

For Such a Time as This? #UsToo

Representations of Sexual Trafficking, Collective Trauma, and Horror in the Book of Esther

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that the book of Esther is a story which reflects sexual exploitation through trafficking and thus contributes to and expands sexual exploitation and trafficking discourses. Specifically, I examine the imagery of Vashti's deposition after she resists sexual exploitation, as well as the subsequent sexual trafficking of countless virgin girls (including Esther) by the Persian Empire. I focus on the Africana girls who are taken from Ethiopia and other African countries, as indicated by the description of King Ahasuerus's imperial rule "from India to Ethiopia" (Esth. 1:1). 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. By recognizing the conditions of sex trafficking in the book of Esther, we can also elucidate conditions that produce trafficking in our own contemporary contexts. I demonstrate how this narrative illuminates the traumatic and horrific experiences of the female collective and conveys the devastation, gruesomeness, and futility of their fates. This takes on particular significance in light of the traction and momentum that the #SayHerName movement has gained in recent years, as it sheds new light on the sheer ubiquity of sexual abuse and exploitation. Finally, I argue that the book of Esther should be considered as belonging to a genre of biblical horror. The narrative is one that describes and details gendered violence, exploitation, terror, and horror as the girls are kidnapped and displaced multiple times. After their initial displacement from their homes, they are shuffled from one harem, to the king's bedroom, to another harem, while their bodies become object/abject for the king's sexual pleasure.

Key Words

Esther; collective trauma; sexual trafficking; biblical horror; polyvocal Africana biblical interpretation; intersectionality

Towards a Theoretical Framework of Sexual Trafficking and Ethnicity

This article offers a theoretical and hermeneutical exploration of the intersections between sexual trafficking and ethnicity both in the book of Esther and in the experiences and histories of Africana¹ diasporized girls and women. Many biblical

¹ To clarify my use of the term Africana in this paper, Africana girls and women constitute the collective communities of girls and women located on the continent of Africa, and/or who descend

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 texts up, allowing interpreters to move past the tendency in other biblical critical methods to ignore oppressive ideologies embedded in the text. Polyvocality is a literary mode that is characterized by multiple and varied voices and/or perspectives (Chandler and Munday 2016), which can deepen, expand, and problematize single-axis gender analysis. It encourages diverse readings and interpretations of texts rather than a preferred dominant interpretation. Polyvocality is also spatial and layered: applied to the book of Esther, it welcomes reflection on the multiple spaces summoned and controlled in the narrative and on the multiple layers of subjugated, suppressed, and often silenced identities of those within the female collective. In other words, non-intersectional and non-polyvocal investigations of the text prevent readers from exploring the violence of sexual trafficking found therein. Interpreters may focus only on Esther, disregarding the significance of the other girls' ethnicity, and failing to recognize their capture and transportation to the king's harem as an act of sexual trafficking. Such interpretations of the book of Esther ignore the intersectional oppressions of gender, ethnicity, and social status experienced by the virgin girls, and thus echo the ways that Africana sexual abuse and trafficking are often erased or minimized in contemporary culture. The victims in this text are targeted because they represent a minoritized, colonized, ethnic group, because they are beautiful virgin women and girls, and because they embody a lower social status than the king. They are consequently trafficked into the king's palace and sexually exploited on the basis of these intersecting identities.

In this article, I therefore bring together Africana, postcolonial, and trauma theories to engage in an intersectional, polyvocal Africana interpretation 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 centre of the interpretative process. I investigate sexual trafficking in cultural, historical, and literary contexts to illustrate how it disproportionately impacts minority and minoritized groups. I understand the lives, stories, and histories of Africana girls and women as sacred texts, which are worthy of exploration and interpretation, and which have the capacity to provide 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 touch and fragment Africana girls and women. Specifically, I draw on the theories of intersectionality and polyvocality to highlight the fact that

from the continent, and/or who have been displaced from the continent through the transatlantic slave trade or voluntary migration.

the Africana girls in the book of Esther are oppressed by the convergence of their gendered, ethnic, and social identities.

