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Fetching Spiritual Power: Black Women's Preaching Bodies as African-Centered Womanist Oratory

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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

Fetching Spiritual Power: Black Women's Preaching Bodies as African-Centered Womanist Oratory

By Melva L. Sampson

In *Fetching Spiritual Power*, I examine how Black women's bodies preach in ways that affirm the value of Black embodiment. Through the carving out of sacred spaces, Black women preachers use the performed word to intentionally disrupt the popular terrains where Black bodies are literally and metaphorically disembodied. African-centered womanist oratory, I contend, becomes a means through which Black women's bodies generate and transmit spiritual power from alternative sources to unfetter themselves and their communities from the remaining vestiges of racial and gender disparities. To support this claim, I use two concepts to tease out the features of Black women's embodied liberation preaching: fetching and Àjé. Fetching is the act of retrieving "old" or "indigenous" community practices in order to sustain one's current reality within interlocking oppressive systems. Tied to the principle of fetching is Àjé, the Yoruba principle that describes the capacity of creating and transforming people by way of powerful speech and divine authority. Fetching and Àjé illuminate the unseen and unconscious connections between African American cosmology and religions of the African Diaspora, which are made manifest in the sacred preaching forms drawn upon by Black women preachers. *Fetching Spiritual Power* is using autoethnographic methods, and concludes that Black women's bodies, preach in culturally elaborated ways as spiritually powerful sign emitting texts that attend to their body and the embodied presence of others.

Fetching Spiritual Power: Black Women's Preaching Bodies and African Centered Womanist Oratory

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Dedication

To the Sacred Empowered Mothers.

To my ancestors both known and unknown from whom I fetch spiritual power daily. For every prayer you prayed on this plane of consciousness and the next so that I might be free, I give thanks. The battle is not over, yet I press on!

To my womanish girls: Frii Nafisah-Joi and Phoenix Imani-Rose. There is no greater joy than raising you to be thinking beings in this world. I wrote this for two reasons: so that you will know that it is obtainable and so that you will remember your own spiritual power.

To Jayden Christian Boone-Young, your life matters to me!

To the three children I conceived and carried but who never had the opportunity to draw breath on this side. You remain in my heart.

To the first Àjé, I encountered, my mother, Norvell Ann Robinson Sampson Holyfield. You are my first teacher. In your womb you placed your hope in me to break the cycle. I hope I have made you proud.

To my blood sisters, Sunya Sampson Wilson and Juliana Sampson one day we will sit around the 'kitchen table' and tell the story about how we made it over!

To my partner in love and life, Darrick! Sir, you are a sure foundation upon which I stand secure. Your resolve to see me through is a true healing balm. You give me complete joy!

To Ieshia Renee Currie and LeRoy Wells…

To Sandra Bland

To those yet to be born…

I dedicate this dissertation to each of you. Ase, Ase Ase-O.

Acknowledgements

I must begin by giving thanks to my dissertation committee: Drs. Teresa L. Fry Brown (chair), Dianne M. Stewart, Emmanuel Y. Amugi Lartey, Theophus Smith and Sarita Kaya Davis (Georgia State) and the Graduate Division of Religion in the Laney Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Emory University. Your support has been immeasurable. Thank you for seeing my potential and for continuing to journey with me until I recognized it also. You have been a community that as Dr. Itihari Toure says, "Is strong enough to hold my truth." I am clear that I am because you are—Ubuntu lives!

In 1997 I graduated from Howard University with a Master of Arts in Communications. Then, I believed I wanted to be a press secretary for a member of congress. I was awarded a prestigious Patricia Roberts Harris Public Affairs Fellowship to work in the office of a United States Representative. I was on my way. At the end of my term, I decided that maybe being a press secretary or working in Congress was not a good fit. I turned to education and non-profit work. One evening after a particular hard day at work, I came home to the following message: "Hey Melva! When are you gonna stop playing around and go ahead and get the Ph.D.?" I laughed out loud and casually went on with my evening routine. I had no desire to do doctoral work, so I thought. I didn't respond to the message right away. A few days later, I received a phone call that LeRoy Wells, my Howard professor, suffered from a massive heart attack while driving down 16th Street in Washington, DC and died. It took another Master's degree for me to finally lean in to the voice to pursue further graduate studies. I am grateful to Dr. Wells for identifying in me what had not yet fully surfaced.

It is important for me to also acknowledge the first post-secondary institution that contributed greatly to my intellectual and spiritual development: Virginia Union University. You gave me the confidence to believe that I could. Shouts out to Deborah Ford, the director of Hartshorn Dormitory. She made us learn the Negro National Anthem and the VUU alma mater and we had to recite it every night. I was walking in a legacy of resistance even then. To Sandra Burrell, Nurse Alice McClain and Walton Meekins who kept me in check the last two years of my tenure. To all of my classmates, friends and co-alumni—it's so hard to be a Panther!!!

I am indebted to the faculty and staff at Candler School of Theology at Emory University for formally introducing me to theological education. To Alton B. Pollard, III who introduced me to the continent of Africa and Michael Joseph Brown who allowed me to sit in his office and ponder what it means to be Christian and of African descent—thank you. To Luther Smith, a.k.a. "Quiet Storm" who channeled Howard Thurman's spirit—a guide unto my feet and a lamp unto my path. Thanks to each of you, "I found God in myself and loved her/ I loved her fiercely."

Prior to starting doctoral work, I was blessed with the opportunity of a life time, which was to serve in historic Sisters Chapel at Spelman College as the program manager for the Sisters Chapel WISDOM (Women in Spiritual Discernment of Ministry) Center. A large part of my assignment was to aid young Africana women in finding the "sound of their genuine." In doing so, I finally discovered what Professor Wells saw in me all of those years ago. I accepted my call to the academy. This work was sparked by conversations with WISDOM Center residents and staff. To date, this was the best professional job I ever had. The labor was great but the reward was even greater. Thank you to Rev. Dr. Lisa Diane Rhodes, Ms. Sallie Burns and Ms. Renee

Leonard—a true dream team, we were. While at Spelman, I developed family beyond Sisters Chapel. To the 'sisters at the table,' you've prayed me through. I am so grateful for each of you: Felecia, Lenora, Carmen, Angela, Dineo, Katina and Quisa.

Truly I never would've made it without the network of the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE). From the influence of Sharon Watson Fluker to now the influence of Stephen Lewis and Matthew Williams, my worldview is so much more expansive. Darlene, Kimberly, Fran and Elsie—my folks! I am also thankful to my doctoral fellowship cohort of 2009-2011. I have admired many of you either up close or from afar and have been amazed by your brilliance and commitment to broadening diversity within our respective fields. Your work is edgy, creative and non-conforming. Sometimes when I get overwhelmed by this work, I scroll through the FTE social media pages and am reminded that I am not alone. Thank you.

To be clear my research has no reach without the support of the institutional and local Black Church. My critique and challenge of the Black Church and some of its harmful practices and theological positions is rooted in a deep and abiding love for what I hope will one day be a place and space of full inclusion. I must acknowledge the church that I was raised in—Second Baptist Church (SBC) in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Rev. Donald P. Turner, Ms. Jean Turner, Ms. Dorothy Lance, Ms. Weems, Bryan Tippet and countless others who deposited so much in me from the age of seven through young adulthood. I learned about God, faith and grace. Those first teachings have never departed from me. Thank you.

While in seminary I was blessed to be assigned to Midway Missionary Baptist Church in College Park, GA to complete my contextual education requirement. I am the preaching woman I am today because of the Midway family. My father in ministry Rev. Edward Spencer Osofo Reynolds and is co-laborer Rev. Judge Penny Brown Reynolds took me in as their own. I love you both deeply, "in a place where there is no space or time." This is God's doing and it is marvelous in God's sight!

First Afrikan Presbyterian Church and the Center for Afrikan Biblical Studies! In this place the unconscious connection of African cultural and spiritual values became conscious. This community of thinking women, men and children has been a safe haven for my family. We have grown exponentially. Thank you to Rev. Dr. Mark Ogunwale Lomax for sharing your pulpit and your classroom. Thank you for allowing your espoused ethic of equality for men and women in the pulpit to match your lived practice. Mama Elder Dr. Itihari Toure, you, ma'am, are incomparable! You too live what you believe. After my own mother, from you I have learned what it means to be concerned about the survival of an entire community. You are a rare jewel. Thank you for sharing your journey with me. Thank you for being a womanist in deed and not only in title. I love me some you. Everything we need is in our community! Ase-O!

To my United Nation of Ifa-Orisa-Vodun (U.N.I.O.V.) and Gelede Society Atlanta family! Much gratitude and special acknowledgement to Iya Songo Eniola Kalimara, Baba Kwame-Osagyefo Kalimara, Iya Osunlade, Iya Olayinka, Iya Oshunmiwa, Alaieyeluwa Olori Aje Oba Oosalase Adekorin Ifandugunwa Efundeji El and Olori Afahari Mku Orisayomi Ifanrewaju Zannu Efundeji Bey. I love y'all genuinely! In the words of Oba, thank you for allowing me to be "the community's pastor." LOL!!!! Each of you are the epitome of inclusion and acceptance.

