

# On/Unstained White dress(es): Afro-Caribbean Female Purity in Sacred Spaces in Three Caribbean Women Poets

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## SHORT BIO

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## ABSTRACT

There is a white dress – baptismal, communion or confirmation – that appears in select poems of three Caribbean women poets, Jennifer Rahim (Trinidad), M. NourbeSe Philip (Trinidad/Canada) and Barbara Ferland (Jamaica). The dress is intended to be worn by Afro-Caribbean girls in a church, sacred, or sacramental context and speak to matters of purity in the female/girl child who is so clad. At the same time, the dress - spotless or yellowed - exposes the impurity, danger, and impiety of the Afro-Caribbean female body that is laid bare in the sacramental and sacred space of Church. This article will explore the experience of "sacred misogynoir" as expressed in Rahim, Philip, and Ferland via the symbolism of the (unstained) white dress. Drawing on the work of C. M. Webster, which unveils how Christian practices exiled Afro-Caribbean women from human and feminine value systems, I draw attention to how these women counter such disvaluing with bodily practices that promoted, (re)valued, and affirmed their body-selves, especially in sacred spaces. Webster's research, in conversation with these poets, illustrates the need for a reframing and revaluing of the Afro-Caribbean female body in sacred spaces such that white dresses no longer function to oppress and devalue.

## KEYWORDS

Sacred misogynoir, Jennifer Rahim, M. NourbeSe Philip, Barbara Ferland, C.M. Webster

## On/Unstained White dress(es): Christianity and Female Purity in Three Caribbean Women Poets

There is a white dress – baptismal, communion or confirmation – that appears in the poems of three Caribbean women poets, Jennifer Rahim (Trinidad), M. NourbeSe Philip (Tobago/Canada) and Barbara Ferland (Jamaica/England). The dress is intended to be worn by an Afro-Caribbean girl in a church, sacred, or sacramental context and speaks loudly of matters of purity in the female/girl child, who is so clad. At the same time, the dress - spotless or yellowed - exposes the impurity, danger, and impiety of the Afro-Caribbean female body that is laid bare in the sacramental/sacred space of Church, where white is symbolic of purity and holiness. White is,

therefore, an important color in Baptism, Reconciliation, Holy Communion and Confirmation. Of course, the symbolism of white and purity is not limited to mainstream Christianity, as can be seen by its presence in Islam and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. In the Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean religious forms, such as Revival in Jamaica and Spiritual Baptist in Trinidad and Tobago, also maintain a complex system of symbolism involving color choice for garments and headgear. Austin-Broos, for example, describes the wearing of white head wraps among female Zion Revivalists during divine worship “[as] signifying their purified state”.<sup>1</sup>

This article explores the experience of “sacred misogynoir”, that is, the double discrimination faced by Black women for being both Black and female in the religious sphere, as expressed in Rahim, Philip, and Ferland via the symbolism of the (unstained) white dress. Christianity was violently or forcibly imposed on the Black people in the Caribbean and among its legacies is a “holy misogyny”, upon which such sacred misogynoir is premised. It highlights the seemingly inevitable misogyny in Western Christianity that has removed women from sacred significance while simultaneously imposing discriminating purity customs.<sup>2</sup> Purity culture in the evangelical movement “promotes a biblical view of sexual purity by requiring strict adherence to sexual abstinence before marriage and supporting only heterosexual, married, and monogamous forms of sexual activity”.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it can be considered as perhaps the starkest of contemporary forms of sacred misogyny and misogynoir. The purity movement is not singular to evangelicalism but has also entered Catholic Church spaces, reinforced by the Catholic catechism, youth bibles, and catechesis, as discussed by Cieslik:

Although most contemporary reflection on purity culture has focused primarily on evangelical Christianity’s Purity Movement between the

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<sup>1</sup> Diane J. Austin-Broos, *Jamaica Genesis: Religion and the Politics of Moral Orders*. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 69.

<sup>2</sup> April DeConick, *Holy Misogyny: Why Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter*. (Continuum 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Madison Natarajan, Kerrie G. Wilkins-Yel, Anushka Sista, Aashika Anantharaman, and Natalie Seils, Decolonizing Purity Culture: Gendered Racism and White Idealization in Evangelical Christianity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 46, no 3 (2022): 317.

1990s and 2000s, the Catholic catechism, youth bibles, and religious education of many young Catholic women now in their 20s and 30s are beginning to feel the impact of this Movement on their subsequent relationships and sexual identities. It's about time that the American Catholic community reckon with the impact of this Movement on its young women.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, neither holy misogyny nor sacred misogynoir are inevitable, but, rather, expose underlying theological, political, and rhetorical groundings that, I argue, need to be continually challenged by counter-narratives of liberation expressing alternatives to the dominant worldview.

Drawing on the work of C. M. Webster,<sup>5</sup> this article demonstrates how Black Caribbean women counter such theological, political, and rhetorical foundations with bodily practices that promote, (re)value, and affirm their body-selves, especially in sacred spaces. Webster's research unveils how Christian beliefs and practices from the time of enslavement exiled Afro-Caribbean women from human and feminine value systems. By placing Webster's research in conversation with the poets Rahim, Philip, and Ferland, the article argues for a reframing and revaluing of the Afro-Caribbean female body in sacred spaces so that white dresses no longer function to oppress and devalue.