Discrimination is a form of oppression that far too many Africana girls and women endure. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, Black women's race, gender, and class interact (or intersect) with each other, culminating in heightened forms of disadvantage and discrimination (1989, 140). Embedded within structural practices of power and struggles for power, discrimination is a weapon wielded by the dominant group against already vulnerable Black women, rendering them more susceptible to other forms of abuse. Crenshaw maintains that by failing to apply the lens of intersectionality to analyses of violence, we cannot adequately address the particular ways Black women are oppressed, subordinated, and discriminated against (1989, 140). Crenshaw endorses discarding single-axis frameworks that reflect "uncritical and disturbing acceptance of dominant ways of thinking about discrimination" (150) because they distort the multidimensionality of Black women's experience, lead to the theoretical, methodological, and practical erasure of Black women, and collapse Black women's experiences under the collective experiences of other ethnic women (139). Single-axis frameworks further fail to detail the "unique compoundedness of [Black women's] situation and the centrality of their experiences to larger classes of women and Blacks" (150). Instead, Crenshaw proffers a multi-axis, intersectional framework that privileges the complex lives and experiences of Black women whom she identifies as "multiply-burdened" (140). Placing Black women's lives and experiences as the starting point of theoretical analysis illuminates the intersections of race, class, and gender oppressions that sustain the multiple disadvantages faced by Black women (145). In addition, this positioning stresses that intersectional oppression is "greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (140).

Without reading the book of Esther through Crenshaw's intersectional lens, considering issues of gender, poverty, colonialism, and ethnicity as they are presented in the text, we may fail to identify the sexual exploitation and sexual trafficking of the Africana virgin girls mentioned in this biblical text. We may likewise fail to recognize the roles ethnicity, gender, and colonialism play in rendering some women particularly vulnerable to trafficking and abuse in both biblical and contemporary contexts. My discussion of the silenced Africana girls in this biblical narrative and of Africana girls and women in contemporary contexts illuminate how ethnicity, gender, and social status intersect with silence and invisibility, both in Esther discourses and later Africana history and memory. Intersectionality disrupts traditional social stratification, recognizes hybrid forms of social disadvantage, and provides an analytical sensitivity to how ethnicity, gender, and class are distinctive systems of subordination but collectively operate as overlapping oppressions for Africana girls and women. It gives voice to the specificity of Africana girls' and women's experiences, and the problems that result from their intersecting identities. Furthermore, intersectionality prevents the essentialization of Africana girls' and women's experiences and their conflation with the experiences of other gender or ethnic groups.

Polyvocality not only provides a glimpse into Africana female lives and experiences in the narrative world of Esther but it affords me, an Africana researcher and writer, the opportunity and space to reflect upon and express more

experientially how we Africana girls and women understand ourselves; how exploitation, displacement, marginality, colonial domination, and other traumatic events impact our identities, histories, and memories, as well as our relation to other people generally, and other women and colonial forces specifically. My scholarship raises the voices and representations of Africana women's experiences of sexual trafficking and trauma. This methodological move counters the theoretical invisibility and erasure of Africana girls and women, affording Africana female bodies visibility in an effort to break cycles of and silences around sexual trafficking. If we do not apply an intersectional lens to the book of Esther and contemporary sexual trafficking discourses, Africana girls and women are further rendered invisible, their historical, systemic, and cultural oppressions allowed to continue unchallenged.

Recognizing Sexual Trafficking in the Book of Esther

Many interpretations of the book of Esther focus primarily on the Jewish girl Hadassah (later renamed Esther) and on the plight of the Jewish people, even though the narrative reflects the experiences of multiple cultural and ethnic groups. Inasmuch as the story centres on its main character, Hadassah/Esther, it likewise reflects Africana girls' experiences of being gathered and transported from Ethiopia and other African territories to the king's harem in Susa. Many interpretations reflect incomplete assessments of sexual exploitation by focusing primarily on Vashti's and Esther's experiences of exploitation, reflecting the interpreter's privileging of these female characters over the many other girls and women alluded to in the text.

