"That'll Preach": Decentering the Pulpit through the Non-Pulpit Homiletical Practice of Black Women

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Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
Religion
May 31, 2021
Nashville, Tennessee

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DEDICATION

This Dissertation is dedicated to all the Black women called to preach in the many spaces and places we find ourselves.

May we do so with the strength, audacity, ingenuity and love of those that have come before us.

May we know that before the church or any other institution says yes, God has already claimed it as so.

May you first hear within yourself, “That’ll Preach” and know it to be truth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While I take full responsibility for the content of this dissertation, I am beyond grateful to my community for the ways they have supported and loved me throughout this work.

To my mentor and advisor, John S. McClure. Thank you for your wisdom, guidance, and mentorship. To my committee, Lisa L. Thompson, Phillis I. Sheppard and Alexis S. Wells-Oghoghomeh, thank you for your mentorship and dedication to my production as well as my person. To the late Dale P. Andrews, whose mentorship and presence was the seed that began this work. Thank you for the ways you show up.

To all my family, friends, and mentors - thank you for your prayers, accountability, support and love. There are far too many of you to name, but know that I see you and I am grateful for you. I offer special recognition to my mom Cassandra Yarborough, my dad David Yarborough and my brother Daniel Yarborough. Special Thank You to Kishundra King, Kyle Brooks, Amaryah Armstrong, Yolanda Norton, Courtney Bryant, Woo Greer, Nicole Harris-Tolliver, Nicole Symmonds, Jill Crainshaw, Aimee Moiso, Brittany Jones, Ana Rodriguez, Lindsey Altvater Clifton, Larry Brown, Keith Menhinick, BlackVandy, H&L, Peloton– I am forever grateful for your love, support and the ways you made this project possible.

All the gratitude to Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer for without their sacred proclamation this work wouldn't be possible. To my ancestors whose loved carried me and presence fueled me - thank you.

Finally, to God who continually shows up in unconditional love around me, above me and within me. Thank you for all of who you are. My words fall short, but my gratitude and love run deep.

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I. INTRODUCTION:

BLACK WOMEN'S NON-PULPIT PREACHING:

PROCLAIMING THROUGH INTERSECTIONAL EXIGENCY

In a world where Black has signified man and woman has signified white, Black women have been understudied and underrecognized for their contributions across scholarly inquiry. Black women have not been seen as resources for theoretical inquiry, but theory has been laden upon their works and their words. They have been theorized through an outsider gaze instead of theory being drawn directly from their practices, experiences, and theoretical assertions. The field of homiletics has not escaped this trend in theory or practice. Black women have been lumped into scholarship as addendums and one-chapter insights within broader treatments of Black preaching and/or women's preaching. However, neither of these lanes alone has adequately considered the critical intersection of *Black* and *woman*. This intersectional identity requires an intentional look so that the genre of preaching is expanded beyond the confines of normativity. Without that engagement, there will always be gaps in understanding the work and preaching of Black women, and therefore the practice of preaching at large.

Black women's preaching across diverse platforms and circumstances is critical to expanding our understanding of what preaching is and what preaching aims to do. The entangled relationship of preaching and the pulpit has created a limited scope for who can be considered a preacher. The pulpit has remained the primary locus and venue where we believe preaching occurs. Although Black women have historically proclaimed theology and scripture in varied venues and spaces, these acts have not been called preaching. However, when Black women's religious and sacred speech is brought to the forefront, regardless of where it is occurring, it

expands the homiletic genre—and, more specifically, expands the scholarship beyond that which has previously aided the erasure of Black women's preaching practices. The aim of this project is to remove homiletical limitations of space and location, show what Black women preachers throughout history teach us about preaching, and excavate the unique homiletical insights that emerge from these preachers.

This project first asks, "What is preaching through the lens of Black women non-pulpit preachers? Specifically, what is preaching through the lens of the lives of Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer?" Underneath this inquiry are broader questions such as, "What makes a moment of public proclamation 'preaching' as opposed to simply a speech or another oratorical classification? What is the genre of 'preaching' within the larger rhetorical category of public discourse?" Preaching as a distinct genre of communication has evolved over time, yet in many ways it remains tied to institutional authority and/or the spatial demarcation of the pulpit. I believe that looking expansively at Black women's preaching challenges accepted definitions of preaching, and if we take Black women's preaching seriously, our limitations necessarily have to change. Preaching as solely a pulpit practice misses the expansive teloi that are found when we examine preaching across platforms. Preaching as a political and subversive act occurs across institutional demarcations and within the greater realm of the world beyond the church. I study these women as preachers because they show us that preaching is a spiritual and also a political act. Their goals were not aimed toward the afterlife but at current situations around them that required immediate attention.

I focus my study of Black women non-pulpit preachers on Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer because they are all widely known for their work as activists and educators across different time periods. Although in some cases their rhetoric has been

examined through the lens of political movements, they have not been explicitly studied as preachers—and more importantly, have not been the source of homiletical insights. My intent is not to justify these women as preachers, but to invite their preaching voices, which operated in spheres beyond the institutional church and pulpit, to teach us about preaching in more capacious ways: Preaching as a political act. Preaching as activism. Preaching as a rhetorical response to the urgent needs of the world, with an urgent call for action at its core. Each of these preachers pushes us to see preaching in a new light, and to develop the study of homiletics as a result.

This project adds a new framework to homiletics by centering the preaching of Black women non-pulpit preachers, who at best have been marginal but are mostly invisible in the conversation about preaching. This creates new windows to consider who is preaching and how change is ignited through the spoken word, as these women demonstrate. Studying them in this way does not enhance the field of homiletics alone. Opening up their identity as preachers adds texture to their historical background and uncovers new questions about how their spirituality and sense of call from God was formative as they moved through multiple spheres. It offers new ideas regarding who they were and how they impacted the world around them. In addition, studying these women as preachers adds to their public witness as activists and educators, showing in more detail how they used their rhetorical prowess to shape the world around them. The intersection of being Black and woman, along with the places that these women chose to inhabit, invites us to consider a new framework and new methodology for studying preaching, one which centers Black women in all of their particularity and exigency.

Here I want to propose a hermeneutic of *intersectional particularity and exigency* as a mode to study preaching. This is a critical intervention in the field of homiletics as it posits embodiment and particularity at the forefront of the rhetoric of a preacher. In this project I use

biography as a foundational tool for understanding the rhetoric of these women. By starting with biographical information, I situate the women within their own stories and then investigate how they preached from those places of particularity, responding to the specific urgent exigencies impacting their communities. Without noting where they were and where they came from and the exigent situations into which they spoke, we lose the depth and potency of their words and why and how they preached what they did. Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer were all Black women non-pulpit preachers who aimed to create change. As such, biography gives us a lens into their embodiment in order to excavate the particular rhetorical situation they inhabited and created in their preaching. This hermeneutic of *intersectional particularity and exigency* serves as my methodological approach for understanding the preaching rhetoric of these women.

The Rhetorical Situation: An Intersectional Approach

A hermeneutic of intersectional particularity and exigency is a methodological approach that most simply means that the study of preaching cannot be detached from the preacher, their embodiment, and the concrete needs to which they were responding in the world. By adding this methodological layer to the study of preaching, I hope to texture how we engage preachers and how we listen for new understandings of preaching through a wider variety of proclaimers. Below, I turn to Lloyd Bitzer's "Rhetorical Situation" to support the idea that rhetoric is responsive to exigency, and, using Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, I outline intersectionality as an analytical tool for critical praxis. This tool can be used to nuance how we code preaching and further open up the possibilities of what preaching is and can be. I then posit that Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer each enter their rhetorical

situation with exigence at the forefront, and from their experiences speak a word to humanity that is both specific to the moment and transcends their contexts. For these women, preaching was rooted in a demand for change, pushing against the systems around them for the purposes of a better life for Black women and the Black community at large. They believed their words might shift the outlook of their listeners beyond their immediate perspective and practice. From the depths of their unique embodiment in a particular place and time, these women were respondents to their situations, proclaiming hope in the inbreaking of a new world through God and the changed behavior of their hearers. This situates the discourse of Truth, Burroughs, and Hamer as urgent responses to significant personal, social, and historical exigencies, which offers nuance to the nature and purpose of preaching. As such, I frame my excavation of them through biography and a study of their rhetoric, because one without the other is an incomplete listening strategy for understanding their preaching.

The Urgency of Discourse

In the 1968 article, "The Rhetorical Situation," Lloyd F. Bitzer argued, "An exigence which cannot be modified is not rhetorical; thus, whatever comes about by necessity and cannot be changed—death, winter, and some natural disasters for instance—are exigencies to be sure, but they are not rhetorical."[1] However, exigencies, urgent needs, and/or demands that are rooted in social injustice and aligned with the mishandling and abuse of particular people are indeed rhetorical because they can be changed. Preaching at best is responding to an exigence. It is a rhetorical situation spurred by the possibilities of change and forward movement in response to the good news expressed by the proclaimer. Truth, Burroughs, and Hamer were in many

[1] Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (January 1968): 6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40236733.

intransigent and oppressive institutions and systems. However, they knew that the social structures didn't have to remain in their current conditions, and they oriented their preaching as a response to the urgent situations around them.

Bitzer also argues that if an exigence can be modified by means other than discourse, it is not rhetorical. When preaching occurs in the public arena, it is under the belief that the expressed discourse matters and is necessary for change. This becomes especially true when preaching is responding to the demands of the external world, which can literally place the body of the proclaimer in harm's way. This has been true for many Black women. If there was a way for change to occur without the use of such dangerous discourse, then certainly the preachers would choose it. The women at the center of this project engaged situations that required a discursive response. They believed that modification was not possible without their rhetorical intervention. Their rhetoric was a necessary catalyst for action and movement beyond their current situation.

In Bitzer's rhetorical situation, the proclaimer is not the only necessary party to consider. The audience must be considered as well. He argues, "The 'rhetorical audience' must be capable of serving as mediator of the change which the discourse functions to produce."[2] Whether they seem capable or not, the possibility that the hearers of the discourse might be able to mediate change is a critical part of the rhetorical discourse. Truth, Hamer, and Burroughs's rhetoric was deeply contextual to their audiences. In order to invite change their words needed to serve as a catalyst for change. Regardless of the audience's belief in their own capabilities or their willingness to change, they bore capacity to be part of the change proclaimed by these preaching women. The rhetorical situations created were situations in which responses to the exigencies presented were not only possible, but invited.

[2] Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," 8.

However painful, unlikely, and difficult it was for Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer to stand in front of their audiences, the exigence of their situations called forth their belief that their words mattered. They chose to speak when they could have chosen silence. They chose discourse in order to create a moment that required a response. They believed that change was possible even if the audience's response was to choose to ignore what they were saying. Bitzer continues, "In our real world…rhetorical exigencies abound; the world really invites change—change conceived and effected by human agents who quite properly address a mediating audience."[3] Change doesn't often come without a fight for those who are marginalized, disenfranchised, and abused by the society around them. That fight from Truth, Burroughs, and Hamer showed up in their actions and their rhetoric.[4]

An Intersectional Approach

The rhetorical situation for Black women preachers is best understood through the lens of intersectionality. Bitzer offers a way to think about the dialectic between audience and proclaimer, and the urgency to which rhetoric responds. Expanding on this idea, it is crucial to lift up as timely and urgent the narratives of these women and their forms of embodiment. In order to better understand the rhetorical situations of these women preachers, however, we must consider the intersections of power, identity, and social constraint that marked their courses of action. Intersectionality is a necessary analytical tool for understanding the fullness of what these women represented in their particular times and social locations. Without intersectionality, we

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[3] Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," 13.

[4] In *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon,* Frank Thomas unpacks rhetorical exigencies through his conversation about Martin Luther King Jr.'s preaching. Thomas's brief assertion is focused primarily on what King was responding to in Memphis and how his rhetoric was shaped as a result of the particular situations happening there. This project engages intersectionality as a strategy for understanding more fully the exigencies of any rhetorical situation. Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 25–32.

miss crucial elements from their stories that form the foundation of the meaning-making in their words. In order to truly get at exigency and rhetorical situation, intersectionality from a praxis perspective becomes paramount.

Intersectionality[5] as a term has taken on many different definitions. For this project I lean on Bilge and Collins's definition:

> Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people and in human experiences…. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.[6]

Intersectionality identifies an intention to see beyond one-dimensional readings of individuals and the communities in which they participate. It critically considers the systems of power that shape the lives of individuals and examines layers of privilege to get a fuller understanding of an individual's experience. As a tool, it supports our ability to see more robustly who people are and how who they are impacts their role and place in the societies in which they live. Putting intersectionality at the forefront also reminds us of the necessity of

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[5] Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in her 1991 article, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." In this article, Crenshaw names the limitations of identity politics and argues for examination of the ways in which an intersection of forces such as race, gender, ethnicity, and class should be considered when mapping struggles for subjectivity in society today. Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Stanford Law Review 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–1299. According to Patricia Collins and Sirma Bilge, "Crenshaw's article identifies an important marker that shows not only intersectionality's growing acceptance in the academy, but also how this acceptance subsequently reconfigured intersectionality as a form of critical inquiry and praxis." Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 81. This move is foundational to the ways in which intersectionality has grown in different disciplines and as a tool beyond her initial work. Many scholars debate whether Crenshaw should receive the full credit for coining the term intersectionality when the actual tool of thinking dynamically beyond identity politics showed up earlier in the practice of different activists and scholars. However, the nature of scholarship is such that when someone publishes a "term" they are the one to receive the credit. It is important to note that this issue is around a Black woman's use of the term, and often Black women are not considered originators of terms and scholarship. This has certainly impacted the conversation around intersectionality.

[6] Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality* 2.

considering the myriad axes of power and privilege that impact a person's experience and the ways they are seen in the eyes of the society around them.

An important intervention of this project is the use of intersectionality as a lens for understanding the rhetorical situation and unpacking the insights for homiletics presented by these women. Many different disciplines have taken intersectionality in different directions. Scholars in womanism and Black feminism have done some of the necessary tilling of the ground for the critical study of Black women specifically. Black women homileticians like Lisa Thompson, Teresa Fry Brown, Donyelle McCray, and others studying Black women preachers have worked in the discipline of homiletics and shown the particularities of Black women preachers and their practices.[7] This intersectional orientation also provides a strong basis for intersectionality to be used as a tool in practical theology, especially Black practical theology, by noting the necessity of the dialectic between theory and practice.[8]

Within a perspective focusing on rhetorical praxis, intersectionality becomes an analytical tool for nuancing the rhetorical situation and engaging many intersecting elements of the narrative, embodiment, and identity of a proclaimer in order to glean insights from their *particularity*. In *Intersectionality*, Collins and Bilge expand the understanding of intersectionality as critical praxis, noting that when people think about intersectionality they often focus on either inquiry or praxis, but not the ways in which these two things intersect. Collins and Bilge argue,

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[7] Other Black women homileticians and scholars from other disciplines who engage with Black women preachers include (but are not limited to) Katie Cannon, Kimberly Johnson, Elaine Flake, and Melva Sampson.

[8] In "Intersectional Rhetoric: Where Intersectionality as Analytic Sensibility and Embodied Rhetorical Praxis Converge," Hailey Nicole Otis asserts that feminist scholarship has primarily discussed what intersectionality *is,* whereas she aims to unpack what intersectionality *does.* She highlights those who produce intersectional rhetoric as opposed to simply naming that these rhetors hold a myriad of identities and create nuanced assertions about "structural oppression on multiple axes." To her point, this chapter aims to show that intersectionality as a rhetorical tool offers a strategy for unpacking the nuances of Black women's proclaiming and drawing homiletical strategy from the particularities of their rhetorical witness. Hailey Nicole Otis, "Intersectional Rhetoric: Where intersectionality as analytic sensibility and embodied rhetorical praxis converge," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 105, no. 4 (2019): 369–389.

> The praxis perspective does not separate scholarship from practice, with scholarship providing theories and framework, and practice relegated to people who apply these ideas in real-life settings or to real-life problems. Instead, this set of concerns sees both scholarship and practice as intimately linked and mutually informing each other, rejecting views that see theory as superior to practice.[9]

More pointedly, they note that by using intersectionality as an analytic tool, the theory of what is happening and how it is enacted are both present.

Intersectionality as critical praxis thickens the rhetorical situation for each of these preaching women by emphasizing the distinctness of the rhetoric of (and response to) their preaching. Their words are unique, deeply rooted in bodies and voices that rise from the nuances of their particular lives, which are lived at the intersection of many social and political forces. Exigent, intersectional preaching is about the development and practice of unique voices speaking to a world that needs it. Within the historical particularity of biography, under the framework of intersectionality, exigency serves as a tool to consider more deeply the sociological and political forces to which homiletical rhetoric is responding, which deepens and expands our ideas of the changes preaching mediates.

This method allows me to study Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer beyond a one-dimensional reflection on their historical context—as actors on a historical stage. Even though they are all Black women occupying different moments in history, they were responding to different socioeconomic, gendered, and racialized situations. Intersectional thinking increases and enhances our sense of the different kinds of urgency into which these Black women non-pulpit preachers spoke, even as we consider meta-threads that are found throughout their preaching practices. Attending to their specific biographies, while noting both the differences and similarities that show up in their rhetoric, can teach us about the

[9] Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 42.

particularities of Black women's preaching across time while also further delineating the ways that the pulpit is an unnecessary prerequisite for the genre of preaching.

Intersectionality illuminates the complicated nature of identity and the ways that injustice preys upon particular identities and demographics. It also helps us consider the ways identities don't fit neatly into a box, and how a myriad of different things impacts each of us in different ways every day. The world is complicated, identity is complicated, and for Black women who move between multiple spaces, a complicated intersectional existence is normative. In this project, intersectionality is a tool to mark the specificity of identity within exigency as we engage the rhetoric of Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer.

All three of the women studied in this project are Black and woman, yet beyond that their identities differ greatly, which is the gift of this project. I don't aim to flatten Black women's preaching into a neat paradigm of sameness; the gift of listening to rhetoric and learning from it is actually found in the particularity. By focusing my attention on Black women specifically, I am able to note the consistencies across these three particular women, as well as where they depart in their rhetoric. A layered analysis of their rhetoric not only provides space for new insight, but also suggests how the discipline of homiletics might be enhanced by the observations retrieved from this analysis.[10] Paramount is a multilayered analysis of the ways rhetoric is informed by the particularities of the whole self within a thickly-understood context.

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[10] Emilie Townes writes: "The key for womanist theology is the use of an interstructured analysis employing class, gender, and race. This kind of analysis is both descriptive (an analysis and sociohistorical perspective of Black life and Black religious worldviews) and prescriptive (offering suggestions for the eradication of oppression in the lives of African Americans, and by extension, the rest of humanity and creation)." Emilie M. Townes, "Womanist Theology," Union Seminary Quarterly Review 57, no. 3 (2003): 159. The interstructured analysis to which Townes refers is present in the tool of intersectionality, especially with a careful look at race, gender, and class. In other methodologies, these different identities (race, gender, class) might be studied separately, while potentially noting overlap. However, when one's embodiment includes all of them, the luxury to extricate any from the others isn't present.

Project Summary

In chapter 2 I investigate preaching as a unique genre of communication by interacting with several key scholars in homiletics who have defined preaching, showing how this project engages with these scholars. I locate the intervention of this project in relation to the study of Black preaching, feminist preaching, and Black women's preaching. I also show the ways that the genre of preaching has expanded in the direction of homiletical artifacts beyond the pulpit, noting how this project focuses particularly on non-pulpit oratorical artifacts offered by Black women. The aim of chapter 2 is to show how a hermeneutic of *intersectional particularity and exigency* adds something critical to the field.

In chapters 3-5, I use biography to explore the historical particularity, intersectional issues, and rhetorical exigency of Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer. As I do this, I extrapolate homiletical insights from their particular preaching witness. In chapter 3 I consider the preaching of Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), a previously enslaved Dutch- and English-speaking Black woman. Her work in women's suffrage and abolition is well known throughout our historical understanding of her, yet her words have often been rewritten to mimic a southern Black dialect not her own. Here, I use her unaltered rhetoric in order to consider her preaching. I take note of the pivots that brought her from Isabella Baumfree to Sojourner Truth, engaging how they influence her non-pulpit preaching life that occurs in her later years. Specifically, I look at "Arn't I a Woman" and "I Suppose I am About the Only Colored Woman that goes bout to Speak for the Rights of Colored Women."

In chapter 4 I consider the preaching of Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879–1961), who was most explicitly tied to the institutional church through her work in the Women's Convention under the National Baptist Convention. Although not a pulpit preacher, she found herself

speaking across a myriad of platforms, pushing against normative ideas regarding Black women's place in the church and society. In this chapter I listen to the preaching of a Black woman whose advocacy for Black women spanned from the age of twenty-one until her death. She is well known as an educator and in some spheres a writer, however this will be a practice of considering her as a preacher. I specifically look at two of her speeches that are most well-known: "How the Sisters Are Hindered from Helping" and "The Colored Woman and Her Relation to the Domestic Problem."

In Chapter 5 I consider the preaching of Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977), who is widely known for her political activism, and yet not through the lens of preaching. Hamer's roots as a poor Black woman in the Mississippi Delta undergird her preaching and shape her preaching rhetoric in particular ways. She began her public proclamation at the age of forty-four as a response to the dire needs of her community and in connection with groups who believed in the change she was preaching. While she is most known for soundbites and public moments of testimony, I listen to the deep rhetoric of her preaching as it parallels the details of her life that aren't often found in quick summaries. I specifically look at an artifact from the beginning of her public preaching ministry, "We're On Our Way," and one from the end, "We Haven't Arrived Yet."

The final chapter excavates meta-homiletical insights from Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer. In this chapter I also accentuate the way in which attention to the particularity, intersectionality, and exigency of their preaching is fundamental to both the study and teaching of Black women preachers.

Conclusion: Towards an Expansive Homiletic

This project is a practice in listening with intersectionally-tuned ears to the exigencies that defined the lives, rhetorical situations, and words of three non-pulpit Black preaching women who are remembered as educators and activists, but who can also be known as preachers. In this project, I consider their womanness, their Blackness, the time period in which they lived, and the nuances of their lives, and examine how their words spoke from those spaces. I assess the rhetorical situation: Why did the situation exist? How did these women find themselves in it? Who was the audience? What was the demand? And finally, what are the themes that arise from their words? By engaging their rhetoric via their narratives, we are able to enter into each of these women's rhetorical situations, aligning our analysis of their words with the particularities of their lived experiences.

Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer were each responding to urgent situations, crafting rhetoric shaped for the uplift and flourishing of Black people. What that meant in the specificity of their existence changed over time. Each of these women has something specific to teach us about preaching. Together, they also have something to say about preaching. Preaching for them was a rhetorical act aimed to make concrete change to the exigencies to which they were responding. Their rhetoric aimed at declaring the inbreaking of justice as a part of God's activity in the world, and their preaching was rooted in that understanding. By engaging their preaching rhetoric, I imagine what their insights mean for others who find themselves proclaiming beyond normative spaces—and who receive the response, whether aloud or silently, "That'll preach."

II. A NEW PERSPECTIVE OF PREACHING:

SITUATING THE BLACK WOMAN NON-PULPIT PREACHER

How does the privileging of the pulpit space and ignoring the critical intersection of Black and woman occlude Black women's inhabitation of the preaching moment in non-pulpit space? This question is foundational as I consider what preaching is, and who gets to decide. What do we miss in homiletics if Black women are not studied expansively, particularly given the limitations and exclusions of pulpit space? In this chapter, I investigate the entangled relationship of the pulpit and preaching and discuss the limitations of studying homiletics solely as "pulpit speech." I survey foundational homiletic scholarship using three epistemological lenses in order to demonstrate how privileging pulpit space and not centering Black women's voice create a hole in the scholarship. I then begin to address that gap through study of the preaching practices of Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer.

Whether explicitly stated or not, early scholars of Black preaching, while doing essential and critical work, primarily engaged and considered Black preaching through the methods and practices of Black men. Although more recent scholarship pivoted away from that model, it is still the norm for the larger body of literature pertaining to Black preaching. In addition, feminist preaching, a category focused on women's preaching practices, has primarily been the realm of white feminists, who tended to conflate all women's experiences into their own without recognizing the intersections of identity across race, culture, class, etc., which make experiences unique. Fortunately, Black women scholars have begun the necessary work of engaging the intersection of "Black" and "woman" and what that means for preaching practice. These three

strands of scholarly inquiry—Black, woman, and preaching—are all critical to this dissertation as they set up the building blocks that lead to my particular consideration of preaching.[11]

In this chapter, I also explore *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* by John McClure, which posits preaching as a unique genre of communication and distinguishes preaching from other forms of communication. *Four Codes* as a system suggests the possible "codes" required for a sermon while making room for preaching to expand beyond normative definitions. In thinking about preaching beyond the normative constraints, I consider Donyelle McCray's work on Harriet Powers, and a more recent work of McClure's where he discusses the interaction of communicative ethics and liturgy. Both authors argue that preaching and/or homiletical artifacts[12] are not bound solely to pulpit practices.

In short, I argue that preaching is a practice that is not limited to the pulpit and that Black women's particular embodiment as non-pulpit preachers offers an expansive view into homiletics that hasn't yet been investigated. This chapter maps the scholarship that leads me to this point, noting the ways that these previous interventions are foundational while mapping how this project specifically departs from them.

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[11] Rather than an exhaustive survey of every possible scholar, I offer a sampling of primary works used in each of these strands to note what has been done in thinking about what preaching is and what it does, while noting the hole in scholarship I aim to fill.

[12] A homiletical artifact is anything being considered as a form of preaching and/or proclamation. This term includes, but is not limited to, a traditional pulpit sermon.

The Preaching Genre: An Overview of Black, Feminist, and Black Women Centered Preaching

Black [Man] Preaching[13]

The study of Black preaching is foundational for studying Black women non-pulpit preachers. Earlier scholarship of Black preaching helped to move the academic understanding of the Black preacher beyond the sole focus on and description of a charismatic performance, and into deeper analysis of performative nuances, theological underpinnings, and the communal telos of Black preaching. This scholarship makes clear that Black preaching cannot be subsumed into what might now be a considered a "white homiletic." Any homiletic that doesn't specify its orientation and the sources of its data omits the necessary acknowledgment that we preach from our epistemological and experiential frameworks, and that that orientation matters. Black homiletic scholarship pushed that acknowledgment forward within the specific context of the Black church. As critical as this inquiry has been, it has still elevated two voices as the "standard" and/or normative mode of preaching: the preaching voice of men, and preaching as a pulpit practice located predominantly in church spaces. It is important here to survey several key scholars in Black preaching to show their nuanced understandings of the nature and purpose of preaching while also demonstrating the aforementioned limitations of male-centered pulpit preaching.

In *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art*, Henry Mitchell offers an important history and analysis of Black preaching. He notes the significance of Black preaching as a form of orality in the lives of Black people, which has served as an active part of their survival. Mitchell argues that Black preaching has "kept its believers alive and coping—even when in an

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[13] While some might suggest other scholars who could be added to this group, the works selected offer a sufficient sample size to support the assertion being made about the overall scholarship of Black preaching.

oppressed condition that would have crushed many."[14] The sermon, then, is a dialogue between preacher and listener that stems from the preparatory work of God and preacher. This is carried out with the help of the Spirit, alongside the necessary work of the preacher and the congregation in the moment. Mitchell's book was one of the first of its kind, unveiling what it meant to be a Black preacher and why it mattered. His major contribution was illuminating the study of Black preaching as a viable subject for scholarly inquiry while demonstrating the importance of a Black homiletician writing about its nuances, its impact, and the roots of the ongoing practice—which primarily reflected the experience of Black male pulpit preachers.

Another foundational work in Black preaching is *The Heart of Black Preaching* by Cleophus LaRue. Expanding on Mitchell's work, specifically the hermeneutical approach to Black preaching, LaRue argues,

> In summary, powerful black preaching has at its center a biblical hermeneutic that views God as a powerful sovereign acting mightily on behalf of dispossessed and marginalized people. A belief in this God, an awareness of the sociocultural context of the black experience, and the creation of a sermon that speaks in a relevant and practical manner to the common domains of experience in black life, when taken together, ultimately result in a powerful sermon that resonates in a potent and meaningful way with those in the listening congregation.[15]

Black preaching has to connect to the experiences of Black life. Without that context, Black preaching loses the core of its identity and purpose, and the God proclaimed becomes misconstrued. Adding to Mitchell's argument, LaRue posits a specific theological orientation and a particular hermeneutic employed by the Black preacher. He identifies five domains of experience, or what he names as "tangible, corporeal situations in which the sovereign God's power is sought and demonstrated in the life experiences of blacks."[16] These domains are:

[14] Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 34.
[15] Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 6.
[16] LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, 20.

personal piety, care of the soul, social justice, corporate concerns, and maintenance of the institutional church. These domains offer categories for the Black experience and give the preacher possible ways to connect to listeners through their experiences in the Black church. Although he names some women when thinking through the theology of preaching, LaRue's work is male-centered and positioned explicitly within the context of the institutional church. LaRue's most important insight lies in his emphasis on naming the particularities of a Black hermeneutic. The idea that our interpretive lens and our understanding of what constitutes Black preaching is rooted in cultural specificity is a crucial addition of his work.

