Womanism Rising

Edited by LAYLI MAPARYAN



UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS PRESS
Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield

Publication of this book was supported by funding from Wellesley College and the Wellesley Centers for Women.

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1 2 3 4 5 C P 5 4 3 2 1
♾ This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Maparyan, Layli, editor.
Title: Womanism rising / edited by Layli Maparyan.
Description: Urbana : University of Illinois Press, [2025] | Series: Transformations: womanist, feminist, and indigenous studies | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024023888 (print) | LCCN 2024023889 (ebook) | ISBN 9780252046230 (hardcover ; alk. paper) | ISBN 9780252088315 (paperback ; alk. paper) | ISBN 9780252047503 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Womanism.
Classification: LCC HQ1197 .W658 2025 (print) | LCC HQ1197 (ebook) | DDC 305.48/896073--dc23/eng/20240729
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024023888
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024023889

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If We Bury the Ratchet, We Bury Black Women

A Womanist Analysis of *Married to Medicine*

HEIDI R. LEWIS

> It comes (to me) from the word "womanish," a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children.
>
> —Alice Walker, *Coming Apart* (1979)

I was eleven years old the first time I heard anyone discuss abortion at length, thanks to MTV's *The Real World: California*. Tamisha "Tami" Akbar—a 23-year-old Black woman who would later star on VH1's *Basketball Wives* as Tami Roman—spoke about her abortion on camera, even allowing the camera crew to follow her to the clinic. I didn't ask adults in my family about this because I was scared and embarrassed. So, it was invaluable that I had learned that little bit about Tami's experiences when my father took me to terminate a pregnancy five years later and I was a sophomore in high school. It was more than a decade later when I learned that two of my close family members had also had abortions when they were teens. Knowledge of their experiences would have been helpful earlier, as it later served to alleviate the shame and embarrassment I wrestled with as a pregnant teen. Coming of age during the explosion of documentary-style reality television, then, has proven its value to young Black women like me who saw—often for the first time—women like us openly struggling to navigate situations that might otherwise be shrouded in secrecy and shame.

I would argue that it is, in part, because of this "airing of dirty laundry" that Black women featured on these shows have been labeled "ratchet" in popular discourse. As I point out in "Exhuming the Ratchet before It's Buried,"[1] early iterations of "ratchet," beginning when rapper Hurricane Chris released his debut album *51/50 Ratchet* (2007), described someone partying and having a good time. Over time, however, the term has evolved into a derogatory one leveled

mostly at Black women who are theorized as unintelligent, loud, and tacky. One of the most popular exemplifications of this is the "Ratchet Girl Anthem" (2012), a song written and performed by comedians Emmanuel and Phillip Hudson in order to "show some women that the way that they carry themselves isn't always cute."[2] Along these lines, the song pokes fun at women who judge people based on whether or not they can afford certain material things, who receive government assistance and spend inordinate amounts of money on clothing and hair products, and who are hypersexual. Their video has garnered over 45 million views, and was eventually repackaged as an official video for BET. I want to mention, though, that while this popular use of "ratchet" may be relatively new, the theory behind it is not. That is, "ratchet" can be best understood as a combination of two controlling images examined by Patricia Hill Collins, namely, Jezebel ("a racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality"[3]) and Sapphire ("angry, menacing, and unintelligent"[4]). Collins argues that these "controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life."[5] "Ratchet," then, often becomes a way for audiences to employ racist heteropatriarchal tactics to control and subjugate Black women.