## Somatic Narratives Resisting Sacralized Violence

Christianity has had a profound influence on the Caribbean woman's bio-political location and imaginings.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Christianity was deployed in the Caribbean to manage and manipulate Black women's biological and social being to achieve political goals, such as maintaining control, maximizing

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<sup>4</sup> Emma Cieslik, Guilty Mind, Guilty Body, Guilty Soul: (Im)Purity Culture in the American Catholic Church, *The New School*, no date.  
<https://tns-gssi.newschool.org/2022/01/30/guilty-mind-guilty-body-guilty-soul-impurity-culture-in-the-american-catholic-church/>

<sup>5</sup> Carol Marie Webster, Chat to Mi Back: Meditation on body archive, *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* 11, no. 1 (2019): 49–66.  
Carol Marie Webster, Body as Temple: Jamaican Catholic Women and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, *Journal of Black Theology* 15, no. 1 (2017): 21–40.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2017.1271582>

<sup>6</sup> Webster, "Body as Temple".

(re)productivity, or promoting ideologies of inferiority and divinely ordained enslavement. This began with Christian complicity in the transatlantic trade of Africans leading to the subsequent enslavement of Africans within the brutal plantation complex in North America and the Caribbean, where racism and white supremacy determined African bodies as being “destined for servitude, imbued with innate inferiority and thus discard-able”.<sup>7</sup> African women, in particular, were subjected to misogyny and misogynoir, with their very humanity and femininity devalued, existing on the border between animal and human and, therefore, outside the realm of moral concern. Their bodies were considered merely chattel, where their sexual, sensual, reproductive, and manual labor was owned and appropriated for the benefit of others, namely the enslaver and his or her family.<sup>8</sup> Slave narratives from the Caribbean and the Americas provide disturbing evidence of the brutality of the enslavers who professed Christianity.<sup>9</sup> For example, in the slave narrative "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Harriet Jacobs (writing under the pseudonym Linda Brent), there are numerous examples of Christian enslavers abusing female slaves.<sup>10</sup> One notable record shows how Dr Flint, who enslaved Jacobs, uses his status as a Christian to justify exploiting and abusing her. Despite being a religious man, having converted to Church of England, he repeatedly sexually harasses and assaults Jacobs during her enslavement. He uses his authority and power over her to coerce her into sexual relationships, threatening her with punishment or separation from her children if she refuses. Despite Jacobs's pleas for mercy and attempts to resist his advances, Flint persists in his predatory behaviour.

Jacobs describes how Flint manipulates the Christian teachings, such as Ephesians 6:1, to justify his actions.<sup>11</sup> He claims that God has given him

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<sup>7</sup> Webster, "Body as Temple," 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Women, including women of color, also owned slaves. See Christine Walker, *Jamaica Ladies: Female Slaveholders and the Creation of Britain's Atlantic Empire*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> SallyAnn H. Ferguson, Christian Violence and the Slave Narrative, *American Literature* 68, no. 2 (June 1996):

<sup>10</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Dover, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on

authority over his enslaved people and that it is his duty to “break her will” and assert his dominance. Religion is used as a tool of control and oppression, enabling the exploitation of Jacobs’ vulnerability as an enslaved woman and mother. Flint, like many others, twisted Christian principles to suit his own desires. The narrative of Mary Prince, born on the Caribbean island of Bermuda, similarly details the sexual and physical violence to which she was subject at the hands of her Christian enslavers.<sup>12</sup>

Given the similarities of the system of enslavement in the Caribbean and North America, it is unsurprising, therefore, that Mitzi J. Smith argues that, white enslavers had unlimited access to the bodies of enslaved women during slavery.<sup>13</sup> They would force or coerce these women to submit to their sexual advances. Moreover, they would coerce or force the women to reproduce with enslaved men to maintain the labor force. This became increasingly the practice once the transatlantic trade was made illegal. Even when religious ritual was deployed,

[t]he Christian baptism of captive African girls and women, at port of embarkation and/or entry, ushered them into lives in which virtue would be systematically denied them. Baptism ushered them into collective systems (economic, cultural and religious) designed to rip, strip, whip and bludgeon virtue from their bodies. Only in this way could they be held separate and apart from those “other” female bodies who were “privileged” in enslavement culture and economy.<sup>14</sup>

Even after the abolition of slavery, African-descended women were still subject to coercion and force; women could be raped with impunity by men inside and outside of their communities. The dominant culture continued to regard African-descended women as “inferior and unworthy of the same

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you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. (New International Version).

<sup>12</sup> Mary Prince, *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave* Paperback (First Rate Publishers, 2015).

Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality and Biblical Interpretation*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Webster, “Body as Temple”, 26.

respect granted to white women generally”.<sup>15</sup> Women and girls in the Caribbean today continue to be the majority victims of sexual violence, especially poor, “Ghetto” women, who are the most vulnerable owing to having minimal or no education (and, thus, are economically vulnerable).<sup>16</sup> Such bodies could and have been subjected to sacralized violence and violations that continues to reverberate in contemporary Afro-Caribbean women’s experiences, as the story of Rastafarian Nzingha King and many others demonstrate.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, conversations about the bodies of enslaved women did not begin or end with Christianity’s flawed and violent oppression and domination. The scripts of inferiority and non-humanity imposed on these women existed in tension with other embodied scripts that valued and affirmed their bodies as sacred and divine. Particularly in conversation with notions of body as a temple in and through which divinity is present(ed).<sup>18</sup> Webster’s research unearths examples of such scripts among women in the Roman Catholic Church in Jamaica, revealing a “way of being in the world that is not commonly articulated in dominant discourses of and about Caribbean women in general, and Jamaican women in particular”.<sup>19</sup> Such “somatic narratives”, that is, stories and meanings embedded in bodily

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, *Womanist Sass*, 120.

<sup>16</sup> Other markers of vulnerability to intimate partner violence include being under thirty and having either been pregnant or begun living with a partner while underage. See Anna Kasafi Perkins, “Christian Norms and Intimate Male Partner Violence: Lessons from a Jamaica Women’s Health Survey,” in *The Holy Spirit and Social Justice Interdisciplinary Global Perspectives: History, Race & Culture*, edited by Antipas L. Harris and Michael D. Palmer (Lanham, MD: Seymour Press, 2019). 240-67.

<sup>17</sup> jennifer s. leath\*, Nontando Hadebe, Nicole Symmonds, and Anna Kasafi Perkins, “Black Feminism, Womanism, and Intersectionality Discourse: A Theo-Ethical Roundtable “intersectionality” as a hallmark of Critical Race Theory,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue 1 (2023); Anna Kasafi Perkins, “Christian Norms and Intimate Male Partner Violence: Lessons from a Jamaica Women’s Health Survey,” in . *The Holy Spirit and Social Justice Interdisciplinary Global Perspectives: History, Race & Culture*, edited by Antipas L. Harris and Michael D. Palmer. (Lanham, MD: Seymour Press, 2019). \*Please note jennifer leith does not capitalise her names.

<sup>18</sup> Webster, “Body as Temple”.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

performances, resisted colonial strategies to dehumanize and annihilate.<sup>20</sup> One of these somatic narratives central to the women's spirituality and performative practices in the liturgical space is "body as temple".<sup>21</sup> This embodied script links an "African cosmology that centres on body episteme in which the body is fundamental to cultural and religious life" with Christian notions of the self that continue to be meaningful.<sup>22</sup> Such African-derived cosmologies encompass a worldview that gives a sense of purpose and direction to people's lives and enables them to act purposefully and exercise a measure of control over their environment.<sup>23</sup> "Body as temple" functions as part of "body as archive", whereby Webster<sup>24</sup>

identifies an understanding of the body that recognizes bodily artefacts as stored in individual and collective bodies for future generations to excavate, critically interrogate, re-craft and/or restore and deploy in the fashioning of present-day individual and community identities, life possibilities and future world imaginings.<sup>25</sup>

Poems contribute to the "body archive" to be excavated, interrogated, recrafted and restored in fashioning the life possibilities of Afro-Caribbean women in the sacred space.

### Three poets, three dresses

The three poets at the center of this conversation unveil somatic narratives of the Afro-Caribbean female body within the context of Christian worship that exhibit ideas and practices steeped in sacred misogyny. Indeed, Church or school are the contexts where many a Caribbean girl is shaken out of her "blissful innocence" concerning patriarchal norms and the meaning of her African body-self. There, too, she encounters the complexities of

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<sup>20</sup> Webster, "Chat to Mi Back".

<sup>21</sup> Webster, "Body as Temple".

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid* 23.

<sup>23</sup> Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, The dimensions of African cosmology, *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religions* 2, no. 2 (2013):

<sup>24</sup> Webster, "Chat to Mi Back".

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

Caribbean sexuality that oftentimes, resists such patriarchal and misogynistic social norms.<sup>26</sup>

*“White in Organdy, Meadowed in Lace”*  
A little girl, (the Lord is with thee.)  
White in organdy, Lifts her starched, black face  
Towards the barricaded altar  
Meadowed in lace. (Ferland, lines 5-9)

The first of the three poets, and also a Jamaican musician, Barbara Ferland (1919-2003), wrote in the 1950s when Jamaica was a colony of Great Britain. Her poem “Ave Maria” (“Hail Mary” in English) first appears in a 1950s mimeo of the *Anthology of the Poetry of the West Indies*, collected by Jamaicans W. Adolphe Roberts and Wycliffe Bennett. Since then, it has featured in several anthologies including a special issue of the journal *Caribbean Quarterly* (1958), *Voice Print: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry for the Caribbean* (Brown and Morris 1990), and *Time for Poetry - A Workshop Approach for CXC*.<sup>27</sup>