Both Mitchell and LaRue emphasize the art of celebration. In *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God*, Frank Thomas also highlights the role of celebration in Black preaching. Thomas posits that celebration is the orientation of the Black preacher because of the need to provide hope to listeners who live in a world that marginalizes and oppresses them. Celebration in worship is a subversive act within a society and world that often makes celebration feel impossible for Black people. Celebration is frequently signified by a particular expression that some call "whooping," which is followed by a response of shouting from the congregants and/or listeners. This aspect of Black preaching is critical, because without an intentional consideration of the content, purpose, and diversity of delivery found under the "celebration" umbrella, whooping can be caricatured as mere performance and delivery, especially from an outsider gaze.[17] Celebration is central to Black preaching, both in and beyond the pulpit, because it creates a space for hope and "next" in spaces where they could easily be ignored. However,

[17] Thomas argues that most of western preaching has ignored the emotional content of preaching, writing that African American preaching attends to the emotional process. The five elements of the emotional process are: use of dialogical language, appeal to core belief, concern for emotive movement, unity of form and substance, and the creative use of reversals. This is outlined more fully in Frank Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin' God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching,* revised ed. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2013), 22–33. This framework shows celebration is a form of effective communication, moving beyond the delivery (but not separate from it), and noting the actual emotional process that invites hearers to participate.

celebration beyond the pulpit may render different responses than that from preaching within the context of worship.

Luke Powery adds to this conversation in *Spirit Speech* where he reminds us that Black preaching also encapsulates lament. He writes, "The juxtaposition and unity of lament and celebration in preaching may be called a doxology because as a unified tensive pairing these manifestations of the Spirit in preaching represent the full glorification of God during times of joy and sorrow."[18] This movement echoes the lament in Psalms and puts preachers at a "full stretch" before God.[19] The relationship of celebration and lament reminds us that Black preaching at its best attends to the fullness of human experience and sees God in all of it. To attend to only one side of the spectrum would be to miss the necessary marriage of celebration and lament in Black preaching. Lament is especially important as we consider Black women non-pulpit preachers and the particular exigencies they are responding to. The tension between hope and lament is present in their preaching as they take on systems that are actively aimed at their demise, while believing another world is possible.

Adding to this list of essential qualities of Black preaching, Kenyatta Gilbert argues in *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* that African American preaching is trivocal preaching.[20] The trivocal paradigm of the prophet, the priest, and the sage are critical elements that must be woven together within the preaching moment to accomplish what Gilbert posits *is* African American preaching. The prophetic voice speaks to "God's justice and what

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[18] Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 96.
[19] "Full stretch is an idea liturgical theologian Don Saliers propagates when speaking about humanity coming before God in times of joy and sorrow in the entire scope of human pathos." Powery, *Spirit Speech*, 96.
[20] There are nuances in the language of "Black" versus "African American" preaching, but for this project, I will use Black preaching and African American preaching interchangeably. When I quote the work of other authors who use "African American" preaching, I honor their choice of language.

God intends,"[21] which is dependent upon the relentless hope that this is not the end of the situation. This requires imagination and invites the congregation to participate in the work alongside God. The priestly voice focuses on the community at hand and cares for the congregation of hearers. There is an emphasis on presence in this voice, alongside a telos of congregational care. Meanwhile, "The sagely voice interprets the congregation's historical and cultural legacy, namely its archival materials, and seeks to decode the complex signs, symbols and texts of a congregation's worship life."[22] This voice requires a preacher that stands with the people, not only in front of them. To know a congregation well enough to speak in folk idioms that resonate with and pull from their own history and understanding is the contribution of the wisdom and depth of the sagely voice. As Gilbert writes, "African American preaching is a ministry of Christian proclamation—a theo-rhetorical discourse about God's goodwill toward community with regard to divine intentionality, communal care, and the active practice of hope—that finds resources internal to Black life in the North American context."[23]

Gilbert's contribution of trivocal preaching to the understanding of African American preaching is significant because it organizes a typology for both the content of African American preaching and what it aims to do. This also counters the popular notion that the prophetic and the pastoral do not sit in the same spaces; Gilbert argues instead that it is paramount that the prophet, the priest, and the sage are all able to come forth through the voice of the preacher. While Gilbert focuses on the pulpit as the locus of preaching, this framework is portable. It can span beyond the pulpit, and its different components are potentially meaningful within a broader context of preaching.

[21] Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 12.
[22] Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching,* 14.
[23] Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching*, 11.

This sampling of works on Black preaching written by Black and male-identifying persons highlights important things that are often centered in Black preaching. Mitchell gives us a theoretical basis, LaRue posits a hermeneutical framework, Thomas and Powery attend to the necessary tension of and relationship between death and hope, and Gilbert weaves these voices together through the trivocal preaching paradigm. However, these scholars have struggled to include the voices of Black women at the same level as they do their Black male counterparts. Black women's voices have been subsumed into these frameworks as if gender identity weren't an essential component to consider. The arguments lifted through these works are true in Black preaching, yet they are not *all* that is true. Black preaching does not *only* occur within the four walls of the institutional church or in formal pulpits. This is even harder to recognize when the voices that have been prioritized are those that have had access these spaces within the institution of the Black church. Through the study of Black women non-pulpit preachers, I aim to shift the center of the scholarship of Black preaching beyond its current focus on the institutional pulpit practices of male preachers.

W(hite)omen PreacHers

Feminist methodologies and hermeneutics for preaching have put women at the center of their inquiries, which necessarily has moved the conversation about preaching away from the male-dominated sphere. In many feminist considerations of preaching, however, the critical identity marker of race is overlooked or dealt with as an accent, rather than as the central conversation. Black women have been footnotes and/or mentions in the works of white feminist homileticians, without a deep dive into what Black women uniquely contribute and offer to preaching. Even with their shortfalls, white feminist ways of talking about preaching have

expanded the conversation and created more entry points into what preaching is and how it can be done in ways that create more inclusivity. These advancements serve this project well. On the whole, feminist preachers resist the non-relational and hierarchal forms of authority that are dominant in traditional male models of preaching. Feminist homileticians tend to lean into a homiletic that is centered more *within* and *from* a community than above it or on its periphery. This section highlights four critical contributions in this line of scholarship.

In *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching from a Feminist Perspective*, Christine Smith posits that to preach from a feminist perspective is to weave an inclusive community. She argues that feminist preaching is often more inclusive and effective because of its inclination toward community and intentionality around marginalized persons. Smith asserts that "the content of preaching from a feminist perspective needs to reflect a vision of wholeness, a tapestry of human complexity and diversity. The prophetic edge of this kind of preaching calls the Christian community to integrative, weaving action in the world."[24] With an in-depth look at feminist preaching through theological, psychological, and other lenses, Smith offers a needed perspective that counters the normative homiletic that she aiming to subvert. Her conversation around "remembering" as a feminist practice is important for understanding her contribution. She writes,

> Women know all too well the silenced nature of women's experience and women's stories and are becoming increasingly committed to giving voice and an honored place to those who have gone before us. This act of remembering, whether it happens in our preaching, our songs, our litanies, our dances, or our symbolic acts together is a faithful act of proclamation and a foundational act in feminist spirituality.[25]

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[24] Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 110.
[25] Smith, *Weaving the Sermon*, 99.

Smith makes clear that feminist preaching lifts the community and aims to center those voices that may have been forgotten in times past. This weaving becomes a project of holding together that which has been relatively unimportant within other modes of preaching, especially stories that have not been told by those whose voices have not been centered. This shift toward remembering and interrogating marginalized voices in homiletics implicitly invites a project such as this one, which involves the elevation of the voices of Black women non-pulpit preachers.

As Smith names, community-centered preaching is a staple of feminist ideals of preaching. Lucy Rose posits a model for communal preaching in *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*. Rose argues for preaching to be an act that collaborates with hearers, both in preparation and during the preaching moment. She asserts that holding authority as a preacher removes the interpretive onus from the community.[26] Instead, she proposes, "The preacher is simply the one responsible for putting the text and sermon as one interpretation into the midst of the community for the particular service of worship."[27] Deep listening and presence *with* hearers, as opposed to authority *over* them, are necessary for a homiletic that is relevant to the community and shaped by the needs of the community. This model of preaching invites the preacher to take a different type of authority (or, Rose might argue, to intentionally "lose" authority altogether), such that the hearers are participants in the proclaiming of the text. This is another way of "remembering" as posited by Smith, and it offers a specific way of designing the sermonic moment to follow the ideals of communal proclaiming. The conversation about authority and its uses is critical to feminist preaching. It also invites us to consider who has the

[26] Rose's model responds to John S. McClure's *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).
[27] Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 4.

luxury of “losing” authority in community, which highlights the lack of intersectionality present in this work. For Black women non-pulpit preachers, participating in community wasn’t about losing authority but asserting *communal* authority in ways that were deeply situated in the vocational, social, and political exigencies faced by a particular marginalized community.

Following this same trajectory of recovering women’s voices and interweaving voices from the community, Mary Turner and Mary Lin Hudson name the violence done to people when they are silenced, and aim to recover women’s voices from this silencing in *Saved from Silence: Finding Women’s Voice in Preaching.* Hudson and Turner argue that when someone is silenced it is an erasure of their identity, and they demonstrate how women are and have been silenced both in the church and the society at large. They argue for a “theology of voice” centered on the necessity of a “triadic” (us to God, God to us, us to each other as humans), and suggest that this communication paradigm is not limited to men or any group of people, but is necessary for the flourishing all of humanity.

In their constructive work on how to recover silenced voices, Turner and Hudson assert that sharing narratives is paramount. They write, “Telling their stories has always been a way for women to authorize their own reality. As we listen to each other’s stories, we begin to make sense of our own.”[28] Their argument reminds us of the necessity of listening and uncovering the voices that haven’t been heard, both historically and in our contemporary context. They also name preaching as a subversive act for women because they are choosing and working to speak in a culture in which they are often silenced.

Anna Carter Florence continues work focused on women’s preaching and the possibility of narrative in *Preaching as Testimony*. Florence argues, “The story of Christian preaching is not

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[28] Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis: Lucas Park Books, 2014), 61.

just about the church's speech. It is also about the church's struggle, and the preacher's struggle, to come to speech: hearing it, naming it, attempting it, embodying it."[29] She argues for a recovery of the "testimony" preaching tradition, and offers three stories of testimony as case studies: Ann Marbury Hutchinson (1591–1643), Sarah Osborn (1714–1796) and Jarena Lee (1783–?). She makes clear that the tradition of testimony isn't solely for women, but when recovered it can show us women's preaching from their locations on the margins. Florence contributes an argument of the testimony preaching tradition that illuminates an embodiment of what we preach, not simply the words. Although the women she looked at were preachers under the normative understanding, testimony preaching spans beyond the pulpit because it encompasses the personal responses of proclaimers to the gospel, which are not confined to one space.[30] Testimony is not limited to a particular power structure, but stems from whatever truths are being ignited within the proclaimer and to which they bear witness. This understanding of preaching moves beyond a hierarchical order of institutional affirmations and places preaching in the voices of anyone with the unction to testify.

Aiming to continue to recover voices that hadn't been studied, Beverly Zink-Sawyer looks at Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Olympia Brown, and Ann Howard Shaw, three white preaching women of the nineteenth century who were ordained and formally affirmed as clergy, but saw their ministry in the woman's suffrage movement. In *From Preachers to Suffragists: Woman's Rights and Religious Conviction in the Lives of Three Nineteenth Century American Clergywomen,*[31] Zink-Sawyer notes the ways that their convictions as pulpit preachers and their struggles as women in ministry prompted their exit from solely speaking in pulpits to moving

[29] Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 4.
[30] Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, xxvi–xxvii.
[31] Beverly Zink-Sawyer, *From Preachers to Suffragists: Woman's Rights and Religious Conviction in the Lives of Three Nineteenth Century American Clergywomen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

into other spaces of the movement. Zink-Sawyer shows the ways that the religious commitments of these women expanded their preaching beyond the confines of the church walls, even as they were still tied to the church through their ordinations as early pioneers for women's ordination. These women used the pulpit as a springboard to a more expansive call outside of the church. By excavating how their journeys from the pulpit support their continued sense of call in other movement spaces, Zink-Sawyer, through the witness of Blackwell, Brown, and Shaw, creates a link between preaching within the church and preaching beyond the church.

Feminist preaching scholarship contributes to be a reassessment of a normative, male-dominated homiletic. These scholars do the critical work of what we might call "a re-gendering"[32] of this male-dominated and historically formally-constructed pulpit practice by showing women's ways of preaching and pushing for new homiletical practices from these ways. They challenge homiletics by utilizing liberation and feminist methodologies, and offering hermeneutical and rhetorical strategies for preaching that aim to include the whole community, especially those who have often been marginalized.

While we know this to be the intention, there are still areas that are problematic within the scholarship. First, although these scholars talk about preaching within the community, with the exception of the work of Beverly Zink-Sawyer, there is still clear prioritizing of church buildings and pulpits as a locus where the spoken act is occurring. With the exception of the three women studied by Zink-Sawyer, when preaching occurs outside of those spaces, it is most often due to the exclusion of a woman as preacher, and not by the preacher's choice—which again suggests that the church is the primary location where preaching occurs. Second, feminist scholarship in preaching has come up short in addressing other identity markers and experiences

[32] Roxanne Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

that women bring to preaching. Florence argues, "We cannot identify a preacher apart from that preacher's story—which includes the work *becoming* a preacher."[33] The preacher's story is heavily rooted in her identity. But the important differences that Black women preachers contribute have been subsumed under the larger umbrella of "feminist" preaching. This type of whitewashing, which blurs women's identities, made it necessary for Black women scholars to center Black women's experiences and point out the importance of the embodied intersection of both *Black* and *woman* as something necessary to study.

Black Women Pulpit PreacHers

Black women homileticians, alongside rhetoricians, theologians, and others, have created scholarship that attends to the necessary intersection of both Black and woman, alongside the other identity markers that Black women hold. This important scholarship that centers Black women has created a space where Black doesn't mean only male, and woman doesn't mean only white. Black women preachers have a space they can call their ideological home and not feel the need to contort their being into scholarship created by and for others. This section walks through the lineage of Black women's homiletical scholarship, which is foundational to the work of Black women proclaimers, both in and beyond the pulpit. It elevates an experience that has been marginal at best in other scholarship, and centers voices that have often been silenced. However, Black women homileticians have still generally prioritized the pulpit, and therefore Black women's preaching is still limited to a place that remains largely dominated by men.

Black women homileticians focus on what it means to be Black, woman, and a preacher. In *Weary Throats and New Songs,* Teresa Fry Brown uses an ethnographic approach to consider

[33] Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, xxviii.

a homiletic through the eyes of Black women. Through narratives of call, growth, and spiritual practices, Fry Brown weaves a story about contemporary Black women preachers. She gives them space to testify to their experiences, illuminating both the beauty and the difficulty of being Black women and preachers across different ages, denominational backgrounds, and regional differences. In talking about the place of the Black woman in the Black church, Fry Brown writes,

> As a child of the black church, I had listened to black preachers boldly denounce the horrors of discrimination and oppression and pronounce the biblical mandate for equality before God. My experience, however, led me to listen beyond the words and see the reality of praxis. I began to question the chasm between words and deeds in roles of women in church.[34]

This deeper listening pushed Fry Brown to consider what women preachers were doing and how they were carving out space for themselves. The Black church has not turned a critically reflective lens toward itself in regard to discrimination and oppression of women as frequently as it has attended to conversations about race. Black women preachers have had to fight for space to be heard in the roles of preacher in the church. Brown argues, "Like their foremothers, many contemporary black women have creatively moved beyond the 'Big Chair Syndrome.' Many know that all ground is holy. God is everywhere. The tremendous power of the pulpit in the black church tradition can be liberating or oppressive."[35] Although Fry Brown's study deals with ministry as a church practice and preaching as a pulpit practice, her statement asserts that there are creative ways that Black women move beyond formal spaces and still have preaching ministries.

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[34] Teresa L. Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 14.
[35] Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs,* 21.

Another approach to studying Black women preachers has been to imagine criteria that constitute Black women's preaching, or what some scholars explicitly name womanist preaching. In *Toward a Womanist Homiletic,* Donna Allen builds on Katie Cannon's work[36] to create a more specific set of criteria for what constitutes womanist preaching. Allen adds to Cannon's list of criteria, which include but are not limited to: a focus on Jesus's life and humanity and not his gender, special attention to the way we talk about sexuality in non-oppressive ways, and continually expanding the ways we talk about God.[37] She writes, "In a womanist homiletic, the preaching event includes a dialogue about the rhetoric of the sermon where not only is linguistic violence exposed, but from this dialogue the theo-ethical praxis and language of the faith community is shaped."[38] In this, she is arguing that womanist preaching creates a new kind of language that is "emancipatory praxis," which subverts the system that uses language violent towards Black women and anyone else.

In the field of communication, Kimberly Johnson builds on these criteria through the lens of rhetoric. She notes that rhetoric as a field has done a poor job of highlighting Black women's sacred speech. In *The Womanist Preacher*, she focuses on contemporary preachers Claudette Copeland, Melva Sampson, Gina Stewart, and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan. She uses Stacey Floyd-

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[36] In *Katie's Canon*, womanist ethicist Katie Cannon asserts, "A womanist critique of homiletics challenges conventional biblical interpretations of sin-bringing Eve, wilderness-whimpering Hagar, henpecking Jezebel, whoring Gomer, prostituting Mary Magdalene and conspiring Sapphira." Katie Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 114. These negative tropes of women in the text have created negative ideas of women, and specifically of Black women, in the larger society. These are not simply shallow readings of the text, but oppressive readings from the gaze of the privileged, even when they are reinforced by those who are marginalized. Cannon argues that preaching needs to have expansive language for God and read women in the text beyond the sinfulness that is traditionally attributed to them. She pushes for more inclusive rhetoric in preaching that doesn't limit women to these negative tropes, asserting that such tropes are linguistic violence. Womanist preaching, then, must find more expansive ways to talk about women in the Bible, such that we also use more uplifting and true ways of talking about the women in the pews. Cannon's critique, requiring that Black women's narratives be at the center and their truths be the source of inquiry, pushes the conversation of preaching beyond general content into the specific words affecting Black women.

[37] For a full list of what constitutes a womanist homiletic, see Donna E. Allen, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic: Katie Cannon, Alice Walker and Emancipatory Proclamation* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2013), 43–44.

[38] Allen, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic*, 27.

Thomas's four tenets of womanism, which emerge from the four-part definition of womanism defined by Alice Walker. Johnson ends the book with a list of twenty-two characteristics for womanist preaching, many that reiterate the criteria presented by Katie Cannon and Donna Allen. These criteria are important because these Black women scholars are pulling from the experiences of Black women, and rhetoric that contributes to their flourishing. Again, this type of homiletical lens moves Black women from the margins into the center of the conversation. My project doesn't aim to build a list of criteria but rather a collection of insights that might serve as invitations from Black women non-pulpit preachers: things to consider when preaching, beyond an exhaustive checklist of what does and does not fall within Black women's preaching practices.

In *Ingenuity: Preaching as Outsider,* Lisa Thompson, rethinks preaching through the perspective of Black women. Thompson invites the reader to witness and learn from their preaching practice, arguing that centering Black women means that preaching must expand beyond a white and male dominated homiletic. She is attentive to the lived and embodied experiences of Black women and the ways experience shapes their preaching practices. She argues that Black women's preaching has been marginal or even seen as deficient because it does not align with whiteness and maleness, which has been the dominant story: "Our imaginings have been overwhelmingly stifled by a default imagery of maleness and what masculinity looks like alongside whiteness; and in turn, anything that moves in contradiction to such imaginings is inherently deficient."[39] However, Black women are able to expand familiar practices into new spaces. In her conversation about celebration, frequently a staple in the conversation of Black preaching, Thompson argues, "As celebration is engaged by Black women it may possess some

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[39] Lisa L. Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 175.

communally expected content…. However, the use of the feminine and its appearance alongside and in combination with more expected content in both obvious and subtle ways is the most explicit form of ingenuity."[40] The familiar is tied with a more explicitly feminine identity, such that women's experience is a legitimate space to proclaim alongside the lived experiences of the community as a whole. *Ingenuity* gives the reader room to see the unique proclaiming practices of Black women and to consider how these practices are used beyond the pulpit as well.

Placing the narratives of Black women at the center of homiletics is necessary and sacred work. Instead of Black women being an addendum, these scholars center and learn from their preaching prowess and posit new ways of thinking about preaching through the practices observed. In addition to these scholars, anthologies of Black women's sermons have given more access to the rhetoric and diversity found in Black women's proclamation.[41] Though this work is paramount for beginning the conversation about Black women's homiletical practice, it still privileges the pulpit and the institutional church. In doing so, we miss the possible expansion that arises from proclaimers whose voices were not found inside of churches, but at protests, in educational spaces, on platforms for civil rights, and in the streets. However, when we begin at the margins—as these scholars have done with Black women—we illuminate other aspects that must be explored and other identities that have been pushed to the periphery of our disciplines, if included at all.

The Limitations of the Pulpit

This project is rooted in the assumption that the pulpit is a limited space to study preaching, especially for groups of people like Black women for whom access to formal and

[40] Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 45.
[41] For example, Thompson, *Ingenuity,* 175.

institutionalized spaces of preaching has been severely limited. The field of homiletics has primarily been studied from within these limited spaces. The exclusionary nature of such a space invites us to consider that preaching must not be held to such a small spatial boundary. In this section I name the limitations of the pulpit, from its inception to its "gendered" nature, and discuss the problematic nature of "pulpit" being the locus of the study of preaching. As a result, this project explicitly moves beyond that space to consider other platforms in which Black women's preaching occurs.

In *Sacred Power, Sacred Space*, Jeanne Halgren Kilde walks through the history of Christian worship by way of architecture and its evolution. Kilde addresses three types of power that show up in the worship space: divine power and/or supernatural power, social power, and personal power. In her excavation of how different facets of power intersect and are created in the worship space, she shows the development of the pulpit in relationship to these power dynamics. Referring to the work of J.Z. Smith, Kilde writes, "The distinctive ways in which religious sites organize or arrange the people who use them constitute an important component of the perceived holiness of a space."[42] In this vein, the organization of space deemed "sacred" offers an aesthetic proclamation about who is allowed to speak, who is important, and who is "less than" in the space—a pattern going back to biblical days. Even before the specificity of the pulpit within the church, the demarcation of sacred space within the walls and secular space outside of the walls already created a distinction from which contemporary preaching is built.

In the late second century and early third century C.E., the first gatherings of the Christian church began to change. Instead of meeting over meals and in homes, other spaces

[42] Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

were starting to signify "church." In these changes, a "bema" was formed. The bema was a platform built for clergy, and the rest of the room was for the worshippers. Kilde argues,

> The bema and the separation it created between the clergy and the ordinary worshippers indicate that Christianity was becoming increasingly institutionalized. The new clergy, presiding over the symbolic Eucharist services that were becoming the centerpiece of Christian worship, played a very powerful role, in effect mediating between the gathered assembly and the God they worshipped.[43]

Kilde shows us that the perceived power and authority of the bema, which later developed into the pulpit, was constructed as a result of institutionalization. This truth has carried into contemporary churches, where the pulpit signifies personal power used in the language of "call," social power that marks those who stand in it as set apart and/or more important, and divine power as it designates the venue through which God speaks. This ancient reality has contemporary consequences, as it has shaped who is deemed a vehicle for God's voice and who is not. In that same vein, we are made aware of who is preaching versus who is not, shaped by where we look for the oratorical authority that designates how God is shaping and moving in the world. While there are certainly nuances across different denominations and generations of church architecture, what has remained consistent is the set apart place for the clergy to speak that is a signifier of power.[44] The voice of God becomes rooted inside the church, via the proclaimer, from this specific location.

In addition to the power dynamics created spatially in the pulpit, Roxanne Mountford argues that the pulpit has a gendered nature. In *The Gendered Pulpit,* Mountford names problematic ways preaching is studied, specifically the lack of attention towards the reality that it

[43] Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space*, 24.

[44] Even when it's not the traditional furniture piece known as the pulpit, there is often something in worship to note a shift in power or signifying that it is the time to listen. For example, in many contemporary megachurches there is a lighting change, a stage cleared, or something to mark that the "word" has been set apart and is going forth from the platform, and this is where we should look for God's voice.

is geared towards what she deems as "the male body."[45] Studying actual embodiment in rhetorical performance is critical to making a full review of the nature and purpose of the rhetoric. Mountford argues, "Texts that were once a robust rhetorical performance have too often been reduced to texts studied without reference to their performative nature."[46] Without an attentiveness to the ways that the art of preaching has been signified by "manliness," we miss the nature of the gendered pulpit, how women preach, and that women add to the overall identity of the rhetorical genre of preaching.

Kilde and Mountford's arguments display the hierarchical nature of pulpit space, both aesthetically within the worship environment, and ideologically as a male-dominated sphere. Preaching, then, becomes a pulpit art that women have to fight their way into because of the significations of its maleness. Black women pulpit preachers have faced pushback and marginalization from within their Black church context, alongside the marginalization and oppression from society as a whole. Many scholars note that the African cultures from which many early Black Americans came did not participate it such gender inferiority. However, as Black clergy reproduced white American clergy structures, the issue of "gatekeeping" pulpit preaching to exclude Black women was clear.[47] The preacher was male.

This project stands on the work of these scholars, with gratitude for the ways they have parsed power and privilege in order to make clear that women must be centered and power has to be interrogated in order to see the limitations of a homiletic centered on one space. However, this project advances that quest by imagining another starting place for preaching. When you truly center women's voices, specifically Black women, the pulpit is not the only place for preaching

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[45] Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit*, 8.
[46] Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit,* 6.
[47] Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit,* 98.

or even a primary place to be considered. In this project, I consider preaching outside of the gendered pulpit. I wonder about new places of sacred demarcation and assess how an expansion of what we deem "sacred" might contribute to the growth and development of the art of preaching. Instead of acquiescing to an ideology that has asked women to "know their place" when outside of the pulpit, I highlight Black women who created new spaces of power and disrupted power centers through their preaching practices. The places for which they proclaimed were expansive and not driven by the same commitments as pulpit preaching. They preached in expanded spheres that impacted the world in ways that were different, but in no way secondary, to preaching in the pulpit.

The following section looks at scholarship that has pushed the margins of the preaching genre beyond the pulpit in different ways.

Preaching: An Expansive Practice

The Four Codes

The Four Codes of Preaching is a helpful tool for examining the rhetorical function and purpose of preaching. In *The Four Codes*, John McClure creates a coding system that can be used to consider how homiletical speech is unique and what makes up this particular genre of sacred orality. I consider this system a bank of possibilities rather than an exhaustive coding system, as I wonder if there are other codes or ways of understanding the codes that could be added. However, genre studies allow us to identify what might mark preaching as preaching by engaging codes within the genre of preaching, and noting when those codes change to another genre. McClure argues, "Genre studies must always extend the boundaries of the basic

expectations that constitute a genre only to the point where those expectations clearly change."[48] His system offers a framework for thinking about the genre of preaching, which serves my project well because the codes are a conversation partner for the insights gleaned from the Black women non-pulpit preachers I engage. One can use the four codes to push the assumptions of the preaching genre by engaging homiletical artifacts that are situated beyond normative understandings of "preaching."

The four codes of preaching are the scriptural code, the semantic code, the theosymbolic code, and the cultural code. These four codes, in no particular order, create the patterns of rhetoric that McClure argues form the basis of homiletical artifacts. This system offers a starting place for thinking through what constitutes a rhetorical schema for preaching, and therefore what falls into the genre of preaching. McClure posits,

> A *rhetorical schema* for preaching is meant to help the preacher organize the diverse verbal components of preaching so that they can be strategically or purposefully effective for a particular congregation. The rhetorical schema for preaching in this book is an attempt to organize these components so that they are useful to preachers who have widely different homiletical profiles.[49]

Each of the codes has an intertext: "A text lurking inside another, shaping meanings, whether the author is conscious of this or not."[50] Through the intertext, we see the code and the way meaning is being made within it. The four codes operate together and are informed by one another throughout the sermon. They aren't set out in a linear pattern, but within the sermon are woven into one another almost like a rhetorical quilt that, together, constitute the sermonic genre.

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[48] John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 6–7.
[49] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 3.
[50] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 9.

The scriptural code refers to "any direct or indirect verbal allusion of the biblical text or to the events to which the biblical text testifies."[51] The intertext for this code is *anamnesis*, or remembering. McClure argues that all sermons move through this type of remembering to recall in some way, shape, or form the foundations of Christian faith. This remembering locates the sermon within a larger trajectory of the Christian tradition and refers back to truths considered through the stories and truths of the biblical text.[52] For McClure, the intertext of *anamnesis* is important to the sermon genre because of its connection to the stories of the Christian faith. Without this referential point, the foundation of the sermon as connected to a larger history and tradition gets lost.

The semantic code looks at the message woven throughout the moves of the sermon. This code focuses on the words that the preacher chooses and what those words, phrases, and sentences then signify as meaningful. The intertext for the semantic code is truth: "Ideas in the sermon acknowledge the existence of truth, promote a certain kind of truth, and respond to certain expectations of truth."[53] McClure notes that this code is closely related to the scriptural code, in that truth in a sermon is often mitigated through how one interprets and understands the biblical story, however loosely or broadly one thinks about it. This shows the interconnectedness of the codes and how they operate together and deeply inform one another, even though they can be looked at separately.