The opening chapter of Esther introduces problematic gendered relationships between the male and female characters, as Vashti is deposed for resisting the king's demands that she display herself before his drunken party guests (Esth. 1:10-12). Dorothy Bea Akoto (2010) notes that the vanity of the Persian court is portrayed by the opening festivities, which last for seven days and culminate in King Ahasuerus's divorce of Queen Vashti after she refuses to satisfy the male egocentric agenda. Akoto, who considers issues of gender and power in the text, asserts that it addresses existential issues of identity, survival, and cultural preservation by a Diaspora minority against an imperial majority. She maintains that the story illuminates how patriarchy is entrenched through royal disputes in which queens and women are used to achieve male agendas; she therefore argues that the book must be read through a gender-sensitive lens (2010, 270). This gendered conflict is one wherein the personal is intertwined with the corporate and the political, as evidenced in the speech given to the king by Memucan, a nobleman of Persia and Medea:

“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 behaviour will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath!” (Esth. 1:16-18)²

² All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

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 to the king's officials and to "all the people," including the men gathered at the king's party and also those who live throughout his provinces. Second, as evoked by Memucan, the male characters fear that one woman's actions will inspire resistance among the entire female collective, which will then become a problem for the entire male collective. Thus, Memucan frames this singular instance of resistance, not just as a personal issue between the king and queen, but as a public and political matter that will affect the relationship between *all* husbands and wives. He suggests that the king write an edict stating, "All women will give honour to their husbands, high and low alike" (Esth. 1:20). The king's edict, however, is worded slightly differently from that which Memucan suggests, demanding that "every man should be master in his own house" (1:22). It is not only Vashti who is to be affected by this edict. Rather, collective action is to be taken that prevents any other woman from following the queen's disobedient lead. Memucan's speech illuminates that gendered relationships are not only significant within the Esther narrative but drive its entire plot.

Vashti is thus 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 destabilizes the patriarchal order, disturbing its identity and power systems. Consequently, Vashti is deposed, abandoned, and degraded; she lacks support, solidarity, and comfort. A law is created and employed as a tool to reassert male control and dominance over the female collective after her refusal to comply with her husband's demands. The judicial sentencing, that "every man be master in his own household," also sends 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 institution of sexual trafficking in the subsequent chapter are imposed upon the female collective, articulating the huge 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 trope 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 the innumerable other brutal murders that occur throughout 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.

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, 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.” (Esth. 2:2b-4a)

Tsaurayi Mapfeka (2018, 86) notes that the decision to replace Queen Vashti with young virgin women through a comprehensive and empire-wide search demonstrates the empire’s desire to assert absolute imperial power, authority, and control over its female population. 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” (US Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report 2014*, 9). These processes are evoked in the book of Esther, although they are not always recognized as such by the reader. As Sarojini Nadar suggests, “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” (2012, 88-89). Moreover, it often goes unnoticed that this violence takes place over four years—from the time of the royal edict, when Ahasuerus had reigned for three years (Esth. 1:2) until his eventual marriage to Esther during the seventh year of his reign (2:16; see Nadar 2012, 87-88). 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, with the king’s 127 provinces spanning from India to Ethiopia (1:1). 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 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, and captivity 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.

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, and the victim (Beyer 2000, 308). 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 king’s provinces 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. The

interconnectedness of this abusive structure highlights that sexual trafficking—as a form of extraction and abuse—is an urgent topic of study in postcolonial and empire studies, as well as in biblical studies of the book of Esther.

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. For example, Michael Fox (1991) describes the king’s selection process of a new queen 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” (27; original italics). While Fox acknowledges here that the girls may not have come to Susa voluntarily, he downplays the violence inherent in the girls’ capture and their non-consensual participation in the ensuing “competition,” focusing instead on the honour that will eventually be bestowed upon the contest winner. To become Ahasuerus’s new queen, he suggests, is more desirable than the alternative of “a barren life of imprisonment in the discarded concubines’ seraglio” (28). Fox suggests that the real competition commences a year after the girls undergo cosmetic treatments, when they are judged on who can best “please” (28) or as Randall Bailey (2009, 237) phrases it, “sex,” the king. As Fox maintains, “Nothing but attractiveness to the king and sexual skills will, in this legendary account, determine who will become queen of Persia” (1991, 28).

Similar to Fox, Nicole 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” (2004, 71; original italics). 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 are 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 does seem 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 ... these 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 to lose a great deal” (2004, 73; original italics). Moreover, she 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 with the populace for his wives” (77).

