Personified Preaching: Black Feminist Sermonic Practice In Literature And Music

Melanie R. Hill
University of Pennsylvania, melhill@sas.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations
Part of the Music Commons, and the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/2884

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/2884
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Personified Preaching: Black Feminist Sermonic Practice In Literature And Music

Abstract
ABSTRACT

PERSONIFIED PREACHING: BLACK FEMINIST SERMONIC PRACTICE IN LITERATURE AND MUSIC

Melanie R. Hill
Dr. Herman Beavers
Dr. Salamishah Tillet

What does it mean when African-American culture and black rhetoric are gendered in preacherly performance discourse? This dissertation is an interdisciplinary analysis of the presence of black women preachers in both twentieth and twenty-first century African-American literature, music, and religion. Though scholarship in African-American literary and cultural studies has examined the importance of voice in black women's cultural production, the cultural figure of the black woman preacher in literature, music, and the pulpit remains unstudied as a focus of current scholarship. Building upon the work that has been done by scholars in sound studies, this dissertation uses music to make an interdisciplinary intervention among the intersections of African-American literary criticism, music, and religious studies. Using the sermon as a literary genre, this project seeks to undertake a close examination of the black woman preacher in all three realms of discursive practice as a way of troubling the static boundary separating the sacred and the secular, sanctified and sacrreligious. By looking at the exegetical, eschatological, and pedagogical elements of black feminist sermonic practice, I investigate how performance of the sermon is personified through the black woman preacher's emphasis on musicality, expressivity, thematic relevance, and improvisatory phrasing.

By formulating a methodology that seeks to think critically about how black feminist sermonic practice occurs in the intersections of black feminism/womanism and oral performativity in both sermon and song, I work to help readers think differently about how the sermonic space empowers the black woman preacherly figure to utilize the sermon to speak on issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Black feminist sermonic practice looks at the heteroglossic functions of black women preachers in literature and music in order to show how they use their sermons to create a "chromatic" space that amalgamates both sermon and song. Further, this dissertation proves black feminist sermonic practice seeks to foreground notions of value, transformation, healing, and communal empowerment.

Degree Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Graduate Group
English

This dissertation is available at ScholarlyCommons: https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/2884
PERSONIFIED PREACHING: BLACK FEMINIST SERMONIC PRACTICE IN LITERATURE AND MUSIC

Melanie Rachelle Hill

A DISSERTATION

in

English

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2018

Supervisor of Dissertation
Herman Beavers
Professor of English and Africana Studies

Co-Supervisor of Dissertation
Salamishah Tillet
Associate Professor of English and Africana Studies

Graduate Group Chairperson
David Eng, Professor of English

Dissertation Committee:
Herman Beavers, Professor of English and Africana Studies
Salamishah Tillet, Associate Professor of English and Africana Studies
Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., Professor of Music
PERSONIFIED PREACHING: BLACK FEMINIST SERMONIC PRACTICE IN LITERATURE AND MUSIC

COPYRIGHT

2018

Melanie R. Hill
For my grandmothers, Ella Mae Whitmore, Willie Mae Hill, and beautiful mother, Sharon L. Whitmore Hill.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I give all glory and honor to God for His abundant grace in my life and for seeing me through my doctoral journey. I thank my mother, Sharon, who has been my constant guiding light and source of continuous support in my life and educational journey. I’m also thankful for the strong women in my life who have encouraged me: Elaine Little and Mildred Ellison.

I thank my committee members, Dr. Herman Beavers, Dr. Salamishah Tillet, and Dr. Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr. for their advice and support. I also want to acknowledge the black women preachers I have interviewed for this dissertation, some of whose names I have listed here, who represent pillars of strength and whose diligence in ministry and social justice has not gone unnoticed: Bishop Dr. Barbara M. Amos, Dr. Sharon S. Riley, Bishop Dr. Vashti M. McKenzie, Bishop Audrey F. Bronson, Dr. Renee McKenzie, Pastor Brenda Billingy, Bishop Dr. Millicent Hunter, Bishop Rosette Coney, Reverend Dr. Crystal J. Lucky, and Reverend Dr. Leslie D. Callahan.
ABSTRACT

PERSONIFIED PREACHING: BLACK FEMINIST SERMONIC PRACTICE IN LITERATURE AND MUSIC

Melanie R. Hill

Dr. Herman Beavers
Dr. Salamishah Tillet

What does it mean when African-American culture and black rhetoric are gendered in preacherly performance discourse? This dissertation is an interdisciplinary analysis of the presence of black women preachers in both twentieth and twenty-first century African-American literature, music, and religion. Though scholarship in African-American literary and cultural studies has examined the importance of voice in black women’s cultural production, the cultural figure of the black woman preacher in literature, music, and the pulpit remains unstudied as a focus of current scholarship. Building upon the work that has been done by scholars in sound studies, this dissertation uses music to make an interdisciplinary intervention among the intersections of African-American literary criticism, music, and religious studies. Using the sermon as a literary genre, this project seeks to undertake a close examination of the black woman preacher in all three realms of discursive practice as a way of troubling the static boundary separating the sacred and the secular, sanctified and sacreligious. By looking at the exegetical, eschatological, and pedagogical elements of black feminist sermonic practice, I investigate how performance of the sermon is personified through the black woman
preacher’s emphasis on musicality, expressivity, thematic relevance, and improvisatory phrasing.

By formulating a methodology that seeks to think critically about how black feminist sermonic practice occurs in the intersections of black feminism/womanism and oral performativity in both sermon and song, I work to help readers think differently about how the sermonic space empowers the black woman preacherly figure to utilize the sermon to speak on issues of race, class, gender and sexuality. Black feminist sermonic practice looks at the heteroglossic functions of black women preachers in literature and music in order to show how they use their sermons to create a “chromatic” space that amalgamates both sermon and song. Further, this dissertation proves black feminist sermonic practice seeks to foreground notions of value, transformation, healing, and communal empowerment.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
<td>IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>VIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE

“Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms...Ah been waitin’ a long time, Janie, but nothin’ Ah been through ain’t too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed.”

-Nanny in Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937)

“There are some things that cross all sacred texts: caring for the vulnerable, love of neighbor as love of self. At a time when those basic principles are under assault, all faiths must come together, not in uniformity, but in unity around what we all hold sacred.”

-Reverend Traci Blackmon (2017)

The second epigraph above is a quote from Reverend Traci Blackmon, senior pastor of Christ the King Church in Florissant, Missouri and executive minister of justice and witness ministries of the United Church of Christ, several weeks after pusillanimous white Nazis came in droves to the University of Virginia’s campus, shouting inglorious epithets. White supremacists planned a meeting in Charlottesville and with diminutive, flaming tiki torches flooded the University’s grounds and surrounding areas. Proximal to UVA’s Grounds, Reverend Blackmon led an interfaith service Friday evening, August 11th, at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Charlottesville where clergymen, clergywomen, and scholars alike sang hymns and songs, preparing hearts for what awaited them outside St. Paul’s doors. In an article written by Elizabeth Adetiba in In These Times, Adetiba interviews Blackmon on her Charlottesville experience. At a time when the faces of male preachers, male clergy, and in particular black male preachers are synonymous with social justice movements, it is the countenance of Reverend Traci Blackmon that covers the sites of the Charlottesville protest against white supremacy. Pictured with Reverend
Dr. William J. Barber, minister, professor, activist, and North Carolina’s NAACP chapter president adjacent to her, Blackmon stands at the center of the image—a telling assertion of the changing face of preachers in civil rights platforms. Blackmon tells Adetiba, “I see it as the death rattle of white supremacy—not the death rattle of white people, but the death rattle of white power.” Blackmon’s assertion connects to Scripture in the battle against spirit, not flesh, and power, not people; Ephesians 6:12 says, “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.”

Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie, the 117th Bishop and the first female Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, stood as the face of a national campaign after the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2012. With billboards posted of her donned in a gray hoodie, she became one of the first black preachers in general and the first black woman preacher in particular to represent in word and in deed on a national platform the domestic terror of black and brown bodies killed at the hands of police. In the late twentieth century and now twenty-first century, there is a rise of black women preachers in the pulpit becoming synonymous with civil rights and social justice movements. Writing on the experiences of pastors like Blackmon and McKenzie as activist preachers in social justice, witnessing Blackmon as a black woman preacher become the face of the Charlottesville movement to counter white nationalism at an institution that I call my alma mater, the University of Virginia, and growing up under two black women preachers, Bishop Dr. Barbara M. Amos and Dr. Sharon S. Riley who themselves defined in the Pentecostal church what it meant to match Scripture with justice and principle with purpose all connect the intricacies of my dissertation, personally and professionally.
My aim in this dissertation is not only to examine black women preachers in literature and music, but I endeavor to analyze and evince the impact of the sermon as a literary genre and also as social, political, and cultural work. I read the sermon as an evolving social text where music interweaves the chromatic spaces that words may not reach, filling those fissures and creating a trajectory where both sermon and song amalgamate in the black woman preacher’s stance on social justice.

In the beginning of “Of the Faith of Our Fathers”, DuBois describes his experience in a Negro church of the South. The frenzied fortissimo sound of praise coupled with a pianissimo “holy hush” reflects the church experience that is characteristic of black ecclesia. Continuing in detail his encounter with the black church of the South, DuBois recounts his experience between sound and word, song and sermon, naming the black preacher as a massive figure whose surging sermon matches the undulation of his body. Using the life of the slave as a backdrop for the charismatic expressions often found in black churches, DuBois names three characteristics of black religion: “The Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy.”

The Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a ‘boss’, an intriguer, an idealist,—all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, gave him his preëminence, and helps him maintain it.”
The black preacher figure did not just arise arbitrarily; rather, the black preacher and under him the black church, rose from a social atmosphere not founded in America. According to DuBois, the Priest or Medicine-Man of the plantation (one who had his roots in Africa) found his duty as,

“...the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of wrong, and the one who rudely but picturesquely expressed the longing, disappointment, and resentment of a stolen and oppressed people. Thus, as bard, physician, judge, and priest, within the narrow limits allowed by the slave system, rose the Negro preacher, and under him the first Afro-American institution, the Negro church.” 7

Through DuBois’s writings, I get the sense that examining the sermon as literary genre and the song of the sermon authenticates the Negro religion as “...not only a vital part of the history of the Negro in America, but no uninteresting part of American history.” 8 If the “black sermon is the mother’s milk of African-American discourse” 9, it is necessary, rather vital, to investigate the nuances of the sermon as a genre in literature.

In Henry Louis Gates’s Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism, he explores the use of language or black vernacular in the African-American literary canon, using the vernacular as a site of cultural memory. Asserting black literature as “double-voiced” in which multiple texts speak to each other, Gates proposes a metaphor for the black literary tradition as “the trope of the talking book.” 10 Gates reaches back to James Gronniosaw’s slave narrative of the late 18th century and other narratives ranging into the 19th century to prove the concept of similar metaphorical themes and ideas shared across certain texts. In this project, I propose that
there are two other metaphorical sites of exploration within the black literary tradition in both sermon and song, illustrating the intersections of literature, music, and religion. For the purposes of this dissertation, I want to extend Gates’s labeling of the black literary tradition further and examine the trope of the singing book and the trope of the sermonic book.

In Personified Preaching, I aim to show preaching not as an aside through which the literary critique and observation of the sermonic in black literature is often seen, but I intend to evince the sermonic in literature and music as a necessary element by which we as scholars continue to develop our understanding of the beautiful complexities of the black literary canon. The art of preaching and the performative elements that accompany the black preaching style are illustrated in this project as a way to understand the function of the sermonic in literature and sound within the sermon through the black woman’s voice to be read as sites of social and cultural memory. In addition to analyzing the impact of the sermon in literature, music, and religion, I term black feminist sermonic practice (BFSP) to demonstrate how black women preachers in particular utilize their social activist preaching platforms to produce agency not only in their own congregations and following but also in the larger community.

Black feminist sermonic practice counters the deeply-entrenched hegemonic structures of racism, sexism, and classism that make women of color and particularly the voices of black women invisible within the church. The goal of black feminist sermonic practice is to fight against white hegemony and create sermonic spaces for the voices of the just to be heard. How is black feminist sermonic practice different from simply black feminism? The difference is that this dissertation looks at how black women preachers in
the pulpit—in those traditional sermonic spaces—create those same spaces with their sermons outside of the church. The very same mode of healing for black women that occurs inside of the church should be the very same mode that reaches black women outside of the church—a sermonic balm—healing speech that concerns the needs of the black woman. However, the point of contention arrives where the spaces that black women look to for healing and restoration inside the church are not there. In fact, the spaces within the church become the very same spaces they, in the end, have to constantly fight against to prove their worth. The manner in which black women create sermonic spaces of healing and restoration outside of the church becomes the new mode of resistance.

Black feminist sermonic practice is both a tradition and a practice. It is a tradition that is passed down from one generation of black women preachers to another, but it is also a practice that continues to develop, move, and find new avenues of healing. Black feminist sermonic practice acts as a balm to situations and circumstances where the voice of the community on issues of abuse, violence, killing of black and brown bodies at the hands of the police are not heard. Black feminist sermonic practice salvifically tunes the ear of the oppressor toward justice.

The use of BFSP counters the deeply-entrenched hegemonic structures of racism, sexism, and classism. The difference between BFSP and black feminism is that the black woman preacher creates this mode of healing within and outside of the church. In black feminist sermonic practice, instead of one woman being the lone voice against prejudice, black women preachers wholly constitute the microphone that amplifies the voices of the voiceless, carrying those around her to a place of rest, freedom, and release.
Using music, this project analyzes the performance, performativity, and performative elements of *black feminist sermonic practice*. There are many discourses on the orality of the black male preacher, yet there is very little scholarship in literary studies on the ways in which black women’s sermons empower black femininity and the black community. In addition to black women preachers, I investigate black women musicians as preachers by examining their performances of their songs as sermons and the manner in which their performance, wittingly or unwittingly, manifests the black church tradition. 

*Personified Preaching* asks: 1) How does the black woman preacher bring freedom and empowerment to black womanhood through her sermons? 2) How is the black woman preacher represented in all three realms of discursive discourse: literature, music, and the pulpit? 3) How does the black woman preacher’s sermons transform and transgress the ways in which society characterizes black femininity? 4) What are the ways in which the black woman preacher in the pulpit and the black woman preacher figure in music turns her sermon into song and her song into a sermon? 5) How are the black homiletical preaching traditions in sermons also characterized in song?

While asking these questions, I coin the term *personified preaching* to emphasize the ways in which the black woman preacher exegetes her sermon eschatologically with intersecting themes of death and resurrection. In this project, I argue that the black woman preacher’s delivery of her sermon inspirits the bodies of her congregation while revitalizing her own body. Through this lens, I am interested in the compelling ways in which the black woman preacher’s sermons—her words, her books, her songs—become personified, giving life to those listening to her delivery. In this project, I am re-reading twentieth and twenty-first century black music compositions as sermons alongside
passages that represent sermons in African-American literature. This study examines the relationship between the black woman preacher in novels and the practices of music, using works from James Baldwin and other writers who illustrate the strong literary presence of the black woman preacher’s oral and corporeal performance through the delivery of the sermon.

According to scholar, sociologist and civil rights activist, W.E.B. DuBois, “the Preacher is the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil.”12 In the early part of the twentieth century in *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois examines the black preacher figure. Black preaching and the black church have been a fundamental part of black life since the 1600s.13 Black preaching and the black church have served as realms of leadership and authority that black people as slaves did not have externally but could themselves occupy within the space of the church.14 The space of the black church made the words and the oral performativity of the preacher visible in a period where black people and everything that characterized them were deemed invisible. The preacher figure is not a monolith, for the figure itself contains many complexities and variances that add significance to not only the preacher figure itself but also to the manner in which the preached Word is delivered.

DuBois describes the black preacher figure at length in, *The Souls of Black Folk*, but what remains to be seen in this canonical work produced in the early twentieth century is an articulation of the black woman preacher. Given textual evidence that DuBois only speaks of black preacher figures as men, how can we reimagine DuBois’s words as the black preacher figure being the most unique personality on American soil with respect to the black woman? What sorts of nuances and varied possibilities about the
black woman herself speak to her position as a preacher, the epitome of moral authority? As scholars, it is incumbent upon us to look past the “Spiritual Strivings” DuBoisian lens that we obviously see pertaining to the black male preacher and begin to re-envisage the black woman through a new perspective away from the margins that examine the modes of transfiguration among black women through sermon and song in and out of the pulpit.

In *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*, Martha Simmons and Frank Thomas mark the black religious experience as a utile implement or tool that has aided the black community in its right to pursue justice in the face of adversity and social oppression:

“...black religion and religious institutions...have been the most important and vital instruments of black survival and liberation during their four-hundred-year history in North America. In addition to being the spiritual foundation of the black community, these institutions have also been the initiators of freedom movements for black people.”

Both Simmons and Thomas emphasize the significant function of the sermonic in not only dance and music, but also in literature. The role of preaching in general but in social justice moments in particular is integral in black culture. Black preachers are not to be characterized monolithically; rather, each preacher has distinct characteristics in the homiletics tradition that set them apart as individuals. There is a long list of black preachers whose homiletical gifts and sermonic impact are always already extant. Black male preachers are normally characterized and are considered synonymous with civil rights and social activist preaching. Because “...there has not been enough said about the
genius of women in the black preaching tradition” and the ingenuity of black women preachers in the black preaching tradition has been overlooked, this project seeks to uncover the homiletical strokes of genius of the black woman preacher in literature, music, and religion.

By building upon the work that has been done by scholars in black literary criticism, folklore and performance studies, such as Gerald Davis, Meta DuEwa Jones, Katie Cannon, and Dolan Hubbard, my project examines the preacherly figures of Julia Miller and Margaret Alexander in literature to Aretha Franklin and Ms. Lauryn Hill in music, in order to show how they use their sermons to create a “chromatic” space that amalgamates both sermon and song. In chronological terms, I consider how the figure of the black woman preacher functioned in nineteenth-century American culture by historicizing her against the backdrop of American slavery. I also look at how songs performed outside of the pulpit could be constituted as sermons that enable the black woman singer to disrupt the hegemonic control the figure of the black male preacher exercises in spaces both inside and outside of the black church. By formulating a methodology that seeks to think critically about how “black feminist sermonic practice” occurs in the intersections of black feminism/womanism and oral performativity in both the sermon and song, I work to help readers think differently about how the sermonic space empowers the black woman preacherly figure to utilize the sermon to speak on issues of race, class, gender and sexuality that are pertinent in the lives of the black women inhabiting the pews. In addition, by foregrounding the black woman preacher’s emphasis on musicality, expressivity, thematic relevance, and improvisatory phrasing, I
hope to clarify the ways that the delivery of the sermon must be understood in terms of both content and context.

My first chapter, *Left-Handed Sermons in a Right-Handed World: Triple-Consciousness, Nineteenth-Century Black Women Preachers, and the Sermon as Literary Genre*, begins chronologically where I trace sermons delivered from late nineteenth and early twentieth-century preachers, Maria Stewart, Ida B. Robinson, and Pauli Murray. By presenting the sermon as a literary genre, introducing Maria Stewart’s sermon and juxtaposing Robinson’s sermon, *Can These Bones Live?* and Murray’s sermon, *Can These Bones Live Again?*, I analyze how the sermons of each woman are delivered along the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality in a post-antebellum historical context. Through the sermons of Stewart, Robinson, and Murray, I expand the familiar DuBoisian *double-consciousness* lens and with each preacher as black, an American and a woman, I structure the theoretical framework of these sermons around the concept of *triple-consciousness* with the sermons outlined in this chapter.19

In my second chapter, *Revolt of the Righteous: Preaching the Gospel Blues and Black Feminist Consciousness with Sermon and Song in James Baldwin’s The Amen Corner and Just Above My Head*, I turn to twentieth-century literature and examine the black woman preacher figures in James Baldwin’s first play, *The Amen Corner* (1954), and his last novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979). The task of this chapter is to examine the exegetical and eschatological approaches to Scriptures Margaret Alexander (*The Amen Corner*) and Julia Miller (*Just Above My Head*) both employ. In addition, I incorporate utile material I discovered from Baldwin’s personal archives at the Schomburg Center in New York to illustrate how he uses black women preacher figures in his novels to trouble
the sacred/secular static boundary. Both Baldwin’s play and novel work as catalysts for denoting the ways that black feminist sermonic practice promotes a sacred agenda in the church as its effects come to be reflected in secular spaces outside of the church, as well. By examining Margaret’s and Julia’s approaches to preaching in both play and novel, I invoke a blues sensibility into my readings of both characters’ sermons. Using the term I coin in this chapter as black feminist blues consciousness and building on what Dr. Otis Moss, III terms blue-note sensibility, I demonstrate the affective power blues music exerts in black feminist sermonic practice. By invoking this sensibility, I recognize the necessity to look beyond the conventional blues idiom of melancholic expression to look at how agency is found in the blue note.

In my third chapter, Tongues on Fire: The Black Woman Preacher as Potter, I use personal interviews I conducted with thirteen black women preachers from across the country to argue how the conversations and sermons of Bishop Dr. Barbara Amos, Dr. Sharon S. Riley, Bishop Dr. Vashti McKenzie, Bishop Audrey Bronson, Dr. Leslie Callahan, and other preachers speak to the politics of the black body. As a Gospel violinist, I use my music ear to hear the vocal modulations of the preacher to determine the symbolism of the sermonic narrative. In addition to investigating how these women use their sermons as modes of resistance, I analyze the homiletical delivery of each sermon and the manner in which active conversations and diligent sermonic strategy show communities, the nation, and the world that the voice of the black woman preacher matters in moments of social injustice.

My fourth and final chapter, Sweet Honey in the Rock, returns the impact of the sermon to contemporary times, re-imagining the sound of the sermon through the
performances of black women musicians, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Aretha Franklin, and Ms. Lauryn Hill. By analyzing Tharpe’s performances overseas, Franklin’s performances at the White House, and Ms. Lauryn Hill’s 2001 *MTV Unplugged* concert, I argue that the sermonic spaces these women create outside of the church is reminiscent of the five characteristics of the black preaching tradition. Each performance is *functional, festive, communal, radical, and climactic*. By examining particular performances of these artists in time, I analyze how each artist tears down the walls of race, gender, and class oppression through song.

Dr. D. Soyini Madison’s foreword in *Solo/Black/Woman* gives a depiction of the role of the black woman’s performance as she stands alone onstage. The entire text is an expansive approach to understanding the oral performance of the the black woman herself. The black woman extends the heart of her work as she amalgamates “hard truths” with “glorious triumphs”:

“...when a black woman stands onstage alone, she must become the consummate griot, the epic storyteller, the virtuosic alchemist letting loose blood, red, woman cycles of hard truth, unabashed literacies, and black female abjection. Like the griot, she is reader, singer, keeper, and destroyer of the record. She brushes the dust off the record book and opens it with purpose. This is a radical act of grand proportion and courage. She reclains the record, holds the book to her ear, and listens to the spectrum of its horrors as well as its glorious triumphs. She lifts the pages and translates the strained whispers from this timeworn record of misnamed black women and the nameless forgotten. ...She is an alchemist of translation and remembering. She blends her own sweet words into the record book.”

---

20

21
Like Miriam in the Old Testament in Scripture, these black women preachers lead their communities in song, dance, agency, and Word with courage and conviction. The black woman’s function as griot, storyteller, and alchemist onstage is the epitome of the black woman preacher in literature, music, and in the pulpit. She brings life to and personifies those things which are considered inanimate. Her left-handed sermons in a right-handed world combat race, class, and gender oppression. Using her social activist preaching and fervid tongue as a weapon against the fiery darts of hegemony, her words, like fire, breathe on the dissonant dry bones of oppression and abjection as she artfully wields the sermonic into mellifluous movement in and around the ears of her listeners.
CHAPTER 1

Left-Handed Sermons in a Right-Handed World: Triple-Consciousness, Nineteenth-Century Black Women Preachers, and the Sermon as Literary Genre

“It is not the color of the skin that makes the man, but it is the principles formed within the soul.”
-Maria Stewart, 1831

“...who is more deserving of admiration than the black woman, she who has borne the rigors of slavery, the deprivations consequent on a pauperized race, and the indignities heaped upon a weak and defenseless people. Yet she has suffered all with fortitude, and stands ever ready to help in the onward march to freedom and power. Be not discouraged black women of the world, but push forward, regardless of the lack of appreciation shown you. A race must be saved, a country must be redeemed...”
-Amy Jacques Garvey

“The hand of the Lord was on me, and He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.
He asked me, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’”
-Ezekiel 37:1 (NIV)

Long, black bones
Waving like angry spears
Under an ocean of years and water
Clamoring fronds uprising
In the cold and tropical sea

Grandmother bones
Father bones
Baby bones thrown overboard
Those who leaped
Who fell in the fight
They who saw the future
And ran screaming into time
The rot which could not go unburied
The troubled spirits swept clean
Away by the avenging storm
Lovers who held each other’s hand and went down singing

These African bones
That did not live
To tell their story
Are troubling the waters
Are asking the bone
Of their bone
Their present flesh
The black bones
Redbones
Half-white bones
Bleached bones
Brown bones
Their bones
Colored forever
In the dyes of history
About the unpoured libations
The monuments which do not rise
Not even in our imaginations
Are wondering how we came
To this place of forgetfulness
With not even a pile of stones
To mark the sacred plot.”

In 1980, Chicana feminist scholar and queer theorist Gloria Anzaldúa pens an open letter to third world women writers, analyzing the white man’s speech to women of color who aim to be agents of change in society: “The white man speaks: ‘Perhaps if you scrape the dark off of your face. Maybe if you bleach your bones. Stop speaking in tongues, stop writing left-handed. Don’t cultivate your colored skins nor tongues of fire if you want to make it in a right-handed world.’” Anzaldúa opens her letter to mujeres de color, addressing them first as sisters in faith writing. Immediately making a declaration against the dangers with which women of color are presented in the white male mainstream world and the white feminist world, Anzaldúa makes clear the wall of
invisibility that has traveled with women of color since their inception into the world.

Furthermore, there is an inherent “othering” of the writing and speech of mujeres de color that white society deems as “inaudible” or not worthy of hearing:

“Unlikely to be friends of people in high literary places, the beginning woman of color is invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women’s feminist world...Our speech, too is inaudible. We speak in tongues like the outcast and the insane.”

Anzaldúa speaks unambiguously from a “triple-consciousness” lens as she sees women of color through the eyes of white supremacy. Women of color are already made to think that they cannot be writers or use their pens to counter the gender barriers structured by a male-dominated society. She uses the thoughts and voice of the white man and what he thinks about women of color, thereby attempting to impede the intellectual progression and stability of la mujer de color.

As Anzaldúa continues to discuss women of color as they pertain to her argument, I find similarities in what Anzaldúa proposes also for black women preachers. I find that argument, though, unequivocally concerns black feminist discourse in general but black feminist sermonic discourse in particular. What I find significant in black feminist sermonic discourse and Anzaldúa’s letter to women of color and the double-consciousness argument is not only through the lens of white supremacy but also of gender inequities between black men and black women within the church from the late 19th century to the present. Although she uses her stance to write about women of color in general, I use Anzaldúa’s letter in this chapter to think about the particular ways her writing speaks to the position of the black woman preacher.
The black woman preacher is incessantly told, “There is no position for you in the church. You don’t have the intellectual capacity to write a sermon. The New Testament speaks against women preaching in the church, and women are told to keep silent. How do your sermons illustrate your ability to stand as a frontline civil rights activist?” Just as Anzaldúa is compelled to address the inequalities women of color in general experience, I am compelled in this chapter to ruminate the sermon as a literary genre and how black women preachers from the late 19th century to early-mid 20th century use their sermon writings to gain agency for themselves and future black women preachers.

The sermon as a literary genre is indeed indicative of the expansion of the African-American literary discourse. Spirituality and religion are crucial parts of the African American literary canon, but to flesh out the sermon itself as a distinct literary genre is a move that augments and adds to black feminist literary intellectual thought. There is a particular historiographical foundation that comes with analyzing the sermons of black women preachers who came before the Vashti McKenzie’s and Barbara Amos’s of the world.

When a woman is denied her right to preach, bones scatter. Every time society justifies the denigration of a woman, a piece of her body breaks, and bones make hollow sounds as they crash like splintered shards of glass, and disjointed, fragmented bones begin to fall by the wayside. Educator and activist Akasha Hull delivers the verses of “These Bones, These Bones” at the Middle Passage Monument Ceremony July 3, 1999 in New York City. After her recitation that year, a large headstone was lowered at the bottom of the Atlantic 265 miles off of the New York harbor to honor ancestors who died during the Middle Passage. Hull paints a lugubrious image of scattered, dry bones at the
bottom of the sea chilled by freezing temperatures. She paints an image of scattered bones that move, looking for a space to be whole and a space to call home. She reads rage, resistance, and acrimony in these bones. Bones without a home. Bones with no activity. Dead bones. Dry bones. *Frigid* bones.

All three stanzas mark the memory that Hull inculcates in the minds of her readers: Black bodies, tossed into the Atlantic with malice, and the sound of blood-curdling, fortissimo screams reduced within seconds to silence as a result of the ocean swallowing the last breath of oxygen they breathe as their lives are extinguished by the forceful plunge of their bodies into the sea. Hull recounts the generations of bones cast away into the sea—the bones of the grandmother, father, and crying child. The progression of this poem marks the movement of time that sees the bones of the ancestors trouble the diasporic waters, quickening the minds of future generations to create life from death, to produce creativity and allow their skill to be a bridge. It is the art of black people that becomes the markers of memory unto our ancestors. The narrative writings of black women tell the story of what was and what is, and the sermons of black women preachers prophesy of what should be and what is to come.

Ezekiel 37:1-9 in Scripture tells the story of the prophet Ezekiel who envisages himself in a dark valley filled with dry bones. The Lord asks Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” In this lugubrious valley, there are many scattered, broken bones. The Spirit of the Lord tells Ezekiel to speak to the dry, desolate bones and prophesy that they will live and have breath. After the prophesy of breath upon the bones goes forth, the bones become a great functioning soldiery:

“All He said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord God: ‘Come from the four winds, O Breath, and
breathe on these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.”

According to African-American religious leader, feminist, educator and civil rights activist Nannie Helen Burroughs, “The Negro woman ‘totes’ more water; grows more corn; picks more cotton; washes more clothes; cooks more meals; nurses more babies; mammies more Nordics; supports more churches; does more race uplifting; serves as mudsills for more climbers; takes more punishment; does more forgiving; gets less protection and appreciation than do the women in any other civilized group in the world. She has been the economic and social slave of mankind.” From Maria Stewart’s lectures to Sojourner Truth’s renowned speech in Akron, Ohio, “Ain’t I A Woman?”, these renowned figures addressed the invisibility of the black woman and through their sermons declared her to be visible. They fought for the right to be heard, noticed, not just observed and cast away.