The third code is the theosymbolic code, and its intertext is worldview. The way that the preacher constructs this code produces a particular worldview that is aligned with that of the

[51] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 15–16.
[52] I would edit this code slightly and call it the sacred text code and/or still call it the scriptural code but be explicit in naming its expansive nature. As Christian traditions expand and as different marginal voices find sacred identity in extracanonical texts, their use and exegetical work with those texts still aid in the support and unpacking of this coding system.
[53] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 57.

hearers, while often pushing against that worldview, as well, to make new meaning.[54] As McClure posits, "It is the preacher's own synthetic theological product."[55] Conceived narratively, McClure names giver, receiver, object, subject, helper, and opponent as six essential characters or actors in the sermon. These roles are ordered into particular ways based upon the preacher's viewpoint and offer the hearers a larger narrative to consider.

The final code is the cultural code, which looks at the way that the preacher utilizes the cultural norms of the listener such that the message is relevant and rooted in an actual context. This code refers to "every reference within a sermon to the broader culture in which the congregation lives its daily life."[56] Therefore, the intertext is experience. This code is what allows the sermon to sit inside a particular community and/or within a particular culture because of the use of references that the audience would understand.

Each of these codes offers a different look into the rhetorical strategy of the preacher. In most cases, this coding system has been used to engage pulpit preaching, outlining the myriad ways the rhetoric of sermons is formed. However, the broad nature of the coding system makes considerable room for preaching to be considered rhetorically without the bounds of tradition and/or institutional affirmation of the definition of preaching and preacher.[57] It invites consideration of works that fall within the codes but outside the pulpit.[58] Again, this tool is a

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[54] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 96–97.
[55] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 93.
[56] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 136.
[57] We see this is explicitly in McClure's later work in John S. McClure, *Speaking Together and with God: Liturgy and Communicative Ethics* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018) and John S. McClure, *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011).
[58] In addition, this makes me consider if there are additional unnamed codes or ways of thinking through these coding categories (via the intertext, their style, etc.) that should be taken into consideration when engaging the sermon genre.

useful interlocutor as I think through the works of women who were not known as preachers because they proclaimed outside of the pulpit.[59]

Beyond Rhetoric: The Quilted Sermon

In "Quilting the Sermon: Homiletical Insights from Harriet Powers," Donyelle McCray offers a new lens for preaching by positioning Harriet Powers's quilts within the lineage of the African American preaching tradition. Moving beyond the explicit rhetorical genre of preaching, as well as subverting the power and privilege of the pulpit often present in Black church preaching traditions, McCray asserts that the quilts crafted by the hands of Harriet Powers are more than folk art and an offering in visual arts; they are preaching.[60] McCray connects Powers's artistry to the critical aspect of African American preaching known as "telling the story." Powers's use of imagination and elaboration as markers of the story also place her within the African American preaching tradition.

The significance of McCray's argument is multifaceted. First, Powers is a Black woman whose quilt preaching is in an extracanonical homiletical form that would not readily or formally be understood as preaching by those who see preaching as solely pulpit practice and rhetorical art. The significance also lies in Powers's own declaration that her quilts were preaching.

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[59] It does not escape me that I am a Black woman scholar engaging the voice and coding system of a white male scholar to consider the preaching voices of the Black women to whom I am listening. To be clear, *The Four Codes* provides a coding system I use as an interlocutor, but it is not a sole authoritative voice on the requirements of preaching. However, it helped me understand nuances present in rhetorical coding and how the sermon genre has been discussed and considered within the field of rhetoric.

[60] McCray describes the quilt visually: "Powers exhibited her *Bible Quilt* at the Athens Cotton Fair of 1886. While the quilt has muted tones today, back then it danced with vivid shades of pink, green, and orange. And more, the quilt had distinctive marks of African American craftwork, including contrasting sash trim, the placement of squares at most corners, and deliberate instances of asymmetry. Silhouettes of humans, animals, and celestial bodies were appliquéd in panels to depict distinct biblical stories and give them a universal quality." Donyelle McCray, "Quilting the Sermon: Homiletical Insights from Harriet Powers," *Religions* 9, no. 46 (February 2018): 2, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9020046.

According to McCray, “Powers takes an unusual step by linking her quilting to preaching. She calls her first quilt, ‘a sermon in patchwork’ and shares an intention to ‘preach the gospel in patchwork, to show my Lord my humility…and to show where sin originated out of the beginning of things.’”[61] McCray did not name Powers as a preacher; Harriet Powers had already done that for herself. Powers’s self-proclaimed orientation was that she was a preacher, and her works were sermons. For non-pulpit preachers, the affirmation of call comes first from themselves. Powers responds to that call with her quilts, and McCray posits that although it is not oral Powers finds a way to preach. When considered in its fullness, Black women’s preaching demonstrates that sermonic discourse must be considered beyond the pulpit, and in Powers’s case even beyond the orality of speech. For Powers and McCray, preaching is not just what we say orally. Preaching is not solely an oral/aural art form that requires auditory breath and physical voice in order to reach a gathered group of hearers.[62] McCray’s assertions invite us to contend with what we mean when we decide that something is preaching. She asks us to look in a completely different place—at a quilt—as an artifact “that’ll preach.” McCray shows the cleverness of Black women to work with what they have and to find ways to create lasting messages beyond the confines of pulpit practice and Sunday morning. She pushes homiletics beyond the pulpit, inviting and almost fighting for her reader to imagine a world beyond stagnant ideas of the genre of preaching. I, too, join in that same fight.

[61] McCray, “Quilting the Sermon,” 1.

[62] Black women found different ways to “save themselves from silence.” In *Saved from Silence: Finding Women’s Voice in Preaching,* Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson emphasize the healing and prophetic shift of women to move from a state of silence into a posture of proclaiming. The reclamation of one’s voice is an act of healing. Voice is not solely a physical act of speaking, but a reclamation of one’s sense of self and power. Powers decides that speech is not the only way to subvert silence, as have other Black women who have found ways to proclaim in literature and other art forms.

Homiletical Practice Beyond the Norm: A Liturgio-Ethic

For Black women non-pulpit preachers, preaching is a spiritual act that is also both a political and moral act, shaping the tenor of moral discourse in communities. In *Speaking Together and with God: Liturgy and Communicative Ethics*, John McClure uses his own coding system to consider confessional, intercessory, and homiletical practices through the lens of communicative ethics.[63] Liturgical practices have social impact and operate beyond the private sector and into the broader public sphere, McClure argues, writing, "Making such an argument requires that we understand liturgical practices to have a social life beyond confessional communities of faith, within public discourse and action."[64] He continues,

> If preaching is to generate reasons for moral argumentation in the public sphere, it must move beyond Habermas' ethical dimension addressed primarily to the religious community, and into his moral dimension of reason giving with public arguments and the translation of inherently religious language (inasmuch as it is possible) into ordinary categories of speech.[65]

This type of public discourse promotes a communicative ethic that focuses on understanding, not solely for the purposes of moral consensus but for the consideration of new moral norms that might expand the audience's perspective. If liturgical practices can be a means by which communicative action operates in the public sphere, then such practices are not limited to formalized pulpits and institutionally-bound confessional spaces.[66]

To further his point, McClure highlights research on public moral artifacts that he considers homiletical based upon the aforementioned criteria of the four codes, or "four

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[63] Although I focus on this extension of the four codes, it is important to note McClure's work in *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention*. Using the framework of a digital audio workstation (DAW) and the process if layering tracks, McClure also engages the four codes as separate tracks that operate independently, and yet together create an expressive and different creative output. With this in mind, McClure's work moves into popular music and other cultural artifacts, showing that they can serve a homiletical function that is seen by the interaction and engagement of the aforementioned tracks. McClure, *Mashup Religion*, 2011.
[64] McClure, *Speaking Together and with God*, xv.
[65] McClure, *Speaking Together and with God*, 116.
[66] McClure, *Speaking Together and with God*, xv.

discursive practices."[67] These homiletical artifacts extend beyond common conceptions of preaching. McClure critiques the rigid boundaries that Habermas places between the religious and public spheres, and argues that homiletical practices "migrate" beyond the explicitly religious sphere into everyday places and spaces.[68] In his focus on homiletical practices, McClure broadens Habermas's communicative ethic by arguing, in part, for the homiletical importance of "aesthetic validity claims." This permits us to look at artistic and aesthetic elements of discourse that are used to elucidate moral validity claims (for better or worse). McClure's overarching definition for the practices described as "homiletical" stems from his work in *Four Codes*. As McClure posits, these four categories span beyond the church and into other modalities such as speeches, novels, movies, and video games.[69] In addition, his argument that preaching involves not only moral consensus-seeking but also complex moral elucidation (making aesthetic validity claims) leaves room for proclaimers whose identities disrupt the norm for their audiences, and who investigate new experiential possibilities for the moral life. McClure's contribution is the assertion that the core elements of homiletical practices can contribute to how a current moral consensus is problematized and a new valid moral consensus is discovered, authenticated, and argued as true.[70] Black women non-pulpit preachers use their rhetoric to fight against moral consensus that is violent. They preach to intentionally disrupt the normative systems in order to create change towards a more just, free, and hospitable society for Black people, and they expand religious spheres into new public spaces through their preaching.

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[67] McClure, *Speaking Together and with God*, 125.
[68] McClure, *Speaking Together and with God*, 1–24.
[69] McClure discusses Gregory S. Jackson, who looks at novels like the *Left Behind* books, artwork, and video games, all of which utilize an aesthetic of immediacy to elucidate moral validity claims. Sherry Mleynek analyzes the rhetoric of the "Jewish problem" in the *Left Behind* series of novels. James W. Jones looks at the *Left Behind* video game. Finally, Jason Bivins argues that the *Left Behind* series, hell houses, cartoon tracts, etc., are aimed to create and promote fear as a response from the audience. McClure, *Speaking Together and with God*, 142–143.
[70] McClure, *Speaking Together and with God*, 107.

Conclusion: A Homiletical Intervention Through Black Women Non-Pulpit PreacHers

Homiletical artifacts are already present in everyday spaces, cultural spaces, and public spaces, yet so many preaching voices go unnoticed and unheard because of a limited scope of what preaching is. Black women non-pulpit preachers have been deemed speakers and orators without any study of the preaching component of their orality. However, as we study their specific goals, the exigencies to which they are responding, and the ways their intersections inform their preaching practice, the definition and purpose of preaching expands. The intersection of being Black and woman, along with the places that these women chose to inhabit, push us to consider a new definition of preaching, which reshapes not only our contemporary practice, but our understanding of the historical lineage of preaching.

In this chapter, I have outlined the lacunae in scholarship that have made it possible for the canon of preaching to have focused primarily on pulpit preachers. In *The Gendered Pulpit,* Mountford asks three questions that guide her work. She says, "What does it mean for a field of knowledge to take into consideration the experience of women? In what ways is a speech act or rhetorical performance 'gendered'? How does a woman earn the respect of an audience conditioned to regard her body itself as symbolic of lack (of authority, eloquence, power, substance)?"[71] To this line of inquiry I add, "How does the specificity of Black women's preaching experiences reframe and expand our definitions of preaching and our methodological frameworks for the study of preaching? How does the way that preaching has historically been studied reinforce a definition that is limited and exclusive?" These questions create a foundation for new preachers to be uncovered and spaces to be reimagined.

[71] Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit*, 13.

Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), Nannie Helen Burroughs (1879–1961), and Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977) are the subjects of my study because I see them as preachers who push against the dominant locale of the pulpit for preaching, even as their preaching practice confirms and affirms some of the ideas of Black preaching, feminist preaching, and womanist preaching. Their aim to create better worlds and wield agency through their rhetoric—subversive to society around them—opens up a different telos for preaching than one might find in the pulpit. They advocated for freedom for their communities and asked for change as a response to their sermons.

Black women's non-pulpit preaching provides a new lens to view preaching, and another place to explore the expansive nature of homiletics. It is rooted in Black hermeneutics, yet centered in the Black community whose lives are both within and beyond the four walls of Black churches. These women were rooted in communities and created a homiletic deeply relevant to the issues and needs important to them and those around them. These women certainly had weary throats, yet they did the difficult work of using words to imagine and create worlds into which they called their community to live. Whether they were challenging the white majority, inviting their own Black community into communal work or care, or speaking directly to systems of power, these women preached in a way that created change. The following chapters are a practice of listening to their preaching through their stories in order to glean insights about what preaching is outside of the pulpit, and how we might practice and know preaching differently as a result of having engaged Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer.

III. A JOURNEY TO TRUTH:

THE LIFE AND PREACHING PRACTICE OF SOJOURNER TRUTH

"You read books; God himself talks to me."[72]

"My name was Isabella; but when I left the house of bondage, I left everything behind. I wa'n't goin' to keep nothing of Egypt on me, an' so I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name."[73] Sojourner Truth, originally named Isabella Baumfree, changed her name at a critical moment in her journey toward a new identity of freedom—freedom into which she had not been born. She declared her call to proclaim truth and that her name signified a journey given to her by God. For her, that was the only source of validation needed. This is the root of the preaching legacy of Sojourner Truth, whose preaching required no specific platform: just a sense of call, her story, and the urgent needs of the time to which she responded through her preaching.

This chapter is a practice of listening to the preaching of Sojourner Truth, noting how her identity as a poor, previously-enslaved Black woman in the late nineteenth century resulted in her becoming a unique preacher for her generation. In this chapter, I summarize her story, accentuating elements that represent an accurate arc of her life and the ways in which who she was informed what she proclaimed. I then engage her rhetoric through two of her homiletical artifacts: "Arn't I a Woman" and "I Suppose I am About the Only Colored Woman that Goes About to Speak for the Rights of Colored Women." These samples of Sojourner Truth's preaching ministry unearth four homiletical insights that are drawn from the particularities of her rhetoric as a Black woman non-pulpit preacher in the nineteenth century.

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[72] Wendell Phillips said that Truth used to say this to him. Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1996), 255.
[73] Sojourner Truth, "The Lord Has Made me a Sign," in *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology,* Marcia Y. Riggs, ed., (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 22.

In both of these messages, Truth was preaching at women's conventions where the focus was on women's rights, mostly geared towards the rights of white women. Despite using the term "women," the proceedings often didn't include formerly-enslaved, enslaved, or freed Black women who were also women in the United States. Although Truth is not usually considered a preacher, my goal is to indicate how she is, in fact, shaping language and occupying an exigent moment as a preacher.[74] Truth's rhetoric offers us strategies of tactical self-disclosure, metacommunication, cultivation of expansive biblical memory, and clarity of message geared at response. As a preacher she shows us the unique ways that non-pulpit preachers use their platforms to craft rhetoric deeply rooted in context with an explicit telos in mind, often rooted in abolitionism and women's rights, excavating the voices of those that have long been silenced.

Her-Story: Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth's story[75] is one of resilience, courage, and pivot points. For many, her known story starts and ends with her activism, with some reference to her previous enslavement. However, her story was far more layered. Fortunately, Sojourner Truth did something unprecedented: she published her own narrative and sold it as a means of income when she spoke

[74] I am calling Truth's speaking "preaching." This is not widely talked about in the literature outside of her time in camp meetings, and there aren't available manuscripts of those moments of proclamation. A few articles call her preacher in their litany of titles (abolitionist, women's rights activist, preacher, etc.). However, they don't actually talk about her role as preacher or her words as preaching.

[75] The historical information that I have chosen to use is from Nell Irvin Painter's biography (1996) and Sojourner Truth's autobiography (1850). While I read many other things, these two were most frequently referenced and gave the most comprehensive understanding of her life. In addition, work in primary sources proved to be more difficult with current travel restrictions due to the pandemic, and many of the newspaper clippings and primary sources found online were retrospective of her after her death. In the future, a more detailed engagement with the primary resources available will be appropriate and necessary to gain a fuller picture of her life, and to understand what her words meant to people who heard her in person (if possible), and those who have listened later. The information rendered here provides an appropriate summary of her life and sufficient context for the particular artifacts studied and for the goals of this project. Truth's autobiography talks about her life in vignettes and ends in the 1840s. Painter's biography then offers a robust secondary source to expand the story to the end of Truth's life, and to fill in additional parts throughout.

at conventions. Although she wasn't able to write or read, she told her narrative in a series of vignettes to her colleague Olive Gilbert, who transcribed them. However, the *Narrative* telling of her life ends before her speaking engagements proliferated. While we know some of Truth's story beyond her published narrative, Nell Irvin Painter concedes that, "I cannot track completely Truth's antislavery and women's rights appearance, for reporters did not invariably consider her worth identifying by name, or even mentioning at all. She doubtless attended and addressed many meetings without notice between 1845 and 1850."[76] With that in mind, and in order to amplify the intersectional historical exigency of her public speaking, I will retell her story, highlighting particularly pivotal moments.

Isabella Baumfree

Sojourner Truth, born in 1797 and named Isabella Baumfree, was the daughter of James and Betsy. She was born enslaved in Ulster, New York, to a Dutch-speaking family. She witnessed pain and sorrow from a very young age. In the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* she talks about witnessing her parents' emotions as she and her siblings were sold or were under threat that they would be taken from each other. Baumfree[77] saw deep love between her parents, saying, "Their human hearts beat within them with as true an affection as ever caused a human heart to beat."[78] However, she also watched and experienced immense grief. Baumfree recounts the agony and helplessness that her dad experienced after her mother passed, reporting the effect his audible cries had on her: "I hear it now and remember it as well as if it were but yesterday....

[76] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 114.
[77] From this point on in this biographical sketch, I address Sojourner Truth as Isabella Baumfree until the time in her life that she makes the choice to change her name to Sojourner Truth. This is the pattern that she follows in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* and I aim to honor that pattern.
[78] Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* ed. Dover (New York: Dover Publications, 1997), 5.

My heart bled within me at the sight of his misery."[79] After her mother passed, her father lived in deep sorrow. Even when she saw him after she had been sold to another plantation, her experiences of him remained the same. Baumfree's familial narrative was rife with pain, as many of her siblings were sold off to different places and she, too, was sold from her parents.

While she was enslaved, Truth experienced physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse from the masters who enslaved her, as well as from their wives. At age nine, Baumfree was sold to John Neely for $100 and taken away from the plantation where her parents were. After having spoken only Dutch in the household into which she was born, she was thrust into an English-speaking household and had to adjust and learn a new language. Neely was violent and severely abused Baumfree. She describes a beating she received that left a "story" on her back that she would always have to remember: "He whipped her till the flesh was deeply lacerated and the blood streamed from her wounds—and the scars remain to the present day, to testify to the fact."[80] Soon after this, Baumfree was sold to the Scriveners for $150, and finally to John J. Dumont for £70. Baumfree was with the Dumonts from 1810 to 1828 (roughly age 13 to 28), when she emancipated herself.

Both Baumfree and her biographers emphasize her time with the Dumonts. She had a deeply complicated relationship with the family. Painter writes, "[Baumfree] denounced Sally Dumont (slave master's wife), adored John Dumont, and converted to a recognition that slavery was wrong."[81] In her *Narrative*, Baumfree speaks highly of the Dumonts' daughter Gertrude, who helped her when her mistress and a white woman servant told a lie about her to John Dumont in order to get her in trouble. Baumfree also had a high ambition and desire to please

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[79] Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 7.
[80] The adoration of John Dumont is complicated and must be read within the context, violence, and specific particularities of slave narratives. Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 10.
[81] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 17.

Dumont. Painter writes, "Her ambition and desire to please were so great that she often worked several nights in succession, sleeping only short snatches, as she sat in her chair; and some nights she would not allow herself to take any sleep, save what she could get resting herself against the wall, fearing that if she sat down, she would sleep too long."[82] Fellow slaves taunted her, calling her "white folks' nigger."[83] Her relationship with the Dumonts was complicated because of its inherent distortions and misplaced affection, rooted in the abuse and mishandling of her person.

One of the ways that the enslaved were controlled was through their relationships. Truth experienced deep heartbreak from losing a lover. Agency for love was not often given to the enslaved, especially when a couple came from different owners. Baumfree speaks of a critical time when she fell in love with an enslaved man from another plantation named Robert. Like many slaves, Baumfree was the victim of cruel separation and was not able to see him. Robert's master didn't want his slaves with anyone else. When it was found out that Robert had come to see Baumfree, he was beaten so severely that her master, Dumont, intervened and made the owners who were beating Robert leave. "Isabella had witnessed this scene from her window," writes Painter, "and was greatly shocked at the murderous treatment of poor Robert, whom she truly loved, and whose only crime, in the eye of his persecutors, was his affection for her."[84] Throughout her life, she saw that affection for her and/or care for herself were often met with punishment and persecution. Eventually she was pressured to marry Thomas, a fellow slave on her plantation, and they had five children.

In addition to the loss of someone she loved and who loved her, Baumfree also experienced the loss of her children. After she left for her own freedom, laws still bound her

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[82] Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 7.
[83] Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 14.
[84] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 16.

children to her previous owners, the Dumonts. However, the Dumonts also made an illegal sale of her son Peter. Increasing her pain and fear, Baumfree discovered that Peter had been sold "down south," which for many northern slaves added an additional layer of terror. Baumfree worked to get Peter back and was helped by others to locate him and return him to her. When she finally was able to get him, he didn't recognize her; he had been brainwashed with ideas of who she was and told that she was evil. He even expressed that he wanted to stay with his master. After some time, Baumfree was able to get Peter to see that she was his mother who fought for him and had come to find him. He then began to tell her all that happened, and "She commenced as soon as practicable to examine the boy, and found to her utter astonishment that from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, the callosities and indurations on his entire body were most frightful to behold. His back she described as being like her fingers, as she laid them side by side."[85] Her pain was profound as a human and as a mother who couldn't protect her son from what had happened. She had prayed for him to return, and he had—but not without the external and internal scars of abuse and dehumanizing treatment.[86] This type of treatment was a stripping of her rights as a human being, but the enslaved weren't seen as having rights. Her story is reflected in her fight for women's rights in her proclaiming, because she intimately knew what it was like to have no rights as an enslaved person and now as a freed Black woman. Through her preaching, she emphasized those rights and she fought for better treatment.

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[85] Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 28.

[86] I want to note that she prayed to get free, and walked into freedom, but that it still wasn't without loss. She prayed to get her son back, and she got him, but it wasn't without the pain of the situation. Her story with God was one of both pain and progress. As we think about her sense of call later in her story, her audacity stems from knowing a God who calls, and is still with her even in the pain. Somehow, her sense of connection to God didn't waver in her own storytelling of that connection, even though her experiences seemed to dictate that it would be hard to keep holding on to God.

Towards Freedom

Freedom was not something given to Baumfree, it was something that she took. On July 4, 1827, Baumfree was supposed to receive her freedom from the Dumonts, but John Dumont refused, saying that he had lost labor from her because of an injury she sustained, and therefore she would not be emancipated.[87] In the *Narrative*, she recounts a conversation with God where she said that she was afraid of the night and wondered how she could escape. She was guided by the Spirit to leave before daybreak so that she wouldn't travel completely in the dark but would be away from familiar neighborhoods before anyone else was up. She left with her infant and the clothes that she had.[88] She escaped[89] and encountered the Van Wagners, who bought her labor from Dumont for a year until she could fully advocate for and get her freedom. Her escape marked a change in her identity. She decided in that moment to fight for her freedom in a different way, which would continue to be a theme across her life—and one that appeared in her rhetoric as well. Her preaching was a continued fight for this freedom. It wasn't enough for her to have paperwork that said she was free; she knew she deserved to have the same rights as the people around her. The fight for freedom was a theme throughout Truth's life as she advocated for more rights and believed God had sent her to do this work.

Religious Radicalism

After Baumfree left the Dumonts, she connected to a religious movement called Perfectionism and was taken in by Elijah Pierson and his wife, both preachers in the tradition.[90]

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[87] Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 18.
[88] Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 19
[89] This is a far more complicated and robust story than this brief outline. However, for the purposes of this project it is enough to know that she escaped and left the Dumonts to encounter the Van Wagners, who took her in.
[90] For more information on the religious organization, see Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19th-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

She participated in the movement in different ways, including preaching at camp meetings alongside the other families.[91] In October 1832, Baumfree met Robert Matthews, who was more commonly known as the Prophet Matthias. He was a self-proclaimed prophet, foretelling that the end of the world would be in 1836. He dressed ornately, adorned with things like a two-edged sword and different astrological devices.[92] As Painter describes, "Matthias claimed that after the Spirit of Truth had disappeared from the earth with the death of Matthias of the New Testament, he, the Prophet Matthias, possessed the spirits of both Matthias and Jesus Christ."[93]

When Matthias arrived, the Perfectionists believed him; Pierson rented a house for him and Baumfree served as his housekeeper without compensation. In addition, she gave money from her savings to support the work that he was doing. The Kingdom of Matthias "consisted of different generations, classes, races, and sexes; Isabella was the only one who was black, but not the only one who was poor."[94] Although in the previous Perfectionist movement Baumfree had been given space to preach, Matthias said that preaching wasn't for women. He cut off her voice and exploited her labor and generosity. Matthias was abusive and domineering, but because of their religious adherence the group continued to follow him. Ann Folger, the wife Matthias, also sexually abused Isabella, coming into her bed at night, which was reminiscent of a previous mistress, Sally Dumont.[95] These experiences mimicked the treatment she had received as an

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[91] Her preaching as Isabella Baumfree was different from the her preaching as Sojourner Truth. Her later preaching in the context of freedom was not the same as preaching towards a particular evangelical agenda rooted in specific religious organizations, such as Perfectionism. For this project, I am specifically focused on her preaching as Sojourner Truth; however, comparing her preaching in these different contexts would be an interesting study. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find manuscripts for her preaching with the Perfectionist movement to do such a comparison. However, I imagine that her life as a previously-enslaved woman would create a much different narrative than her white counterparts who had always known freedom. This time, though, gave her experience preaching to mixed race audiences, which may have served her well as she considered the strategy for her preaching beyond the confines of this explicit religious experience.

[92] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 51.

[93] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 51.

[94] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 53.

[95] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 56.

enslaved person, yet in this group she felt a different proximity to whiteness than she had experienced as a slave. The Kingdom of Matthias fell apart when his indiscretions became public knowledge.[96]

When reflecting on this time in the Kingdom of Matthias, Truth speaks of being in a liminal space between colleague and servant, which created ambiguity and confusion in her roles. What was clear, however, was that her status as Black, woman, and poor deeply shaped how she was treated and considered within the household—as had been true in previous situations in her life. Even beyond the lens of slavery, she saw the ways that the particularities of her embodiment created a different experience than any of her counterparts who didn't share the layers of identity impacting her. This season of life would give her time listening to different scriptures and thinking through her own theological identity, which she then offers in her later preaching by using the biblical text to support her call for rights and freedom.

Sojourner Truth

After the experience in the Kingdom of Matthias, Baumfree left New York City. On June 1, 1843, which was Pentecost, she changed her name from Isabella Baumfree to Sojourner Truth: "She informed Mrs. Whiting, the woman of the house where she was stopping, that her name was no longer Isabella, but SOJOURNER; and that she was going east. And to her inquiry, 'What are you going east for?' her answer was, 'the Spirit[97] calls me there, and I must go.'"[98] This name change was significant because in slavery she had been given a name, and changing it

[96] The Kingdom of Matthias dissipated when Matthias found himself in legal trouble for things he had been doing and were being reported about him. Baumfree stuck by him for much of that time, using her resources to support him and withstanding mocking from others who couldn't understand why. However, her loyalty diminished over time and she became more disillusioned by what had happened. Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 56.
[97] Truth is using "Spirit" to mean the Holy Spirit.
[98] Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 58.

herself marked a new sense of freedom and living alongside the Spirit and into her call. She recognized the importance of a name and the ways that it signified who she was claiming herself to be. Again, Sojourner Truth chooses another level of freedom for herself and works to live into this new stage of her life more fully. Her sense of call brought her to Connecticut.[99] The power and resiliency to choose to be something else in a world that had tried to place her in a particular box and social location is significant. This pivot in her narrative is critical as we consider her preaching. Her preaching was rooted in her life story, with a goal of justice and more rights. She knew too intimately the consequences of lack of rights, and her preaching was focused on fighting for rights for women generally, including those often excluded: Black women.