The title, “Ave Maria”, references a devotional prayer said to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in the Roman Catholic Church, the “Hail Mary”.<sup>28</sup> The “Hail Mary” alludes to Luke 1:35 where the girl Mary is addressed by an Angel, who tells her she will be the mother of the savior. The “Hail Mary” is incorporated into a longer meditative prayer called the Rosary, which is often prayed while using a string of beads also called the rosary. Mary’s story and that of her son Jesus are reflected on meditatively as the various decades

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<sup>26</sup> Carole Boyce Davies, “Secrets of Sweetness,” in *Caribbean Erotic: poetry, prose and essays*, edited by Opal Palmer Adisa and Donna Aza Weir-Soley. (Leeds, UK: Peepal Press, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Nahdja Carasco Bailey, *Time for Poetry - A Workshop Approach for CXC*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> AVE MARIA, gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Iesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen.



of the rosary are prayed in unison by the Catholic faithful. In Ferland's "Ave Maria", children are praying the rosary in a church. Perhaps it is First Communion Day, given the finery they wear, although out of respect people tended to wear their best to Church.<sup>29</sup> The children repeat the words of the Hail Mary in rote, sing song fashion: "Skipping syllables, Follow-the-Leader pace" (Ferland, line 4). This is unsurprising as, prior to 1965, Mass was delivered in Latin and not the vernacular so most Catholics would not have been able to fully participate.<sup>30</sup> Many of them prayed the rosary throughout in rather rote fashion, disconnected from the ritual around them. The Gospel, the most important reading, and the homily would have been in English. Unmentioned, but lurking, is the presence of the White,<sup>31</sup> ex patriot, missionary priest leading the ritual.

The rhythm of the poem mimics the praying of "Ave Maria", confirmed by the interspersing of words of the prayer (enclosed in parentheses) at significant points throughout. Ferland re-shapes the source prayer "with West African cultural traces, illustrat[ing] deep-rooted Christian piety".<sup>32</sup> The poetic voice looks and listens in as the children intone and drone the rosary. In the poem, "a little girl (the Lord is with Thee)" is described: "White in organdy/[she]lifts her starched, black face/Towards the barricaded altar/Meadowed in lace" (Ferland, lines 5-9). The juxtaposition of the Angel's greeting to Mary, "the Lord is with Thee", which is the second line of the "Hail Mary", with the introduction of the little Black girl immediately recasts her as capable of reflecting and containing the divine. Ferland revalues the little girl, affirming the sacredness of her body. She is, perhaps ironically, cast as "White", reflecting/sharing the color of the organdy dress she dons (organdy is a lightweight, sheer, yet stiff fabric, usually made of cotton). Its crisp stiffness is typically achieved with the aid of (white) starch, which is used to describe

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<sup>29</sup> Mary L. Zimmerman, *Vatican II and The Liturgy: Revisiting Lost Traditions*. Master of Arts in Liberal Studies thesis. (The State University of New Jersey, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Zimmerman, "Vatican II and The Liturgy".

<sup>31</sup> White is capitalized to designate White as a racial category, pushing back against suggestions that it should be lowercase, unlike Black, since it refers simply to skin color. To do so is to continue the myth that White is not a racial identity.

<sup>32</sup> Gordon Collier, "At the gate of cultures" of the New World Religion, Mythology, and Folk-Belief in West Indian Poetry," in *And the Birds Began to Sing: Religion en Literature in Post-Colonial Cultures*, edited by Jamie S. Scott. (Brill Series: Cross/Cultures 22. Brill, 1996), 238.

the child's black face. She, a Black colonial subject, is graced and, perhaps, (over)shadowed by a black God of the Rastafarl. In Webster's oeuvre, her body signifies and is a temple in which divinity dwells.

At the same time, the description of her face as starched suggests excessive piety and seriousness engendered by the sacred space filled with misogynoiristic ritual and symbolism. Notably, the altar, also a sacred object, could only be approached by the male priest and male altar servers, hence, being barricaded by altar rails, it is "meadowed" in white lace, again, pointing to and bringing about the sacredness of the space. However, it is more likely that it is the little girl who is so "meadowed". Perhaps she is wearing the customary chapel mantilla (veil) expected of women and girls then, in deference to Church law shaped by the Pauline injunction: "For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. That is why a woman ought to wear a veil on her head, for the sake of the angels" (1 Cor. 11:7–10).<sup>33</sup>

Her stiff countenance contrasts with the jouissance of Afro-Christian worship as well as the joys of living perhaps imaged in the longed-for ripe fruit, hanging temptingly but out of reach on a branch outside the Church window. Such descriptions of ripeness are often used in the Caribbean to depict a young girl in the flower of adolescence; ripe fruit ready to be plucked by a man, any man, as was their wont from the time of enslavement. (She is the early blooming cyclamen girl of M. NourbeSe Philip discussed below.). This ripe fruit girl contrasts with the fruit of Mary's womb (Jesus) and Mary herself, for she, according to Christian dogma, remains chaste and virgin despite giving birth. However, the fruit is also a more mundane signifier, for Mary is petitioned to "Bend low the laden bough/Child-high; sweeten her incense-

