence to affect neurological and social stability. The book of Esther presents horrifying situations that had the potential to induce aggression—a form of emotional instability—among those impacted by violence and horror.

It is clear that the Jewish collective in the book of Esther are afraid of the Persian empire. They are especially afraid of Haman who plots and offers to pay for their destruction and the king who authorizes their annihilation. Evidence of this fear includes Esther's deference to Persian law when she is encouraged to speak up on her people's behalf (Esther 4); Mordecai's and the other Jews' weeping, lamenting, and lying in sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4); Esther's careful and strategic invitations to banquets (Esther 5, 7); Esther's rhetoric and desperate plea to the king regarding the plight of Jews (Esther 7); and Esther's subsequent weeping and pleading at the feet of the king (Esther 8). These scenes illustrate how the horrors presented within the text induced fear in the Jewish characters and collective. To adapt, it is possible that they resort to the aggressive violence outlined and proposed in Esther 8 and carried out in Esther 9. Although the narrator does not explicitly state the reason

the Jewish collective deploys violence, a many of us—as contemporary consumers of horror and violence—can relate to aggressive responses to threats to our lives and livelihood.

Minimal and calculated resistance by Jews throughout the book of Esther suggest that the communities which produced this literature endeavored to critique the systems and structures that oppressed them in ways that would not invite other brutal violence. This approach is less aggressive than engendering physical violence against one's oppressor or oppressors. However, a literary artifact that envisions violence can be understood as aggressive behavior. Attention to features of horror in biblical texts raises important questions about readers' responses, about whether violent/horrific acts in sacred texts are used to legitimize current practices of abuse, and about the impacts of the representation of violence and horror in sacred texts on individual and group identities and memories.

The story of Esther functions as commutative and collective memories of Jews that outline the horrors of sexual exploitation, colonialism, and cultural genocide; this is similar to how Africana people develop narratives to reflect on and critique experiences of sexual abuse, colonial domination, and cultural genocide. This story details the experiences not only of Jews but also of other racialized/ethnic groups, specifically Africana girls and women. Although the story is focused on the Jewish collective's struggles and interactions with power, oppression, and exploitation, other ethnic groups are subjected to very similar struggles. This dissertation sheds light on how the ancient community and some contemporary readers and interpreters create social hierarchies that are used to suppress or erase the experiences and struggles of other ethnic groups that co-exist with Jews in the story world; specifically, I consider how these narratively marginalized groups also struggle with diminished power, sexual abuse, and other cultural oppressions. I hope that the issues I raise in this dissertation prevent Africana and other minoritized cultural groups from absorbing the violence of oppressive systems. I also hope that I have modeled and inspired ethically

responsible and holistic interpretations of the biblical text that aid in our ability to identify sexual trafficking in ancient and contemporary contexts and that this will galvanize us towards collective action which critiques gender hierarchies, patriarchy, and colonialism and dismantles sexual trafficking systems around the world.

One Night with the King? … Another Consideration for Religious Leaders

The lyrics of a familiar song "One Night with the King," originally sang by Aretha Franklin and popularized in Africana churches and communities by Prophetess Juanita Bynum, inadvertently normalizes and promote sexualized violence against women by ignoring the exploitative and abusive aspects of the narrative as well. This is a result and consequence of appropriating and accepting dominant hegemonic biblical interpretations that mask exploitative ideologies and practices, especially concerning Africana people. As Randall C. Bailey notes, this type of careless interpretation presents a "danger," whereby we are taught to ignore our own cultural bias in interpreting biblical texts."[2] In soulful melodious tones, both Franklin and Bynum perform the following lyrics:

> One night
> With the King
> Changes
> Everything
> One day
> In His courts
> Did forever
> Change my course
>
> One moment
> In His presence
> And I've never
> Been the same
> One night
> With the King
> Changes
> Everything

[2] See Randall C. Bailey, "The Danger of Ignoring One's Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text," in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 66–90.