Black feminist sermonic practice fights to dismantle forms of racial denigration and social oppression through the delivery of the sermon. How can the sermon as a literary genre be taken seriously without reaching back into the past and understanding the sermon for what it was to black women in both the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries? The aim of this chapter is to examine the sermons of Maria Stewart, Ida B. Robinson, and Pauli Murray through a “triple-consciousness” lens and what these writings signify for the future generation of black women. Stewart, Robinson, and Murray used their sermons to prophetically speak to a future generation of preachers, leaders, and teachers. Black women weren’t just fighting for the right to be heard in their homes; they were fighting for the right to be agents of change in sermonic spaces, as
well. Throughout the exegeses of these sermons, there is an inherent “triple-consciousness” that is read in each sermon through race, class, and gender. Borrowing from the DuBoisian term of double-consciousness where he evaluates the black man’s perception of himself through the eyes of white society, “triple-consciousness” is a critical framework through which I examine the sermons of Stewart, Robinson, and Murray.29 This chapter seeks to provide an in-depth analysis of the sermons of late 19th and early 20th-century black women preachers. These women “of the cloth” were not necessarily ordained in the conventional way. Some of the women who were ordained traditionally fought assiduously to gain a modicum of respect from fellow male clergy.

Mae G. Henderson in Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer’s Literary Tradition, presents Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogic and heteroglossic functions of language and how these languages interact with each other.30 It is my goal to show how the sermons of these women dialogically speak to the sermons of other black women preachers. As Bakhtin posits in his chapter, “Discourse in the Novel”, there is a centripetal and centrifugal force of language. I see the sermons of these women not only speaking inwardly (centripetal) to their own communities but I see their words forced out (centrifugal) into other communities concerning social justice:

“Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification intersect in the utterance. The utterance not only answers the requirements of its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act, but it answers the requirements of heteroglossia as well; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity.”31
This chapter examines the sermons of the black woman preacher through a “triple-consciousness” lens where the black woman preacher figure preaches resistance from her position of being black, an American, and a woman. In W.E.B. Du Bois’s 1903 published work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, he defines double-consciousness:

> “After the Egyptian and Indian…the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro…is born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, —an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

During the same year W.E.B. DuBois penned and published *The Souls of Black Folk*, another manuscript, *The Negro Church*, was also published in which DuBois gave a thorough sociological account of the black church while teaching at Atlanta University in 1903. In the same manner DuBois examines double-consciousness for black people as a whole, a similar framework, in this chapter, is used to investigate the skepticism black women preachers endured in the 19th century during slavery. What are the ways in which black women who were not deemed “evangelists” preached their stories through writing?

Charles Hamilton in “The Ministry During Slavery” provides a deep view into the lives of black male preachers during the antebellum period from Reverend Jupiter Hammon and Reverend Richard Allen to Reverend Nat Turner and Reverend Henry Highland Garnet. While he lauds the preaching strengths of these aforementioned preachers, there is an audible silence (visible absence) of any black woman abolitionists or even black women preachers from this chapter. While he presents the good deeds that
each of these men implemented during this tumultuous era in America, the deeds of the black woman go unnoticed. How is it that each of these preachers during the slave era fought against demise and subjugation without taking heed to the denigration of their own women? The purpose of this chapter is not only to acknowledge the successful implementations of black women preachers in civil rights during the later 19th century and early 20th century, but my aim is to also shed light on the sermons of these powerful figures. The sermons of the black male preacher are always the ones during the civil rights epoch that get acknowledged and written about; however, my aim in this chapter is to uncover the social justice consciousness of black women preachers in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The writings of the work of these tenacious women provide a foundation on which future generations of black women preachers now stand.

Chanta M. Haywood writes in her chapter, “The Act of Prophesying: Nineteenth-Century Black Women Preachers and Black Literary History”, women such as Julia A.J. Foote, Jarena Lee, Maria Stewart, and others were “historical agents”--they were tools of change whether they wrote down their intellectual opinions or not. Stewart, Robison and Murray were examples of historical agency. Haywood defines prophesying as “the appropriation of a perceived mandate from God to spread His word in order to advance a conscious or unconscious political agenda.” I take Haywood’s definition of the prophetic and Henderson’s dialogic theory and amalgamate the two to examine how Stewart, Robinson, and Murray’s sermons speak to each other before the sermonic written word of the black woman was even popular.

In her argument, Haywood makes clear that there are scholars such as Evelyn Higginbotham, Bettye Collier-Thomas and others who have made breakthroughs in their
discoveries of the religious work black women in particular have made in the 19th century. Haywood emphasizes the necessity of recognizing and acknowledging in scholarship the element of the prophetic in African-American literature. The notion of the prophetic is often bypassed by academicians, but it is the prophetic in literature that speaks to the path of the African-American narrative structure.  

“...we have paid little attention to how these women’s prophesying influenced their literary strategies and approaches. Further, an analysis of prophesying as a religious rhetoric and literary trope could lead to new possibilities for interpreting African American literature, containing undercurrents of religion and religious rhetoric. Even more, little has been written that connects the idea of prophesying to the development of African American literary history in general and African American women’s literary history in particular.”  

In black feminist sermonic practice, though, it is important to see how these women’s writings, their sermons, and their actions contribute to the sermon as a literary genre. As Pauli Murray asserts in her 1978 sermon Can These Bones Live Again?, preachers must deliver sermons that daily apply to the lives of their flock.

It is correct of Haywood to point out Jocelyn Moody’s book on 19th century black women and the significance of pointing out the impact of black women preachers and writers during this era. As Haywood mentions, black feminist scholars don’t give a lot of credence to religion in black literature, even though it’s everpresent. She makes this claim as a result of believing that the reason why many black feminist erudites may not pay much attention to the religious aspect of African American literature is because most black feminist scholars believe the black woman of the church “‘has been maligned in traditionally canonical literature and popular culture alike by African American critics as dissimilar as writers James Baldwin (in for example, The Amen Corner and If Beale
Street Could Talk) and Toni Morrison (The Bluest Eye), and comedians Flip Wilson and Martin Lawrence.” Neglecting the religious component of black literature especially inherent in black women’s writing will lend itself to scholars’ misreading or misunderstanding important theories in black literature. Haywood is not suggesting that every scholar of black women’s writing must “‘get religion’”, but she is suggesting that black feminist scholars not overlook religion in African-American women’s religious writing in particular and black literature in general.

In Patricia Hill Collins’ second edition of Black Feminist Thought, she makes clear the academic architecture of black feminism as a “social justice” project and black feminist thought being the intellectual center of this discourse. The second edition of Black Feminist Thought is more an expansion of Collins’ earlier thoughts on black feminist thought with the inclusion of sexuality in the intersectional discourse of race, gender, and class. How does black feminist thought contribute to this fourth chapter? In her outline of Black Feminist Thought, Collins presents six points of this intellectual center that contribute to the growing discourse on black women: the first point illustrates the dialectical relationship among black women. Collins defines this dialectical relationship as one that connects black women’s activism and oppression together. She sees black feminism as a necessary tool that dismantles the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality as they all relate to the black woman.

The function of black feminist sermonic practice not only catapults or positions the black woman in a realm of higher authority than just the churchwoman listening to the sermon in the pew, but this practice lends itself to the black woman being the “microphone” that disseminates and expands the voices of the voiceless. Dr. Leslie
Callahan speaks of this element of *black feminist sermonic practice* in that women who were once in positions of denigration and subjugation, fight with all their might to attain a higher position and once they get that position, it is incumbent upon them to affect change. The distinction with this tradition is that black women are affecting change with their sermons—both through oral performativity and through the written word.

The second element of black feminist thought is the connection of the black woman’s ideas and experiences. It is the differences within these ideas and experiences that makes this second point palpable. Collins quotes Katie Canon as writing, ““[T]hroughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed.”” Collins speaks to the diversity in responses to the same institutional problems that Black women face.

Collins’ third point of black feminist thought references black women’s dialogical relationships (dialectical focuses on oppression and activism) whereas the dialogical relationships focus on the “collective experiences and group knowledge” of black women. Based on these collective experiences, black women have garnered types of activism and justice results that in turn aim to empower her. Collins makes it important that the lived experience of the black woman must be tethered and tied to black feminist thought. When it doesn’t apply to the life of the black woman, then its position within black feminist thought is questioned. This particular point emphasizes what Pauli Murray explains as the connection between the sermon and the lived experience of the black woman and the black woman as preacher. Collins mentions black women scholars such
as Mary Church Terrell, Anna J. Cooper, Frances Ellen Watkins and others who used their intellectual work for true activism as the fourth point of black feminist thought.

The fifth element of black feminist thought is the ever-evolving nature of its actions and practice. Collins points out that so as the social conditions of this nation change, so must the epistemology and practices and ways of responding to said injustices change.

“In order for black feminist thought to operate effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic. Neither Black feminist thought as a critical social theory nor Black feminist practice can be static; as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them.”

The final element of black feminist thought focuses on the intellectual relationship this practice has with other social justice matters. The fifth element illustrates the connection between the written sermon and its delivery on social justice matters, which is what this chapter endeavors to prove.

**Left-Handed Sermons in a Right-Handed World**

**Maria Stewart**

Born Maria Miller in Hartford, Connecticut in 1803, Maria Stewart was known to be the first black woman to give a political speech that involved the foregrounding of black feminist intellectual thought, religion, and politics, encompassing the beginnings of black feminist sermonic practice. She was known to be the first to sermonize the politics of the black community in front of an audience consisting of both black and white men and women. Most scholars assert Stewart as the first black woman lecturer to give a “speech” in front of a mixed audience. Although Stewart’s speech revolved around
politics, it was the element of Scripture that separated her speech from the rest, eventually
developing into sermons. Stewart published in 1831 and lectured from 1831-1833.

Orphaned at five years old, Stewart would serve as an indentured servant under a
minister for the next ten years. Stewart married by 1826, but her husband’s death three
years later and white businessmen who stole James Stewart’s inheritance, left Stewart
destitute. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison started a newspaper entitled The Liberator. At
the time, Garrison was searching for a black woman writer to submit for publication.
Stewart’s first work in Garrison’s newspaper in 1831 was “Religion and the Pure
Principles of Morality--The Sure Foundation on Which we Must Build.” Scholar Marilyn
Richardson asserts, “Black women’s autobiography, as exemplified in Stewart’s sketch
might be ascribed another level of definition, indeed a triple consciousness, as she
demonstrates the creative struggle of a woman attempting to establish both a literary
voice and an historical mirror for her experience as ‘an American, a Negro,’ and a
woman.”

Indeed, Stewart like other black women preachers mount their sermons on race,
class, and gender in a triple-consciousness sphere. In the beginning of Stewart’s sermon,
she asserts the democratic principles upon which this nation was built: freedom, liberty,
and justice. Stewart cautions her community to not succumb to the thought of inferiority
white people have about black people. She challenges black people to prove to society
that the stereotypes associated with skin color are not the negative elements to which they
ascribe. Pulling from the eighth chapter of the Psalms, Stewart asserts God made “all men
free and equal.” Further, Stewart admonishes her readers that she stands firmly in the
faith, for the nation will never be united as one entity until the piety, morality, and virtue
are among its principles. With a sermonic clarion call, she commands the daughters of Africa to arise and awake. By using apostrophe in her speech to address virtue and its relation to the black woman, Stewart creates an efficacious framing of the recognition of intelligence by white counterparts: “O virtue! How sacred is thy name! How pure are thy principles! Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.” As Stewart admonishes her readers the principles of Scripture, she says that her heart’s prayer is that there would be a strong transformation and change among the people of this nation. She says that the minds of this nation’s people have for far too long been inundated in malevolence and ignorance and now is the time to reform. Stewart’s use of prosopopeia and inclination of wisdom to the minds of the people of this nation signifies a centripetal and centrifugal force with which Stewart writes.\textsuperscript{53} Stewart focuses her speech centripetally on the people of her race, but she also directs her speech out to the people whose bones are still dry:

“Our minds have too long grovelled in ignorance and sin. Come, let us incline our ears to wisdom, and apply our hearts to understanding; promote her, and she will exalt thee; she shall bring thee honor when thou dost embrace her. An ornament of grace shall she be to thy head, and a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee. Take fast hold of instruction, let her not go, keep her, for she is thy life.”

This is not an ordinary political speech; this is not even a speech at all but a sermon. Plain political speeches do not use the discourse of sin as a way of explaining the racial prejudices and injustices of a people. Stewart uses clear biblical language and scriptural references in her writings. This type of sermonic writing distinguished her from her counterparts. Stewart does not just invoke the political aspect of reformation and social justice and equal treatment under the law to her readers, but she also makes clear
that freedom can only come to her people when the yokes of subjugation and denigration are broken. These yokes are firm holds that have stunted the growth of this nation’s people for centuries. Stewart’s clarion call is to the people who will stand up for justice and rise for righteousness.

Resuscitating Dry Bones

Ida B. Robinson

Ida B. Robinson was born in 1891 in Hazelhurst, Georgia and became the first black woman preacher to officially start an organization called Mt. Sinai Holy Church. Mt. Sinai is an association that is known for officially ordaining women to be preachers from the 1920s to the present. After marrying Oliver Robinson in 1917 and moving to Philadelphia, Robinson joined the United Holy Church of America organization. She became elder and eventually pastor of Mount Olive Holy Temple Church in North Philadelphia. In 1925, Robinson was elected Bishop of Mount Sinai Holy Church. What was particularly distinct about this organization is that even though they had men hold offices and positions, the organization’s structure focused on the official ordination of women. I examine both Ida Robinson’s sermon, Can These Bones Live? and Pauli Murray’s Can These Bones Live Again? to look at similarities and differences between the two sermons and prove the prophesying breath of the black woman preacher breathes onto dry, scattered bones of death, thereby promoting healing, transformation, renewal, and deliverance with her sermons. How do the sermons of these black women preaching on the valley of dry bones produce air, oxygen, and whole bodies again?
Throughout the sermon, *Can These Bones Live?* Robinson strategically repeats, “Oh, ye dry bones, hear ye the word of the Lord, positioning not only herself but other women as the mouthpiece of God, justice, and reform. Her sermon concentrates on the function of the preacher with her flock, cautioning preachers to live holy lives. Using a tree as a metaphor for the church, Robinson labels pastors as the “true fruit of the vine.” Robinson cautions her listeners to not allow their bodies or “earthly tabernacles” to become annihilated dry bones.

This particular sermonic mantra contains an intrinsic multivocality or heteroglossia. In this sermon, it is the preacher’s tongue that represents a fiery flame to extinguish death and give life to lifeless bodies. This sermon is more didactic in nature in that it admonishes preachers of the Word to be “doers of the word” and act upon that Word they preach. As a black woman preaching from a triple consciousness lens, Robinson admonishes her listeners to be the “light of the gospel” breathing upon those dry bones that attempt to fragment the body of black women preachers. At the end of her sermon, Robinson asks, “Can These Bones Live Again?” Upon asking this question, I believe Robinson was speaking prophetically Pauli Murray’s sermon into existence. Not only can these bones live again, but they can live in many dimensions that give life to the black woman in particular.
**Freedom Dreams**

Pauli Murray—an attorney, author, civil rights activist, and ordained Episcopalian priest—born in 1910 was the first African-American to earn a Doctor of Juridicial Science (JSD) from Yale University Law School in 1965 with a dissertation entitled *Roots of the Racial Crisis: Prologue to Policy*. Prior to Yale, she enrolled at Howard University Law School as the only black woman in her law school class. After graduating from Howard, she applies to Harvard’s Law School graduate program in 1944. After she was rejected based upon her gender, she sued the University. After suing Harvard, Murray enrolls in University of California’s Boalt Hall Law School’s graduate program. She then enrolled in University of California Berkeley to attain a Masters of Law degree. In her legislative career, Murray is credited with writing the section of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 Title Seven which prohibits discrimination against women, particularly in employment.\(^5^6\) Her sermons were not just writings, but they were social justice works, as well.

Holding three law degrees, Murray was ordained as Episcopal priest in Washington D.C in 1977. She is the first woman, second African-American to officially receive ordination as priest in the Episcopal church.\(^5^7\) “The Liberation of Black Women”, was a piece published in 1970 in *Voices of the New Feminism*. “Jim Crow” laws in the South imposed racial segregation, but Murray coined the term “Jane Crow” to highlight the sexist and racial disparities black women in particular encountered in education, in their jobs and even in their homes. According to Murray, “Jane Crow” is defined as “...the entire range of assumptions, attitudes, stereotypes, customs, and arrangements that have robbed women of a positive self-concept and prevented them from participating fully in society as equals with men.”\(^5^8\)
While Pauli Murray’s civil rights accomplishments are often discussed and she is known for being an attorney, civil rights activist and feminist, her ordination as the first African-American ordained Episcopal priest is often overlooked. Murray has given many sermons concerning social justice issues. In a speech to young women graduates at Cedar Crest College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, Murray speaks on the vision of “Exodus.” Extracting this term from a biblical context, she manifests this vision into a perspective that allows women to see their exit from a male-dominated society. As the world progresses, Murray acknowledges that with each progression and turn toward feminist freedom, women face new challenges, new obstacles, and “new lifestyles” in this season of change. She opens her address with Miriam’s song in Scripture. It’s a psalm of Miriam’s as she leads the people of Israel. Miriam in Exodus chapter fifteen is represented as a prophetess who leads her people (the Israelites) with song and dance across the Red Sea. As the people of Pharoah are swallowed up by the water, it is the figure of the woman in song and movement that allows a new era of biblical leadership from women to be visible. Murray writes,

“It is said that the subjugation of women is the oldest form of human oppression and has been the model for the subjugation of other groups in society. For women struggling against sexism, Miriam has emerged as a symbol of courageous womanhood, asserting new freedom and sharing leadership with her brothers Moses and Aaron in a time of national crisis. In later tradition she was remembered as a spiritual leader of great power and influence. According to the prophet Micah, the Lord says to the people of Israel, ‘I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.’”

All throughout Murray’s sermons, she uses women in Scripture to put into context the justification of women involved in ministry, in politics and civil society in America and
around the world. Her sermons aren’t just to challenge biblical sin, her sermons reach an area of drought and institutional sin that she waters with her words.

Because Murray considered herself born in exile, her sermon mimics or is reminiscent of the exile of the Israelites in Scripture. Exile means forced migration and Murray attributes exile in Scripture to the exile of many blacks from the South to the North in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s during the Great Depression. She borrows in this sermon Ezekiel’s scene of “dry bones” representing the scattering of blacks in the North from the South as “dry bones”:

“This image of Negro migrants in cities of the North during the Depression years of the 1930s has changed very little for all too many. The third generation of these exiles constitute the ‘dry bones’ still scattered about in the crumbling urban areas. We take considerable pride in the fact that one of our own modern Joans of Arc— Secretary of Housing and Urban Affairs Patricia Roberts Harris—who just happens to be an Episcopalian—is leading an historic campaign against entrenched economic interests to see to it that ‘these dry bones live.’”

Delivered on Passion Sunday in the beginning of her sermon, Murray amalgamates Scripture, race discourse, poetry and psalm into one sermon, “Can These Bones Live Again?” Much like the Israelites in exile and in captivity travailing despite feeling like strangers in a land they were supposed to call home, Murray links the Israelites’ position in Scripture to the representation of blacks in the South endeavoring to move to the North. After the Emancipation Proclamation in 1965, Murray asserts that a reenactment of the Israelites’ exile happened with blacks moving from the South to the North in immense migration. Murray makes it clear in the beginning of her sermon that she finds Scripture utile when she can readily relate it to her own life and experiences.
Murray opens her sermon with remembering Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, his death, and his ultimate resurrection. This sermon was preached on Passion Sunday where she outlines in one full sentence the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Ezekiel 37 is used as a preface to Murray’s prophetic preaching on dry bones. Murray tells her audience that she cannot preach the Scripture unless she can apply it directly to her own life, for it is difficult for a shepherd to preach something to an awaiting flock that she does not live out herself. Murray traveled to North Carolina and she recalls the rector of the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill saying to her, “‘You remind us vividly by your presence that the Christian faith is radically specific, grounded in history, related to real people, to flesh and blood, to the grandeur and degradation of human life as it is.’” 62

Murray remembers as a little girl how she would grab her grandmother’s hand and tell her that she would read the Psalms to her and Ezekiel 37. Why was the eagerness of this child to read Ezekiel 37 to her grandmother so immense, so vivid, so poignant? I deduce that the story of Pauli Murray is reminiscent of Janie’s narrative in Their Eyes Were Watching God in that Janie’s grandmother wanted to live her preached sermon through her granddaughter. Often, that is what past generations want for the future generations of their family: to live a life better than her grandmother, great-grandmother, and so on. The arc of the sermon of these women becomes great when we look at the sermonic progression…:

“I had touched on Grandmother’s...favorite Bible selection(s). And she treasured that ragged old Bible Miss Mary Smith of Chapel Hill had given her more than any other article in the house. She said she got it when she was a little girl and was confirmed at the Chapel of the Cross. It was over one hundred years old. It was the one book Grandmother tried to read herself, peering through her glasses
and spelling out the Psalms a word at a time. I had learned to read some of the Psalms by now and every Sunday evening. I would read to Grandmother some of her favorite passages. She seemed so proud of having me read to her from the big Bible that I loved it as much as she did. I liked the huge print and the way the verses were divided on the pages. I liked the sound of the words rolling off my tongue and I would let my voice rise and fall like a wailing wind, just as I had heard Reverend Small chant the Morning Lesson at St. Titus on Sundays. Grandmother had the utmost respect for the Holy Word.  

As Murray reflects on Ezekiel 37, she recounts her childhood days with her grandmother. Her grandmother was given a 100-year-old Bible by a lady named Miss Mary Smith in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Murray’s grandmother with all her might tried to read the Psalms—one word at a time. Her sight was failing her and she didn’t have much education. Because Murray could read at a young age, every Sunday she would read the Psalms to her grandmother as she looked upon her granddaughter with proud eyes. Murray reflects and then realizes that she, as in her grandmother’s prophecy, is the same preacher called to speak/breath/sermonize/preach over the “dry bones” of her community.  

By incorporating poetry from WWII and a refugee who wrote in 1959 about the desegregation of public schools in America in her sermon Can These Bones Live Again?, Murray weaves the past in with the present to evince an evolving and incessant dialogue of the desire for blacks in America to not feel like strangers in their own land. She matches what the Hebrew people felt in Scripture with what black people felt in the mid 20th century and still feel like this today with the 137th Psalm of displaced people singing songs in a strange land. She attributes black American writers such as James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and others who write about the Exile. We as writers now don’t think about it in those terms all the time, but that’s
what African American literature encompasses—it’s a literary canon about a people in exile.

The prophet Ezekiel spoke life in the midst of death. He spoke life in the midst of the valley. Murray links the biblical story of the exile of the Jews in Babylonian captivity with the exile of the black community in America. America is Babylon and the black community represents the Jews in Scripture. Murray presents the great migration of the North of blacks during the Great Depression of the 1930s and asserts that the “third generation of these exiles constitute the ‘dry bones’ still scattered about in the crumbling urban areas.” As the sermon progresses, Murray marks the impact of the sermon and the “Exile years” in African American literature. Just as the exile years have been documented or marked in black literature the sermon has also been documented and marked within this genre. Murray says,

“Alex Haley’s Roots, Margaret Walker’s Jubilee, and my Proud Shoes...in various ways have told the stories of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael, the outcast of the bondage of the people of Israel in Egypt, the Exodus, and the wandering in the Wilderness. ...Writers like Richard Wright, Ann Petry, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and poets like Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn [Brooks], Countee Cullen have documented the Exile years.”

Murray points out that she sees herself as the Ezekiel of the 20th century. For the people who are outcast, for the people who are always “othered”, they are called upon to speak to the dry bones in our society--the dry bones of social injustice--the dry bones of that “tridimensional phenomenon” of race, class, and gender disparities. What are the dry bones of our society--the dry bones of racism, the dry bones of sexism, the dry bones of denigration and subjugation, the dry bones of malice, the dry bones of hate...all of these dry bones these black women preachers from Stewart to Murray encountered, yet they
faced these dry bones directly and spoke as prophets and preachers to those dead things. Their sermons and their words transform these dry bones in society, and the women of today and the preachers of the 21st century still speak to these bones.

This story Murray narrates in the beginning of her sermon is reminiscent of Hurston’s scene in *Their Eyes* with Janie and Nanny. These older women--these grandmothers--these women who came before the women preachers today dreamed dreams and had visions and prophesied that there would be a space, a platform, a pulpit for their daughters to make clarion calls and thunderously preach social justice. This sermon specifically symbolizes the black woman preacher of the late 19th century and early 20th century breathing upon the flesh, sinews, joints, limbs of broken black bodies to form a whole community. Black women preachers are still breathing. They have not stopped. The breathing continues until each dry bone is brought wholly together.

I bring Murray’s sermon into this preacherly discourse to show that black women preachers before the Traci Blackmon’s, Leslie Callahan’s, and Barbara Amos’s of the world, there were black women who represented the “gatherers” of dry bones in an earlier epoch, black women whose sermons symbolized air and black women whose words were the very heartbeat of their communities.

**Sermon as Literary Genre**

In Katie Cannon’s discourse on the sermon as literary genre in the works of black women, she examines the efficacious use of the sermon in black women’s writing. I argue here that black women preachers *themselves* add to the literary canon with their sermonic oeuvres. Writers from Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Nella Larsen, and Gloria Naylor are all authors whose works look at some element of the black
preaching tradition and the sermon. With Canon’s claim that black women make up a majority of the black church population, she analyzes how the use of sacred rhetoric in these writings changes the social, religious, and cultural experiences of male-dominated hierarchy in the Black church. She presents five male preachers in five novels where sacred rhetoric is performed: Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Reverend Mills in Alice Walker’s *A Short Walk*, Reverend Morrissey in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Brother Ezekiel in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, and Rev. Michael T. Hollis in Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills*. While she questions what black women hear when they read these texts and the negative images that are associated with women’s portrayal in these sermons, it is evident that these women who are hearing these sermons must stand up and speak out with their own sermons. These women must not be hearers only of the Word but also doers.

Where is the figure of the black woman preacher in this analysis? All of these black women write about preaching, but they put the male preacher in the category of authority. Perhaps, they only put the male preacher figure in authority in their novels because that’s the only way society sees the arc of leadership—as male-dominated. But just imagine and deviate from the societal norm for a little while and write the figure of the black woman preacher throughout the pages. By examining the black literary canon, it’s evinced that black women writers write about the male preacher (Hurston) and the black male writers write about the black woman preacher (Baldwin and Hughes). What story would these novels have told if these sermons were spoken from the mouth of a black woman?
Canon names her framework the “womanist ethics critique”—a methodology that sheds light on the underlying patriarchal views and perspectives on women in sermons. Her critique is like a magnifying glass that enlarges the very problems in patriarchy within the church and society that we wish to annihilate. Canon also posits a “womanist liberation matrix” that cracks open these fissures and addresses patriarchy directly. The difference with Canon’s womanist liberation matrix and black feminist sermonic practice is that I exegete the performativity of sermons written and delivered directly from the mouths of actual black women preachers and artists. When the black woman is confronted with the “womanist ethics critique,” she has her own sermons from her mouth and pen to counter patriarchy.

**Freedom Dreams in Exile**

In her eighth chapter, “The Wounds of Jesus: Justification of Goodness in the Face of Manifold Evil”, Katie G. Cannon writes:

“*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), [Hurston’s] second novel, is a drama based on the values of the community and the tension that arises when there is a conflict between what the community advises Black women to do and what, in fact, is done, especially when the mirror in the Black woman’s soul (her eyes) is focused on God.”

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston posits Nanny as a woman who had dreams for herself, but those visions were never manifested with her. This did not impede Nanny, though. She persevered and said, “These dreams will be for my offspring since I can’t carry it through.”
In this novel, Janie is a carrier of the Word. Janie’s life is full of dichotomies: dawn and doom, morning and evening, sunrise and sunset in the branches of her life. When Nanny sits Janie across her lap and soothes her tears over Janie’s anguish to marry Logan Killicks, Nanny tells Janie her account of growing up in slavery: “You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways.”

Much of what Nanny wanted for Janie was the dream she always saw within herself. Nanny “wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high” but because she knew how limited her resources were, she wanted to save the text for Janie. Much of what Nanny espouses here is what the great grandmothers of black women preachers wanted for their daughters. Nanny says that freedom found her with a baby in her arms. The whispering wind of freedom found Nanny with new life in her arms. Freedom found Nanny with another chance. Freedom found Nanny with another chance to make the pulpit a reality for Janie. Despite the pulpit becoming a dream for 19th century black women preachers, the pulpit becomes a reality for future black women preachers. In subsequent chapters of this dissertation, we as readers begin to see the preacherly pulpit form more and more--with greater shape, greater depth and breadth. The arc of this project will see the pulpit get bigger--wider. What matters most in this first chapter is that readers see the pulpit of the black woman preacher take shape. The pulpit of the black male preacher has always been open, welcoming, and a space of comfort for him. The space of the pulpit has not always been a welcoming presence for the black woman. What I also stress in this chapter is that the pulpit doesn’t necessarily come in the form of a platform in a magnanimous church edifice that you see in
megachurches; rather, the pulpit is what the black woman makes it to be. The pulpit is that sermonic space where the black woman gives instruction and correction. The pulpit is where the black woman preacher then becomes visible, breaking down the wall of subjugation and invisibility with her words. Nanny didn’t want Janie born enslaved. She stressed to Janie that she didn’t want to be seen as a work ox or brood-sow. She had other dreams for Janie. She wanted Janie to be protected, and a marriage with Logan Killicks was the only avenue Nanny could see Janie’s freedom. The black women preachers of today spell out the dream for the valiant women who came before them. They are the manifestation of the 19th century black woman preacher dream in every way—in literature, in the pulpit, and through black expressive culture:

“Ah didn’t want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn’t want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn’t mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah’d take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt. But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world. So whilst Ah was tendin’ you of nights Ah said Ah’d save de text for you. Ah been waitin’ a long time, Janie, but nothin’ Ah been through ain’t too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed.” 72

Many of Nanny’s sentiments here echo what the 19th century and sometimes even early 20th century abolitionists (who may not have been conventionally ordained preachers) felt. Nanny—a woman born into slavery—wanted more for her granddaughter, Janie. She did not want to see Janie born into slavery. There’s something significant about Nanny desiring to “preach a great sermon in this context.” Because women’s voices were perpetually silenced during this era, they had to be silent when it came to the physical
labor exerted upon their bodies; they had to be silent when their children were ripped from them. Freedom found her with a baby in her arms so instead of acquiescing, Nanny takes what she had with her and attempts to make a path of greatness for Janie’s mother. The baby Nanny held in her arms would one day speak for her—she would “expound” what Nanny wanted to say but couldn’t. There wasn’t a pulpit for Nanny, yet she had so much to say and immense creativity buried inside of her.