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<sup>33</sup> These days, the traditional practice of the veil is being reclaimed by some Catholic women, who describe it as a "veiling of the tabernacle", the box containing the living body of Christ, the host. See Emma Cieslik, "Veiling the Female Tabernacle: The Feminist Undertones to Catholic Women Rekindling Traditional Devotional Practice". [Blog - Faith Practices], *Feminist Studies in Religion*, December 21, 2021. <https://www.fsrinc.org/veiling-the-female-tabernacle-the-feminist-undertones-to-catholic-women-rekindling-traditional-devotional-practice/>

flavoured breath/with food, good Mary” (Ferland, lines 16-18). The little girl is hungry! Yet, her hunger, in a childhood shaped by Christian belief and ritual, is fed first by piety. It is no surprise, then, that Collier says that, in “Ave Maria”, “Christian sentiments often confirm the consolatory social function of belief in the face of implicit or explicit adversity”.<sup>34</sup> Yet, Ferland rejects such consolatory religion, for real hunger needs to be treated first with food to sustain life.

“Ave Maria” closes with Mary being exhorted to pray for sinners “now”! Ferland pushes back on the idea of sinfulness as she adds, “And for the blameless,/Now, before the hour of their death” (Ferland, line 21). She reclaims the innocence of the girl child, who, as both Black and female, is blamed for sins of sexual impurity resulting from the legacy of missionary colonialism, which have become woven into the fabric of Caribbean life and culture.<sup>35</sup>

*“Feeling a fraud dressed all in white”*

*“Feeling a fraud dressed all in white”*

“What will the boys wear?”

“Black trousers and white shirts,” she said.

“How come they get to wear black?”

“Well, I suppose boys are allowed a little dirt,” she said, laughing.  
(Rahim, lines 12-17)

This preoccupation with female sinfulness and impurity is more explicit in Jennifer Rahim’s work,<sup>36</sup> especially in the poem “First Communion Day” from her collection *Approaching Sabbaths*.<sup>37</sup> Renowned Jamaica poet and novelist Kei Miller describes Rahim (1963-2023) as one of the “exciting new poets in the Caribbean” and includes her in his anthology, *New Caribbean*

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<sup>34</sup> Collier, “At the gate”.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Shaw and Anuncia Escala, “Latin America and the Caribbean,” in *Women and Religion: Global Lives in Focus* (Women and Society around the World), edited by Susan J. Shaw. (ABC-CLIO 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Rahim died suddenly on March 23, 2023; she was only 60 years old.

<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Rahim, *Approaching Sabbaths: Poems*. (Peepal Press, 2009). See also “She Dreams of Falling” and “For Women like Us” in *Approaching Sabbaths*.

*Poetry*.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, I would describe her as the foremost poet of the Roman Catholic faith in the Caribbean, as her work is shaped by this faith, though she wrestles with and often pushes it aside even as it forms the bedrock of her musings. This is evident in “First Communion Day”:

On First Communion Day she felt a fraud  
dressed all in *white* like a bride.  
Her sins chimed like nursery rhymes  
in the confessional - all sang in perfect time,  
but one. No metre could order its horror.  
She prayed the others would cancel it out. (Rahim, lines 1-6;  
emphasis added)

The poetic voice in the poem has privileged access to the internal thoughts of a young girl all dressed in white “to take First Communion”, the sacrament where a person receives the Holy Eucharist, consuming the consecrated bread and wine for the first time. At least twenty years separate Ferland’s unnamed girl’s experience and Rahim’s similarly garbed girl, but the same concerns remain, though treated differently in the post-independence and post-Vatican context. With the reforms after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the celebration of the Mass is now more participatory. Gone are altar rails, mantillas, Latin Masses and remote priests, but the importance of white dresses for purity<sup>39</sup> in sacred spaces remains. Clergy and hierarchy are now, more often than not, local men, while women continue to be excluded from priesthood despite being active in the Church. Most Catholic children receive their First Holy Communion when they are at least seven years old, as this is considered the age of reason, when they are deemed to be morally responsible. Indeed, Rahim’s girl child, “dressed all in white like

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<sup>38</sup> Kei Miller, *New Caribbean Poetry: An Anthology*. (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press, 2007), xvi.

<sup>39</sup> A white dress appears again in another Rahim long-form poem, “A Place” “XIII”. This time it is a baptismal dress (2014, 82): “the balm that cures verse to scripture/as when newness opens unexpectedly/like unfurled wings, spotless/as a baptismal dress/redeems space” (Rahim 2014, 82). Here Rahim reclaims the value of the white garment, claiming its ability to cure, renew through its spotlessness. This baptismal dress, unlike its First Communion compere, calls to mind the biblical and the angelic. Here, the ritual of baptism wipes away all sin, especially original sin.

a bride" (Rahim, line 2), begins making judgments about her own (im)moral status. The very color of her dress provides a stark contrast to, and calls out, her "impure" moral state. While the fabric of this unnamed girl's white dress is not proffered, we can assume it was of the kind of organdy worn by Ferland's "little girl" or the satin-cotton of Philip's cyclamen girl, as we see below.

