Is It a Sermon?

Art, Activism, and Genre Fluidity in African American Preaching

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Introduction

Albert Ayler was known for screeching and groaning through his horn in songs like "Our Prayer" and "Ghosts." Audiences found the music blood-curdling, 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 two poems, "Collect for Poplarville," a nighttime prayer for all those hunted by the dogs, firearms, and viciousness of the lynch mob, and "For Mack C. Parker," pondering the implications of lynching on the afterlives of perpetrators and victims.[2] Some twenty years later, after being ordained as an Episcopal priest, Murray recognized poems like "Collect for Poplarville" and "For Mack C. Parker" 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, sermonic performances: Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years, Jeremiah fashioned a yoke and put it on his neck, Symeon the Stylite lived on a pillar fifty 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 included sermonettes. From time to time, even a simple committee report sheds its banality and gives everyone a taste of the 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 concept 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 grow into a treatise, start as a letter and turn into a sermon, or flit back and forth between these categories.[6] 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.

From its inception, Christian preaching has been a parabolic venture, indebted to patterns of Greco-Roman rhetoric but not beholden to them. "Sermon" and "homily" are slippery, "notoriously ambiguous" terms among biblical form critics.[7] As C. Clifton Black stresses, "God has made nonsensical (ἐμώρανεν ὁ θεός) [*emōranen ho theos*], 1 Cor. 1:20) everything in this world we ever thought wise—about power, prestige, wealth, church growth, biblical scholarship, homiletics, *everything*. No word could be more witheringly and healthily parabolic than Christ the crucified."[8] Doesn't this suggest that Christian preaching has an inherent elusiveness? That we lose something vital by pinning it down?

The lines of demarcation around sermons are blurry in Black sacred discourse as well. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from 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 King 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 preachers 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—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity."[9] 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.[10] Privileging a few voices at the expense of others has propelled a warped vision of power and contributed to the delegitimation of the preacher.

A thorough exploration of Black preaching requires attending not only to the clergyperson but to the singer in the choir stand, the painter before an easel, a quilter and her needle, 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 equivalent of a sermon and compares his use of light and shadow to "call-and-response."[11] 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?[12] And how might they even challenge assumptions? These preachers might, for example, challenge the assumption that a thirty-minute oration by an ordained person on a Sunday morning still "counts" as a sermon if the oration is deflating or scolding rather than encouraging. Can a hate-filled tirade ever be a sermon? Should a message still count as a sermon if it bores the listeners or wilts the listeners' imagination of God? There are, of course, simply bad sermons. The question is whether certain criteria indicate that another classification is in order altogether. And 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 lean toward 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 exponentially 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 reestablish 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 to follow the Spirit's leading in this new moment. While there is much about the thirty-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 inside and 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. Christian power dynamics are crystallized and amplified in the pulpit. 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.

Amid the polarization and verbal jousting that has become normative in contemporary American discourse, preachers face a bit of a conundrum. On

the one hand, the amped-up, hyperbolic speech often associated with the prophetic tradition is vital. By speaking in extremis, prophets summon our attention and communicate divine pathos. Yet at the same time, extreme speech abounds in the current rhetorical landscape. As a result, discerning prophetic authority has become more difficult.

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 will 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.

As I hope will be clear, I am also curious about the nature of divine revelation—specifically, how it is molded by the memory of past generations who discipled us in the faith. Like the apostle Paul, through preaching we pass on what was entrusted to us. That which is relayed is discerned and sifted, of course; nevertheless, it is inherited and rooted in the hope of communal survival. African American preaching is often laced with memory of the ancestors, those whose bones populate the underwater cities of the Atlantic—owing to the Maafa—and their succeeding generations. These ancestors include famous exemplars, lesser-known figures who are known by their posterity, and many whose names are known only to God. No longer captive to empire, they have been made whole, and though unseen, they are understood to have an ongoing presence. These benevolent spiritual guides find ways to assure us, lead us, and warn us. According to Kurt Buhring, "In some African societies, the ancestral realm is similar to the human, visible world; in others, the ancestral realm is a utopian paradise. Either way, there is a certain reciprocity to the relationship between the ancestors and humans."[13] And since the beloved dead are believed to encircle and uphold the living, illuminating their continuing influence is an ethical obligation and an important though often overlooked dimension of the preaching vocation.

