

Introduction & First Chapter of Manuscript

Is it a Sermon?

Genre Fluidity in African American Preaching

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9-1-2020

INTRODUCTION

Albert Ayler was known for screeching and groaning through his horn in songs like “Our Prayer” and “Ghosts.” Audiences found the music bloodcurdling, a wrenching experience of anguish and bliss. Many of those who were mesmerized by the music struggled to describe his atonal wailing. For Ayler, it was simple. He was preaching. Yawping through his saxophone was a means of bearing a holy message. He’d discerned his call while listening to John Coltrane and was now a “missionary” and sounder of “truth for those who can listen.”¹

In 1959, Mack Charles Parker, a young African American man, was abducted in the middle of the night and lynched near Poplarville, Mississippi. Pauli Murray, an attorney in New York, read about the case and penned “Collect for Poplarville” (Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer):

Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord;

Teach us no longer to dread
hounds yelping in the distance,
the footfall at the door,
the rifle butt on the window pane.

*And by thy great mercy defend us from all perils
and dangers of this night;*

Give us fearlessness to face
the bomb thrown from the darkness,
the gloved hand on the pistol,
the savage intention.

Give us courage to stand firm against
our tormentors without rancor—
Teach us that most difficult of tasks—
to pray for them,
to follow, not burn, thy cross!²

Over twenty years later, and after being ordained as an Episcopal priest, Pauli recognized poems like “Collect for Poplarville” as early sermons and was convinced poetry and sermons were overlapping genres.³

This book is about the shoreline of homiletics, the place where preaching laps up against other forms of expression. The examples just mentioned are not flukes. They form part of an aspect of preaching with a long history. There were, for instance, the sermonic performances: Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for 3 years, Jeremiah fashions a yoke and puts it on his neck, Simeon the Stylite lived on a pillar standing

50 feet in the air, Julian of Norwich made a pulpit out of her anchorhold.⁴ We also see preaching that merges with prayer, singing, or everyday discourse. Consider the Baptist deaconess whose morning prayer rhythmically flows into a sermon, or a singer like Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith, whose gospel solos turned into sermonettes. From time to time, even a simple committee report sheds its banality and gives everyone a taste of Good News. The gospel dances in and out of the forms we create for it. What modes of preaching get overlooked due to genre classifications? What types of proclamation go unrecognized because they don't meet our expectations for what a sermon is supposed to look like?

The conception of the sermon genre was not always construed so narrowly. In medieval England, for instance, Christian commentary, treatises, letters, poetry, and drama came under the umbrella of sermon along with some spiritual writings that were never even brought to speech.⁵ An item could begin as a sermon and become a poem, begin as a letter and become a sermon, or flit back and forth between these categories. This fluidity required openness on the part of the audience and reflected a culture that prized spiritual counsel. The English intuited that, as evidenced by the different genres of scripture, divinely inspired messages might take a range of forms.

Similarly, the lines of demarcation around sermons are blurry at best in many Black Church settings. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is a case in point. It begins in the margins of a newspaper, runs on to bits of paper, and eventually flows on to full pages of a tablet once he receives one. By straddling epistle and sermon, his message has visceral impact. Surely, King's carceral setting and preacher-activist vocation shape the message in his case. Yet, the fluidity I am describing also arises in church sanctuaries with preacher's who are much less engaged in bodily witness in the public square. Many a pastor has preached a forty-minute oration of a sermon that climaxed in ten minutes of song, parts of which consisted of solo and parts of which were sung by the entire congregation. The very runniness of the venture is what's provocative here: the message's underlying instability provides a helpful vantage point for thinking about the nature of preaching. Like a river, the sermon's movement is a sign of life and an indication that an invisible current is at work beneath the surface.

Scrambling and even violating the boundaries of genre is a reappearing feature of Black radicalism. The search for fullness of life in the face of social death leads to a passionate disregard for structures that muzzle truth. As Fred Moten explains, "blackness is the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity."⁶ When this conception is applied to preaching, the pastiche nature of the venture becomes prominent. Dynamism at the boundaries of the genre is part of Black preaching's genius. The fluidity mirrors the Holy Spirit's tendency to spill past human confines set around a message as all things are made new.

Holding to rigid boundaries around the conception of the sermon presents serious problems. First, if sermons are considered solely as messages preached from a pulpit during a worship service by an ordained person, the very definition of preaching mutes too many of the church's preachers, particularly women, queer people, laypersons, and people who preach outside of liturgical settings. Yet, such people play an essential proclamatory role in African American faith communities both within liturgies and beyond them. And, since homiletical approaches that work for charismatic straight clergymen sometimes hinder those who move through the world differently, research that considers a range of identities is vital. The sources we choose for examining Black preaching are critical in determining which voices are foregrounded and in shaping the norms of the discourse.⁷ Privileging a few voices at the expense of others has propelled a warped vision of power and contributed to the de-legitimation of the preacher.

Reviving Black preaching becomes possible when we attend not only to the clergy person, but to the singer in a choir stand, the painter before an easel, a quilter and her needle, lecturers, and protesters who understand themselves to be engaged in work that is fundamentally proclamatory. On a practical level, this means taking a painter like Aaron Douglas seriously when he describes a painting as the "visual parallel" of a sermon and compares his use of light and shadow to call and response.⁸ What does it mean to assume a visual artist has *homiletical* insight to offer? How do such proclaimers participate in the sermon genre and expand it? And how might they even challenge assumptions? One of these preachers might, for example, challenge the assumption that a thirty-minute oration by an ordained person on a Sunday morning "counts" as a sermon if the oration is deflating or scolding rather than encouraging. Should a message still count as a sermon if it bores the listeners or wilts the listeners' imagination of God? Is categorization within the sermon genre determined primarily by ecclesiastical authority and liturgical space or more by the Spirit's efficacy in spreading a divine message regardless of the medium? I'd say the latter and suggest that these blurry modes of proclamation are areas where preaching flourishes.

This book is about preaching but it is also about genre. Genre is never pure, and this must be doubly true of preaching if the gospel envisioned is a *living* word and if the church is a *living* community that continues to evolve in the power of the Holy Spirit. I realize genre fluidity can be disconcerting to some degree because so many of us have been taught to understand reality by naming and categorizing it. One question that tends to come up when we suspend the traditional walls around a sermon and consider visual art, music, letters and the like is, 'Well, is everything a sermon?' While I'm not eager to guard the borders of the sermon genre, the short answer here is no. Yet, rather than re-establish new and roomier boundaries, I want to urge a turn from this boundary-setting reflex. Instead, receive the different preachers illumined in this book on their own terms and examine the approaches,

intentions, and fruits of their work. Consider the arguments and how they are made. What modes of listening to scripture and to life do they encourage? What troubling patterns of sermon composition do they interrupt? The proclaimers in this volume produce meaning in a variety of ways that are helpful in strengthening the practice of preaching whether in traditional or innovative forms. And, in a world trembling under the weight of violence, pollution, consumerism, and alienation, gleaning these insights is critical.