What occurs when there is no repository for the creativity and brilliance you house within to be released? Here, Nanny speaks of Janie’s mother, but while Nanny was trying to make a way of freedom for her, Janie’s mother was led astray. Janie’s mother was raped by a schoolteacher who left her in the woods to fend for herself. Nanny was looking for Janie’s mother that night because she didn’t come home. Janie is born here and upon her arrival into the world, Nanny said she would save the text for her. Nanny had a dream for her offspring. Janie carried that dream. Janie is the mother of that dream. Janie is the figure standing and preaching about “colored women sittin’ on high.” At the end of the novel, Janie tells Phoebe her story and Phoebe proclaims, “‘Lawd! Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo.’”

Janie’s sharing of her journey to Phoebe represents the torch-sharing element of black feminist sermonic practice that shows the preacherly figure using her story to not only amplify herself but also the women around her. Nanny represents the voices of all those grandmothers and great-grandmothers and great-great-great-grandmothers who saw freedom for their offspring. They had freedom dreams.
CHAPTER 2

“Revolt of the Righteous”: Preaching the Gospel Blues and Black Feminist Consciousness with Sermon and Song in James Baldwin’s *The Amen Corner* and *Just Above My Head*

“In order to come through and to make it through, we created a song.”
-Nikki Giovanni

“Sometimes, now that I’m out of the pulpit, I feel more in the pulpit than I did when I was preaching.”
~Julia, *Just Above My Head* (1979)

“If you don’t survive your trouble out of your own resources, you have not really survived it; you have merely closed yourself against it.
-James Baldwin

In current scholarship, you will often find the cultural and social impact of black music in African-American literature discussed extensively. A musical gumbo of jazz, the blues, and gospel where the polyphonic textures of all these genres combined give us a sense of the progressing social text that both literature and music provide. The black woman’s vocal performance in literature is now becoming a prevalent topic of academic conversation; even the music in Baldwin’s oeuvre has been written about, but the impact of the black woman’s sermon in African-American literature remains a missing element in literary conversation. The impact of the black woman’s sermon in African-American literature is equally meaningful in scholarly conversation, for the “black sermon is the mother’s milk of African-American discourse.”

In “Of the Faith of Our Fathers”, W.E.B. DuBois describes the black preacher figure at length in *The Souls of Black Folk* as the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil.”
this passage one is led to assume the black preacher figure can only be envisioned as male. What remains to be seen in the canonical scholarship of the early twentieth century is an articulation of the black woman preacher.

Preaching and the black church have been a fundamental part of black life since slavery was being established during the 1600s. Black preachers provided a realm for both leadership and authority, whose credibility went unquestioned within the space of the church. There, the performativity of the preacher could render the black body visible in a period where black people and everything that characterized them were deemed invisible. Black preaching and the black church have been essential to black life, serving as realms of leadership and authority that black people as slaves did not have externally but could themselves occupy within the space of the church. Far from being a monolith, the preacher figure embodies many complexities and variances on how the preached Word can be delivered. This begs the question, can we imagine DuBois’s black preacher figure in his words “the most unique personality on American soil” as a black woman? What sorts of nuances and varied possibilities do we need to place in the foreground in order to imagine black women as preacher figures and as the epitomes of moral authority? A question such as this requires that we eschew the DuBoisian lens in favor of a perspective in which we re-envision the black woman and reposition her in the center of religious discourse on our way to unearthing the modes of transfiguration black women evoke via sermon and song, in and out of the pulpit.

This chapter investigates two black women preacher protagonists in two of James Baldwin’s works—his first play, *The Amen Corner* (1954) and his last novel, *Just Above My Head* (1979). Situating these works in an historical context, *The Amen Corner* can be
understood as a Civil Rights Movement work, while *Just Above My Head (JAMH)* can be ascertained as a post-Civil Rights Movement text. While *The Amen Corner* was written in the early 1950s during the integration of public schools with Brown v. Board of Education I and II, *Just Above My Head* was written after much of the Civil Rights Movement of bus boycotts, lunch counter sit-ins, and voting protests in the pursuit of social justice. When both play and novel are published, Baldwin gives us black women preachers at a time when the black male preacher becomes synonymous with the Civil Rights Movement. In addition with *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin writes at a particular instance when black women writers’ oeuvres from Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and others began gaining recognition in the African-American literary canon.

Having contextualized these works, the task of this chapter will be to examine the exegetical and eschatological approaches to Scriptures employed by the two black women preachers featured in them. I will consider Margaret and Julia’s respective approaches to preaching, the mechanics and the expressivity of their sermonic delivery, and in the process, look beyond the sacred agenda of their sermons in order to foreground the cultural and social work those sermons perform. The musicality of the sermonic text and its delivery are suggestive of what I am calling a blues sensibility. Hence, I use the term *black feminist blues consciousness* to demonstrate the affective power blues music exerts in *black feminist sermonic practice*. As I augment blues sensibility I recognize the necessity to go beyond the traditional blues idiom of blues and melancholic expressions to examine how joy, mobility, agency are found in the blue note. Building on what Dr. Otis Moss, III calls the *blue-note sensibility*, I examine the sermonic practices to be found
both in Baldwin’s play and his novel.\textsuperscript{78} I use Moss’s work as a catalyst for denoting the ways that \textit{black feminist sermonic practice}, while advancing a sacred agenda in the church reflects its effects in secular spaces \textit{outside} of the church, as well. Both texts show an increased efficacy of the impact of Margaret’s and Julia’s sermons outside of the confines of the pulpit. Using \textit{The Amen Corner} and \textit{Just Above My Head} I seek to illustrate the poetics of \textit{black feminist sermonic practice} as it is birthed in the pulpit and then moves beyond it to affect secular life outside of the church. I argue that irrespective of their location, these characters remain preachers and the impact of their sermons can be felt even when they step outside the church.

\textit{Black feminist sermonic practice} counters the hegemonic structures of racism, sexism, and classism that make women of color and particularly the voices of black women invisible within the church. The goal of black feminist sermonic practice is to fight against white hegemony and create sermonic spaces for the voices of the just to be heard. How is the black feminist sermonic practice different from simply black feminism? Black feminist sermonic practice examines how black women preachers in the pulpit—in those traditional sermonic spaces—create those same spaces with their sermons outside of the church. The same mode of healing for black women that occurs inside of the church \textit{should} be the very same mode that reaches black women outside of the church—a sermonic balm—healing speech that concerns the needs of the black woman. However, the point of contention arrives where the spaces that black women look to for healing and restoration in the church are not extant. In fact, the spaces within the church become the very same spaces they, in the end, have to constantly fight against to prove their worth. The manner in which black women create sermonic spaces of
healing and restoration outside of the church becomes the new mode of resistance that we see with Margaret and Julia in *The Amen Corner* and *JAMH*.

*Black feminist sermonic practice* is both a tradition and a practice. It is a tradition that is passed down from one generation of black women preachers to another, but it is also a practice that continues to develop, continues to move, and it continues to find new areas and new avenues of healing. Black feminist sermonic practice acts as a soothing salve where the sermons of the black woman—a figure in society who has been mistreated, ignored, stepped over, bruised and considered the “mule of the world”—tune the ear of the oppressor toward justice. The church for the black community in general always represented a place of healing, a place of comfort and restoration, but what happens when that place that you know as home, does not feel like home anymore? What happens when that space of healing starts to become a space of regret and retraction? Margaret and Julia’s presence disrupts the churches they lead, and Baldwin positions these women in this time in these respective novels to illustrate how gender is seen as a territory or terrain over which the Word or prophecy is fought.

Katie Canon’s chapter, “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness”, refers to black women as “moral agents.” By marking the trajectory of the black woman’s vocal emergence and need for her voice to counter degradation of the black community, Canon provides an historical context of women’s involvement in the church during slavery and of their informal interpretation of Scripture. These women weren’t in the “pulpit,” as formal titled preachers, but their work as “crusaders” of social advancement in the church spilled into their impact outside of the church, as well. Black women were essentially invisible under the white supremacist lens. It is within the
structure of the black church that black women found a space for vocalizing social justice. The impact of the sermon can be discussed in perpetuity, but until we have concrete evidence of the inner workings of black feminism and blues sensibilities within the sermons of the black woman preacher in literature, then we’ve missed the value of the black woman’s sermon in African-American literature. What I intend to examine in this chapter is the blues music essence in the preaching of the black woman in literature, using my own discourse of merging black feminism with both sermon and song in the novel. Using Moss, Cannon, and other scholars’ assertions of blues music, I examine the amalgamation between the blues sensibility in preaching and black feminism, pinpointing those minor tonal notes within the sermon that sing in and past oppression of the black woman’s voice and body to create a chromatic space of black feminist sermonic practice cultural discourse that marks the freedom of the black woman in mind, body, and spirit. Later in this chapter, I also examine Margaret and Julia as “moral agents” even after they leave the church.

Born in Harlem in 1924 into a religious and strict childhood, James Baldwin was the eldest of nine children. Amiri Baraka fervently deemed him as “God’s black revolutionary mouth.” The language of the church, patterns of the Bible and the struggles found in Scripture are significant characteristics of Baldwin’s writing. In Baldwin’s interview with Terry Gross, he delineates his three-year position as boy preacher in the pulpit:

And all of the elements which had driven me into the pulpit were still there—were still active. I was not less menaced. And in those three years in the pulpit-- it’s very difficult to describe them; I probably shouldn’t try--...there was a kind of torment in it. But I learned an awful lot. And I lost my faith, well the faith I had had. But I learned something else. I learned something about myself, I think. And I learned something through dealing with those congregations. After all I was a
boy preacher. And the people whose congregations I addressed were grown-ups. Boy preachers have a very special aura in the black community and the aura implies a certain responsibility and that responsibility above all to tell the truth. So as I began to be more and more tormented by my crumbling faith it began to be clearer and clearer to me that I had no right to stay in the pulpit.  

In both his play and novel, the church was Baldwin’s armor for writing and the performance of the people were his tools for composing the text. Almost every novel and play that Baldwin writes is contingent upon the church and its imperfections; those imperfections are evinced most clearly in *The Amen Corner* and *JAMH*. He uses the sermon and the black woman preacher figure to reveal that the inconsistencies within the church are the same incongruities in the secular world. Baldwin reveals:

> I was armed, I knew, in attempting to write the play, by the fact that I was born in the church. I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically-speaking, comes the act of the theatre, the communion which is the theatre. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theatre was to recreate moments I remembered as a boy preacher, to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up, and hopefully, to change them. I knew that an unknown black writer could not possibly hope to achieve this forum.  

In Albert Murray’s chapter, “The Blues as Music”, there is a clear sense of what it means to have joy in the blues or to have joy in the morning. When the blues as music is generally defined, it is thought of as lugubrious, whining, complaining, downtrodden, dismal, dark compositions saturated with minor scale inflections; however, this spiritual aspect of joy coming during mourning or joy coming in the morning is the direct application of the blues to Baldwin’s work and to Margaret and Julia’s sermons:

> But as preoccupied with human vulnerability as so many of its memorable lyrics have always been, and as suggestive of pain as some of its instrumentation sometimes seems to be, blues music can hardly be said to be synonymous with lamentation and commiseration. Not when the atmosphere of earthiness and the disposition to positive action it engenders are considered. And besides, sometimes the lyrics mock and signify even as they pretend to weep, and as all the finger
snapping, foot tapping, and hip cocking indicate, the instrumentation may be far less concerned with agony than with ecstasy. (Murray 51)

In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, James Cone defines the blues as music “about black life and the sheer earth and gut capacity to survive in an extreme situation of oppression.” Dating the blues back to the late 19th century, Cone further defines the blues as “the essential ingredients that define the essence of the black experience”:

“And to understand them, it is necessary to view the blues as a state of mind in relation to the Truth of the black experience”: Like the spirituals, the blues affirm the somebodiness of black people, and they preserve the worth of black humanity through ritual and drama. The blues are a transformation of black life through the sheer power of song. They symbolize the solidarity, the attitudes, and the identity of the black community and thus create the emotional forms of reference for endurance and esthetic appreciation.” (Cone 117)

The blues is a significant style of preaching in the black church. Blues music is an art form characteristic of despair, loneliness, torment, distress, pain, and sorrow, but out of this blues, out of this sorrow and out of this pain, emerges a sound that transgresses despair and brings joy. It appears oxymoronic to have joy emanate from the blues, but this marks the narratives and the trajectory of the black feminist sermonic practice—a sermonic practice that exegetically reflects sermons of pain that turn into proclamations of joy and sermons of anguish that turn into declarations of triumph. Both the sermons of Margaret and Julia mark specific sounds and particular notes that carry on the tradition of blues sung by black women. Black women sing their pain, anguish, sorrow, and grief. There was a particular joy that emanated from singing out the sting and pain of racism and misogyny. Not only was singing a way to ease out the heartache, but preaching proved a way to massage and assuage the burdens of the black woman.

Dr. Otis Moss, III defines black preaching as “…a unique cultural narrative and theological enterprise where African motifs meet diverse western influences of North
America. A beautiful, bold, homiletical voice, poetry, prophetic witness, southern storytelling, lament, blues, and celebration are born out of this tradition.”87 Blue note sensibility preaching is a homiletical sermonic style that amalgamates both, as Moss terms, the blues moan and the gospel shout. This amalgamation leads to a prophetic style of sermonic delivery that leaves a trace of hope in spaces of grievance.

Through the sermons of Margaret and Julia, I extend Moss’s blue note sensibility term by providing a sense of the blue note as “other.” Blues music with roots in African-American music, theory-wise, does not belong to the natural scale; it is a minor or flattened “out note.” Blue notes are sounds that are dissonant and “don’t belong.”88 In relation to blues sensibilities within the sermon of the black women preachers in Baldwin’s works, their sermons and their lives are filled with blue notes--modes of not belonging, marginalization, denigration by white supremacy and also by men in their families, churches, and communities.

Baldwin’s 1954 play, The Amen Corner reflects the traditions of the black church and how those traditions are displayed in the home. Set in a Harlem church in the 1950s, Baldwin writes the story of single mother, Sister Margaret Alexander, who is the prominent leader and preacher of her church, but she struggles with keeping things together at home. Her ex-husband, Luke returns to her life and her son, David, desires a career as a jazz musician. David wants to follow in his estranged father’s footsteps, but Margaret sees the annihilating path (in her eyes) her son is travelling and attempts to keep him in the church and out of the “world.” Margaret’s position of prominence within the church is challenged by her son’s rebellion at home. As a black woman whose position of authority is countered within the church and within her own home, Baldwin allows us
from a theatrical perspective to get a glimpse into Margaret’s quest for the keys to the kingdom. The kingdom represents love and immersing one’s self in love is the ultimate endeavor here: “[Margaret’s] triumph...is that she sees this finally and accepts it, and, although she has lost everything, also gains the keys to the kingdom. The kingdom is love, and love is selfless, although only the self can lead one there. She gains herself.”

How Luke, Margaret’s ex-husband, and David (Margaret’s son) battle with each other in each scene of the play marks an already rocky start to the illustration of the preacher’s house. Baldwin writes in his introduction that this play reflects much of what happened in his own life with respect to his own relationship with his stepfather. Baldwin only wanted his stepfather’s love. His stepfather was a preacher, yet because of Baldwin’s private life, it was challenging for Baldwin to find love from his father. In The Amen Corner, Baldwin takes his own story but instead of narrating a black man as the preacher, he tells the story of Luke’s mother as the preacher. The preacher in this instance is seen as the enforcer, the ruler, the regulator; Margaret is forced to occupy the role as “leader” and “breadwinner” of her own house--a traditional position that usually men occupy in the household, especially in the 1950s. Yet from Baldwin’s own words, it is through the black woman preacher and what her sons and daughters are threatened by that dismantles the traditional role of the black woman in 1950s African-American literature.

It is through Baldwin’s introduction in The Amen Corner, that I witness one of the connotations or definitions of black feminist sermonic practice. Through Margaret Alexander’s example, we are able to see this praxis. Although Margaret loses her church,
her husband, and perhaps even her son in the play, she gains herself--she gains love of herself. This is what Baldwin defines as the *keys to the kingdom*.

*As The Amen Corner* takes place over the course of a week in Harlem, both the church and Sister Margaret’s house are set within the same unit. From its literary illustration, the pulpitum or pulpit takes up the most room in the church. A chair fit for a high priestess sits atop the platform. Before Margaret’s first sermon, the choir sings with raised voices of God’s care. The first song that Baldwin includes gives a musical preface to Margaret’s first sermon. The choir sings jubilantly,

One day I walked the lonesome road  
The spirit spoke unto me  
And filled my heart with love,  
Yes, he filled my heart with love,  
And he wrote my name above,  
And that’s why I thank God I’m in His care. (Baldwin 6)

Stepping up to the pulpit as she meets her congregation with resounding, repeated cries of exaltation, Margaret’s first sermon entitled, “Set Thine House In Order” comes from 2 Kings Chapter 20, an exegetical and eschatological illustration of the urgency that besets Margaret’s own house. 92 In this sermon, Margaret preaches the importance of going to people who you know will pray for you—people who you know have a connection to God. Throughout the first sermon exists a call and response reminiscent of the black church choral tradition. The congregation meets her words with resounding responses of agreement, “Amen! Amen!” She tells her congregation,

Now when the king got the message, amen, he didn’t do like some of us do today. He didn’t go running to no spiritualists, no, he didn’t. He didn’t spend a lot of money on no fancy doctors, he didn’t break his neck trying to commit himself to
Bellevue Hospital. He sent for the prophet, Isaiah. Amen. He sent for a saint of God. (Baldwin 8)

Margaret delivers a sermon of simplicity and comprehension, one to which her congregation can relate, but her words are like a hammer that dissolves the rock of immorality into diminutive pieces. Gesturing to her congregation with both hands, Margaret continues to preach:

I know some of you think Sister Margaret’s too hard on you. She don’t want you to do this and she won’t let you do that. Some of you say, ‘Ain’t no harm in reading the funny papers.’ But children, yes, there’s harm in it. While you reading them funny papers, your mind ain’t on the Lord. And if your mind ain’t stayed on Him, every hour of the day, Satan’s going to cause you to fall. Amen! …But a saint of God ain’t got no business delivering liquor to folks all day--how you going to spend all day helping folks into hell and then think you going to come here in the evening and help folks into heaven? It can’t be done. The Word tells me, No man can serve two masters!93

The contrast and conflict evident in Margaret’s first sermon as she admonishes her flock to abandon contradictory ways, is the same division that is illustrated in her own house. The divisiveness in her sermon breaks apart and displays the fissures of not only the people under her care in the church, but also the people under her influence in her own home. Baldwin uses these chasms in Margaret’s sermon to show the collapsible pulpit on which she stands. The choral selection before her sermon “I’m So Glad I’m in His Care” is a gospel blues song recorded and written in 1941 by legendary gospel musician Sister Rosetta Tharpe. The figure in the song walks a lonesome road until his or her heart is filled with love. The double emphasis on “Yes, he filled my heart with love” is a sonic prophecy that Margaret encounters towards the end of the play. Baldwin chooses a song written by a gospel blues black woman musician to preface Margaret’s “Set Thine House
in Order” sermon. In this context, Baldwin conveys the uses of the blues and perhaps in this instance, the uses of the gospel blues.

Margaret ends her sermon with music reflective of the text she preached.

I got the holy spirit
To help me run this race.
I got the holy spirit,
It appointed my soul a place.
My faith looks up to heaven,
I know up there I’ll see
The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit
Watching over me. 94

Just as Margaret’s sermon and song penetrate the souls of the congregation with words as fire, the reaction of the congregation to the preached Word is like a strong, violent force of hand claps, foot stomping, shrieks of joy, hands waving loosely in the air, along with the zils of the tambourine shaking feverishly, having its own shout and holler. It is through Margaret’s first sermon that we witness the preached word from Scripture acting as healing salve to her congregation, but the same sermon reflects the hidden breaches in her own life.

The dichotomies of which Margaret preached are reflected in her life, as she’s not only the breadwinner for her house but also the leader of her church. While the Amen Corner in her church shows unwavering support of her to her face, they surreptitiously converse about her actions behind her back. In this case, both Margaret’s church and home suffer chasms. The “Amen Corner” is defined as a group of people who give “unwavering support.” According to the OED, the Amen Corner is defined as “that part of a meeting-house occupied by persons who assist the preacher with occasional and irregular responses.” 95 To say Amen means, “it is so.” The word “Amen” offers an
affirming belief or response to something said. Baldwin writes the hypocrisy of “The Amen Corner” in this play, as individuals who appear to be in “your corner” speak against you, claiming and accusing you of wrong. After her first sermon, the elders of the church question how Margaret can travel to the sister church in Philadelphia and “heal” them with her words, but her own church appears to be suffering under her leadership, according to the elders. This instance of Margaret’s congregation speaking of her disparagingly behind her back is an example of the leadership of the black woman being challenged not only in her own house but also in the church. This is also an example of the blues sensibility that Dr. Moss refers to—despair that not necessarily comes out in Scripture here, but also arises after the impact of the sermon. Margaret experiences blues sensibilities in her daily encounters with her congregation, but it is through the sermon that “hope” arises for her in the midst of despair.

During this period, it was unheard of to have a black woman in a leadership position, notwithstanding a preacher in the church unless they were the “mothers” of the church. The men and women but mostly the men of the church stand out against Margaret and her hegemony and disapprove of the fruit that her preaching tree produces. Brother Boxer, one of the elders of the church proclaims with anguish,

The Word say, You going to know a tree by its fruit. And we ain’t been seeing such good fruit from Sister Margaret. I want to know, how come she think she can rule a church when she can’t rule her own house? That husband of hers is in there, dying in his sins, and that half-grown, hypocrite son of hers is just running all roads to hell.96

When Margaret is about to lose her church, her sister--Odessa--tells her to remember the vision. She admonishes Margaret to think back to the vision of the church she had before she lost the support of the Amen Corner. Margaret seems to be a woman of loss--loss of
her husband and the loss of her son. She struggles to keep her house together. At the end of the play, Margaret does order her house--she may not be a pastor any longer, she may have lost the members of her congregation, but she did gain something and someone--love and herself, holding the keys to the kingdom.

The same way in which the hand of God delivers King Hezekiah from death after he prays fervently and turns his face to the wall reflects a similar order from Margaret. After Margaret realizes the elders of the church are having a meeting to depose her and she may lose her congregation, her sister, Odessa reminds her of the vision. She admonishes her of the time that it is to be not a woman but a winner:

Odessa: Maggie. It was you had the vision. It weren’t me. You got to think back to the vision. If the vision was for anything, it was for just this day.

Margaret: All these years I prayed as hard as I knowed how. I tried to put my treasure in heaven where couldn’t nothing get at it and take it away from me and leave me alone. I asked the Lord to hold my hand. I didn’t expect that none of this would ever rise to hurt me no more. And all these years it just been waiting for me, waiting for me to turn a corner. And there it stand, my whole life, just like I hadn’t never gone nowhere. It’s a awful thing to think about, the way love never dies!

Odessa: You’s got to pull yourself together and think how you can win. You always been the winner. Ain’t no time to be a woman now. You can’t let them throw you out of this church. What we going to do then? I’m getting old, I can’t help you. And you ain’t young no more, neither. 97

Odessa’s words shift Margaret from the marginalized position of woman in which her church places her, to winner. A winner is a victor, champion, conqueror, and hero. Odessa helps Margaret implement what Patricia Hill Collins calls, the “power of self-definition.” This power is ultimately attained from within the self, but at times, the community of believers who don’t let the vision inside die awakens this force. Collins
refers to particular black women characters from Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* to Janie in Zora N. Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* who enact the power of self-definition through writing letters or through the performance of telling their stories. Collins writes,

“According to many African-American women writers, no matter how oppressed an individual woman may be, the power to save the self lies within the self. Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward personal empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuations lies within the individual woman herself.” 

Odessa helps Margaret redefine womanhood, displacing her outside of oppression and marginalization that the black woman endures to a space of victory, not defeat. While Odessa helps Margaret realize her true position, it is Margaret who finishes the duty of self-definition. After Luke’s death, Margaret delivers her last sermon. When Luke dies, he and Margaret reconcile, but it is not until her last sermon that Margaret preaches the *keys to the kingdom* to herself:

Margaret: Children. I’m just now finding out what it means to love the Lord. It ain’t all in the singing and the shouting. It ain’t all in the reading of the Bible. *(She unclenches her first a little.)* It ain’t even --it ain’t even--in running all over everybody trying to get to heaven. To love the Lord is to love all His children--all of them, everyone!--and suffer with them and rejoice with them and never count the cost!

*(Silence. She turns and leaves the pulpit.)*

Margaret cautions her congregation that even when they think the world is not watching them, their eyes are fixed on the actions of the Christian. She emphasizes the importance of her congregation to live holy, sanctified, and set apart from the “world.” Baldwin writes Margaret Alexander’s character out of inspiration from a South Carolina pastor at Mt. Calvary Assembly Hall of the Pentecostal Faith Church for All Nations,
named Rosa Artimus Horn. Horn inspires the writing of *The Amen Corner*’s protagonist, for Baldwin recalls his own conversion experience at Mt. Calvary, propelling him to connect the Pentecostal culture of spiritual expression to the culture of theater. Baldwin writes in his introduction to *The Amen Corner*: “I knew that out of the ritual of the church, historically speaking, comes the act of the theatre, the communion which is the theatre. And I knew that what I wanted to do in the theater was to recreate the moments I remembered as a boy preacher, to involve the people, even against their will, to shake them up, and, hopefully, to change them.” (XVI)

Margaret mentions the mantra “Set Thine House in Order” on two occasions in her first sermon. Baldwin purposefully writes this scriptural mantra of setting one’s house in order because he wants us as readers to decipher the dichotomies and contradictions that beset the preacher’s household. Baldwin is not only writing about a doctor, a lawyer, a secretary in these texts. He specifically chooses the *black woman preacher figure* to position her at a level of high esteem only to reveal the imperfections that she has as a flawed woman preacher/character. In this context, black women were not necessarily placed in positions of eminence and for Baldwin to place a black woman in a position of high esteem not only generally but particularly within the church when black women’s voices were not even welcomed in the pulpit is telling to the kinds of realities and many inconsistencies that surround the black church, particularly in the relationship between black men and women in the church. Baldwin has a message here: that it is the Word that these black women characters plant as seeds in the hearts of the congregation, but when they leave the church, their sermonic/preacherly presence is still felt, if not more, outside the walls of ecclesia.
Out of all of Baldwin’s works, his last novel is his least discussed text in current scholarship. In the 1980s and 1990s when academics critically write about Baldwin and his works, *Just Above My Head* is absent from the conversation, at least in the way this chapter highlights. The church stands as a prominent structure in Baldwin’s novels and plays, yet it is the figure of the black woman preacher that begs the most discursive dissection in the academy. The way in which scholars are supposed to reimagine the black woman figure as preacher in Baldwin’s novels speaks of how he sees the black woman with respect to men in the church. As academics, we cannot simply dismiss the church in Baldwin’s work; the church is a fundamental aspect of his work and the understanding of the traditions of the church, (i.e. preaching, elements of style in scriptural exegesis, the performance of the woman’s voice as she delivers her sermon) is the most salient.

Few reviews exist of Baldwin’s last novel; in the reviews from the Washington Post and the New York Times that are extant, Julia’s character is either jarred by rasping clauses that position her as malevolent mistress to her father or she’s not mentioned at all. In the first review of Baldwin, September 1979, James Romano of *The New York Times* provides harsh criticism of the novel. Pointing to the novel’s lack of plot organization, Romano aims successive, rapid, and fiery darts that put Baldwin’s complex narrative in a category of artless books.¹⁰¹ Romano writes one complete sentence regarding Julia: “Later Julia emerges form a sordid relation with her weak, exploitative, father, becomes a prostitute, then a model, then the exalted lover of an African chief and finally a bright and lovable matron in Yonkers.” Edmund White of *The Washington Post* has more of an accepting view of Baldwin’s books where he, apart from any other writer, actually
mentions Julia. While White’s column readers think he is drawing attention to Julia’s character in his literary review, he gratingly writes Julia as a hypocrite who as “an eerily controlled monster of vanity and manipulation [is] bent on destroying her mother and seducing her father.” I find White’s portrayal of Julia problematic, forcing her character into an incestuous web that White subtly implies is Julia’s fault. Is this all we dare say about Julia? Baldwin positions Julia as a black girl preacher as the foremost voice of guidance and reason to show through the lens of the sermon the black woman preacher’s narrative in literature as she preaches and lives the gospel blues.

*Just Above My Head* is a complex narrative that tells the story of two families, the Halls and Millers. While Baldwin writes the complicated stories of his male characters, particularly Arthur Hall, a gay gospel singer--it is the life of Julia Miller--the child evangelist in the text whose life marks significant vicissitudes. Julia is a young preaching prodigy—a girl preacher—who delivers fiery sermons at her father’s church and whose dynamic preaching captivates her congregation. As Julia matures, her life takes a turbulent turn with her father’s rape. Julia stops preaching and ventures into the world of modeling and prostitution. She endures many tragedies, one of them being the loss of her unborn baby as a result of her father beating life out of her. Through pain and suffering, she perseveres death and regenerates her own body. The sermons that she preaches as a young evangelist manifest themselves later in Julia’s life. A rebirth, a renewal, and a rekindling of her identity as a black woman living life for herself represents a transformation, signifying her renewed path to womanhood. Baldwin’s ingenious use of music and the sermons in this novel represent an analysis of the sermon through the lens of personified preaching. In addition, the manner in which Baldwin uses Julia’s character
to renew her own body as well as the bodies of her listeners proves the theory of performance in personified preaching.

The novel’s beginnings are tinged with gospel music rhythms. From “Daniel Saw The Stone” to “Beams of Heaven as I Go”, “Book One: Have Mercy” jumps into the present as Hall visits Julia’s house with Esther Phillips’s record “From A Whisper to a Scream” playing in the background. When Hall visits Julia, he sees her dressed in an African robe with her hair tied up, smoking a cigarette and grilling ribs. Hall notes a change he sees in her. From the beginning, readers aren’t taken into Julia’s transformation from girl preaching prodigy to regular citizen. Hall portends the movement of Julia from preacher to regular citizen when he sees her in rare form and she turns to him with a smile on her face, “…a child’s smile, which made her so moving a child evangelist, and, later on, so moving.”