Defining the exploitation of the virgin girls as a “beauty contest” ignores the elements of capture, captivity, and forced displacement which constitute trafficking

and ultimately prevent the recognition of such experiences as exploitative. As Carol Bechtel notes, this definition is highly misleading as contestants in beauty contests typically exercise volition (2001, 31). Bechtel also calls attention to the fact that, unlike contemporary beauty contest participants, the girls who are not chosen by Ahasuerus to be his new queen would have been unable to return home. The remaining girls become the king's concubines and stay secluded in his harem indefinitely. Therefore, once raped and exploited in the narrative, Africana girls are narratively silenced and erased. Sexual violence and exploitation begin and end with narrative and vocal silencing and suppression. The Africana 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. This type of silencing and invisibility enables sexual trafficking to survive and thrive, both in the biblical narrative and within contemporary contexts.

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

Collective trauma is experienced when groups have shared experiences of catastrophic events that lead to group members' collective suffering. The book of Esther contains depictions of considerable violence as its plot is laced with one horrific catastrophe after another. Read closely, this story can be understood to reflect the woundedness and torture of several collective groups, including women and girls, eunuchs, Diaspora Jews, and their enemies, who are variously confronted with displacement, subjection under imperial rule, the creation of hegemonic and sexist laws, and the threat of government-sanctioned violence and cultural and racial genocide. Intersectionality and polyvocality uncover yet another group in the text—Africana girls and women—who, as a collective, have been negatively stereotyped and sexually exploited within Old Testament texts and throughout history.³ The book's traumatic imagery reflects multiple and persistent sufferings, emphasizing the terror that is woven throughout both the biblical story and Africana girls' and women's histories. Specifically, for the Africana girls who are a subset of the wider collective of female characters in the book, the traumatic process is facilitated through legalized gender oppression, the sexual violence of trafficking, and other violations of their agency at the hands of the king and his empire. As evidenced in Vashti's treatment, hostile ideologies and stereotypes about women are promoted within the narrative, framing their customs, practices, and bodies as threatening, transgressive, intolerable, and in need of subjugation and erasure. As a result of Vashti's open resistance to patriarchy and imperial domination, the punishment for the entire imperial female collective and the solution to preventing further female resistance is the enactment of empire-wide sexual trafficking.

The treatment of both Vashti and Esther make clear that women's agency and status will always be limited, especially under colonial control. Both women are queens and thus have high socio-economic status; however, neither is able to prevent sexual exploitation nor overtly resist their own oppression, or that of the other girls and women encountered in this text. Both women speak, although Vashti's precise words are not recorded—the narrator simply tells us that she “refused to come at the

³ Hagar is another example of an Africana woman who experiences enslavement and sexual exploitation in the biblical texts. For further discussion, see West (1995); Tillman, Bryant-Davis, Smith, and Marks (2010); White (1997); Kempadoo (2001); Junior (2019).

king's command" (Esth. 1:12). The Africana girls, however, are utterly silent. There is no hint in the text of their verbal resistance to being transported to Susa, placed in the royal harem, and systematically raped by the king. Nor do we hear the protests of these girls' families or other members of their communities concerning their capture, displacement, and sexual violation. As royal concubines, the girls are socially located beneath the queen and have even less agency and autonomy than she. The suffering specifically endured by the Africana girls in the biblical text shatters social bonds, destabilizes their sense of safety, and isolates them, both at individual and collective levels. This treatment of girls and women is despicable, yet not surprising; empires always necessitate violence in both ancient and contemporary contexts, as illustrated in both the first two chapters of Esther and, more recently, in the history of Africana girls and women before, during, and following the transatlantic slave trade, or *Maafa*.⁴

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 (Farley 2006; Leibowitz 2017). Yet silence can still be very disruptive. If only we would listen to the quiet screams and 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, gendered, and social locations of the virgin girls; the details of their capture, displacement, and sexual trafficking, and their 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 narrator's silencing of such protest is 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 present soundless shrieks and inaudible stutters of throbbing hostility, paralysing trauma, and abject 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 the characters of the virgin girls, such as

⁴ *Maafa* is a term coined by Marimba Ani (1994) 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 resonance with the term *Shoah*, often used to denote the Jewish Holocaust.

“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 today depend on, capitalize 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. This process is thus amply illustrated in both the narrative world of Esther and in contemporary sexual trafficking discourse.