The proclaimers highlighted in this volume demonstrate accountability to the ancestors. Their genre-bending sermons do not arise out of a vacuum.

They reflect a certain kind of anamnesis that remembers the action of God and the ways God has spoken to and through the ancestors. This means foregrounding some of the modes of wisdom-sharing cherished by the ancestors—such as dance, song, and storytelling—and reckoning with the ways these discourses were censored and maligned under the conditions of slavery and colonialism.[14] So as novel as some of these approaches are, they reflect the proclaimer's familial history, skills, life circumstances, and spirituality. This book is not about preachers who went hunting for innovative sermons, but, as Malan Nel suggests, more about sermons that sought out preachers who would provide the appropriate brooding space in their hearts for God's dynamic truth.[15] Further, by focusing on preaching as wisdom-sharing and as a means of corresponding with the ancestors, I also hope to address a problem Kenyatta Gilbert identifies: the "present-future" preoccupation in Black religious practice.[16]

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. Since the inner lives and spirituality of preachers profoundly shape strategy, I begin with biographical sketches before turning to their approaches. Chapter 1 begins with a focus 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 explained, and melody proved as vital to her work as lyric.[17] Drawing on vocal stylings modeled by her elders, Jackson 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 implications for contemporary preachers.

Musicality is a crucial frame for Black preaching but not the only one. So visual art drives chapter 2. 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 pair Powers with a more contemporary quilter, Rosie Lee Tomkins (also known as Effie Mae Martin Howard). Tomkins's quilts function as eulogies, diaries, testimonies, and scriptural meditation—sometimes all at once. Her quilts are inspirations for people who are overwhelmed by the fragmented nature of life and need to see it pieced together again. Both quilters offer insights on quilting as a mode of discourse.

In chapter 3, I turn to the invaluable gifts dancers bring to preaching. The focus is Sister Thea Bowman, a Roman Catholic who joined the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and used dance as catechesis. For Bowman,

dance expressed the gospel in ways that drew on the model of the ancestors. Bowman also felt dance strengthened the link between the church's preaching and its public witness in street activism and the public square.

The challenge of energizing faith-driven activism arises again in chapter 4, which profiles Howard Thurman. I focus on his meditations because he intended for them to provide a contemplative refuge for activists and an experience of divine intimacy for all who were wearied by the fast pace of life. Thurman's meditations have a hybrid quality in that they shuttle between sermon and prayer and between the visible and invisible worlds.

Then in chapter 5, I reflect on the relationship between preaching and literature with a turn to Toni Morrison. After discussing some preacherly aspects of her novels, I home in on her Nobel Prize acceptance speech—a parable about storytelling and ancestral wisdom. I detail some of the ways her strategies mirror those used by Jesus to deepen moral imagination.

All the cases above involve improvising on the sermon, and this entails straining certain conventions and extending them like taffy. While the proclaimers in this book have different approaches, they share similar approaches to authority, ephemerality, and memory of the ancestors. They either directly stir political action or do so indirectly, providing the necessary spiritual foundation. And 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 considered Pieter Bruegel's group dialogues, Mamie Till Mobley's justice-driven addresses, as well as testimony, retreat-meditations, lectures, letter writing, picketing, and sculpture, just to name a few.[18] Yet rather than attempt an exhaustive catalog of preaching mediums, I selected a few exemplary approaches that foreground the significance of ancestral memory while offering transferable practical strategies. In choosing the 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 when claiming voice, navigating masculinist spaces, and nurturing strength for resistance. These dynamics seem doubly relevant for Black feminist or for womanist preaching.

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.