Increasingly, the church's gaze is being turned outward to the broader world. The emptying of many Protestant churches puts new pressures on the remnant. The call is not to prop up the church of the past but follow the Spirit's leading in this new moment. While there is much about the 30-minute oration that must be preserved, it is also necessary to remember that the Holy Spirit is the source of the church's preaching. This book is about becoming attuned to the realm of the Spirit's proclamation outside church walls.

Because this book is about genre, it's also about power. How we refer to a given message matters a great deal. In many cases, honoring a message as a sermon values its substantive and pedagogical heft, but there are surely cases when the designation could add a layer of "preachiness" to something that is not intended to be dogmatic. Genre classifications generate questions about authority and shade the kind of disposition one has when receiving discourse. Preaching is, to a large degree, a performance of Christian power dynamics. And, since we live in a moment when some of the received assumptions of clerical power have withered, egalitarian modes of preaching and power sharing are essential.

The urgency surrounding the power issues is heightened by the attention-starved culture of the United States and the tendency to idolize immediate results. So, in exploring genre fluidity in preaching, I am not suggesting genre-bending for its own sake or as a means of wowing a congregation. That approach would reify brittle assumptions about the purpose of preaching. I believe you'll find that the witnesses in this book walk the shoreline of preaching for reasons other than self-aggrandizement. They play at boundaries as a means of following the Spirit's revealed trajectory for a given message and teach others to do the same. In doing so, they reveal the sermon as a husk for divine encounter. Sermons are vehicles that question, and in some cases, deepen faith. They sharpen people's recognition of divine action in the world, expanding affective and perceptive capacities in the process. Rather than being defined solely by form, sermons are characterized by the kind of energy they yield and their capacity to build up people of faith who actively and at times joyfully disrupt the manifestations of evil in the world.

The chapters in this book are arranged as a series of cases. Each case presents a proclaimer who engages in genre-bending preaching and illumines unique insights about the nature and potential of the preaching craft. Chapter One focuses on Mahalia Jackson, who described her vocation in apostolic terms and used the choir loft as a functional pulpit. "I can't sing a song that doesn't have a message," she

explains, and melody proves as vital to her work as lyric.⁹ She sought to drape her listeners in an experience of grace and transcend the division between sacred and secular space. I explore her techniques and tease out practical strategies for contemporary preachers.

The overlay between sermon and song extends to instrumental music, too. Chapter Two, features one such preacher: Albert Ayler. He haunted audiences with juddering, atonal yawps that barely registered as music for some listeners. His aim was not to entertain, but to prophesy through music and usher listeners into divine union and ethical action. I consider how his reliance on improvisation, ephemerality, and experimentation are indispensable to vibrant preaching.

Visual art drives Chapter Three. I introduce Harriet Powers, a nineteenth-century African American woman who described her “Bible Quilt” as a sermon. I explore her aesthetics, hermeneutics, and sense of voice. African American women have used quilts to claim voice, preserve memory, and express themselves artistically since antebellum times, so I present Powers as a preacher intent on stewarding Black tradition. I also comment on how she propels arguments through images and seeks to reform unhelpful patterns of seeing. I put Powers in conversation with a more contemporary quilter, Rosie Lee Tomkins (also known as Effie Mae Martin). Tomkins’ quilts function as diaries, testimonies, and scriptural meditation—sometimes all at once. She provides helpful insights on genre and quilting as a mode of discourse.

In Chapter Four I turn to the invaluable gifts dancers bring to preaching. The focus is Alvin Ailey’s *Revelations*, a ballet that enacts joy and bodily freedom. His work makes an important contribution to the volume because he had a conflicted relationship with the church. Yet, his estrangement only serves to underscore the power of *Revelations*. The chapter discusses the semiotics that ground his choreography and ultimately presents the dancer as a messenger of hope.

This investigation of sermon genre is not limited to the arts. I am also interested in the relationship between preaching and protest. Chapter Five examines the proclamatory weeping of Mamie Till Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till. Describing her tears as a form of speech, I present Mobley as a Marian figure in the Civil Rights Movement who rouses the Black Church and broader community. Proclamatory weeping has a long history in the Christian tradition. I situate Mobley in this landscape and make contemporary connections to “Mothers of the Movement” like Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin; Lesley McSpadden, mother of Michael Brown; and Lucy McBath, mother of Jordan Davis. Practical strategies for linking preaching and activism close the chapter.

Then, in Chapter Six, I turn to the wisdom tradition, focusing on Toni Morrison’s Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. The address is a parable about storytelling and I put it in conversation with parables by Jesus and by Søren Kierkegaard. My goal is to

explain the gifts parables offer for contemplating the tensions and paradoxes of Black spiritual life. Naturally, I discuss Morrison's techniques for using cultural memory, counternarrative, and disenfranchised grief, and I examine her strategies for presenting epiphanies that feel authentic.

While the proclaimers in this book have different approaches, they share important commitments. I detail these in Chapter 7 where I synthesize some key themes about genre fluidity and coming to voice. In different ways each preacher profiled in this volume shows us how to say something that matters, how to reach a deeper substrate of truth. Together, these preachers urge a new, multivocal vision of preaching that reaches a broader population and engages the human person more holistically.

Of course, many other modes of discourse could have been included in this book. I have considered testimony, retreat-meditations, lectures, letter-writing, cartooning, and sculpture, just to name a few. Yet, rather than attempt an exhaustive catalogue of preaching mediums, I selected a few exemplary instances that have special relevance for the contemporary moment and offer transferable practical strategies. When selecting cases, I drew heavily on the preaching of African American women and laypeople. I am convinced that a thorough examination of African American women's preaching must consider the significance of genre-bending in claiming voice, navigating masculinist spaces, and nurturing strength for resistance.

Finally, let me say that I love a good sermon—I mean the traditional oration offered in the pulpit as part of a Christian liturgy. The reflections about preaching beyond these bounds are not offered to undercut this aspect of the church's preaching, but rather to appreciate the Holy Spirit's work on broader terrain.

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- ¹ Jason Bivins, *Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 32.
- ² Pauli Murray, "Collect for Poplarville," in *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (Norwalk, CT: Silvermine, 1970), 38.
- ³ Pauli Murray, *Pauli Murray: Selected Sermons and Writings*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 207.
- ⁴ Isaiah 20:1–3; Jeremiah 27–28 NRSV.
- ⁵ Beverly Mayne Kienzle, "Typology of the Medieval Sermon and its Development in the Middle Ages: Report on a Work in Progress" in *De L'Homélie Au Sermon: Histoire De La Prédication Médiévale, Actes du Colloque International de Louvain-la-Neuve*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse and Xavier Hermand (Louvain-la-Neuve: Publications de l'Institut d'Etudes Médiévales, 1993), 86.
- ⁶ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2003), 1.
- ⁷ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 17.
- ⁸ Susan Earle, ed., *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Yale University Press and Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, 2007), 60.
- ⁹ Mahalia Jackson and Evan McLeod Wylie, *Movin' On Up* (New York: Avon, 1966), 29.