One night
With the King
Changes
Everything
One day
In His courts
Could forever
Change
Your course
One moment
In His presence
And you'll never
Be the same

One night
With the King
Changes
Everything

This is
My testimony
From the desert
To the King
It had been
My destiny
To be chosen
For such
A time as this

I didn't know
That all
My dreams
Could become
Realities

Then I saw
His face
And His love
Captured me
Yeah

One night
With the King
It changes
Everything
One day
In His courts
It will forever
Change

Your course
(All you need
Tonight is)
Just one moment
In His presence
Just one moment
In His presence
Hooo

One moment
In His presence
And you'll never
Be the same
One night
With the King
It changes
One day
In His
His courts
It changes

One night
With the King
It changes
Oh, yes
It does
Everything

Ohhhh
I know that it
Changes
I know that it
Changes
It changes
Everything
Yeah
Yes, it does[3]

Similar to the biblical interpreters I have engaged throughout this dissertation, the lyricists, Jeannie Tenney frame "one night with the king" as an opportunity for economical and perhaps political advancement. It grants a female access to upward mobility, enabling her

[3] Written by Jeannie Tenney (2008), Performed by Aretha Franklin, Juanita Bynum and Jonathan Butler, "One Night with The King," accessed January 6, 2020, https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/arethafranklin/onenightwiththeking.html.

"dreams to become realities" and changing the course of her life forever in a seemingly positive way. Unlike the biblical interpreters, however, the Tenney fails to specifically mention or even allude to sex. The focus is merely on "one night with the king" and how it changes everything, namely the course of one's life. Indeed, this night changes the course of females lives, but not in the way that it is being framed and promoted in this song, with the exception of Esther's life and livelihood. The foreign ethnic virgin girls' lives and bodies are being marked by the trauma of systematized, institutionalized, and sexualized violence at the hand of patriarchs and imperial subjects, namely the king.

Moreover, the Tenney conflates the traumatic experiences of sexualized trauma and the threat of cultural genocide by incorporating the scriptural reference "For such a time as this" (4:14), claiming that the one night is one's destiny, that which one has been chosen for. I do not believe that Franklin or Bynum would intentionally promote sexual trafficking. A legacy of appropriating dominant hegemonic biblical interpretation, however, is that some Africana readers/hearers fail to consider the interpretative impact and influence on Africana identity and culture. In the text, one night with the king can cause irrevocable and irreparable damage to Africana females' bodies and psyches. If we continue to ignore our own cultural biases and read/interpret against our interests, as illustrated in the incorporation of this song in worship experiences, we will blindly promote the sexual trafficking and abuse of our own cultural and ethnic collective.

As Africana peoples committed to liberation and justice, we must critique distorted dominant interpretations of Esther 1–2 so that we can be life-giving and life-sustaining communities and support systems for one another. We must resist and rebuke interpretations and ideologies depicted within the sacred texts that function to diminish Africana females' agency and lives. It is therefore essential for Africana biblical scholars, clergy, and lay persons to lead the way in transforming biblical interpretation through the implementation of

intersectional polyvocal Africana biblical hermeneutics. Africana interpreters should, foremost, recognize, center, and expand our analysis to include Africana peoples in the text. In addition, we cannot select/soundbite the verse in Esther 4 where Mordecai suggests Esther may have come to royal dignity "for such a time as this." We cannot merely celebrate Esther's willingness or her decision to give into Mordecai's pressure to become a martyr for her people without shedding light on the context, conditions, and actions that produced "a time as this." In other words, in order to preach and teach on "for such a time as this" or "one night with the king," interpreters, teachers, preachers, and readers must be attentive to the ancient context that produced this text and to intersecting race/ethnicity, gender, class, and other aspects of identity that are at play in enactments of oppression and in the progression of the plot. Moreover, Africana interpreters should make connections between the sexualized violence perpetrated against the virgin girls and other enactments of violence against wider social groups, not only in the book of Esther but throughout the Bible and history.