1

The Singer

> A musician is a kind of preacher.
> —Rashied 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 churched by the deep softness she and her longtime accompanist, Mildred Falls, offer up in the dark theater. Then Jackson comes back 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 into a cushioned chair drenched and exhausted. 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 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 laywomen's preaching clouds

her contribution. Jackson drew directly from Black preaching traditions in her music and activism. Through her music she made an offering, embodied an argument, interpreted the church's texts, and ushered listeners into an experience of the Holy Spirit that often matched or exceeded what might have been experienced in a liturgical setting. What Jackson did so beautifully is illumine the overlay 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. "I would always find myself drawn to the church. And it's because I liked 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 was so visceral that it shaped Jackson's vocation. The preacher's cry became a template, a sound she sought to explore and improvise on in her 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 JACKSON: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

To understand Jackson's preaching, it is necessary to first have a sense of the life experiences and spirituality that animated her proclamation. She was born on October 26, 1911, in New Orleans.[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]

Jackson's father, John Jackson Jr., had come to New Orleans from nearby Kenner, Louisiana, and labored as a stevedore and carpenter.[7] He also seems to have been a substitute preacher that local Black Baptist preachers could count on when needed.[8] 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.[9]

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.[10] 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 instrumental, because she provided childcare for her young cousins, cooked, and cleaned. 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. And though she would later look back and describe New Orleans as a jolly city full of people who knew how to enjoy life through music and food, her memories would be tinged with sorrow.[11]

In these early years, she spent hours listening to Bessie Smith sing the blues and taught herself to sing by following Smith's example. What she gained from Smith was more than style; she also gained an epistemology and a vision of how music could shape the psyche.[12] 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 had a direct impact. "I sang what I, myself, had heard. I put in the sadness I heard in the men's voices as they worked on the railroad tracks nearby, and the trains themselves."[13] That somber quality contributed to her distinctive sound.

By the time she reached young adulthood, Halie was longing for change and moved to the South Side of Chicago in 1930 or 1931 to join her Aunts Hannah and Alice. Around this time "Halie" became "Mahalia." She took jobs at a date factory, at the Edgewater Beach Hotel, and as a domestic worker for a white family in Hyde Park, but she directed her creative energy to singing—her true source of joy and mission.[14] She loved singing 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: Mahalia Jackson, Louise Lemon, and brothers Prince, Robert, and Wilbur Johnson.[15]

Yet it was clear early on that Jackson had gifts as a soloist. Her legendary voice was first recorded by Decca Records in 1937, which released "God's Gonna Separate the Wheat from the Tares" (with "Keep Me Every Day" as the B-side) and "God Shall Wipe All Tears Away" (backed by "Oh My Lord").[16] While these were not commercial successes, they introduced 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.[17] 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. Her natural expressiveness was sometimes read through an overly sexualized lens or met with contempt by those who sought to distance themselves from the boisterousness they associated with slave worship. Jackson defended her approach from such critics. “I want my hands . . . my feet . . . my whole body to say all that is in me.”[18] Regular visits to Sanctified churches convinced her that bearing witness required physical as well as oral expression.[19]

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. In other words, she testifies to the unseen world where relationships are not bounded by time or space. Her voice envelops anguish in joy but conveys both 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. Swirling around heaven, she becomes a singing and dancing prophet who invites 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. Invitations abounded. Before long, Jackson had a packed recording and concert schedule, a contract with CBS, and her own radio and television shows. Her voice was sometimes at odds with television’s mandatory levity during the 1950s and early 1960s, but her ability to churn sorrow into hope intrigued audiences. 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 held concerts in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Israel, and she 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 such as Mahalia’s Beauty Salon, Mahalia’s House of Flowers, and real estate holdings that included an apartment building. 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.[20] This meant she had a practice of carrying large amounts of cash—nearly $15,000 in one case.[21] She would hide money in a secret compartment in her purse as well as 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.[22] 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." 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." 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.[23]

Schwerin could see that Jackson was still shaken hours later as she recounted the story to him and to her brother, Johnny. But 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."[24]

This police encounter arose 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!"[25] The threats prompted a critical period of prayerful discernment. When she decided to proceed with the purchase, rifle bullets were shot through the windows.[26] 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 Edward R. Murrow's television show *Person to Person*. Several children came. "But those white folks wouldn't stay there with me as a neighbor," she later recounted. "One by one they sold their houses and moved away." Though she was 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."[27] This incident, like the encounter with the Louisiana State Police, underscored the fact that Jackson's fame and wealth did not protect 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.[28]

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.[29] Feeling a call to embolden the activists, she agreed to sing in Montgomery to raise money for the boycott.[30] Multiple collaborations would follow as her friendship with King and Abernathy deepened and as song proved to be an instrumental resource for nonviolent activism.