Proclaiming Truth

Sojourner Truth was known widely as an activist and speaker; however, there aren't a lot of manuscripts of her preaching. We do know that some of the presentations of her proclamations were adapted by others for particular audiences, and were not true to her actual rhetoric. In one of her most famous proclaiming moments, known popularly as "Aint I a Woman" (but we now know it to be "Arnt I a Woman?"), disparities between the original and later presentations were vast. Marius Robinson's report of the meeting, published in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle,* is crucial.[100] He was Truth's friend and host, and recorded what she said in her own vernacular, instead of the reimagined vernacular that would become the popular

[99] "On one level 'Sojourner Truth' means itinerant preacher, for a sojourner is someone not at home, and truth is what preachers' impart. She saw her mission as lecturing to the people, testifying and exhorting them to 'embrace Jesus and refrain from sin'... [Also] Isabella had a long-standing preoccupation with truth. As a girl she had been beaten and sexually abused, as an enslaved worker her word had been subject to disbelief, and as a litigant reclaiming her honesty she was liable to be doubted in situations of the utmost seriousness." Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 74-5. Therefore, her name change was actually reclaiming herself as one where truth lives, and as a person who expresses truth and should be believed.
[100] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 125–126.

understanding of the speech. Painter writes, “Robinson introduces Truth as an ex-slave, but without the use of dialect or other rhetorical techniques to emphasize her blackness…. According to Robinson, Truth did not seize the floor, she asked permission to speak; and as though doubting her right, she announced that her intervention will be brief.”[101] By contrast, Frances Gage later published another record in the *New York Independent* that differed from the original manuscript and was written in a southern dialect that would not have been true to Truth’s speaking.[102]

It is crucial, then, to note that the legend of Truth and the life of Truth are disparate. Certain people wanted Truth to demonstrate a particular kind of Blackness that she simply wasn’t; her rhetoric was manipulated to form a palatable manuscript that reinforced the icon she had become, rather than the actual person she was or an accurate account of her words.[103] Her actual words are enough. Too often Black women are made to be icons, aunties, and legends, and the overall narrative of their lives—including both shadows and things that weren’t difficult—get overlooked because of a need for them to fit into a simplistic category. Truth knew and expressed that her story was her own, and not all of it was meant for public consumption. With that in mind, and knowing the care she took with language, what she did share publicly through proclamation or personal storytelling was both intentional and precise, even though she was without the ability to read or write. Within the words of Sojourner Truth are rooted the very real

[101] Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 126.
[102] There isn’t nearly as much detail around her other speeches as there is around the Women’s Convention of 1851, primarily because of how famous her words (especially the rewritten words) have been throughout history. We have manuscripts for some speeches, but not as much information or even newspaper clippings describing them. Many of the contemporaneous newspapers speak of her in the past tense, not the present. I will be working from Robinson’s account of Truth’s words, rather than from those rewritten for publishing flair.
[103] See Carleton Mabee and Susan Mabee Newhouse, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend* (New York: NYU Press, 1996).

experiences of Isabella Baumfree.[104] The aim of this project is to listen to her words as preaching to discover what she valued in proclamation.[105]

Introduction to the Artifacts

The following section offers a detailed consideration of two of Truth's sermons, both offered at conventions: "Arn't I a Woman,"[106] preached at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851,[107] and "I Suppose I am About the Only Colored Woman that Goes About to Speak for the Rights of Colored Women" (hereafter "I Suppose"),[108] preached in 1853 in New

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[104] As stated previously, I focused my attention on Truth's autobiography alongside the secondary source Painter provides in her biographical monograph. These sources offered focused vignettes of Truth's life. However, they were not the only sources read. Other sources read but not referenced explicitly include: Carleton Mabee, "Sojourner Truth, Bold Prophet: Why Did She Never Learn to Read?" *New York History* 69, no. 1 (1988): 55–77. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23178487; Larry G. Murphy, *Sojourner Truth: A Biography* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Biographies, 2011); Nell Irvin Painter, "Difference, Slavery, and Memory: Sojourner Truth in Feminist Abolitionism," in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 139–158. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv1nhkdd.14; Nell Irvin Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 2 (1994): 461–492, doi:10.2307/2081168; Neil A. Patten, "The Nineteenth Century Black Woman As Social Reformer: The 'New' Speeches of Sojourner Truth," *Negro History Bulletin* 49, no. 1 (1986): 2–5. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44176646; Sallie M. Cuffee, "Reconstructing Subversive Moral Discourses in the Spiritual Autobiographies of Nineteenth-Century African American Preaching Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 2 (2016): 45–62. Accessed February 18, 2021. doi:10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.2.05; Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave* (1875). http://www.libraryweb.org/~digitized/books/Narrative_of_Sojourner_Truth.pdf.

[105] Truth's life changed drastically over time, although when she is spoken about as a symbol her narrative is often frozen in a particular timeframe of her life. Symbols are powerful, but they often flatten the truth in order to maintain themselves. For example, Painter writes, "A chasm seems still to separate the strong canny person who would create the legendary Sojourner Truth from the woman who stayed with a scoundrel [Matthias] who beat her up, suppressed her preaching, took her money, and made her do his housework for nothing."[105] Painter asserts that biographers who write a flat reading of Truth and don't provide the multilayered nature of her story are dependent on her being unchanged. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 59.

[106] Pulled and crossed referenced from Marcia Y. Riggs, ed., *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 22.; Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 125–126.

[107] The legend often told is that Truth jumped up in a hostile white crowd and began this particular speech, delivering it in southern dialect that (as a northern, Dutch-speaking Black woman) she didn't even have. "Contrary to legend," Painter states, "Truth had not braved a hostile white crowd, for the crowd was friendly."[107] Truth reported to a friend that she received more invitations to speak after the event in Akron, and, more importantly, she was able to sell many of her books that she had brought with her which was her goal for more financial stability. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 129.

[108] Pulled and crossed referenced from Marcia Y. Riggs, ed., *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 23.; Woman's Rights Convention, Lucy Stone, National American Woman Suffrage Association Collection, and Susan B. Anthony Collection. Proceedings of the Woman's Rights Convention held at the Broadway Tabernacle, in the city of New York, on Tuesday and

York City at the Fourth National Women's Rights Convention. Each of these moments is extemporaneous and invites us to consider preaching insights and invitations through the proclamation of Sojourner Truth.

Four Homiletical Insights

Tactical Self-Disclosure

The first homiletical insight is *tactical self-disclosure*. Truth used her experiences to enhance her messages, and yet is clear that she doesn't have to share every detail from her story with everyone. Even in her *Narrative*, she is particular about what she shares.[109] This shows that for her, the particularities of her narrative were a tactic to move towards a message and an invitation. They were also a mark of agency, detailing what she wanted to take with her and what she chose to leave behind. Storytelling was critical—not only for the sake of testifying, but for drawing out a demand for her hearers.

One execution of tactical self-disclosure occurs through her chosen name and her decision to come into public spaces as Sojourner Truth, not Isabella Baumfree. Renaming (re-signifying, re-imagining, re-identifying) oneself was critical for Truth because her previous named was attached to her enslavement. When Isabella Baumfree decided to rename,[110] she honored her agency to be *who she was called to be*, not who she had been told she was. This

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Wednesday, Sept. 6th and 7th. New York: Published for the Committee: Fowlers and Wells, Publishers, 1853. Pdf. https://www.loc.gov/item/93838289/.

[109] In the *Narrative*, Olive Gilbert writes, "There are some hard things that crossed Isabella's life while in slavery that she has no desire to publish, for various reasons. 1. She was protecting the people who were in relationship with those who caused the pain, because she didn't believe that they needed to be injured by the truth of their beloved. 2. Because they are not all for the public ear. 3. She says, were she to tell all that happened to her as a slave—all that she knows is "God's truth"—it would seem to others, especially the uninitiated, so unaccountable, so unreasonable, and what is usually called so unnatural…they would not easily believe it." Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* 46.

[110] In another artifact, "The Lord Has Made me a Sign," Truth explicitly details her name change as having been given by God in this combination of "Sojourner" and "Truth." Continually speaking her name in spaces and standing as Sojourner Truth is the kind of re-signifying of freedom and agency that I assert here.

didn't mean that she didn't carry her story with her; she was choosing to live out a different narrative with a type of agency.[111] For Truth, it was actually changing her name that signified her freedom from enslavement and from the bonds of anyone else (like Matthias) who would try to control her. This rhetorical change notes agency, and can be an invitation for preachers and proclaimers to decide what they want to be called in order to most clearly state who they are deciding to be.

The other more explicit way that Truth utilizes this strategy is through using important moments of her story as a means to deliver her overall message. In "Arn't I a Woman," Truth opens her first section with examples of her work in the fields. She recounts, "I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal. I can carry as much as any man, and eat as much, too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now."[112] Without naming it explicitly, she shows that she is Black, woman, and poor. She is describing the work of enslaved people and/or those on plantations as free Blacks who still had to work these specific jobs. This point is critical because most white women weren't doing these jobs. By doing some self-exegesis in the form of rhetorical prose, Truth asks the audience to consider that if she is equal to men in all these ways that are characteristic of an enslaved person (which again distinguishes her from her white women counterparts), then she should have equal rights. She also says, "I can't read, but I can hear."[113] Again, a part of her story is being denied access to literacy. She names this, but also points out that it doesn't stop her

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[111] Through this move, Truth invites Black women, who have not been at the center of homiletical practices, to consider the power of a name and/or self-identification in our homiletical practice.
[112] Truth, "Arn't I a Woman," 21–22.
[113] Truth, "Arn't I a Woman," 21–22.

from having something to say. This use of narrative in small sound bites offers enough to round out who she is without a longer, detailed narrative of her life.

In "I Suppose," Truth says, "I come to you, citizens of New York; I was born in it, and I was a slave in the state of New York; and now I am a good citizen of this state."[114] She discloses her history of slavery and being free, and her place as a citizen. Enslaved people weren't citizens, Black people historically have not been given their full rights as citizens, freed or otherwise, and Black women weren't often thought of at all in their particularity. By beginning the sermon with these declarations, Truth sets up her hearer to consider her experience as support for her message. This is different from including experiences with which the audience would identify. Instead, she is speaking from the particularity of how her experience diverges from theirs.

Metacommunication

The second homiletical insight from Truth's preaching is *metacommunication*. Truth was metacommunicative about hegemonic ideologies that were active in the context where her message was received. She names explicitly that being a Black woman in the spaces she was proclaiming made her words feel different to her hearers because her embodiment was not one they were used to seeing. Revealing what is clearly present created an opportunity for those listening to examine why it was so strange, even as she then proceeded to declare and name the importance of the rights she was asking for.

In "Arn't I a Woman," Truth declares, "I am a woman's rights."[115] She doesn't say, "I have women's rights," or "I should have women's rights." She declares her place using an "I am" within the system in which she is denied a full identity. She is saying, therefore, "Your

[114] Truth, "I Suppose," 23–24.
[115] Truth, "Arn't I a Woman," 21–22.

denial of my rights is not something to be taken lightly or outside of the context of my humanity; you are denying me my actual self by taking away what is mine." Specifically, for Truth, whose background is littered with abuse, mishandling, enslavement, and oppression, to declare space and claim guidance from the Holy Spirit[116] in order to speak is subversive to societal norms and theological norms. Her use of "I am" situates her as an embodiment of what she's asking for, which is not the normative embodiment associated with the woman's rights movement in the nineteenth century.

In "I suppose" Truth explicitly names what may be keeping the hearer from receiving her message. She asserts, "I know that it feels o' hissin' and ticklin' to see a colored woman get up and tell you about these things, and Woman's Rights."[117] This strategy asserts that Truth knows that it is peculiar for her hearers that she is speaking. Crowds at these events were used to hearing white women (and the occasional white man) speak. She names that she is talking about and advocating for women's rights, and then immediately afterward points out that this messaging is different for people to hear from her as a Black woman. The clarity and plainness of her words are important: women's rights matter *and* Black rights matter, because I, a Black woman, deserves rights. Truth also proclaims, "We have all been thrown down so low that nobody thought that we've ever get up again; but we have been long enough trodden now; we will come up again, and now I am here."[118] *I am here.* Truth states that she is here in a space that, based on her experience, she has known she wasn't "supposed" to be, and yet she is here and advocating for a better situation for herself and others like her.

[116] Her biographical story is littered with tales of her being guided by the Holy Spirit, and she also self-declares, as stated above, that the Spirit invited her to go and journey and speak the truth. This is why she changed her name to Sojourner Truth.
[117] Truth, "I Suppose," 23–24.
[118] Truth, "I Suppose," 23–24.

Disrupting normative discourse through metacommunicative rhetoric positioned Truth, in the specifics of her embodiment, to preach the particular messages of justice from her perspective. This is also a strategy of claiming space in a place that would often ignore the very intersections she was emphasizing. While we don't have many records of the audience's reaction to Truth's rhetoric, one can imagine that in a time where white women activists were pushing Truth to speak on women's rights without focusing on color, and Black men were pushing her toward solidarity with the cause of abolition without considering her womanhood, her declaration of "both/and" created a new paradigm for her hearers. Truth's prose brings to light a triple consciousness[119] that evokes for her hearers a new consciousness about the nuances of women's rights and expectations for Black women.

Cultivating Expansive Biblical Memory

Sojourner Truth engages the practice of *cultivating expansive memory,* both biblically and theologically, to include the oppression of Black people and women and the ways that those identities intersect. Her preaching intertwines her experience and her exposition of scripture in a dance that adds her voice to the exegetical rendering of the text. She invites her audience into a practice of remembering the world of the biblical text through the lens of her experience, and

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[119] In "Triple Consciousness: The Reimagination of Black Female Identities in Contemporary American Culture," Nahum Welang expands DuBois' concept of double-consciousness that he posits in *Souls of Black Folk*, arguing that this is limited to Black men, and there is another layer for Black women. Welang admittedly adds to a larger body of literature, recognizing Bonnie Thornton's "dialectics of Black womanhood," Alice Walker's "the conditions of twin afflictions," and Frances Beale's "double jeopardy." Defining triple consciousness theory (TCT) that focuses specifically on American culture, Welang writes, "Black women, due to the physical and psychological anguish they have historically endured on both fronts of race and gender, are fated to view themselves through three lenses and not two: *America* (represented by the hegemony of white patriarchy), *blackness* (a racial space that prioritizes the interests of black men) and *womanhood* (a hierarchical gendered identity with white women at the top and black women at the bottom)." Nahum Welang, "Triple Consciousness: The Reimagination of Black Female Identities in Contemporary American Culture," *Open Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 296–306. https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0027.

does so with one aim in mind: change. The audience hears how the stories of Black women disrupt the ways the text has been read to maintain the status quo. Truth's life as a preacher is grounded in the work of justice, and her re-membering of scripture in her preaching is used towards that end as well.[120]

In "Arn't I a Woman," Truth draws on the Bible as a foundation to justify women's participation and women's rights. Through her own interpretive lens, she expands the normative readings of the text by centering the women and reading them generously. For example, she says, "I have heard the Bible and learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again."[121] She is known for sarcasm,[122] and she utilizes the Bible as a tool to unveil nonsensical logic: even if it is true that Eve caused sin, advocacy for women's rights is advocacy for a chance to make right what was wrong. She then goes to Mary, Martha, and Jesus: "When Lazarus died, Mary and Martha came to him with faith and love and besought him to raise their brother. And Jesus wept, and Lazarus came forth."[123] Jesus responded to the requests of women, and "He never spurned woman from him."[124] Jesus came to them when Lazarus died, and helped them when they called, which is what she's asking people to do now. As a final point, Truth reminds her hearers that this same Jesus did not come from man at

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[120] In *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, Allen Dwight Callahan offers a lens for understanding the Bible as it intersects with African American culture and how that intersection has historically created particular meanings and biblical themes for African American people. He writes, "African slaves and their descendants discerned something in the Bible that was neither at the center of their ancestral cultures nor in evidence in their hostile American home: a warrant for justice in this world." Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), xiv. In his chapter, "The Talking Book," he talks about the ways that this written text lived in the hands of enslaved and previously enslaved people who were unable to read. African Americans took the Bible and created their own stories towards this aim of justice in this world for them. Truth uses her re-membering of scripture as a practice towards justice through the abolitionist and women's rights movements.

[121] Truth, "Arn't I a Woman," 21–22.

[122] Truth was known for her sarcasm as a part of her rhetorical strategies. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 127.

[123] Truth, "Arn't I a Woman," 21–22.

[124] Truth, "Arn't I a Woman," 21–22.

all but "through God who created him and a woman who bore him. Man, where is your part?"[125] This walk through the scripture, from Adam and Eve to Jesus's life to the very existence of Jesus, recalls the text in order to make one point: women have rights, and the fact that men are keeping them from this is antibiblical, anti-God and antihuman. In this, she is promoting, deepening, and expanding the intertextuality of anamnesis among her listeners,[126] encouraging them to remember the myriad ways that women's rights appear in the text in stories that would have been familiar to many of the hearers. Her use scripture disrupts the hearer's perception of women's rights and claims those rights as something everyone needs to address.

In "I Suppose," Truth used scripture to create a historical precedent for the request that she was making. Truth says, "I was a-thinkin', when I see women contendin' for their rights, I was a-thinkin' what a difference there is now and what there was in old times. I have only a few minutes to speak; but in the old times the kings of earth would hear a woman."[127] She is paralleling then and now in order to say, "So what's happening now?" She then goes on to talk about Esther.[128] "Queen Esther come forth, for she was oppressed, and felt there was a great wrong, and she said I will die or I will bring my complaint before the king. Should the king of the United States be greater or more crueler or more harder?"[129] She talks about what the king did for Esther, and wonders aloud why women in her context are treated as less than. She draws a parallel for the audience to consider: if this is the ideal that we see from the text, what then is our right or prerogative to operate in another fashion? Truth asserts, "The women want their

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[125] Truth, "Arn't I a Woman," 21–22.
[126] McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 16–17.
[127] Truth, "I Suppose," 23–24.
[128] Sojourner Truth couldn't read and write so she was rehearsing what she heard. Esther the individual is pulled out of the full context of the story, and Queen Vashti's narrative is not included, which would not have supported her point. However, her focus on normalizing Esther speaking to the king allows her to normalize the idea that women should be free to speak to any authority.
[129] Truth, "I Suppose," 23–24.

rights as Esther."[130] Her identity and her explicit inclusion of Black women through naming her presence in her sermon leaves no question about whether or not she is including Black women in the necessity of rights that are justified by the text. Her reference back to her context via the text creates a solid parallel. Following these things, Truth draws on Jesus's words in Matthew 13:37, saying, "What I say to one, I say to all—watch!" because what was said to men is also given to women. Then, drawing Exodus 20:12, which says "Honor your father and mother," she pushes against the ways that children are mocking their mothers for the audacity to speak up and claim their rights. Again, Truth uses the text to shun what is happening in her current context.

Truth quilted together her knowledge as a strategy towards her message. She spoke of "women" in general and expanded the audience's memory of biblical women, such as Esther, as authoritative prototypes. Yet by talking about herself as a colored woman and from the beginning naming ways that colored women have been pushed down, Truth included Black women explicitly—not as a side piece to the movement—in the narrative of women's rights and in the legitimating anamnesis of biblical women. When we hear Queen Esther's story in this sermon, there's an interplay between this woman who just claimed her New York citizenship and her experiences of oppression and declared space, which stands alongside this biblical witness of a woman doing the same. We have Sojourner Truth's narrative of standing in front of people who would be shocked to hear her because "colored women" wouldn't have gotten that platform, set alongside Queen Esther, who showed up to the table to speak. These texts dance with each other to promote a remembering of the text that works alongside a remembering and acknowledging of Black women's particular experiences, as seen through Truth's story.

[130] Truth, "I Suppose," 23–24.

Clarity of Message for Response

The final homiletical insight gleaned from Sojourner Truth's proclaiming is a clarity of message for the purpose of a clear request for response.[131] Sojourner Truth spoke because her message was urgent. Her aim was to evoke an actionable response in which all people—but specifically men, more specifically white men—would be more adherent and attentive to women's rights, and especially her rights as a Black woman.[132] Truth invokes her rights by intentionally proclaiming that she is a woman, and therefore to deny those rights to her is to deny her actual self. As a previously-enslaved woman, she has experienced even fewer rights in the past, and yet she remains in constant and immediate danger, and is denied access to things that others have. Truth's message pushes a particular moral discourse into the public sphere, using cultural references to affirm her equality and reiterate the urgent need for change.[133] Truth's preaching responds to a hierarchical society in which women were seen as of less value than white men, Black men less than white women, and Black women less than Black men. For Truth, naming the importance of women's rights and why they were necessary was a goal that couldn't be convoluted or misinterpreted. When the message is urgent, inductive approaches aren't as effective because you are dependent on the hearer to receive and interpret them. Instead, "making it plain" is a strategy in Truth's preaching.

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[131] Truth plays between different promotions of the intertext of truth, to use John McClure's language in *Four Codes of Preaching*. She plays between conversational and assertive truths. This is what I am calling exigent truth telling. To invite the hearers, she uses questions and a bit of an invitation to consider all of the different ways that what she is describing is happening—yet these questions aren't left completely open-ended. The aim is clear: women's rights. The specificity, however, is left in the conversational style. Using exigent preaching, Truth does ask the listeners to decide that women deserve their rights, but she doesn't go through a list of those rights or other details. See McClure, *Four Codes of Preaching*, 52–92.

[132] According to Lloyd Bitzer, there is not rhetoric without an actionable response. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," 6.

[133] See McClure, *Speaking Together and with God*.

In “Arn’t I a Woman,”[134] Truth’s message is that it is dangerous for those withholding women’s rights to do so, and thus women should be given their rights. First, she appeals to logic, and sarcastically uses the image of measuring amounts (pints/quarts) to talk about rights: “As for intellect, all I can say is, if woman have a pint, and man a quart—why can’t she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, for we can’t take more than one pint will hold.”[135] At the end of the section she proclaims, “Why children, if you have a woman’s right, give it to her and you will feel better,”[136] suggesting that these rights are not yours to keep for yourself, and if you are carrying them you probably feel off because you are holding what doesn’t belong to you. She is claiming that those holding and withholding the rights of the people are the ones in the spot of danger. Truth names the ramifications of ignoring her request: “But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him, he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.”[137] This sentence is particularly interesting because Truth herself is both the slave and the woman, the hawk and the buzzard, Black and woman. This was the function: give *all* women their rights.[138] Her rhetoric aims to say we are going to get them, so you should “feel better” by playing a part.

In, “I Suppose I am About the Only Colored Woman that Goes About to Speak for the Rights of Colored Women,” Truth is still focused on women’s rights, and making clear what she is requesting. Her message is that women should receive their rights, and they aren’t asking for

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[134] Others assigned this name to Truth’s work. I think it should be named, “I am a Woman’s Rights.”
[135] Sojourner Truth, “Arn’t I a Woman,” in *Can I get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology*, Marcia Y. Riggs, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 21–22.
[136] Truth, “Arn’t I a Woman,” 21–22.
[137] Truth, “Arn’t I a Woman,” 21–22.
[138] “A function statement is a description of what the preacher hopes the sermon will create or cause to happen for the hearers. Sermons make demands upon the hearers, which is another way of saying that they provoke change in the hearers (even if the change is a depending of something already present). The function statement names the hoped-for change.” Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

much. She reiterates, "I come forth to speak about women's rights,"[139] continuing, "We'll have our rights; see if we don't; and you can't stop us from them; see if you can."[140] This sermon is later than "Arn't I a Woman," yet it keeps the same clarity about what she is here to talk about and why. Because she was speaking at women's rights conventions, it wasn't necessary for her to name her topic directly. Yet for the sake of posterity, she makes clear that as a Black woman she is advocating for the rights of her people—women and Black people—and doing so in a space for women's rights.

Truth also places heavy emphasis on the ability of human beings to act and move, declaring that women's rights are not something that have to be a controversial issue. Rights can be given, things can change, and therefore they should. In both the artifacts looked at here, Truth does suggest that should human beings *not* act—specifically the men she is calling forth to respond—then God will. In "Arn't I a Woman," Truth says, "But the women are coming up blessed by God and a few men are coming up with them."[141] God is already moving, and you can get on the side of the blessed if you participate in making right that which is wrong. This statement affirms that God is on the side of those who are struggling and oppressed, and God's hand is working through them.

Conclusion

Sojourner Truth preached at a time when Black people, especially Black women, were not regarded as humans, but as labor. She advocated for the rights of women and Black people, showing up in her body as both. Across her proclaiming moments, her preaching consistently

[139] Sojourner Truth, "I Suppose I am About the Only Colored Woman That Goes About to Speak for the Rights of Colored Women," in Riggs, *Can I get a Witness?* 23–24.
[140] Truth, "I Suppose," 23–24.
[141] Truth, "Arn't I a Woman," 21–22.

opened new perspectives for her hearers and asked for a clear response. Four important homiletical strategies are visible in Sojourner Truth's preaching. These homiletical strategies emerge from hearing Truth through intersectional exigency: the demand on her particularity and how she responds rhetorically. Truth's preaching makes rhetorical use of *tactical self-disclosure*, *metacommunication*, *cultivating expansive biblical memory,* and *clarity of message for response*. Each of these homiletical tactics emerges from the particularity of her preaching identity as a Black woman non-pulpit preacher, shaped through the rhythms of her story, in order to meet head on the urgent needs of the times and places where she speaks.

In Sojourner Truth's preaching, her tactical self-disclosure is at work alongside her cultivation of expansive memory in the biblical text. Her experience plays alongside the biblical text to support her messaging around her rights, and therefore the possibility of women's flourishing within the society. In his exposition of a "transformational" hermeneutic of scripture in *The Four Codes of Preaching,* McClure writes, "The transformational style is correct in showing that, having discovered the truth claims of the biblical text, we must not leave them like 'the assertions dissected in the classrooms of logic' but enable them to 'reach us at the level of deep affect and make a personal claim upon us.'"[142] It is the interplay between Truth's lived experience, which is different than that of most of her hearers, and her reading of the scriptures that gives the actual affect. Truth doesn't just use her experience to support the biblical text, but her experience becomes a "text" of its own, read and revealed as its own revelation for what is to come. She knows that her audience is full of people without her experience but familiar enough to know the reasons her experience is shaped in particular ways. Therefore, by revealing her

[142] McClure*, Four Codes of Preaching*, 41–42.

experience and allowing others into the nuances of what it means to be poor, Black, and woman, she speaks from that place and asserts her focus, marking precedent with the biblical text.

For Sojourner Truth, the message was clear because it had to be. Men grant women their rights, and while we're at it, white men specifically grant Black people their rights, too. She draws attention to her embodiment with semantic clarity; her message includes all of who she is, which is neither just woman nor just Black, and which is also supported by her experience as a previously-enslaved Black woman. Truth's commitment to a clear message as a response to exigent needs offers perspective on what kind of rhetorical tools are used when the necessity for clarity is urgent. She was here to talk about, advocate for, make claims about, and invite the hearers to participate in extending the deserved rights of people who experienced life like her. This was socially and politically disruptive. She knew that, and instead of backing down, she used metacommunication to place her own body in the middle of her message, knowing that her very *presence* was disruptive to the what was considered normative.

As stated previously, the women's rights movement at the time was dominated by white women. Truth was asked to speak specifically about women's rights, as if her rights as a Black person weren't inextricably bound to her rights as woman. The movement at large seemed to want her to show up as a Black woman to affirm the sameness of womanhood and remove the racial identity and class identity of being poor and formerly enslaved. In *Ingenuity*, Lisa Thompson writes, "Those who remain and render a message in places that would prefer their invisibility, dare to preach with a distinct and creatively tactical imagination for the sake of their deep convictions—*ingenuity*."[143] To speak one's whole truth as a Black woman is not only an act of self-care but of community care, expanding the space for others, whose persons are rendered

[143] Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 175.

societally invisible, to speak as well. When Black women choose not to live into the identity fragments imposed on them by society, they display courage while affirming their own humanity. Truth's preaching demands space for her voice and the voices of those like her who aren't in the room, all of whom believe that their rights are worth fighting for. As Truth says, "We have all been thrown down so low that nobody thought we'd ever get up again; but we have been long enough trodden now; we will come up again, and now I am here."[144]

[144] Truth, "I Suppose," 23–24.

IV. A COMMITMENT TO BLACK WOMEN, A BELIEF IN BLACK PEOPLE: THE LIFE AND PREACHING PRACTICE OF NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS

"Negroes should stop apologizing for not being white and rank their own race."[145]

"If you are going to be a Christian, you've got to do something week-days as well as talk and feel about it Sundays."[146] Nannie Helen Burroughs said this to her friend Rev. Earl Harrison as she was talking about what it meant to live as a Christian beyond weekly worship. Her work aimed at the everydayness of life, helping to elevate Black people through training and support. Burroughs was a prolific proclaimer, a renowned educator, and a woman committed to working tirelessly to support the upward movement of Black people during the early to mid-twentieth century. While she was deeply entrenched in the Baptist church at both a local and national level, her platforms for speaking were not Sunday morning worship services. She saw her work as a part of the work for God, but not limited to particular venues and days of the week. Burroughs was extensively involved in organizations geared towards the betterment and support of Black women in the different spheres where they operated, which opened up more influence, more opportunity, and more training to support their efforts and their survival.

Ignited by God's call to service, Burroughs fortified her activism through her proclamation. While some aspects of her commitments may be contentious to the twenty-first century reader because of the seeming adherence to gender norms of the time, her proclamation within the specificity of her time period was both radical and subversive in many ways. In

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[145] Nannie Helen Burroughs, "The Path to Real Justice," in *Nannie Helen Burroughs: A Documentary Portrait of an Early Civil Rights Pioneer 1900–1959*, Kelisha B. Graves, ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 148; Nannie Helen Burroughs, "The Path to Real Justice" in *What Do You Think?* (Washington, DC: 1950), 105–11.