Still, while Tami Roman and other Black women[6] have been bringing the "ratchet" to national television for over twenty years, the backlash they receive seems to be more intense than ever—likely because of the prevalence of social media and the increasing number and popularity of shows featuring predominantly Black casts. For instance, earlier this year, VH1 made the decision to cancel *Sorority Sisters* in response to online protests. Due to depictions of Black sorority sisters on the show—referred to as "combative, unsisterly and ratchet"[7] by Sophia A. Nelson—Alpha Kappa Alpha suspended two of its members, and Delta Sigma Theta expelled five. Similarly, Michaela Angela Davis launched the "Bury the Ratchet" campaign at Spelman College in 2012 to "get the spotlight off the ratchetness and on the successful women in Atlanta."[8] After rethinking Hazel Carby's "policing of Black women's bodies"[9] theory (the ways Black women's bodies are policed by the folks who control the dominant culture) and Darlene Clark Hine's "culture of dissemblance"[10] theory (the ways Black women police *our own* bodies in attempts to self-protect *against* those aforementioned folks), I came to the conclusion that either-or dichotomies (i.e., "ratchet" or not) are especially harmful, because they erase many Black women from the conversation.[11] Likewise, Brittney Cooper declares, "We have to think about how the embrace of ratchetness is simultaneously a dismissal of respectability, a kind of intuitive understanding of all the ways that respectability as a political project has failed Black women and continues to disallow the access that we have been taught to think it will give."[12] In this way, anti-ratchet discourse perpetuates oppressive expectations for Black women that restrain Black women's subjectivities, particularly those, named or unnamed, that fall outside

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norms of "respectability."[13] This happens because existing readings of so-called "ratchet" Black women seem to be initiated by the following question: "How are (constructions of) these women harming Black communities?" Alternatively, I conduct a more nuanced and complex reading harmoniously situated within Black feminism and womanism by beginning with the question: "How might (constructions of) these women be advantageous to Black communities?" As a result, analyses of "ratchet" Black women on reality TV starting from this point have the potential to illuminate challenges afflicting Black communities that are absent in other mainstream media spaces and in the academy. More specifically, I conduct an analysis of Bravo's *Married to Medicine* with the intention of advancing Black feminist and womanist theories and politics regarding Black reproduction in a way that creates a space for families to negotiate challenges that may arise during family planning.

Black feminists have long problematized reproductive theories and politics. For instance, Angela Y. Davis problematizes white feminist theories and politics concerning birth control when she writes, "More and more, it was assumed within birth control circles that poor women, Black and immigrant alike, had a 'moral' obligation to restrict the size of their families. What was demanded as a 'right' for the privileged came to be interpreted as a 'duty' for the poor."[14] Black feminists have also been critical of Black men who theorize birth control as always already genocidal. For example, the Mount Vernon/New Rochelle (MV/NR) group—which consisted of Patricia Haden, Sue Randolph, Patricia Robinson, and others—recognized that despite "genocidal motives," birth control granted Black women "freedom to fight genocide of Black women and children [as well as] Black men who still want to use and exploit us."[15] Further, contemporary Black feminists have also addressed tensions among Black women regarding family planning. For example, Joan Morgan writes, "I feel like the career bitch from hell every time I hear my girlfriends say they would gladly abandon careers to be full-time mothers and housewives."[16] While Morgan briefly addresses the idea that heterosexual Black women should more deliberately consider involving their partners in family planning (challenging the simplistic "my body, my decision" theory), further theorizing must consider this more thoroughly, as I will explicate through my analysis.

I would also argue that the most effective Black reproductive politics must be inextricably linked to the womanist commitment to the vernacular and the communitarian. As Layli Maparyan (then Phillips) writes, "Vernacular identifies womanism with 'the everyday'—everyday people and everyday life."[17] She defines the communitarian as "the fact that womanism views commonweal as the goal of social change" with commonweal being "the state of collective well-being."[18] This makes reality TV featuring "ratchet" Black woman an optimal site for analysis because of its impact and focus on Black women from various walks of life culturally, socioeconomically, and geographically, among other factors.

Also, because of my communitarian focus on Black families, this analysis is not situated at the institutional level, because as Maparyan claims, "Womanist activism does not focus on the confrontation of institutional structures so much as on the shaping of thought processes and relationships."[19] Hence, while I am concerned with media and popular culture as institutions, I am *primarily* concerned with challenging existing thought pertaining to "ratchet" Black women so as to ascertain how they can help us advance Black feminist and womanist thinking about reproduction. I also want to note that I do understand that reality television cannot and should not serve as a stand-in for narratives individuals and communities express in other spaces, such as biographies or every day conversations, because it is a mediated construction that is both edited and dramatized. Still, as Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share point out, audiences "are often not aware that they are being educated and constructed by media culture, as its pedagogy is frequently invisible and unconscious." Hence, my purpose here is to deconstruct the ways in which reality television traffics in Black women's narratives in order to excavate *readings* that can advance Black feminist and womanist thinking. This is particularly critical, given the popularity of these narratives.