The 1901 Christian hymn, *What Are They Doing in Heaven Today?* is one of the first songs analyzed in the first section, “Book One: Have Mercy”, of Baldwin’s novel. This song is significant because it is the song sung before Julia’s final sermon, *Set Thine house in Order*. As this idea of heaven is fleshed out in *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin fantastically personifies not only Julia’s voice as she sings this song before her sermon, but he also personifies her body as she is performing the song. In retrospect, Arthur (the now deceased gospel singer) is singing the song for Mother Bessie’s funeral. At this point in the beginning of the novel, though, Arthur is dead and Julia’s voice is heard in lieu of Arthur’s. She mimics the melisma, the dynamics of how Arthur sang the song before she preached her sermon. The text becomes the music and the music becomes the text. Her voice is compared to a bird singing before an impending storm. In addition, the
bodies of her listeners become markers of affect. The gospel blues music of this hymn from Julia represents the introduction of music into Baldwin’s text. Not only is the body of Julia as a black woman preacher personified here, but the bodies of her listeners also signify the rise and fall, crescendos and decrescendos, that embody Julia’s voice. Julia sings,

I’m thinking of friends whom I used to know
Who lived, and suffered, in this world below.
They’ve gone up to heaven,
And I want to know
What are they doing there now?
Oh, what are they doing in heaven today?
Where sin and sorrow are all washed away,
Where peace abides, like a river, they say.
Oh, what are they doing there now?
There were some
Whose hearts
Were burdened with care.
They passed every moment
In sorrow and tears
They clung! to the cross
with trembling and fears
Oh, what
are they doing there now?  

As Julia sings the Christian hymn, “What are they doing in Heaven Today?” Baldwin uses this specific moment of song before the sermon to signify the meaning of the black woman’s voice in sermon and its attribution to nature. As she sings the hymn, Baldwin eloquently describes Julia’s voice as a muffled moan or “subterranean roar, like the first faint warning of an earthquake.” As Julia’s cacophonous moan becomes coherent melody, the bodies of her listeners, their heads, arms, legs, and torsos of both men and women begin to mark the cadence and dynamics of her voice. Julia’s voice is compared to a bird whose melodious tone, its fortes and pianissimos, match the bodies of the
congregants. Julia is no longer a sole person, but she becomes a figure embodying the song before the sermon. Hall Montana witnesses Julia’s vocal ascension, and her fingers on the piano musically decode the lyrics of the hymn. Here, the text becomes the music and the music becomes the text, and the bodies of the congregants are, once again, likened unto a sea whose waves mimic the mobility of Julia’s voice. 109 Julia’s first sermon in the novel comes as a nine-year old child evangelist. As a child, Julia is thrust into power—she is already given adult-like personality traits and characteristics. Her sermonic speech embodies that of a well-seasoned 40-year-old preacher.

In the beginning of Book Two: “Twelve Gates to the City”, Baldwin gives the reader a microscopic view of everything around Julia.110 The church itself is filled, not another body can enter the congregation. All wait to hear Julia’s words of fire pierce the audience with a spiritual electric current that shocks the body, mind, and soul. Julia, at nine years of age is a powerful figure born in the Deep South—a space where pain, terror, and fear swept the black community. Her frame is small and her eyes deny her actual age. As a nine-year-old preacher, people are mesmerized by her genius. She is innocent, untouched, untainted, yet when she preaches, her voice is not that of a child. Egypt is mentioned several times in this text, and each mention of Egypt refers to Julia.

Baldwin immediately begins book two with Julia’s first sermon.111 The title of book two that prefaces the sermon is “Twelve Gates to the City.” “Twelve Gates to the City” is a song recorded by the renowned American gospel group, The Davis Sisters, from Philadelphia. In both The Amen Corner and JAMH, Baldwin prefaces each sermon with songs sung by black women blues/gospel musicians (Sister Rosetta Tharpe, The Davis Sisters). As Baldwin’s novel is consistently told in a gospel blues mode, the hymns
and spiritual songs which he uses to introduce each section illustrates his representation of gospel blues in both song and sermon. Hall narrates the scene, but it is Julia’s sermon that carries power. The beginning of the first scene of Julia’s sermon shows her elevated above her family, above her peers, as her father “boyishly” and rapidly takes out the platform contraption on which Julia stands. Baldwin illustrates Julia as a symbol of purity, innocence, and prodigiousness. Baldwin writes Julia on a collapsible platform/pulpit, positioning Julia as the congregation sees her—she is a child preacher, a girl prodigy accoutered in white, symbolizing the highest form of purity and moral authority, standing ready to give the Word to her flock.

Baldwin uses the commingling of song into sermon and sermon into song, presenting the first text from which Julia preaches, Psalm 31, as a sacred hymn. Psalm 31 comes from a place of lament and fear. It is a command from the writer to God to turn His listening ear to the trepidatious heart. The writer pleads to be heard, and it is as if the dissonance of the blues is screaming for joy on the other side. Psalm 31 is gospel blues, foreshadowing the trajectory of Julia’s life even after she leaves the pulpit. It is in her departure from the pulpit that Julia finds joy; the lament and sorrow she feels even as a preaching prodigy is reflected in her first sermon. The writer sees the danger all around and pleads to God for help. Baldwin’s placement of Julia’s origins from the Deep South represent to the place from which Julia preaches. As Julia takes her stand on the platform, her spirit incessantly screams, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” 112 Julia preaches from the root of pain and fear. The novel begins with her as a mature woman out of the pulpit and away from its confines; however, in Book Two, Baldwin takes us
back to Julia’s first sermon—a sermon that is preached from the place of pain and
desolation seeking the other side of joy.:

She was dressed all in white, and standing on a platform which was hidden by the
pulpit. This was a special, collapsible platform, constructed by her father, and she
looked at him as she stood there, and as he stood up to read. The hidden platform
looked like a wooden box, with a rope handle...This contraption, and her father,
traveled with Julia everywhere; and made Julia’s appearance in the pulpit seem
mystical, as though she were being lifted up. (63)

The collapsible platform that Baldwin writes upon which Julia stands symbolizes the
ultimate destruction and downtrodden, foreboding illustration of Julia’s ultimate demise
as a child preacher. Julia is presented as a prodigy lifted up to the highest value of moral
authority. The platform on which she stands is one that is built by Joel Miller, her father.
It is her father who builds that platform for Julia only for it to be taken down again and
again. This demonstration of Joel Miller and Julia is a representation that portends both
Julia’s demise as a preacher and Joel Miller’s destruction as her father. Baldwin presents
two dichotomies here within the first few words of Julia’s sermons before she begins.
Julia is a child prodigy dressed in white, representing innocence, yet she stands atop a
collapsible platform hidden by the pulpit. The platform is hidden by the pulpit, so it’s
unable to be seen. It just looks to other people as if Julia is lifted up and exalted, but she
is really standing on shaky ground—a foundation that is sure to collapse, and a
foundation that screams instability.

In Quincy Troupe’s last interview with James Baldwin in 1987, he asks Baldwin
about his definition of the pulpit. In his early days in the pulpit at fourteen and fifteen
years old, Baldwin saw the pulpit as a type of demarcation between the preacher and the
people. Concerning his relationship with his stepfather (or father as he calls him),
Baldwin thought that his movement into the pulpit would allow him to counter what his father was doing/preaching. He saw a lot of self-righteousness and back-biting in the church, but the argument is that the church is not supposed to be like the world:

“In a way that was very important to me, that whole time in the pulpit, because it gave me a kind of distance that was kind of respected; that was the reason I was in the pulpit, to put distance between people and myself. I began to see my people…both ethnically and otherwise. And in the time I was in the pulpit I learned a lot about my father.” 113

Donned in white, Julia stands before the congregation on the pulpit as an exalted figure while her father reads the verse. After the reading, Julia stands head held high, like an exalted priestess, examining the congregation before she speaks, then letting a loud, “Amen!” erupt from her mouth, she narrates the story of David and Goliath. David and Goliath is a notable story in Scripture, where David as a young warrior kills the Philistine giant with stones. Julia’s first sermon is an epitome of the gospel blues. The function of Julia’s gospel blues sermon as her first text delineates the importance of understanding the content of the sermon as literary genre in gospel blues form. Baldwin doesn’t present Julia as a high priestess on a preaching platform without stating the pain and torment she endures as the daughter of Joel Miller:

‘*Amen!*’ said Julia. ‘Now that was *David* talking. You all know who David was? David wrote these *psalms* and I believe they was put to music in the olden times and the people sang and made a joyful noise unto the Lord with the psalms…David went out, one day, looking for this wicked giant, looking for this big, terrible looking, *wicked* giant had everybody in the neighborhood scared to death of him, this giant they called Goliath, and little David went out with his slingshot one day, and he *slew* this wicked giant! (Baldwin 65)

Even though the way in which Julia delivers the narrative of David and Goliath appears to be from the perspective of a seasoned preacher, Julia is just nine years old.
Baldwin writes with a clear knowledge of the arc of the sermon--its crescendos and decrescendos, including the effect of call and response. Baldwin marks the personification of Julia’s preaching performance from her hands, feet, arms, and torso, causing the inanimate parts of Julia’s body to become animate through her sermon.

Julia preaches with an effortless fluidity, peppering her sermon with points of emphasis and rhetorical questions. The form of her sermon is not traditional; she marks her sermon with scriptural mantras from the psalms of David, ranging from Psalm 23 to Psalm 121, illustrating a clear representation of song integrating sermon. The sentence structure of her sermon is continuous, not marked with periods. It is an address that progresses and climbs higher and higher with every step she takes. Julia’s use of anaphora symbolizes her sermonic skill in the mechanics of her delivery. She continuously asks her congregation, “Do you know who David was? Who was this David?”

A steady crescendo that never diminishes ensues, and the pace of the sermon is rapid. Even though she cannot pace back and forth across the pulpit because of her diminutive frame, her movement is still palpable--strong and present. Her eyes, neck, shoulders all move with her speech. The words of her first sermon are mapped onto the body of the congregation in a rhythmic cadence. Her movement is terrifying; her voice is forceful, reminiscent of an earthquake. Her voice awakens the dead, causing dumb stones to speak and the dead to rise again. Julia constantly quotes the psalms and almost all the known passages David writes. Julia ends with an exclamation, and the church erupts in a shout of praise and celebration, thereby responding with “He delivered me!” to her climactic call of “I cried!” After the third call and response, a spiritual earthquake takes
over the church. The floor beneath Julia’s feet shakes and the church as a body moves to the tempo of the sermonic storm with swaying, ringing cries and shouts of praise. The church and Julia’s voice begin to work in unison, and when Julia pauses, the church pauses:

The floor beneath my feet shook, the very walls seemed to rock, the storm burst in a thunder of hands and feet and the wrath of the piano, the racing—like horses!—of the tambourines, and the people started to shout. Julia stood there, above it, watching, like a high priestess. She had caused this storm, or it had come through her, but she was neither singing nor shouting, and her eyes might have been fixed on Egypt. (Baldwin 67-68)

Julia has a terrifying presence, it isn’t just her preacherly voice that thunders across the church booming in the ears of the congregants, but her entire persona—her entire being is “terrifying.” Julia’s sermonic performance transfixes her audience, like the melismatic improvisations of a jazz musician captivates the full attention of an audience. Each time she mentions David, her voice rises in pitch, modulating to higher keys, and as her voice moves higher the congregation moves higher with her. Her voice had the ability to terrify silent stones into speaking and those who are dead to rise again. This is the essence of the preacherly “grain” in Julia’s voice.116

As a narrator, Hall Montana witnesses the sermonic storm coming through Julia whose rains drenches all who gathered to hear her. Julia’s personified preaching is terrifying yet miraculous, forceful yet supernatural, melodious and magical. This sermon is a clarion call of deliverance from oppressive power, from physical subjugation. She uses the story of David and Goliath as a blues tale told preached with gospel shouting power. Baldwin uses this narrative and structures her way of delivering the sermon as our first preacherly introduction of Julia at nine years old to show the unexpected
transformative power of a preaching prodigy on the souls of individuals who were once sleeping but are now alive from her fiery tongue. The narrative of her first sermon presents itself as she becomes David fighting the Goliaths in her life. Even though Hall doesn’t narrate the abuse of Julia by her father until later in Book Two, Julia was the city under siege. Her physical and spiritual vessels were under siege, and it is not until later in the novel that she inhabits the strong city of which she preaches. Her preaching was the sound needed to start the redemptive call not to the congregation but to herself.

*Up Above My Head*
*I Hear Music in the Air*
*Up Above My Head*
*I Hear Music in the Air*
*There must be a God somewhere...*

Every flourish of Julia’s hand, every swing of her arm, every motion of her feet and the fluidity of this first sermon demonstrates the fervor and resolute power of the black woman preacher’s voice. The music is in her hands, and the rhythm is in her feet. Hall describes the reaction of the congregation to the sermon. As Hall narrates this scene, the eyes of Julia and her father bear significance. There is an immediate distinction between Julia’s eyes and her father’s; her father’s eyes—while possessing an evil spirit—are described as bright while Julia’s eyes are described as dark, flashing, and distant on an “untouched” face. Our first reference to Egypt in the text stems from Hall’s description of Julia’s appearance/aura. He recounts her dark, flashing, distant eyes...marking the time that her parents stole her from Egypt. This entire description of Julia is dichotomous; her father’s eyes are bright...hers are dark and flashing. She is described in the beginning as being dressed in white appearing as a high priestess yet her peers see her as a witch who
puts spells on the people over whom she’s in charge. Egypt is considered both a place of refuge and a place of oppression. It is seen as a place to come up out of and to flee to. Even as Julia reads the Word, she is viewed as a child before her time; the sound of her voice is different from the rest; the blue notes are heard in her voice. Her appearance is different or “othered” from the rest. She is not like the others; she is considered “set apart.” Yet, even as the congregation reads the Psalm, Hall feels in this moment as though he is making a precarious promise. There is a mysterious aura that follows Julia, and it is evident to all who see her.

“Her father sat down--he always stood to read, the congregation sat--and she stared out over us, suddenly very far above us, something like a high priestess, that was true, from some other time and place.” (Baldwin 65)

In the personal archive of Baldwin’s original manuscript of Just Above My Head Book Two: Twelve Gates to the City, he writes with a ballpoint pen “Come on in the Lord’s house—it’s going to rain.” At the bottom of his script, Baldwin writes, “a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.” This quote comes from the book of James in the New Testament, “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that and suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” On the side of this quote he writes, “St. James” and then to the left of “St. James” he writes “a single-minded man?” as if he’s questioning whether to solidify a double-minded man or single-minded man. Baldwin uses the book of James in the New Testament and the narrative of trials and tribulation and the testing of one’s faith to preface Julia. Before
book two was even written, Baldwin knew of the type of instability he wanted to write for his characters, specifically Joel and Julia.

Not only is the blues tale illustrated in the text of the sermons Julia preaches, but Julia herself becomes a blues heroine of many dichotomies. For her first sermon, the church is crowded and at once Julia is labeled as both “holy” and a “freak”: “The church was packed, for a child evangelist was, after all, something in the name of a holy freak-show.” At the same time that Julia represents that which is good and is surrounded by that which is bad, she was labeled as something more than the “promise and the prophecy fulfilled.” It’s as if Baldwin saw more in Julia than what we are presented. Or it is as if there was more inside of Julia than she knew. While she was standing on a platform high and lifted up, evil was all around her. She stood atop of a collapsible platform that was built by the one abusing her, and in the midst of being seen as both holy and a freak, the blues would not last. The melancholic evil would not last. Julia was diminutive in form with hair and skin coarser and darker than Joel’s. Joel was presented in a presence of light but inwardly was evil whereas Julia was described with dark, flashing, and “unbelievably ancient” eyes in her “tiny, untouched face.” She is a model for what is innocent and what is not.

While Julia’s first sermon is a psalm; her second sermon is a lament. It’s as if through this sermon, Julia knows of what is to come with her father, Joel. As Julia takes the pulpit to eulogize Mother Bessie, she feels something entering into her and something departing. The text she chooses for Mother Bessie’s funeral is the same text from which Margaret Alexander first preaches in *The Amen Corner*: Isaiah 38:1, *Set Thine House in Order*. Before Julia utters a word, she looks at every individual in the church. A
particular cognizance envelopes Julia, and she notices the deacons, the pastor, and others
around her waiting with baited breath for her first clause. Before this last sermon, though,
that summer her mother, Amy Miller, passes away. What Julia preaches at Mother
Bessie’s funeral and the actions of Julia’s mother on her deathbed are equally reminiscent
of what Hezekiah does after he prays to God for deliverance

On the day of Mother Bessie’s funeral, Julia feels death’s hands ready to grab her.
As she walks to the pulpit to deliver her second sermon, Set Thine House in Order, a
profound anguish bubbles in her belly. After her father ceremoniously reads the passage
from Isaiah, Julia proclaims, “‘Amen! ...My text is: set thine house in order.’”

‘We come together here,’ said Julia, ‘because that message just came for one of
us, just like it’s going to come for all of us, each and every one of us one day. She
might have had her face turned to the wall, but then, she had to sit up and look
around her, and hear the message and we believe, amen! That she called on the
Holy Ghost, and she got busy with the Holy Ghost and she started to put her
house in order.’ (Baldwin 161)

With Julia’s last sermon of preached comes an opportunity for new life. Not life in the
form of physical birth, but the death of Mother Bessie symbolizes Julia preaching to
herself. The sermon of Set Thine House in Order was preached to the congregation of
Mother Bessie’s funeral, but that sermon was for Julia. There is a significant recognition
of all the parts of the house (which symbolize the body) that need cleaning. Julia had
endured the abuse of her father long enough. The afflicting abuse she suffers from her
father represents the death of her old body. The fiery fervor that sweeps the church in the
beginning of the novel during Julia’s first sermon, does not occur in her second. The
climactic element of the first sermon is not embodied in the second. Julia’s second
sermon is sobering to herself and her listeners. After saying “amen” the funeral
proceeded. Julia’s job here was done, marking her last sermon *in the church*. The people around Julia weren’t aware that this would be her last sermon. After Mother Bessie’s funeral, Julia labored to take care of her mother Amy on her deathbed. To other people, Julia was still “striving on holy ground.”

Time stands on Julia’s sermon and her “house.” Yet in this context here, the term house constitutes the body physically and spiritually. Joel Miller strips Julia of the tools that were fashioned to build her house; he strips her through his sexual abuse and flogging of her body. Julia’s body goes to a deep place of anguish where even she thought would be impossible to climb out of. Her body bleeds blue.

In spite of the blue-note cries in the valley of spiritual death around her, Julia’s dark, flashing eyes speak promise--a promise to live and not die:

“Julia had become gaunt indeed, but death refused to prefer her over her mother: life, inexorably, sat in Julia’s face and her eyes held the furious, driven repentance of the living.” (Baldwin 164)

Walking away from her last sermon, Julia feels an inevitable shift in herself and the people around her. The rape of her body by her father, the abuse she endures as a fourteen-year-old girl who is expected to comport herself as if she were older than her years constitutes her valley of dry bones. When Julia’s mother dies a couple of months later, she experiences a level of displacement. The house that used to be a home was no longer a place she wanted to go. She feels like a stranger in that house. A piece of her sermon returns to her memory as she’s walking away from her meeting with Crunch and Arthur: “oh, Lord, can these bones live?” Julia thinks to herself, “Can these bones live?” She needed breath to breathe on her dry bones: her dry bones were as a result of her father abusing her, increasing the blue notes around her. With every thrust of his
pelvis into her, her bones clanked on the floor like hard steel. Joel was killing his daughter. Just above Julia’s head, the weight of her father’s abuse hangs over her. Trapped and not knowing how to escape, she looks for a way out.

The most powerful displays of black feminist sermonic practice in *JAMH* come from “the power of self-definition.”¹²⁵ Black women writers in particular agree that the power to save the self from an oppressed state is to lean on the power within in order to heal the grieved spirit from the inside out. As evidenced in literature, either from writing letters or from oral communication of telling their stories aloud, there are many forms of agency that black women in particular use to regain a new sense of self.¹²⁶ There are two moments in this text when Julia preaches outside of the pulpit: in her conversations with Arthur when she sees him again for the first time in years and her last meeting with Hall Montana. She expresses the renewal and transformation she feels not only in her physical body but also in her spirit. She is preaching to Arthur here. An epiphany arises for Julia during their conversation, and she realizes that when she was preaching in the pulpit, she believed what she was saying, but she didn’t know it. Now that she’s out of the pulpit, she knows what she was saying versus what she believed. There is a marked difference here between believing and knowing:

> Julia declares, “Maybe I see people better than I did. Maybe I see myself. When I was preaching, I don’t think I knew what I was saying. I didn’t know what it meant.” Arthur asks, “How could you preach it--if you didn’t know it was true?” Julia responds, “Oh, I believed it--but I didn’t know. And now, maybe, I don’t believe it but I’m beginning to know.’ She looked at him and smiled. ‘I know that sounds crazy.’” (Baldwin 280)

Julia hears herself again, and there is an unequivocal change Arthur notices about her. It stuns him to his core; he doesn’t comprehend it. He knows the change in Julia is there,
but he cannot understand it...he cannot comprehend her. Julia is just above Arthur’s head.¹²⁷

When Julia and Hall go on their first date to the village, Hall realizes something in Julia’s face has changed. He acknowledges this newness that he sees is like Julia had risen...like she had come back from the dead:

I see Julia’s face, that changing face; for a very long time, I could not take my eyes from her face. I saw the face of the child, and the face of the little girl preacher, the faces I had always seen--or never seen--and a new face, or faces, I had never before confronted. Everything she said and did that night was touched, for me, with the miraculous--it was as though she had come back from the dead. (Baldwin 354)

Later in the novel when Julia returns from her trip to Abidjan, the rebirth continues for Julia. Going to Africa was about going to a new space--a new realm of freedom and bringing that sweet taste of freedom back with her to New York. Julia’s entire appearance changes from her accoutrements, to the texture of her hair, and her skin complexion. Her skin is darker, her hair is coarser, her reflection changes. She immerses herself in this newness; this was a baptism for her--to wash away the old and re-emerge with the new. When she immerses herself from the cleansing bath, she scrubs her hair, skin, allowing everything old to fall and wash away. When she rubs her body with oils and perfumes, she relaxes in the scents of her newfound present.

Julia’s language noticeably changes and black feminist sermonic practice’s sacred agenda starts to stretch outside of the pulpit for her. The power and agency of herself that Julia regains is a part of what makes the black feminist sermonic practice palpable in and outside of the pulpit, for it is not through the men that she finds solace. Julia finds comfort, redemption, deliverance in the sermon--her words that she knows herself to be
true. It’s the application of the sermon to the life of the black woman preacher that demarcates salvation from stagnation.

Both novels portray black women preachers and their roles as leaders in dissenting churches and homes. Trudier Harris, in *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*, argues that the men in *JAMH* are threatened by Julia’s power and they subjugate her by attempting to wield their power on her. However, it is through the *sermons* that Julia wields the most power. Harris asserts that Julia is the most powerful woman portrayed in the novel, and it is through the Word that she delivers that power. The same way in which she delivers the power through her sermons is the same way she usurps man’s power over her. Harris continues,

> The unconquerable center of Julia’s being, backed by a religious conviction, keeps her power beyond suppression by Hall while it also suggests that she may suffer, but she will never be subdued.

Illustrated by Baldwin’s portrayal of other black women in his previous novels, Julia’s character is distinct from the rest of the black women characters in the novel. The gendered aspect of Baldwin’s novel is significant because he makes Hall the main narrator but places a black woman in one of the highest positions of authority, particularly in the church. In this narrative, Hall is a “man’s man.” He feels women should be cared for and loved, but he does not see women as equal to men socially.

Because Hall cannot possibly comprehend Julia’s story on his own--it’s above his head--this already presents some challenges. Julia’s story is a narrative that we must decode for ourselves as black women, not necessarily through Hall Montana’s telling of it. Julia is intangible, not able to be easily comprehended. With all of her complexities and complications, though, Julia is a black woman figure who stands above the rest.
Julia escapes from the limits men place on women. Through her turmoil and pain, the space which Julia creates for herself is too profound to be designated as safe, yet she has molded a space that revolutionizes, and transforms, heals, redeems, and lives. It is with great purpose that Baldwin chooses to write a black girl proclaiming truth. It is with great purpose that through Julia’s “fall from grace” and hollow dry bones that her sermons for herself serve as her milk and meat to nourish and uplift her out of the abysmal valley.

In both the novel and play, the church represents the tree but when people come to the church hungry, they leave hungry. The hungry people come to the tree for fruit, but because of the church’s immorality, there is no fruit and people still leave hungry. An empty vessel cannot pour water. This is what happened in both Margaret’s and Julia’s churches. Julia and Margaret were looking to feed the people through the Word and power, but they were hungry themselves.

The black women preachers of which Baldwin writes don’t remain preachers in the conventional sense, yet they evolve outside of what the conventions of their position meant to them. Alexander leaves the church and gives her last sermon on love. Miller has left the church, takes a trip to Abidjan, and comes back with her own sermon, telling Hall at the end of the novel what she’s learned and preaching more at the end of the novel than she does in the beginning: “Sometimes now that I’m out of the pulpit, I feel more in the pulpit than I did when I was preaching.” What Baldwin wants to show us is Julia was never fully herself in the beginning of the novel. What she learns most about herself is when she steps out of the confines of the pulpit into her own “power of self-definition.” Both Margaret and Julia transform and leave the church. There is an evolution of the preacherly position here and Baldwin’s critique of the church is reflected when both
women preachers leave the church and step outside of their traditional roles. Baldwin shifts our level of thinking that is locked into traditions of believing the man as the ultimate moderator of authority and brings in the black woman—the black woman who is often thought of as the mule of the world, who works, toils, travails assiduously is castigated but is brought back as a renewed, powerful figure holding the keys to the kingdom.

Rather than present a monolith of the church, Baldwin illustrates the variances, imperfections and dissonance in the black church. In The Amen Corner and JAMH, he presents the church as a multi-dimensional space with many layers that are uncovered from the immoral actions and betrayals of the congregation. Baldwin writes in his introduction to The Amen Corner that Sister Margaret’s “sense of reality [was] dictated by the society’s assumption, which also becomes her own, of her inferiority. Her need for human affirmation, and also for vengeance, expresses itself in her merciless piety; and her love, which is real but which is also at the mercy of genuine and absolutely justifiable terror, turns her into a tyrannical matriarch.”

Out of both Margaret and Julia, Julia is the one that voices most articulately the freedom that she “acquires” at the end of the novel.

Julia’s dinner meetings with both Arthur and Hall are where she voices the strongest sermons. At the end of the novel, Julia realizes now more about herself than ever before. Hall assures her that he is free and he tells her what he’s going to do with his freedom. He’s going to watch over the people that he loves with the freedom he has. She replies, “‘That’s a two-way street,’ she said. She watched me for a moment. ‘You’ve been somewhere, too.’”
When we see Hall and Julia first meet in the beginning of *JAMH*, Julia tells Hall, Ruth, Tony, and Odessa what she discovered about Mother Bessie’s funeral, reiterating that she realized she had to set *her* house in order:

‘I’ll never forget. That afternoon made a great difference in my life. I’ll never forget that afternoon. I sensed—I guess I *knew*—that I had come to the end of my ministry—of *that* part of my ministry, anyway—and that it was *my* house that I would have to set in order. If I was to live. I was preaching Mother Bessie’s funeral. But you don’t always get carried to the graveyard when you die.’ (Baldwin 41-42)

Death was not ready for Julia; through her sermons that she preached for others there were still more lessons to be learned and more preaching to do outside of the pulpit. The pulpit with its regulations and requirements of order confined Julia. Outside of the pulpit, she observed more, she learned more, and it is the manner in which she learns her lessons after her trip to Abidjan that distinguishes Julia the girl preacher to Julia the blues heroine. Julia is not only able to pass on the keys to the kingdom through her words to herself, but also to Hall. Julia lives, she finds her breath, a breath that blows the dissonant, blue notes into dust, and she finds her voice again. With words like a sermonic fire, she can hope again, she can love again, and she lives again.

Both Julia and Margaret are blues heroines, for through their sermons and preaching, they found a way of retrieving joy, solace, and comfort, and even more so when they leave their pulpit positions in the church. When Margaret and Julia depart from the church, they aren’t leaving their spiritual groundings or their moral compass, yet leaving the church allows their moral compass to become more in tune and more directed towards a particular agency and mobility of themselves that these characters didn’t have when they were preaching from the pulpit:
As a response to his rationale for writing *JAMH* and other works, Baldwin writes,

“How I came to write the novel, or to be driven to write it; obviously involves my personal history; which scrutinized with sufficient rigor, would carry us back to Adam. I was born in a certain time, and place, into the hands of certain people, as is everyone. In this case, the people were my immediate family, and the people into whose hands they had been born. I had been born black, in a white country.”¹³⁶

With the same tension Baldwin experienced with his father, he wrote into Julia’s experience with Joel, albeit in a much more violent and forceful way.

Asserting that *JAMH* is a “gospel tale told in the blues mode”, Eleanor Traylor defines a blues hero as “[he] who is able to report the abyss while, at the same time, encouraging us of our possibilities…”¹³⁷ It’s not uncommon when scholars discuss blues music with Baldwin’s works¹³⁸—it is apparent that Baldwin incorporates the blues in his literary style and in his characters, but the way in which Baldwin writes the blues in the sermons of Julia and Margaret is what distinguishes these characters and texts from other works. Baldwin writes both Julia’s and Margaret’s lives as blue-notes. Both Margaret and Julia are blue note heroines; we often speak of the blue note heroes in Baldwin’s works, but what about the blue-note women, the blue-note heroines who turn their mourning into melody and who turn their sorrow into song?

At the end of her essay, Traylor sketches with her words a “House of Tales”. “House of Tales” is a great tabernacle that is reminiscent of the church. There is a welcome table down the aisle at the center of the church where three prominent figures stand. On one side of the aisle elders stand with a song reminding others of the assiduity endured in order to overcome hundreds of years of slavery. On the other side of the aisle stand the fruit of the slaves’ children (their great grandchildren). Traylor depicts *JAMH* as
a house or vision positioned within a city where plush fields plentiful with great harvests of cotton and corn are seen. According to Traylor, on the right hand side the “ancient tellers of the tale” sit and on the left “the new.” In Traylor’s words, these figures embody Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright with James Baldwin standing at the center. As I recreate this illustration in my mind within the context of this chapter of blues preaching heroines, I see writers of the significant literary canon of black women writers, Zora Neale Hurston standing on the right, Toni Morrison standing on the left, and both Margaret and Julia standing right in the center with her arms open telling everyone to, “come on in the Lord’s house; it’s going to rain.”

In conclusion, both Baldwin’s The Amen Corner and Just Above My Head illustrate, through the stories of both Margaret and Julia, black women preachers as blues heroines through a gospel-blues lens. In my discovery of his personal papers, I’ve included below, an unpublished poem Baldwin wrote that channels The Amen Corner. Not only does it channel The Amen Corner, but also pieces of Just Above My Head resonate between each stanza. Written in 1964 ten years after The Amen Corner, this poem is composed as prophecy; it is a sermonic trajectory of the African Diaspora from the Middle Passage to the streets of Harlem and even to the twenty-first century. It is a call and response and poetic prophecy that speak openly about the social justice issues of this nation from a sermonic platform. It is the reason why Amiri Baraka aptly labels Baldwin as “God’s black revolutionary mouth”, for Baldwin asserts, “To love man is to love God. To preach [the] love of God and live without the love of man will lead to disaster for the wrath of the righteous is great [inevitably]. The need of love is greater
than the need of glory.” Without love, the righteous must revolt and their wrath will be merciless reflecting their instruction.”