Before First Communion or regular reception of the Eucharist, confessing sins is necessary to ensure that the communicant is ready to receive the spotless body of the Lord. Confession is but a ritual for Rahim's girl child, however, as it does not give rise to the spotlessness promised. Like Ferland's "little girl", she engages in a routine Christian ritual of questionable meaningfulness as "her sins [are] chimed like nursery rhymes ... all sang in perfect time" (Rahim, line 3), much like the rote repetition of the girl in "Ave Maria". Similarly, there is a rote giving of answers in the Confirmation ceremony depicted by Philip in "Cyclamen Girl", as well as a concern with "learning about sin", which will be explored below. While the sin that elicits the feeling of fraudulence in the girl in "First Communion Day" is not detailed, it is perhaps not farfetched to suggest it was of a sexual nature given the comparison to the white of a bride for whom this is a symbol of virginity preserved.

This is confirmed in lines 7-11, where the girl child "still felt dirty", "after kneeling beneath the crucifix". She explains away her sadness to her mother, "I don't like my dress", receiving the response, "But you look beautiful. So innocent" (Rahim, line 11), or so "blameless" like Ferland's girl child. The maternal response is loaded with irony, especially her subsequent laughing response to why boys are allowed to wear black, "Well, I suppose boys are allowed a little dirt" (Rahim, line 15). The ease of the contrast in meanings where white represents purity/sinlessness and black represents impurity/sinfulness is not lost on Rahim, nor her reader. The final line seals the deal, when the girl child states, "Then you should dress me like them" (Rahim, line 21). Implicitly, her white dress is seen to be stained as she is not worthy to wear it spotless. It is unclear whether the sexual activity implied is consensual; it is probable that it was not given the historical levels of

sexual abuse experienced by women and girls in the Caribbean.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, within Rahim's corpus there are several poems that treat with sexual abuse and its impact on women and girls, such as "Opening in Up"<sup>41</sup> and, as mentioned previously, "She Dreams of Falling" and "For Women like Us".<sup>42</sup>

Of course, the purity culture in Catholicism that is at the root of Rahim's girl child's feelings of guilt and shame, is not a new development. The Church "is known for [effectively] using guilt and shame to discourage sinfulness [especially sexual sinfulness]".<sup>43</sup> The female body is treated as a threat to male continence and women bear the burden of keeping men in line by learning to feel shame about their bodies and sexual feelings. Victims of sexual abuse, both inside and outside of the Church, are blamed for their own violation: What did she say? What did she wear? Intertwined with the Purity Movement of the late 1990s and 2000s, Catholic purity culture has had a damaging effect on the identities, health, and well-being of many young Catholic women,<sup>44</sup> particularly those of African descent whose cultural beliefs encode women as more prone to sinfulness, supposedly evidenced by their menstrual uncleanness.<sup>45</sup> Rahim avers to all these bio-political ideas and practices and pushes back against them in her telling (re)telling of the story of a white First Communion dress.

### *Early Bloomers in Satin-cotton*

#### The cyclamen girl -yellowed confirmation dress-

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<sup>40</sup> Anna Kasafi Perkins, "Christian Norms and Intimate Male Partner Violence: Lessons from a Jamaica Women's Health Survey," in *The Holy Spirit and Social Justice Interdisciplinary Global Perspectives: History, Race & Culture*, edited by Antipas L. Harris and Michael D. Palmer. (Lanham, MD: Seymour Press, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Rahim, *Approaching Sabbaths*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Cieslik, "Guilty Mind".

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Anna Kasafi Perkins, "'Shi Wi Use Har Blood Tie Him': A Theological Interrogation of Cultural Beliefs about Menstruation and Female [Im]morality in Jamaica," in *Memories of Caribbean Futures: reclaiming the precolonial to reimagine a postcolonial languages, literatures and cultures of the Greater Caribbean and beyond*, edited by Nicholas Faraclas, et al. (Puerto Rico/Curacao: University of Curacao, 2019), 175.

(photography circa 1960)  
curls like copra<sup>46</sup> left to dry  
in the glare of unanswered questions/away  
from the brittle matrix of her coconut cocoon. (Philip, "Eucharistic  
Contradictions," lines 14-19)

M. NourbeSe Philip (born 1947) is explicit about the difficulties of the black girl in the sacred space, which overly structures the social space. Her collection, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), is "a long poem composed of a series of shorter pieces grouped under section titles, all of them linked by the recurrent tropes of language and silence in the Caribbean herstory".<sup>47</sup> The second series is a section entitled, "Cyclamen Girl", in which Philip subjects religion to the same subversive treatment that she does language from the perspective of a woman.<sup>48</sup> "Cyclamen Girl" is named for the so-called poor man's orchid, which is said to bloom early and often. Moreover, cyclamen were believed to be intoxicants and aphrodisiacs. Ironically, the flowers have also been associated with miscarriages and so pregnant women avoided them. Seedek argues that Philip's work protests racist, gendered and sexual silencing of the colonized by the colonizers.<sup>49</sup> Philip draws upon the body, represented by the tongue, to break the silence imposed upon the cyclamen girl. Furthermore, she re-members and reclaims the body of the African female that was the "site of exploitation and [the] profoundly anti-human demands [of] forced reproduction along with subsequent forceful abduction

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<sup>46</sup> Copra is the dried, white flesh of the coconut from which coconut oil is extracted. It is typically left to dry in the sun. Perhaps Philip's reference to copra speaks to both the girl and her hair, which may have been processed. Of course, the whiteness of the flesh of the coconut is akin to the now dried whiteness of the yellowed (aged) confirmation dress.