It is my practice to have a council of elders to guide me in this realm of life. There have been many over time. Of course, commencing with elders who now guide me from the other side my maternal great grandmother Mamie McDonald and my maternal grandmother Annie Inez Adkins. I acknowledge that each of you are ever present. I try to live my life in ways that will bring honor to your memory and witness. After Dr. Wells transitioned, he sent Rev. Dr. Marcia Clinkscales to me. She introduced me to Candler and it was under her 'warring tongues' that I accepted my call to ministry. The years have passed but time stands still when I think of how you midwifed me into my purpose.

In 2005 I presented my first conference paper at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in the Womanist Approaches to Religion section. The previous year, I witnessed Raedorah Stewart captivate listeners with her womanist theo-poetics and knew then that I wanted to one day present. After I delivered my paper, I was sent for. Rev. Dr. Cheryl Kirk Duggan insisted on meeting with and guiding me in to the right Ph.D. program. I'll never forget your words, "because the wrong program will kill your spirit." Thank you for seeing my light and clearing the path so that others would see it too.

Rev. Dr. Lee Butler, you are more than words can describe. When I made the hard decision not to attend Chicago Theological Seminary you told me you would remain my 'fundi.' Your word is true! You have advocated for me, guided me, listen to me fuss, cuss and cry. You have offered wise counsel and spiritual direction. My heart swells when I think of how you have cared for the well-being of my soul. Thank you. Dr. Tracey Hucks, when I am low, the words written in *Yoruba Traditions* fill me up again. You are the Sacred Empowered Mothers personified! You along with Dr. Pamela Lightsey and the Womanist Steering Committee model what it looks like to live your truth daily. Dr. Songo Xosi Georgene Bess, with the help of the Spirit, you saved my life in this process. You resuscitated me. Dr. Baba Daniel Omotosho Black: what shall we say to these things? You indeed 'got the oil.' Thank you! Daniel Hembree and Amenti Sujai, I think of you often and am so grateful for your wisdom and support.

I must acknowledge the institution of friendship. To the original Glamour Girl Posse' (GGP)! While distance separates us our memories remain. Doreen, Carol, Denise, Jamie, Stephanie and Harriet you were my first friends. No matter where I am in the world, I will always carry Homestead in my heart! HST for life!

I was once told that you meet life-long friends when you go to college. So true. Shouts out to Larquel Way Weaver, Genea Veal, Kisha Clinton and Sharlotte Williams. True Delta sisters. To Rhon, James and Cy Manigault-Bryant, thank you for holding our family down during this process. We love y'all immensely. To my (play) cousin Amey Victoria Adkins, deep breath, at the moment of perceived defeat you nursed me with encouraging emails all the way from Amsterdam. I'll never be able to fully articulate what that has meant and what you mean to me. For being sisterly above all, I give you thanks. To my sissy Shively T. Jackson Smith, you have literally been the wind beneath my wings. You have been my rock in a weary land and to think you didn't think you would like me, LOL! Alexis and Elana, we were the only three Black people who happened to be women admitted into the 2009-2010 class in the Graduate Division of Religion. We've been through much. I'm so glad that we never fell victim to the plight of competition. I'm so proud of you both and know that I wouldn't be here without encouragement from you both. Shouts out to my GDR folk: Alphonso Saville, Meredith Coleman Tobias, Jamil Drake, Mark Jefferson, Ashley Coleman and Sarah Farmer.

SoulTrust! To Ronnie Galvin and Yanique Redwood; Mike and Natasha Wright; Stephen and Tamu Lewis, thank you. You helped our family during this time in very tangible ways. We aren't friends, we are family. Much love. Thank you Maisha Handy, my predecessor in Person Community Religious Life. Your prayers have literally carried me. T. Renee Crutcher, talks with you always remind me of who I am and whose I am. Leoleen (Dima) and Cedric (Akintunde), for taking our children so that I could write, not enough thanks in the world for how appreciative I am for how y'all love them.

Finally, I would be remiss not to acknowledge my broader family. Again, to Darrick, Frii, Phoenix and Jayden, I truly thank you for your patience, love and support. To my mom, Norvell, you are the real MVP! To my mother in law, Cleopatra Young, you pray for me without ceasing. I appreciate and love you so. The same is true for my father in law Ernie Bo! To my cousin Kamilah Hall Sharp—you already know! To by bonus dad, Sidney Holyfield—I LOVE YOU! To my biological father, who was never well enough emotionally or spiritually to be in my life. I forgive you and acknowledge that you did the best you could with the knowledge you had at the time.

To Lydia Kelwo-Bennet, a woman I've never met but, whose words of testimony on Facebook deeply moved me. Thank you for penning this for all of us who were/are too physically, spiritually and emotionally exhausted from this process to intelligibly articulate "this spot of ground:"

> *This dissertation was written in early mornings, late nights, stolen moments, on note cards, on napkins, in a tape recorder, on my iPhone, and gazing into the eyes of my baby. This dissertation was written in defiance of people who thought they could steal my ideas because I would be too slow to publish--since I had kids. This dissertation was written in spite of, and because of, mom brain. This dissertation was slow to start, quick to finish, and a pleasure in the middle because this dissertation was part of the reason I am here on earth, "doing the what I came to do." This dissertation looked like me stepping into my power, finding out how powerful my voice is, breathing and writing every kind of love I can eke out of ink, addressed to Black people across our differences. This dissertation was written because I needed it in order to survive. Not because the academy lets me survive, but because I had time, and a mission, and words, so I wrote them and they constituted a dissertation--and I lived. This dissertation was written because there is so much left to say, and so much love to still write, and so many words we still have yet to read and to hear and I wanted to be a drop in that ocean. This dissertation was written because I want us to live, and I still believe that we can, if we take these words, and those words, and your words, and my words, and all of our words, and build a world of words and actions and love that can withstand the destruction of this moment. This dissertation was written because people loved me into it. This dissertation was written because I learned to love myself into it. This dissertation was written.*

I close with your words knowing that "nothing can stop me, I'm all the way UP," THANK YOU!!

Table of Content

PROLOGUE
FETCHING SPIRITUAL POWER

I grew up seeing and believing in what millennials have christened Black girl magic, which is the ability to speak things into existence, create something out of nothing, and effect change by disrupting dehumanizing narratives through truth telling and justice seeking.[1] My Great Aunt Susie was known for her ability to talk the fire out of a burn, an indigenous and folk healing practice that lessens the severity of the wound. The healer speaks a specific mantra and releases the pain of the burn to God. My grandmother was forced to leave school after finishing the sixth grade, yet her well of knowledge ran deep. Nez, as she was affectionately known, was regularly called upon in our community for her ability to create. With minimal description she could bring a dead state of being back to life with a needle, some thread, and a little fire. My mother, Norvell, is proficient in symbolically wading in the waters of the clandestine to confront natural and supernatural imbalances caused by oppressive systems and humans who impose them. Early in the morning or late in the night I have watched her make petitions to the Sacred Mothers to increase her capacity to move through murky waters or any substance that impedes vision or offers resistance to free movement. Like my foremothers, my mother said I came here with my own power. The conditions of my conception and birth were tumultuous. Twice,

[1] Black Girl Magic, a term introduced on social media, is "used to celebrate the universal awesomeness of black women." According to a video of Huffington Posts Black Voices, the hashtag Black Girl Magic acknowledges Black women to stand in their own greatness while not hindering other women to stand in theirs. In a Facebook post on 1/14/2016 scholar and activist Donna Auston wrote, "…On Black girls/women we live magic. We do magic even most especially and most impressively on the days when we feel drained, beaten, devalued and dehumanized anything but magical and this is what makes our actions magical." For more insight on Black Girl Magic consider Ashley Ford, "There is Nothing Wrong with Black Girl Magic" *Elle.* January 13, 2016. Accessed on January 15, 2016. www. http://www.elle.com/life-love/a33251/there-is-nothing-wrong-with-black-girl-magic.

external circumstances attempted to thwart my arrival. My mother was 19 years old when she married my father who was home on a 30-day furlough before being shipped off to Vietnam. As a Black man in America he had his own challenges, which the war only exacerbated. By the time my mother was 20 she was pregnant with me. She was strongly encouraged to abort me. According to my mother, after begrudgingly arriving to the doctor to have the procedure she felt me move in her stomach with force and power. She leaped from the table and told the doctor and her family that she could not go through with it. She'd recently been introduced to the rhetoric of Chilean born Cuban revolutionary Ché Guevara. She immersed herself in learning more about revolutionary change. She would begin attending Black Panther Party meetings and later show interest in the Nation of Islam. My dad returned from Vietnam more broken than he was before going. My mother became the repository for his anger. He physically and emotionally abused her in unimaginable ways. My mother said, while pregnant with me, my dad kicked her in her stomach. She recalled portions of her stomach being green from the bruising. Reflecting back, she says that the circumstances of her life seemed to work against my safe arrival onto this plane of consciousness. However, she believed the empowered Mothers were sending me here and so she willed me into being and birth. Once I arrived she would name me Ché. She said, it was because I came with undeniable power, power that has been passed down to withstand wickedness. I was her revolutionary whom she credits with saving her life.