[146] Susan Lindley, "'Neglected Voices' and Praxis in the Social Gospel," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 93.

addition, the reality that her work and words mattered and had a great impact cannot be argued. The initiatives she was able to complete through the money she raised for Black women's education and survival, and the organizations she created as places for Black women to have voice and be supported in their flourishing, would be significant had she never spoken a word. However, her public rhetorical witness across different spheres—religious, educational, activist and otherwise—wove these identities through all the spaces she inhabited. She knew these spheres intimately through her own experience and by watching her mother and her grandmother work to survive. In spite of all that she accomplished, she felt like she had not done enough to deserve accolades and praise.[147] Although people may call her different things—educator, leader, advocate, activist, speaker—she would most readily self-identify as one doing the work of the Lord. As a result, the biographical information of her early years is slim because she felt that talking about herself was more trivial than using her time to speak about the causes and initiatives she supported.[148]

Different scholars have asked, "Who is Nannie Helen Burroughs the person, the educator, the activist and/or thinker?" My question is, "Who is Nannie Helen Burroughs the proclaimer, and what homiletical insights are we invited to consider through her preaching, which extended into so many different spheres?" This chapter explores Nannie Helen Burroughs through the lens of her sacred proclamation, and as someone who preached beyond the

[147] "In a letter to her friend Carter G. Woodson [in 1931 which was well after the school was running and she was established in Women's Convention], Burroughs bemoaned a chapter about her in Sadie Danie's *Women Builders* (1931) as premature: 'I have not done enough to be given a place in any book. I hope to accomplish something that will be enduring and really constructive, but up to now I am woefully disgusted with what I have been able to accomplish for the women and girls of my race.'" Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, xv.

[148] "As Burroughs's biographer and friend, Earl L. Harrison, recalled, 'like a tree she is better known by her fruit. She is so full of ideas and so imbued with the passion for service that she had no time to talk about Nannie.'; "Like many early twentieth century black women who were not only the inheritors of Victorian propriety but also the daughters of women whose claim to interiority was snatched away by slavery, Burroughs never willingly volunteered information about her private life or her past." Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs,* xxi.

normative space of the pulpit. I outline her life to show how her experiences ignited her sense of call, and to illumine the rhetorical threads that can be seen throughout her work. I explore two of her earlier pieces, "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping," and "The Colored Woman and Her Relation to the Domestic Problem." Homiletically, Burroughs encourages: 1) clarity of message as a response to exigency, 2) a salvific understanding of Black women's presence and participation within institutions, 3) scriptural and explicit God references as familiar taproots that attend closely to her context, and 4) language specific to the particular audience she was aiming to influence. Each of these homiletical emphases shows us something about Black women's homiletical strategies in spaces beyond the pulpit. These strategies arise from the particularity of Burroughs's experience and the rhetorical exigencies she met head on. She spent her life responding to problems for Black women operating within ecclesiastical and social institutions, and aimed to create more space for the women's flourishing. Burroughs is known as many things, and preaching can be included in the list of practices she embodied.

Her-story: Nannie Helen Burroughs

Nannie Helen Burroughs intentionally avoided talking about her early life or her personal life.[149] Her focus was on the Christian work ahead, which included her story within other stories. Although there are clear ties between her early life and her rhetoric, because of the lack of details available her story must be pieced together. Though her early years are significant, she began her public witness at only twenty-one years old, and the institutions she created and in which she

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[149] I am primarily using Opal Easter's biography, *Nannie Helen Burroughs,* and Kelisha B. Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs: A Documentary Portrait of an Early Civil Rights Pioneer 1900–1959* to help tell the story. While I was able to find some resources for the other comprehensive biography, Earl Harrison's *The Dream and the Dreamer: An Abbreviated Story of the Life of Dr. Nannie Helen Burroughs and the Nannie Helen Burroughs School at Washington,* I was unable to get access to the full manuscript.

participated constitute the bulk of her life and work. What follows is a brief snapshot of her story, moving through her early life, her work with the National Baptist Convention, her creation of the National Training School for Girls, and finally her affiliations and work with several other organizations—all for the purposes of accomplishing God's work by helping Black women.

Burroughs was born in Virginia on May 2, 1879,[150] to John Burroughs and Jennie Poindexter Burroughs. Her maternal grandfather was a former slave who, after he was freed, was able to own a small farm. Both her father and uncle were freed just before the Civil War began, and after the war ended were able to purchase land as well. This put their family in a better financial space than other Black people at the time who were unable to own land and/or find stable income. John Burroughs was also a Baptist preacher who received some education from Richmond Institute.[151] While Burroughs knew her father in her early years, his presence wasn't consistent for the majority of her life. When Burroughs was five, her only sister Maggie died. After Maggie's death, her mother took Burroughs to live in Washington, DC, with her maternal grandmother, where there were better educational opportunities for her. While in DC, Burroughs was an active youth at the 19th Street Baptist Church.[152]

Burroughs's mother and grandmother, who raised her, were critical role models in her life. In the few anecdotes we have from Burroughs, she often speaks of her mother Jennie and her grandmother Maria. Jennie Burroughs was a domestic worker, and this position taught Burroughs firsthand the issues and vulnerabilities faced by a single Black woman trying to

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[150] Graves writes, "The idea that four million formerly enslaved African Americans might thrive in America unchecked provoked widespread anti-Black violence and anti-Black legislation in the form of black codes throughout the South. The postbellum period and the failure of reconstruction represent what historian Rayford Logan called the nadir. Here ensued the bloody battle between the South's neurotic urgency to persevere white supremacy and the ambitions of black folks to uplift themselves from the dishonor of enslavement." Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, xix.
[151] Currently Virginia Union University, established in 1899.
[152] Opal V. Easter, Nannie Helen Burroughs (New York: Garland, 1995), 27.

provide for her family in the late nineteenth century.[153] Her grandmother, Maria Poindexter, pushed Burroughs to live with honor and pride, regardless of what she was doing. She lived by the motto, “We ain’t no hung-down-head race,” and she instilled in her granddaughter “a deep sense of racial pride and an infinite respect for folk wisdom.”[154] Poindexter said:

> Hold your spirit up inside, child, hold your spirit up and that helps you to hold your head up. Don’t let your spirit down. I used to hold my head up so high that sometimes they would say, “Maria why don’t you look down at the ground?” I would say, “look down at the ground? I aint no groundhog. I am looking up at God because that’s what He made me for.” Honey, they slaved my body, but they didn’t slave my mind. I was thinking high, myself, and some day we colored folks is going to live high.[155]

The influences of both her mother and grandmother show up in Burroughs’s work and her rhetoric. We see her respect for people who make an honest living and an emphasis on honor as salvific practice for Black people. Her commitment to education and excellence also stems from these roots of the women that raised her.

Burroughs’s educational history is particularly important because she spent a large part of her later career in education, and her commitment to scholastic excellence began early. As a child, she had typhoid for two years—and experience that might have put others behind in school, but not Burroughs; she was able to graduate at seventeen alongside her original class.[156] She went to M Street High School, which is well known in DC for its illustrious history and faculty,[157] and she graduated in 1896.[158] During high school, Burroughs organized the Harriet Beecher Stowe Literary Society, which gave students an opportunity for both literary and

[153] Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs,* xxii.
[154] Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs,* xxii.
[155] Nannie Helen Burroughs, “A Woman’s Point of View,” *Pittsburgh Courier,* September 17, 1930, 6; reprinted: Nannie Helen Burroughs, “A Woman’s Point of View,” in Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs,* 55–57.
[156] Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs,* xxii.
[157] M Street was built in 1892 and replaced what was called the Preparatory High School, established in 1870. One of the principals was Mary Matterson, who was the first Black woman to receive a college degree in the United States. Later principals included Judge Robert Terrell, the husband of Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Julia Cooper. Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 25–26.
[158] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 17.

oratorical expression.[159] This practice of oratorical and literary work would continue in the school she later created. Upon graduating, Burroughs expected to find a job teaching in the Washington Public School system, but unfortunately wasn't able to do so. "It broke me up at first," Burroughs said. "I had my life all planned out, to settle down in Washington with my good mother, do that pleasant work, draw a good salary and be comfortable for the rest of my life."[160] This was a critical turning point for Burroughs because she had to figure out what to do now that all of her plans had led her to the classroom and she did not get a teaching job, even though she was known to be excellent. Although this was a difficult moment for Burroughs, she persevered.

Burroughs's career after graduation included various jobs, but her goal of being an educator never left her. Through a family friend, Burroughs landed a job at the *Christian Banner*, a Baptist paper. She was known to be great in that role; as her employer said, "We have never had her equal. She is a dynamo in an office. Her motto always was, 'Do a thing so thoroughly that no one else can improve on it.'"[161] After scoring highly on an exam, Burroughs tried to get a job as a clerk but was told there weren't any jobs for colored clerks and ended up working as a custodian in an office building.[162] Sometime later, Burroughs became L.G. Jordan's bookkeeper and editorial secretary. He was the historian and corresponding secretary for the National Baptist Convention's Foreign Missions Board. Burroughs moved to Louisville with the National Baptist Convention when they established a new national office there in 1900. This was the beginning of

[159] Burroughs didn't attend college. She received an honorary doctoral degree from Shaw University in 1944 when she was in her mid-sixties. Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 26.
[160] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 26. In Earl L. Harrison's *The Dream and the Dreamer* in a letter Burroughs wrote to Booker T. Washington requesting employment.
[161] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 27.
[162] This is significant as we look at her life of advocacy. Her goal was to be an educator, however, being a domestic worker was also a part of her story. I believe this experience certainly informed her sense of responsibility to consider these positions as honorable alongside other occupations.

the career for which Nannie Helen Burroughs is known. She spent the majority of her life doing work for Black Baptist women and Black women generally, both domestically and globally.

Burroughs's work with the National Baptist Convention (NBC) cannot be understated. The year she began her work alongside L.G. Jordan was also the year of her inaugural public proclamation, "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping." This was the catalyst for the vote that opened up opportunity for the Women's Convention (WC) to be established in 1900—a major accomplishment. Establishing the WC was not easy because the men of the NBC were reluctant to let women have their own sphere in which to operate. Virginia Broughton, Mary Cook, and Lucy Smith had been trying to get the WC going since 1880.[163] The main obstacle was the gender dynamic within the NBC in which men in power did not want to lose control of women's work by giving them their own sphere of operation. The men were primarily ministers, and many of the women were their wives. The men didn't think their "helpmates" needed their own space, which brought up issues of power and submission.[164] However, in her proclamation Burroughs clearly articulated how this auxiliary would benefit the men, and how a women's sector wasn't just necessary but invited by God. Her close relationship with L.G. Jordan helped because the auxiliary would directly assist the Foreign Missions, so he aided in rallying votes.

The first WC had S. Willie Layton as president, Burroughs as corresponding secretary, Virginia Broughton as the recording secretary, and Susie Foster the treasurer. "As corresponding secretary, 21-year-old Burroughs was responsible for gathering the activity reports from each

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[163] "Broughton, Cook and Smith had long argued that women should have a leadership position in the church. All defended their position with examples of the roles of women in the Bible." Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 28. The first time the idea was brought to the newly formed NBC (before it was to the American Baptist Convention) was in 1895. At first it was approved, with Virginia Broughton as elected recording secretary, but it was disbanded the following year and women were put on boards run by men. In 1900, the WC was able to be more established, even with the threat of being disbanded still over their heads. This was the context of "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping."

[164] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 29.

state organization or society and compiling them into the annual report given at each convention. She also conducted the correspondence at the executive committee of the WC and was authorized to organize societies."[165] As a result, Burroughs built an abundance of relationships and worked to expand the reach of the organization. During her first year as secretary, Burroughs is said to have "labored 365 days, traveled 22,125 miles, delivered 215 speeches, organized a dozen societies, wrote 9,235 letters and received 4,820."[166] She was dedicated to the work, and to making sure that the promises of efficacy she pronounced in her speech were true. Even though it was incredibly successful at creating opportunities for women and children and raising an abundance of money for the NBC, the Women's Convention was under the constant threat of being taken over by men. Burroughs fought to keep the WC separate. As much as the men wanted to downplay its efficacy, they couldn't deny the reality that the women were bringing in significant amounts of money that contributed extensively to the mission.

Burroughs's accomplishments through the WC are manifold, and I offer here a few highlights to show the range of her reach and her level of excellence. By 1903, Burroughs reported that the organization represented a million Black Baptist women, which by 1904 included 480 new local societies and 102 children's bands. By 1920, the women had raised over $50,000 for missions—the equivalent of $1.5 million today.[167] Burroughs created several resources for mission training, including how to establish clubs and organizations on a local level, which were pushed and promoted at a national level.[168] She also wrote and produced a play, "Slabtown District Convention: A Comedy in One Act,"[169] which in a lot of ways was a

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[165] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 30.
[166] Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, xxv.
[167] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 31.
[168] For example: "How: A Guide to the Missionary Society and Red Circle Guide for Christian Young People."
[169] See Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "'Sisters Who Can Lift Community': Nannie Helen Burroughs, 'The Slabtown District Convention,' and the Cultural Production of Community and Social Change," in Cheryl Townsend Gilkes,

satire of the WC. Burroughs operated in many spheres and believed it was paramount that folks were actually trained in the things they set out to do.

In 1906, Burroughs established the first committee of her school, The National Training School for Women and Girls, that she would run out of the WC.[170] Reminiscing on not getting a teaching job out of high school, she said:

> An idea stuck out from the suffering of that disappointment that I would someday have a school here in Washington that school politics had nothing to do with, and that would give all sorts of girls a fair chance, without political pull, to help them overcome whatever handicaps they might have. It came to me like a flash of light, and I knew I was to do that thing (establish a school) when the time came. But I couldn't do it yet, so I just put the idea away in the back of my head and left it there.[171]

The initial version of the school was the Woman's Industrial Club, which she established when she first moved to Kentucky. This club addressed the needs of working women, providing "day and evening classes for the women in bookkeeping, shorthand, typing, sewing, cooking, child-care, hygiene, sanitation, cleaning and handicrafts."[172] The women paid ten cents for membership, made lunches to sell to Black workers, and purchased a house that was a place for their activities as well as interim housing for folks coming to work from other cities.

In 1901, Burroughs pitched the idea for the National Training School to the NBC and WC. She wasn't able to get support until 1904, and in 1906 the school committee of 80 members from across the globe was formed. Together they decided that Washington, DC, was the best site for the school because of the variety of people coming through town, and the job possibilities

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"If It Wasn't for the Women…": Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 142–157.

[170] "The Trades Hall is now the headquarters of the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC) which split from the NBC in 1962. The PNBC also owns the school property. The street that runs in front of the School is now named Nannie Helen Burroughs Ave. The District of Columbia declared the School a historical landmark in 1991." Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 87.

[171] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs,* 57. Quoting Earl L. Harrison, *The Dream and the Dreamer: An Abbreviated Story of the Life of Dr. Nannie Helen Burroughs and Nannie Helen Burroughs School at Washington, D.C.* (Washington, DC: Nannie Helen Burroughs Literature Foundation, 1956), 10.

[172] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 58.

there. Burroughs raised a lot of money and was able to establish a sustainable program, even though there were difficult moments financially. The school was funded through a myriad of resources:

> The school was funded by tuition and contributions from the WC, members of the Board of Trustees, Baptist churches, local churches of other denominations, women's missionary circles, individual donations and small financial gifts from White missionary societies and foundations. The School was supported primarily by Blacks and was never dependent on the support of Whites for its existence, unlike several other Black institutions.[173]

While the WC across the country raised money for the school, Burroughs also found private funding resources. Even when the NBC cut off financial support in 1938,[174] Burroughs found enough funding that the school was out of debt by the time the NBC tried to re-establish relationship with the school, and Burroughs, years later.

The goal of The National Training School for Women and Girls was to educate and empower Black women, and was called "the School of the Three Bs – the Holy Bible, the Bathtub, and the Broom. The Bible was a guide to everyday Christian living (Clean Lives), The Bathtub symbolized personal cleanliness (Clean Bodies) and the Broom symbolized cleanliness of the environment (Clean Homes)."[175] This aligned with Burroughs's focus on the principles of true womanhood on which the school was founded.[176] Students were challenged to live with

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[173] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 68. This is important because she names Black women's work as salvific for the entire race, and so she didn't have to depended on white help.

[174] In 1938 the NBC voted to cut off financial support to the school. Burroughs was late to the event because her train was late and wasn't present for the vote. She had some issues with many of the men because she refused to settle on her goals or adhere to any of their prescribed limitations over the Women's Convention. "She told an NBC member on one occasion that 'if an idea struck your head, it would split it wide open.'" The NBC wanted to control the WC so that they would also control the finances. The NBC then tried to vote her out at the 1939 convention, but the women stood up for themselves against their husbands/pastors, and she won the vote. Burroughs found other funding sources, and when the NBC came back around to re-establish their relationship, she was out of debt and working toward even larger fundraising. This is important because it shows that she was not going to let anything stop the progress of the work. Her rhetoric was rooted in a truth that she was living, and she aimed to empower and invite other women into it. Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 82.

[175] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 63.

[176] "The education of Black women was influenced by two philosophies. The 'Cult of true Womanhood' which emphasized innocence, modesty, piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity, and 'uplifting the race' which

honor. In a letter to one of her students, Mary Dorsett, Burroughs writes, “Remember that you must always do your best and be your best because you are not only representing the race, but you are representing the womanhood of the race, and too many people expect the Negro women to be ordinary. It is a part of your business to be extraordinary.”[177] This was the esteem and expectation to which she held her students.

The school began with junior and high school divisions. Students could take sewing, dressmaking, housekeeping, and domestic sciences. It was a requirement for all students to take Black history, and the school hosted annual contests in Black historical essays and oratory.[178] Burroughs wanted to make sure that students knew their history and also felt proud to be learning and doing whatever they were doing. Access was also important. Students without the means to pay could work their way through school in the laundry facilities, or receive other scholarships. Students would leave with a clear way of living and skills to make a living, having had a top-quality education for wherever they were headed next.

Burroughs was active in many circles. In addition to her extensive work in the Women’s Convention and her school, she was active in the NAACP, a founding member of the National

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emphasized the economic, educational and social improvement of the entire race. It should be noted that the educational emphasis was on ‘service’ rather than leadership development. This ‘service’ as seen as an obligation.” Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 13. Easter’s articulation here is important because it gives us a view into the times. This was the nature of education of Black women because—particularly from the lens of educated Blacks, which Burroughs was—the emphasis was on creating education that would advance the race, which included work, and also included a telos of “everyone wins.” This cult has also been talked about through the lens of “politics of respectability.” “Through the discourse of respectability, the Baptist women emphasized manners and morals while simultaneously asserting traditional forms of protest, such as petitions, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice. Ultimately: the rhetoric of the Woman’s Convention combined both a conservative and a radical impulse.” Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church*, 1880-1920 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 187. Burroughs built the school on this principles and ideas that were a part of her broader life, stemming from her work in the Women’s Convention.

[177] Correspondence from Nannie Helen Burroughs to Mary Dorsett, 12 May 1956, Lincoln Heights, Washington, DC. http://www.nburroughsinfo.org/files/124835663.jpg.

[178] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 64.

League of Republican Colored Women, in several different women's clubs, and passionate about civil rights, women's suffrage, and the campaign against lynching.[179]

> Burroughs was very outspoken on the subject of women's suffrage. She worked hard for the passage of the 19th Amendment and denounced Black men who she felt had compromised the struggle for political equality. She said that, through cowardice or material gain, the men had misused the vote. Burroughs urged her sisters to redeem the race through wise use of the ballot.[180]

Burroughs's involvement in broad networks helped her accomplish her goals. She worked alongside prominent others including Mary McLeod Bethune, Margaret Washington, Lugenia Hope, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida Wells Barnett. Burroughs worked tirelessly to create support systems for Black women, which she saw as a vehicle to advance Black people as a whole. She believed that Black people could create a world in which they could not only survive, but one in which they could flourish—and that they didn't need help beyond themselves to accomplish it. This principle guided her life and work, and is clear in her proclaiming, as well.

Introduction to the Artifacts

Burroughs's focus was to help Black people within religious and social institutions, and beyond. Central to her rhetoric is her deep belief that she was called to serve God through *Christian service*. She believed that if Black women were supported, the rest of the race would be as well. Honor and virtue were paramount in her rhetoric, reflecting her grandmothers' ideals. This contributed to the disdain Burroughs had for people who looked down on domestic workers because of their work, as if their value wasn't as high as others. An educator at heart, Burroughs used Bible verses to reinforce her ideas, and did so specifically to engage the dominant hearers in her audience, Black Christians, many of whom were also involved in various forms of Christian

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[179] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 96–98.
[180] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 105.

service.[181] As Graves argues, "A quick look at her archive reveals a woman who moved seamlessly between the gospel, education, and politics. She considered her work as a crusader for Christ to be her foremost call in the world."[182] Burroughs is special because she shows us that these areas that are often separated were deeply integrated for her. Her preaching wasn't specifically in the pulpit, although many of the spaces in which she operated were explicitly religious spaces. Addressing her audience through text and theological nuance, she finds language that exhibits political prowess in order to articulate what should be done in the name of God—specifically that women should be able to contribute.

The remainder of this chapter will examine two moments from the early years of Burroughs's proclaiming journey that show the foundation that she continued to stand on for years after. I will look at "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping" and "The Colored Woman and Her Relation to the Domestic Problem."[183] The first speech is foundational to Burroughs's work on behalf of Black women and her deep desire for them to have their own spaces to flourish—acknowledging that this aim is often hindered by the power of men in those spheres. Her speaking focuses on evoking action and asserting new ways of being. The second speech announces her disdain for the contempt of workers. These two homiletical artifacts offer critical lenses into Burroughs's preaching rhetoric as a whole.

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[181] While Burroughs primarily talked to Black people, this quote from another proclaiming moment shows us why she was so adamant about the focus on Black people resourcing themselves. She told white America, "We don't want your teachers, we have our teachers; we don't want your furniture, nor your clothes, we have plenty of clothes; we don't want your doctors nor your preachers; we have our doctors and our preachers; we don't want what you have earned; all we ask of you is a man's change. What we ask is fair play and to be let alone." Nannie Helen Burroughs, "Up from the Depths," in Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs,* 72.

[182] Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, xviii.

[183] There were other moments that I could have examined that were even more explicitly wrapped in spiritual and religious thought, like " Reflections on Baptist Theology" and/or "The Role of Church and Society." However, I intentionally focused on works that wouldn't have been so explicitly about church and Bible to note the ways that Burroughs is still using the same rhetorical strategies in these different spheres and opening up opportunities of moral persuasion.

Background

"How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping" (hereafter "How the Sisters")[184] was Nannie Helen Burroughs's first public proclamation and one of the moments for which she is most known. She offered this address at the 1900 National Baptist Convention as a precursor to the vote over whether women would be able to have their own sphere of influence as the Women's Convention. Although the specific reason she was asked to speak is uncertain, it is safe to assume that she may have been a delegate from her church, and/or that her connection with Jordan (in Foreign Missions) gave her more widespread renown. Regardless, "To be a convention speaker, one had to be well known in Black Baptist circles. [Her friend] Harrison points out that Burroughs was in great demand to speak at church gatherings."[185] This was when Burroughs moved from more administrative positions to the forefront, advocating for Black women to have a proper place in the work of the church, and specifically in the NBC. This particular moment of proclaiming was intended to help move forward the Women's Convention initiative establishing a women's auxiliary. It had been tried before but denied for several years. After Burroughs's speech, however, the vote passed and the Women's Convention was established in that same convention.

"The Colored Woman and Her Relation to the Domestic Problem" (hereafter "The Domestic Problem")[186] was Burroughs's proclamation at The Negro Young People's Christian

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[184] National Baptist Convention, *Journal of the Twentieth Annual Session for the National Baptist Convention, Held in Richmond, Virginia, September 12–17, 1900* (Nashville, TN: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1900), 196–197; Republished: Nannie Helen Burroughs, "How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping," in Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs,* 25–6.
[185] Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 27.
[186] Irvine Garland Penn and John Wesley Edward Bowen, eds., *The United Negro, His Problems and His Progress: Containing the Address and Proceedings of the Negro Young People's Christian Congress, Held August 6–11, 1902,* (Atlanta, GA: D.E. Luther Publishing, 1902), 324–29. Republished: Nannie Helen Burroughs, "The Colored Woman and Her Relation to the Domestic Problem," in Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 27-31.

Congress held in 1902. She was one of many speakers, but her address garnered significant notoriety. A report from the event stated:

> The distinctive feature of last night's session of the negro congress was the address made by a younger woman, Nannie H. Burroughs, of Washington, D.C., on the subject "The Colored Woman and Her Relation to the Domestic Problem." The power of clear, close thinking and the ability to give expression to her wholesome thoughts and sound advice in the choicest and clearest language was received with surprise, but with marked appreciation, by the immense throng gathered in the auditorium, among the audience being a number of white people. She made a strong plea for the recognition of the dignity of labor by the women of the race, and maintained that the "race problem" would be largely solved when the salvation of the negro woman was assured. At the conclusion of her address a large number of those present, among them several white people, went to her and personally thanked her for the timely words of wisdom which she had spoken.[187]

Amid the different speakers, including Booker T. Washington, in different formats and locations at this meeting, Burroughs's speech was revered as one of the most dynamic and impactful moments of the entire session.[188] She wanted Black people to be able to compete in the industrial world of the time. If Black people, especially Black women, weren't competent for the jobs allotted, they would be unemployed and unable to care for themselves.[189] Burroughs's aim was to explain why it was important to train Black women, and why it was equally critical not to demean work and discredit the honor of the domestic worker.

Homiletical Insights

A Clear Problem and a Clear Solution

Burroughs didn't have the luxury of abstract illustrations or rhetoric unsupported by clear pragmatic ends. Everything she spoke was for the purpose of immediate action from her

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[187] "Negro Young People's Christian and Educational Congress, Atlanta, Ga., Aug. 6–12, 1902." (2018). In *Newspaper Clipping, Logbooks, Journals & Scrapbooks*, 12. http://dh.howard.edu/og_news/12, 19.

[188] Another clip said, "The following address by Nannie H. Burroughs of Washington D.C., on "The Colored Woman and her Relation to the Domestic Problem, probably created a stronger impression than any address heard at the negro congress." "Negro Young People's Christian and Educational Congress, Atlanta, Ga., Aug. 6-12, 1902." (2018). Newspaper Clipping, Logbooks, Journals & Scrapbooks, 12. http://dh.howard.edu/og_news/12, 26.

[189] Graves, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, xxxiv.

audience, consistently for a cause that would help Black people. She asked clear questions and offered clearer answers so that after she spoke her hearers would know *exactly* what was being asked of them. As a preacher outside of the pulpit, her rhetoric was rooted in a particular cause that was more specific than a general gospel message. The clarity of her rhetoric, in addition to the passion with which she spoke, made for compelling messages that often got her asked back. More importantly, what she advocated for often came to pass, as we see with the vote over the Women's Convention and the building of the training school.

In addition, the itinerancy of non-pulpit preaching—even if there were repeated hearers in the crowd—didn't leave room for Burroughs to depend upon previous messages to pull from. She had to say what she meant in the moment, because it might be the only time her audience would hear her speak. She capitalized on the moment with clarity of purpose, including how she asked people to respond to what she was saying. I begin my catalogue of her homiletical strategies here because her positionality as activist/educator alongside preacher/proclaimer, coupled with life experiences that showed her why advocating for Black women was so critical, creates a different type of urgency for her rhetoric.

In "How the Sisters," Burroughs asks directly, "Will you as a pastor and friend of missions help by not hindering these women when they come among you to speak and to enlist the women of your church?"[190] She is not asking for the hearers' assistance in the work, nor is she asking that they exert specific energy to produce something for the women. Burroughs is merely asking that they commit to not getting in the way of the women and not hindering their ability to do the work they are called to do. Women are seeking to be helpful, and the men are

[190] Burroughs, "How the Sisters," 25–6.

simply asked not to stand in their way. The entire artifact is built on invoking a response to this question: non-interference.

Burroughs argues that the lack of hinderance by men (as opposed to actively helping) is itself important, and asserts the positive impact that this "lack" of action will have. Her aim was to get them to vote for the separate auxiliary of the Women's Convention. The message needed to be clear so that when it was time to vote the substantive reasons behind the choice could be understood from her rhetoric: women should be allowed to be helpful, and men are simply asked not to get in their way.

Burroughs's rhetoric in "The Domestic Problem" is equally clear. Her underlying concern is that educated Black people were looking down on Black women who were domestic workers and not recognizing how critical they were to helping the race at large. The solution was a change in behavior and outlook, such that domestic work would be seen through the lens of honor, and training would be widely provided. Burroughs argued, "The training of Negro women is absolutely necessary, not only for their own salvation and the salvation of the race, but because the hour in which we live demands it. If we lose sight of the demands of the hour we blight our hope to progress."[191] This critical quote, which is spoken early and reiterated throughout, makes clear the foundation of her message—even without hearing the rest of the proclamation.[192]

[191] Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem," 27–31.

[192] Some reiterations of this sentiment include: "The solution of this problem will be the prime factor in the salvation of Negro womanhood, whose salvation must be attained before the so-called race problem can be solved."; "The subject of domestic science has crowded itself upon us, and unless we receive it, master it and be wise, the next ten years will so revolutionize things that we will find our women without the wherewith to support themselves."; "What will this crowding from service mean to Negro women? It will mean their degradation." Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem," 27–31.