Chapter 1

Messenger

A musician is a kind of preacher.

—Rasheid Ali

When Mahalia Jackson comes backstage after a two-hour performance, she is parched and collapses in a chair with exhaustion. Ready hands reach out with a glass of cool water, which she gulps as another is poured. Other eager hands reach around the water glass to blot her sweaty face and neck with towels. She drinks in this care for her body as she did the water and on an internal cue springs up, helpful hands still blotting, and marches back to the stage for an encore. She croons out another hymn, and the sound rises out of her and through the wave of listeners who rock, weep, or close their eyes in reverence. For a few more minutes they are church by the deep softness she and her long-time accompanist, Mildred Falls, offer up in the dark theater. Then, Jackson returns to the dressing room—for good this time—dripping with sweat and exhausted.

Her sweat is not just the natural result of the stage lights. It arises from the exertion of vocalizing her convictions. And in this respect, she sweats like many of the Black Baptist preachers she saw growing up who, whether they chanted on a given Sunday or not, ended their sermons by falling drenched and exhausted into a cushioned chair. Her sweat also clues us into the nature of her work. “I can’t sing a song that doesn’t have a message,” Jackson explained once in an effort to distinguish spiritual edification from entertainment.¹ Singing was a missional endeavor to soothe and energize people of faith. Jackson thought of herself primarily as an evangelist and she is as essential to the roster of twentieth-century African American preachers as she is to the history of gospel music, though the tendency to minimize lay women’s preaching clouds her contribution. In fact Jackson drew directly on Black preaching traditions in her music and activism. Through her music she makes an offering, embodies an argument, interprets the church’s texts, and ushers listeners into an experience of the Holy Spirit that often matches or exceeds what might be experienced in a liturgical setting. What Jackson does so beautifully is illumine the overlap between the sermon and the song.

In her songs, Jackson sought to capture the “cry” that she heard in the Baptist church of her youth. She explained:

I would always find myself drawn to the church. And it’s because I like the songs and I liked the way that the preacher, the old preacher, would preach in his method. He weren’t educated like some of our ministers today, but there was a way that he would preach, would have a singing tone in his voice that was sad. And it done something to me.²

The affective impact of the preacher's cry is so visceral that it shapes Jackson's vocation. The preacher's cry becomes a template, a sound she seeks to replicate and use as the foundation for her own evangelistic ministry. "Really, it was the basic way— it *is* the basic way— that I sing today, from hearing the way the preacher would sort of preach in a cry, in a moan, would shout sort of like in a chant way, a groaning sound, which would penetrate to my heart." ³

Mahalia: A Biographical Sketch

To understand Jackson's preaching, it is necessary first to have a sense of the life experiences and spirituality that animate her proclamation. She was born on October 26, 1911 in New Orleans, Louisiana.⁴ Her mother, Charity Clark, had recently arrived from Pointe Coupée, a remote community about 150 miles to the northwest where her parents, Paul and Celia Clark, chiseled out a life as farmers.⁵ Charity's move to New Orleans allowed her to start a new life in the city and join her siblings Porterfield, Hannah, Bessie, and Mahala, called "Duke," for whom Jackson was named.⁶ (Mahalath, who is described in 2 Chronicles 11:18, inspired this name.)⁷

Jackson's father, John Jackson, Jr., had come to New Orleans from nearby Kenner, Louisiana and worked as a stevedore and carpenter.⁸ He also seems to have been a reliable substitute preacher on whom local Black Baptist preachers could count when needed.⁹ Much of the effort to sustain the father-daughter relationship was borne by Mahalia. John was already married to someone else when Charity gave birth and he eventually had children with a number of different partners.¹⁰

Little "Halie," as she was then known, was enfolded in the Clark family's circle of love and immersed in the Black community that lived near the levee and the Mississippi River. As a youth, she sang in the Mount Moriah Baptist Church Junior Choir and had a spiritual home in four sister congregations in New Orleans: Plymouth Rock Baptist Church, Zion Travelers First Baptist Church, Broadway Mission Baptist Church, and Mount Moriah Baptist Church.¹¹ This spiritual nurture proved vital. Charity died while Halie was quite young—less than eight years old. Her Aunt Duke became her guardian and was known to be a harsh disciplinarian. Within that household, Halie's labor was essential because she not only cooked and cleaned but cared for her young cousins. Duke worked outside her home as a domestic and took Halie along to assist with the laundry, childcare, cooking, and cleaning of white households. The result was a truncated childhood. Though she would later look back and describe New Orleans as a "merry" city full of people who knew how to enjoy life through music and food, her memories were tinged with sorrow.¹²

In these early years, she spent hours listening to Bessie Smith sing the Blues, and taught herself to sing by following Smith's example. Other formative influences included a certain vegetable salesman who announced his goods with a somber tone in his voice and laborers who sang work songs as they laid railroad tracks. These

different notes of melancholia affected her. “I have a type of voice I hear people talk about that has a blue note in it. In other words, it has the cry in it. It’s sort of hardened, you know.”¹³

By the time she reached young adulthood, Halie was longing for change and moved to the South Side of Chicago where she joined her Aunts Hannah and Alice.¹⁴ Around this time “Halie” became “Mahalia.” While she took jobs at a date factory, at the Edgewater Beach Hotel, and as a domestic worker for a white family in Hyde Park, she directed her creative energy to singing— her true source of joy and mission.¹⁵ She loved signing with others in the choir at Greater Salem Baptist Church and later as one of the Johnson Singers. This group functioned as a gospel quartet even though there were five members: Jackson, Louise Lemon, and brothers Prince, Robert, and Wilbur Johnson.¹⁶

Yet despite her commitment to the church choir and the Johnson Singers, it was clear early on that Jackson had gifts as a soloist. Jackson’s legendary voice was first recorded by Decca in 1937. The two records were “God’s Gonna Separate the Wheat from the Tares” and on the reverse, “Keep Me every Day” and “God Shall Wipe All Tears Away” backed with “Oh My Lord.”¹⁷ While these were not commercial successes, they introduced the public to a soloist who was on the rise. Her talents were quickly recognized by Thomas Andrew Dorsey, the composer and musical pioneer who would be celebrated as the “Father of African American Gospel Music.” He asked Jackson to sing his compositions at various churches and concerts, and eventually began calling her the “Empress” of gospel music.¹⁸ The two collaborated closely during the early 1940s, and during the same period Jackson became a regular soloist with the National Baptist Convention. This role exponentially increased her visibility and led to more invitations to sing.