When I went off to graduate school in Washington, D.C., I encountered other women who possessed a similar spiritual force. This time, they were preaching women. In a traditional Black Baptist church, ordained clergywomen were a rarity, and the pulpit was off limits and not considered appropriate space for women's bodies. In the Pentecostal church I started attending, preaching women outnumbered men. When circumstances called for the gift of healing, the skill

of exorcising an ill spirit or conjuring a miracle, the woman co-pastor and other preaching women were frequently summoned. In those moments, I was arrested with amazement yet comforted by my familiarity with this power. I witnessed women wielding divine authority through preaching. I knew that Black women's bodies yielded spiritual power. I was beginning to see that the male dominated pulpit could not withhold the Asé, a mystical force and quality which makes words once uttered come true, that these fire baptized and Holy Ghost filled preaching women embodied.

Years would pass before I would publicly acknowledge my own call to preach and draw conscious connections between my Black Baptist/Pentecostal narrative, the spiritual power embodied by my foremothers and African spiritual values. On this side of time, what is clear is that the spiritual power Black women behold and use both individually and collectively to attend to the exigent nature of systemic oppression is, indeed, transformative. This power is not binary and as such is not limited to secular or sacred space. From kitchen tables to sanctuary pulpits Black women have exacted spiritual power as a proclamation of our humanity and of the humanity of our unborn.

From the early 19th century to today, Black preaching women have drawn from unconventional sources of knowing to "assert meaningful agency" and combat bodily and spiritual enslavement.[2] Viewing these sources from an African-centered and womanist lens provides new conceptual and practical resources for preaching. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the use of Black women's preaching bodies as conduits of divine authority and to examine how Black women's bodies preach in response to oppressive systems. The study

[2] Bell Hooks, *Sisters of the Yam: black Women and Self-Recovery.* (Boston: South End Press, 1993) p. 68.

also considers the role of cultural and spiritual retrieval in Black women's approach to proclamation through an auto/ethnographic lens to illuminate the liberating and transformative aspect of embodied African-centered womanist preaching. Finally, the study aims to elucidate the utility of embodied, African centered, and womanist approaches to preaching in order to affirm the value of Black life. In so doing, it explores how Black women's preaching bodies generate and transmit sacred truths from alternative sources and pulpits to unfetter themselves and the larger community from the remaining vestiges of racial and gender disparities.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Where there is a woman, there is magic."
Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*

"`Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me.'"
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

INTRODUCTION

Black preaching women possess innate spiritual power to confront systemic oppression. Locating my own ancestral lineage of Black women who embodied spiritual power stimulated my interests for this work. This chapter introduces spiritual power and investigates whether or not it has purchase for homiletical training through the vantage point of African derived spirituality and womanist sacred oratory. The present study addresses one issue that has five aspects. One, Black bodies have been and continue to be devalued. Two, cultural beliefs about Black female bodies. Three, the pulpit represents a problematic rhetorical space for Black female bodies because it simulates male power. Four, homiletical tradition is at its core logocentric, privileging words and language as fundamental expression. Five, Black women's preaching bodies situated in an African-centered and womanist epistemological framework have been unaccounted for in the study of homiletics. I elaborate on each of these in the following section.

Thereafter, I explain the nature of the study and give a brief synopsis of the auto/ethnographic research design, which distinguishes the research method and explores

how the design accomplishes the study's goal followed by a presentation of the research questions. Next, I introduce the theoretical framework by placing the study in perspective among other relevant studies and describe the important issues, perspectives and controversies in the field of homiletics followed by a review of the contributions the study makes to the field of homiletics. The chapter concludes by addressing the scope and limitations of the study and a chapter by chapter overview.

Background of the Study

Since our capture from the West Coast of Africa, our journey across the Trans-Atlantic and our arrival to the Americas, Africans in America have labored for humanization. Despite the physical, spiritual and cultural resistance of many enslaved men and women, the gains achieved by the southern Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and the election of an African American president in 2008 the struggle for Black livelihood persists through today. While the term post-racial permeates modern American society, disproportionate numbers of African Americans remain caught within the grip of what Patricia Hill Collins identified as the "matrix of domination visible in interlocking systems of oppression."[3] In a recent statement to the United Nations, Rev. Dr. Iva Carruthers, General Secretary of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, affirmed this havoc wrought by such systems. She wrote: "the 1955 gruesome murder of Emmett Till and his mother's courage to show his body to the world became the iconic symbol of White supremacy, racism and terror experienced by African Americans in the United States during the mid-20th century."[4]

[3] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* (New York; Routledge, 2002).
[4] Iva Carruthers in a statement written to the United Nations regarding acknowledgement of people of African descent, 2016.

There has been no easing of this tension; only a deafening worsening. Black male and female bodies continue to be compromised in extreme and disheartening ways. Addressing unresolved racial issues Carruthers further illumined that "sixty years after the murder of Emmett Till, the United States is still plagued with killings and murders of Black youth with impunity, not only by vigilantes under cover, but by the outright egregious actions of agents of local, county and state governments, police officers sworn to protect and treat all citizens equally."[5] The re-emergence of exiled freedom fighter Assata Shakur's command for racial unity affirms Dr. Carruthers' sentiment. Between 2012 and 2015, the murders of Jordan Davis, Tanisha Anderson, Rekia Boyd, Renisha McBride, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland, to name a few, bore the brunt of this impunity. In a 1973 letter entitled, *To My People,* Shakur said, "It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains."[6] The letter's reintroduction into our 21st century consciousness begs that while much has changed since she first issued this war cry, much has stayed the same. Racially tense times remain pervasive. A brief catalog of recent social media hash tags are signs that Black embodiment remains a constant threat: #blacklivesmatter, #ferguson, #baltimore, #keepitdown, #notonedime, #Charleston9, #whoisburningblackchurches, #whathappendtosandrabland, and #ifidieinpolicecustody.

According to statistics compiled by The Guardian, from January 2015 to the end of June 2015, 547 people had been killed by police. In total, 478 of those people were shot and killed, while 31 died after being shocked by a Taser, 16 died after being struck by police vehicles, and 19 have died after altercations in police custody. When adjusted to accurately reflect the US

[5] Ibid.
[6] Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987).

population, the totals indicate that Black people are being killed by police at more than twice the rate of White and Hispanic or Latino people. Black people killed by police were also significantly more likely to have been unarmed.[7] Watchdog group Mapping Police Violence reported that "police killed at least 102 unarmed Black people in 2015, more than any other race."[8] That is, "37% of unarmed people killed by police in 2015 were Black, despite Black people only being 13% of the U.S. population." More succinctly, "unarmed Black people were killed at 5 times the rate of unarmed Whites in 2015. Subsequently, only 9 of the 102 cases resulted in an officer(s) being charged with a crime."[9] Just as the death of Emmett Till galvanized a movement for change and fueled cries for justice the recent resurgence of fragrantly killing young Black Americans has moved a new generation of truth seekers and wisdom bearers to take action.

Black women maintained their historic role in confronting the evil of White supremacy. They have responded with condemnation and moral outrage, in very high profile ways, at the dehumanizing social ordering and stigmatization of Black bodies. In response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, a teenaged boy killed by an overzealous neighborhood watch person because he looked suspicious, Alicia Garza, Opal Tomenti and Patrisse Cullors organized #BlackLivesMatter. Developing beyond the initial social media hashtag, Black Lives Matter "is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise."[10] Garza affirmed that "Black Lives Matters is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity and our resilience in the face of deadly

[7] Accessed February 22, 2016. http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jul/01/us-police-killings-this-year-black-americans
[8] Accessed February 23, 2016. http://mappingpoliceviolence.org/unarmed/
[9] Ibid.
[10] http://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/

oppression."[11] Bree Newsome also responded when in June 2015 a gunman walked in and sat amongst congregants of historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina.[12] After listening to the Bible study lesson taught by the pastor and other ministerial leaders, the assailant opened fire killing nine people. His response was that he wanted to start a race war.[13] The surveillance video showed that the perpetrator had a confederate flag license plate on his car. This discovery reignited a tense debate about the history of the confederate flag as a controversial symbol of bigotry and the rightness of displaying the flag on and around public institutions.[14] In response, on June 27, 2015 Newsome's Black and female body affirmed and celebrated the sacred worth of Black embodiment through direct action. Newsome boldly scaled a 30-foot flag pole at the South Carolina State Capitol to bring down the confederate flag. When the police motioned for her to come down, Newsome responded, "In the name of Jesus this flag has to come down. You come against me with hatred, oppression, and violence. I come against you in the name of God. This flag comes down today." As she scaled back down the pole, she announced that she was prepared to be arrested. Newsome loudly recited the 23rd Psalm from the Bible as she was being led away by the police.