Through hymns and gospel songs, Jackson expressed the pain and faith shared by many of the activists. Her performances at rallies might better be described as instances of testimony. She testified to the need to persist in the struggle for 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 purchased his headstone.[31] 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 Systems, designed to provide job opportunities and foster entrepreneurship.[32] 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.[33] She was twice divorced, and her spouses, Isaac "Ike" Hockenhull and Sigmund "Minters" Galloway, added to her stress. Hockenhull had a vexing gambling problem and pressured Jackson to sing secular music. Galloway sought to control her career and ran up expenses with abandon. Neither Hockenhull nor Galloway provided the consistent emotional support or deep respite she craved.

On January 27, 1972, after a series of cardiac events, 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.[34] 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.

SINGING AS PARADIGM FOR PREACHING

The long marriage between sermon and song has received considerable scholarly attention.[35] In African American preaching, the two do not merely feed one another but become entwined in the Negro spirituals, chanted sermons, and sermon celebrations that bubble over into hymnody. This interweaving underscores the sermon's consanguinity with other highly potent ancient speech forms such as incantation, oracle, and spell.[36] But apart from the more explicit instances where sermon and song overlap, preaching is at its plainest a kind of song in that it is a heartfelt utterance that aims to glorify God. In this respect, even the preacher's unsyncopated speech holds cosmic power, blending with the chorus of the morning stars and the woodland trees that sing out with joy (Job 38:7; Ps. 96:12). Singing provides a fitting paradigm for preaching because it indicates a homiletical posture for truth

telling. The preacher shares not just the church's official truth but a personal truth. And similarly, singing indicates a posture of listening. Members of the congregation are invited to internalize, ruminate on, and apply the message by setting it to the tune of their own lives.

Many iconic African American preachers who were Jackson's contemporaries bore truth through musicality. For example, Caesar Arthur Walter Clark Sr., celebrated pastor of Good Street Baptist Church in Dallas, had a pattern of beginning with a crawling delivery that steadily increased in tempo and energy. As the sermon reached 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 cases such as these, 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 nourishing spiritual vitality within the listener's heart, and fruit because scriptural exegesis enfleshes and interprets the song.

Gardner Taylor stressed this fluidity in his remarks at the funeral of Sandy F. Ray, another of Jackson's contemporaries who expertly wove speech and song in 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."[37] One could say that in such sermons music is the capsule for truth or, perhaps better, that the music itself is the truth born through the sermon. Part of the sermon's function is to put a song in the heart.

With this well-established history in mind, it will suffice to simply note a few salient areas of rhetorical correspondence between Black sacred music and African American preaching. First, despite the preparation and imagination involved, both find their genesis in the realm of the Spirit rather than human intellect. And at the most organic level, preaching and singing are holistic face-to-face endeavors. Both involve the full self—the whole mind, heart, voice, body, and life story. Similarly, both are climate-sensitive ventures. Enthusiastic listeners can often coax new depths of truth out of a preacher or singer, molding the message and strengthening its grasp; resistant listeners can sometimes deflate or constrain the process even if the proclaimed word has an ultimate sufficiency due to its divine mandate. Either way, the atmosphere in the room (or on Zoom) makes a discernible difference.