Baldwin’s Poem:

“Black boy in the river
Amen
Black boy on the needle
Amen
[Eastland] (White folks) cutting coupons
Amen, Amen, Amen
Black mothers praying
Amen
Black heroes dying
Amen
And white folks lying
Amen, Amen, Amen.

White is not a color.
Amen.
And processed hair’s a scandal.
Amen.
Both are a mighty sickness.
Amen.
White folks keep buying Mau Tau*
Amen.
And blacks buy Nadinola.¹⁴¹
Amen.
Somebody’s getting richer.
Amen.
And we can’t face our mirrors.
Amen.

Uncle Tom is dead now.
Amen.
Even Sambo’s gone now.
Amen.
Mister Nkrumah’s here now.
Poor Mr. Charlie
Amen.
Got dues to pay, now. Amen.
And don’t know how, now.
We want our freedom
Amen
Don’t want no projects,
Amen
NO white friends grinning
Amen, Amen, Amen.
We bled and died here
Amen
And lived in fear here
Amen
Were bought and sold here
Amen Amen Amen.
The deal’s gone down now
Amen
We’ll make no deals, now
Amen
We’ve paid our dues now,
Amen, Amen, Amen.

We built this land, sir,
Amen.
At your command, sir.
Amen.
Beneath your whip, sir.
Amen, Amen, Amen.
Our time has come, now.
Amen.
Or yours is ended.
Amen.
That’s where it is, friend.
Amen.
Amen, Amen, Amen.
We’ll walk together.
Amen.
Or give up walking. Amen
We’re tired of talking.

The labor unions.
Amen.
The space of cities.
Amen.
And Education
Amen.
To save this nation
Amen.
Are ours by night, friend.
Amen.
You buy our leaders
Amen.
And kill our children.
Amen.
And ask our patience.
Amen, Amen, Amen
We came in chains, here.
Amen.
You came in steerage.
   Amen.

But we were kidnapped.
Amen, Amen, Amen.
You lied about our history.
Amen.
And lied about our women.
Amen.
And lied about yourselves
And now we don’t believe you.
Amen.
This lie is yours to live with
Amen.
And we will save this country.
Amen.
For your souls, our children’s
Amen.
And turn you into men, yet.
Amen, Amen, Amen.  

142
“I stood in the authenticity of my being: Black, preacher, Baptist, woman. For the same God who made me a preacher made me a woman, and I am convinced that God was not confused on either account.”
-Prathia Hall

“In the absence of vaulted ceilings, stained glass windows and other pleasures of the eyes the black preacher’s spoken word becomes the vehicle through which insurgent and dispossessed listeners encounter the sublime.”
-Dr. Crystal J. Lucky

“Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues on fire.”
-Gloria Anzaldúa

According to W.E.B. DuBois in his 1903 publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, the “Negro church of to-day is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character.”\(^{143}\) More explicitly, the black church is also defined as “the crucible in which the systematic faith affirmations and the principles of biblical interpretation have been revealed.”\(^{144}\) The church in general but the black church in particular represents a place of refuge, solace, and activism. It is a place where strategies of resistance to oppression, subjugation, and denigration are talked about, formed, and implemented. The church—the black church—serves as an implement of healing and restoration from the “troubles of this world.”
In 1903, DuBois’s statement was a true, conceptual representation of the theological nexus of the black community. Men led their congregations in song and Scripture, while the women prayed and listened to the fiery admonition of the preacher who with crescendoing claps, a thunderous dance, hoarse voice, and perspiring palms raised to the heavens, called for freedom and reformation from hegemony and white supremacy for his community. One hundred fourteen years later, the makeup of the black church has changed. While some of DuBois’s descriptions concerning the church remain the same, other illustrations have been altered. Prayers of hope, songs to soothe the soul, and shouts of praise are still extant, but the social justice cry lingers. The resonant sound of the social justice cry ranges from a pianissimo snivel to a fortissimo wail. It rings in the ears of this nation like a cacophony, jarring the hearing and visibility of the black community that yearns to be pulled back into united harmony.

This united harmony of race, class, and gender intersections remains to be seen. What is the role of the black woman preacher in today’s battle for social justice? How does the voice of the black woman in today’s pulpit reshape and reform the social justice struggle of which millions of black bodies encounter everyday? What is the function of the black woman preacher in today’s society? How can the black woman preacher be the voice for the voiceless? How can the black woman who has for so long carried the burdens of everyone else in the world continue, through her sermons and songs, articulate the issues of the black woman?

How does the black woman preacher, through her sermons, release that marginalization and render her voice and herself visible from invisibility? In this chapter, I analyze the specific ways that black women preachers in their sermons deal with the
issues of social justice that affect them and the people around them. Black women have an aptness for formulating healing spaces through their words and songs and circles of transformation that are unique to the black woman preacher. Why does this matter now? Now, more than ever, there is an attack on the black woman in politics, education, and also the pulpit.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how the black woman preacher uses her sermons as modes of resistance to the violence enacted upon black bodies. Social justice issues invade the preaching moment every Sunday in the pulpit, but the black woman preacher’s position of “holding the light” and bringing to justice those very things that attempt to hold the black community hostage is specific to this chapter. Using Kelly Brown Douglas’s text, *Stand Your Ground—Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Katie G. Canon’s essay on the emergence of black feminist consciousness, Alice Walker, and others, I argue how the conversations and sermons of Bishop Dr. Barbara M. Amos, Bishop Vashti McKenzie, and Dr. Leslie D. Callahan, Bishop Dr. Millicent Hunter, and other preachers speak to the politics of the black body. Through these interviews, I use the words of each black woman preacher as text to illustrate how each of them speaks to each other across the aisle and across denominations. What each of these women makes clear is the function of the black woman preacher in today’s society. What they make clear is what we’ve seen from black women since the 19th century who sermonize their speech against social injustices.

Countering the notion of the black faith tradition freeing the black body from double consciousness, I problematize Douglas’s argument intersecting the black faith tradition and double-consciousness. In her fourth chapter, “A Father’s Faith: The
Freedom of God”, Douglas creates the narrative of the black faith tradition as a tool of protest and resistance to social injustices concerning the black community. In her argument, Douglas writes, “[Black faith] frees black people from the ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of [white] others.’” Her argument evinces double-consciousness as a non-entity in the black faith tradition when its existence as a peculiar sensation still exists, even in 2018. In her chapter, she rightly acknowledges the feelings of the father of Trayvon Martin, Tracy Martin, illustrating how Tracy’s unshattered faith speaks to the black community. While the father’s faith is a true notion and Douglas’s inclusions of Maria Stewart and Ida B. Wells evoke an empathetic response to her chapter, where is the illustration of the faith of the mothers? Where is the voice of the mothers in this context? We know they are there. We see them every time the camera covers an unjust ruling concerning their sons or daughters. Where and how are their images being portrayed? In this chapter I also speak to how the sermons of these women help us overcome race, class, and gender inequities, but I also argue that these sermons are a reminder that we are not yet free but still working to constantly rid ourselves of the problem that DuBois eloquently writes in the early 20th century. It is still a problem we are fighting today-- this “peculiar sensation” that we term double-consciousness--and as black bodies, this problem continues to follow us. The problem of the 20th century of which DuBois carefully articulates in The Souls of Black Folk, is still the same problem today: the problem of the color line. This peculiar sensation and feeling that permeates the black body, this double-consciousness-this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others still exists. We see this double-consciousness through the assassinations of black bodies from Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice to
Michael Brown and Sandra Bland, reminding the black community and this world that the struggle continues.

The constant deaths of black bodies at the hands of police and sometimes at the hands of individuals who unofficially deem themselves as the police continue to sting America, vexing the minds of those family members and friends who are incessantly affected by this for the rest of their lives. When these violent acts occur, it is a pain and a hurt that permeates the black community as a whole, but black women in particular. Father’s Day weekend, June 16th, 2017, I watch Valerie Castile angrily confront the media on the horrific news of the Minnesota police officer who shot and killed Philando Castile with his girlfriend and daughter in the car as witnesses. The boiling anger inside of her continues to be stirred as she thinks of her son’s death and countless other black men and women who have experienced tragic death at the hands of police. Listen to the voice of the mother, listen to the voice of the black woman, she is telling you something. Castile’s mother lividly states with fervor that America as we know is not evolving, but *devolving.*

The lugubrious cry of the black woman, the chilling scream of the black mother for her children, and palpable fear of the black child is a resounding fortissimo. The echo of her voice joins the reverberations of other black women and mothers from Sybrina Fulton and Gwen Carr to Valerie Bell and Geneva Reed-Veal, who produce through their efforts spaces of activism, circles of influence, and words of wisdom that *preach* to the masses. In addition to examining the social justice sermons of black woman preachers in the pulpit, I also look at the mothers—the black women—who use their space outside of theological institutions to preach their narratives and reflections.
Kelly Brown Douglas’ publication, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, was published at a gripping time when the senseless killings of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Rekia Boyd, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and countless others rocked the nation. Douglas positions the faith of black men in her chapter but what she doesn’t talk about is the faith of the black women and in the context of my chapter the faith of the black women preachers. Where is the woman’s voice, the woman’s faith, the woman’s leadership, and the woman’s presence in the faith struggle? Black faith as Douglass calls it is central to both men and women. I’m not saying that she’s excluding women from this “faith discourse” altogether, but in the matter of social justice and as we are seeing now with Philando Castile and his mother’s anger and rage, it is now more apparent now more than ever that the black woman’s feeling, her voice, her position and her sermonic presence is the most significant here.

Further, Douglas expounds in this chapter her notion of the “black faith” tradition—a tradition that is longstanding in a majority of black churches in America. Douglas defines the black faith tradition as “…a discourse of resistance that allows black people to affirm their innate and created worth, even when everything around them suggests their utter worthlessness” and positions it within the parameters of resistance. 147 Douglas continues with this particular definition of faith and asserts that this black faith tradition “frees black people from the ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of [white] others.’” 148 Although Douglas presents a clear point about the intersection of the black faith tradition and double-consciousness allowing black people to develop an autonomous mind that counters white hegemony and oppressive natures that demonize the black body, I would push this concept further and argue that the black faith tradition
of which she writes does not “free” the black body from double-consciousness. When someone is free from something, they no longer have to deal with the issue or idea. When they are free, that concept no longer pertain to them. True freedom dismisses an oppressive notion and renders it non-existent. When someone is free, they are released from that problem, never for that problem to be seen again. Everyday, black people still wrestle with double-consciousness. This problem has not disappeared. To be totally free from something means a complete dismantling of the oppressive chains in and around the individual affected from said oppression. We as a people are still working towards this desired freedom.

DuBois coins the term double-consciousness in 1903, outlining the racial problem of the 20th century. One hundred fourteen years later, black Americans still wrestle with this concept—this idea of being a seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world.”149 The mind is released from double-consciousness chains, but double-consciousness is still exists. The intersection of the black faith tradition and double-consciousness helps the black body cope with always seeing yourself through the eyes of others.

One of the goals of this chapter is to address how the sermons of these women speak to the politics of the black body. Here, I’m not only writing about speeches made by black women about the black body; I carefully mark specific sermons from black women in the pulpit whose preacherly moments provide and create active conversation and diligent strategy to show communities, the nation, and the world that the voice of the black woman preacher matters in moments of entrenched social injustices.
The Sermon as Art

In Cleophus J. LaRue’s *The Heart of Black Preaching*, one has to match the connection between the sermon in black preaching and African American life. When the black preacher prepares to deliver Scripture and exegete it in such a way that the listener comprehends, there is an element in black preaching that cannot escape the discussion of black life in the sermon. In carefully exegeting a sermon, the preacher will both point to Scripture and the social occurrences of black life. In order to understand black preaching, one must understand the context in which that sermon is delivered. There is always intentionality behind the delivery of a particular sermon. I find this particularly true as I examine black women preachers and how they address the listener. LaRue writes, “While it is true that most black theologizing takes place in the pulpit, it is also true that a certain type of experiential brooding occurs in the embryonic stage of the sermon prior to the actual exegesis of the text. This deliberate, subliminal musing is an essential ingredient in the creation of the black sermon.”¹⁵⁰ In his analysis of black preaching in general, LaRue lays the groundwork for understanding two very important points in black preaching: how the preacher’s incorporation and exegetical emphasis of black social reality in the sermon and its pertinence to Scripture and also how the text of the sermon “…impacts the sense in which God is believed to be present in and through scripture.”¹⁵¹

The discussion of and resistance to racial prejudice and discrimination has been integral to the black sermonic experience since the 19th century.¹⁵² In this piece of scholarship, LaRue outlines the organization and structure of the black church and the essence of sermonic delivery, yet what remains to be seen is how the black woman preacher engages in these social justice concerns. As a result, the aim of this chapter is to
discuss the manner in which the black woman preacher’s sermons in these periods of social cacophony become not just the message, but the movement. To push this point further, this chapter also concerns how not just the preacher’s sermons become the movement, but how in these sermonic moments of social justice discourse the preacher herself is the movement.

In her essay, *Moving on Down the Line*, Hortense Spillers vividly describes the embodiment of the sermon in her essay. Drawing on instances of sermonic embodiment from the speeches of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., she emphasizes that these men’s sermons stand as a symbolic form that molds and shapes the psyches of the black American public. Indeed, Spillers delves deeply into the sermonic form, concentrating on the impact of its written form. The written form of the sermon, no doubt, brings to light the absence of black men and women’s ability to write or read. I would push this examination of the written form of the sermon that Spillers suggests further and examine the oral performativity in this chapter, for there is a distinct difference between the oral and the written, relating to the sermon.

The use of black feminist sermonic practice has never been clearer. Its praxis counters the deeply-entrenched hegemonic structures of racism, sexism, and classism that makes women of color and particularly the voices of black women invisible. Again, the goal of black feminist sermonic practice is to fight against white hegemony and create sermonic spaces for the voices of the just to be heard. How is black feminist sermonic practice different from simply black feminism? The difference is that this chapter looks at how black women preachers in the pulpit—in those traditional sermonic spaces—create those same spaces with their sermons outside of the church. The very same mode
of healing for black women that occurs inside of the church should be the very same mode that reaches black women outside of the church—a sermonic balm—healing speech that concerns the needs of the black woman. Often, I realize that black women preachers examine the women of the Bible for reflection and sermonic delivery. Many current news stories represent an example of black feminist voices even on an international scale resisting and fighting against dominant white voices, even those of white females.

Dr. Leslie D. Callahan, the first woman pastor of St. Paul’s Baptist Church in Philadelphia, posits the sermon as a proclamation that envisions the world as it is and lends prophetic voice to the world as it should be. It is clear that the sermon is an art form:

“...the sermon in worship is the space of proclamation. It’s the occasion for the articulation of a particular contemporary understanding of the Gospel. But because it’s contemporary it also reflects an understanding of the world as it is and envisions...it articulates a vision of the world as it should be or as it might be.”

The way that a particular sermon is crafted, organized, its content expanded, reduced, and then expanded again reflects the diligence and sculpting that the artist or preacher gives to her art form—her sermon. Hortense Spillers sees the function of the sermon as a “psychic configuring of [African Americans’] communities.” The sermon in this chapter is personified as a moving, breathing, life-altering, mind-changing art form. Separate from just an amalgamation of poetic words on paper, the essence of the sermon is its function apart from manuscript, apart from its image in script form. How does the sermon contribute to the mental shaping and contouring of the black community? In times of social justice chaos, the sermon shapes the psyche of those willing to put its proposed strategies to practice.
In my conversations with Dr. Sharon S. Riley, Stellar-Award winning songwriter, psalmist, and senior pastor of Faith Deliverance Christian Center in Norfolk, Virginia, she mentions a great homiletics professor, Dr. Myles, at Virginia Union University who taught her that a great sermon is like building a house. A house usually has a porch which is the introductory piece of the sermon, the house itself is the text or Word of the sermon, and the walls, windows, décor of the house represent the intricacies of the sermonic art (the anecdotes, or personal narratives the preacher tells to have her congregation relate what’s she carrying to their own stories). The roof of the house is the celebratory moment of the sermon, but in each sermon however the walls and windows and décor were built is a testament to which part of the house speaks to you specifically. The difference between male preaching and women preaching, according to Dr. Riley, is the careful, methodical, nurturing way that women build the porch:

“With women preachers I think it is the engagement at the beginning that tends to be somewhat different from men…even the exposition of the Word and the building of those smaller rooms within the message [tend] to give you parts and pieces that [you always] walk away with something. You hear the message and you get to the roof, but there’s always a room in the house that was yours.”

According to Dr. Riley, music is the porch of the house. By developing the house’s foundation, the song either helps to open the door of the house or close the door.

In 1903, the black woman is absent from this particular conversation let alone the preacherly conversation, but it is significant to note that the black preacher assumes a position of being “the voice” for the people. I want to stretch this and argue further that the black preacher position herself to be the amplification for the voiceless—that the black preacher be the reason why these voiceless individuals are even heard. Stand in for
the marginalized; stand in for the hurt black bodies; stand in for the weeping mothers’ who have violently and tragically lost sons and daughters to police brutality. Dr. Riley declares that as the black preacher the black community listens to us and that the preacher is the voice of authority. By being the voice of authority, the black preacher has to also empower, encourage, and enlighten everyone else while hearing God’s voice:

“I think that we have to even as we speak to the issues today of inequality the issues of being ignored the issues of being paid less, while those are issues for females they are even worse issues for black females. The church cannot be silent just those kinds of things and as a black woman trying to encourage to push to not just sit there, hold the pebble, and do nothing.”

**Black Woman Preacher as Potter vs. Sculptor**

Re-exploring Roland Barthes’s discourse on the “grain” of the voice gives credence to the virtuosic black woman preacher figure and her sermonic performativity. Barthes writes, “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.”155 The grain is the instrument that facilitates the action (the body, the hand, the limb). The grain is that implement or tool that carries the action or performance forward. What is the grain in the black feminist sermonic practice? Is it the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs? I would argue that it’s all three and more.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, he writes about the varying functioning parts of the body and how each part of the body is significant for the other parts. He admonishes the church in Corinth not to take lightly each other as members, because each person represents an operating part of the church. Each individual’s gifts were to edify the church and in turn, the parts of the body that were not
considered important were in fact deemed important. Each member of the body cannot 
function without the other. The hand cannot function without the arm and the head cannot 
function without the eyes. As Paul writes, “on the contrary, the parts of the body that 
seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we 
treat with special honor.” The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are the ones we 
can’t do without. Additionally, the voices in society that we deem as feeble or as non-
extant are the voices that we need to listen to and can’t do without. There are great 
similarities between Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth and Dr. Callahan, Dr. Amos, 
and Bishop McKenzie’s push for future black women preachers to nurture, mentor, 
develop, and stand in for the people whose voices aren’t necessarily heard speaks to the 
similarities among black women preachers.

As Dr. Callahan asserts, it is essential for the black woman preacher to take her 
position as the microphone and amplify the voices of those persons who perspectives, 
voices, opinions are muted in society. The job of the black woman preacher who 
practices her black feminist sermonic tradition is to unmute those voices, unstop the ears 
of the people who would not normally pay attention the voices of the marginalized. The 
voices of those in society who are rendered voiceless are the ones we as a 
community/society and nation can’t do without. This reflects Callahan’s message of the 
preacher standing as the microphone and the voices of the marginalized symbolizing the 
other members of the body.

Black feminist sermonic practice is both a tradition and a practice. It is a practice 
that continues to develop, continues to move, and it continues to find new areas and new 
avenues of healing. Black feminist sermonic practice acts as a balm to situations and
circumstances where the voice of the community on issues of abuse, violence, killing of black and brown bodies at the hands of the police are not heard. *Black feminist sermonic practice* acts as a soothing salve where the sermons of the black woman—a figure in society who has been mistreated, ignored, stepped over, bruised and considered the “mule of the world”—tune the ear of the oppressor toward justice.

This distinction between the preacher as potter, not sculptor is significant here. The sermon is, indeed, an art form. In addition, though, the sermon is crafted and organized from the mind and pen of a potter. Normally, we think of potter and sculptor as synonymous terms; however, when fleshing out the significance of the preaching moment and the sermonic impact of the black woman preacher, it is important to note the distinction between the two terms: potter and sculptor. The black woman preacher as potter is one who molds entities, shapes things for use. Her sermons, her activism, her resistance to white supremacy and misogynoir…through her sermons, through her sermonic practice, and through her implementation of using her position of preacherly power to augment the voices of the voiceless, is what makes her a potter. In conventional terms, a potter is one who makes pots, plates, bowls. A potter is one who creates these utile entities that are made for someone to use. There is an element of utility in the black feminist sermonic practice. The black woman preacher as potter crafts her artistic sermon so that the words on the page become animate in the psyches of her listeners. Her listeners then in turn respond to her art and make use of what she’s crafted for good for themselves in their lives and in their communities. A sculptor is one who makes statuary things; in other words, a sculptor makes things that are inanimate, things that cannot be put to use, things that are just put on display to look pretty (i.e. statues). The black
woman preacher as potter uses her sermons and her activist pen to embolden and empower the vessels that listen to her. The people that she’s preaching to aren’t statues. The people that she’s preaching to are vessels made for good use. Her words are like fresh water pouring into pots and bowls for good use. Callahan’s mentioning of terms potter and sculptor place the black woman preacher in a distinct role as potter and the mic.

Callahan: “...you’ve got this raw material and in some ways I think that preachers are artisans that is we make things for use, God help us. I hope so, right? We don’t make things just to put on a shelf; we make things for use. I think we make things...preachers make things for use. So more potter than sculptor. We hope folks take these products and that they are useful, that they hold water, and that they actually can be functional in the world. …good sermons are beautiful. They’re enticing; they ring in your ears like great music.”

All of Callahan’s sermons are about black life. She does not see her position as a preacher and as a black woman as separable. She preaches to her congregation through her own moment, not just through her own body and identity. Callahan continues to define the sermon: “the sermon makes sense of our times through the ancient story and makes sense of the ancient story through our times.”

Here in this instance is where the preacher as Artist or Artisan is important to recognize here. Callahan presents her view of the preacherly moment as a liberating oftentimes quite different view than what other preachers have. This view is one that needs to be considered more often. In times of social justice turmoil, we look to that one preacher or that one leader to be the voice, but according to Callahan, the preacher should instead be the mic and amplify the voices of those individuals whose vocal sounds are marginalized, cast out, and thrown to the wayside. As preachers and particularly as black
women preachers, our job, our function is to be the microphone for the voiceless. That is the duty of the black woman preacher. When I think about the black feminist sermonic practice and what function this praxis can have in the preacherly moment, Callahan’s perspective gives a liberationist view. It is the women, black women in particular whose voices have been thrown by the wayside. The lives, the sermons of these black women must be heard, too. The preacher being the “voice” is inconsistent, as Callahan says, “with where we are as a movement.

Callahan: “I think this notion that what we need are strong voices I think is wrongheaded and I think it’s inconsistent with where we are as a movement. I think that rather than seeing ourselves as people who are supposed to be the voice for the voiceless, I think those of us who have positions of power and privilege need to be the mic and amplify the voices of people who have been speaking all along and we haven’t been able to hear them. Rather than insert ourselves and insinuate ourselves to grab the mic, I actually think we need to hold the mic and pass the mic and be the mic to amplify the voices of people who are talking whose voices are not being heard.”

She continues to assert the position of power that writers, musicians, singers, and preachers have of giving voice to words in a way that is unconventional. The function of the black woman preacher being the mic, not just being the mic, but having movement—passing, moving the mic, and taking action so that the voiceless can be heard is one of the preacherly illustrations of the black feminist sermonic practice. When we think about the folks in the civil rights movement, the leaders who we always voice were the civil rights leaders had people beside them coming up in the movement who were doing the work. Women were doing the work. It’s the preachers, the musicians, the singers, the artists who use their positions of giftedness to create a sacred space of activism.
When I ask Callahan about the role of the black woman preacher in today’s battle for social justice, she mentions two things that are paramount to the discussion of black women’s role in this social justice fight. She calls out an administration that came into power on the part of black people’s vote, but she calls into question the absence of the policies to help those people who allowed said power to rise into office. She says the problem with this is that these are our church members, the people that we as black women preachers preach to. She mentions a book by Walter Fluker called *The Ground Has Shifted* where she details his assertion that says as a people we must stop looking the other way when we see flawed policies that relate to the black community. Instead of looking the other way, we must hold those systems accountable.

Callahan: “I think we have to rethink the kind of ideologies of responsibility and respect that undergird our capacity…like we respect, ironically, we respect the people who cause us trouble and then we call out the folks who are in trouble responsible and I think we should respect the people who are in trouble and call for responsibility on the parts who created the circumstances. We blame the individual and we let the system off and it needs to be the other way around. We need to have some grace for individuals and hold the system accountable.”

In attempting to articulate her prayer for future black women preachers, Callahan ponders and says something that I connect with her sermon in *Race, Faith, and Community*, reflecting Mali Music’s song “Fight for You.”¹⁵⁸ She stresses the importance of black women fighting for one another. Too often we fight for everyone else and forget about ourselves. Hurston’s acclaimed book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a clear indication of the protagonist Janie learning to fight for herself even when no one else will. For so long black women have been deemed as “the mule of the world.” What is so important about the black feminist sermonic practice is that the black woman from
resistance and sermonic and sonic protest breaks out of that mule-like barrier placed before her, escapes, and begins to create her own space of release. Is it that she breaks out of the mule-like barrier or that she resists the mule-like barrier placed around her. In this instance, the black woman preacher’s resistance in black feminist sermonic practice against the ‘mule of the world’ mantra that describes the black woman is what the black feminist sermonic practice entails. It’s her own freedom perfume. Callahan mentions the Mali Music song “Fight for You.” She could have been talking about anybody fighting for anyone, but her prayer and her sermon reflect this desire. Part of the black feminist sermonic practice again is that we recognize when a system or someone in that system desires to hold us back—someone who wants to impede our voices or prohibit us standing as the mic for the voiceless. Our job is not to be silent when one of us gets knocked down; rather, we continue to stand and hold the mic for the marginalized. We assert our positions with fortitude and grit.

In 2015, Dr. Callahan presents a sermon at Louisville Seminary. She opens her text with the killings of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and Michael Brown. It is significant when the black woman preacher talks about social justice issues. She spells out the different spaces in which we as black people converse, respond, and act on the state challenges that the black community encounters. In the black church she emphasizes that “we are still challenged, because so much of the time in the independent black church we forget to hold the light because we are so busy trying to keep the lights on. We forget who we are and what we are about because we are trying to perpetuate ourselves and keep beautiful buildings like this one heated and lighted.”
Callahan continues to talk about her music inspiration, Mali Music that crosses over with his sermon. It’s a love song manifesto, “Fight For You.”

“Black lives matter. Black living matters. Black thriving, real life abundant black living matters. This is the moment in which we are privileged to live. At the same time though I see it as a privilege I recognize it as a challenge.”

Callahan’s sermon fits with Cannon’s writing of the dynamics of black life and how black feminist consciousness emerged. It emerges out of a need to constantly dismantle the pre-fixed norms that continue to entangle black women and their families: poverty, disease, homelessness, sexual exploitation, and misogynoir. Black women have turned to the pages of Scripture for comfort, healing, and reformation. Yet, black life is not a monolith; it is full of passion, creativity, ingenuity, giftedness: “…as God-fearing women they maintain that Black life is more than defensive reactions to oppressive circumstances of anguish and desperation. Black life is the rich, colorful creativity that emerged and reemerges in the Black quest for human dignity. Jesus provides the necessary soul for liberation.”

In her sermonic conclusion, Callahan emphasizes that as a people, we want the blood to always disappear. We want the rage to disappear. We want the fighting to disappear, but in reality the blood, rage, and the fight are still extant because we are still in a struggle. Callahan’s assertion confirms my need to trouble Douglas’s rationale of the black faith tradition freeing the black body from double-consciousness.

One of the most fascinating instances of interviewing black women preachers is that each of these women considers social justice issues regarding the black community close to their hearts and purposes. Social inequity is what black women have always
fought hard to denounce. When talking with Callahan there is a cry to help the people in her speech. It is a cry to assist the black community through her position.

In the same way that Callahan feels the black woman preacher has a responsibility to meet the social needs of her congregation, Bishop Vashti McKenzie, the first woman bishop elected to the African Methodist Episcopal Church in its over 200-year history, McKenzie emphasizes the crux of what it means to, through the sermons and through the ministerial work, lead a black church that makes a significant impact on the black community. Preachers from King on down reach into politics to nudge the governmental process in restoring help to those in need. Social justice issues comprise the preaching moment. In the same way Callahan stresses the need for the black church leaders to step up to the plate and give a voice to their members, Bishop McKenzie feels a similar way. McKenzie stresses that it is incumbent upon black leaders and particularly black women leaders to address the social justice issues that affect your flock—the social justice issues that move the lives of your congregation. She says black women preacher leaders must respond. All around people are asking the pastor what she is going to do about this social justice issue or how she responds. According to McKenzie, “…everything that impacts the people that you serve as a black preacher you must address. You have to respond.” McKenzie continues to posit the position of the black woman preacher as a double responsibility. She says, “As a black woman in America wherever we go, we have to represent the whole race.”

This declaration speaks to the womanist concept that stems from Alice Walker’s womanist prose. What is special here about Anna Cooper’s quote is that the black woman is always carrying. She’s always carrying the burdens of those around her. With the black
feminist sermonic practice, we are seeing the black woman carrying those around her to a place of rest, to a place of freedom, to a place of release. She through her words, through her power, through her determination and through her grit, carries the burdens of the black community with her. In the black feminist sermonic practice, the black woman goes from being the “mule of the world” to agent, activist of change. Rather than always seeing the black woman as carrying the burdens of her community, the black woman preacher actively pushes through those barriers placed before her.

In Walker’s definition of what it means to be a womanist, she writes, “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.” Womanism is another shade of feminism. One of the outstanding definitions of womanism is a womanist’s commitment to the health of entire beings, both women and men. Rather than exclude other classifications and gender groups, womanism includes and embraces the marginalized, the ones put on the shelf, the ones not intended for use. Black feminism arrests and holds captive the idea that feminism only belongs to white women and womanism makes the invisible visible.

McKenzie is adamant that she is a womanist preacher who preaches from the “sister-girlfriend side of the page.” What and how McKenzie speaks of the black woman is particularly significant to this chapter. Sometimes, there is a double smack to the black woman when she attempts to get through the same door as the man. McKenzie says, “the greatest pains that black women face is that once the brother gets in the door, he doesn’t hold it open for her. And now it’s like a double slam. [The woman says], ‘Okay brother! Go! Go! Go! Go! And here I come!’ [And the brother then says], ‘Oh not you! You’re female. You go back. Goodbye. See you later.’ And so I feel that if I get a chance to open the door, that I want all of y’all to come.” This latter sentence gives credence,
again, to Callahan’s prayer for the black woman preacher. Through her position, the black woman preacher fights for other black women preachers.