Black women's creative conjure via the ability to bring balance to imbalanced structures through both verbal and non-verbal work rhetoric is evident in the fight against unjust treatment. Visible in our disruption of dehumanizing narratives is a distinct ability to alter people, places and systems via spiritual power, divine authority, and power of the word each components of African-centered womanist oratory. These properties bear witness to our African past. Our

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[11] Ibid.
[12] Frances Robles, Jason Horowitz and Shaila Dewan Shaila, *"Dylann Roof, Suspect in Charleston Shooting, Flew the flags of White Power."* www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/us. June 18, 2015 Accessed on September 29, 2015.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Jessica Ravitz, *"After Confederate Flag Comes Down Charleston Church Starts New Chapter."* www.cnn.com/2015/07/12/us/charleston-south-carolina-emanuel-ame-church-new-chapter . July 22, 2015. Accessed September 29, 2015.

practice of healing our community through preaching bodies—sources of liberating knowledge—and Asé, the power to bring our desires of freedom into being illuminates a shamanistic quality. This quality helps to highlight two phenomena. First, is the unseen and overlooked connections between African American life, culture and socio-cultural movements in the United State on one hand and African spiritual values of community and healing on the other hand. Second, is the way Black women display a particular embodiment of spiritual power. In my desire to address the historical commodification and criminalization of Black bodies through the lens of homiletics and Black women's spiritual power, I challenge the distinction between the secular and sacred.[15] Whether protesting in the streets, occupying local, state and federal space to announce and affirm that Black lives matter or using lived experiences to shift material reality, Black women's bodies preach truth to power to resist tyranny. The same spiritual power that my grandmother, great aunt, mother and preaching women wielded to effect change is the same power that reverberates as a useful counter narrative to the rapacious moral injury endured by Africans in America.

In *Fetching Spiritual Power,* I examine first, how Black women's preaching practices employ African-centered womanist principles to affirm the value of Black embodiment. Second, I explore how Black women's bodies perform African-centered womanist oratory. Through the carving out of sacred spaces, Black women preachers use the performed word to intentionally disrupt the popular terrains where Black bodies are literally and metaphorically disabled. Womanist oratory, I contend, becomes a means through which Black women's bodies generate and transmit spiritual power from alternative sources to unfetter themselves and their communities from the remaining vestiges of racial and gender disparities. To support this claim,

[15] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy,* (Oxford: Heinermann, 1969), 2.

I use two concepts to tease out the features of Black women's liberation preaching: fetching and Àjé. Fetching is the act of retrieving "old" or "indigenous" community practices in order to sustain one's current reality within interlocking oppressive systems. Tied to the principle of fetching is Àjé, the Yoruba principle that describes the capacity of creating and transforming people by way of powerful speech and divine authority. Asé, and Àjé are both forms of spiritual power. Asé, is a mean to spiritual power. Asé is also one's inner spirit as in honoring or listening to my Asé. Àjé is the spirit of the Sacred Mothers. One's Asé can be informed by Àjé. However, Àjé is decidedly woman owned and administered. Àjé is the power of the feminine and female divinity. Fetching and Àjé illuminate the unseen and unconscious connections between African American cosmology y and religions of the African Diaspora, which are made manifest in the sacred preaching forms drawn upon by Black women preachers. *Fetching Spiritual Power* is framed by auto/ethnographic methods, and concludes that Black women's bodies preach in culturally elaborated ways as spiritually powerful sign emitting texts that attend to our body and the bodies of others. Christianity is one of many religious anchors for Black preaching women in the U.S.

Problem Statement

The first problem is identified by the claim that Black bodies have been and continue to be devalued. Black bodies weather the liminal space of questionable existence and certain death. Further, Black bodies remain contested terrain upon which racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, homophobia, capitalism and militarism wreak debilitating havoc.

The second problem is the set of cultural beliefs about Black female bodies. From the 19th century through today, women have always preached with or without institutional license. The history of our preaching has been "discontinuous, sometimes hidden, and filled with the

struggle of bearing a female body in the pulpit."[16] In her study of the agency, meaning, and proclamation of female preachers, Amy McCullough recounts that "for centuries church tradition argued that the female body was unfit for sacred space. Cultural messages in other eras argued that a woman's voice did not belong in the public sphere."[17]

Race adds another dimension to gender restriction in the pulpit. In his text, *The Spirit of the Holy Ghost is a Male Spirit: African American Preaching Women and the Paradoxes of Gender,* Wallace Best purports, "deeply rooted perceptions of Black women's bodies is a primary factor in the culture of resistance to Black preaching women."[18] From the moment a Black woman's body was captured on the shores of the continent of Africa, her body was no longer a free standing mass in the universe but that of a foreign epistemological agent. Black female bodies in the 19th century remained relegated to the margins of inhuman other. Ideals of respect applied only to human subjects. Black people collectively were considered cargo and property, but not human. To be Black and female held an even more precarious status. Black women's bodies defied the privilege rendered by The Cult of True Womanhood. In the U.S., Black women's bodies signify a history of conquest, enslavement, lynching, and rape, and this history is marked on the body by contrary figures of triumph and terror, overexposure and

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[16] Amy McCollough, *Her Preaching Body…* (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2012). McCollough provides a thorough overview of bodily courage accompanying female preaching. Other sources can be found in Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina, 1998) Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women and Their Sermons 1850-1979,* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,1998). Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Women Preaching: Theology and Practice Through the Ages* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004). Beverly M. Kienzie and Pamela J. Walker, eds. *Women Preachers and Prophets through two millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988).

[17] Ibid, p. For illustrations of how female preachers navigated these cultural codes, see Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) and Beverly Ann Zink Sawyer, *From Preachers to Suffragists: Woman's Rights and Religious Convictions in the Lives of Three Nineteenth-Century American Clergywomen* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

[18] Wallace Best, "The Spirit of the Holy Ghost is a Male Spirit: African American Preaching Women and the Paradoxes of Gender." *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power and Performance,* eds. R. Marie Griffiths and Barbara Dianne Savage, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 102.

invisibility.[19] Coupled with living beneath the gaze of patriarchy and race, Black women's bodies have historically been viewed as a material good void of any redemptive possibilities. Conquest and commodification attempted to separate the materiality of the body from the soul of the body.

The third challenge is that the pulpit represents a problematic rhetorical space for Black female bodies because it simulates male power. The preaching body has often been male resulting in the need for Black preaching women to seek out alternative pulpits from which to proclaim the Word of God. The presence of Black women in the pulpit challenges the proper place for Black women's bodies in the broader society. Religion in general and preaching specifically has been a constant site for disciplining women's bodies. In *The Gendered Pulpit*, feminist rhetorician Roxanne Mountford articulates, "Spaces like bodies produce meaning and are also endowed with meaning."[20] Speaking about the Christian pulpit she explains, "rhetorical spaces carry the residue of history within them, but also, perhaps, something else: a physical representation of relationships and ideas."[21] Thus she proffers "the relationship between women and masculine rhetorical pulpits are tenuous."[22]

Historically, male authority has made little to no room for Black women's preaching bodies. The pulpit is a traditional site of knowledge production in the Black church, and males are considered chief generators. However, Black preaching women's ability to confront and critically engage hegemony is not solely lodged in the physical space of the pulpit. This ability is

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[19] Angeletta Gourdine, "*Fashioning the body as politic in Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust."* African American Review. Fall, 2004.
[20] Roxanne Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces.* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2003) 33.
[21] Ibid, 17.
[22] Ibid, 17.

within an ideological framework that signals radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement.

The fourth issue is that the homiletical tradition is at its core logocentric, privileging words and language as fundamental expression, and only recently have scholars begun to consider the intentional use of the body as an interlocutor. In *A Kinesthetic Homiletic: Embodying the Gospel in Preaching,* Pamela Ann Moeller acknowledged that homiletics gives primacy to the oral sensorium.[23] For Moeller, the oral sensorium does not take into account a holistic approach to preaching. She contended that rendering the body as only a tertiary source limits the ability to express and experience the embodiment of the gospel. The body is the primal channel through which the Gospel flows. Moeller used modern dance theory to illumine the usefulness of the body in preaching. Movement creates intimacy between the profound and the mundane. The homiletic grows out of communion between the body and the Sacred. Positioning the body as a vehicle through which the Spirit moves helps to situate the interest in Black women's preaching bodies. Moeller's scholarship provides a helpful starting point. However, Moeller's efforts to theorize embodiment in homiletics have accounted for gender but lack consideration of the Black jeremiad—lament. As a result, Black women's preaching bodies as liberative terrain are marginal in a field dominated by the masculine rhetorical pulpit.

The fifth aspect is Black women's preaching bodies situated in an African-centered and womanist epistemological framework have been unaccounted for in the study of homiletics. African American and womanist homileticians have acknowledged the African cultural origins embedded within the African American preaching tradition, but their retrieval and utility in

[23]Pamela Moeller, A *Kinesthetic Homiletic.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 6-7.

contemporary Black preaching and beyond have been overlooked. This denial effects both individual and collective memory connected to one's identity. Traditional homiletical approaches to preaching privileges an Anglo-Christian epistemology that fails to recognize the importance of the body as a primary instrument in proclamation and a site of healing and spiritual power that is grounded in feminine energy. Consequently, only certain modes of knowledge production are validated.