Thus, while the language of sexual abuse is present in the text, it is only alluded to in the vaguest of terms. Moreover, the sexualized language and imagery in the narrative is connected to social and geographical settings, as well as movements between these settings. Of major importance, the language and imagery used here suggests that women and girls in African countries are sexually exploitable and can be transported unproblematically to the palaces and bedrooms of patriarchal and colonizing subjects. As such, Africana bodies become highly sexualized ethnic bodies under the tutelage of patriarchy and empire. In other words, my reading of the book of Esther 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. Moreover, the international transporting and gathering of displaced and exiled Africana female bodies ensures questions of gender, ethnicity, and class become paramount in the intersection of patriarchy and empire. In fact, racialized notions of gender, social status, and sexuality are foundational to colonial enterprises.

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.⁵ This observation may help us to understand why Africa was at the centre of and foundational for the Maafa. Colonial forces perceived and promoted ideologies that dark-skinned ethnic girls and women, especially those of African descent, are not fully human; that the rape of Africana girls and women is not a criminal act; and that Africana girls and women do not need to be protected from colonial oppression. These ideologies highlight not only the ethnic hierarchical relationships and abuses of power in colonial and sexual trafficking institutions but also the affinity of colonizers from powerful “majority” ethnic groups to target, exploit, and justify the sexualized abuse of minoritized and colonized ethnic bodies.

Although the book of Esther is a story written and constructed centuries ago, it has resonances with the cultural traumas of more contemporary African diasporic

⁵ According to the US Department of Justice report (2011) that tracked trafficking incidents in the United States from 2008–2010, 62 percent of confirmed sex trafficking victims were African American. See also D’Arrigo (2019); Butler (2015a; 2015b); Chong (2014); Phillips (2015); Bocinski (2017); Owens (2019).

subjects at the hands of imperial powers. From the sixteenth through to the nineteenth centuries, many African people were captured, transported, and harboured on plantations throughout the Diaspora during the Maafa. Specifically, girls and women were raped and impregnated against their wills, and could be beaten and killed if they attempted to resist. The experiences of capture, forced displacement, imperial domination, ethnic suppression, and sexual trafficking are markedly shared by African women and girls in the book of Esther and throughout history. The words in this biblical text capture and represent the cultural memories, histories, and materialized pain of African women and girls across time and space, from the Persian empire to subsequent slave trade routes and beyond. When read alongside the experiences of African women and girls trafficked during the slave trade, the words in the story of Esther are “made flesh,” in a sense, and dwell amongst us, teaching us about African materiality, sexuality, and spirituality. We can see how colonization and sexualized trauma mark the bodies, identities, memories, and histories of African diasporic peoples in general, and women and girls specifically. As victims of social fragmentation and displacement, their bodies become more susceptible to physical, sexual, and psychological violation.⁶

In his discussion of cultural trauma, Alexander proposes that for collective cultural traumas to emerge, social crises must become cultural crises resulting in acute discomfort at the core of the collectivity’s sense of identity (2013, 15). African American identity emerged in contexts marked by colonialism, capture, displacement from native homelands, sexual exploitation, genocide, ethnic suppression, and a host of other physical, sexual, and spiritual abuses. There are gaps in our histories, memories, and genealogical records due to this erasure of contact with our ancestors, ancestral narratives, memories, and identities. Enslavement, displacement, genocide, and sexual exploitation constitute cultural crises that not only resulted in acute discomfort but in cultural fragmentation, identity dislocation, social disintegration, religious and ideological decentralization, and enduring trepidation. Bryant-Davis et al. describe the socio-historical context of African American women’s sexual assaults, noting the connection with slavery:

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

⁶ Caroline Blyth (2017) posits that the femme fatale is a cultural icon who is traditionally conceptualized as a deadly, alluring presence. Blyth explores how the biblical character Delilah is interpreted as a foreign female with insatiable sexual appetites and a propensity to do violence in both biblical interpretations and pop culture. Marked as the “other,” the femme fatale is considered an abnormal outsider with the intent to do harm to those considered the “insider.” This definition of the femme fatale parallels the ways African women and girls have been conceptualized throughout history: as seductive, licentious, dangerous, animalistic, and perverse. Consequently, colonizers rationalize and justify sexualized violence against them. See also McClintock (2013) on the hypersexualization of foreign women in colonial discourse. For more on the sexualized stereotyping particularly of African women and girls, see West (1995); Harris-Perry (2013); Bravo (2012).