Married to Medicine, which debuted on the Bravo network in March 2013, is particularly significant for this analysis, given its popularity. The premiere episode garnered nearly 1.9 million viewers, while season two premiered to 2.4 million viewers. Season five—the most recent season, at this writing—premiered on November 5, 2017, to 1.48 million viewers. While its audience has been steadily declining—down to .84 million viewers for the most recent episode of the season (episode ten)—the significance of the series is also critical because of its focus on Black reproduction.[20] More specifically, I examine the tension that arises because Quadriyyah "Quad" (Webb) Lunceford does not want to have children, while her husband Gregory does. This is important, because as Patricia Hill Collins argues, "We must distinguish what has been said about subordinated groups in the dominant discourse, and what such groups might say about themselves if given the opportunity."[21] Hence, an analysis of "ratchet" Black women intended to subvert existing theories and to provoke epistemological shifts must recognize—as much as possible—that these women are already speaking for themselves.

An initial reading of *Married to Medicine* would likely incline viewers to interpret Quad as "ratchet," in part, because of her sassiness, as well as her infatuation with fashion and style. As her biography on the *Bravo* website points out, she "burst on the scene and stole our hearts with her witty sharp tongue comebacks and fun loving personality. She's always the life of the party and a self-proclaimed socialite [. . .] Always dressed to impress and doing it for the Gods, Quad is a true fashionista!"[22] In addition, Quad has also found herself in or very close to drama with her fellow cast members, which has, at times, become violent. I point this out because I do not want to romanticize "ratchet"

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as if it is all good all of the time. On the one hand, I, like Michaela Angela Davis, find myself heartbroken when I see Black women engaged in violence. On the other hand, if we *bury* the "ratchet," Quad might be one of the first women to go, and with her would go the potential to advance Black reproductive theories and politics.[23]

Conversely, Black feminist and womanist analyses would consider how Quad's "ratchet" positionality, at least in part, allows her to challenge racist and heteropatriarchal theories about the relationship between Black women and motherhood, which manifests vis-à-vis pressure for her to have a baby less than a year after marrying her husband Gregory. In a confessional segment during the fifth episode of the first season, Quad exclaims, "I hear this—I guarantee you—about fifteen times a day. And if it's not from Mariah, it's from Gregory. If it's not from Gregory, it's from Jackie. It's like, ugh, stop already!" Black feminists have problematized these politics because of the ways in which they combat racism directed at Black men at the expense of Black women's needs and desires. As Patricia Haden, Donna Middleton, and Patricia Robinson write, "The woman's body, which receives, hosts, and gives forth the future of the species, is inherently powerful. Her body and power had to be overthrown and suppressed when the male felt overwhelmed by this power and responded with the desperate need to take power from the woman."[24] Hence, while some of Quad's castmates, including her husband, interpret her attention to her desires and needs as self-absorbed and vain, this attention can best be understood as resistance that allows her to fully develop her whole self before beginning the journey into motherhood.

This resistance is also fueled by Quad's unapologetic commitment to independence, which challenges oppressive theories about motherhood as well as marriage. During the tenth episode of season two, Gregory and Quad argue intensely about her developing puppy couture clothing line, "Picture Perfect Pups." Gregory refers to the project as self-indulgent, telling her, "There are people who don't have time to go out here and buy dresses for dogs and pamper them all day long [. . .] It's not playtime in the world, okay? It may be playtime in your world, but other people have real issues, and you know it." Quad explains her entrepreneurial interests by telling her husband that she does not want her identity to be solely and inextricably linked to his professional accomplishments. She tells him, "I'm just not happy sitting here being your doctor's wife. That's not really my style." In many ways, then, Quad's "ratchetness" becomes the vehicle through which she can demand the time, space, and energy needed to develop her desired self. As Frances Beale notes, "A woman who stays at home caring for children and the house often leads an extremely sterile existence. She must lead her entire life as a satellite to her mate. He goes out into society and brings back a little piece of the world for her."[25] Similarly, Quad's resistance here is also illustrative of womanism's focus on diarchy, which, as Maparyan points out, is committed to existential equality, harmony, and collaboration between men and

