Personified Preaching: Black Feminist Sermonic Practice In Literature And Music

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Abstract
PERSONIFIED PREACHING: BLACK FEMINIST SERMONIC PRACTICE IN LITERATURE AND MUSIC

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

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

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