The Salvific Ends of Black Women's Presence and Participation

One of the grounding rhetorical threads of Burroughs's preaching is the salvific nature of Black women's presence and participation. She repeatedly speaks about the salvific nature of Black women's work and the ways that Black women can provide the solution to issues if the hearers will simply support (and/or not hinder) what they are aiming to do. Black men are also supported by these efforts, as they will have help and are not in the way of what God has called the women to do, and the world at large is saved for a variety of reasons. Her explicit use of "salvation," as opposed to "help" or another non-religious term, points to a larger, eschatological reality toward which she is aiming and within which she locates her work theologically. She aligns the elevation of Black women and their work with the telos of salvation in the gospel narrative in a way that would have been commonly known in Black religious spaces. For Burroughs, the tasks of service, work, excellence, and honor aren't merely "good human" things, but are all things for the glory of God—and Black women have the capacity to carry out the honor and service that God desires. This is foundational in her rhetoric and critical for understanding her as a preacher in the early twentieth century. This would be a message at any time, but in the early twentieth century Black men were focused on the "race problem," and the salvific liberating telos of civil rights, and assumed that a "gender problem" and the saving work of women's rights was not something that required discussion. As such, Burroughs makes clear that her voice is not for the general public; she is specifically naming and advocating theologically and eschatologically for Black women—which for her is where advocating for Black life must begin.

In "How the Sisters," Burroughs explicitly names Black women's service and help as a solution. She takes those who were seen as "helpmates" to Black men—Black women—and

elevates these women as the solution in their own right. She posits, “For a number of years there has been a righteous discontent, a burning zeal to go forward in his name among the Baptist women of our churches and it will be the dynamic force in the religious campaign at the opening of the 20th century. It will be the spark that shall light the altar fire in the heathen lands.”[193] This “altar fire in the heathen lands” was an illustration of the presence of God in the places where God’s light was not seen as prevalent. Because the work she was asking to do had a missional end, her aim was to argue that when Black women serve, they bring the light of God where the light has not been.[194]

She continues, “We come now to the rescue. We unfurl our banner upon which is inscribed this motto, ‘The World for Christ. Woman, Arise, He calleth for Thee.’”[195] She states that the men “toil unceasingly,”[196] and supports her claim of rescue (giving it salvific undertones) by naming that this is not just something that the women have thought of, but that Jesus is calling them to this work and it will change lives—including the lives of those have tried to get in their way (the Baptist men). Her strategic framing makes it clear that Black women’s work will save the world and will rescue the men, but she also addresses the organization by claiming the work will secure more funding, and the mission will benefit and be saved as well.

Within the solution and rescue aspects, Burroughs also names the consequences of inaction: “We realize to allow these gems to lie unpolished longer means a loss to the denomination.”[197] The organization doesn’t just maintain but suffers a loss by not allowing these women to do their work; they save the men from labor and failure, and spark excellent fire in

[193] Burroughs, “How the Sisters,” 25–6.
[194] Certainly, our notions of missiology have changed and this language would not be appropriate now. However, we must root Burroughs in her context. It would be far easier to critique someone today for saying this but to critique out of context doesn’t actually help us in understanding her rhetoric.
[195] Burroughs, “How the Sisters,” 25–6.
[196] Burroughs, “How the Sisters,” 25–6.
[197] Burroughs, “How the Sisters,” 25–6.

new areas. The organization needs the women. Burroughs closes with very practical information and financial numbers indicating the impact of the help and the pragmatic ramifications of women's work.[198] This is the grounding presence of this sermon. Black women are the answer and are ready to come to the rescue. Her invitation is, simply: do not get in the way of such necessary work.

In "The Domestic Problem," Burroughs posits her strategy for creating better training for Black women and lifts up the labor of the domestic worker as salvific for Black women and therefore salvific for the Black race. Like in the previous artifact, she uses language like "rescue" to describe how Black women's work affects the whole. In the opening of her sermon she says,

> May I venture forward in this hour to make a plea for a class of women of my race whose number is legion? May I plead for the moral and industrial salvation of two-thirds of the women of this country, women who by the sweat of their brow must eat bread? I refer to the honest working woman. If this class of women arise, they will push forward, higher and higher, the principles espoused by negro women who are laboring for the salvation of the masses. If they fall, they will pull down with them, for it is impossible for us to rise unless we take the masses of our sisters with us.[199]

In this opening invitation, she situates Black women's wellbeing as that which literally saves the rest of the race. This piece is important because it suggests salvation as both a "saving for" in relation to the domestic workers for whom she's advocating, and a "saving from" in the sense of the moral salvation of those who look down on them. Broadly, this salvation benefits the whole Black community. After setting up what she calls "the domestic problem," she says, "The solution of this problem will be the prime factor in the salvation of Negro womanhood, whose salvation must be attained before the so-called race problem can be solved." Black women are

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[198] "The implement to be used is money for the support of men and the purchase of land to build houses of worship. We have decided to help in this campaign, and have apportioned the amounts as follows: 10 woman's conventions to give $25.00 each; 20 woman's associations and district conventions to $5.00; 1,000 missionary societies to give $2.00 each; 2,000 women to give $1.00; 300 children's bands to give 50 cents each; 15,000 pastors to pray for a great uplift in woman's work at home and abroad." Burroughs, "How the Sisters," 25–6.
[199] "Negro Young People's Christian and Educational Congress, Atlanta, Ga., Aug. 6-12, 1902." in *Newspaper Clipping, Logbooks, Journals & Scrapbooks.* 12. https://dh.howard.edu/og_news/12, 26.

prioritized, but *lifting up* Black women—specifically those women who have been seen as less than and/or as not holding a particular type of honor—are indeed the needed salvation.

Anticipatory Reading of Rhetorical Context

Nannie H. Burroughs was known to speak often and to large groups of people. She frequently spoke to Christian groups, to activist organizations, and at larger conferences, and the diversity of hearers shifted from context to context. Her attentiveness to the specificity of context as a basis for shaping her rhetoric is a critical homiletical insight. Her rhetoric was almost exclusively aimed at the Black people in the room. However, most of her speaking was to the girls at her school, the assembly of the National Baptist Convention, or in other political or educational spheres where mostly educated Black people were gathered. Therefore, the use of particular rhetorical strategies specific to each context elevates her as a rhetor and an effective preacher.

In these artifacts, Burroughs uses these strategies in two ways: 1) anticipating *backlash* and addressing it (pre-emptive anticipation), and 2) anticipating specific understandings of honor in order to challenge them (corrective anticipation). These were geared toward the population to whom she was speaking, and while they may have had a broader impact on the people who later read the manuscripts, we can see their immediate effect through the responsive actions of the hearers. Knowing your audience and knowing how your audience might receive you is critical for Black women; we often enter spaces where hearers have already decided who we are and what we do or do not bring to the table.

In "How the Sisters," Burroughs does a masterful job anticipating backlash by framing her proclamation with words intentionally aimed to put hearers at ease and enable them to then

hear her straightforward question. Her audience was Black men of the NBC, many of whom had already voted against the very thing for which she is advocating, specifically because they don't want to use their resources to create a space that they cannot control. Knowing these things, she says, "We come not to usurp thrones nor to sow discord, but to so organize and systematize the work that each church may help through a Woman's Missionary society and not be made poorer thereby."[200] "We" refers to the women, and essentially, she is saying that they aren't trying to take over the men's space, which has been a part of the pushback. She says, "We realize that to allow these gems to lie unpolished longer means a loss to the denomination."[201] Men wanted their "helpmates" to be just that and not have their own spheres of influence, lest they take over in some form or fashion. Burroughs is saying that a takeover is not the aim, articulating what they are *not* there to do as a way to open up what they *were* to do—which was offer help through their own ways to the entire denomination. She recognized that as a young Black woman in this Baptist environment, she was already seen as a subversive presence. She was likely to put folks on edge such that her message would be unable to be heard. So she names this in hopes of consoling the egos of the audience in order to actually be heard.

Similarly, in "The Domestic Problem," Burroughs uses the specificity of the context to shape her rhetorical push. She isn't anticipating backlash as much as that established perspectives of honor and virtue won't align with the plea that she is making. Whereas in "How the Sisters" she aims to soften the message, in "The Domestic Problem" Burroughs uses the notion of honor and virtue, which were consistent themes throughout the conference, to enliven and thrust forward her rhetoric. She takes time to outline why normative understandings are problematic and dangerous for the flourishing of Black women and the race at large, and she

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[200] Burroughs, "How the Sisters," 25–6.
[201] Burroughs, "How the Sisters," 25–6.

publicly scorns those who would come for the women she would support. Burroughs argues, "When the nobility of labor is magnified, and those who do labor are respected more because of their real worth to the race, we will find less number trying to escape the brand, 'servant girl.' We are not less honorable if we are servants."[202] She is inviting the educated people to whom she is speaking to see honor and virtue in positions that have been seen as dishonorable. Burroughs argues, "The race whose women have not learned that industry and self-respect are the only guarantees of a true character will find itself bound by ignorance and violence or fettered with chains of poverty."[203] Again, using honor and character as her basis because of their frequency in this particular conference, she pushes the notion and names that what some have deemed dishonorable is not. She was angry at people who would mock the domestic worker, especially since she saw them as foundational to the race. With remarks like, "Fidelity to duty rather than the grade of one's occupation is the true measure of character,"[204] and, "Industry is one of the noblest virtues of any race. The people who scorn and frown upon her must die,"[205] she argues that honor and virtue are found in those whom some in the crowd might consider the least honorable, which is something that needs to change.

Scripture and God Talk as Sources of Authority

In both artifacts, Burroughs uses scriptural references as a form of historical and anecdotal memory for those listening. The use of scripture in "How the Sisters" is intriguing because it is not primarily exegetical but used in a way that is designed explicitly to lend legitimation and authority to her ideas. For instance, Burroughs says, "It has ever been from the

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[202] Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem," 27–31.
[203] Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem," 27–31.
[204] Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem," 27–31.
[205] Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem," 27–31.

time of Miriam, the most remarkable woman, the sister of Moses, the most remarkable man, down to the courageous women that in very recent years have carried the Gospel into Tibet and Africa and proclaimed and taught the truth where no man has been allowed to enter."[206] Burroughs pairs Miriam and Moses. That Moses's character was remarkable would have been commonly understood. However, Miriam was not as frequently discussed, and Burroughs positions her directly next to Moses. Burroughs's claim that Miriam is equally as "remarkable" as Moses, and pairing her with the women carrying the gospel, writes in Miriam as a historical precedent for women doing the work of God today. By bringing in Miriam, Burroughs reminds her audience that the biblical men they love so much have counterparts. She knows how to speak to this audience and how to operate in this space—but she's also just telling the truth. Burroughs closes this paragraph by saying, "Surely, women somehow have had a very important part in the work saving this redeemed earth."[207] This just feels like it has a hint of sarcasm to it, which is not uncommon for Burroughs as she was known to use wit as a rhetorical strategy.[208] Alongside expanding memory, there is some play involved. She uses biblical characters[209] to remind those listening that what she is asking for is not unfounded, but biblical. In this case the Bible is not the center of her rhetoric, but referential as a common source of authority for this group of hearers.

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[206] Burroughs, "How the Sisters," 25–6.
[207] Burroughs, "How the Sisters," 25–6.
[208] Wit and sarcasm are often closely related, and Burroughs was known to use them in her rhetoric. In a response to a speech she gave in London, an account of her speech appeared in the *Daily Express*, the local London newspaper at the time. In the article the writer called her "witty." Easter, *Nannie Helen Burroughs*, 32.
[209] In her discussion about Burroughs position as a leader in the social gospel movement, Susan Lindley writes, "Nevertheless, one can argue that Nannie Burroughs did attempt to apply the teaching of Jesus and the message of Christian salvation to society and institutions as well as individuals. Her strong faith demanded activism in this world: If you are going to be a Christian, you've got to do something week-days as well as talk and feel about it Sundays." Susan Lindley, "'Neglected Voices' and Praxis in the Social Gospel," 93. Because of Burroughs's activism and her belief that she had a special role to play in America and Christianity, Lindley locates her as a social gospel leader. This is a note for future considerations for Burroughs's preaching and how her preaching aligns with the preaching of social gospel movements.

Similarly, in "The Domestic Problem" Burroughs uses scriptural references as familiar touchpoints of illustration. In one, she uses John the Baptist to name the preposterous things that women would rather do than be seen as a servant, even though domestic work is an honor, not a deficit. After calling such women "parlor ornaments," she says, "These are women at service who would eat their meals off the heads of barrels or dress after the fashion of John the Baptist in the wilderness before they would sacrifice their high-toned moral character, simply to shine in the social world by virtue of their idleness and ability to dress well."[210] Again, John the Baptist and his wild appearance were known by the audience, so she was able to reference them as a way to lend authority to her message. Her other scriptural allusion is in talking about why being a servant is just a part of being a human. She argues, "God made us all servants the very day he dismissed Adam from Eden… 'By the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread.' What mean these women who are eating bread and not sweating, either, by scorning the women who are obeying the divine injunction?"[211] It is no coincidence that she named Adam, because her point is that we were all made to work. And these women are, as she puts it, simply "following the divine injunction." So why are we out to dishonor their clearly honorable work?

Finally, in "The Domestic Problem," Burroughs cleverly draws in God to talk about how Black people are perceived, and that whether or not it is true it simply shows how far God can bring them:

> They tell us we came from apes and baboons, and we have made it this far. Further, if God could take a crop of apes or baboons and make beings like us He is God indeed, and we can trust him to raise us from servants to queens. If we did come from these ungainly animals of the four-footed family, we got here nearly as soon as the people who didn't have so far to come.[212]

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[210] Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem," 27–31.
[211] Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem," 27–31.
[212] Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem." 27–31.

In this moment, she aims to say it doesn't matter where we come from or who says where we are coming from, God will and can elevate us to royalty. She is also aiming to say, don't let white people, the "they" in her sentence, convince us that this work is not honorable because of who they have told us that we are. She uses God language to legitimate her message and remind the hearer that honor and greatness can come from humble beginnings, no matter their origin story (again without necessarily agreeing with what she is saying "they" said). She aligns salvific and God-like participation with a type of societal stability. We can win. So how do we win? We stop thinking that being a servant is bad—and even if we do, we remember that *God* deems places honorable beyond a societal norm that would articulate otherwise.

Conclusion

Nannie Helen Burroughs was a dynamic preacher who saw her work as creating space and opportunity for Black women, who had often been disregarded, to be supported and seen. She offered an incredibly textured witness to the times in which she lived and the spheres in which she operated. The fruit of all she did spoke for itself. She created jobs, opportunities, and schools, and pushed those with power to help to create tangible progress as well. Her upbringing alongside her mother who fought for her place as a domestic worker and her brief time also as a domestic worker, unable to get a job as a teacher, deeply informed the work that she sought. Her embodiment as a Black woman gave her insight into the peculiar situation of Black women within the Black community and the American context generally. Her advocacy stemmed from her knowledge and her sense of urgency, requiring a response from those who heard her.

Nannie Helen Burroughs believed to her core that there were practices to move Black people in the direction of being as self-sustaining, strong, and well. As a preacher she shows us

how her story and her praxis, rooted in ministry as a practice of life and in the everyday struggles of being a Black woman in the twentieth century, deeply informed how she preached and advocated for the good news of Black flourishing. Burroughs's rhetorical witness spanned institutions and platforms that didn't always directly overlap. From her, we are reminded of the clarity required when one requires a specific response. We gain access to what Black women-inspired-and-led salvation-in-the-here-and-now looks like through her eyes. She invites us to consider more deeply what it means to use scripture as a familiar authoritative lens that includes Black women, beyond a particular type of exposition, and she encourages us to consider the necessity of deeply contextual language for purposes that can be both pre-emptive and corrective in relation to hegemonic reactions and interpretations.

Burroughs invites us to consider the necessity of response to the preaching moment and the actual telos of preaching. When we consider her proclamation in the canon of preachers, we see her style of preaching conveys that preaching should evoke action. For her, the necessary response was action, movement, and progress for Black people in tangible ways that could be seen and quantified. Preaching was not about the symbolic "thoughts and prayers," but changing of policies, enacting votes, and moving Black people forward in a way that could be qualitatively and concretely identified. This type of preaching is not only intended to change the heart of the hearers, but to inspire a new way of living that has critical effects on the community in which they operate. She believed in Black people and in destigmatizing different spheres in which Black women operated, such that they would be acknowledged and treated as the critically important people they were. Her preaching set a precedent for her practice in bringing schools

and opportunities into existence that would make this elevation possible. As she said, "It is not the depths from which we come, but the heights to which we soar."[213]

[213] Burroughs, "The Domestic Problem," 27–31.

V. TOO SICK TO BE SILENT, TOO TIRED NOT TO TALK: THE LIFE AND PREACHING PRACTICE OF FANNIE LOU HAMER

"I am Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired."[214]

"We have to build our own power. We have to win every single political office we can, where we have a majority of Black people… Just because this cracker is starting to show us a few teeth and talk nice doesn't mean he'll move over and let us have some of that power."[215] Fannie Lou Hamer believed in Black power and telling the truth about the state of affairs for Black people in Mississippi. She was an activist, a community organizer, and a woman in relentless pursuit of rights for Black people in the United States. She knew that the conditions Black people suffered were not only unacceptable, but that they could and must be changed. A native Mississippian, she experienced firsthand the violence and injustice present in Mississippi, and specifically advocated for those in Mississippi whose voices had been left out of conversations for justice.

Although her witness in the civil rights movement is celebrated now, there were mixed opinions about her presence and rhetorical ability because of her speaking style, which reflected her particular location as a poor Black woman in Mississippi Delta. Regardless, there is no denying that Fannie Lou Hamer's voice was critical in revealing the conditions of Mississippi, and proclaiming that God was not pleased with the America that operated in such hateful ways.

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[214] Fannie Lou Hamer, "'I'm Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired', Speech Delivered with Malcolm X at the Williams Institutional CME Church, Harlem, New York, December 20, 1964," in *Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell it Like It Is,* ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 75-80.

[215] Fannie Lou Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges: An Autobiography of Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer*, ed. Julius Lester (KIPCO, 1967), 17; Fannie Lou Hamer, "To Praise Our Bridges," in Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth, vol. 2, ed. Dorothy Abbott (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 324; https://snccdigital.org/wp-content/themes/sncc/flipbooks/mev_hamer_updated_2018/index.html?swipeboxvideo=1#page/6

As a proclaimer, Hamer was known for integrating singing, often of hymns, into her speaking, and moving crowds with her voice, her testimony, and her practical application of biblical stories. She was known widely as an activist and orator, and here we will listen to her as a preacher.

Hamer's proclamation was a direct response to the dire situation into which she was born, and which she refused to consider the final word for herself and other Black people. There is no place in America untouched by the prevalence and violence of racism, and the Mississippi Delta was known to be one of the more egregiously violent and horrific areas for Black people to live. Hamer recounts several personal stories of police brutality, unwarranted arrest, and terror at the hands of white mobs of "cowards,"[216] as she would often refer to them. While her actual public witness didn't begin until she was in her 40s, the fodder for her proclamation came from a lifetime of witnessing injustice against and demeaning of Black people—yet being told by her mother that she should be proud to be Black. She lived her life believing that, making that pride true, and fighting for Black people to be able to participate in the world equally to their white counterparts.

This chapter highlights moments of Fannie Lou Hamer's life that are foundational to her preaching ministry. Her witness shows preaching in the sphere of community organizing, undergirded by Christian rhetoric but resistant to any faith that would speak without acting. I argue that three of the homiletical insights unique to her are: 1) storytelling as a strategy of truth, 2) the constant use of "we" to proclaim collective responsibility, and 3) scripture as moral foundation. I excavate these from her preaching ministry at large and specifically through two

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[216] Reminiscing on a white mob, Hamer said: "I aint never heard of no one white man going to get a Negro, They're the most cowardly people I know." Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 11.

artifacts: “We Are On Our Way” from the beginning of her public ministry in 1964, and “We Haven’t Arrived Yet” that emerges toward the end in 1976. Who Fannie Lou Hamer was is clearly displayed in what she said, and her particularity in turn offers rich contributions to homiletics.

Her-Story: Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer (née Townsend) was born in Mississippi on October 6, 1917, the youngest of Jim and Ella Townsend’s twenty children. Both of her parents were sharecroppers, but her father was also Baptist preacher and a “bootlegger” in the community, and her mother was a domestic worker in white homes.[217] When discussing her childhood, Hamer talked about the difficulties of growing up poor, but because of the principles that her mother instilled in her, she spoke with pride. Thinking back, Hamer said, “My mother was a great woman. She went through a lot of suffering to bring the twenty of us up, but she still taught us to be decent and to respect ourselves, and that is one of the things that has kept me going.”[218] In one instance, the young Fannie Lou Hamer decided she wanted to be white. As a child she looked around and saw that white people had all of the things that she wanted—proper food, clothing, access—so she decided that she wanted to be white. Hamer recalls Ella Townsend saying, “‘I don’t ever want to hear you say that again, honey!’ She said, ‘you respect yourself as a little child, a little black child. And as you grow older, respect yourself as a black woman. Then one day, other people will respect you.’”[219] Her mother’s wisdom was a major influence throughout Hamer’s life,

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[217] Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 1.

[218] Fannie Lou Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges: An Autobiography of Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer*, ed. Julius Lester (KIPCO, 1967), 11; Fannie Lou Hamer, “To Praise Our Bridges,” in Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth, vol. 2, ed. Dorothy Abbott (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 324.

[219] Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer. *The Independent Eye*, Cincinnati, Ohio, Dec. 23, 1968–January 20, 1969.

stemming from this moment when she was a child. We see this wisdom echoed in her rhetoric: being proud to be Black, fighting to have equitable rights as Black woman, and moving through the world with respect and honor for oneself.

Family greatly shaped Hamer's story and experiences. The Townsend family was very poor, which was common for a Black family in Mississippi, and Hamer knew poverty intimately. She recounts "So many times for dinner we would have greens with no seasoning and flour gravy."[220] At times they went without shoes: "We wouldn't have on shoes or anything because we didn't have them. She [Ella Townsend] would always tie our feet up with rags because the ground would be froze real hard."[221] Sometimes a plantation owner would tell Hamer's mother that they could gather the scraps in the field, but to do so they would have to walk barefoot to get what they could. Her mother would also help white families kill hogs, and the families would then give her the intestines, feet, and head.[222] At one point, the Townsend family started to get on their feet and stopped sharecropping in order to build on their own land. They had a house for themselves and cattle that would secure a future for the family. When they were gone one evening, some white men from the community came and poisoned their cattle. They returned to see that their piece of financial hope was gone, which made it almost impossible for them to get out of poverty again. They had to go back to sharecropping in order to make ends meet.[223]

Most Black people in that time and place were sharecroppers, and Black children were not left out of that work. One anecdote Hamer often mentioned as a difficult moment in her own life occurred when she six years old and was manipulated by a white plantation owner to pick cotton for some food and treats. He offered her food in exchange for work, which created an

[220] Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges*, 11.
[221] Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges*, 9.
[222] Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges*, 11.
[223] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 14–15.

agreement no six-year-old would understand. She accepted the treats, went and worked—only to realize that this exchange would keep her tied to this plantation owner. In the end, she would be picking hundreds of pounds of cotton each day while only earning one dollar for it.[224] This was not an uncommon practice in the area where she grew up. Anger over such exploitation of even children shows up in her passionate testimony and advocacy for freedom.[225]

Needing to sharecrop for survival, Hamer wasn't able to go to school beyond sixth grade. Although she wasn't given a lot of schooling, she loved school when she was able to go. The Black schools in Mississippi were desperately underfunded, and Black students were only in school from December to March because of the sharecropping season. Hamer was a bright student, wining spelling bees and other oratorical competitions. After sixth grade, supporting her family had to be her priority.[226] She heeded her mother's words of wisdom, however: learn to read because "When you read, you know—and you can help yourself and others."[227] This wisdom and these experiences were in the marrow of her bones as an adult, and came forth through her rhetoric, as well.

Faith was also a critical thread in Fannie Lou Hamer's life. At twelve she joined Home Baptist Church and was baptized in the Quiver River in Sumner, Mississippi. As she grew older, she could quote the Bible better than most people, which she demonstrates with skill in her

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[224] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 5.
[225] In *To Praise Our Bridges,* Hamer writes, "The question for black people is not, when is the white man going to give us our rights, or when is he going to give us good education for our children, or when he going to give us jobs—if the white man gives you anything—just remember when he gets ready he will take it right back. We have to take for ourselves." Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges,* 17. This comment stemmed from her experience being exploited as a child. As Maegan Brooks writes, "The experience of being tricked into an exploitative system of sharecropping at such a young age led Hamer to distrust the white power structure and to advocate black self-reliance. Maegan Parker Brooks, *A Voice That Could Stir an Army: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Rhetoric of the Black Freedom Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 19–20.
[226] Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 12.
[227] Susan Kling, *Fannie Lou Hamer: A Biography* (New York: Women for Racial and Economic Equality, 1979), 12.

sermons, especially considering that they were extemporaneous. She began to interrogate and question how churches were operating in response to the depth of injustice taking place around them. This questioning and wondering shows up repeatedly in her public rhetoric, alongside her deep reliance on faith and biblical stories. For Hamer, faith was critical: "'Christianity should be being concerned about your fellow man, not building a million-dollar church while people are starving around the corner,' Mrs. Hamer said. 'Christ was a revolutionary, out there where it was happening. That's what God is all about, and that's where I get my strength.'"[228] That strength would carry her through the most excruciating moments of her life.

In 1944, when she was twenty-seven years old, Fannie Lou Townsend met and fell in love with Pap Hamer, to whom she stayed married throughout her life. They had difficulties having biological children, but eventually adopted: "By 1954, the Hamers had begun caring for two young girls that they adopted: nine-year-old Dorothy Jean, the offspring of a single mother unable to care for her, and five-month-old Virgie Ree, a burn victim whose parents were too poor to provide adequate medical care."[229]

During this time, the Hamers lived and worked on the Marrow plantation in Ruleville, MS. In addition to ongoing white violence carried out against Black people in Montgomery County, Hamer also experienced personal violence at the hands of a doctor in 1961. Hamer was scheduled to have an ovarian cyst removed, but was instead given a hysterectomy. Writing about this incident, Kay Mills says of Hamer, "There was one more crucial element that molded a poor sharecropper into a leader: it was anger, touched with sorrow about her lack of control over her own life. Without her knowledge or permission, Fannie Lou Hamer was sterilized in 1961."[230]

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[228] Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 18.
[229] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 21.
[230] Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 21.

Medical malpractice, especially sterilization, against Black women was not unusual, and had actually grown to be a common occurrence in Mississippi—another injustice that had to be fought.

The following year, civil rights workers from The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)[231] came to Ruleville and held a mass gathering to try to get Black people registered to vote—seemingly impossible task in Mississippi. Hamer's anger at the unjust circumstances of her life and her complete unwillingness to accept such circumstances as the continued reality for Black people became the fuel for her response. Although she initially had not planned on going to the SNCC meeting, her attendance became a major turning point in her life. From that point on, she became actively and loudly involved in advocacy for voting rights, and in doing something concrete to help Black people.

This was the beginning of the Fannie Lou Hamer who became known publicly—starting when she raised her hand to say she would go register to vote.[232] In reflecting on the gathering, Hamer noted, "Until then I'd never heard of no mass meeting and I didn't know that a Negro could register and vote."[233] But during the meeting, she not only encouraged others to try to vote, she used her role as a community leader (she was a timekeeper on a plantation) and her testimony to remind those present what they were up against. As June Jordan said, "Her bravery

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[231] "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Emerged during an intense period of domestic social upheaval— a period beginning in the late fifties and reaching its peak during the mid-sixties. African Americans and other Americans of like minds let their discontent with the racial order in the American South (and later on in northern areas) be known using a variety of tactics ranging from litigation and boycotting to sit-ins. A civil rights organization originally comprised of college students, SNCC spearheaded the freedom movement of the sixties with its voter registration campaigns in the black belt areas of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi." Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 23. Ella Baker called the organization together in 1960.

[232] "That night she changed her own destiny and that of a great many others, black and white. She would lose her job, be jailed and beaten for her beliefs. She symbolized one aspect of what the movement hoped to accomplish: to embolden local people to resist a harsh and violent system." Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 3.

[233] Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges*, 12.

made them brave."[234] The summer of 1962 marked Hamer's formal entry into the civil rights movement. Arrests, bombings, and job dismissals followed, but Hamer continued working as a field secretary with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the early sixties. She conducted door to door canvassing and taught citizenship classes throughout the rural South.[235]

Registering to Vote

By the early 1960s, Mississippi had made it almost impossible for Black people to vote. One tactic was to require registrants to pass difficult literacy tests focused on obscure parts of the Mississippi State Constitution.[236] White men would also show up with guns, attempting to intimidate Black voters and incite fear as they registered one by one. After one group of Black people was unable to register in Indianola and was heading home, their rented bus got stopped for being the wrong color. A yellow bus was, of course, a standard color, so the charge that it was the "wrong color" was simply way to issue a fine for driving while Black. According to Susan Kling, this incident was a significant turning point in Hamer's personal fight against racism: "Beginning with the Indianola experience, Hamer moved from being an individual whose sole means of 'resistance' was survival to being one who took initiatives to promote collective struggle for real power. As she began resisting on a different level during her SNCC years and after, the stakes and positive consequences grew in direct proportion."[237]

Hamer didn't let this first "no" stop her, and she went back again to register—and this time succeeded. However, as a result of registering, Hamer lost her job. The owner of the

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[234] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 25; June Jordan, *Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Crowell, 1972), 24.
[235] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, x.
[236] "Mississippi and other southern states had effectively taken the vote from their black citizens by requiring them to pass a test to register, one they almost always failed because it was administered by people who didn't want them to pass. A black person too well educated to be denied the right to register as often forced to choose between voting only for white candidates or not voting at all." Mills, *This Little Light of Mine,* 1.
[237] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 30.