For example, in the book of Esther, the sexual exploitation of Esther and possibly other Jewish virgin girls outlined in Esther 2 is a problem that is connected to the creation of the gender hierarchy in Esther 1, the threat of Jewish genocide in Esther 3, and the subsequent mass murders at the hand of Jews in Esther 7–8. Similarly, the sexual trafficking of Africana girls and women is connected to racial and gender hierarchies set up by colonizers, the enslavement and genocide of African peoples during the transatlantic slave trade, and other manifestations of resistance to violence and oppression by Africana peoples. Issues of sexual exploitation, cultural genocide, and violence intersect, as do the identities and oppressions of the cultural groups discussed in this dissertation. In fact, in many instances, rape is a weapon of cultural genocide. In many cases, cultural collectives internalize sexual exploitation and assaults on individual bodies and collective consciousness.

One consequence of sexual violence is the internalization of oppression and violence which may explain the mass murders carried out by the Jewish collective in Esther 9.

Moreover, the book depicts a world in which the empire understands the worth of people only in utilitarian and consumptive terms. This portrayal may contribute to the ways Africana people, Jews, and other minorities have been treated throughout history. Interpreters must gain the skills to recognize ideologies before we can begin to address and challenge them. By focusing on Africana girls and women, I have identified and critiqued some of these damning ideologies and practices.

Challenges to Researching

One of the key challenges in researching and combatting sexual trafficking is low or under-reporting. Although reported rates of sexual violence are high, there are slightly higher rates of unreported incidences of sexual violence because women and girls are reluctant to disclose the abuse to the police and other officials. This reluctance can be attributed to the social and cultural attitudes that devalue women's and girls' rights and the failure of officials to indict and/or convict perpetrators. In many instances, victims are silenced by local, state, or government authorities' neglect and refusal to protect them, investigate their claims of abuse, and hold the perpetrators responsible for the violence enacted. These issues are currently being raised and critiqued by the #SayHerName movement.

Other reasons for underreporting may include fear of retaliation, self-blame, and/or fear of judgment by others. Additionally, child sexual trafficking has become embedded as a cultural norm, sanctioned through attitudes which suggest that men have the right to engage in sex with underage girls and that girls are responsible for inciting sexual assault by the way they dress. The abuse is masked by secrecy and shame, which permeate the culture and consequently lead to a stigmatization of rape disclosure. Moreover, many child victims are criminalized for truancy and prostitution, while perpetrators experience low arrests and

prosecution. This enables perpetrators to resume their heinous crimes. In addition, men dominate courtroom spaces and hold positions of power in other legal/criminal justice systems, i.e. as judges, lawyers, jurors, and officers. Therefore, many female victims perceive that justice will be forfeited because these individuals whose duty is to serve and protect lack empathy or fail to have ethical convictions. This is unfortunate, because police and court officials play a major role in the fate and resilience of victims post-traumatization.

Consequences of Sexual Trafficking

Consequences of sexual trafficking can be physical, emotional, religious, and spiritual. Some of the negative physical and health consequences include sexually transmitted infections and diseases, infertility, developmental challenges, teen and unwanted pregnancies, and unsafe abortions. Other psychological effects include lowered self-esteem, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, distress, eating disorders, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and attempts, stress, dissociation, panic disorders, and engagement in high-risk behaviors that render people more vulnerable to abuse. Noted religious and spiritual effects are challenges to one's faith, conflation of pimp and other parties involved in trafficking with God/religious leaders, failure to perceive the church as a safe place to talk about sex and sexuality, failure to consider religious leaders as protective, experiences of blame and shame, no protection under biblical laws, and the challenge of women and children being viewed as property in the biblical world. This understanding is prevalent in contemporary contexts as well.[4] There are also economic and legal consequences of sexual trafficking. Sexual trafficking leads to and keeps persons entrapped in cycles of impoverishment: victims lack education; they experience wage theft, language barriers, and diminished economic opportunities; they often

[4] Bryant-Davis et al. note that some religious beliefs are used to blame and justify the sexual violation of females or shame them for the effects of the assault. Further, religious leaders tend to use religious texts to objectify and demonize females ("Margins," 348).

lack legal work history or have no marketable skills; they cannot gain or maintain employment; and they may lack a legal immigrant status.