Likewise, singers and preachers tend to select from the same menu of rhetorical devices. Chief among these is repetition-driven progression.[38] Through this artful approach, new variations of color and energy emerge with each round. This strategy has much in common with classical rhetoric, which

extolled the orator who, by amplifying and refining, found multiple ways of communicating a single concept.[39] Repetition offered a path to depth as well as retention. And more, repetition facilitated divine encounter. In much the same way that icons elicit an increasingly rapt gaze and draw viewers past the image to the living God, in the best cases repetition leads the listener past the orator to the Truth, the Holy One.

Other rhetorical methods include rhythm, melody, and time-honored devices like exempla (brief illustrative stories), injunction, metaphor (such as the haunting comparison to people and lambs in Roland Hayes's "Hear de Lambs a-Cryin'"), and apostrophe (speaking to someone who is absent or to an inanimate object, as in Greg O'Quin's "I Told the Storm"). Immediacy is achieved through in-the-moment supplications, bestowals of blessing, apotropaic prayers, exclamations, and rhetorical questions. Dialogue also plays a defining role, whether involving singers, musicians, and listeners, or preacher, musicians, and listeners. Whatever the combination, these methods reflect an intention to speak to the deepest part of the human person. Neither the singer nor the preacher is content with merely saying something about God; each seeks to facilitate a moment of union.

Further, when the visions of Christianity that inspired and sustained past generations are recalled through word and song, something beautiful happens. The viewpoints, values, and survival strategies of the ancestors become compasses for the present moment, and the unity between the living and the dead surfaces. And more, the winding terrain of spiritual life is represented through the singer's melisma and ornamentation, suggesting the human capacity to persevere. Mahalia Jackson's approach provides a window into these rhetorical dynamics.

A SONOROUS SAGE

If one takes the images of Mahalia Jackson on the concert stage in secular venues like the Newport Jazz Festival as seriously as the images of Jackson on church fans or in the choir loft in the 1959 film *Imitation of Life*, it becomes clear that Jackson did not aspire to fit the archetype of the whooping or chanting preacher or of the pastor-singer. She brought a bluesy sensibility to liturgical settings and made the depths of church music accessible to her secular audiences in swingy renditions of spirituals such as "Didn't It Rain" and "Walk All Over God's Heaven."[40] She never pastored a congregation, nor did she seek ordination. 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. Instead, she had a lay

ministry that flowed in church settings as well as secular spaces, and in both cases she gave melodic addresses that captured the heart of what sermons are and what they should do. Her preaching voice emerges best when one sets aside the prophetic model and thinks of her as a sage, a preacher who "functions as a wise observer of life" and encourages fellow lay listeners along "their God-guided search for wisdom in daily life."[41]

As Kenyatta Gilbert notes in his study of African American preaching, the sage has a "wisdom-focused, dialectical, communal voice" and interprets the "signs, symbols, and texts" in the community's cultural archive.[42] In Jackson's case, this proved to be a sonic archive, and gospel music was a form of wisdom with its own sounds, arrangements, emotional palettes, and ancestral linkages. In other words, Jackson treated gospel music as a body of knowledge that schooled the human spirit, offering interpretations for the full range of human experience and taking moments of anguish and perplexity as seriously as the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes.

Alyce McKenzie's insights about the preacher as sage are especially pertinent to Jackson's case. McKenzie observes that in Proverbs 1:5, wisdom (תַּחְבֻּלוֹת) [*tahbulot*] is understood as a form of aural "steering" that feeds the "formation of an interior disposition."[43] Jackson's music functioned in a similar way by fostering suppleness in the hearts of listeners. Sometimes she charted an affective path from sorrow or ennui to hope, and other times her music became a container or conduit for pain. "That's the way with the songs," she explained. "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." She hoped her songs "would soothe the minds of the listeners, give them faith, and make them believe more in God."[44] In other words, her music offered a salve as well as a certain clarity about human experience. In some instances, the music could prompt an immediate 180-degree turn in a listener's outlook, but cumulatively, it equipped people with the melodies and lyrics they needed to interpret their lives. She revealed gospel music's capacity to shape memory, facilitate self-awareness and self-transcendence, and increase tolerance of ambiguity so that people could face the unknown.