Purpose of the Study

Nature of the Study

In the past fifteen years there has been a movement toward more reflexive and context-centered methods that allow the researcher to privilege lived experiences in the context of research inquiry i.e., Feminist and Womanist methodology, Africentric methodology, Disability Theory, etc. Auto/ethnography is the off-spring of this evolution. According to Butz and Besio, there are essentially two different definitions of auto/ethnography.[24] The most commonly used approach is where the researcher chooses to make explicit use of their own positionality, involvements and experiences as an integral part of ethnographic research.[25] According to this definition, auto/ethnography is something a researcher does, a particular way of doing ethnography self-reflexively in the research process.[26] The second definition of auto/ethnography refers to instances in which colonized subjects represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms. The former definition is the approach used in this study. I employ auto/ethnography to set aside conventional social scientific preoccupations in

[24] David Butz and Kathryn Beso, "The Value of Autoethnography for Field Research in Transcultural Settings," *The Professional Geographer* 56, no. 3 (2004), 350-360.
[25] Paul Cloke, Philip Crang and Mark Goodwin, *Introducing Human Geographies* (London: Arnold, 199).
[26] Carolyn Ellis and Andre Bochner, eds., *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 1996).

favour of personal meaning, empathetic connection, and identification to tell stories about embodied struggles.[27] This methodology privileges my life and experience as the focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences—I am both the observer and the observed.[28]

In *Sweetwater: Black Women's Narratives of Resilience,* Robin Boylorn cited Maya Angelou as having advised Black women to "tell one's own story as one has known it, and lived it and even died it."[29] Boylorn further asserted, "for generations Black women have overlooked themselves as they have been overlooked, accepting, without critique the versions of their lives and realities that were offered back to them."[30] *Fetching Spiritual Power* illumines Black embodiment and the utility of an African-centered womanist epistemological and methodological approach to proclamation. The targeted population is Black preaching women who either espouse or desire to embody an African-centered womanist ideal in their preaching praxis. The primary study location is First Afrikan Church outside of Atlanta, Georgia. First Afrikan is a mid-sized African-centered church congregation within the historically and predominantly White denomination of the Presbyterian Church, USA. The secondary study location is also in Atlanta within a multi-faith women's society created to challenge the contradictions of patriarchy and white supremacy.

While auto/ethnography is growing in popularity, it is still a contested approach. Common criticisms of auto/ethnography are that it is not scientific and it's too psychoanalytic. Despite these criticisms auto/ethnography is becoming increasingly popular in the academy.

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[27] Andrew C. Sparkes, "Autoethnography: Self-Indulgence or Something More?" in *Ethnographically Speaking:Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics,* Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, eds. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2002), 209-32.
[28] Carolyn Ellis, *Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2009).
[29] Robin Boylorn, *Sweetwater: Black Women's Narratives of Resilience* (New York: P. Lang, 2013), 1.
[30] Ibid, 2.

Disciplines utilizing auto/ethnography include: education, counseling, communication, religious studies, anthropology, women's studies, and rehabilitation to name a few. Some researchers speculate that the popularity of auto/ethnography is fuelled in part by social trends and wider debates within the academy about social attitudes about self, reflexivity, and the recognition of power dynamics.[31] To this end, I am interested not merely about myself *per se* but more so in developing a mode of analysis that captures a broader social phenomena of verbal and embodied rhetorical strategies used by Black preaching women to retrieve indigenous spiritual power and resist oppressive systems.

Research Questions

The match between the research question and the qualitative research design is complimentary. This study is guided by the following research questions: How do Black women's bodies preach? What sermons do Black women's bodies preach in response to interlocking oppressive systems that affirm and celebrate Black life? How do Black women's preaching bodies deploy African-centered and womanist approaches to preaching that affirm and celebrate Black life? How do Black women's preaching bodies generate and transmit sacred truths in alternative pulpits?

Qualitative Validity

There are numerous ways to approach these research questions (e.g., interviews, focus groups, observation, surveys, and ethnography). Each approach has its inherent strengths and

[31] Marilyn Metta, "Putting the Body on the Line: Embodied Writing and Recovery through Domestic Violence," *Handbook of Autoethnography* Stacy Holman Jones, Tony Adams and Carolyn Ellis eds., (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 486-510; David H. Michels, "The Place of the Person in LIS Research: An Explanation in Methodology and Representation." In *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science,* 34 no. 2 (2010), 161-83; Paulette Rothbauer, "Finding and Creating Possibility: Reading in the Lives of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Young Women." PhD diss. (London, ON: University of Western Ontario, 2004).

weaknesses. Ultimately, it is the nature and intent of the research question that determines the best approach. Given the lack of previous research in the area, my positionality (e.g. a Black female preacher), and the introspective nature of the research question, auto/ethnography is the most amenable approach. My decision to analyse six of my sermons and include other preaching women as coders and participant-observers allows for greater 'depth' in terms of understanding the meaning of the constructs being investigated, as well as reduces the 'noise' encountered when too many voices are included.

There are four basic criteria in assessing quality in qualitative research: credibility, confirmability, and dependability, and transferability. In other words, can we believe the results, can we repeat the results, can the results be corroborated by others, and can we generalize the findings to other contexts. Chapter 3 illumines the level of rigor involved overall, but especially with the coding (e.g., First and Second Cycle coding processes use of peer coders, and the assessment of reliability). Coding is the cornerstone of knowledge construction- this is where definitions are rooted and meaning constructed. My attention to issues of validity is also very strong. For example, my use of multiple sermons addresses dependability (would we see the same themes across sermons); the inclusion of other preaching women as observers addresses confirmability (can these women corroborate the meaning); reflexivity and triangulation of data sources addresses credibility (the ability to identify patterns and higher conceptual relationships among the data); and again the use of preaching women as observers also speaks to transferability (do these concepts have meaning in their own preaching context).

Significance of the Study

There is a gap in the scholarship on embodied African-centered womanist paradigms of preaching. Available research on embodied preaching examines either gender or race. Only a few explore both gender and race. This study offers a different lens through which to survey the art of preaching and address the culture of resistance to Black women's preaching bodies. This work adds to existing scholarship by employing an African-centered womanist theoretical perspective focused on a force called Àjé to interpret Black preaching women's spiritual and feminine power as a way of knowing and being that brings value and worth to the Black collective. Furthermore, this project seeks to explore what Rachel Harding identified as "the indigenous wisdom of the African American community, particularly of women, into engagement with more academic understandings of intellectual production."[32] Like Katie Cannon's *Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, Donna Allen's *Toward a Womanist Homiletic* and Teresa Fry Brown's *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word*, this dissertation contributes to and draws from the "critical, epistemological, and creative methodologies that are, in current parlance, understood as womanist."[33] These are "approaches that profoundly wed interdisciplinary, intellectual work to reflective insights emergent from the lived experiences of women of color."[34]

Importantly, this study expands the body of work concerning Black women's preaching bodies and shifts them from the margins to the center of homiletical possibilities. Black women's preaching bodies and Black preaching women's experiences are validated in ways that help

[32] Rosemarie Freeney Harding with Rachel Elizabeth Harding, *Remnants* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), xx.
[33] Ibid, xx.
[34] Ibid.

Black congregants and Black church governing bodies establish beliefs and behaviors that illumine Black bodies as liberating epistemic sites. Locating Black women's preaching bodies as vehicles through which Spirit speaks and moves suggests that Black women's preaching bodies effect change. Fundamentally, affirming the value of Black embodiment is healing for the collective soul and a means to facilitate America's African Diasporic people's ongoing efforts toward survival and human flourishing.

Theoretical Framework

Talk of embodiment in religious studies begins with the transcendental nature of religion and moves toward the body as a site of incarnate witness.[35] In *Black Religion and Aesthetics* Pinn credited the importance and benefit of the divine embodied, yet contended "this perspective has done little to highlight and center the physical body."[36] Pinn posited the body as a text to be mined. Beginning with the nineteenth century, literature in homiletics reveals that the discipline has been historically linear and logo-centered. The discipline's conversation around embodiment has been limited to audible speech, diction and isolated movement and is rooted in what Roxanne Mountford identifies as a "masculine world of rhetorical performance validated by the American protestant pulpit" visible in sermon delivery."[37]

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[35]Anthony B. Pinn, "Embracing Nimrod's Legacy: The Erotic, the Irreverence of Fantasy, and the Redemption of Black Theology," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic,* editors, Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 3.
[36]Anthony Pinn, "A Beautiful Humanism and the Aesthetics of a New Salvation," in *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Arica and the African Diaspora,* editor, Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 23.
[37]Roxanne Mountford. *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces.* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 2003) 33.