<sup>47</sup> Belén Martín Lucas, "Postmodern, postcolonial and feminist: Marlene Nourbese Philip's poems at a theoretical junction," in *La fabrique du genre: (dé)constructions du féminin et du masculin dans les arts et la littérature anglophones* [online]. (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008) <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.30712>

<sup>48</sup> Edgardo Perez Montijo, "Eucharistic contradictions: Religious imagery in Marlene Nourbese Philips' "Cyclamen Girl". *The tower (Río Piedras)* 7, no 25 (2002).

<sup>49</sup> Aberer Refky Seedek, "The African Female Body as a form of Resistance in a Post-Colonialist Context: A Study of Marlene Nourbese Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 7, (May 2014).

and sale of children”.<sup>50</sup> It is that same African female body which refuses to succumb to the anti-human deformation imposed upon her by the colonisers, as Webster highlights. Her body is the very site of resistance, containing the very tools needed to resist and survive - memory and history.<sup>51</sup>

The Cyclamen series consists of seven poems, represented in the discussion below by the short form in parentheses: “The Catechist” (TCat), “Eucharistic Contradictions” (EC), “The Catechism” (TC), “Vows” (V), “Transfiguration” (T), “The Communicant” (TCom) and “Epiphany” (E). Each poem gives a twist to the Christian ritual or festivity that its title announces through comments on a yellowed photograph of a girl in a communion dress (circa 1960), “black girl white dress” (Philip, “TCat” line 7), from four different perspectives: historical, religious, racial, and sexual. “In the poems, there is a constant movement back and forth between the portrait of the young girl, and the voice of the mature poet, who contemplates her”.<sup>52</sup>

Philip admits that in the series of poems, she is trying to deconstruct her past, carefully examining “that coming of age”,<sup>53</sup> passing from childhood into womanhood, “the cyclamen girl/caught between/blurred images of/massa and master” (Philip, “TCat” lines 26-29). The echoes of the patriarchal legacy of Enslavement (“massa”) reverberates in the contemporary (“master”). At the same time, the Christian god is (re)present/ed in the White male enslaver (massa/master), who is the acclaimed “Massa God” in the Jamaican parlance. Both are rejected by Philip’s subversive treatment.

The first poem, “The Catechist,” captures the cyclamen girl on her Confirmation Day, arrayed in the prescribed white garments of sacramental purity for Western Christianity. Unlike Ferland’s communicant, the cyclamen girl is dressed in satin-cotton (a soft, smooth, flowy fabric), “all the rage those days” with crinolines<sup>54</sup> stiff (Philip, “TCat” lines 2-6). “Vows” presents us with an overload or surfeit of white in the Ceremony, where six white items of

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<sup>50</sup> “The Absence” 24 in Seedek, “The African Female Body,” 293.

<sup>51</sup> Seedek, “The African Female Body”.

<sup>52</sup> Perez Montijo, “Eucharistic contradictions”.

<sup>53</sup> H. Nigel Thomas, “A rejoinder to prospero: an interview with M. Nourbese Philip,” *Kola*. Mar 22, 2008. [https://www.thefreelibrary.com/\\_print/PrintArticle.aspx?id=180798316](https://www.thefreelibrary.com/_print/PrintArticle.aspx?id=180798316)

<sup>54</sup> Crinolines were the flounced nylon and net petticoats worn in the 1950s and 1960s to poof out skirts.



clothing or accessories are listed: satin ribbons, cotton sox, Bata<sup>55</sup> shoes, Book of Common Prayer,<sup>56</sup> satin-cotton confirmation dress climaxing with “White/Soul” (Philip, “V” lines 1-12). Philip’s critique of racist religion is clear. The accursed African body cannot be changed but the depraved African soul can be made “White”. Similar echoes lurk behind Ferland’s image of the little black girl’s “starched face”. The cyclamen girl subverts the very point of the ceremony in white, however, as she lies and speaks a promise in the Christian Trinity. Hers is belief “in and on/the ‘the triune majesty’ - /sunshine/black skin &/doubt/(in that order)” (Philip, “V” lines 21-26).