**Living the Race Struggle**

In order for the black woman to preach from a socially conscious lens, she has to have lived through the experience of enduring the race struggle. Bishop Dr. Barbara M. Amos, founder of Faith Deliverance Christian Center in Norfolk, Virginia, believes that the black woman preacher endures race and gender biases everyday, so to preach from a pulpit of social justice means preaching from her daily experiences. Apart from their own sermons, it was what these black women have experienced in their everyday lives since they were children that makes these preachers have a socially conscious mindset. To be able to preach black social consciousness, you have to have experienced and gone through the race struggle. With preaching and crafting a sermon comes the experience—the social lived experience.

According to Dr. Amos, social justice issues are women’s issues. What Dr. Amos explains here is significant to the reason why she became involved in social justice issues that are specific to the black community. She is very clear on the fact that she doesn’t parse social justice issues as male/female, but that she sees these issues as women’s issues. It was the racial incidents in Cradock section of Portsmouth, Virginia that fueled her response to racial and gender injustices. It wasn’t until the age of thirteen that she experienced the stinging result of redistricting and integration in her school district. She was reappointed to another school and with that reappointment came walking to school everyday. She explains that everyday she went to school, Caucasians would call her
names, throw rocks at her and allow their dogs to run her. That is why she is desperately afraid of dogs to this day.

Dr. Amos’s message has always been about liberation and the deliverance of the oppressed people. The Pentecostal church has always been evangelical in their dissemination of their message. Yet according to Dr. Amos, social justice issues took a backseat. But what changed Bishop’s message to being more conscious of gender and racial inequities in the pulpit was her introduction to Rev. Herbert Daughtry in Brooklyn, NY. She says that her messages have always been about deliverance, but it wasn’t until she heard Reverend Daughtry that she began to preach deliverance in a socially conscious way. When you grow up in the Pentecostal tradition, you are told about personal sin…don’t do this…don’t do that. But it’s institutional sin, too, that we as a nation are dealing with. The black woman’s preaching voice brings the institutional sin of this nation the forefront because they speak from the experience of race and gender…of being black and of being a woman.

Amos: “And I think that and some memories I have of some incidents—racial incidents were what really fueled me to be socially conscious because I was very much aware of the treatment that I experienced and the fact that it was a very real thing. And so it was important to me to be socially conscious growing up because I disapproved of the injustices that I saw. And initially I never really thought about it in terms of a male/female thing because I didn’t have that luxury. It was always a black and white thing that I had to fight for. So that the evolution to dealing with women’s issues was something that came later. In fact as I deal with justice issues I never really separated the things out because most social justice issues are women’s issues. When you look at health disparity, income disparity and all those kinds of things, those are women’s issues. So that you didn’t really have to name them women’s issues, but we were always at the bottom of the totem pole when it came to social justice.”
When you talk about the black church and its traditions, we are always taught the “nots” as they apply to life, but Dr. Amos’s message here is paying attention to the institutional sin—the killing of black bodies is institutional sin, misogynoir is also institutional sin. What Dr. Amos stresses here is that her messages are messages of liberation because the Bible is “a book of liberation.” She has always emphasized that the Gospel is in both word and deed. “…when you look at the Bible—the Bible is a book of liberation. All of its pages—the theme of liberation runs through all of its pages.” In her article, “The Ideal: The Biblical Pattern of Unity”, Dr. Amos emphasizes the need for preachers to stress to their congregations what must be done in order to ensure equality for all people. She writes,

Amos: “Our desire for oneness must transcend race, gender, class, age, and a variety of other concerns that have negated our message of unity. Indifference, intolerance, feelings of superiority, and subjection of others different from ourselves are not acceptable actions when claiming unity of the spirit. When you look at the prophets, when you look at the persons whom the Lord used. Look at Jesus—the bible is a book of liberation. And I don’t think you can preach the Gospel—I don’t think that you can preach a gospel in word and deed and not deal with humanity and the conditions of humans. It’s apart of the Gospel.”

This is why we turn to the church when there are social struggles in our community. This is why the church is seen as a platform to have those concerns voiced. This is also why the voice of the preacher is so important in this context. What is the meaning and significance of the black woman preacher in social justice fights. Because when the black woman preacher fights and makes a clarion call for justice she’s making a clarion call for rights for herself.
“…when you trace the roots of most injustice whether it’s mass incarceration, the war on drugs, the war on poverty, most social ills can be traced back to money and the economy.”

Further examining the role of black women preachers and their sermonic role in America, Dr. Amos gives a clear perspective about what exactly happened on the night of November 9th, 2016. She looks at the election of Donald Trump and compares how people see her as a woman in ministry. They respect the building, they respect what she’s done as a black woman preacher and leader in this nation, but the same people who respect what she’s done tangibly still wrestle with the fact that she’s a woman. Black women preachers do not escape misogyny, it’s everpresent even in 2017: “…after seeing the misogyny, the hatred, the venom, and the racism and he’s still elected—that speaks to the fact that we have not come as far as we thought we’d come. And I run into that same thing now. There are many instances where people respect me because they respect this…they respect this building they respect what I’ve done, they respect what the Lord has done through me, they respect the people whose lives had been changed but they still wrestle with the fact that I am a woman.” Dr. Amos she cautions her brothers “not to do to women what they accuse white people of doing to them—of having a façade of being open but not being as open as they think they are.”

The Black Woman Preacher as Potter in the Pulpit

Black women preachers preach from a place of redemption. In many of the biblical stories about women, there are many instances where the suffering of the woman gets ignored. In this sermon on Acts 16, Bishop Dr. Barbara M. Amos begins with the slave girl in Scripture that had the spirit of divination. When Paul and Silas were hauled
off to jail, the owners of the slave girl saw that their hope of making money disappeared. In essence, because of this they sent Paul and Silas to jail. Bishop Amos says a political overtone is present here with the deliverance of the slave girl. They didn’t care that the woman got spiritually free, they cared because her spiritual freedom spilled over into her political and economical and psychological life. Her spiritual freedom caused economic havoc, not a tongue, dance, or shout.

“As long as you just get spiritually free and keep on shouting and let people beat on you they don’t mind you getting free. See, as long as you get spiritually free and keep letting people dog you that’s all right. See as long as you get spiritually free and get saved and let people keep taking off and land in your life then that’s all right. But when you say, “This ain’t no airport. Don’t land no more. Don’t land another time.” That’s when it became a problem. What became a problem here is that this woman’s spiritual freedom turned around and caused economic havoc. When you truly get delivered, I’m not talking about getting a shout, I’m not talking about getting a dance, I’m not talking about getting a tongue because there’s a difference in being free and being liberated. When you get spiritual deliverance, it starts spilling over into every area of your life. …God wants our gospel to become so liberating until it just doesn’t free people in church.”

At the climax of her sermon, the chords that the organist plays responds according to the manner in which Dr. Amos’s voice falls and rises in pitch. The organ responding then becomes a second, individual voice to the preacher’s oration and the congregation provides the collective or communal response to the text of the preacher. In the climactic portion of the clip, sermonic improvisation ensues where Dr. Amos connects the scriptural text of Paul and Silas to the lives of the female congregants attending the conference. “Music is the voice of God.” The rich and intricate concept of the sonic sermon and its historic connection to slavery emphasizes the significance of these ideas.
as epistemological. The manner in which a sermonic poem can be read without music but still contains sound within the words highlights both the text’s sonic and literary value.

Dr. Amos’s message resonates with Bishop Dr. Millicent Hunter’s claim the struggle for the black woman in America.\textsuperscript{164}

Hunter: Okay. To me, it means, as human beings, we can be bound by the chains of the past and the present. For a black woman, if I get the visual that we have a double or triple set of chains, not only the color but the gender issue. And if you can be set free from those chains of the past and the present and those limitations that are put upon us because of our femaleness and/or our blackness, deliverance from that means that you’re not hindered in any area because you understand there is more power in you and working with you and through you if you accept that power, then the strength of those chains that are there to hold you back.

\textbf{Stand Your Ground}

The year of 2015 marks a pivotal year in discovering black women preaching social justice issues in the preaching moment. In 2015, Bishop Vashti Murphy McKenzie uses 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 as her text and gives a stirring sermon entitled, \textit{Stand Your Ground}. When you hear McKenzie preach, she always has a tune to her voice-but it is with this sermon that the musicality and repeated singing of “Stand Your Ground” in the key of G marks great significance in this preaching moment.

McKenzie begins her sermon discussing fear, personifying both fear and courage. Expounding upon fear she repeats its arrival in all sizes and colors, without knowing social economic status. Fear is personified here, but she continues to emphasize courage as getting up every morning. Courage starts a business in an economic recession. Courage is doing what you think you cannot do and doing what everybody says is impossible. Courage is daring to come to grips with reality without engaging in denial.
She personifies courage in her sermon. In the midst of her sermonic exegesis on fear and courage, McKenzie yells the name, “Trayvon Martin!” You can see her anger and passion behind his senseless murder. She says the unthinkable happened and it makes her mad. With her voice crescendoing and decrescendoing, she asks, “What happened that night was not an episode of Law and Order...it was an all too real live violent senseless act that makes us all sit up [and] take notice. It makes us mad, and we want to know why?” Continuing to call out Emmett Till and Trayvon, McKenzie cautions her audience, “We still believe in our justice system; we just have a problem with the ‘just us’ system.”

Her breath becomes rapid, and she asks her audience, how do we empower our sisterhood and the body of Christ to confront the challenges on a daily basis? “We are not nothing! We are something and we have value and worth!” she proclaims. In the midst of her sermon, McKenzie poses a question to black womanhood:

“And you just can't keep running over us and expect us to lay down and take it! How do we strengthen our families so that what is meant to break us apart keeps us together? How do we reach beyond our own ethnic boundaries to embrace and include a diverse world population? How can we do all that is required of us and still remain good stewards of our time treasure and our talent. How do we prepare our children who are already behind in public school for a future that is all too willing to exclude them?”

She asks the black community have we done enough? Have we invested enough? Have we preached enough sermons to make a difference in the world? McKenzie emphasizes, “Mad has its place, but it's not the only place. It was the bravery of the sisterhood who went that morning to complete the embalming process. Mad may be the staring place but it is not the staying place.”

Admonishing her listeners to do what is right, she exclaims, “This speaks of the Social justice dimension of our faith to do justice means that we must work for the establishment of equality for all people especially for those who are powerless throughout all of this time the cross now reminds us of...
everything that failed including the justice system. From Palm Sunday parade to
an empty tomb they were examples of failure of justice. How the powerful
oppressed the powerless how prisoners are exploited and the courts are corrupted.
What's happening then is happening now. And here is the prophetic talking to us
in the 21st century and here in this call we must take our places to do justice
which means to make it right. ...The call to do justice is the call to make it right."

McKenzie stresses that it is apart of our reasonable service to God to help provide food
but it is also our work to prevent the conditions to make people hungry it is apart of our
makeup to comfort those who may be victimized but it's also our right to help keeping
people especially a child in a hoodie so that they are not shot on their way to school and
on the way home. She speaks and sings that it is the responsibility of the church to work
to change the praxis that makes human beings refugees sex slaves or the policies that
create homelessness and poverty to do justice it involves all of us as an individual and as
a corporate body.

At the point of the sermon when she repeats, “Don't get mad, but stand your
ground,” McKenzie uses the image of the cross to make a point that the body of Christ
should stand their ground. An organ isn’t present in this moment to accompany her, but
without music behind her, she begins to sing in E minor. As McKenzie begins to sing in
E minor and as she continues to talk about the efficacy of the Christian church in social
justice issues, she emphasizes that the church stands their ground. Her voice becomes
varied with its words, but she speaks on the same note. Further into the sermon, a certain
melisma exists and she speaks in E minor. She’s not singing in E Minor, but her tone of
voice as she speaks is in the key of E Minor.

As McKenzie modulates during the climax of her sermon, the scale or range of
keys/ notes from half-steps E to F are reminiscent and reflective of the slight increase and
minor shifting in McKenzie's sermon. As she vocally travels the path to the climax of her sermon, each half-step in music represents the incremental forward movement and mobility of her sermon and how the sermon's high progression sounds to the ears of her listeners. McKenzie’s voice continues to modulate to F sharp minor. As she admonishes the people to stand their ground, a plethora of black women dressed in red, with faces set as stone begin to demonstrate solidarity and fortitude, linking arms with each other across the pulpit as McKenzie preaches. She says when you stand together and link arms and collaborate and cooperate with each other and when you stand together you can't get through because the bond is so close and you're linked together in heart, in mind and spirit. All of the women at the conference begin to link arms and move in white together and she motioned after everybody moved to stoned still. She says this is the moment where we look beyond me and mine and say if it's one child it's my child if it's one neighborhood it's one street it's my street. The ability of a preacher to match the height of her sermonic text to an incremental movement and shifting in sound (sound and sermon matching) illustrate the dynamic relationship between sermon and song. The way that McKenzie's voice increases in song and word represents the unity and message of standing your ground and getting the justice that she propagates.

Movements Move and Activists Activate

In Christopher Small’s book, Musicking, he presents his readers with one question: what does this performance of this work mean in this time and in this space? This pointed question often appears explicitly in academic books from Small’s Musicking to Guthrie Ramsey’s Race Music. But this question, if we open our eyes and examine what’s going on around us, is a prevalent circle of focus as it relates to the social and
political status of the black community. In the context of this chapter, what does the delivery of the sermon from the mouth of the black woman preacher mean in this time and in this space? I insert space instead of place here particularly for the purpose of illustrating that the sermon doesn’t have to necessarily occur in a religious place in order for action to occur.

In conclusion, as I witness sermonic social justice moments in the pulpit and the voice of the black woman preacher making a clarion call for equality for black men and women, I see another sermonic space being created outside of the church from the “Mothers of the Movement”—the mothers of precious lives senselessly taken away with racism’s ugly grip. In January 2017, the mothers of the movement, Gwen Carr, Valerie Bell, Sybrina Fulton, and Geneva Reed-Veal travel to Oxford Union to tell the stories of their assassinated sons and daughters. On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was murdered by NYPD. He said, “I Can’t Breathe” eleven times. Gwen Carr expresses to the audience at Oxford Union this past January 2017, that it is the grace of God and His “everlasting arm” on which she leans. She urges her listeners to turn “mourning into a movement and sorrow into strategy” and how pain has to try to become a powerful purpose to change what is happening to the black community today.

Sybrina Fulton urges her listeners at Oxford Union to care for and have compassion for the bleeding hearts of black America: “The same heart that you have in London are the same people and the same hearts back in the States.” Fulton counts February 26, 2012 as the worst day of her life. It wasn’t the killing of Trayvon that was the worst day of her life; it was his body positioned in the casket dressed in white that was the worst day of her life. She did not “stand up until Trayvon was shot down.”
Geneva Reed-Veal, Baptist minister, stands erectly, takes the microphone, and cautions her audience, “Wake Up!” She articulates her words—she builds a house. Her voice goes to a soft piano. She cautions the audience to use their gifts—she tells each person, “Hold up your hand for me.” The audience holds up their right hands, and she says, “Each of you has four fingers and a thumb on that hand, right? Each of those does different things, but you need all of them for the hand to work. So I say to you—find out which piece you are. Whether you are an activist, please understand that activists activate, if you run around telling someone you’re in the movement, please be moving. If you’re going around hashtagging, because this was out for quite some time #SheWoke, which means you as a woman are awake, please don’t hashtag that if you are dead or sleeping.” She admonishes the listeners in London to, “Do what it is you’re good at. Speak, galvanize, evangelize to people because the world is in a mess right now. It is about healing a country a group of people that didn’t even know it was sick. React foolishly or respond appropriately. Movements Move and Activists Activate.”

Build Bridges and Share the Light: Black Women Preachers as Artists

Dr. Amos’s message of her being a bridge-builder and a torch sharer not a torch-bearer is synonymous with Dr. Callahan’s message of black women preachers allowing room at the “top” for all of us—not just one. Her assertion that women preachers should be the microphone and apply the voices of the voiceless is synonymous to Dr. Amos’s message of classifying herself as a torch-sharer, not a torch-bearer. Amos says God shared with her that if she passes the torch/light to another person, then she doesn’t have one. When you pass the torch or light it leaves you in darkness. Why not share the torch and both of us can create new light together. This is the essence of black womanhood in
black preaching. Share the light, build the bridges, and make room for all: “I want to be a bridge-builder back and forth with young people and I want to be a torch-sharer, not a torch-bearer. Say you’re passing the torch—God said, “No, because if I give you the light [then] I don’t have one. Because if I give you the light and you walk away, it leaves me in darkness. So why can’t we share the light? Because I can take your creativity and innovation and let it coexist with my wisdom and tradition and knowledge and we’ll go forth.”

Given the text of Alice Walker’s *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* in conjunction with the poignant phrases from black women preachers, it is clear to me now more than ever that there is a distinction between what Alice Walker deems as “Saints” and “Artists.” How does Walker’s characterization between saints and Artists concern black women preachers? What is the function of the black woman preacher in today’s society? How can the black woman preacher be the voice for the voiceless? How can the black woman who has for so long carried the burdens of everyone else in the world (*mule of the world*) continue through her sermons and songs carry the issues of the black woman in particular and the black community in general.

In this essay, Walker draws off of Toomer’s portrayal of “Avey” in *Cane*. From the perspective of Toomer, Walker notices he makes a significant observation about black women in the early twenties. There were undiscovered treasures inside of the black woman that had yet to be discovered. Who would discover these treasures? As Toomer walks through the South in the early 1920s he observes the one thing that sanctifies or sets the black woman apart from any other group: her *spirituality*. It is the connection between her body and her soul that Toomer notices. This spiritual connection is so
profound and fervent that the black woman herself is not even cognizant of her own value. She carries the burdens of everyone around her, which distracts her from her true potential. She doesn’t let these distractions subside, for she feels that it is incumbent upon her to nurture, care for everyone. The black woman cares for everyone, but who is caring for her? She possesses a deep well of brilliance, ingenuity, and creativity that lies prostrate, unconscious because it is her body, not her mind that they see. It is what her body is used for that they see, not the mind that It is her physical labor and ability to create economic production that they see. They don’t see what is inside of her. They don’t see her creativity; they don’t see her passion for art. They don’t see her passion to augment her intellect. They only see what she can do for them, not what she can become.

Black women’s ability to fight for visibility comes in the form of sermon; it comes in the form of song. Fight to be seen, fight to be heard. Because of this enters the black woman’s preaching voice. How has the black woman through her sermons fought to be removed from classification of a saint, to one of an artist? The weapons of the black woman’s warfare are not carnal but mighty through God for the pulling down of strongholds.

Walker makes clear how men (Black and White men) in this instance see black women. Black women are not considered whole beings, but as Toomer observes in the South, black women’s minds are temples of veneration and their bodies are shrines. Walker emphasizes continuously how black women are not and were not revered as whole people. They are seen as objects to be worshipped, but saints were mute. The Saints whose bodies are built as shrines and whose minds are only seen as altars are mute. These women who stare out into the world are not here. They scream but no one
can hear them. These same women that Walker calls Saints are our family—our grandmothers and our mothers.

Walker continues to flesh out how Toomer sees black women in a sonic way full of metaphors. Butterflies have a distinct pattern of colors. Each butterfly has a unique array of bright and vibrant colors. The way that each color is marked illustrates the delicacy and rarity that each butterfly has. The same way that Toomer sees butterflies is similar to black women in society. Each black woman has a distinctive color, vibrancy, ingenuity that marks their path. Yet their brightness and the dynamic gifts they provide to the world are invisible. They want to fly. They want to fly high. They want their gifts and creativity to elevate and be visible, yet their wings are trapped in an “evil honey”—a yellowish liquid whose stickiness impedes them from elevation. The honey is sweet, its taste is refreshing when scooped and placed on the tongue. The honey itself is sweet, but what or who makes the honey traps the butterflies’ wing spread. These exquisite butterflies are only known as the “mule of the world.” They travail assiduously for the same economy and society that treat them as nothing other than “the mule of the world.”

Here, Toomer sees the subjugation of the body of the black woman. The essence of the word “Saint” in conventional terms is one that illustrates emulation, reverence, and sanctification. A person who is set apart from the secular world is one of the connotations of a saint. However, in this context, I feel as though Walker is using this word “Saint” as a way of evincing how white men saw black women. They saw black women’s bodies to be used for not only economic production, but child-bearing production. They never paid attention to the intellect, the mental grit, the beautiful and unique strength of spirituality of the black woman. The white man and all of society ignore the spirituality of the black
woman. They disregard her complexity. They shun her brilliance. They turn a deaf ear to the desperate pleas of the black woman for a creative space to speak her mind. Her “Sainthood” was only for the white man’s gain.

Her sainthood represented her being set apart from those freedom spaces in which she would have thrived if she had been given the chance. Alice Walker details the bodies of these black women becoming shrines and their minds suitable for worship. She pens these words not in the context of ecclesiasticism, but she wants her readers to see another connotation of “Sainthood.” Black women not being seen as whole beings, but whose bodies are in shrines and whose minds were altars for worship represents the black woman’s body being in a tight box where she cannot escape the borders constructed around her. These borders symbolize white supremacy, misogynoir, and immobility of the black woman’s artistic gift. The gifts and treasures which the black woman possesses aren’t dead, they are still alive. Walker puts the term “shrine” in quotes to mean something else other than one who is canonized in ecclesia. The term shrine is defined as “a building or other shelter, often of a stately or sumptuous character, enclosing the remains or relics of a saint or other holy person and forming an object of religious veneration or pilgrimage.” I put remains in italics because this definition of “shrine” clearly illustrates a saint who is dead. Shrines are sacred places in which the dead reside. The sanctuary with which the white man saw the black woman was her competence to labor and travail. He did not see her sacredness in her gifts but in her labor—what she could do for him. The spiritual disconnection of which Walker writes here concerning the black woman is that the black woman’s body in the Reconstruction era in the South was put in a tight box that did not allow her to be completely herself.
The fierce crack of the whip from the slave master’s hand against her back abruptly halts her song as she cries humiliation and denigration. Under the weight of the whip, her legs surrender to the dust and mud and her body sinks with such force into the ground as she wails a dissonant sorrow song. Its fiery sound seeps into the bloodied open flesh wounds that could only be healed from escape into her freedom space. As Walker writes, we can all imagine the madness, frustration, and vexation of the black woman not being able to release her song, release her speech, release her artistic gifts. The black woman in the post-Reconstruction South never had a “room of her own.”

The shift from regarding our mothers and grandmothers, and now preachers, as Saints to Artists is significant. Saints are holy, set apart, and revered; however, there is a memorialization of our grandmothers and mothers here as Saints that renders them invisible, absent from earth, and essentially dead. There is not anything wrong with calling a person a Saint, but normally people who we call saints are no longer here on earth. They are physically invisible. Saints are physically invisible. Saints have a heavenly aura that renders them already transitioning from earth to heaven. Saints’ works are canonized or memorialized. Yet, Artists still live. Artists are still extant in spirit. Artists have the intensity and profundity of their work. Artists find a space to release creativity. Artists speak truth in the present moment. Walker’s point of shifting the conversation of our mothers and grandmothers from Saints to Artists is so that we begin to see that memorializing the spirituality and hidden gift of creativity of our ancestry is rendering them dead, spiritually.

Black women preachers aren’t just saints whose bodies, whose identities, and whose art is created to sit in a shrine. Black women preachers’ art is mobile, not stagnant.
Rather than render their spirits dead, which they are not, call them Artists. Artists whose spirits still live, and Artists whose sermons *still* speak.
CHAPTER 4

“Sweet Honey in the Rock”: Reimagining Black Homiletics and the Sound of the Sermon in Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Aretha Franklin, and Ms. Lauryn Hill

“Art itself never lies. Art reflects what the truth of something is. The DNA of art gives you, the host, to be totally free in your expression.”
-Sam Waymon, brother of Ms. Nina Simone

“The black sermon is the mother’s milk of African-American discourse.”168
-Dolan Hubbard

“I never left the church. The church goes with me.”
-Aretha Franklin

She jes’ spreads huh mouf and hollahs,

“Come to Jesus," twell you hyeah

Sinnahs’ tremblin’ steps and voices,

Timid-lak a-drawin’ neah;

Den she tu’ns to “Rock of Ages,”

Simply to de cross she clings,

An’ you fin’ yo’ teahs a-drappin’

When Malindy sings.169

Paul Laurence Dunbar’s renowned book of poetry, Majors and Minors, paints a colorful representation of how literature merges seamlessly into song. His most anthologized poem, When Malindy Sings illustrates the variations of the black woman’s singing voice. Notable to this poem is Dunbar’s remembrance of his mother’s resonant voice lifting the notes off the hymn score, carrying them with rich tones and tangible
textures beyond the ceiling to the skies. The epistrophe, *When Malindy Sings*, seeks to evoke the vocal variances of the black woman. The listener gets a different experience every time he or she hears Malindy sing. In the 1960s, famed jazz vocalists Nina Simone and Abbey Lincoln perform covers of Dunbar’s poem. Despite Simone and Lincoln making covers of Dunbar’s verses, the stanza positioned above is absent from these two covers. In spite of this absence from Lincoln and Simone’s performances, Dunbar’s stanza is a clear representation of the sermonic practice illustrated within the black woman’s vocal performativity.

Dunbar’s description of Malindy as she opens her mouth to sing represents her voice actively reaching her listeners with long and wide strokes, signifying her voice range and the many octaves it can reach. The melisma of Malindy’s voice as she sings “Come to Jesus” is the invitation of salvation, healing, deliverance, freedom, and redemption to her listeners. Symbolizing the black woman preacher and singer in a period of racial, social, and economic turmoil, Malindy’s voice is the sweet honey in the rock.

In chapter three, “Tongues on Fire”, I outline the homiletical delivery of the black woman preacher in particular social justice moments. Just as I propose in chapter three that the black woman preacher in the pulpit converts the sermon into song, in this chapter, I argue that the black woman *musician*, bringing spiritual music into secular spaces, converts the song into sermon. Using the performances of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Aretha Franklin, and Ms. Lauryn Hill, I detail how each of these women creates sermonic spaces in music, using the black feminist sermonic practice. By framing each performance under a sermonic guise, I use Evans E. Crawford’s five characteristics of the
black preaching tradition to prove that each of these performances, through particular rhetorical devices, represents the sermonic delivery of the black preaching tradition.

In his June 1995 lecture, *Musicking: A Ritual in Social Space*, at the University of Melbourne, Christopher Small posits a pressing question that applies to each artist in this chapter: “What does it mean when this performance takes place at this time, in this place, with these people taking part?” Reimagining black homiletics in jazz, gospel, hip-hop, and R&B, I consider several questions in this chapter that explicate the connection between the sermon as song and the song as sermon: 1) How do Tharpe, Franklin, and Hill, represent the black woman preacher in song? 2) How does the black woman’s performance of spiritual music mimic the black preaching tradition? 3) How do Tharpe, Franklin, and Hill create sermonic spaces in secular arenas through their performances? 4) What are the specific rhetorical devices used in homiletics that are also seen in each of these women’s performances? Finally, 5) how do these black women dialogically sing across different generations?

By analyzing the performances of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Aretha Franklin, and Ms. Lauryn Hill, I propose that these black women musicians with their voices and instruments create sermonic spaces in secular arenas. The sermonic space they create with their voices and performativity is reminiscent of the five characteristics of the sermon in the black preaching tradition: Each performance is functional, festive, communal, radical, and climactic. I argue that these artists invoke a particular sermonic element in each of their performances, but it’s not just solely for the illustration of bringing the church into secular venues. I also argue that the times and spaces in which these performances are given show black women musicians using these sermonic spaces
to preach social justice. Illustrating the reality of the black feminist sermonic practice in music in this chapter, I examine the careers of these artists as they tear down the walls of race, gender, and class oppression through song.

As Crawford spells out in his text in *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* the first characteristic of black preaching and the sermon is that the sermon is *functional*. The crux and appeal of the sermon itself is that it has meaning. The secondary meaning of the sermon in black preaching tradition is that the sermon is *festive*. There is an inherent joy that comes out of mourning. As the Psalms are signature verses of worship and adoration to God, Psalm 30: 4-5 says,

```
“Sing praises to the Lord, O you his saints,  
and give thanks to His holy name.  
For His anger is but for a moment,  
and His favor is for a lifetime.  
Weeping may tarry for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.”
```

In this *festive* characteristic of the sermon, there is agency, mobility, movement, freedom, and dance that come after the mourning and “morning.” This element of joy coming from the blues—this stance of joy and exuberant celebration coming from mourning and troubled times is exactly what is portrayed in each of these artists’ performances. Tharpe, Franklin, and Hill literally enact the *festive* sermonic concept in their performances from televised episodes in Denmark to the White House. Just as the musician herself creates a sermonic space for her healing, she also creates a realm of transformation for listeners.

As Crawford emphasizes from his findings, there is a difference between a talk-back congregation and a feel-back congregation. In all the performances of artists Tharpe, Franklin, and Hill, their audiences feel what they are saying, hence making the song and
performance both a feel-back and talk-back scene. The audience members “punctuate” their feelings on top of the performer’s feelings in the music and the space then becomes the third characteristic of the sermon: *communal.* The fourth characteristic of the black preaching tradition is its *radical* sentiment. Crawford defines this radical sense of the black sermon as the intent of both the text and the preacher to point to specific instances in the lives of the congregants that match in Scripture. The radical element of black preaching is intentional in that it points to a particular need in the individual and pulls from black consciousness discourse. Finally, the fifth characteristic of the sermon is its *climax.* In the black preaching tradition “whooping” and tuning where the sermon becomes song is immensely characteristic of black preaching. The text becomes a score and the preacher’s voice becomes a song. In some instances, black homiletics develops into improvisatory framing where the preacher’s voice turns into high riffs and melodic melisma—the beautiful point where both song and sermon meet.

Black feminist consciousness arose out of clear need to dismantle the “tridimensional phenomenon” of race, class, and gender oppression. In chapter three, “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness”, Katie G. Cannon aptly provides a meticulous description of what the black woman as slave had to endure through mind, body, and spirit. Her body was used not for her own, but to satisfy the needs of black men for breeding and for the sexual advances of White men. It was through religion that the black community in general but black women in particular found solace in troubled times. The black church served as the social epicenter for the black community. Concerts, weddings, community-organizing meetings, and civil rights meetings/activities convened
in the church. Black women became the backbone of the civil rights movement and in turn became crusaders for justice.

Why is the black woman’s voice in music so profound? In Farah J. Griffin’s, “When Malindy Sings”: Meditations on the Black Woman’s Vocality, the black woman’s singing voice represents a “hinge, a place where things can come together and break apart.” Griffin is very clear here that as she defines the markers of the black woman’s singing voice, she defines it meticulously so from the cultural style of the black woman’s voice, not necessarily the musical technique of how the black woman may sing. Griffin emphasizes the essence of the black woman’s voice coming from the black church, asserting “the black church has been the primary site for the development of a distinctive black singing style and tradition.”