To be clear, gospel music does not become an end in itself; Jackson believed God's presence gave the music its power and meaning. Similarly, biblical Wisdom literature cannot be reduced to a set of propositions or principles and proves brittle apart from God.[45] The mediation of God's guidance is itself a divine encounter of sorts and one that directs and edifies the faith community.[46] Jackson's music had this dual function of guiding and enlivening. The contours of her wisdom-bearing emerge when attending to her approaches to dialogue, authority, and embodiment.

DIALOGICAL EXPERIENCE OF TRUTH

The sage is involved in an ever-deepening search for truth, and dialogue partners are instrumental to this process. Together their mutual curiosity leads to new discoveries even in the most familiar sources. For example, Ralph Eubanks remembers the continuing conversation his father had with Jackson every Sunday morning when he played her song "In the Upper Room":

> 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.[47]

Eubanks puts his finger on a crucial element of Jackson's sagely voice through this attention to dialogue. For Jackson, singing was a way to be in dialogue with God and invite others into the conversation.[48] 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, "Mahalia Jackson always preached through her music, using the powerful delivery of the lyrics she sang to get her message across to an audience. . . . Through her testimonial style of singing, Jackson was preaching to my father."[49] Jackson's favorite hymns included "Jesus Lover of My Soul," "My Faith Looks Up to Thee," and "Just as I Am." Personal memories shaped her performance of these hymns, and audiences could see her emotions rise as she reflected 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 personal investment in the testimony and the effort to connect with listeners.

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' own empathetic embrace in the midst of her struggles, while simultaneously embracing the hurt of the congregation by cradling them in song."[50] Jackson weaves three cords in her testimony: her own story of suffering, the listeners' pain, and Jesus' tender response.

Eubanks and Jennings are not alone in their interpretations. Johari Jabir similarly describes Jackson's music as "her testimony," observing a dialogical dimension that Mildred Falls, Jackson's accompanist, stirred by responding to Jackson's vocals.[51] With her left hand, Falls "provided a walking bass line that gave the music its 'bounce' reputation," and with her right hand, she "compensated for the lack of horn players common to a jazz band," staying in continuous conversation with Jackson's voice.[52] Together, in songs such as "Didn't It Rain," the "dynamic duo" revealed how "swing has a spiritual and philosophical purpose" and drives the search for truth.[53]

A shift in consciousness accompanied this dialogue for Jackson. "I truly have a divine feeling . . . within me when I'm singing these gospel songs. I don't seem to be myself. It seems like I'm transformed from Mahalia Jackson into something divine. And I just feel good all over."[54] The exchange with the audience was not entirely within her control; it was something that unfolded. Her role was to be open, present, and let herself be carried by the music, willing to improvise. And improvisation does not suggest a failure to prepare. Rather, it indicates a true understanding of the ephemeral nature of performance. The full integration of person, message, and moment enables the improviser to spontaneously draw from an internal well of knowledge. 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."[55]

Improvisation entails genuine expression and authentic openness to the other. This exchange hinges on a fresh and lively vision of truth in which new dimensions continually surface. The sage mines ever deeper substrates of truth with her listeners. These new depths do not break down easily into takeaways or into a portable set of "how-tos," but elements of the exchange can echo in the hearts of the listeners. These remainders can include melodies, certain phrases, onomatopoeia, or vocal flourishes, but in every case they suggest an ongoing process of mulling over the music and a desire to continue the conversation.

PURPOSEFUL AUTHORITY

Jackson had a unique form of religious authority with multiple tendrils. The moral ground of her authority stemmed from being a seeker and bearer of divine wisdom. These dual dimensions indicate an "egalitarian" understanding of authority.[56] The sage respects the varieties of human experience too much to exert power over others and instead uses both differences and areas of

agreement as springboards for further exploration. At the same time, Jackson's moral authority worked in tandem with other aspects. For example, expert power emerged whenever she drew on her incredible skill of reading the energy of an audience and when she controlled sound as it moved through her body. By partnering with her audiences, performances became joint ventures of seeking the sublime together. Artistic skill and stardom in turn contributed 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 the "authority of purpose."[57] Letty Russell uses this term as a contrast to empty clerical authority. 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 or expertise, which tend to elevate one above others, authority of purpose is nonhierarchical and seems especially suited for bearing witness.