Discussion in canonical preaching manuals about embodiment by John A. Broadus about what qualifies as embodiment in homiletics has historically and traditionally been directed toward, even if not directly to, masculine, white and heterosexual bodies.[38] Broadus noted the material body as the prime instrument of preaching however his conversation about the experience of preaching i.e., gesture and the physicality of preaching was overshadowed by his propositional deductive reasoning approach to preaching. Broadus was enthralled with the rhetorical method of speaking persuasively. He argued that abstract reasoning from general principles must at every step be compared with facts. Thus sacred truth while disseminated through the body was solidified in one's ability to logically reason. Acknowledging the body as conceptual paradigm in the act of proclamation was of lackluster interest for Broadus and his contemporaries. Epistemological claims buttressed the body, even the white male heterosexual body. Every homiletical model for reason presupposes an epistemology.

The common method for Broadus' homiletic is rooted in a scientific methodology also known as representationalism. According to McClure, represenationalism was built upon a deep separation between a knowing subject and objects to be known, a hardened split between subjects and objects.[39] Historically homiletical theory disregarded the body as an interpretive agent even though the ability to reason is an act of embodiment. From the Euro-masculinist perspective reason is only concerned with the mind and if bodies were considered i.e., European and male then heterosexual males would be privileged. The emphasis on logic and disembodied reasoning created a bifurcation between the intellect and the body.

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[38] John Broadus, *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons, 1945 edition,* ed. J.B. Weatherspoon (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945).
[39] John S. McClure, *Other-Wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001)71.

The New Homiletic

The propositional deductive reasoning approach in homiletics left much to be desired. Technical reason and scientific epistemological strategies to preaching gave way to the New Homiletic. Experience, conveyed through the body, became central to preaching through symbols, narrative, imagination, encounter and personal knowledge.[40] Influenced by Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr and Reinhold Niebuhr new homileticians adapted to an ontological form of reasoning. H.H. Farmer's, *The Servant of the Word,* Fred Craddock's *As One Without Authority: Essays on Inductive Preaching,* and David Buttrick's *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* are foundational texts in the New Homiletic. To address the dilemma of biblical preaching, preaching that appeared to be preoccupied by the past, Farmer stressed the importance of "rediscovering the significance of preaching as the unique vehicle of the Gospel."[41] In so doing, the temptation for the preacher and the hearer to adopt the role of observers not personally concerned is thwarted.

Characteristic of the new homiletic, Farmer emphasized the importance of a personal encounter for the listener. Experience is subjective and opposes detached logic. Craddock's approach to the 'linguistic overkill' characteristic of deductive preaching was embodiment. The body was taken as a valid interlocutor. Craddock postulated that the preacher leads the listener into an experience of the mystery whereby the hearer is called to participate in the sermon and identify with the preacher's articulation of reality. Buttrick called for a rethinking of the nature of authority for preaching. He envisioned preaching as a part of a new social world whereas the goal of preaching was to communicate communal consciousness. In the new social world, the Bible was no longer the locus of authority instead it was experience. Equally influential are Charles Rice,

[40]Ibid, 76.
[41] Farmer, H. H., *The Servant of the Word* (New York: Schribner, 1942), 9.

Paul Scott Wilson, Thomas H. Troeger and Robin Meyers.[42] The late twentieth century ushered in foundational epistemologies also recognized as critical communicative homiletics. Inspired by critical communicative reason whereby appeals to common human experiences impute meaning God becomes accessible and the material body of the 'other' is considered.

Other-Wise Preaching

A post-modern ethic of preaching presented an emergent exploration of embodiment and the *other*. Bodies beyond the hetero-normative gaze become primary interpretive sources for preaching. McClure argued that an other-wise homiletic "uncovers the contradictions within the authorities of preaching so that preachers can discover and experience preaching that is constantly interrupted by the proximity of the other and an obligation to the other." Hence, McClure situates the "other" as important and worthy of address. He ultimately proposes a homiletic that "others" itself in affinity and commitment to those who are other.[43]

McClure stressed that other-wise homiletics is a dialogical and embodied act wherein the preacher emphasizes the listener as co-authors. The 'other' is a material body not an abstract construct. To engage the 'other' one has to engage the body. Kathy Black's, *A Healing Homiletic;* Donovan Turner and Hudson's *Saved from Silence: Finding Women's Voices in Preaching;* and Lucy Atkinson Rose's *Sharing the Word: Preaching Roundtable Church* are pioneering texts that illumine the value of embodiment and the central use of *other* bodies in homiletics.

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[42]Charles Rice, *Interpretation and Imagination: The Preacher and Contemporary Literature* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970); Paul Wilson Scott, *Imagination of the Heart: New Understandings in Preaching.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988); Thomas Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990); Meyers, Robin. *With Ears to Hear: Preaching as Self-Persuasion* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993).
[43]Ibid, 133-134.

Black Preaching and Black Embodiment

The New Homiletic and Other-wise preaching coupled with dehumanizing social ordering of Black bodies cleared the path for formalized affirmation and survey of the Black preaching tradition. Here embodiment in homiletics is theorized as liberation from the forces of racial oppression. Writing around the time of James Cone, the progenitor of Black liberation theology, Henry Mitchell affirmed the uniqueness of the Black oral/aural sensorium in his seminal texts *Black Preaching*, *Celebration* and *The Recovery of Preaching.* Black sacred embodiment is valorized in the sermonic moment as "a vehicle of ongoing divine revelation to an oppressed people which houses the hope that the revolutionary fire of our faith can blaze new paths of liberation for the entire race."[44] God, in Black preaching, is what Cone has deemed ontologically Black. That is, God is on the side of the oppressed of which Black bodies have been subjected.[45] The prophetic, liberating, and spirited both celebratory and lamenting witness of Black preaching illumine the conjuring nature bodies wield in the preaching moment. As the study of the relationship between Black embodiment and the Divine in preaching increased, so did scholarly contributions. Charles Hamilton's *The Black Preacher in America*, H. Beecher Hicks' *Images of the Black Preacher,* Cleo Larue's, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, Frank Thomas' *They Like to Never Quit Praising God,* Luke Powery's *Spirit Speech* and Kenyatta Gilbert's *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching*, to name a few, "offer substantive observations about Black preaching."[46] These works fail to adequately consider Black preaching women's embodiment.

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[44] Donna Allen. "Toward a Womanist Homiletic: Katie Cannon, Alice Walker and Emancipatory Proclamation" (PhD, diss., Vanderbilt University, 2005), iv. www.etd.library.vanderbilt.edu/available/etd-R152005-023230/unrestricted/allenETD.pdf.
[45] James H. Cone. "*God of the Oppressed* rev. ed." (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).
[46] Allen, *Toward a Wommanist Homiletic,* v.

Black Women's Embodiment in Homiletics

The paucity of research on Black women's embodiment in homiletics makes visible what literary theorist Mae G. Henderson identified as "the unique and peculiar dilemma of Black women."[47] While discussion of embodiment and Black embodiment in homiletics have progressed, Black women's embodiment remains marginal in the male dominated preaching tradition in general and the Black preaching tradition specifically. Black preaching women's bodies as communicative agents in the struggle for liberation from interlocking oppressions is central to the womanist homiletical agenda. Katie Cannon, Teresa Fry Brown and Donna Allen advance this agenda in their scholarship produced for and by Black preaching women.

In *Katie's Cannon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* Cannon utilized a womanist critical evaluation to confront the sexist proclivities within the Black Preaching tradition.[48] She theorized African American sermonizing as type of linguistic violence levied upon women. Cannon challenged the use of problematic images in Black sacred rhetoric wherein women are cast as bearers of folly, deception and waywardness. While not explicit in the scope of Cannon's approach, the call to critique androcentric preaching, requires an embodied rhetorical approach. A kind of bodily lexical legacy Black women's preaching bodies deploy to perform identity, challenge interlocking oppressive systems of racism, sexism and classism and affirm the value of Black embodiment. In this vein, interpretation is not only a cognitive performance but an embodied one that warrants Black preaching women's bodies as necessary interlocutors.

[47] Mae G. Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black woman Writer's Literary Tradition" in *Changing Our Own Words* edited by Cheryl Wall (New Jersey: Rutgers University, Press 1989)
[48] Katie Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995)

In *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* Teresa Fry Brown theorized Black preaching women's embodiment as spiritual power. Fry Brown used the terms weary throats and new songs as metaphors for Black preaching women's knowledge construction and validation.[49] In so doing she bared Black preaching women's struggles with masculine rhetorical performance in the pulpit and their ability to generate and transmit sacred truth in alternative spaces in spite of forced exclusion. Respondents to her study were asked to describe the first time they were exposed to a Black woman proclaimer. A consistent attribute was spiritual power. Descriptive sentiments like, "…she was a powerful preacher and pastor. I was astonished to hear a woman powerfully handle the word of God…" or "I thought she had so much power" affirmed Black preaching women's ability to circumvent discriminatory strategies by brandishing spiritual power.[50] Spiritual power was characterized as, "unabashed clarity to speak the word of God truthfully, clearly and passionately," or "the ability to command attention."[51] Here Black women's preaching bodies become conduits of the Divine. That is, bodies that have historically been viewed as wretched beings and soulless commodities are embodied by and with divine authority to preach a gospel that is oft used to disavow their bodies. Fry Brown identified this characteristic as anointing. The anointing is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. It represents spiritual power. When operating "under the anointing," Black preaching women constitute a connective tissue between the past and the present. Black preaching women's embodiment of spiritual power from the 19th century to today bears witness

[49] Layli Phillips and Barbara McCaskill, "Who's Schooling Who? Black women and the Bringing of the Everyday into Academe, or Why We Started Womanist," *Signs* Vol.20,No. 4 Postcolonial, Emergent, and Indigenous Feminisms (Summer, 1995), p. 1011. Accessed July 3, 2011. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174892.
[50]Teresa Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs*, 39.
[51] Ibid, 39-41.

to the presence of a way of knowing and being that disputes Western and patriarchal notions of power.