women.[26] Additionally, it is significant to note that Quad also organizes a "Pups in Paris" event during the sixth episode of season one to bring dog-lovers together to raise money for Canine Companions for Independence, a foundation that supports people with disabilities. In this way, Quad also manifests her love for dogs in a way that helps people in need, which is neither entirely selfish nor frivolous.

A womanist framework would also consider how Quad's theories about motherhood challenge anthropocentric[27] theories about motherhood, as well as theories that privilege biological childbirth. Often, Quad makes it clear that she regards herself as a mother due to her relationship with her puppies Khloe and Kar'rie. She says, "I'm not ready for a child yet. So, Kar'rie and Khloe are my babies." In this manner, Maparyan writes, "The very things that an actual biological mother does with her child or children to facilitate wellbeing and optimal development can be done by people of any sex, gender, or sexual orientation with people biologically related to them or not (or even nonhuman beings) on behalf of individuals, specific groups, all humanity, or all creation."[28] This is also meaningful for Quad beyond her own struggles, as she encourages her castmate Jackie to more seriously regard her role as a mother to her stepdaughter Kursten, telling her during the season one reunion, "But you *are* a mother." This kind of theorizing also allows us to affirm the many ways Black women contribute to the health and wellbeing of communities within and outside of immediate, extended, and biological families.

For Quad, this theorizing also manifests in the dialogue that she engages with Gregory, even when those conversations become contentious. Maparyan defines womanist dialogue as "the means by which people express and establish both connection and individuality. Dialogue permits negotiation, reveals standpoint, realizes existential equality, and shapes social reality. Dialogue is the locale where both tension and connection can be present simultaneously; it is the site for both struggle and love."[29] During the third episode of season two, when Quad tries to speak with Gregory about *The Five Love Languages* by Gary D. Chapman, he jokes around, singing along with his acoustic guitar about wanting to have a baby. She responds, during confessional, "The fact that I feel like he's minimizing what I'm saying, it really hurts deep inside. I mean, if something is important to me, then it should be equally important to him. We are one. There's no more Gregory and then Quad or Quad and then Gregory. It's one, and I don't think he's getting that right now." Similarly, Gregory also expresses concern that Quad often does not take seriously his desires to have children. Along these lines, during the eleventh episode of season two, Gregory remarks in confessional, "I feel like Quad does not take my desire for a baby seriously at all. She seems to think I'm gonna be able to procreate at eighty." I would attribute their feelings here to the idea that they both feel they are being coerced by the other. As Kimala Price argues, "Women must be able to freely exercise their [reproductive] rights without coercion."[30] I would agree, adding that we must advance our theories

so that—through Black feminist and womanist thinking—people can discern between coercion and compromise. Quad and Gregory are able to realize this discernment when they attend a couples' retreat with their castmates, discussing their issues in conversations with other couples, which fosters their willingness to learn from each other and from their friends. As a result, Gregory suggests that they not use prescription birth control, continuing to use other methods of pregnancy prevention, and that they wait three months before revisiting the conversation. Quad agrees, especially since Gregory commits to supporting "Picture Perfect Pups." Later, Gregory claims in confessional, "I think that everything is gonna happen. I think that your business is gonna get up and running, and everything is gonna come out like gangbusters, and you're gonna be able to do what you wanna do. I'm gonna be able to get what I wanna get. I'm not really worried about it, to tell you the truth." Quad replies, "Well, good. I'm happy to hear that you're not worried about it. We're making progress." I do not want to suggest that Quad and Gregory's dialogic methods are ideal or perfect, especially since these are not dialogic qualities that womanist thinking requires. Rather, I want to suggest that their dialogue has the potential to inspire more Black feminist and womanist discussions about Black reproductive theories and politics in ways that encourage families to attend to individuality *and* community.