Jackson’s blossoming influence did not indicate the absence of detractors. Some listeners in Baptist circles preferred a more reserved worship experience and were alarmed by her gesticulations. Some interpreted her natural expressiveness as being overly sexualized. Others who sought to distance themselves from the boisterousness they associated with slave worship viewed her singing with contempt. Yet Jackson defended her approach from such critics. “I want my hands ... my feet ... my whole body to say all that is in me.”¹⁹ Regular visits to Sanctified churches convinced her that bearing witness required physical as well as oral expression.²⁰

Despite resistance, Jackson’s popularity steadily increased and then catapulted in 1948 with the release of her hit song, “Move On Up a Little Higher.” Listeners were treated to a bouncy melody over which Jackson describes the beauties of heaven. As the song unfolds, she imagines moving up higher and higher, first meeting biblical figures like Daniel, Paul, Silas, and Jesus, and then reuniting with deceased loved ones like her own “loving Mother.” In other words, she testifies to the

unseen world where relationships are not bounded by time or space. Her voice blends anguish with joy to yield a hard-won hope. She also narrates a vision of mobility and freedom for a Black female body that far exceeds what is afforded in everyday life. She seems to swirl around heaven at will and improvises along the way. The song, then, renders a singing and dancing prophet who is inviting others into her experience of delight.

“Move On Up a Little Higher” was an artistic achievement due to Jackson’s vivid storytelling and singular voice. Abundant invitations followed. Before long, Jackson had a packed recording and concert schedule, a contract with CBS, and her own radio and television shows. Her voice was at odds with television’s mandatory levity during the 1950s and early 1960s, but her ability to churn sorrow into hope intrigued viewers. As she brought gospel music to secular audiences, she also crossed racial barriers, eventually singing in Carnegie Hall, on the Ed Sullivan Show, and at the Newport Jazz Festival. International audiences beckoned, too. She gave concerts in the Netherlands, Sweden, Israel, and sang for the King of Denmark and for Queen Elizabeth in England. In short, “Move On Up a Little Higher” made her an international celebrity. A savvy businesswoman, during the late 1930s and early 1940s she had funneled her resources into personal ventures like Mahalia’s Beauty Salon, Mahalia’s House of Flowers, and real estate holdings that included an apartment building. As a result, by the early 1950s, she had accumulated considerable wealth.

Financial success also compounded some of Jackson’s struggles. Early experiences had taught her to insist on being paid in full and in cash before the end of her performances.²¹ This meant she had a practice of carrying large amounts of cash—as much as \$15,000.²² She would hide money in a secret compartment in her purse, in her shoes, bra, and money belt. Carrying these large sums made her vulnerable to muggers and rogue police officers. Jules Schwerin remembers a meeting with Jackson shortly after a frightening encounter with Louisiana State Police near the Mississippi border in the Vicksburg vicinity.²³ After a full day’s drive from Chicago en route to New Orleans, she was searching the dark countryside for a gas station and a motel that would accommodate African Americans when she heard sirens. Apparently, the sight of a Black woman driving a lavender Cadillac triggered suspicion.

Once pulled over, Jackson presented her license and registration with an extra dose of courtesy to de-escalate the tension. Her efforts were not reciprocated. Two officers circled her car and then one got in her face. “Bitch, tell us why you’re drivin’ this here car! Ain’t yours, for sure.”²⁴ She tried to bring a quick end to the encounter by acquiescing, “This here’s my madam’s car. She don’ drive, she even makes me have the registration in my own name. Miz Dorsey flew herself down to New Orleans couple days ago, Sir, she had me drivin’ it from Chicago to New Orleans to meet

her.”²⁵ But her response did not quell the hostility. “Take off your shoes, bitch. You better be tellin’ the truth, or you’ll find yourself in the lock-up.” Sweating with terror, Jackson removed her shoes and then emptied her purse when commanded as the officers searched for cash. They took her wallet and then escorted her to the home of a local judge. Still in his pajamas and slippers, the judge listened to the officers’ claims and promptly charged her a \$250 fine for speeding. One of the troopers opened her wallet and counted the fine out aloud before returning it to her. Jackson could immediately see that \$200 had been stolen but she rushed to her car and on to New Orleans.

Schwerin could see that Jackson was still shaken hours later as she recounted the story to him and to her brother, Johnny. Her rage was mixed with relief because she knew the encounter could have been worse. “They would have just as soon put me in the pokey, if they had found all that money I was carrying in my bra and other places. They would have figured, no black woman could make that kind of money honestly. . . would have held me for a week, maybe, ripped me off besides, by the time I could find myself a decent lawyer.”²⁶

This police encounter took place around the same time as another experience of racism and sexism in her life. In 1956, she sought to purchase a red brick ranch house in the Chatham section of Chicago. Until then, the neighborhood had been almost entirely white. Threatening phone calls awoke her in the middle of the night. “You move into that house and we’ll blow it up with dynamite. You’re going to need more than your gospel songs and prayers to save you. Wait and see what we do to you!”²⁷ The threats prompted a critical period of prayerful discernment. When she decided to proceed with the purchase, neighbors shot rifle bullets through the windows.²⁸ She had to hire police protection for close to a year.

As a neighborly gesture, Jackson invited local children to her home for cake and ice cream during a filming of Ed Murrow’s television show, *Person to Person*. Several children came. “But those white folks wouldn’t stay there with me as a neighbor. One by one they sold their houses and moved away.” Though disappointed, white flight did not lessen her peace. “Today the neighborhood is almost entirely colored. . . The grass is still green. The lawns are as neat as ever. . . The same birds are still in the trees. I guess it didn’t occur to them to leave just because we moved in.”²⁹ This incident, like the encounter with the Louisiana State Police, underscored the fact that Jackson’s fame and wealth only insulated her from experiences of racism and sexism. Conscious of the need for systemic change, she became a formidable voice in the Civil Rights Movement—a movement Richard Lischer rightly describes as a preaching movement.³⁰

She met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. Ralph David Abernathy in Denver at a Baptist convention during the height of the Montgomery Bus Boycott.³¹

Feeling a call to embolden the activists, she agreed to sing in Montgomery to raise money for the boycott.³² Multiple collaborations followed as her friendship with King and Abernathy deepened and as song proved to be a crucial resource for nonviolent activism.

Through hymns and gospel songs, Jackson expressed the pain and faith that many of the activists shared. Her performances at rallies might better be described as instances of testimony. She testified to the need to persist in the work of justice and freedom despite fatigue or threats. Perhaps only second to King's "I Have a Dream" speech, her rendition of the Negro Spiritual, "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned" is one of the most memorable moments of the 1963 March on Washington. The song voiced the anguish of centuries of enslavement and hatred and the pain of experiences like her own with the Louisiana State Police and her Chicago neighbors. Song was a means of protest, lament, and a way to summon divine courage to move forward.