Black women's embodiment in homiletics provides an epistemological and methodological platform from which to centralize and validate Black women and Black preaching women's experiences. In *Toward a Womanist Homiletic* Donna Allen highlighted Black preaching women's embodiment of the Gospel and culture as a necessity for creating a critical paradigm from which to analyze and talk back to disruptive social ordering. [52] She posited that, "embodiment is necessary to understand the performed identity of African American female preachers."[53] For Allen embodied, multisensory and kinesthetic communication is foundational to the development and practice of a womanist homiletic. Black preaching women's embodiment dislocates the logocentric only womanist critique. Allen contended, "Embodiment in preaching is a demonstration of God as transformative presence."[54] She continued, "In womanist preaching embodiment is revelation. It is the manifestation of God's presence with the oppressed in the wilderness engaged in redemptive struggle and rhetoric of resistance."[55]

Homiletical theory has progressed in its development from abstract philosophical and propositional deductive reasoning to embody an inductive symbolic reflective form of knowing in preaching where the body is an essential component. While still heavily logocentric bodies have moved from the margins of sermon delivery to the center of interpretive and methodological frameworks. Bodies not only perform the Gospel but perform identity. Narrative approaches illumining personal encounter and *other*, often marginalized, bodies cleared the

[52] Allen, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic,* 33.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid, 45.
[55] Ibid.

pathway for the formalized study and evaluation of Black preaching. In the Black preaching tradition 'embodying the Word' or allowing the 'spirit to use you' are cues that position the body as being a primary portal for the Divine to manifest in preaching. Bodies, then, preach alongside the sermons they deliver. Even still, Black women's embodied mediated action in homiletics in many ways continues to be overlooked by scholars both broadly and specifically and have only recently gained traction. Spiritual autobiographies, ethnographies, and texts on womanist theology, ethics, and biblical interpretation have yielded a helpful harvest by fulfilling what Phillips and McCaskill identified as "perhaps the central organizing principle of womanism: the absolute necessity of speaking from and about one's own experiential location and not to or about someone else's."[56] However, it has only been a little over twenty years that Black women's experience and embodiment in homiletics has been recognized, albeit marginally, in the academic study of the art of preaching. According to Cannon, "it is only recently because Black preaching has not asked questions about womanist interpretation and womanist theological studies have not included homiletics."[57]

Raising the struggles Black women have when they enter the academy Phillips and McCaskill contended, "Black women bring with them different kinds of lives---lives shaped by the ubiquitous and historically inescapable fact of triple oppression i.e., race, class and gender."[58] As a result, "all Black women regardless of their social background, have had to formulate

[56] Phillips and McCaskill, *Who's Schooling Who,* 1010.
[57] Cannon, *Katie's Canon,* 114. While scholarship in womanist homiletics is increasing there still only remains a handful of Black women who are in tenure track positions teaching homiletics at Association of Theological Schools accredited institutions. They are: Teresa Fry Brown, Candler School of Theology, Emory University; Gennifer Brook, Garrett Evangelical Seminary; Valerie Bridgeman, Methodist Theological Seminary; Debra Mumford, Louisville Theological Seminary; Joy Moore, Fuller Theological Seminary; Lisa Thompson, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and Veronice Miles, Wake Forest Divinity School.
[58] Phillips and McCaskill, *Who's Schooling Who,* 1010.

themselves in response to this fact."[59] This is also true for Black women entering the pulpit. Hence, Black preaching women's embodiment illumines the experience of the material body and presents a counter-narrative to a dominantly raced, classed and gendered pulpit. Therefore, Black women's preaching bodies are mediating and transmitting life forces. Further, Black women's preaching bodies "sacralize both the human body and spirit" as sites of embodied knowledge that yield a transformative narrative commensurate with scriptural authority.[60]

Definitions

Preaching, Black preaching women and Black women's preaching bodies are used in this study in a unique way. First, preaching is defined as a sacred performative act that affirms and celebrates Black embodiment as being created in the image of God. In general preaching is largely understood as a speech act. Here, I employ Judith Butler's notion that the speech act is a bodily act. Therefore, I focus on preaching as sacred somatic rhetoric that deploys the body as an interlocutor that is commensurate with the written text. A Black preaching woman is a woman of African descent, clergy or non-clergy, who proclaims the value of Black life from the traditional pulpit, in the public square or other alternative locations. I intentionally use the term preaching women instead of clergy women. Clergywomen signifies institutional acceptance. Preaching women, on the other hand, implies an internal or communal authority that functions within and beyond the institution. Black women's preaching bodies are communicative agents, sites of revelatory knowledge and conduits of divine authority. Black women's preaching bodies affect change in this study by performing a particular African-centered womanist identity that has as its focus the total liberation of people of the African diaspora at large and in America specifically.

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[59] Ibid.
[60] Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*, 238.

African-centered is an ideological perspective that acknowledges and embraces the rich cultural and spiritual value of African diasporic people. In this study this view along with womanist consciousness is central thus privileging the physical and intellectual bodies and experiences of Black women. Womanist consciousness is operationalized as truth telling and justice seeking.

Scope, Limitations and Delimitations

Using an auto/ethnographic methodology, this study explores my journey to African-centered womanist oratory. My experience illustrates a dynamic and embodied spiritual power that arose as an unconscious connection to and with the Yoruba concept of Àjé. Further, I wanted to know how a conscious connection to and retrieval of Africana spiritual values and womanist display of spiritual power influences Black preaching women's ways of knowing.

Qualitative methods embrace grounded and reflexive approaches that privilege marginalized voices. As a result, it is sometimes considered not to be as methodologically rigorous as quantitative techniques. Based on the research method and design, the data in this study may be assessed as limiting. The limitations of the data in this study are inherent within the research method and design. Another limitation is generalizability of Black women's homiletical processes. This study signifies a particularized way of being in the world which ultimately shapes Black women's preaching practices. My stance could be categorized as essentialist. That is, making ontological statements about Black preaching women or suggesting that all African-centered and/or womanist preaching women display the approaches mentioned in the study. I suspect that within this study there will be moments of recognition and resonance for some who identify as Black preaching women. However, I do not speak for all Black preaching

women.[61] Generalizing Black Church worship experiences is also a limitation. It should be noted that experiences within African American denominational churches are not monolithic but diverse and complex. For instance, displays of spiritual power might look different in one setting than in another.

This study introduced Àjé but did not give a full treatment of Yoruba or Ifá cosmology. I only dealt with several aspects of Àjé: spiritual power, power of the word, Asé, and divine authority. Àjé is a multifarious energy that requires intense study and understanding well beyond the timeline of this work. I chose to use Africana literature and literary analysis as my entry point over Yoruba philosophical thought. This project is not about drawing contrast or comparisons between Christianity and Ifá. Instead it is about revealing the unconscious and conscious continuities of African spiritual values using Àjé as conceptual framework to elucidate Black women's embodied preaching prowess.

The data was collected at the onset of the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) in 2013. Black Lives Matter served as a contextual backdrop but was not the sole driving force. The driving force was mining African-centered womanist manifestations of spiritual power in Black preaching women. It was impossible to ignore the continuous and unnecessary killing of Black men, women and youths across the U.S. Equally, it was hard to preach. Finally, this research doesn't provide a full on analysis of the BLM movement but examines embodied Black preaching as response to the dehumanizing social ordering of Black bodies in general and Black women's bodies specifically.

Chapter Summary

Chapter one provided a brief historical overview of Black women's preaching bodies from the 19th century through today. A statement of the problems this project seeks to solve and significance of this study provide insight into the purpose of this study. Chapter two commences with introducing Àjé as spiritual power that enables the ability to summons one's desire, facilitate creativity, operate with divine authority and issue balance to imbalanced technologies. The literature unveils this power in Black preaching women's performance of spiritual formation locates the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as the first place Black bodies are constructed as contested space. This chapter also mines the literature in homiletics and the sociology of embodiment in search of ways Black embodiment is represented or not in homiletics. It also elucidates specialized knowledge as a site for alternative meaning making. The chapter rounds out with an exploration of African spiritual values, namely conjure, in Black women's proclamation. Chapter three introduces the auto/ethnographic research design. First Afrikan Presbyterian Church, an Afrocentric Christian ministry, is identified as the setting. The sample, process of data collection, operationalization of terms, measurement and assessment of the need for this study are likewise presented. Chapter four uses the Yoruba concept of Àjé to analyze sermonic and autobiographical data collected from 2013 to 2014. Finally, chapter five provides conclusions based on the study and implications of the research are articulated with recommendations for future study.