SISTER ROSETTA THARPE

Sister Rosetta Tharpe, affectionately and aptly known as the Godmother of Rock n’ Roll was known as the world’s greatest gospel singer and guitar virtuoso. In the summer of 1964, Tharpe performs for a British audience outside of Manchester, England in a railway station, and at many of her performances, Tharpe’s audience was just as diverse as her instrumentation. Chuck Berry, and Elvis Presley, to name a few were musicians greatly influenced by Sister Tharpe.

Born in Cotton Plant, Arkansas in March 1915, Tharpe’s father could sing and her mother, Katie Bell, was an evangelist with the Church of God in Christ. The energy of gospel music to which Tharpe was exposed surrounded her from birth. Tharpe’s mother left her father and moved to Chicago and joined Roberts Temple COGIC. Rosetta’s
mother took her to perform in various churches and revivals, and it was from these multiple performances that Tharpe’s name began to travel. Holy Temple COGIC was the first church where Tharpe performed in Philadelphia. At age 19, Rosetta’s mother married her off to a preacher, Tommy Tharpe. The marriage didn’t last long. With a union ending in divorce, Tharpe moved to New York with her mother and earned a performance engagement at the famous Cotton Club. Rosetta was known as a gospel artist, but when she moved to New York, she began to sing secular music in clubs; her fans were perplexed and did not understand why she made the switch to secular music. A few years later, much to the jubilance of her original fans, Tharpe performed spirituals and gospel music not in churches, but on television and other secular venues. Tharpe wanted to go against the grain; her guitar separated her from other musicians. The vision of seeing a black woman not only sing but also play an acoustic guitar skillfully began to break down the barriers of black women in music.

In Maria Johnson’s chapter, “Black Women Electric Guitarists and Authenticity in the Blues”, she names Rosetta Tharpe and Memphis Minnie as pioneers of blues music on the electric guitar. In the 1930s and 1940s, Tharpe mixed her instrumental competence with her bluesy voice, crowning her as the queen of gospel blues:

“Tharpe’s powerful stage presence and command of the electric guitar is demonstrated in a video of her performing ‘Down by the Riverside’ with a male vocal group behind her. She moves around the stage as if the guitar is a part of her. When she takes a solo, she cocks her head to one side, crosses her legs, and deftly executes a rapid-fire succession of notes. She repeats a riff, then bends a note expressively, lifting her guitar into the air. Moving from the lower frets and register to high up on the neck, she arrives at another bent note, which she sustains with the left hand while waving her right hand back and forth to the beat.”
Johnson explores the type of socialization associated with women and their instruments. In musical genres of jazz, you would typically see the woman not as an instrumentalist but as a vocalist—a vocalist whose stature was diminutive and whose skin was light. Women were not chosen for their skillful musicianship; rather, they were still seen as objectified figures only for male ogling eyes. Johnson continues to assert that in jazz and blues women vocalists were more apt to be compared to women instrumentalists because the body of the woman while singing was given more attention in these particular spaces. Piano was for the most part considered more “ladylike” than the guitar, because the piano wouldn’t block the view of the woman’s body as she sings where as the guitar was more of a phallic symbol that represented strength and power.

Tharpe’s last recorded performance was in 1970 two years after her mother passed away. Like Franklin and Hill, Tharpe brought the church to the people. Tharpe expanded her audience and didn’t just perform for African-Americans. She brought the vision of a black woman musician to international audiences as well. Her good friend, Roxie Moore, said, “She would sing until you cried and then she would sing until you danced for joy. She kept the church alive and the saints rejoicing.” Tharpe’s Copenhagen performance in Denmark would convene three years before her death.

Crowned as one of the first singers to bring gospel into the secular arena, I turn my attention to Rosetta’s 1965 performance in France. Her international performances of \textit{Up Above My Head} symbolized the \textit{functional, festive, radical, and communal} elements of the black preaching tradition. Tharpe’s international acclaim was received widely. After Tharpe is introduced she walks confidently onto the stage, cuing the band to come in with her after her soft but commanding counts of, “1, 2, 3…” She begins singing, “I
hear music, mighty *fine* music…” Tharpe continues to look up as she performs, adding her own improvisation to her singing: “I wonder what the world would do if there was no music.” She proceeds to play her guitar solo, continuously strumming its strings. Her body gestures mark the dynamics of her vocal performance. At a time when the US was enduring racial tensions, Tharpe used her presence and performance of *Up Above My Head* overseas to not only spread faith but to add to the visibility and agency of black women musicians. Her voice decrescendos as she sings, “It would be sad, sad, sad, if there were no music.” As she sings/speaks of the birth of Jesus and its significance, the song of her guitar and the melisma of her voice mark the jubilant feeling she has and wants to spread to her international audience.

Another television show of the 1960s called *Gospel Time* shows Tharpe performing *Up Above My Head* with the Mt. Olivet Institutional Baptist Church choir.¹⁸⁷ *Gospel Time* was a television show in 1962 created by Chicago’s own Howard Schwartz, which aired in different cities across the country from New York to Chicago. Backed by a large choir, Tharpe sings jubilantly about faith and joy. At this time, you didn’t see a female performer--a black woman--improvising on the guitar with a choir singing in a secular arena.

When Tharpe was diagnosed with diabetes after the death of her mother in 1968, a deep depression overwhelms her. A performance in Denmark marks Tharpe amalgamating spirituality in a secular arena with a popular song, *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*.¹⁸⁸ This performance is specifically significant because of the time and place when Tharpe performs this song that was marked as one of the great songs of the civil rights movement. This was her last known recording in 1970 in Denmark. Tharpe begins, “I’m
going to sing a song that maybe you wouldn’t understand and maybe you do. A song that I love so dearly and I have so many friends here in Copenhagen for many, many years have been coming here.” Before she begins, she mentions her mom’s death and her sentiment of feeling alone. Acknowledging her audience’s potential unfamiliarity with the song, Tharpe prefaces her performance discussing the “divine power” in which she believes. This performance marks not only the sadness of her mother’s death, but it is also prophetic of her own impending misery with diabetes and eventual death.

When Tharpe performs she continues to look to the heavens pleading for God to take her hand. Her descending singing notes of F, E flat, D flat, and B flat symbolizes the descent of Tharpe’s life; she sings not only of her own story but this performance signifies Tharpe’s intent to convey song in the middle of the US’s civil rights struggle.

ARETHA FRANKLIN

It was 2016, and the atmosphere of the Wells Fargo Center was vibrant. Crowds of people stormed the escalators, and after waiting in long lines, they entered their respective halls, and sat down in blue seats, anxiously waiting the crowning moment of Hillary Clinton’s Democratic nomination acceptance speech. Away from the movement of the people was a small room concealed with dark, vast curtains. The only glimmer of light that could be seen was towards the room’s entrée. As I showed my pass to the guard and stepped into the room, the low but constant hum of several individual’s voices buzzed with anticipation. I carefully set my belongings down and proceeded to take my seat. My eyes toured the room; most people huddled in small circles conversing with each other, were not even cognizant of who was about to walk in the room. I continued to converse with a couple of people near me, and as my eyes shifted to the right, I could feel
them widen. Standing in the doorway, taking one step slowly in front of the other, and donned in a blue, resplendent dress, was the Queen of Soul: Ms. Aretha Franklin. With her bodyguard and a couple of relatives by her side, Ms. Franklin calmly sat in the plush white seats at the front of the room.

Word traveled fast as to where Ms. Franklin was. Approximately five minutes after Ms. Franklin took her seat, Donna Brazile and Leah Daughtry walked in to greet her. As the atmosphere began to calm down and the speeches of particular delegates were made, I could hear Ms. Franklin say as she watched the speeches, “That’s right. Yes.” During the break of the speeches, I walked over to Ms. Franklin and spoke with her. It was a conversation that is indelibly etched in my mind. As I knelt down next to her, I felt the power of her spirit and decades of soul-singing that lifted the spirits of not only the nation but also the world resonating in my ears.

Ms. Aretha Franklin was the first woman to be inducted into the Rock Hall in 1987. Baptized at age 10, she traveled extensively with her father and was brought to different churches to sing while he preached. Selling more than 75 million records, Franklin currently has more than 40 Top 40 hits. Born in Memphis but raised in Detroit, Michigan, Franklin began singing in church under the pastoral leadership of her father and civil rights advocate, Reverend Clarence LaVaughn Franklin. Franklin grew up hearing her father, preaching fiery sermons from “Dry Bones in the Valley” to “The Eagle Stirreth Her Nest.” Like music, Reverend C.L. Franklin’s sermons were recorded live, and his sermons were renowned. He traveled around the country to different churches preaching. As C.L sold his sermons through recordings, Franklin sold her music through song. This was a precursor to what his daughter’s life would become through
music. According to Ann Powers in *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, Aretha Franklin’s style of voice that was developed in the church crossed over into mainstream music. The sacred voice of Aretha in the church crossed lines into the secular music of the world: “Aretha Franklin’s celebrated use of melisma (stringing together a series of notes in a single syllable) and ‘squalling’ (bursting unexpectedly into those divine high notes), not to mention the call-and-response that drives many of her hits, [are] derive[d] straight from the church. 189

In *Aretha Franklin: The Queen of Soul*, Franklin’s biographer Mark Bego details the emergence of the black woman musician in the 1970s. In this particular epoch, Dionne Warwick, Roberta Flack, Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin as well as other vocalists released chart-topping hits from “Day Dreaming”, “Young, Gifted and Black”, “Compared to What?”, and other soul-stirring songs. Aretha’s musical influences range from Reverend James Cleveland to Clara Ward. Her gospel album, *Amazing Grace*, crossed over into mainstream popularity, becoming one of the greatest recorded gospel albums of all time. Franklin’s brother compares his sister’s voice to the homiletical delivery of a black preacher. He says,

“‘You listen to [Aretha] and it’s just like being in church. She does with her voice exactly what a preacher does with his when he moans to a congregation. That moan strikes a responsive chord in the congregation and somebody answers you back with their own moan, which means ‘I know what you’re moaning about, because I feel the same way.’ So you have something sort of like a thread spinning out and touching and tying everybody together in a shared experience, just like getting happy and shouting together in church.’” 190

Aretha’s release of her August 1970 album *Spirit in the Dark* echoes her brother’s aforementioned sentiments. Released as her nineteenth studio album the song, *Spirit in the Dark*, rose to number three on the R&B Billboard charts. Performed in C Minor in
this particular clip. Franklin starts with a slow intro, melismatically singing out the
pronoun “I” before completing the phrase, “getting the Spirit in the Dark.” Clearly
vacillating between sacred and secular lines, this song illustrates the movement of
perspiring, glistening bodies dancing and moving to the strong bass beats of the music.
However, the sound that accompanies these lyrics is reminiscent of the Gospel sound. As Franklin repeats, “Spirit in the Dark” she is enacting a call and response between
herself and the accompanying vocalists. The slurred notes Dflat, Aflat, Bflat, and Dflat
from the vocalists represents the cool, hummed response to Franklin’s repeated call of,

“Spirit in the Dark”:

I-I’m gettin' the spirit in the dark 
(um-hum-hum)
I'm gettin' the spirit in the dark 
(Um-hum-hum)
People movin' oh and they groovin'
Just gettin' the spirit 
(Um-hum-hum) in the dark

Tell me sister how do ya feel?
Tell me my brother-brother-brother
How do you feel?
A do you feel like dancin?
Get up and let's start dancin'
Start gettin' the spirit 
(Start gettin' in the spirit)
Spirit in the dark 
(In the dark)”

The violinists making tremolos with their bows in D flat is an eerie representation of the
wavering lines of the sacred and secular. Because tremolos have a “wavering” sound,
the tremolos in “Spirit in the Dark” symbolize the wavering or vacillating moves between
sacred music and the secular. When listening to Spirit in the Dark, the vacillation
between these two labels is clear. The cool response is repeated to Franklin’s call for the first fifty seconds of the song. Reminiscent of the celebratory or festive and climactic element of the black preaching tradition, the percussion and tempo start increasing, and as Franklin is playing the piano and singing, the climax of the song arrives when she mimics a shouting/dancing church or ring shout. She continues to holler, “I believe I’ve got it” as the band continues to play the sermonic climax.

In performance at the White House in 2015, Franklin stands, with welcoming thunderous applause from her audience, at the doorway of the performance hall and opens with a gut-wrenching version of “I Love the Lord, He Heard My Cry.” Franklin’s voice in the clip mimics the work songs, spirituals and mellifluous voice of the slave woman as she travails in the field. Singing in the key of E flat minor, Franklin’s melisma symbolizes the vacillating body of the slave woman as she labors under the hot, scorching sun. Her melisma symbolizes the groan and moaning of the slave woman as her back aches from the continuous bent of picking cotton. In Franklin’s voice, the movement of the slave woman’s feet, arms and fingers as she indefatigably toils to produce a harvest can be heard. The high E flat Franklin sings at the climax of this spiritual represents the tired but persevering wail of the slave woman, with skin scorched from the sun, as she lifts her face to the sky pleading, “Lord, Lift Me Up.” Franklin’s voice is also a resonant echo of the slave who built, brick by brick, the structure of the White House. The glissando between notes E flat and D natural represent the slow slide of the black woman’s body as she moves in slow rhythm plodding through the fields. White, sparse material coats the underbelly of her fingernails as she continues minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, collecting cotton.
Approximately a minute into singing the spiritual, the band stops and begins playing “Lord Lift Me Up.” Aretha creates a true representation of the black church in the White House. With a choir, keys, horns, drums, and an accompanying woman beating the tambourine as though it’s a Pentecostal worship service, Franklin brings the church to every venue. Just as the preacher would ask his congregation, she asks the audience, “Do you want to be lifted?” Franklin gives a curtsy after the song and shouts with a fortissimo, “Hallelujah! Glory to God! I’m feelin’ all right right along through here. What about you?” She continues to sing, “I wonder, I wonder, do you know he’s a burden bearer. He’s a wonder!” She begins to pray as she sings these words saying, “Lord, will you lift up humanity” and a climactic communal response ensues. Towards the end of her performance, Franklin, giving a recitative, sings while speaking that great gospel singer, Reverend James Cleveland was one of her mentors on the piano. She speaks as she sings about her grandmother. It is as if the spirit of God and Reverend C.L. Franklin envelop her. Not only does Franklin bring church to the people’s house, but she also brings the spirit of the black slave woman with her. President Obama at the end of the program called the gospel tradition at the White House event “old-time religion.” Franklin’s 2015 performance is one of the examples of Franklin a mainstream soul singer with Gospel roots bringing the sermon and the art of homiletics into a political and secular venue.

In “Hum Thought: Tales, Tunes, and Talk” Crawford describes the essence of call and response in the black preaching tradition. Call and response is prevalent in a majority of Franklin’s performances. Call and response is “a responsive chord created in the congregation and sounded back to the preacher and the rest of the congregation. …the response is not only a matter of talk-back—using a variety of expressions such as ‘Well?’
and ‘Stay right there’—but also a matter of feel-back manifested in gestures and body language.”

In another performance at the White House in 2014, after singing *Amazing Grace*, Franklin proclaims, “Omega—oh yeah!” declaring God as Alpha and Omega. Her performance becomes testimony wrapped in song. She continues to sing, “Can you feel like running sometimes?” With resplendent heels bedazzled with glitter, Franklin does a light run across the stage and the house band continues to play the shouting music reminiscent of the black church tradition. An antiphony begins with the horns and Franklin’s voice—a call and response on E natural begins. Franklin sings, “It was grace that brought me safe thus far.” She continues, “You don’t know what the Lord has done for me. He’s brought me from the hospital to the White House.” Her incessant recitative here illustrates testimony wrapped in song. As Franklin proceeds to tell her audience the story of her recent hospital visit, she sings her testimony, “As I was leaving the hospital they said, ‘Ms. Franklin, there’s something we want to tell you.’” She tunes her voice, like a preacher’s with the piano and the organ. She sings, “You don’t know that I’ve come from a praying family.” She goes back to her father’s sermons and proceeds to talk about her father’s famous sermon, “An Eagle Stirreth Her Nest” and says she believes God in stirring the nest of humanity. Pointing to President Obama, First Lady Obama, and the rest of the audience, Franklin in that moment sings not only her healing but also the prophetic healing of the nation. Tinged with gospel and saturated with soul, Franklin’s music career has lasted decades. 2017 will be her last year of live performances. What is the meaning of Franklin’s voice during this time? Aretha Franklin—a woman whose voice has carried this nation through turbulent times during
the civil rights movement and the black power epoch with her music—becomes the prophetic preacher who through her songs and full circle performances at the White House ushers in the spirit of empowerment and healing.

**MS. LAURYN HILL**

Ms. Hill, donned in her New York baseball hat, sunglasses, and jeans walks out to a clapping, smiling audience waiting anxiously to hear her new music. Since 1998, Hill has been out of the entertainment spotlight. Her *MTV Unplugged 2.0* recording marked her first solo album since 1998. In a distinct setting compared to other artists’ live recordings, Hill is perched on a diminutive stage with her guitar, some lit candles, note pad, tea, and a microphone. Hill’s accouterment is intentional; she does not put on a façade for her fans, presenting as she calls it, *realness*—the *Real* Lauryn Hill. She says while chuckling, “I used to get dressed for ya’ll. Now, I don’t have the energy. It’s a new day.”

At 23 years old, Hill had five Grammy Awards (one of which was for Best Album of the Year—*Miseducation*), The Sammy Davis Jr. Soul Train Entertainer of the Year, the Essence Award for Excellence, and many other awards. Lauryn Hill’s *MTV* unplugged album was the most socially conscious but the lowest-selling album in her recording history. In 2001, on a diminutive stage adorned for one, Hill begins recording her second album with *MTV*. The songs Hill performs for her listeners take both her and her audience to a place of musical euphoria. Hill’s singing transcends conventional music production boundaries placed on mainstream artists. The performance of certain songs is unique and specific to Ms. Hill because songs from “Oh Jerusalem”, “I Find it Hard to
Say”, and “I Gotta Find Peace of Mind” are soul-stirring compositions that literally unplug and strip the listener of all flesh, taking them on a journey to the Spirit. Hill is very clear in her reference to God in each of the performances of these songs. Looking at the ways in which Hill is a prophetic voice in music to social justice issues, I seek to prove in this chapter that most of her *MTV Unplugged* album and other songs are sermons. The black body, feminism, song and the sermon are all intrinsic to Hill’s performance.

Just as Baldwin discusses the struggle of the artist in his collection of essays, Hill struggles to be human in the face of fame. Rather than wallow in the struggle, Hill uses this challenge as a testimony wrapped in song that builds a strong connection between herself and her listeners. In *The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity*, Baldwin asserts the artist’s struggle for integrity is a metaphor for the struggle to be human:

> “I am not interested really in talking to you as an artist. It seems to me that the artist’s struggle for his integrity must be considered as a kind of metaphor for the struggle, which is universal and daily, of all human beings on the face of this globe to get to become human beings.”

In La Marr J. Bruce’s article, “The People Inside My Head, Too”: Madness, *Black Womanhood, and the Radical Performance of Lauryn Hill*, Bruce details Hill’s fall from beloved prophetess to media-portrayed madwoman or lunatic after her first album in 1998, which smashed music barriers. Referring to a 2006 interview, Bruce highlights Hill discussing her own musings about the dangers accosting black womanhood. In this interview, Hill makes it clear that she has had her own “war in the mind.” The battle to love yourself, the battle to deem yourself worthy, and the battle to look in the mirror and say to yourself, “I am beautiful” speaks to the challenges black women encounter daily in
society. Hill’s second album destabilizes those ideas and perceptions formulated by structural oppression that counters what is good and what is true about the black culture in general and black womanhood in particular:

“Hill’s commentary is dense with womanist, Afro-Affirmative, antimisogynist, antiracist, and anticolonial insights. She cites a centuries-long history of epistemic violence, psychological terror, and spiritual assault endured by black women. She repudiates the ‘mule of the world’ creed that potentially naturalizes black female abjection and endorses a culture of self-defeat and foregone surrender. She rebukes false prophecies that black women cannot find reciprocal love, political autonomy, or spiritual fulfillment. She instructs black women to ‘go through the fear,’ ‘to do something with the insecurity in order to move toward liberation. Significantly, Hill counsels black women to master the voices, but does not propose silencing them; her notion of liberated black womanhood can subsume those voices.”

Hill’s prophetic voice in music has not always been welcomed with open arms. In the sixth chapter of Mark in Scripture, Jesus returns to His hometown with His disciples. As Jesus prepares to teach in the synagogue, many who see Him begin asking questions, doubting His teachings, challenging the miracles He performed, and ultimately despising the sagacity with which He spoke. After hearing these challenges, Jesus responds, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” How does the world treat its prophets? I am not, in this chapter, comparing Hill to Jesus in any way, but the reality of Hill’s socially conscious music is not as well received in mainstream music as her previous songs. In his article, Bruce does not counter Hill’s ingenious prophetic voice; rather, he adds that this idea of madness and subrationality is what Hill embraces and of which Hill produces music. Positing four elements of “madness”--phenomenal madness (chaos of the mind), clinical madness (any range of severely neurotic disorders), anger madness (aggressive displeasure), and
psychosocial alterity (divergence from “normal”), Bruce witnesses all four elements of madness in Hill’s performances since 2001.

Using madness in this context as a method and metaphor in art-making, self-making, and world-making, Bruce details Hill’s performance of “I Gotta Find Peace of Mind”, noting that as she strums her guitar she “dreamily describes” the figure afflicting her. I argue, though, that rather than “dreamily describing” this figure or what individuals in Judeo-Christian theology would term the “enemy”, Hill begins to invite her audience into a testimonial space. Hill begins to turn her sermon, her story, her testimony into song. This is illustrated from her repetition of what she needs to tell the audience:

“I need to tell you all, all the pain he's caused
Mmh
I need to tell I'm, I'm undone because
Mmh”  

This song is not an airy reflection of pain and hurt; rather, this composition is the epitome of the five characteristics of the sermon in the black preaching tradition. “I Gotta Find Peace of Mind” is functional or “meaning-centered.” A yearning need inside of Hill rises because of her need to share with the audience the reality of not only getting free but staying free. When Hill manipulates the strings of her guitar, she allows the audience to become apart of her space—apart of her sound.

In Christian theology, we combat the temptation and fleshly desires of the mind. Whether it’s greed, jealousy, or any other form of temptation, there is an inherent battle between mind and body. What Hill does here is she creates with her guitar and raspy voice the sermonic/worshipful space. She does not lose her prophetic voice and yet even through the madness and talking wound to which Bruce refers, Hill’s performance as she
dexterously fingers multiple notes on her instrument becomes more of a musical baptism where through her tears she becomes new. As Hill refers to this context in several instances in her songs the favored Scripture, “…Old things have passed away, behold all things have become new”, her album is not only one that looks at the social justice battles of the world, but she preaches through her singing that the social justice battle begins with the war in the mind—the battle between spirit and flesh; mind and body.

The song, “Peace of Mind” is in G Major, symbolizing peace and calm. The chorus “Peace of Mind” stays in G Major. When she begins to sing, “I Gotta Find Peace of Mind” the key of G is more of a prophetic tune that she strums on her guitar. She makes clear that there is an enemy present who keeps telling her that her success isn’t possible; that her life isn’t possible, but she repeats, “I know it’s possible.” The key of G Major, which symbolizes happiness counters what the “enemy” says to her. The G Major key represents music that is idyllic and lyrical—a calm and satisfied passion. She could have started the song in a minor key illustrating a dirge-like tune, but she starts in a calm tune. With this song, Hill breaks the mold and sets her own “standard” of what is accepted in music. Refusing to be apart of the dominant entertainment culture, Hill steps aside from the norm and creates her music realm that is uniquely hers. She fights for herself in this song. She fights for her mind, for the things that seem impossible, are possible. The things that are improbable are tangible. The things that are grabbable are haveable, for anything is possible. After this proclamation, Hill converts into the key of G Minor, repeating, “Free! Free! Free! Get Free Now!” There is a deep decresendo as she ends the song singing repeatedly, “He’s my peace of mind.” This moment leads listeners into a sacred space where she sings to her audience, “Everyday is another chance to get it
right this time.” Ending with, “What a merciful God. Oh, what a wonderful God”, her voice breaks as she sings continuously, “wonderful, merciful.”²⁰⁴

There are clear moments throughout her performance and the text that are attributed directly to Scripture, thereby proving Hill’s psalm is a testimony of redemption and the incessant discovery to find peace. Singing through obvious pain, it’s often imagined that Hill is talking about an ex-lover or boyfriend; however, as the climax of the song draws nigh, it is evident of whom Hill is talking. Her peace of mind is God. In the middle of her performance she sings, “I just can’t believe that you would have anything to do with someone so insecure, someone so immature.” Like the Psalm of David that says, “What is mankind that you are mindful of him, human beings that you care for them?”²⁰⁵ As Hill continues to sing and repeat these lyrics”, Hill becomes the David in Scripture who played his harp before King Saul to remove and hinder malevolent spirits in Saul’s mind and around him.

In 1 Samuel chapter 16, Scripture tells the story of Samuel anointing David. David, the son of Jesse of Bethlehem was a young man tending sheep. Samuel searched all over for the “one” the Lord wanted to anoint. He passed by Eliab, Abinadab and other individuals who deemed themselves worthy of the anointing and who Samuel thought the Lord wanted him to anoint. However, the Spirit of the Lord was very clear that He saw the hearts of these men and could not choose them, for “The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”²⁰⁶ Hill’s performance, particularly of “Peace of Mind” is reminiscent of David playing his lyre for Saul. The vibration of each string penetrates whatever is hindering
Hill from attaining peace of mind, and the higher note and frequency of vibration, the more Hill supernaturally ascends with her music into a space of freedom.

“Touch my mouth with your hands
Touch my mouth with your hands
Oh, I want to understand
The meaning of your embrace
I know that I have to face the temptations of my past
Please don’t let me disgrace
Where my devotion lays”

In this instance, Hill becomes a psalmist who sings through the dark space of denigration, and the sting of subjugation, thereby creating a type of heteroglossic speech with both the guitar and her voice.

After her sonic testimony of “Peace of Mind,” Hill proceeds to share with her audience the challenges she has overcome as an artist who is still growing, still developing, and still gleaning. More than anything, her message after the spiritual space she created directs her listeners’ hearts toward her truth and reality rather than the crazed persona that the media portrays. After her performance of “Peace of Mind” Hill responds to an audience member’s fervent approval of her song:

Hill: “Thank you, Praise God. I know everybody is in the same mess. I’m telling you. We all are. I’ll be the first to tell you. I’m a mess. And God is dealing with me everyday. Everyday I’m trying to learn how I can be less of a mess. He showed me, ‘Look Lauryn, you’re the problem. I’m going to show you how you’re causing the problem and now I want you to be the solution. And that’s what all these songs are about. Problem causing solution. Free your mind. We all think that the gospel is join a church building and that’s deception. The real gospel is repent which means let go of all that crap that’s killing you. Life is supposed to be a pleasurable experience, not this torment. And when I realized that I was tormenting myself-- it was about my lust-- it wasn’t [about] things that I needed. It was just all these security blankets. The more I acquired, I became
more of a prisoner. [With] forty people on staff, you can’t do nothing and now creativity is impossible because all you can think about is all these folks that you’re supporting and carrying. It’s not good. …we all get to do what our passion is. And that’s what praising God is all about, is doing your passion. It’s not useless, worthless, monotonous ritual when we show up and can’t wait to see the game. It’s doing your passion, fulfilling your passion. That’s how we’re thankful; that’s how we say we appreciate the opportunity to be alive. …So now after all that, I’m just ready to be me. And it’s a lot to work through.

“To get free” implies that a walk, a journey, a path must be taken in order to get to the promise, and the promise here is freedom. When Hill was on tour, she couldn’t be a real person. She was a prisoner. She was trapped in her own illusion that she created for the public. This illusion is how the public knew her; however, the will of the flesh conflicts with the will of the spirit. The spirit gives life and the flesh produces death. The spirit gives peace and the flesh evinces immorality.

I find it hard to say, that everything is alright
Don’t look at me that way, like everything is alright
’Cause my own eyes can see, through all your false pretenses
But what you fail to see, is all the consequences
You think our lives are cheap, and easy to be wasted
As history repeats, so foul you can taste it
And while the people sleep, too comfortable to face it
His life so incomplete, and nothing can replace it
And while the people sleep, too comfortable to face it
Your lives so incomplete, and nothing can replace it

“I Find it Hard to Say” and “Black Rage” channel Hill’s use of her pen to rouse a nation from slumber. Before Hill wrote “Rebel”, she had to understand what she was talking about before she could share it with anybody. Hill wrote this song in response to the February 4, 1999 murder of 23-year-old Guinea immigrant Amadou Diallo. Diallo was shot 41 times by four NYPD police officers on Wheeler Avenue in the Bronx. The
four police officers were charged with second-degree murder and reckless endangerment. Each officer was acquitted and found not guilty. All four officers ceased gunfire until there were no more bullets in their guns. Repeating “Wake Up” with notes B and A, signals a clarion call to her audience and those in this nation who are sleeping thinking that racism doesn’t affect them, MUST wake up! Her singing is a strong shout to those who are mentally sleeping.


The first stanza of “My Favorite Things” in The Sound of Music speaks of warmth, comfort, belonging, memory—all these things that individuals attribute with brightness: “Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, Brown paper packages tied up with strings, these are a few of my favorite things.” In the midst of these “things” that bring comfort, the song speaks of the troubled times in one’s life and the sight of their favorite things dismisses everything bad. However, contrast this warm song to Hill’s blatant and forcefully honest composition of “My Favorite Things” using the same music. Here, Hill speaks to the screams of the black community against all things violent against their bodies. Hill pens, “Black rage is
founded in two-thirds a person; Raping and beatings and suffering that worsens; black human packages tied up in strings, black rage can come from all these kinds of things.”

The key of Hill’s “Black Rage” is significant, because it is recorded in A flat minor. A flat minor is a key that represents a bleeding heart being squeezed until there’s no more oxygen that it can pump through the rest of the body, and death ultimately ensues. In black rage, Hill uses the voices of young children (a young girl is audible) muttering—the words of the children are inaudible or incoherent but you know the children are there. Her incorporation of the audibility of the young children speaks to the need for future generations to not acquiesce or become comfortable with race, gender, and class oppression.

**To Zion**

According to Hill in a 2017 NPR interview, her “singing voice [has] to become more like my speaking voice in order for the tune to coexist.” Currently, fans continue to beg Ms. Hill to come back with a full album. From “To Zion” to her *MTV Unplugged 2.0* live performance and album, Hill continues to create a sermonic space in secular spaces. Rolling Stone names her “Unplugged” album as a public breakdown, but this album was instead a representation of Hill unplugging herself from false pretenses and the prisoner’s cell in which she found herself in the late 1990s.