While Jackson was celebrated for her visible role in the Civil Rights Movement, her actions behind the scenes added credibility to her public witness. When Emmett Till was murdered in Money, Mississippi in 1955, Jackson contacted his mother, and paid for his headstone.³³ Jackson was also known for giving money to those in need when asked on the street and for inviting destitute men to her home for dinner. A skilled cook, she fed them hearty meals and later developed a chicken franchise, "Mahalia Jackson Chicken System," designed to provide job opportunities and foster entrepreneurship.³⁴ Seeing people without food or housing tapped a well of sorrow for her as did contempt directed at people in need. Perhaps this sensitivity resulted from her own early experiences of poverty and the pressure to assume adult responsibilities as a child. In any case, she responded to hunger and homelessness with the same missional impetus that propelled her singing.

Jackson's sense of responsibility to minister to others enriched her life by expanding her web of friends, enabling her to travel extensively, and giving her fulfillment. But ministry also exhausted her and strained her intimate relationships. Her schedule of performances from 1956 to 1966 hovered around two hundred shows a year.³⁵ Twice divorced, her spouses, Isaac "Ike" and Sigmund "Minters" Galloway, added to her stress. Hockenhull had a vexing gambling problem and pressured Jackson to sing secular music. Minters sought to control her career and ran up expenses with abandon. Neither Hockenhull nor Minters provided the consistent emotional support or deep respite she craved.

On January 27, 1972, after a series of cardiac episodes, Mahalia Jackson died at Little Company of Mary Hospital near Chicago. She was sixty. Thousands who had received her lessons of love in song came to pay their respects at services in Chicago and New Orleans.³⁶ They mourned a messenger of hope who had not only stood in

front of pulpits to sing truth but raised her voice outside church walls to reach people in concert halls, rallies, and their own homes.

A Sonorous Preacher

Jackson never pastored a church. Though she considered telling Bible stories to local children part of her ministry, she did not have a practice of exegeting scripture through traditional sermons from the pulpit. Yet, through song, she structured addresses that captured the heart of what sermons are and what they should do. Her music reveals the porosity and expansiveness of the African American sermon genre. Here it helps to recognize that genres are not fixed categories, but fluid ones. They are expanded, modified, and performed in fresh ways as new voices inhabit them and as new situations arise. Belonging within a genre is not a simple “type/token” or “general form/particular instance” question. Genres are stretched by experimentation and on occasions when the guidelines that typically govern them are only partially followed. This means one can participate in a genre without seeming to belong. Jackson does just that. In her case, this participation is discernible through her approaches to sound, authority, and embodiment.

Sounding Truth

While the African American preaching traditions reflect tremendous variation, the stream of preaching in which Jackson participates is marked by skillful use of musicality to communicate meaning. The chanted sermon had special appeal for her. In these sermons, the preacher, captivated by the hope of the gospel, moves from rhythmic speech into song. By intoning the message, the preacher invites listeners to join in a rhythmic group proclamation of the gospel and to share in an experience of heightened joy and in some cases even ecstasy.³⁷ Argument is propelled through melody, tone, and evocative language, and amplified through the listeners’ voiced or embodied assent. So, musicality is not a purely ornamental aspect of such sermons; it is foundational to bearing meaning.³⁸ The kerygmatic thrust of the gospel is not manifest in flat doctrinal statements (though these have their place), but in the performance of the resurrection’s blossoming hope and spontaneous joy.

Many iconic African American preachers who were Jackson’s contemporaries preached this way. For example, Caesar Arthur Walter Clark, Sr., the celebrated pastor of Good Street Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, had a pattern of beginning with a crawling delivery that steadily increased in tempo and energy. As the sermon approached its climax, he would sometimes chant familiar hymn lyrics that were in turn taken up by the congregation in a collective utterance of the Christian hope. In these cases, the hymn is not simply an appendage to the sermon but its heart. The hymn functions more like a parallel text that is illumined through the preceding

scriptural exegesis. So, song is both the seed and fruit of the sermon—the seed because the preacher latches on to a song that is already within the listener’s heart nourishing spiritual vitality, and fruit because scriptural exegesis enfleshes and interprets the song. Attempting to distinguish sermon from song in such instances is futile. Gardner Taylor makes this fluidity clear in his remarks at the funeral of Sandy F. Ray, another of Jackson’s contemporaries who expertly wove story and song into his sermons. “It was hard to tell whether one heard music half-spoken or speech half-sung. When the glad thunders of that voice reached its climactic theme, the heavens seemed to open, and we could see the Lord God on His Throne.”³⁹ One could say that in such sermons music is the husk for truth, or, perhaps better, that the music itself is the “truth” sought through the sermon. The sermon’s function is to put a song in the heart.

The sound of the chanted sermon became a commodity in the 1920s when preachers like J.M. Gates, F.W. McGee, and Leora Ross recorded sermons and sold them commercially.⁴⁰ For decades after, Black southerners who had recently moved to urban areas and craved folk sermons could get a taste of home through the phonograph. The fact that the preacher was not present in person did not undermine the message. Immediacy was communicated aurally through the physicality of the preacher’s intonations and vocal flourishes. So, whether at home listening to a record or in a sanctuary listening live, listeners were sonically enfolded into the life of the Black Church. Ralph Eubanks remembers that Jackson’s “In the Upper Room” had this effect for his father. The song was a message “spoken just for him” and played every Sunday morning.

Even today, I can see him standing over the record and watching its incantatory spin as he listened to the music flowing from the scratchy speakers. . . ‘In the Upper Room’ is a traditional spiritual, one whose power comes from its slow, meditative call to prayer followed by a call-and-response affirmation of belief. The lyrics ask the listener to believe, but the singer must express belief for the song to get its message through. What captured my father each Sunday was that Mahalia Jackson sang ‘In the Upper Room’ as if she was making a personal profession of faith and asking him to do the same.⁴¹

For Jackson, singing was a way to be in dialogue with God and invite others into the conversation.⁴² Dialogue anchors a line of homiletical theory called conversational preaching that could be applied here, but Eubanks cuts directly to the chase when he explains, “Through her testimonial style of singing, Jackson was preaching to my father.”⁴³

Song also marked a shift in consciousness. “I don’t seem to be myself. I am transformed from Mahalia Jackson into something divine.”⁴⁴ The preaching moment is not something she controls. It is something that unfolds. Her work is to be open,

present, and willing to improvise. Such improvisation does not suggest a failure to prepare, but an integration of person and message and the freedom to draw from a deep well of knowledge as she desires. Danielle Goldman explains that within this understanding of improvisation “performance and composition occur simultaneously—on the spot—through a practice that values surprise, innovation, and the vicissitudes of process rather than the fixed glory of a finished product.”⁴⁵ Drilling down to mechanics, what one notices in Jackson’s singing are arcs, natural rises and falls in energy that peak in certain moments when she is fully present and connected to both the lyrics and the audience. Of course, these peaks were rehearsed, but rehearsal facilitated presence and engagement rather than strict adherence to a plan. She let herself be carried by the music in her heart. This required accepting the ephemeral nature of the moment on the one hand and committing to it fully on the other. The result are songs that reflect the ebb and flow of Christian life and show listeners what it means to be borne up by divine power.