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. (2010, 62)

These historical accounts illuminate that African women and girls are increasingly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and other intersecting oppressions due to the convergence of colonialism, racism, sexism, and poverty. The exploitation and oppression consequently lead to mental, emotional, physical, and psychosocial trauma.

In the opening chapters of *Esther*, the social crisis presented by the male collective as a threat to their power and identity ultimately becomes a cultural crisis for the African female collective. Similarly, 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. Furthermore, 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, African girls who are victims of sexual trafficking have been charged with killing their abusers and traffickers. Cyntoia Brown, Chrystal Kizer, and Alexis Martin are three women whose experiences testify to the continued trafficking of African diasporic girls and women and the forfeiture of justice imposed on them by the legal system. Similar to Vashti's fate, we see that by speaking out and protecting themselves, these women have become criminalized and "put away," leaving them even more 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 with later narratives of slavery and suffering during the *Maafa*, we are left with a narrative of sexualized violence that shouts out the ongoing and undisputable damage to the integrity of African 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 African women and girls.

Biblical Horror: A More Fitting Genre for the Book of Esther?

The word "horror" comes from the Latin *horrere/orur* and the French *error*, meaning "to tremble" or "to shudder." In English, "horror" is defined as intense feelings of fear, shock, disgust, or dismay (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 393). Recently, biblical scholars have begun to analyse how biblical literature reflects the language, imagery, and storylines of the horror genre, specifically contemporary horror films. Although many films that reflect biblical stories shed light on obsessive violence, such as the violent acts of Noah, the killings and plagues during the exodus, and the brutal death of Jesus (see McGeough 2016), much of the scholarship on the Bible and horror focuses on how the Bible is featured in and impacts on contemporary horror films (e.g. Graybill 2017; Kalmanofsky 2008; Wiggins 2018). In this section, I do not consider the horror as it is depicted or alluded to in films based on the biblical story.

Rather, I discuss the “horror” presented in the book of Esther as a means of highlighting the outrageous violence perpetrated against the female collective in this narrative.

While many readers and commentators note the excessive violence that is threatened and enacted throughout Esther, this biblical book has typically been categorized as belonging to various genres including historical narrative, Persian court chronicle, Diaspora novel, hero’s tale, romance tale, and carnival tale. These classifications orient the readers’ focus toward certain aspects of the text, while distracting them from seeing the sexual exploitation and trauma presented in the first two chapters. Thus, understanding the genre of Esther as carnivalesque, 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 skilfully ... The author is not praising the Persian Court but laughing at it” (1977, 173). Yet, as Duran asks, “What’s so damn funny?” (2003, 74). There is *nothing* funny about sexual abuse and exploitation. Readers often miss, minimize, or ignore the representation and horror of trafficking in this text, by searching for humour, farce, exaggerations, and other literary devices, which would serve to critique the empire and patriarchal power structures. Yet placing this biblical book within the genre of biblical horror can help to identify the violence, exploitation, and trafficking as a widespread trauma that all the female characters (Esther, Vashti, and the virgin girls from India to Ethiopia) endure.

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. According to Tina Pippin, horror has an uncanny edge, presenting what is familiar to us in unfamiliar ways that incite feelings of dread and fear (2002, 80; citing Freud 1958, 219). Pippin asserts that horror narratives allow us to express our worse fears and (at times) our hopes in literary form, so that we can share our anxieties with others (2002, 79). Moreover, through horror, “present fears and oppressions are visible in the vivid descriptions of the monstrous and its destruction” (80). Read as horror, the book of Esther thus reveals and exposes the uncanny yet familiar phenomenon of sexual trafficking in an unfamiliar way, leaving readers disturbed and unsettled.

Amy Kalmanofsky defines biblical horror as a “composite emotional response to a threatening entity or situation comprising the emotions of fear and shame” (2008, 75). 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 involves the emotional response to the impact of the threatening entity’s actions (2008, 75). 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 (75-76). We see this process at play in the book of Esther. The virgin girls endure exploitation and abuse at the hands of the Persian empire, which represents the threatening entity. Not only does the king encroach upon the girls’ bodies, but the empire induces fear by separating the girls from their families, preparing them for sexual abuse, and continuing to isolate them from their families

and communities even after Esther is chosen to replace Vashti as queen. While details are lacking about the girls' emotional responses to being displaced and raped, readers know that in patriarchal societies, girls and women were 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 but also a means of terrifying and intimidating their families in order to minimize their resistance to imperial rule. As likewise highlighted by the royal edict that followed Vashti's deposition, "The devastated serve as terrifying reminders for the observers of their own vulnerability and as warnings that they too could suffer a shameful fate" (76).