Authority of purpose helped Jackson claim her space whether on a dais in a church or on a stage in Carnegie Hall. And the authority of purpose helped her trust her own body, devise her own way to tell stories, and interpret songs that resonate with the depths of human experience. Free from the trap of exerting herself over others or proving herself worthy, she could devote her energies to the larger purpose of connecting deeply with her listeners.

Jackson's audacious aim was to touch the souls of her listeners, and this 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," and he describes the spiritual as the "homiletical twin" to the sermon because of the use of slow delivery in each.[58] Jackson sang spirituals often, and even when singing other songs or hymns she extended notes or slowed the meter for effect. She used deliberate pacing to feel the haptics in the room and facilitate shifts in consciousness. This refusal to rush gave each song gravity, underscoring her sense of purpose.

Jackson's sense of purpose was also bound up with exploring the power of sound. After all, it was not theological propositions that drew her to church but the magnetism of the sounds she heard: "I would always find myself drawn to the church. And it's because I liked the songs and I liked the way that the preacher, the old preacher, would preach in his method. He . . . would have a singing tone in his voice that was sad. And it done something to me."[59] It had a visceral impact, and her call was to summon that sound and search for its antecedents, which I would ground in the ache of the spirituals sung by her ancestors. Jackson reached for consolation of the same Jobian depth. This effort required the authority of purpose.

EMBODIED WISDOM

Jackson's performance preparation process was also 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. "Before I go on stage, I read my Bible. . . . It's my strength, and it is the strength and spirit of my songs."[60] This meditative reading surely centered Jackson but also indicated missional focus. She knew she was telling a 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, explained 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."[61] For Jackson, song was a means of publicly interpreting Christian doctrine, and this required an embodied hermeneutic.

The emphasis on embodied wisdom turns on the assumption that a sermon is less like a speech and more like a performance of a biblical text or a performance of Christian truth. This notion of performance accords with the Anglo-French etymology of the word *perform*—*per-* (thoroughly) + *furnir* (to complete or furnish).[62] The rhetor carries the truth to completion so that propositions come alive.[63] Similarly, Jackson brought Christian teachings to life by involving her whole body. When singing, her eyes communicated as much when open as when closed. Closed eyes revealed an intensity of concentration rather than retreat. Hands were often clasped in prayer or waved for emphasis. Her facial expression conveyed emotion, and the muscles of her neck tightened and loosened visibly. Her jaws moved to shape the sound. Viewers could not see her diaphragm, but it, too, was active in sustaining her breath. All this bodily engagement indicates an enfleshed understanding of wisdom.

The fact that Jackson was a larger, round-bodied woman raises critical issues concerning performance. Sometimes she was haunted by the mammy stereotype. For instance, during the production of *The Mahalia Jackson Show*, she received an anonymous note comparing her to Beulah, a radio and television character who was an African American maid (played for a time by Hattie McDaniel) and in many ways analogous to mammy.[64] The note was a discouraging reminder of how narrow the conceptions of Black womanhood were. 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.[65] As a consequence, 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 but to serve the music.[66]

In a 1952 interview for the *Chicago Tribune*, Jackson spoke of dieting, saying she was easing off her celebrated cooking: "I'm reducing, and it's quite a struggle. I weigh 240 pounds now, but by the time the Chicagoland Music Festival comes around, I expect to be down to 200. . . . You need strength to sing the songs I sing. . . . You could say that 200 pounds is my singing weight."[67]

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 audiences. Her commitment to Black political empowerment would not allow that. For example, she enjoyed giving offertory appeals. In one playful episode, she openly competed with a pastor to see who could contribute the most to the offering plate and pulled money from her bra to outdo him.[68] It is true that television muted some of this freedom, but not enough to render her as a mammy figure.