In contrast to some traditional preachers, Jackson did not reduce her message to takeaways or to a portable set of “how to’s.” She trusted listeners too much for that. It was good if a song or a melody echoed in the heart of the listener after a concert, but her aim was to open the heart. Sound and affect were her primary hermeneutical tools. Listening to her hymns, one notices that there are no empty words. Even the onomatopoeia and vocal flourishes are brimming with emotional content. She means every word that she says, and this contributes to the immediacy of the message.

Purposeful Authority

Jackson’s pattern of sounding truth raises questions about the kind of authority that undergirded her singing. As a gospel singer, Jackson had a unique kind of religious authority with multiple aspects. Her power was personal, moral, and spiritual. Expert power was also at work because she drew on her incredible skill in reading the energy of audiences and in controlling sound as it moved through her body. These skills enabled her to immerse listeners in joyous energy. By partnering with her audiences, performances became joint ventures of seeking the sublime together. Artistic skill and stardom in turn contribute to Jackson’s charismatic authority.

Yet one aspect of Jackson’s authority that stands out and has significant transferability for those without musical genius is her “authority of purpose.”⁴⁶ Letty Russell uses this term as a contrast to empty clerical authority.⁴⁷ She understands that without divine purpose and a commitment to the equality and well-being of all, clerical authority can have ruinous effects. Authority of purpose describes the credibility that inures from clarity, conviction, and earnestness when reaching out to others. Unlike charismatic power, expertise, or moral power, which tend to elevate

one above others, authority of purpose is nonhierarchical and seems especially suited to bearing witness.

Authority of purpose helps Jackson claim her space, whether on a dais in a church or on a stage in Carnegie Hall. And the authority of purpose helps her trust her own body, devise her own way to tell stories, and interpret songs that resonate with human experience. Fidelity to the song's message and to the God to whom the lyrics point propels her. She was convinced that she was called to comfort her listeners as a mediator and this purpose is determinative.

Along this line, Willie Jennings uses the religious icon as an analogy for understanding the dynamics of Jackson's singing. "The iconic expression, and therefore the iconic movement, begins when the singer sacrificially offers up her own pain and suffering in the act of singing. Here the singer displays the depths of Jesus's own empathetic embrace in the midst of her struggles, while simultaneously embracing the hurt of the congregation by cradling them in song."⁴⁸ Tenderness and a sense of mission drive the endeavor.

Jackson's audacious aim was to touch the souls of her listeners. This was not the kind of task that could be executed quickly. It took time. Henry Mitchell explains that the use of slow delivery in Black preaching facilitated an "impact on the whole person: on cognitive, intuitive, and emotive consciousness."⁴⁹ Mitchell calls the Negro Spiritual the "homiletical twin" to the Black sermon because of the use of slow delivery in each.⁵⁰ Similarly, in her songs, Jackson used deliberate pacing to feel the haptics and facilitate shifts in consciousness. Often, she extended notes or slowed the meter for effect. This refusal to rush gave each song gravitas. She could not always assume that hymn lyrics (or the biblical texts behind them) had any self-evident authority for the listeners. Making the lyrics come alive was a central part of her interpretive work. This, too was a slow task because it meant finding the place where the lyrics intersected with her own life and plumbing it emotionally to tap into universal human experience.

One of the results of Jackson's purposeful use of authority was the creation of soothing energy.⁵¹ Much like traditional sermons (at least the better ones), Jackson's hymns were husks for energy that gave listeners strength and succor. Describing this dynamic in her own songs, Jackson explains, "There is sadness but always there is the hope and the faith in the Lord and the forgetting of sadness and trouble in praising Him."⁵² Singing this way replicated the experience that drew her to the church in the first place. After all, it was not the church's propositions that drew her but the magnetism of the sounds she heard. "I would always find myself drawn to the church. It's because I like the songs and I like the way the preacher, the old preacher would preach his message. He ...would have a singing tone in his voice, that was sad. And it done something to me."⁵³ This sound, the hopeful articulation of sorrow, had

an uncanny authority. Soft, arresting, and enlivening all at once, this bluesy sound warranted a fresh vision of power and embodiment was key to that.

Embodying Conviction

Jackson's performance preparation process was telling. Her weeks included multiple rehearsals that equipped her to internalize songs so that she could improvise on stage when desired. But in the hours just before getting on stage, she began her process by reading and meditating on scripture. This meditative reading surely centered Jackson but also indicated missional focus. She knew she was telling the Christian story through song and readiness to tell that story was crucial. She had to get beneath the lyrics and incarnate her beliefs. When this happened, the impact on the audience could be electric. One reviewer, stunned after seeing her at Carnegie Hall, explains that "some inner spiritual force has given her the power to tell a story in song with as much passion and rapture as any prima donna who ever graced the stage. And you have the innermost conviction that in her heart she feels and lives the text of each song."⁵⁴ For Jackson, song was a means of publicly interpreting Christian doctrine and for her this required an embodied hermeneutic.

The emphasis on performance is consistent with Henry Mitchell's description of African American preaching in *Black Preaching: Recovery of a Powerful Art*. He makes it clear that a sermon is not merely a speech about matters of faith but the performance of a biblical text.⁵⁵ His notion of performance is not based on fiction or illusion; it accords with the Anglo-French etymology of the word perform, *par*, *per* (thoroughly) + *furnir* (to complete, furnish).⁵⁶ This theological understanding of performance involves truth being carried through to completion.⁵⁷ Jackson's work should be interpreted this way. Her performances of texts (or derivative texts) were occasions when Christian teachings were brought to life.⁵⁸

Embodied knowledge played a pivotal role in her interpretive work. Jackson made herself present to the listeners and available to the message she was called to proclaim. This meant committing to the message not only intellectually but physically and bringing her whole body into the work of proclamation. When singing, her eyes communicate as much when they are open as when closed. Closed eyes reveal an intensity of concentration rather than retreat. Hands are often clasped in prayer or waved for emphasis. Her facial expression conveys emotion and the muscles of her neck tighten and loosen visibly as sound is carried. Her jaw moves to extend or give shape to sound. Viewers cannot see her diaphragm, but it, too, is working to sustain her breath. Jackson relies on her body to help her summon truth from inside herself. Bodily engagement indicates full investment in the moment.