Marlow plantation where she was working told her that she would have to recall her form if she wanted to work there. Hamer's final response was, "Mr. Dee, I didn't go down there to register for you. I went there to register for myself."[238] After having to leave the plantation—and her family—she, alongside other activists, became a target of violence. On September 10, 1963, ten days after her eviction from the plantation, sixteen bullets were fired into the Tucker home where she was staying, fortunately missing all human targets.[239] Terror and fear-based intimidation from white locals ensued, including from white local police officers trying to shut down the activists and make Hamer pay for helping them register to vote.

Winona

Fannie Lou Hamer continued to advocate for voter registration, literacy, and economic freedom despite the threats against herself and her family. There was a high cost. One of the most frequent testimonies that became foundational to her preaching—and was the catalyst for her public and national witness because she gave it on national television—came from the horrific and terror-filled experience of Winona on June 9, 1963. On a bus ride back from a training about literacy, Hamer and her seven co-workers stopped at a bus stop. A few of them went in and demanded to be served at the counter. They were harassed by police officers and decided to leave. They went back outside, and as was customary they began to collect information on their assailants (license plate, names, etc.) before getting back on the bus. The officers inside got wind of this from a white man who had been observing outside. Hamer, who was one of the oldest on the trip, got off the bus to see what was happening and was told by her companions being arrested to get back on. As she was getting back on the bus, the officers

[238] Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges*, 20.
[239] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 34.

demanded her arrest. Once she was inside the police car, they kicked her and harassed her all the way to Montgomery County jail. All who were taken into custody were beaten along the way and told repeatedly they were going to be taught a lesson. At the prison, they were put into single cells and received brutal, individual beatings. June Johnson was the first to be beaten, and they could all hear her screaming. Johnson had irreparable damage to her eye and a permanent knot on her head. Each of their accounts reflected this type of brutality.

After calling to Ruleville and confirming her reputation as a voter registration worker, officers came to Hamer's cell and told her she was going to wish she were dead.[240] Hamer recounts, "They put me in a cell with these two Negro prisoners and threatened them if they didn't beat me. They gave one of the men a long blackjack and made him beat me till he was exhausted. Then, when he was tired, the second one sat on my feet and beat me some more. They beat me till my body was hard, till I couldn't bend my fingers or get up when they told me to. That's how I got this blood clot in my left eye — the sight's nearly gone now. And my kidney was injured from the blows they gave me in the back."[241] The attack was also sexualized, as they pulled her dress up as she kept trying to pull it down. She fought back, and was threatened that the beating would become even more severe if she continued to resist. After she was beaten, she continued to hear the other young women crying out in pain as well.[242] The group was detained for four days, suffering under conditions of not being fed, being burned in the showers with scalding water, and intimately witnessing one another's excruciating beatings. After their trial, they were forced to sign statements at gunpoint that said they had beaten each other.[243] It took

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[240] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 51.
[241] Earnest N. Bracey, *Fannie Lou Hamer: The Life of a Civil Rights Icon* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), 87.
[242] Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges*, 14.
[243] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 55.

the combined efforts of the SNCC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and word to get to Martin Luther King, Jr. for the group to be released. ALL of this was needed to get six people released from jail based on unfounded charges—for simply daring to claim their rights as Black people.

After their release from jail, Hamer was taken to a hospital in Atlanta because of the severity of her injuries. She didn't let her family or her husband visit because she did not want them to see her "in such bad shape."[244] Hamer remarked, "I just wonder how many more times is America gonna turn its head and pretend nothin' is happening. I used to think the Justice Department was just what it said—justice. I asked one of those men, 'Have y'all got a Justice Department or an Injustice Department?'"[245] Winona represented one the most painful tragedies of Hamer's life. Even with the pain and trauma lingering in her body, she would later use this story on state and national stages as concrete evidence of the experience of Black people in Mississippi. She didn't shy away from details because it was critical to her that people knew the truth of that harrowing experience. This story and other narratives of oppression and cruelty are central to Hamer's rhetorical witness.

To the National Stage: 1964 Democratic National Convention

On April 26, 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer and a few hundred other Mississippians went to the Democratic National Convention to form the Mississippi Free Democratic Party (MFDP) as a response to the all-white delegation that did not represent the population of Mississippi. By this time, Hamer was well known throughout Mississippi as an activist fighting voter suppression and economic disparity. However, after the DNC she got national notoriety. During the appeal for the

[244] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 57.
[245] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 58.

Freedom Democratic Party, Hamer gave a testimony of what happened to her in the Winona jail.[246] "By the end of her eight minutes, Hamer had exposed Mississippi for the sadistic brutality so characteristic of its treatment of blacks. Filled with emotion, Hamer wept. 'I felt just like I was telling it from the mountain,' she told a Jet reporter, Larry Still. 'That's why I like that song "Go tell it on the mount." I feel like I'm talking to the world.'"[247]

From this point on, Hamer found herself on the national stage weaving testimony with biblical admonitions for America to be more just for Black people. Her repeated assertion that America was "sick" and needed to get better and do better became a consistent theme throughout her messaging, alongside clear biblical support for the claims she was making. In addition to speaking, "Hamer began concentrating her efforts on economic self-reliance through the Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, Head Start programs, and the Freedom Farm Corporation, a cooperative venture she established to feed, clothe, and house Mississippi's poor. In many ways, the building of the corporation was largely a one-woman effort."[248] She raised money and inspired people in surrounding areas to create similar programs. Although she wasn't always respected by middle-class civil rights leaders because of how her speech patterns betrayed her lack of education, nobody could deny her impact.

Fannie Lou Hamer suffered the consequences of daring to be a Black woman who believed in her freedom in a world of white supremacy and racism. Her husband was often fired from his jobs as direct result of her advocacy and the work they were doing out of their home to

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[246] Although the television network hurriedly cut away from Hamer's testimony to cover a press conference that President Johnson called to lessen the impact of her statement, the MFDP received hundreds of telegrams in support of its efforts. In addition, the MFDP was offered a compromise of two seats, which Hamer adamantly demanded that they should not take—much to the dismay of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. who believed they should start with a compromise. For her, the audacity of a compromise was a slap in the face to those who were demanding freedom and an equal voice representative of the population in Mississippi. She made vocally clear that she would not accept two seats at the convention, and the party sided with her. Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 98–99.
[247] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 58.
[248] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, x.

help feed and collect food for others. They repeatedly suffered police harassment and had a myriad of threats aimed at them. Toward the end of her life, Hamer became severely ill, and unfortunately died in poverty even after all she had done. She spent her life giving all she had to others, and speaking about the realities of Mississippi—adding the voice of a poor woman to the movement for Black freedom. On March 14, 1977, Fannie Lou Hamer died of cancer. Her tombstone in Ruleville includes her famous quote, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Introduction to the Artifacts: The Voice of the Mississippi Delta

Fannie Lou Hamer's preaching was a response to her own experience, rooted in the urgency of the times. After the 1962 Ruleville meeting, she spent a great deal time speaking across different platforms and inviting people into the change that she wanted to see. Her extemporaneous style was woven with narrative, and she advocated for a justice that included poor, Black, Mississippi Delta residents, of which she was one. Her rhetoric was a product of her practice, seen through her storytelling, immense knowledge of Bible, and current events that she threads together in her invitations to others to join the work. This was hard work, and she knew it. She spoke testimony interwoven with biblical instruction, advocating for real change and critiquing any rhetoric and practice (especially from pastors) that offered no practical implications. Hamer wasn't asking people to do something that she was not actively participating in herself. She put her own body and life on the line for a cause she felt was worthy of the sacrifice: the cause of freedom for Black people, particularly by increasing economic prosperity and fighting voting suppression.

Her body was a text unto itself, displaying the history of brutality that had been done to her, and she used her voice not to let hate get the last word, but to speak of how we might

operate, live, and move beyond hate.[249] She often sang before speaking and prayed afterwards, creating her own worship service amid any larger event going on.[250] When people talk about hearing her speak, one thing is consistent—a dynamic articulated by Earnest Bracey: "If nothing else, Hamer suggested something quite significant and practical in terms of solving racial problems. Her magnetic personality and tired, serious eyes drew almost everyone's attention…. It was difficult for anyone to forget Hamer after hearing her speak."[251] Her extemporaneous style was not about a linear exposition and/or a perfectly outlined sermon; she offers anecdotal evidence, supported by biblical framing and invitation, with a clear message for her hearers to be a part of the solution even when it is hard.

This chapter explores these truths in two different artifacts, "We Haven't Arrived Yet" and "We're On Our Way." These artifacts are intentionally taken from early in her speaking career (1964) and later on (1976) to see the continuities across time. As previously mentioned, I assert three homiletical insights that stem from Hamer: storytelling as a strategy of truth, the constant use of "we" as a proclaiming of collective responsibility, and theological and scriptural assertions as foundation for critique. The artifacts studied here were given at two very different

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[249] In *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, Frank Thomas posits that one of the four qualities of the moral imagination is to "envision equality and represent that by one's physical presence." Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 45. He connects this to the violence consistently inflicted on Martin Luther King, Jr. during his public witness during the Civil Rights Movement. The risk to the body is a part of preaching a dangerous sermon in this paradigm of the moral imagination. Fannie Lou Hamer consistently experienced assaults and threats based on her activism and rhetoric. In addition, her body carried the stories and long-term impact of the brutal beating at Winona. Hamer's body was a representation of the exigencies she was responding to before she even said a word. She adds to that text through her preaching focused on orally responding to the exigencies present in her situation.

[250] Harry Belafonte was a friend and said, "I can't describe her voice as a voice. I have got to always talk about Fannie Lou Hamer singing and the power of her voice because there was a mission behind it and in it. I can describe Marilyn Horne, and I can describe Leontyne Price. [The] closest might be Mahalia Jackson, because certainly when Mahalia sang, there was mission in her song, especially when she sang anywhere in the movement." Mills, *This Little Light of Mine*, 19; Interview with Harry Belafonte, Los Angeles, Calif., January 28, 1991. Although I won't study her singing, her singing was often part of her appearances, and was deeply appreciated by many. In future study, I'm interested in considering the patterns of her speaking as liturgical movements.

[251] Bracey, *Fannie Lou Hamer,* 3.

times in her journey, as well as in different settings and to different audiences. As a result, the common trends across the two are indicative of the meta-codes of her rhetoric.

"We're On Our Way" was delivered to a group of Black Mississippians in September of 1964 in Indianola, Mississippi, just a few months after Hamer's appearance at the DNC. For upwards of two years she had been trying, with the help of her campaign manager Charles McLaurin, to get a speaking venue, but it wasn't until after her national stage appearance that she was given an opportunity to influence local politics in this way.[252] Mass meetings were gatherings that were critical to the movement because they were an opportunity for folks to hear from activists on the ground and get instruction for how they could participate.

"We Haven't Arrived Yet" was delivered at the University of Wisconsin in Madison on January 29, 1976, to a group of predominantly white listeners. This was a presentation followed by a question and answer period. I will focus on the "presentation" portion and show how this homiletical artifact offers insights in relation to the genre of preaching. This was one of Hamer's last public appearances because she was growing more ill and became unable to travel. Both of these homiletical artifacts demonstrate Hamer's unique preaching style and reflect the themes rooted in the exigency that emerges from her story.[253]

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[252] Fannie Lou Hamer, "'We're On Our Way,' Speech Delivered at a Mass Meeting in Indianola, Mississippi, September 1964," in *Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell it Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 66.

[253] I am using exigency as the precedent for rhetorical response that stems from the particularities of one's identity as seen through their story.

Homiletical Insights: The Rhetoric of Freedom

Storytelling as a Strategy for Truth-telling

The use of storytelling is critical to Fannie Lou Hamer's homiletic. She is most widely known for the ways that she garnered response through detailed testimony, opening up the ears of her hearers to the painful realities of Black people in Mississippi. In addition to personal testimony, she wove historical examples as precedent for her points; in other situations, she combined personal testimony with historical storytelling to weave meaning into the "why" of her demands. Storytelling evoked an emotional response from Hamer's hearers as they were faced with detailed accounts of white supremacy in action and charged to do something to change it. Whether she was speaking to Black audiences or in mixed company, Hamer used this rhetorical strategy to push the urgency of her requests and to speak truths that would otherwise be ignored—or perhaps, for those for whom these weren't their experiences, would be seen as too awful and inhumane to be true. This particular homiletical strategy is important through the lenses of exigency and intersectionality because it was through her specific narrative that the sense of urgency is made plain, and is seen explicitly in the rhetoric. It exposed the truth in a way that was undeniable (even if some chose to ignore it), which forced her hearers to make a choice about what to do with that truth instead of arguing against it.

Detailed Personal Testimony

In "We Are On Our Way,"[254] Hamer starts her preaching with, "First, I would like to tell you about myself." In the moments following this declaration, she unpacks her story.[255] Her goal was for listeners to hear truth in her testimony, to see the problem, and to feel encouraged to participate in the solution. She then says, "My name is Mrs. [claiming respect that wasn't often given to black women] Fannie Lou Hamer and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street in Ruleville, Mississippi."[256] After establishing who she is (which they know) and from where (which is important to her story), she continues with narratives of what has happened. Speaking about registering to vote, she recounts, "When we got here to Indianola, to the courthouse, that was the day I saw more policemens with guns than I'd ever seen in my life at one time. They was standing around and I will never forget that day."[257] She continues the story until she gets to their drive home, and being stopped by a patrolman who was watching the bus:

> When we got back to Indianola, the bus driver was charged with driving a bus the wrong color. This is the gospel truth but this bus had been used for year for cotton chopping, cotton picking and to carry people to Florida, to work to make enough to live on in the wintertime to get back here to the cotton fields the next spring and summer. But that day the bus had the wrong color.[258]

Again, she is setting the scene through her narrative, highlighting particular instances that were violent and oppressive in nature, stringing together more than one story so that her hearers would

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[254] To recount every piece of testimony in this artifact would be to rehearse the entire artifact in a way that wouldn't be productive; however, I aim to give you clear examples so that you can see how testimony is operative and how it becomes the foundation for the other homiletical insights.

[255] This is different than a sermon one might expect in a pulpit: starting with oneself explicitly, outside of an illustrative short story, may be seen as pulling away from the telos of pulpit preaching and towards a particular gospel. Non-pulpit preaching offers a wider range of flexibility; the telos for Black women is often justice, and therefore the means to get there via proclamation is different. For Hamer, a primary tool was her specific narrative.

[256] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.

[257] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.

[258] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.

know these experiences were the rule rather than the exception. After this account, she tells a story about her returning home and the consequences of simply voting:

> After we got to Ruleville, about five o'clock, Reverend Jeff Sunny drove me out into the rural area where I had been working as a timekeeper and a sharecropper for eighteen years. When I got there, I was already fired. My children met me and told me, said "Momma," said "this man is hot!" Said, "He said you will have to go back and withdraw [your registration] or you will have to leave."[259]

Hamer then recounts an exchange with Marlow, the plantation owner. She ends this story saying: "And I addressed and told him, as we have always had to say, 'Mister,' I say, 'I didn't register for you, I say, I was trying to register for myself.' He said, 'We're not ready for that in Mississippi.' He wasn't ready, but I been ready a long time. I had to leave that same night."[260] Following this, Hamer recounts several acts of violence that resulted from her trying to vote, including, "On the tenth of September in 1962, sixteen bullets was fired into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker for me."[261]

This first series of personal testimonies in "We Are On Our Way" framed the question she truly wanted her hearers to answer. The situations she described cannot continue for her, which gives her now a clear space to pose her question (which she's already answered with her testimony): "Now the question I raise: is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave? Where people are being murdered, lynched and killed because want to register to vote?"[262] Hamer's testimony stood as a witness to what was wrong, and which couldn't be argued because it was the truth of the experience. It was the foundation for her argument, supporting her demands and texturing the picture of what her proclaiming aimed to change.

[259] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.
[260] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.
[261] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.
[262] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.

Testimony invites hearers into the urgency of change and her claim that what has been doesn't have to be what is or will be.[263]

Stories from History Woven with Stories of Today

In "We Haven't Arrived Yet," Fannie Lou Hamer again uses personal testimony along with historical events. At this point in her journey, many to whom she speaks have already heard her story. So, she uses that story and weaves in other narratives from history to point again towards the issue and the need for continued work. Personal witness is not lost, but is framed within broader stories—which is still impactful storytelling. When talking about how "sick" America is, she says:

> Where millions of folks have been destroyed, stripped black men of their heritage—and Indians and any other minority group—but stripped us from our heritage, taken our names, integrated our families—from the beginnings… my grandmother was a slave and I just had plenty of white blue-eyed uncles… and today telling me, George Wallace, in Boston, Massachusetts that "let the states handle it, and don't bus the kids." Do you realize how sick we are?[264]

Here she uses her own experience of the story of her grandmother who birthed twenty children, only three of whom were not the result of rape by a white man—which meant many of her uncles and aunts were as light as white people. She cleverly points out that the integration of white people and Black people wasn't something new (speaking to the interracial nature of her uncles and aunts), but now it is inconvenient for Black people to bring it up because it meant rights and not oppression. Still talking about integration but focusing on schools, she says:

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[263] This is a sampling of the testimony in the sermon. It is a 45-minute sermon for which several minutes of it are detailed testimony. Hamer also recounts in detail the events of Winona. Similar to this series of testimony, she follows up with a question about the state of affairs. She then says, "But I want the people to know in Mississippi today, the cover has been pulled back off of you and you don't have any place to hide." Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.

[264] Fannie Lou Hamer, "'We Haven't Arrived Yet', Presentation and Responses to Questions at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, January 29, 1976," in *Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell it Like It Is*, ed. Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 176–185.

> Now I just want to ask one question: how do you think black people, Indian people, and any other oppressed folk feel celebrating something that, years ago, destroyed over twenty-five million of my people that was being brought here on the slave ships of Africa? Wiped out our heritage; raised families by our grandmothers; and taking our name and today saying that it's wrong to bus a child for equal education! See this kind of crap is nothing but an excuse. See, this is an excuse when they talking about you know, "we don't want the kids bused," and folks buying it![265]

Again, using a story to focus on how sick America was everywhere, not just in the South, she talks about Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination: "You know we supposed to been an example for the rest of the world, but how you think it feel when a man as nonviolent as Dr. Martin Luther King, that preached nothing but love and says it's wrong to kill, he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee? But it was people involved in that from the top to the bottom and they didn't all live in the South."[266] Fannie Lou Hamer uses storytelling as tool to gather evidence for her messages: America is sick, we have work to do, and these things are too urgent not be addressed and changed.

"We" the People: An Intentional Reminder of Collective Response

The use of "we" when talking about the situation at hand and the action required to move forward is a powerful tool because it makes Hamer and her hearers into a single unit: people who are in this together. For those who felt like brutality was an issue of the South, the use of "we" reminded them that no area of America (or the world) was immune to racism. For those who thought that it was enough to listen to her story and acknowledge it as bad, her continual use of "we" demanded a response from everyone listening: either you choose to act or you choose to ignore, but both are responses nonetheless. This is strategic because it made the work collective, and also reminded those listening that even after all Hamer has been through (as heard in her

[265] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.
[266] Hamer, "We Haven't Arrived Yet," 176–185.

testimony), she was still working and including others in that work rather than sending others out to do it. Hamer's use of "we" throughout both artifacts was clearly an intentional choice; "we" was constantly used when she could have said "I," as in "This is what I think and I believe and I do, so you should too." Her "we" was a reminder of collective struggle, with the hope for collective overcoming. Here I will highlight a few key moments from each artifact to make this point.

In "We're on Our Way," Hamer is speaking to a group of Black people in Mississippi, affirming that "we" (the Black listeners) were actually moving somewhere but we still had many places to go. She is also naming what Black people are up against while reframing the rhetoric of hate popular on opposing sides. She says:

> *We* are not fighting against these people because *we* hate them, but *we* are fighting these people because *we* love them and *we're* the only thing that can save them now. *We* are fighting to save these people from their hate and from all the things that would be so bad against them. *We* want them to see the right way… And I believe tonight, that one day in Mississippi—if I have to die for this—*we* shall overcome.[267]

Here she is showing that *we* are fighting, *we* are moving beyond hate—even if hate is what "they" are using. As a result, it isn't "I" who will overcome, but *we*. When speaking of her belief in legislative power as the reason why it is so critical for folks to register to vote, she asserted, "*We* want people, *we* want people over us that's concerned about the people because *we* are human beings. *We* have prayed and have hoped for God to bring about a change. And now the time has come for people to stand up."[268] In her closing, she does use "you" and "I," but makes clear these are for the purposes of *we*—again, strategically reminding listeners they are being charged to act, and that action together allows for a collective journey and reaping together. Hamer closes,

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[267] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74. Emphasis added.
[268] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74. Emphasis added.

> *We* want ours and *we* want ours now…. But *we* are determined today, *we* are determined that one day we'll have the power of the ballot. And the sooner you go to the courthouse, the sooner *we'll* have it. It's one thing, it's one thing I don't want to say tonight after I finish—and it won't be long—I don't want to hear you say, "honey I behind you." Well, move, I don't want you back there. Because you could be two hundred miles behind. I want you to see, "I'm with you." And *we'll* go up this freedom road together.[269]

That was the goal, that freedom would be a gift to the collective—and Hamer's continual use of "we" reminded them that they would not be alone.

In "We Haven't Arrived Yet," Hamer is speaking to a group of mostly white (although still mixed) and educated people in Wisconsin. Her use of "we" here had a similar strategy in reminding them that this was a collective effort. However, this "we" was used to show the solidarity of the Mississippians she represented, while also promoting a sense of collective urgency about racism and naming that despite how the audience might feel, "We are in this together." She proclaims:

> … blacks in the North is in the worse condition, most of them, than we are in the South because we know where we stand! And a lot of you don't. You know some of you get a few degrees, a pretty good house, and a bill you can't hardly pay—trying to live like somebody else and think you have arrived. But, honey, regardless of how you feel, *we* are in this bag together. And there's nobody at the University of Wisconsin and no other place in this country is free until I am free in the South.[270]

Again, although the struggle was seen to in the South—an untouchable place for northerners—Hamer wanted to be clear that nothing about the northern way of life makes them free, because "we" aren't free until we *all* are.

Scripture as Moral Foundation

Fannie Lou Hamer uses many biblical examples in her speaking. A daughter of a Baptist preacher and a lifelong person of faith, she knew the Bible deeply. Even though she spoke

[269] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74. Emphasis added.
[270] Hamer, "We Haven't Arrived Yet," 176–185.

extemporaneously, she quoted passages of scripture often, using them as clear parallels to the problems at hand. To think more specifically about her use of scripture and theological assertions, I break them up into three categories: 1) scripture to show God is on the side of the fight for freedom, 2) scripture used to critique the church, and 3) scripture used to critique white America. All of these point to scripture as a tool that directly parallels life, and as a collective moral compass that exposes the issues at hand.

1. Scripture to Show God is on the Side of the Fight for Freedom

In "We're On our Way," Hamer says, "When my family and I decided to move back in Sunflower County in December, the car that we had been paying on for the last three years, it was taken. We didn't have many things and part of them had been stolen. But just to show you that God wants people to stand up—so, we began at this address, 626 East Lafayette Street."[271] She articulates early that God wants the work to be done, so even though the car was gone they got a house. She places God on the side of the work she is inviting the people to join. After a string of stories, she then says:

> You see the point is about this, and you can't deny it, not either one of you here in this room—Not Negroes—we have prayed for a change in the state of Mississippi for years. And God made it so plain he sent Moses down in Egypt-land to tell Pharaoh to let my people go. And he made it so plain here in Mississippi the man that heads the project is named Moses, Bob Moses. And he sent Bob Moses down in Mississippi, to tell all these hate groups to let his people go.[272]

Even though this wasn't a church service, the use of this Exodus narrative would have been well known in the context of a group of Black people in a church setting. She uses scripture to place God on their side as encouragement, and as an assertion that this work is God's work.

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[271] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.
[272] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.

In "We Haven't Arrived Yet," Hamer references Mark 3:25 to name the state of the nation. She says:

> See, some of you all aint going to like it because you know, and I am just telling the truth and so you can, you know, you can respect the truth because if changes is not made in this sick country, it's not going to be *me* crumbling, *we* are going to crumble, because a house divided against itself cannot stand. A nation that's divided against itself is on its way out and when you see a place that's so prejudiced that anything is divided, you know anything is divided, not only for kids is for grown-ups.[273]

By directly paralleling this scripture and the nation, Hamer aligns God with the work at hand, and explicitly places in the role of evil the forces that are against liberation and freedom. Hamer later asserts, "And the sixth chapter of Ephesians and the eleventh and the twelfth verse said: 'Put on the whole armor of God that he may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.' And the twelfth verse say: 'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against power. Against principalities. Against the rulers of darkness of this world. Against spiritual wickedness in high places."[274] This work is a part of the armor against evil, and is the armor of God—so again, God is on the side of freedom.

2. Scripture to Critique the Church

This use of scripture primarily shows up in "We're On Our Way," although you can see it in other artifacts and in her question and answer after "We Haven't Arrived Yet." Hamer was known to be frustrated by clergy because she felt that the church could be doing much more than it was doing. "This is one of the things that I don't like," she said. "Every church door in the state of Mississippi should be open for these meetings; but preachers have preached for years what he didn't believe himself. And if he's willing to trust God, if he's willing to trust God, he

[273] Hamer, "We Haven't Arrived Yet," 176–185.
[274] Hamer, "We Haven't Arrived Yet," 176–185.

won't mind opening the church door."[275] Here, she is critiquing preachers' fears of being targeted if they fight for freedom, while naming that freedom is exactly what they have been preaching. She continued,

> Because the first words of Jesus's public ministry was: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim and bring relief to the captive." And you know we are living in a captivated society today. The thirty-seventh of Psalms said, "Fret not thouselves because of evildoers, neither be thy envious against the workers of iniquity for they shall be cut down like the green grass and wither away as the green herb. Delight thouselves in the Lord and verily thou shalt be filled." And we are determined to be filled in Mississippi today.[276]

Hamer's frustration was that preachers claimed things that she didn't see them practicing in ways that she found effective: "We know we have a long fight because the leaders like the preachers and the teachers, they are failing to stand up today."[277] Talking about a specific preacher, she said with frustration,

> The preacher said "I don't like bringing politics into the church." And when he says this it make me sick because he's telling a big lie because every dollar bill got a politician on it and the preacher love it. And if this man, and if this man don't choose to be a shepherd, he can be a sheep and follow the shepherd. …Now you can't tell me you trust God and come out to a church every Sunday with a bunch of stupid hats on seeing what the other one have on and paying the preacher's way to hell and yours too. Preachers is really shocking to find them out. You know they like to rear back in the corners and over the rostrum and said, "what God has done for Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego" but what he didn't know, God has done the same thing for Fannie Lou Hamer, Annell Ponder and Lawrence Guyot."[278]

Hamer names her frustration, and then asserts that she knows firsthand what God does—and that she wants the church to be a part of the solution.

[275] Hamer, "We're On Our Way", 66–74.
[276] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.
[277] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.
[278] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.

3. Scripture to Critique White America

Hamer also uses scripture to critique white America. In "We're on our Way," she says,

> Some of the white people will tell us, well, I just don't believe in integration. But he been integrating at night a long time! If he hadn't been, it would be as many light-skinned Negroes as it is in here. The seventeenth chapter of Acts and the twenty-sixth verse said: He has made of one blood all nations. So, whether you black as a skillet or white as a sheet, we are made from the same blood and we are on our way.[279]

Here, the Bible is used to support her claim about the need for Black people to vote, and that America must change. Hamer argues,

> America is divided against itself and without their considering us human beings, one day America will crumble. Because God is not pleased. God is not pleased at all the murdering, and all of the brutality, and all the killings for no reason at all. God is not pleased at the Negro children in the State of Mississippi suffering from malnutrition. God is not pleased because we have to go raggedy each day. God is not pleased because we have to go to the field and work from ten to eleven hours for three lousy dollars.[280]

God is not pleased at the state of affairs for Black people as a result of American racism.

Finally, Hamer uplifts Black people using the text, again reminding of the ways that whiteness is violent to their existence:

> "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." The beatitude of the Bible, the fifth chapter of Matthew said: "Blessed are they that moan, for they shall be comforted." We have moaned a long time in Mississippi. And he said, the meek shall inherit the earth. And there's no race in America that's no meeker than the Negro. We're the only race in America that has had babies sold from our breast, which was slavery time. And had mothers sold from their babes. And we're the only race in America that had one man had to march through a mob crew just to go to school, which was James H. Meredith. We don't have anything to be ashamed of. All we have to do is trust God and launch into the deep. You can pray until you faint, but if you don't get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap.[281]

Hamer claims that God is on their side, but also that there is work to be done. She uses scripture to back her claim that the lives of Black people will get better, but that will require work from

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[279] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.
[280] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.
[281] Hamer, "We're On Our Way," 66–74.

them as well—even as she names ways that white America has made Black lives particularly horrendous.