Almost eleven years ago, my husband and I found ourselves in a similar situation. When we learned I was pregnant with our first child, I was in the first year of my master's degree program, and he was about to enter Barber College. Still, we were excited to have our first baby. However, I became pregnant again when our son was ten months old. I had just earned my master's, and my husband was not yet finished with Barber College. Hence, I had different feelings from what I had experienced in the first pregnancy, since I knew I would soon pursue a PhD and he would soon open his first business. My immediate thought was to have an abortion, which was in stark contrast to his. All I could think was, "How are we going to talk about this? How are we going to compromise?" Even though we were both scared and anxious, we decided to face our fears and address each other's questions and concerns. We thought and talked about the future, and decided that we would welcome our new baby into our family. And even though he wanted a lot of children at one point, we also decided that two would be enough for us. It helped that older people who had been in similar situations shared the challenges and advantages that we would likely experience. It would have also been helpful if Black feminist and womanist writing had been there to help guide me through this particular time in my life, as it had when I had to confront white supremacy in the workplace, misogyny in Black communities, imperialism and colonialism in scholarship, and so many other times before. I also realize, though, that this intervention is part of my charge as a writer working within this tradition. Anyone who has ever been in my shoes, pays attention to Quad and Gregory or Rasheeda and Kirk Frost on VH1's *Love & Hip Hop:*

Atlanta, or to Tamar Braxton and Vincent Herbert on WE TV's *Tamar & Vince* knows that the work of helping Black families to plan their futures collectively is critical for our survival and for our thriving.

Notes

1. Heidi R. Lewis, "Exhuming the Ratchet before It's Buried."
2. Emmanuel Hudson and Phillip Hudson, "Ratchet Girl Anthem (SHE RATCHEEET!)."
3. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 83.
4. Ibid, 70.
5. Ibid, 69.
6. This list includes, but is not limited to, Kameelah Phillips (*The Real World: Boston*, 1997), Coral Smith (*The Real World: Back to New York*, 2001), Irulan Wilson (*The Real World: Las Vegas*, 2002), Omarosa Manigault (*The Apprentice*, 2004), and Tanisha Thomas (*Bad Girls Club*, 2007).
7. Sophia A. Nelson, "As Sorors, We Were Right to Protest."
8. Jazmine Denise Rogers, "Michaela Angela Davis Is Coming for Reality TV Producers."
9. Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," 746.
10. Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 912.
11. Lewis, "Exhuming the Ratchet."
12. Brittney Cooper, "(Un)Clutching My Mother's Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability."
13. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*.
14. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*, 210.
15. M. Rivka Polatnick, "Diversity in Women's Liberation Ideology," 686.
16. Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 160.
17. Layli Phillips, ed., *The Womanist Reader*, xxiv.
18. Ibid., xxv.
19. Ibid., xxx.
20. While *Married to Medicine* is currently in its tenth season, my analysis is focused primarily on the first three seasons.
21. Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center," 175.
22. Bravo Media LLC, "Quad Webb-Lunceford."
23. Another story line concerns similar aspects of Black reproduction in that another cast member, Jacqueline "Jackie" Walters, wants to have children, while her husband Curtis Walters does not. However, this analysis is focused on Quad, because Jackie would not be considered "ratchet," according to popular and academic discourse.
24. Patricia Haden, Donna Middleton, and Patricia Robinson, "A Historical and Critical Essay for Black Women," 180.
25. Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy," 112.
26. Maparyan in discussion with the author, October 2015.
27. Regarding humankind as the central or most important element of existence.
28. Layli Maparyan, *The Womanist Idea*, 62.
29. Phillips, *Womanist Reader*, xxvii.
30. Kamala Price, "What is Reproductive Justice?," 43.

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