In an interview for Essence magazine, “Hill says,

“People need to understand that the Lauryn Hill they were exposed to in the beginning was all that was allowed in that arena at that time. There was much more strength, spirit and passion, desire, curiosity, ambition and opinion that was not allowed in a small space designed for consumer mass appeal and dictated by very limited standards. I had to step away when I realized that for the sake of the machine,
I was being way too compromised. …I had to fight for an identity that doesn’t fit in one of their boxes. I’m a whole woman. And when I can’t be whole, I have a problem. By the end I was like, ‘I’ve got to get out of here.’

Hill’s song, “To Zion” is a song that tells of the joy of Hill having her firstborn son, Zion. In this song, Hill pens the challenges with which she was faced: people attempting to control her prerogative, telling her not to have a child while her career is burgeoning. To Zion is in the key of D Minor, which represents “womanliness” and “melancholy.” She opens her performance saying to the audience, “This is a song about life.” During the song, the lyrics symbolize Hill being a representation of Mary in the Bible carrying Jesus. She is uncertain, skeptical, unsure of what is to come with what is being carried inside of her. What eased her emotions was the angel that came to her one night and told her to kneel to pray.

“Unsure of what the balance held
I touched my belly overwhelmed
By what I had been chosen to perform
But then an angel came one day
Told me to kneel down and pray
For unto me a man child would be born”

As she points to her heart with her eyes closed, Hill sings, “Now the joy of my world is in Zion.” She sings most of this song with her eyes closed, reflecting on the power God gave her body to perform a miracle. For the vamp, the background vocalists sing “Marching, Marching, Marching To Zion…Beautiful, Beautiful Zion.” As her vocalists continue to sing this verse with fortitude and determination, their voices mimic the feet of those in the Bible marching to Zion—not only of those in the Bible marching to Zion, but also those who are marching toward promise. Those who are marching toward hope; those who are marching toward improvement. Those who are marching toward faith.
Those who are marching toward a new day. Those who are marching toward freedom. As her vocalists continue to sing these words, Hill touches her hair, closes her eyes, and continues to belt, “My Joy! My Joy! My Joy!” She continues to sing on two notes as she becomes ecstatic with the memory of Zion. The name Zion has deep significance here. Zion isn’t only Hill’s joy but it represents Hill’s connection between herself and God. 210 That international stage becomes a sermonic space where Hill loses herself and forgets any one around her. While singing, she doesn’t pay attention to the musicians, background singers, it’s her and people following her…marching to Zion, marching toward the promise of healing, self-worth, and empowerment of black womanhood.

While creating his play, Black Nativity, Langston Hughes makes known his newfound penchant for gospel music. In Charles I. Nero’s article, “The Female Gospel Voice and the Musical” Nero pens Hughes path of producing black musicals that incorporated black gospel music traditions. According to Nero, Hughes was “…entranced by their stepped-up rhythms, tambourines, hand clapping, and uninhibited dynamics, rivaled only by Ma Rainey singing the blues.” 211 Hughes defines gospel singing as performance that “defies notation.” 212 Nero points out an article that Hughes wrote for the New York Herald Tribune Magazine in ’63:

“In the formal sense, they do not rehearse songs. They absorb them. They never look at printed music. They listen to the melodies over and over. They hum them. Then croon them, harmonize them without consciously harmonizing, weave one voice behind another, sit and rock and sing, or maybe stand and improvise and laugh and cry and love and enjoy a song together while they are learning it. Then in public performance, often some one in the group will do something no one thought of in rehearsals. But nobody is thrown off the track, and the song retains its overall entity. This is what the old time jazz musicians call ‘head arrangements,’ right out of themselves—or else from outer space. Like the best of jazz, much of gospel singing defies notation.” 213
Tharpe, Franklin, and Hill have defied--and for Franklin and Hill--are still defying notation in much of their careers. Through the lens of music, we see a black feminism that dismantles race and gender oppression not only in word but also in song.

After examining the intricacies of Tharpe’s, Franklin’s, and Hill’s performances, it is imperative to situate their performances in a framework that speaks to the sonic parts of their performances as well as through the lens of black feminism. In his article, Reginald Jackson presents the slide guitar as an allegory through which listening, hearing, and thinking are delved. In addition, Jackson uses the characteristics that accompany slide guitar—glissando, vibrato, tension, fretless-ness—to re-think the ways gender and race play into our hearing, thinking, and living explorations. In this article, Jackson begs the answer to the position of the black female voice as it relates to the sonic characteristics of the slide guitar: “Where does the black female voice reside in the context of slide guitar, and to what affective ends is it taken up—or outright ‘lifted’?”^214 Jackson’s description of the vibration of the slide guitar moving with the body is synonymous with Rosetta Tharpe’s performances of the 1960s and Lauryn Hill’s performances in 2001. Specifically with songs such as Hill’s “I Gotta Find Peace of Mind” the guitar and her body become one. There is no individuation in this song. The melody of her voice, the penetration of her fingers on the frets of the slide guitar, and the gesture of her body with the rhythm as she uses her own fingers to strum evinces Jackson’s illustration of resonance and the voice and the instrument becoming one.

In Carla L. Peterson’s foreword entitled, “Eccentric Bodies” in *Recovering the Black Female body: Self-representations by African-American Women,*^215 Peterson speaks of artistry and culturally expansive production mending the physical and social
rupture of black bodies during the Middle Passage. I am particularly reminded of the “eccentric” bodies of black women—bodies who have been rendered voiceless for centuries and how these bodies that were once perceived as inutile resurrect themselves and use their tradition, culture, rituals, etc. to escape the normalized view of the black female body. It is through this mode of black expressive culture and resurrection that the voiceless find a voice. It is through this black expressive culture that the musician writes her psalm. It is through this black expressive culture that the writer finds her poetic use and uses her pen as a weapon, writing through the struggle. It is through this black expressive culture that even the dancer’s limbs—from head, torso, and feet move through, dance through pain. Through sermon wrapped in song, Tharpe, Franklin, and Hill “[overcome] voicelessness in their efforts to reconcile body and spirit and represent the beauty of the African-America self.” Tharpe, Franklin, and Hill illustrate the black feminist sermonic practice portraying the black woman musician as spirit figure, and through the union of body and spirit, healing and transformation take place.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe was not only known for her fiery gospel vocalization, but she was also known for the fire that came from her guitar strings and the way both her instrument and voice illuminated the stage. Aretha Franklin’s gospel soul tuning mixed with Lauryn Hill’s rhymes and singing is like sweet molasses poured onto warm, griddled pancakes for a smooth, savory taste. These women with their instruments enter the worlds of jazz, hip-hop, soul, gospel, and R&B, dismantling dominant notions that women can only do “x”, “y”, and “z.” Tharpe, Franklin, and Hill efficaciously mold their voices and instruments with the elements of the sermon in order to be utile tools of social agency.
CONCLUSION

“Write with your eyes like painters, with your ears like musicians, with your feet like dancers. You are the truthsayer with quill and torch. Write with your tongues on fire. Don’t let the pen banish you from yourself. Don’t let the ink coagulate in your pens. Don’t let the censor snuff out the spark, nor the gags muffle your voice.”

Freedom dreams. Freedom finds the words of the black woman preacher, amalgamating them into a symphonic sermon. The words of Anzaldúa above symbolize the breath of our ancestors exhaling upon dry, scattered bones. The writings and sermonic art of Maria Stewart, Ida B. Robinson, Pauli Murray, Dr. Amos, Dr. Riley, Bishop McKenzie, Bishop Bronson, Bishop Hunter, Dr. Leslie Callahan, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Aretha Franklin, Ms. Lauryn Hill, and so many others exhale upon dry bones, commanding them to hear the psalmic sound of the Spirit, to move with hind’s feet as “historical agents” that effect change, and with eagle eyes watch God. The black women preachers today represent those freedom dreams--they are freedom personified.

^1^ Adetiba, In These Times

^2^ Ephesians 6:12 (KJV)

^3^ The term “holy hush” is a phrase Bishop Vashti McKenzie used in her description of the black church when she was younger.

^4^ DuBois, 120

^5^ DuBois, 120

^6^ DuBois, 123

^7^ DuBois, 121


^9^ Gates, 19


^11^ DuBois’s assertion on the preacher figure stems from his canonical early twentieth century text, The Souls of Black Folk (1903) In this text, DuBois declares the black preacher figure as the most unique personality in America. He writes, “A leader, a politician, an orator, a boss; an intriguer, an idealist—all these he is, and ever too, the center of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number. The combination of a certain adroitness with deep-seated earnestness, of tact with consummate ability, give him his preeminence, and helps him maintain it. The type, of course, varies according to time and place.” (No Longer Bound: A Theology of Reading and Preaching by James Henry Harris) (74)

^12^ Cannon, 115

^13^ Cannon writes in her exposition of black preaching and the church that the black community had a religious cultural that belonged to them. Amalgamating West African religious traditions and orthodox Christianity, “...black men and women developed an extensive religious life of their own. The Black church was the only social institution in which African Americans could exercise leadership and power, and the preacher and preaching were held in the highest esteem in the Black church community. “...The Black preacher served as the arbiter of intellectual/moral life and the principal interpreter of canonized sacred writings.” (115)


19. *Triple-Consciousness* is a term I borrow from Marilyn Richardson’s discourse on black women’s autobiographical writing. The three categories of triple-consciousness encompass the idea of being black, an American, and a woman all whilst endeavoring to see yourself through the eyes of others. Triple-Consciousness is an extension of DuBois’s double-consciousness term and is utilized in black feminist/womanist circles.

20. These black preaching tradition terms are derived from Evans E. Crawford’s, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (1995)


22. “These Bones, These Bones” is a poem from bard, writer, activist and educator, Akasha Gloria Hull who recited these stanzas for the Middle Passage Monument Ceremony in New York in 1999. These verses were performed to pay homage to the ancestors who did not survive the Middle Passage. *Fire and Ink: An Anthology of Social Action Writing*. Eds. Frances Payne Adler, Debra Busman, and Diana García (307)


24. *Mujeres de color* is a Spanish translation for *women of color*.

25. Anzaldúa not only draws upon the invisibility that women of color endure in white male mainstream and white feminist societies, but she also addresses the sexuality of women of color that counters heteronormativity. She renders the language of those in the minority as “inaudible” as white society thrusts this unrecognized pattern of voices into the categories of the “outcast and the insane.” (23)

26. Refer to pages 1-2 for the full version of “These Bones, These Bones.”

27. *Ezekiel 37:1-9* (NIV)

28. *Words of Fire* (23)

29. The term “triple consciousness” is taken from Marilyn Richardson’s discourse on black women’s autobiographical writing, for the black woman is not just writing through a lens of being black and an American, but she is writing through being black, an American and a woman. Those three categories constitute triple-consciousness.

30. Henderson, 3

31. Bakhtin, 272


33. Haywood, 16

34. In *Prophesying Daughters*, Chanta M. Haywood makes clear how scholars have not given credence to the prophetic element in African American literary criticism. (17)

35. Haywood, 17

36. Haywood, 25

37. Haywood, 25

38. Haywood, 25

39. Collins, 22

40. The third chapter of this dissertation project expounds Callahan’s point of the black woman preacher being not the “voice” for all but the “microphone” for all. My personal interview with her is transcribed in chapter three, *Tongues on Fire*. 

143
Dr. Callahan is pastor of St. Paul’s Baptist Church and this BFPS characterization is derived from my personal interview with her.

Collins, 25
Collins, 26
Collins, 30
Collins, 33q
Collins, 39
Collins, 39
Collins, 41

Gordon, An Introduction to Africana Philosophy. Stewart, “is known as the first African-American woman to write a political manifesto and as one of the founding voices of black feminist thought, although her work defended a model of Christian virtue and European conceptions of womanhood that, as we shall see, affirmed the perspective of a black world that could only see itself through the eyes of whites.” (47)


The latter two sentences of this quote reference Proverbs 31, a part of Scripture that speaks on the piety and worth of a chaste woman (31)

Prosopopeia is defined as the personification of an inanimate object.

Bettye Collier-Thomas gives a punctilious biography of Pauli Murray, not only highlighting her sermons but her social justice work, as well.


Tridimensional phenomenon is a term borrowed from Katie G. Canon’s “Katie’s Canon” where she details race, class, and gender as the key issues in black feminist discourse.

“A womanist ethical critique helps us delegitimize the patriarchal teachings of the Black church. By disentangling the textual marginalization of women, we can find clues to Black churchwomen’s moral agency and restore, as much as possible, the rich traditions of women’s contributions to African AMerican theological thoughtCannon,

“Of the Faith of Our Fathers”; *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) DuBois, 120


Cannon writes in her exposition of black preaching and the church that the black community had a religious culture that belonged to them. Amalgamating West African religious traditions and orthodox Christianity, “…black men and women developed an extensive religious life of their own. The Black church was the only social institution in which African Americans could exercise leadership and power, and the preacher and preaching were held in the highest esteem in the Black church community. “…The Black preacher served as the arbiter of intellectual/moral life and the principal interpreter of canonized sacred writings.” (115)

Dr. Moss defines Blue Note sensibility in *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World: Finding Hope in an Age of Despair* as the amalgamation of the “shout and moan.” Moss asserts that there must be a reclamation of this Blue Note sensibility in postmodernity in order for prophetic preaching to take place. (22)

What makes Dr. Cannon’s text so fundamental to this chapter is her exploration of black women has “moral agents” in the face of struggle between the worlds of white supremacy and male domination. She writes, “The feminist consciousness of Afro-American women cannot be understood and explained adequately apart from the historical context in which Black women have found themselves as moral agents. By tracking down the central and formative facts in the Black woman’s social world, one can identify the determinant and determining structures of oppression that have shaped the context in which Black women discriminately and critically interpret Scripture, in order to apprehend the divine Word from the perspective of their own situation. Throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of White supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one White, privileged, and oppressive, the other Black, exploited, and oppressed. Thus, an entangling of the Black religious heritage sheds light on the feminist consciousness that guides Black women in their ongoing struggle for survival.” Katie G. Canon, “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness” (47)

In response to black feminist/womanist (to borrow Alice Walker’s terminology) consciousness, Cannon makes clear the role of black women within the church as agents of social change and platforms of resistance. She writes, “The black woman as educator attended Sunday services at local churches, where she often spoke in order to cultivate interest in the Black community’s overall welfare. Churchwomen were crusaders in the development of various social service improvement leagues and aid societies. They sponsored fund-raising fairs, concerts, and all forms of social entertainment in order to correct some of the inequities...in the Black community.” (52)
The Black woman began her life of freedom with no vote, no protection, and no equity of any sort. Black women, young and old, were basically on their own. The patterns of exploitation of the Black woman as laborer and breeder were only shaken by the Civil War; by no means were they destroyed. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black women were severely restricted to the most unskilled, poorly paid, menial work. Virtually no Black woman held a job beyond that of domestic servant or field hand. Keeping house, farming, and bearing and rearing children continued to dominate all aspects of the Black woman’s life. The systematic exclusion of Black females from other areas of employment served as confirmation for the continuation of the servile status of Black women.” (Cannon 51)

Terry Gross’s Interview with James Baldwin: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWRuQ8CJOFg

Baldwin, The Amen Corner (XVI)

In one of pieces of writing in The Cross of Redemption, Baldwin explains in “The Uses of the Blues” the meaning of the blues as an art form in song. He makes clear in this context that a “toughness” exists in the blues that makes the experience of the artists singing it real: “I am engaged, then, in a discussion of craft or, to use a very dangerous word, art. And I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy. Now joy is a true state, it is a reality; it has nothing to do with what most people have in mind when they talk of happiness, which is not a real state and does not really exist. Consider some of the things the blues are about. They’re about work, love, death, floods, lynchings; in fact, a series of disasters which can be summed up under the arbitrary heading ‘Facts of Life.’” (70-71)

Moss, Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World introduction (xii)

In a regular major tonic scale, all notes are in harmony with each other; however, when a “blue note” is inserted which is a flattened third of flattened fifth--it is considered as an “out note.” The blues scale “...had its roots in Afro-American music with the slaves and became being really used in Blues, receiving the name of ‘Blues scale.’ The term ‘blue note’ is generally translated into Portuguese as ‘out note,’ due to the fact of this note not [belonging] to [the] natural scale.” (simplifyingtheory.com/blues-scale-blue-note)

“Keys to the Kingdom” is a recurring mantra in The Amen Corner as a response to Margaret’s last sermon on love and the necessity to love both God and man.

Baldwin, The Amen Corner (XVI)

“The first line written in The Amen Corner is now Margaret’s line in the Third Act: ‘It’s a awful thing to think about, the way love never dies!’ That line, of course, says a great deal about me--the play says a great deal about me--but I was thinking not only, not merely, about the terrifying desolation of my private life but about the great burdens carried by my father. I was old enough by now, at last, to recognize the nature of the dues he had paid, old enough to wonder if I could possibly have paid them, old enough, at last, at last, to know that I had loved him and had wanted him to love me. I could see that the nature of the battle we had fought had been dictated by the fact that our temperaments were so fatally the same: neither of us could bend. And when I began to think about what
had happened to him, I began to see why he was so terrified of what was surely going to happen to me. The Amen Corner comes somewhere out of that.” (15)

92 Margaret’s first sermon, “Set Thine House in Order” comes from 2 Kings Chapter 20:1. In this passage, King Hezekiah’s life is extended after he prays to God to deliver him from death. Isaiah, the prophet, comes to Hezekiah while he is sick and tells him what the Lord says, “‘Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.’” After the prophecy from Isaiah, King Hezekiah turns his face to the wall and prays to God to remember how he’s walked in truth and loyalty in the eyes of the Lord. After King Hezekiah’s prayer, the Lord Isaiah to return to Hezekiah and tell him that his will be extended by 15 years. (2 Kings 20:1-20 NKJV)

93 Baldwin, The Amen Corner (9-10)
94 Baldwin, The Amen Corner (10)
95 Amen Corner. OED. University of Pennsylvania Library Online Database.
96 Baldwin, The Amen Corner (37)
97 Baldwin, The Amen Corner (80-81)
99 Baldwin, The Amen Corner (88)
100 Baldwin’s connection of the communion in church to the culture of theater is expressed in the preface to The Amen Corner. Hardy also refers to Baldwin’s discourse of the communion of the church matching theater in his essay, “James Baldwin as Religious Writer: The Burdens ad Gifts of Black Evangelicalism” (67)


103 Esther Phillips’s record “From a Whisper to a Scream” is a 1972 rhythm and blues song.

104 Baldwin, Just Above My Head (26)
105 Baldwin, Just Above My Head, 42-43.
106 A more general definition of affect is a “manner in which something is physically affected or dispersed.” More specifically, it is the “actual state or disposition of the body.” (OED; Def. 7)

107 Baldwin 43-44.
108 Baldwin 42.
109 “Yes, the sea of women’s hats, the rocks of men’s shoulders: a slow wind ruffles the sea, and breathes on the rocks, drops, then rises…and some raise their faces, as into the wind, and some cover their faces with their hands,…everything is still. Only the voice is rising, like a lone bird against the coming storm…Oh, thunders the piano, and Yes, breathes the wind, and the voice, the lone bird, mounts,…I watch Sister Julia’s fingers decipher the text in the keyboard. It is a strange wind that rises, from so far away, and the lone voice rises above the wind. The sea moves back and forth, and rocks move from side
to side, the lone voice rises, approaching a hard triumph, the piano bearing witness, the wind slowly dropping…” (Baldwin 43-44)

110 “Twelve Gates to the City” is a song written by the renowned American gospel recording group, The Davis Sisters of Philadelphia. Interestingly, Baldwin prefaces the sermon with songs written and recorded by black women blues/gospel musicians.

111 Psalm 31:21 marks Julia’s first sermon in the text

112 Romans 7:24-25: “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (NKJV)


114 Call and response is a form of musicality that is often used in the black church between soloist and choir, or in this context, between preacher and congregation.

115 Psalm 23, Psalm 24, Psalm 37, Psalm 91, and Psalm 121 are marked near the climactic point of Julia’s sermon, giving a clear example of how song integrates sermon. (Baldwin 66)

116 The term “grain” refers to Roland Barthes’s, Image, Music, Text where he describes the grain of the voice.

117 Baldwin, Just Above My Head (64)

118 These observations are from my personal visit to James Baldwin’s archive and personal papers of JAMH at the Schomburg Center in New York (September 2017)

119 James 1: 6-8 (NKJV)

120 Baldwin, Just Above My Head (64)

121 Julia’s second sermon is Margaret’s first. Set Thine House in Order stems from Isaiah 38:1: “In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord. Set thine house in order: for thou shalt die, and not live.”

122 Baldwin (164)

123 Baldwin, Just Above My Head (237)

124 Ezekiel 37:4-6

125 In her book, Black Feminist Intellectual Thought, Collins defines the iterations of black feminist thought, its dynamics, and the manner in which black women cultivate spaces to give themselves and others agency.

126 Collins uses Alice Walker’s The Color Purple and Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God as examples of black women writers writing the healing of black women characters in different artistic forms, from narration to letter writing.

127 Baldwin, Just Above My Head (280-281)

128 “In Julia, therefore, Baldwin has created a representation of that part of womanhood that man might wish to suppress, but that he also, paradoxically, wishes to be in touch with. The other women--the faithful wives, the adoring sisters, the sacrificing mothers--lose interest for him in direct proportion to their abilities to fulfill the functions for which they have been created in the works in which they appear. But Julia is that ‘something else.’” (209)

129 Harris pens “Perversion in Paradise--Or Salvation?: Just Above My Head as a way of explaining Baldwin’s intentions for his last novel. She explicates clearly and decisively
the potential reason for a black man to be the narrator of a black woman’s story and not the black woman herself. We, as readers, are constantly seeing Julia’s life through the eyes of the black male limited omniscient narrator.

Harris writes, “Her rebirth is what makes Julia different from the earlier Baldwin women. She makes a complete change from one life-style to another, from one very restricted way of thinking to larger, more functional ways of thinking. She represents an escape, a freedom that looms large because of the path taken to reach it. Although her transformation makes her different from the earlier portraits of black women, there are other connections here with Julia that have been hinted at before between earlier black women and men in their lives.” (187)

Harris pointedly says, “Hall sees himself as a man’s man...He sees a definite place for women; they should be loved and protected, and they can possibly pursue careers of their own, but they should not consider themselves equal to men. Since Hall’s narration reveals much about himself, the progressive impressions he gives to us about women should be considered within the chronology of the narration, not necessarily within the chronology of the years he covers, though, as we have seen with his evaluations of Joel, his attitudes have been formed early.” (188)

According to Harris, Hall will always see Julia in the “‘child’s smile’ that belies her history, but he never fully understands the complexities that compose it. She is metaphorically above his head. A phrase from a traditional song about music in the air and heaven, the title also suggests that which cannot be touched and that which cannot be understood. ...Julia, whose body Hall has touched many times, remains a mysterious entity. She has something intangible that cannot be taken.” (203)

Baldwin, Just Above My Head, 280
Baldwin, The Amen Corner (16)
Baldwin, Just Above My Head, 557
Folder Seven of Box 26 in James Baldwin’s archive at the Schomburg Center in NY.
Eleanor Traylor, “I Hear Music in the Air: James Baldwin’s Just Above My Head.”
Traylor, 95
Traylor 105-106
Box 29, Folder 9; the following quote is from Baldwin’s unpublished personal papers at the Schomburg Center.
Nadinola is a skin-bleaching cream.
Located in Box 29 Folder 6 at the Schomburg Center in New York; this poem has never been published. I discovered this poem among the personal papers of James Baldwin’s archive and believed it fit well with the sermonic as not only literary but also poetic genre.
DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (121)
Katie G. Canon in “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness” details the great significance of the black church tradition from the seventeenth century to the 21st century. Canon critically analyzes the position of the black woman in America with both theological and feminist lenses. As a result of the black woman’s stance as “mule of the world”, there remains an everpresent struggle that the black woman has had to endure from White hegemony and patriarchy. In addition, the black woman has had to endure a
double-consciousness of her own, one where she endures a world of White oppression and privilege and a black exploitative world steeped in oppression. (47)

Douglas (155)

Philando Castile’s interview, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsTGr8JolEA

Douglas (154)

Douglas (155)

In Souls of Black Folk, DuBois outlines the “peculiar sensation”, this double-consciousness and defines in poignant words what it means to be a Negro in America in 1903.

LaRue continues to assert the importance of the black social experience and its incorporation into the sermon of the black preacher. These two elements are inseparable. This observation is particularly important in this chapter when examining the sermonic space of the black woman. The context of each sermon is crucial in order to comprehend fully the meaning and impact of the black woman’s ministerial delivery and just how her sermon impacts society outside of the church (13).

LaRue (14)

In his chapter, “The Search for Distinctiveness”, LaRue names four points that are essential to the black church experience and the delivery of the preacher’s sermon: personal piety, care of the soul, social justice, and corporate concerns. Out of all four of these elements, social justice is one of the most important aspects of the black church. Resistance to racial oppression and subjugation have always been apart of the preacher’s messages since the origins of the black church.

Here, Spillers distinguishes between the literary and theoretical versus the oral and vernacular. She looks at how the African American community is known to be both musical and oral while at the same time endeavoring to distinguish between literary/theory and oral/vernacular. Spillers writes, “Ages ago, in this land, the book for the black person was a mysterious and therefore precious formula to be known, precisely because his/her captor didn’t want them to know and passed anti-literacy laws!” (87)

In Hortense Spillers’ essay, “Moving on Down the Line”, she defines the form of the sermon as a “fundamentally symbolic form that not only lends shape to the contours and outcome of African Americans’ verbal fortune under American disguise but also plays a key role in the psychic configuring of their communities.”

Barthes, Image Music, Text (188)

1 Corinthians 12: 22-23 (NIV)

Interview with Dr. Leslie Dawn Callahan

Dr. Callahan’s sermon on Race, Faith, and Community: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzSEpp9ppjc

Cannon (56)

McKenzie references Anna Julia Cooper who emphasizes the role the black woman plays with respect to the whole race. Cooper dedicated her life to uplift the role of the black woman in society. Cooper says these words from her book A Voice from the South in 1892, “only the black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.” (ajccenter.wfu.edu).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7XqsuFZSIA
This is a clip from one of Dr. Amos’s sermons on Acts 16: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7XqsuFZSIA

According to Bishop Rosette Coney, music is God’s voice. I find this assertion particularly interesting when comparing the sermon and song with the black woman preacher figure. In the pulpit, the voice of God speaks through music and Word.

Bishop Dr. Millicent Hunter’s, senior pastor of The Baptist Worship Center in Philadelphia, words about the state of the black woman in America.

McKenzie, Stand Your Ground: https://roho.io/stand-your-ground/

Mothers of the Movement at Oxford Union January 2017: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iZuzRMMdgYo

Alice Walker inserts Virginia Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own”, a manuscript that details what is necessary for a woman to write fiction: “Virginia Woolf in her book A Room of One’s Own wrote that in order for a woman to write fiction she must have two things, certainly: a room of her own (with key and lock) and enough money to support herself.” (In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens 235)

The above epigraph is extracted from 2005 The Encyclopedia of the African and African-American Experience edition. With editors, Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., this volume is one of many encyclopedic editions that provides the history of the African diaspora. (728)

When Malindy Sings by Paul Laurence Dunbar: https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/when-malindy-sings/


Evans E. Crawford in The Hum: Call and Response in African-American Preaching credits New Testament preacher, James Massey, who teaches him five characteristics that are significant in the black preaching tradition (68-71).

Crawford takes great care in detailing the functional aspect of the sermon. He emphasizes the need of the sermon to be “meaning centered” instead of “museum centered.” The sermon is not meant to be an exhibition for people to admire and gaze at its performativity, but it is meant to signify a particular meaning and evoke a specific response from the people to whom it reaches.

Psalm 30:4-5 (English Standard Version—ESV)

Crawford spells out the element of the black preaching tradition of the participants. He labels this participation and involvement “congregational punctuation”, emphasizing “…while the preacher can initiate a pace, it is not the preacher’s alone. The hearer has a part in it as well. Even when there is a congregation that feels back more than it talks back, the very willingness to recognize the part the hearer plays in the proclamation is often enough to maintain the pitch on a level that keeps faith sweet and strong.” (70)
Johnson illustrates clearly the lines of demarcation that went along with gender and which musical instrument was associated with which gender. Particularly in the musical genres of jazz, blues, and rock/pop women stood as objectified entities only for the male gaze: “Female performers have often been hired more for their looks than for their musicianship, typically, according to a European American standard of beauty, requiring a slim ‘sexy’ figure with light skin. In addition to racism and class discrimination, colorism has been a factor in women’s blues from the start.” (55-56)

Johnson (56)

Rosetta Tharpe: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9BFVcZr5Sc

Up Above My Head-Gospel Time TV: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JeaBNAXfHfQ

Precious Lord, Rosetta Tharpe (beginning at 9:28): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2H1pDEg9F4


Franklin’s performance of Spirit in the Dark was performed in the UK on August 8, 1970 for BBC television: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc0bHrffNrE

Lyrics of Spirit in the Dark:
http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/arethafranklin/spiritinthedark.html

A tremolo is often performed on stringed instruments with the sound of a waver. Tremolos are never stagnant; tremolos have a sound that moves.

Franklin’s White House performance in 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ddYfaRuVGA

Crawford, 55-56

Franklin’s White House performance in 2014 for Women of Soul: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYK45mTOuhc

Baldwin, 51

Bruce, 385

Bruce, 385

Mark 6:1-5 (NIV)

Lyrics to Lauryn Hill’s, “I Gotta Find Peace of Mind” 2002

Crawford, 68

A “talking wound” as Bruce describes it is “…a trauma that clamors again and again in the consciousness of its victim that echoes like a sinister refrain that inflicts hurt with each iteration.” (7)

Lauryn Hill “I Gotta Find Peace of Mind”:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pb7KjMTgK-Q

Psalm 8:4 (NIV)

1 Samuel 16:7

Lyrics to Hill’s “I Find it Hard to Say (Rebel)”

Lauryn Hill: (conspiromedia.wordpress.com/tag/brother-anthony/)

Lyrics to “To Zion”:
https://play.google.com/music/preview/Tkou3iedbaxdgblxr26xxuhomecu?lyrics=1&utm_source=google&utm_medium=search&utm_campaign=lyrics&pcampaignid=kp-lyrics&u=0#
Lauryn Hill’s “To Zion”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy1tjxXCQXs

Nero, 78
Nero, 79
Nero (79)

Reginald Jackson, Toward Tensile Humility: Gender, Race, and Ethical Praxis of Slide Guitar, 140

Michael Bennett and Vanessa Dickerson are editors of Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representation by African-American Women.

Peterson, 10
Peterson, 10
Anzaldúa, 31
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Baldwin, James. “The Artist’s Struggle for Integrity.” *The Cross of Redemption*: 

154


Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the


Peterson, Carla L. “Eccentric Bodies.” *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-