Conclusion

Fannie Lou Hamer believed that freedom was possible, that justice was not outside of the people's grip, and that her experiences that told her otherwise didn't have to be the story forever—and certainly not for those coming behind her. She spent the latter part of her life publicly advocating for voter registration and ways of mitigating the poverty that was ever-present for Black people in Mississippi. Her willingness to tell her story in uncut ways, to speak to the masses using scripture as a parallel to the world and therefore a tool for critique, and demanding that "we" be foundational to the work, comprise the particular homiletic insights offered by her unique perspective—insights that we can all listen to and learn from. Her rhetoric, rooted in the experiences of what had been, the work in which she was engaged, and a vision of a future that she believed in moving towards, shows the nature of preaching from her perspective. Her unwillingness to compromise in ways that lessened the blow of her truth was the gift of her rhetoric and her preaching fervor.

Fannie Lou Hamer's rhetoric is a product of her story. Her preaching responds to the life that she was living and her hope for a better tomorrow. Her preaching is uniquely hers. Hamer's homiletical strategies offer new tools to consider when thinking about preaching outside of the institutional church and in different settings. When speaking about her preaching, hearers could not deny that her witness made them think and at least consider what she was saying because it was based in so much unadulterated truth.[282] She called for America to see the truth of its

[282] Such comments included: "As an orator, Hamer was extraordinary—a black heroine who gave 'hair raising' speeches against the Mississippi political establishment all over the country." Mills, This Little Light of Mine, 9.

sickness, and in the same breath to know that where we are doesn't have to be where we remain. She believed deeply in freedom, recognizing it would take everyone's action to get there and that America had to change. As Hamer asserted:

> There's so much hypocrisy in America. The land of the free and the home of the brave is all on paper. It doesn't mean anything to us. The only way we can make this thing a reality in America is to do all we can to destroy this system and bring this thing out to the light that has been under the cover all these years. The scriptures have said, "The things done in the dark will be known on the house tops."[283]

[283] Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges,* 16.

IV. CONCLUSION:

A HOMILETICAL HERMENEUTIC OF PARTICULARITY:

INSIGHTS OF BLACK WOMEN'S NON-PULPIT PREACHING

Black women preachers proclaiming on platforms outside of the pulpit bring a critically new perspective and voice to homiletics. Their preaching wasn't limited to Sunday morning at the 10:45 am service, but expanded across each day of the week, advocating for the freedom and flourishing of Black people. Through their witness, I assert that preaching is not about the location of the pulpit or the institutional backing that is often required for individuals to take a space in that pulpit. Black women's non-pulpit preaching is a practice of proclaiming the hope for justice as truth, oriented towards moving the society to a more beloved place of wholeness and possibility, rooted in freedom and the care of those on whom their witness is focused. Such preaching proposes immediate change. These preaching women didn't have the luxury of vague or abstract messaging, after which hearers would leave without knowing what they were being asked to do. They spoke with clarity and conviction, aimed toward specific goals—conviction that today invites us to consider the nature and purpose of preaching in a new light. Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer practiced preaching with the telos of justice in the here and now, in direct response to the specific needs they were experiencing. Their preaching practice was rooted in a change they envisioned that day, because urgency was at the forefront for their communities. Their words and witness demonstrate unique homiletical insights rooted in their lives and immediate situations, and requiring urgent action.

Their contribution to the discipline of homiletics starts with centering the voices that have been excluded from the study of preaching. For several reasons, these preachers have often been

left out of our courses of study. First, Black women preachers haven't been widely studied—even those who managed to gain access to pulpits. Patriarchy continues to serve as a gatekeeper to Black women's access to pulpit spaces, and although the study of the preaching of Black women has expanded among different Black women homileticians, it is still far from equitable in relation to their male counterparts. In addition, even though Black women are being studied, the location of preaching has still been primarily in the institutional church and formal worship services. When the study of preaching is solely or even primarily engaged as a pulpit practice, we risk the erasure of the fullness of Black women's preaching practice, along with so many others whose voices have been marginalized, or who have been excluded from the pulpit. This intervention challenges the notion that preaching is limited to any space, particularly one with a history of exclusion.[284] We have much to learn from the homiletical witness of Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer, who are Black women non-pulpit preachers.

A Homiletical Hermeneutic of Particularity, Intersectionality, and Exigency

This project uses biography as a fulcrum for understanding the homiletical rhetoric of Truth, Burroughs, and Hamer in order to illuminate the ways that their embodiment and lived experience were critical to their rhetoric. Black women non-pulpit preachers all speak from a *homiletical hermeneutic of particularity, intersectionality, and exigency*. A homiletical hermeneutic of particularity, intersectionality, and exigency is a lens through which a preacher's markers of identity converge with specific responses to her context and the world around her, and become the interpretive tool for her preaching. These women and their *specific* lived

[284] I want to be clear that I am not discounting pulpit preaching or pushing back on the importance of that practice. I assert that pulpit preaching is one form of preaching, not preaching in its entirety, and that studying preachers beyond the limitations of this space offers us a robustness to the understanding of preaching, including who can do it and which proclaimers are a part of our historical preaching lineage.

particularities—which we tend not to hear because they've been marginalized in society and from the pulpit—teach us about why particularities matter in general, why their specific circumstances bear exigency for the world and the gospel, and why it is problematic to exclude the voices that bring these particularities to the forefront of preaching. These women become a paradigm for why our understanding of preaching should be expanded beyond the pulpit, why particularities matter for the preaching of truth, and why marginalized voices should not be excluded. These preachers see the world through their experiences and narratives, and through their hopes for a better world for their specific communities. Sojourner Truth spoke as a previously-enslaved Black woman from New York, a heritage through which she interpreted women's suffrage and the rights of Black people. She often spoke to mixed or primarily white audiences, which shaped how she spoke and what she said. Nannie Helen Burroughs began speaking at twenty-one years old and had a long career across decades. Her primary speaking was in Baptist circles and educational spaces. Although sometimes she spoke in mixed spaces, she primarily addressed Black people in her quest for Black women's forward movement, especially in regards to Black women domestic workers and those seen as less than even within the Black community. Fannie Lou Hamer came from Mississippi, and talked about the ways that her socioeconomic status set her apart from other aspects of the movement in which she participated; she spoke through the story of her lived experiences of violence and other injustices she was fighting. All three of these Black non-pulpit preachers demonstrate that their proclamation is rooted in their lives.

In the previous chapters, I have explored the unique homiletical practices that defined the preaching of each of these women. In this final chapter, I excavate key overarching homiletical insights. Each insight is posed as a question because studying these preachers gives us

possibility—not only in our notions of what preaching is but also in the invitation to all Black women preachers to consider their own preaching voices, the nature and purpose of who they are as preachers, and the context in which they choose to proclaim. All of these insights demonstrate that each preacher has a voice stemming from particularity.

Black women's non-pulpit preaching opens up several possibilities. The preaching is rooted first in context, with a goal of responding to the exigency at hand so that some change might result from the rhetoric brought forth. For each of these preachers, the starting point of preaching is herself and the world she inhabits, and everything else is interpreted through the lens of that truth—offering others a piece of that truth through an invitation to practice. Through engaging their Blackness, their womanness, and the other markers of their lives, they created and engaged particular rhetorical situations. By listening to the witness of Black women non-pulpit preachers, preachers in general must consider their own particularity as critical to their preaching, not divorced from it. In addition, the spectrum of places for preaching, and who is included both in our contemporary understandings and our historical lineages of preaching, will continue to expand. Out of the homiletical hermeneutic of particularity we gain insights into the sanctity of story, the exigent function, the critical importance of practices that parallel preaching, and scripture and theology as a moral compass.

The Sanctity of Your Story: How does your story serve the purpose of your preaching?

Black women non-pulpit preachers teach us the significance of personal narrative in proclamation. Their embodiment as Black women and their experience of the times and places they were living were not addendums or cute illustrations, but were the heart and substance of their preaching. These women used their life stories as both an effective tool for displaying the

current circumstance, and a means of explaining a response to make that situation better. As people who were marginalized, their stories were often ignored or not told, and therefore bearing witness to their own lives and the lives of those around them who were also oppressed was central to their invitation to their hearers.

In different ways, Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer utilize their own stories and embodiment to provide concreteness to the messages they are speaking. Sojourner Truth points us to her womanhood as a Black woman and calls out injustice particular to her embodiment. She uses her experience as a previously-enslaved woman to expound her claims that women have rights—and that means *all* women. Nannie Helen Burroughs pulls from the narratives of what she has witnessed firsthand as a domestic worker. By hearing her story, we become aware of how that story was woven into her sense of urgency to develop a higher level of societal respect and access for all Black women, especially those who (like domestic workers) have been overlooked. Fannie Lou Hamer's rhetorical prowess centered her story as the sacred text of truth, refusing to shy away from details of her pain that might make others uncomfortable, as a practice of bearing witness to the things she was fighting against. All three highlight their stories in their own way, yet the common thread is that their story is sacred and has authority, their truth is worth proclaiming, and this is foundational to their preaching.

Centering their story as sacred also expands and reinforces the collective memory of the hearers. Even if hearers previously hadn't known that the reality of the conditions being described by these preachers, the hearers are now responsible for having that information. A story that is not yours may be easier to ignore or deny as truth, but none of these preachers'

hearers can deny that they have been told there is something that can be done to change the realities. In *Preaching as Testimony*, Anna Carter Florence argues:

> Preaching in the tradition of testimony shifts the locus of authority away from the ministerial office and places it with the one who testifies: that is, the one who has seen and believed the liberating power of God's Word and who then risks proclaiming the truth of the gospel. This shift locates authentic and authoritative preaching not in the ecclesial center but in particular situations of struggle and trial at the margins, in which competing worldviews and even lives might be at stake.[285]

Black women non-pulpit preachers find themselves in this testimonial tradition, already pushing against normative ideas of who can preach and what the ministerial office contains. However, while these preachers use God's word written in text, they lean on God's lived word through the sacred "text" of their experiences. The *struggle* Florence talks about occupies the center of their narratives. Authority migrates from the singular witness of the biblical text toward the witness of the sacred text of their lived struggles for justice. It is this authority that grounds their agency to continue writing and speaking. Their struggles are central to their accounts of their lived experiences and the lived experiences of those with and for whom they advocate, resisting the racist, sexist and often classist worldviews of the environments in which they live. In their use of story as a tool of proclamation, they claim space and highlight a new tradition where who they are and what they have experienced is central to their sacred proclamation. They use story as both declaration and invitation for their audience to respond, which stirs more a liberating force that resists and challenges the normative power structures that have made the realities they aim to change possible in the first place. The stories and testimonies are the sacred text of their narratives, supported by other "texts" woven in to complete the message. These Black women non-pulpit preachers teach all Black women preachers to excavate and consider our stories worth telling as a part of sacred truth and for the purposes of the preaching impact. This impact aims at

[285] Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, xxvi-xxvii.

increasing freedom, justice, and collective belovedness, especially for those that have not been given the luxury of these things from the systems they inhabit.

As a result of listening to Truth, Burroughs, and Hamer, all marginalized preachers might consider the question, "How does my story serve the purpose of my preaching?" Preachers are often made to feel tied to interpreting the biblical text, the contemporary context (today's news and the social location of the local community), and cultural references that would translate to the community of listeners. However, the specificity of personal witness and testimony as critical to one's homiletical structure is an offering from these non-pulpit preachers. Typically "witness" and "testimony" in a preaching context is considered through expressions of "What Jesus has done for me," but these women are speaking witness to what has happened in their lives as something important to hear on its own terms. This kind of truth-telling is still rooted in the power of God for them, but that power is referential to their lived experiences and the ways they believe that change can occur as a result of preaching. They expand the notion of testimony in that it can also serve as an invitation to participate in God's activity of justice in this world.

This question also invites preachers to consider which stories are always or almost never told. As Black women preachers, Truth's, Burroughs's, and Hamer's stories were often cast aside and not considered. By centering their stories, these preachers made known what had been pushed to the margins. Speaking their stories reveals what has not been heard, even as the speaking itself pushes against the norms of what "should" be heard. Black women preachers must consider how their stories are shaped within the larger context to determine their effective use, especially how the use of their story might be subversive and oriented to the work of justice.[286] Not all stories function the same way. That is why the question asks how one's story

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[286] Their experiences and lives also point out the importance of living towards justice and freedom for all as a gospel root, because people are literally dying (exigency) because we are not living the gospel. This is the clear function.

can be used towards the goal of preaching which is wholeness, justice, and freedom. The question from this insight doesn't aim to move preachers to ask, "How can we include more personal narratives in the sermon?" but "How can I use my personal narrative to increase belovedness, wholeness, possibility, freedom, justice?" For some non-Black, non-marginalized people, the answer may be that their personal narrative needs to be one of repentance and reparation, for example, and not one in which their own personal story is centered in the same way as these women in their preaching. Not all white, male, privileged, ordained preachers—or any other identity markers that are rooted in access and privilege—should or even could tell their personal stories as a means to proclaim a truth that moves the community toward freedom and justice. When one's story is already centered within the dominant culture, a different way of using of narrative may be the most effective towards the aforementioned goals. Not all personal narratives demonstrate exigency or illuminate justice, so it is critical that preachers find the ways in which their personal narrative aligns with these purposes of preaching.

By narrating their contextualized struggles for justice, non-pulpit preachers centralize and mobilize their own stories as equally sacred alongside the other stories being woven together for the purposes of the message. However, context matters and preachers should consider how to approach this in their own settings. Again, these are Black women non-pulpit preachers whose stories were not readily told. When Sojourner Truth articulates the specifics of her hard labor and work in the field, which for white women would have been considered men's work, she does so to parallel her humanity with those trying to deny it, prompting them to consider her question, "Am I not also a human being and a woman as well?" When Nannie Helen Burroughs names the lived experiences of domestic working women, she does so as one who has done that work and seen her mother and grandmother do so as well. The goal is to garner honor so that more

resources can be provided for this group that has been cast aside. When Fannie Lou Hamer tells the detailed narratives of her beating at the Winona prison, she paints a concrete picture for her hearers of the horrors that they have agency to respond to and change. Her story aimed to open the minds and hearts for the purposes of action. These stories are sacred as they enliven and point towards the message of justice and the invitation to participate in its coming as a part of God's activity in the world.

Exigent Function: To what are you responding, and how are you asking your hearers to respond?

Black women non-pulpit preachers carve out expansive platforms for their proclamation. Whether they were speaking to thousands or just a handful of people, the sense of urgency was the same. They weren't speaking in abstract ideas or inaccessible metaphors to a "universal" audience. Their preaching responded directly to a specific problem that they aimed to change. The telos of their preaching was clear: an actionable response. Their rhetoric did not leave the end goal up to the imagination of the hearer because it was far too important. Lives were literally at stake. Their preaching practice was a response to an immediate situation that needed to be addressed; the function of the preaching was in the here and now, rooted in justice and an inbreaking of God in this moment, not in the eschatological beyond. Context is paramount in the content, because urgent need is not without particularity but rooted in it.

Exigency worked in two ways for Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer, which helps us think expansively about preaching. On one end, they were responding to an urgent need of their community that they wanted addressed. As such, they used rhetoric to invite hearers to accept the exigency they were proclaiming as a catalyst for action.

Each preacher made clear that they were looking for tangible change, not simply a "knowing." Sojourner Truth was responding as a Black woman in a world where neither Black rights nor women's rights were equal to white men's rights. She wanted women's rights *and* Black rights in a time where neither were supported. To ensure that Black women would not be lost in the pushes for those rights, her aim was to reveal the issues and the absurdity of it all while standing in her fullness as a Black woman; she declared, "Give women their rights." Nannie Helen Burroughs was responding to the harsh conditions of domestic labor occupations that were primary spaces of employment for Black women, as well as the ways these women were looked down upon and seen as less than within the Black community itself. In addition, she was responding to racism and sexism (among other things) that created a host of injustices, which then became the catalysts for her creation of clubs and other organizations. Her rhetoric about these conditions was a response to them and a means to get others to respond with their actions. Her preaching always had practical invitations and a reminder that if you weren't going to actively help, at least don't get in the way of progress. Fannie Lou Hamer was responding to the conditions of Black people in Mississippi, noting that often times the voices of poor Black people, especially those uneducated and in the South, were being left out of the conversation. She used her rhetoric as a response to these conditions, and then named responses for her hearers: there is no not-responding to the situation of Black poor people in Mississippi Delta, and everyone has a role they can play in bringing forth more justice. These women preached towards new action, believing in a world that could be built by those who were listening.

With exigency in the forefront, Black women preachers might ask themselves, "What am I responding to now?" and "How am I asking my listeners to respond in concrete ways?" The world around these Black women presented urgent situations. They chose to respond, lifting up

their voices as Black women from the margins and a creating space where none had been made for them. Preachers might consider what action they want their preaching to inspire, and how they hope that action affects their community in a way that creates more justice, belovedness, and freedom for all—especially those for whom society doesn't make room. It's critical that all preachers know that we are all responding to urgent conditions, whether directly from our narrative or in the community around us that is too often a casualty of various forms of privilege. The idea of "calling" and "being called to preach," then, becomes an invitation to participate in the inbreaking of God for a clear purpose: response that positively impacts the whole, not just those for whom things are easy or comfortable. Call is not an abstract invitation from God, but a call from God to an actual situation in order to bring more justice, hope, and freedom to this earth, enlivening the possibilities of more freedom for all.

The telos of non-pulpit preaching is always pragmatic and tied to a concreteness of real issues, which creates room for a proclaiming space to emerge. Marginalized preachers across platforms should consider these questions, so that listeners are invited to participated in a new world through their actions. In addition, such preachers must wrestle with how they are articulating the urgency for action as these women have shown us that the right time to respond in the face of injustice is always now. Black women non-pulpit preachers show us the benefit of exigent response to preaching. It enlivens action and pushes rhetoric from the abstract to the actualized, animated in the practices of hearers.

The Practices that Parallel Preaching: How do your practices align with your proclamation?

Black women's non-pulpit preaching emerges from their practice, aiming to inspire the practice and work of others for the sake of a more just world as seen above in the exigent function. The study of preaching has primarily been rooted in the moment of oratorical offering to a group of listeners. The hope is certainly that preachers are living what they are proclaiming, however the tangible evidence of that is not always clear. Through the preaching witness of Truth, Burroughs, and Hamer we see what preaching looks like when practice forms and supports preaching. Knowing the story of these preachers, alongside listening to their rhetoric, we see clearly that their rhetoric was backed up by habits of action—strong and often collectively shared practices. They were already engaged in and practicing what they were asking others to do. This is critical because this invitation holds proclaimers accountable to their words beyond the rhetorical situation. It requires an authenticity that can be seen by those listening, which then compels the listeners to respond with action of their own—ideally practices that increase justice and freedom.

Truth, Burroughs, and Hamer engaged in specific, goal-oriented actions that were in direct alignment with their preaching. Sojourner Truth demanded respect and an acknowledgement of her humanity, which she first gave herself. In re-naming herself beyond her previously-enslaved self, she used her agency and made clear that she would acknowledge her own journey; her renaming was a declaration of her fight for more freedom through the journey to truth. Nannie Helen Burroughs advocated for the education of Black women, access to more resources for Black people at large, and a church that would see itself as a resource for Black flourishing every day, not only Sunday. As such, she built a school supported by Black funding

to show that Black people can build things and can support ourselves to gain access to what we need. She also created organizations for Black women to find community and be able to serve in ministry where they had otherwise been unable to do so. Again, she didn't simply talk about these things, telling others what they should and should not do; her practices shaped her rhetoric such that she was able to speak truth from what she knew and invite others to join her and do their part, unique to their own particularity. Fannie Lou Hamer continuously put her body and life on the line for what she believed in: Black voting rights and economic support for Black people. Her request for others to sacrifice wasn't without a bodily memory of what her request could mean, and her plea that those listening advocate for poor Black people in Mississippi—not just certain Black people—came from her experience of doing that work as a poor Black person in Mississippi, and using what little resources she had to make change. For all three, the praxis of preaching emerged from what they were doing, emphasizing that their rhetoric was rooted in that truth.

Preachers might ask themselves, "Am I preaching for an actual response?" Again, if not, that is something to be addressed because preaching aims towards response. As Lisa Thompson asserts in *Ingenuity*, "Namely we are left with the criteria that preaching does not exist for the sake of itself, but somehow preaching is accountable to life on the ground because life itself is sacred."[287] For Black women non-pulpit preachers, this accountability is more than just an ear to the ground by reading the newspaper. This is an ethical commitment to preaching from your lived and practiced truth, and not preaching *at* people with requirements that you as preacher have no intention of living into. For the three Black women preachers I studied, this looked like activism and pushing for new policies, resources, and opportunity for the Black community.

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[287] Thompson, *Ingenuity,* 107.

However, this commitment is not limited to these particular types of practice. Sermons focused on self-care should come from someone practicing wellness, not just talking about it. Preaching that invites stewardship should come from practices of alignment and stewardship beyond money: with time, people, and other resources that allow for life. Preaching and practice should not be disparate in the life of the proclaimer. Preaching is not only an act of teaching or proclamation or even testimony, but of living the things that preaching proclaims about how the world is supposed to be. Black women non-pulpit preachers show us an embodied version of preaching that aligns the personhood of the preacher with the act of preaching, and claims that that personhood is central to the truth of the proclamation that aims towards justice and freedom.

Scripture and Theology as Moral Compass: How do scripture and our view of God support the work of justice?

Black women non-pulpit preachers use scripture as familiar points of reference to create new parallels with concrete, contemporary situations. For non-pulpit preachers, the exegetical exposition that we might expect in pulpit preaching is not required. But for these preachers, scripture was in many ways a moral compass, reaffirming with theological and scriptural back up their assertions about action. God was on the side of those who would take action that aligned with the work the preachers were proposing. Throughout the preaching of these women, their theological claim consistently aligns their work with a call from God, and the reasoning behind their invitations to their hearers is rooted in scripture. One of the things we learn is that the ways they rhetorically engage their particularity requires both *a lens and response* of justice. We can learn from these preachers how we can read and attend to our own particularities through a lens of justice, and then align our scriptural and theological uses toward justice, as well.

Both Fannie Lou Hamer and Sojourner Truth were extemporaneous preachers, pulling scriptural references from memory to use as theological backing for practical assertions throughout their preaching. Although Nannie Helen Burroughs was less extemporaneous, her use of scripture was similar in that pieces were taken from throughout the Bible to support her point and create pragmatic parallels to what she was claiming about the world. Truth specifically engages scripture to cultivate expansive memory, bringing in new ideas woven with her experience, such that the text was heard in a new way by her, often white, hearers. Burroughs uses scripture as a historical precedent, placing women like Miriam among biblical "greats" to remind her hearers that what she is advocating—the inclusion of women—isn't new and is always critical. Fannie Lou Hamer used scripture as the foundation of her visualization of how the world should operate. Scripture was the underpinning of her critiques of the world around her: how can we live like *this*, when the text says *this*? Hamer referenced many different texts within any given sermon, stringing them together toward her overall message that God wants Black people to be free and is behind this work we are doing—so let's do it. Each of them uses the text and their placement of God's activity as a moral compass, asserting what was right and what was wrong through the examples from the biblical text.

In reflecting on these non-pulpit preachers, Black women preachers might ask, "How is scripture guiding my preaching toward justice? Where have I positioned God?" All of the women in this study imagined God on the side of their work towards more freedom and a more equitable living opportunities for Black people and the specific communities they were fighting for within the larger Black community. This was clear in their rhetoric. Preachers in the margins must consider where they see God's activity in the fight of justice and freedom, and whether they are committed to articulating that activity clearly in their preaching practice. Black women non-

pulpit preachers demonstrate God's divine support as they are asking folks to respond practically. God is concerned with the everyday and lived struggles that are exacerbated by systemic oppression, and God is on the side of those fighting for justice. That affirmation is clear to these preachers—an important assertion for anyone preaching to consider.

These questions also allow for preachers to concretize the telos of preaching, and to consider their own theological commitments and how those emerge in their preaching. This will shape their exegetical work if that's a part of their preaching practice. For non-pulpit preachers, these questions are critical because an exposition of any one story may not be effective for their goals of action. A threading of multiple stories may provide a stronger basis for a clear moral backing, via the biblical text, for the assertions being made. Scripture, sacred text, and God being on the side of the work for freedom are critical in the language and goals of Black women's non-pulpit preaching. If preachers across platforms engage these questions, they might find clearer theological messages and also offer their listeners clarity on how they are participating in God's work through the invitation of the sermon.

Conclusion

Black women non-pulpit preachers offer the gift of particularity amidst exigency, creating a specific lens for their proclamation, which had direct and practical implications for the societies in which they lived and the communities to which they were accountable. Specifically, from Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer we recover and uncover new truths when the lived narrative is woven with the scriptural one, such that a new gospel, a new mission, and a new commission are birthed. Preaching is a practice of proclaiming truth, oriented towards moving the community of listeners beyond their current practices and ways of

being and into a place of more freedom and possibilities of justice for those who have not had them. When we listen to the preaching and note the rhetorical insights from Black women's non-pulpit preaching, our preaching actually changes. New questions arise, and new ways of thinking about what we are doing and why we are doing it emerge in ways that enhance and further the study of preaching.

I came into this project with a question that will forever change the way I teach and practice preaching, and my aim is that it also changes how the field of homiletics thinks about preaching. How would the study of preaching change if rhetorical studies were centered on Black women's proclamation, including those who weren't often called preachers because they were not located in the pulpit? This project first argues that studying Black women's non-pulpit preaching through the layering of both biography and narrative expands our notion of preaching in necessary ways. I also argue that preaching includes pulpit practice but is not limited to it. The study of preaching has new places to explore—and more importantly, when Black women are centered in that study new homiletical insights are offered because of the ways that Black women preach. Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer give us the gift of a homiletical hermeneutic of particularity, intersectionality and exigency as a foundation for one's preaching. Through their preaching practices, we are invited to consider how we as preachers use our own stories, what we are responding to, how our practices align with our proclamation, and how scripture and theology are intertwined with these other themes.

This is the beginning of a conversation, not the end of one. This work isn't limited to Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Studying preaching through the lens of Black women non-pulpit preachers opens up a new threshold to possible inquiries into the nature and purpose of preaching as seen across a myriad of platforms: exploring these

insights of preaching by studying other non-pulpit Black women preachers in different realms: singers, poets, other educators and activists, and nonprofit organizers; whoever found themselves outside of the pulpit but still preaching. This type of inquiry opens up an array of possibilities to consider what preaching is, what its purpose is, and how this expansive view can be taught. It also sparks the question of the liturgical practices that surround these non-pulpit preaching moments and how they might add to the study of ritual and liturgical studies. The expansion of preaching beyond the pulpit is necessary to envision ways of thinking about preaching on platforms not directly connected to worship services, and in many cases without an institutional church affiliation.

In our contemporary world, preachers span many places and spaces. In addition, while the localized church is still critically important, individuals are finding sacred space in other places and ritual environments in which preaching is critical in different and nuanced ways. Preaching is a practice that includes the pulpit but has never been, and never will be, limited to a single platform or a single demographic in order to be alive and dynamic. Listening to the practice and proclaiming of Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer expands our knowledge of what preaching can be, and what we might pay attention to when listening to preachers. Their insights also reveal new questions we in homiletics might consider when thinking about what preaching is, what it means to be "called" to preach, and the critical nature of context in sermon formation.

The gift of a homiletical hermeneutic of particularity, intersectionality, and exigency that rests on the aforementioned four pillars, is that preaching is a practice woven with one's person and story, not devoid of it. Too often in pulpit preaching, Black women preachers are taught to focus primarily on the gospel of Jesus, as if who they are is not critical to their proclaiming. It is

actually critical for preachers whose voices have been on the margins to take inventory of who they are and preach from a place of particularity so that their stories are woven into the sacred memory of those whose stories are most spoken. Preaching isn't stripped of the self; it quite literally emerges from the self, woven through the expansive nature of a call that uses words spoken aloud. One's unique circumstances and ways of being carve out a particularly rhetorical rhythm that has attachments and threads connected to others, but that stands on its own.

Black women's preaching, especially beyond the pulpit, shows us the necessity of the real presence of the self in the preaching moment, and the ways that self-disclosure, personal experience, and the clear assertion of who one is are a strong foundation for the rhetoric one offers and therefore the invitation one offers their hearers. Black women's non-pulpit preaching invites us to consider more ways to listen and understand preaching. In an anti-Black, anti-woman, anti-poor world, Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer chose to find the audacity to speak prolifically for causes they believed in, and placed what they were saying alongside what they were doing. These preachers, moving through different platforms but with clear messages rooted in justice and the hope for Black flourishing, teach us so much about preaching. Their words, proclaimed across a myriad of platforms, are reminders of the expansive nature of preaching and the gospel of truth declaring justice and freedom as its goal. As the church folks would say, "That'll preach."

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