Shame is a consequence of sexual trafficking that far too many victims experience although they are not at fault. Sexual victimization can be an intensely emotional experience that negatively affects victims long after they have been assaulted. Sociologist and anthropologist Karen G. Weiss notes that negative emotions experienced by rape victims can significantly shape how victims feel about themselves.[5] Survivors of sexual exploitation frequently describe the encounter as dehumanizing and humiliating. Victims of sexual exploitation often experience shame, humiliation, disgrace, and dishonor,[6] not only due to exploitation but because of the responses of community members to victims afterwards.

Disclosing exploitation produces a visibility that exposes victims to negative responses. Visibility puts victims at risk of being exposed, identified, vilified, or even criminalized[7] once a disclosure has been made about the incident. Many victims are publicly disparaged, which intensifies their sense of shame. Victims may also experience a sense of inferiority, discouragement, and temporary defeat.[8] Psychologist Gershen Kaufman notes that the effect of shame is to call attention to the self, which often results in persons feeling that they are dissected under a microscope.[9] Often visibility or hypervisibility involves additional scrutiny, because the persons, cases, and/or situations appear to be "different" from others. This can be compounded because of factors such as race, class, gender, or physical abilities,

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[5] Karen G. Weiss, "Too Ashamed to Report: Deconstructing the Shame of Sexual Victimization," *Feminist Criminology* 5, no. 3 (2010): 286.
[6] Donald L. Nathanson, "A Timetable for Shame," in *The Many Faces of Shame*, ed. Donald L. Nathanson (New York: Guilford Press, 1987), 3.
[7] Irina Anderson and Kathy Doherty, *Accounting for Rape: Psychology, Feminism, and Discourse Analysis in the Study of Sexual Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 3.
[8] Silvan A. Tomkins, "Shame," in *The Many Faces of Shame*, ed. Donald L. Nathanson (New York: Guilford Press, 1987), 143.
[9] Gershen Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based Syndromes* 2nd ed. (New York: Springer, 2004), 22.

as Crenshaw illustrates.[10] Kaufman adds that people who belong to different cultural and racial groups and who feel outcast or inferior as a result often experience social pressures characterized by unrelenting exposure to shame, which then leads to humiliation and is aided and doubly magnified by powerlessness.[11]

The task of making instances of sexual violence visible for the purposes of prosecution or eliminating crimes is complex because structures are embedded in the world to obscure women. Disclosure of abuse presents a dilemma for Africana women and girls: invisibility and silence are what enables sexual trafficking to thrive; yet visibility and vocality regarding the abuse often produces negative consequences for Africana females. This process is further complicated because of the binding effects of exposure. Exposure binds movement and speech, paralyzing the self. There is an urge to hide or disappear, a spontaneous reaction to the self's heightened visibility that can overwhelm the self.[12] These reactions also halt prosecution when victims become too traumatized or paralyzed to continue the process—if they are given an opportunity to prosecute at all. One of the reasons Africana females' voices have been marginalized is because experiences of sexual exploitation are linked to shame. Attention to experiences of sexual abuse and culturally produced shame that follows these encounters may enable us to transform structures that facilitate sexual trafficking and, at the same time, alter the cultural responses to African diasporic victims to ensure safety and protection and prevent further traumatization.

Conclusion

If only we could join the chorus of #SayHerName supporters by lifting up the names of those Africana girls and women impacted by imperial violence in the book of Esther. We cannot do

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[10] Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection," 139-167.
[11] Kaufman, 299.
[12] Kaufman, 18.

that though, because they remain nameless. But, as morally and ethically responsible biblical interpreters, we can bear witness to the plight of these girls and women whose names we will never know. We can stand with those impacted by sexual violence and exploitation throughout history and up to the present day, as we commit to read between the lines, behind the euphemisms, and through the silences and silencing in the biblical text and in narrated stories of Africana girls and women across time and space. In doing so, we may not redeem the biblical text, but we will redeem the stories and dignity of all the girls and women whose voices have too often been silenced. Some stories cannot or should not be redeemed. Instead, these stories can and should teach readers about themselves and their roles in perpetuating oppressive ideologies and practices. Hopefully, sitting with the stories long enough and opening one's self up to different perspectives/interpretations of biblical narratives will encourage readers and interpreters to use their power, authority, and voices to work towards eradicating oppression for all peoples and uplifting the stories of those whose voices and stories have been suppressed.

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