Despite the hostile climate of show business, Jackson believed her body was a gift, and she relished in her sonic capacity to bridge the visible and invisible worlds. One of the clearest examples of this took place at the March on Washington. At the request of Martin Luther King Jr., she sang the spiritual "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned."[69] 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. Among the many lyrics she could have selected for the second verse, 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 those who were enslaved have an ongoing presence that is being mediated through song. They are summoned by the voicing of their testimonies. Of course, this idea challenges the Western notion of the body's materiality and the rigid wall between presence and absence, but it reflects an important dimension of African American spirituality and reveals the metaphysical landscape of African American preaching. Being attuned to the presence of the living and the dead is part of what it means to be fully embodied.

The third verse builds on this idea: "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." "Me" is broad enough to encompass all African Americans, living

and dead, and indeed all who suffer. Jackson's stress on "tell"—extending the note, closing her eyes and bending her knees for emphasis—was especially poignant because in that moment she functioned as emissary for her enslaved ancestors. Their strength was bequeathed to the vast crowd. Their warning of the cosmic consequences for evil was announced before the marchers, human adversaries, and the powers and principalities.

Surely this role as intermediary also prompted her interjection during King's speech when she famously encouraged him to tell the listeners about the dream. After having first heard "I have a dream" as a refrain in a prayer led by Prathia Hall, King had drawn on the theme before, but Jackson sensed that the dream was ripe for the moment. What I want to stress here is that Jackson's homiletical counsel, which helped inspire one of the most celebrated speeches of the twentieth century, was preceded and undergirded by her embodiment of ancestral wisdom.

Through her song and prompting to King, Jackson braced the demonstrators for the violence that would come in the immediate future as a backlash to that march. In less than two weeks, these horrors would include the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham that would kill Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, and the shooting deaths of Virgil Lamar Ware and Johnny Robinson. Jackson could not have known exactly what lay ahead, but the wisdom she embodied as an intermediary for the ancestors makes it clear she knew much was at stake. Preachers are called to relate concrete contextual realities to the transcendent world, and Jackson did both.[70]

LEGACY AND PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

Overall, Jackson's music reveals the porosity of the African American sermon genre. Here it helps to note 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 always a simple "type/token" or "general form/particular instance" question.[71] Genres are stretched by experimentation and on occasions when the guidelines that typically govern them are only partially adhered. This means one can partake in a genre without seeming to belong.[72]

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 other artists such as Edna Gallmon

Cooke and Shirley Caesar who underscored the intersection between sermon and song. "The Lord called me to the melody of song and the ministry of the Word," Caesar explained. "He called me to use music to preach. . . . I sing a sermon and I preach a song."[73] 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 challenged listeners to discern a sermon *in* song. Within this frame, preaching involves putting a song in the listener's heart and performing a sacred text in a way that provides a link to the faith of the ancestors. Through the sung word, the living and dead are shown to be in a continuing communion.

Jackson also provides an example of preaching that is not overdetermined by a colonialist framework. Her model is not haunted by the specter of a domineering man telling others what to do, or using fear, coercion, or manipulation to achieve its ends, or objectifying the listeners so that they become pawns—only finding power as they cede to the preacher's vision. Yet her sagely approach is still grounded in conviction and lived experience. Were she to counsel preachers, I suspect she would stress the importance of communicating the substance of a message sonically. This would mean proceeding as if the contours of the message had to be sculpted through rhythm, pitch, tempo, and other elements of music rather than by the lyrics alone. Composing the sermon to music or treating the manuscript like a musical score that charts the arc of the message for emphasis could serve as starting points.

Gardner Taylor was once asked why he did not have a practice of whooping or singing in sermons, and he replied, "Your words should sing!"[74] Even as a nonsinger, he appreciated the vital links between sermon and song. This vibrant pairing is helpful for thinking about the sermon in relation to other forms of discourse. What if the fluidity between visual art and sermon were as legible as that between song and sermon? What other ways of knowing might emerge and what new levels of wholeness might result? In the next chapter, I consider what it might mean to preach a soundless message and *see* a sermon.

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