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 (Graybill 2017). 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 African 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 form of holding cell—until such a time as the king calls her back again "by name" (2:14). Fox argues that these holding cells would have created an oppressively regulated atmosphere—they are essentially a prison, where the girls are held until they are once again called to the king's chamber (1991, 35). Clearly, these girls are deemed to have no inherent worth, called by their name *only* if the king desires them. Like Vashti, they are expendable in the interests of the empire. Thus, Vashti and the virgin girls become the personification of abject horror, through whom we, the audience, experience our own sense of horror.⁷

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 (Graybill 2017, 51). 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 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. 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 these female bodies.

⁷ For examples of the abjection of virgin female bodies in horror texts and films see Angela Carter's short story "Bluebeard" in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), and the films *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.

Moreover, as Graybill (2017, 51) has observed, the horror genre often identifies the opened female body as a means of negating and negotiating masculinity. Graybill points out that disturbances to and crises of hegemonic masculinity are intricately linked to the openness of the body (64-65). Stated differently, torture, or the opening of the female body, becomes a way to speak about and around masculinity and masculine performance (52). For Graybill, the openness and torture of female bodies reveal that masculinity is contested, problematized, and renegotiated in complicated—if not violent and frightening—ways (58). Masculinity is “unstable, rage-filled, impotent, acting with and acted upon by violence” (68). 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 two opening chapters.

A final feature of horror that is worth noting is its ability to evoke psychological responses within its audiences. As Kalmanofsky notes, “audience reactions are essential to the genre of horror as horror is identified by the reactions it elicits from the audience” (2008, 61). In other words, a distinctive feature of the horror genre is that, through its portrayals of fright, disgust, and terror, it simultaneously produces these same responses among those consuming it. Noel Carroll (1990, 18) describes this 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. And certainly, each time I read the text of Esther, its graphic imagery of repeated sexual exploitation terrifies me, especially when I consider the impact of this text in light of recent trends in trafficking, and its effects on abused and trafficked girls and women who may be searching their sacred scriptures for consolation and hope. The female collective in Esther are tormented girls and women who experience terror and pain, and who are helpless, overwhelmed, and immobilized by a seemingly unpreventable system embedded within patriarchal and colonial culture. Girls and women, across time and contexts, who read the text of Esther can do nothing but anticipate their woundedness and the inevitable terror that ensues. Their pain is 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 represent 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.

The experience of the Africana girls in the book of Esther is representative of the experiences of sexual exploitation faced by a larger collective of Africana girls and women throughout history. 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. By reading Esther through the lens of horror, the terror within this text is highlighted, urging readers to recognize the deep injustices perpetrated against female bodies in the name of empire, patriarchy, and colonialism, and to challenge these, both within the narrative itself and in our own contemporary contexts.

Conclusion

In this article, I have applied the theories of intersectionality and polyvocality to my reading of Esther in order to highlight the role that intersecting identities and oppressions play in sexual trafficking. In the opening chapters of this narrative, we learn that the Persian king and his imperial forces targeted Africana and other foreign girls for sexual trafficking. In its depiction 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. 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. Drawing on the hermeneutics of collective trauma and horror to read Esther thus allows for an ethically responsible and wholistic interpretation of the biblical text, which helps us identify sexual trafficking in ancient and contemporary contexts. Such a reading also galvanizes us towards collective action that critiques gender hierarchies, patriarchy, and colonialism, and works to dismantle sexual trafficking systems around the world.

The US-based campaign #SayHerName aims to raise awareness of the names and stories of Black women and girls who have been victimized by racist police violence, and to offer support to their families.⁸ 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. Alas, though, we cannot, because they remain nameless. But, as 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. We *can* 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.

⁸ For further details, see the official #SayHerName website <http://aapf.org/shn-campaign>.

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