The fact that Jackson was a larger, round-bodied woman raises critical issues concerning performance. She was not a mammy figure, but the specter of this stereotype haunted her work at times. For instance, during the production of *The Mahalia Jackson Show*, she received an anonymous note comparing her to Beulah, a maid played for a time by Hattie McDaniel and analogous to mammy.⁵⁹ The note disgusted and discouraged her and reflected a failure to see her or to recognize the nature of her work. Indebted to Bessie Smith's blues influence, Jackson embodied a black vernacular aesthetic that scrambled the sacred-secular divide as well as the binary between cultivated and vernacular music.⁶⁰ She was not estranged from her body or her sexuality as many in Chicago's Black Baptists circles knew, and her brightly colored gowns accentuated her curves. Even on the occasions when she performed in choir robes, the robe was not designed to hide her girth; she was still asserting herself and drawing on her whole body to communicate. In a sea of images of women who teetered on heels or modeled themselves on European beauty standards, Jackson was grounded, self-satisfied, and executing her own agenda.

But in addition to misreading the ways Jackson used her body, mammy associations also misread her joy. She had a buoyant personality behind the scenes and under the stage lights, not a cheap joviality put on to please white viewers. Her commitment to Black political empowerment would not allow that. She became skilled at giving offertory appeals to increase giving and help the church address community needs. In one playful episode, she openly competed with a pastor to see who could contribute most to the offering plate and pulled money from her bra to outdo him.⁶¹ It is true that television muted some of this freedom, but not enough to render her as a mammy figure. Neither Jackson's warmth nor her round body were indicative of docility.

Yet the legacy of slavery does play a role in Jackson's work as a performer and one of the strongest links concerns memory. As in the case of preaching and other forms of spoken rhetoric, memory has an important function in singing. Speakers and singers need to remember lines to deliver them effectively. They also rely on the memory of choreographed gestures to amplify what is spoken. Jackson adds to these her consciousness of how the past shapes the present moment. Her favorite hymns included "Jesus Lover of My Soul," "My Faith Looks Up to Thee," and "Just as I Am." Personal memories shape her performance of these hymns and audiences can see emotion fill her body as she reflects on her journey. On these and similar occasions, hymn singing is revealed as a practice of testimony. *Marturein*, the New Testament term for physically bearing witness and a cognate for "martyr," is applicable here because of the bodily investment in the message.

Jackson draws on communal memory as well as personal. One of the clearest examples of this takes place at the March on Washington. At the request of Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackson sang the Negro Spiritual, "I Been 'Buked and I Been

Scorned.” The song had special resonance that day on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial because it articulated the pain and hope of the enslaved in their own language and cadence. There are many lyrics Jackson could have selected for the second verse, but she chose, “Ain’t but the one thing I’ve done wrong/ Ain’t but the one thing I’ve done wrong/ Ain’t but one thing I’ve done wrong/You know I’ve been in the valley for too long.” The striking thing about the last line is that it suggests that those who were enslaved have an ongoing presence that is being mediated through song. They are still alive. Of course, this idea challenges the Western notion of the body’s materiality and the rigid wall between presence and absence. Jackson’s performance suggests consciousness of these supernatural realities are part of what it means to be fully embodied and present to listeners, whether visible or invisible.

The third verse builds on this dynamic. “You know I’m gonna tell my Lord when I get home/ You know I’m gonna tell my Lord when I get home/ Yes, I’m gonna tell my Lord when I get home/ How you’ve been mistreating me for so long.” Her stress on “tell,” extending the note, closing her eyes and bending her knees for emphasis, conjures communal memory. In that moment she is an emissary for her enslaved ancestors. Their spiritual resource of appealing to God in the face of injustice is bequeathed to the vast crowd. Their warning of the cosmic consequences for evil is announced before the marchers, human adversaries, and the powers and principalities. Jackson’s stirring message encourages the demonstrators as they face the demands of the moment and strengthens them for the racialized violence that is to come in the immediate future as a backlash to that march. Included among these horrors in less than two weeks is the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that would kill Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley. Jackson could not have known exactly what lay ahead but her embodied conviction makes it clear she knew much was at stake.

Homiletical Implications

Mahalia Jackson did more than sing gospel music; she was one of its architects. Her sound influenced a host of contemporaries, including Willie Mae Ford Smith, who also played with sermon hybridity and is credited with originating the song and sermonette. This practice of inserting a short story or mini sermon in a song was also taken up by Edna Gallmon Cooke and other artists like Shirley Caesar, who underscore the intersection between sermon and song. “The Lord called me to the melody of song and the ministry of the Word,” Caesar explains, “He called me to use music to preach. . . I sing a sermon and I preach a song.”⁶² In these cases, the turns from song to discourse or vice versa are more distinct. It was not uncommon for Jackson to offer short exhortations between songs when in concert, but her preaching was not limited to these orations. Rather, her approach challenges listeners to discern

a sermon *in* song. In this paradigm, preaching involves putting a song in the listener's heart, performing a sacred text in a way that links the audience and the spiritual world.

Aurality, authority, and embodiment play defining roles. Comfort is mediated sonically and continues to echo and evolve in the listener long afterwards. Sound unifies listeners in a shared experience of consolation. The truth Jackson shares is supra-linguistic and accessible to people with a range of beliefs. And, while she has tremendous expertise and charisma, she relies on the authority of purpose when singing. This facilitates a holistic experience for the listeners in which hidden suffering can come to consciousness. Slow delivery with fewer words enables full absorption and gives the message weightiness. Improvisation keeps the performance lively, as does Jackson's physical and emotional investment.

Jackson also provides an example of preaching that is not overdetermined by a colonialist framework. In other words, her model is not haunted by the specter of a powerful white man telling others what to do. Instead, contemporary proclaimers are led to imagine sermon as a song that helps people summon the courage to live with faith. Further, Jackson's emphasis on embodying conviction suggests that whether sung or spoken, preaching is more like singing than giving a speech.

Questions for Further Reflection and Application

1. What aspects of Mahalia Jackson's life story resonate with you most?
2. What sacred purpose authorizes your preaching? What grounds your credibility? For Mahalia Jackson, the authority comes from a strong sense of her identity as a child of God and a desire to share God's love.
3. It helps, of course, to have a core focus or spine for the message, but beyond the thesis or focus statement, why are you communicating?⁶³ What is the deep truth beneath the words?
4. What are your constraints as a preacher or witness? The constraints might be physical or involve the listeners or context. Naming constraints often helps one navigate them or in some cases overcome them.
5. Where are the high moments in your message? Treat your manuscript like a musical score and chart the lines you want to emphasize. Mahalia Jackson's hymns have a clear arc, often building in two of three specific moments into mini-crescendos or crescendos. The arcs do not always occur as triumphalist endings; the arcs are more organic and vary as the core message necessitates.
6. Jackson brings her body into the message. How can you enfold the message with your body and gestures in a way that feels natural?
7. How can you bring your *whole* body to the message? What hinders your availability or connection? This task does not mean acting or bringing false

drama to the message, but it does require being willing to connect with the listeners. It does mean letting the message steep in you and not trying too hard to control it or the outcome.