The poem “Transfiguration” speaks not of the full unveiling of Jesus’s divinity to the disciples (Matt. 17:1-9), but to the transformation of the cyclamen girl into a woman, represented by “the ceremony of White”. In this case, it refers to the sacrament of Confirmation, in which Catholics enter full Christian maturity. Part of the ritual of Confirmation involves the confirmand answering “present and ready” as her name is called. Philip plays on that name calling out to salute the stolen and silenced ancestresses of the cyclamen girl by calling out the names of female goddesses from her African and Indigenous past. Even “Ave Maria”<sup>57</sup> and Aphrodite<sup>58</sup> are remembered as part of the past that has shaped her. Philip “deconstructively inserts Catholic and Anglican liturgy alongside initiatory invocations to Greek and West African divinities, in a collection that re-works New-World African female identity (that of a slave on an eighteenth-century sugar plantation) in a more impressionistic, less

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<sup>55</sup> Bata was a very popular shoe brand in the Caribbean in the 1960 and 1970s. It was founded in the Moravian town of Zlin, in what is now the Czech Republic. Its popularity in countries like Jamaica, which had its own experiment with democratic socialism, may have been related to its social welfare experiment. It combined efficiency with experiments in collectivism and profit-sharing. The company built employee housing, schools, shops, hospitals and recreation facilities.

<sup>56</sup> This indicates that this is an Anglican not a Roman Catholic Confirmation ceremony. They are very similar in rite and meaning, however.

<sup>57</sup> Ava Marie/Ava/Marie are girls’ names in the Caribbean, which allude to the Virgin Mary.

<sup>58</sup> Enslaved people were often given names from the Greek and Roman classics. See examples discussed of the enslaved families on the former Mona and Papine Estates, Suzanne Francis Brown, *Mona, Past and Present: The History and Heritage of the Mona Campus, University of the West Indies*. (Kingston, Jamaica, 2004). Also, Suzanne Francis Brown, “Finding Families within the Communities Enslaved on the Mona and Papine Estates, 1817-1832,” *Caribbean Quarterly*. 51 (2005).

narrative-governed and multivocal way”.<sup>59</sup> Importantly, this newly initiated Christian cyclamen girl, whose “fleeting childhood/Passed like the blood/Of her first menses/Quick and painful” (Philip, “T” lines 18-21) must be named.

Beyond the actual photo, “Black girl white dress” represents Black female sexuality as it has been repressed and mis-represented by Christianity and male patriarchy, beginning with the experience of enslavement and continuing into post-emancipation. Perched precariously on the edge of full-fledged womanhood, this cyclamen girl is a danger to her family honor with her “secrets of sweetness” in the face of the complexities of sexuality in the Caribbean.<sup>60</sup> She must become “a skilled trapezist” as she swings “between/the code of Victoria - /no sex before marriage/no love after/and/the code of mama-/”now you’s a young lady/you can press your hair” (Philip, “TC” lines 10-17). Victoria represents the “learning about sin”, which the Church purity culture teaches, and Mama represents the cultural practices that seek to erase African characteristics such as tightly coiled hair that is often straightened as a mark of entry into womanhood, explicitly rejecting Africa.

## **(On)Stained Dresses - Towards a Conclusion**

Christianity has been the dominant religion for many people in the Caribbean since the coming of missionary colonialism. The legacy of missionary colonialism includes ways of thinking and acting that have been interwoven into the very fabric of Caribbean life and culture.<sup>61</sup> This legacy includes sacralized misogynoir that dictates Afro-Caribbean women’s status in sacred as well as so-called secular spaces. The warped versions of Afro-Caribbean female sexuality engendered are captured and critiqued in the poetry of the three Caribbean women poets: Ferland, Rahim, and Philip. Through presentations of a white dress (and other white accessories) in the sacred sacramental spaces of Church, these women reject the traditional white dress and its meanings imposed on a girl, representing Afro-Caribbean women and girls. The white dress, whether yellowed with age or bridal in newness, is stark against her black skin, highlighting the sinfulness and

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<sup>59</sup> Collier, “At the gates of culture,” 247.

<sup>60</sup> Boyce Davies, “Secrets of Sweetness”.

<sup>61</sup> Shaw and Escala, “Latin America and the Caribbean”.

impurity put upon her by the missionary colonizer.<sup>62</sup> Each white dress is different – baptismal, First Communion, Confirmation – speaking to the different stages of growth into Christian maturity, changing times, and the perceived innocence (or lack thereof) of the girl. Even as they reflect the constraint of sacred misogynoir, these dresses intervene by calling into question and rejecting negative somatic descriptions.

Ferland, Rahim, and Philip express the potential for the performative body practices and critical perspectives of the Jamaican (and Trinidadian) Roman Catholic women, unveiled by Webster in her research on the “body as temple”. In so doing, they reject groundings of misogynoir through sacred acts of body reverence. Such acts of body reverence call women to deploy a bio-politics of sound, speech, and thought which refuses the silencing, belittling, or misrepresenting of the Afro-Caribbean female. In doing so, sacramental spaces can become places of affirmation that push back against taken-for-granted notions of Afro-Caribbean women’s inherent sexual sinfulness captured in “the lurking smell of early pregnancy” (Philip, “TC” line 22). It answers the call for the cyclamen girl to “return [...] / To her own” (Philip, “Epiphany” lines 9-10).

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<sup>62</sup> Seedek, “The African Female Body”.

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