8. When have you lived the claims of your message? Where does your life story intersect with it?

¹ Mahalia Jackson and Evan McLeod Wylie, *Movin' On Up: Mahalia Jackson* (New York: Avon, 1966), 29.

² Mahalia Jackson, Oral History with Jules Schwerin, January 8, 1952, *The Mahalia Jackson Reader*, ed. Mark Burford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 27.

³ Jackson and Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 27.

⁴ Jackson's birthdate has been contested, but Mark Burford argues convincingly that her birthdate is October 26, 1911. Mark Burford, *Mahalia Jackson & the Black Gospel Field* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 44–49.

⁵ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 36.

⁶ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 38.

⁷ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 42.

⁸ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 41.

⁹ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 50.

¹⁰ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 42.

¹¹ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 49–50.

¹² Mahalia Jackson, *I Sing Because I'm Happy*. With Songs Recorded, Annotated, and Compiled by Jules Schwerin (Washington: Smithsonian Folkways Records, 1992).

¹³ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 226.

¹⁴ This move likely took place in 1930 or 1931. Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 60–62.

¹⁵ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 65.

¹⁶ Horace Boyer, *The Golden Age of Gospel* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2000), 86.

¹⁷ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 67.

¹⁸ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 88.

¹⁹ Jackson and Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 66.

²⁰ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 225.

²¹ Jules Schwerin, *Got To Tell It: Mahalia Jackson, Queen of Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 15. This early insistence did not last throughout her career; she would later accept payment by check.

²² Schwerin, *Got To Tell It*, 15.

²³ Schwerin does not note the exact date of this incident, but it appears to have been in late 1955 or early 1956. His biography on Mahalia Jackson is less of a detailed historical narrative and more of an artistic portrait. His oral history of Jackson on *I Sing Because I'm Happy* includes accounts of police harassing the African American community in New Orleans.

²⁴ Schwerin, *Got To Tell It*, 15.

²⁵ Schwerin, *Got To Tell It*, 15–16.

²⁶ Schwerin, *Got To Tell It*, 17.

²⁷ Jackson and Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 119.

²⁸ Jackson and Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 119.

²⁹ Jackson and Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 122.

³⁰ “With King as its voice, the Civil Rights Movement became a Word of God movement, and the Word, exactly as it is portrayed in the New Testament, became a physical force with its own purposes and momentum.” Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and The Word That Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12.

³¹ Jackson and Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 122.

³² Jackson and Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 124.

³³ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 369.

³⁴ Burford, *The Mahalia Jackson Reader*, 413.

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- ³⁵ Jackson and Wylie, *Movin' On Up*, 104.
- ³⁶ Peter Feldman, "Mahalia," in *The Mahalia Jackson Reader*, 249.
- ³⁷ Evans Crawford and Thomas H. Troeger, *The Hum: Call and Response in African American Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), 45. Martha Simmons offers a thorough discussion of the chanted sermon in "Whooping: The Musicality of African American Preaching Past and Present" in *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 864–84. Simmons distinguishes whooping from tuning and makes connections to African practices of using tonality to convey nuances of meaning. Simmons, "Whooping," 869.
- ³⁸ William Clair Turner, Jr., "The Musicality of Black Preaching," in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, eds. Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 196, 208.
- ³⁹ Gardner C. Taylor, *The Words of Gardner Taylor: Special Occasion and Expository Sermons*, Vol. 4, edited by Edward L. Taylor (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2004), 141.
- ⁴⁰ Lerone A. Martin, *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 93, 94–115, 118–19.
- ⁴¹ W. Ralph Eubanks, "I Will Move on Up a Little Higher: Mahalia Jackson's Power to Witness through Music," in *Can I Get a Witness?: Thirteen Peacemakers, Community Builders, and Agitators for Faith & Justice*, edited by Charles Marsh, Shea Tuttle, & Daniel Rhodes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 199–200.
- ⁴² Eubanks, "I Will Move on Up a Little Higher," 200.
- ⁴³ Eubanks, "I Will Move on Up a Little Higher," 201. Mikhail Bakhtin is one theorist whose work scaffolds conversational preaching. Marlene Ringgaard Lorenson, *Dialogical Preaching: Bakhtin, Otherness, and Homiletics* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).
- ⁴⁴ Eubanks, "I Will Move on Up a Little Higher," 200.
- ⁴⁵ Danielle Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2010), 5.
- ⁴⁶ Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 67. Russell distinguishes authority of purpose from that stemming from "clerical privilege." Christine Smith suggests that "authority" is an ill-fitting term for preaching given the intimacy involved. Rather than relying on authority or one's license to speak, she urges focusing on credibility and authenticity instead. Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 47.
- ⁴⁷ One could argue that the integrity of clerical authority comes from divine purpose.
- ⁴⁸ Willie Jennings, "When Mahalia Sings: The Black Singer of Sacred Song as an Icon," *Black Sacred Music* 3 (1989): 6–13; *The Mahalia Jackson Reader*, 198.
- ⁴⁹ Henry Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990), 97.
- ⁵⁰ Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 97. Luke A. Powery explores the relationship between the sermon and the Negro Spiritual in detail in *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 22–23.
- ⁵¹ Nicole Fleetwood discusses Black sacred music's propensity for stirring energy in Arthur Jafa's 2016 film, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*.
- ⁵² Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 226.
- ⁵³ Mahalia Jackson, Oral History with Jules Schwerin, January 8, 1952, *The Mahalia Jackson Reader*, 27.
- ⁵⁴ *New York Amsterdam News*, October 7, 1950, *The Mahalia Jackson Reader*, 247.
- ⁵⁵ Mitchell, *Black Preaching*, 59.
- ⁵⁶ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "perform," accessed September 8, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perform>.
- ⁵⁷ Ruthanna Hooke, *Transforming Preaching* (New York: Church Publishing, 2010), 32. Hooke goes on to say, "To call preaching a performance highlights the fact that it is a practice with a particularly acute tension between the practicing self and the faith that is practiced." Hooke, *Transforming Preaching*, 35.
- ⁵⁸ Some Baptist traditions permit preachers to preach on any biblical text or any hymn from the hymnal.
- ⁵⁹ Burford, *The Mahalia Jackson Reader*, 317 n 7.
- ⁶⁰ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 242.
- ⁶¹ Burford, *Mahalia Jackson*, 261.
- ⁶² Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "Shirley Caesar and the Souls of Black Folk: Gospel Music as Cultural Narrative and Critique," *The African American Pulpit* (Spring 2003): 13.
- ⁶³ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 86.