Chapter II

BLACK WOMEN'S BODIES, SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE AND SPIRITUAL POWER

"She [Mattie] sat on the edge of the bed and enfolded the tissue-thin body in her huge ebony arms. And she rocked. Ciel's body was so hot it burned Mattie she first touched her, but she held on and rocked."

Gloria Naylor, Women of Brewster Place, 104

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates how Black women preach with their bodies. It also elucidates Black preaching women's spiritual power and the utility of embodied, African-centered womanist oratory in order to affirm the value of Black life. In so doing it explores how Black preaching women's bodies generate and transmit sacred truths from alternative sources and pulpits to combat interlocking oppressive systems. In this chapter, I review literature specific to indigenous spiritual power, the devaluation of Black bodies, African-centered womanist epistemology and oratory and fluid spiritual boundaries Black preaching women traverse both consciously and unconsciously. spiritual power, itinerancy and early Black preaching women, the use and exploitation of Black women's bodies, the intellectual progression of embodiment in homiletical theory, womanist epistemology and African spirituality and spiritual power reminiscent in Black women's preaching.

I begin by introducing the Yoruba concept of Àjé as a conceptual construct to explore Black preaching women's spiritual agency and Black women's preaching bodies as sites of spiritual power from as early as the 19th century through today. Second, I employ primary and tertiary sources to frame Black women's bodies in the historical context of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Starting here clarifies how Black bodies in general and Black women's bodies

specifically have been imagined and constructed as both disputed and sacred space. From here I move to Black enslaved women's narratives to reveal how Black women talked about their own bodies and how the institution of slavery found the uses of their bodies more beneficial to a commodified market place. Next, I appraise literature in cultural anthropology, communication, Black feminist and womanist thought to mine alternative sources of knowledge to illumine how bodies know what they know. The chapter concludes by looking at the survival of Africanity in Black women's preaching and Black religion. I organized the sections of the review in this way in an effort to present an orderly and logical flow. This flow unveils the inception of the devaluation of Black bodies, offers a historical overview of U.S. cultural beliefs about Black women's bodies, reveals the roots of logocentrism in homiletics, and the value of Africana religious retentions and subjugated knowledges in Black preaching women.

Àjé

The Sacred Empowered Mothers

In Yoruba cosmology, the capacity to create and transform people, places and systems and issue balance to imbalanced interlocking oppressive forces via powerful speech and divine authority that summons desires into reality is wielded by a concealed power called Àjé. This power is guarded by three Orisha or deities, Oshun, Yemanja and Oya. Each Orisha embodies specific qualities that represent aspects of the Sacred Empowered Mothers. Oshun is the lead guard of the Àjé. Several Yoruba creation stories depict Oshun as the "protector, savior and nurturer of humanity."[62] One myth highlights Oshun as the central figure in the creation of human beings:

[62] Bayyinab S. Jefferies, "Yoruba Deities," accessed February 28, 2016, www.britannica.com/topic/Oshun.

> The Yoruba people believe that the Orishas were sent by Olodumare, who is considered the Supreme God, to populate the Earth. Oshun, being one of the original 17 sent to Earth, was the only female deity. The other gods, all male, failed at their attempts to revive and populate the Earth. When they realized they were unable to complete the task given to them by Olodumare, they tried to persuade Oshun to help them. Oshun agreed and brought forth her sweet and powerful waters, bringing life back to Earth and humanity and other species into existence. As that Yoruba myth suggests, humanity would not exist if Oshun, the goddess of life and fertility, had not acted.[63]

Here Oshun's 'sweet and powerful waters, are metaphor for Àjé. Àjé, "underpins the concepts of creation and creativity, but as a force of justice and retribution, Àjé is essential to social harmony and balance. As Africans were forced into exile and enslavement, they took Àjé with them and continued its work of creating, destroying, harming, and healing in the New World"[64] Oshun's ability to complete her Divine assignment in spite of the lack of full participation by her male counterparts symbolically elucidates the power inherent in Black women's preaching bodies to "create and continue to re-create and texture, color and enliven nearly everything they touch no matter where they are."[65] Yemanja is considered to be the protective energy of the feminine force. In the Yoruba tradition she is the mother of all and the source of all of the waters. Artist Thalia Took said the following about Yemanja:

> As all life is thought to have begun in the sea, all life is held to have begun with Yemanja. She is motherly and strongly protective, and cares deeply for all her children, comforting them and cleansing them from sorrow. She is said to be able to cure infertility in women, and cowrie shells represent her wealth. She does not easily lose her temper, but when angered she can be quite destructive and violent, as the sea in a storm.[66]

Yemanja's spiritual power materialized in the very life center of women—the womb. As one who embodies Àjé, Yemanja's ability to cure infertility exemplifies the vitality of healing as a feature of spiritual power. Healing, then, is not quarantined only to the

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid, 5.
[66] Thalia Took, "Yemanja," accessed March 3, 2016, http://www.thaliatook.com/AMGG/yemaya.php.

physical realm of womb life but transcends to the cosmos in an effort to maintain balance. As Yemanja ushers in balance through healing waters, as the guardian of the cemetery, Oya addresses imbalance by issuing forth winds of change. The winds of Oya "represent a time of upheaval or sudden change of a destructive and chaotic but necessary nature."[67] Facets of each Orisha manifest in Àjé. The Orishas direct Àjé however, the source of Àjé are the Sacred Empowered Mothers.

The Àjé come from and are the Mother's themselves. Àjé "is the power of the feminine and of female divinity."[68] In *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts…*Teresa Washington indicated the following:

> Àjé is decidedly woman-owned and administered. Female ownership of Àjé can be attributed to the life-giving, highly spiritual and sacred womb; indeed, Our Mothers' wombs are literal door ways to our existence and the terrestrial origin-sites of Àjé. While many hold that Yoruba females of all ages have some degree of Àjé, elderly women, endowed with wisdom that is tempered with life's vicissitudes, are considered the most evolved, balanced, and powerful.[69]

In Yoruba theology, the Mothers are an esteemed group of spiritual entities, honored second only to Ifa, the voice of God itself. The role of the Mothers is the "rectification of human behavior and development of ìwà pèlè, good character, of individuals in concordance with their own "heads" (ori) as well as collective harmony."[70] They are known by many praise names such as Àwon Iyá Wa (Our Mothers); Àwon Iyámi Òsòròngà (The Great and Mysterious Mother) or Yewájobí

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[67] Thalia Took, "Oya," accessed March 4, 2016, http://www.thaliatook.com/AMGG/oya.php.
[68] Annette Lynn Williams. "Our Mysterious Mothers: The Primordial Feminine Power of Àjé in the Cosmology, Mythology and Historical Reality of the West African, Yoruba." (Ph.D. diss, California Institute of Integral Studies, 2014), ix
[69] Teresa Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Àjé in Africana Literature.* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 17.
[70] Menoukha Case, review of *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Àjé in Africana Literature* edited by Afro-*Caribbean Religions, Culture and Folklore* (Winter-Spring, 2007): 172.

(The Mother of all the Òrìsà and Living Things).[71] Henry Drewal and Margaret Drewal maintained that the Mothers are "recognized as the spiritual and terrestrial gods of society and the owners of the world."[72] Washington posited that "the Mothers enjoy suzerainty because of Àjé."[73] Àjé has the power to create and destroy so that rebirth is possible.

The Power of the Word and the Making of African Witches/Witchraft

Àjé originates with the womb of the Mothers and also the power of the word.[74] Chief Yagbe Onilu informed that "according to Ifà the difference between men and women is that women are born with *Ofo Ase* –the power of the word or to pray effectively which is inextricably linked to Àjé."[75] Onilu defined *Ase* as the following:

> A component of the life force breathed into each human being by God; it is spiritual power; it is the power to create—everything—Gods, ancestors, spirits, humans, animals, plants, rocks, rivers, and voiced words such as songs, prayers, praises, curses, or even everyday conversation. Existence, according to Yoruba thought, is dependent upon it; it is the power to make things happen and change. The power of the word is an important part of harnessing Asé.[76]

Using the oracular power of the Mothers, Black preaching women consciously tap into the power of the word to create space for marginalized bodies within dominant spaces. Historically, this power has often been reviled by power holders. Attempts to hinder the progress of Black preaching women succumbed to the power of the word—Asé.

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[71] Babatunde Lawal, *The Gelede Spectacle.* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 39 cited in Teresa Washington's, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Àjé in Africana Literature.* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 13.
[72] Henry John Drewal and Marfaret Thompson Drewal, *Gelede.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 7-8 in Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts…*, 13.
[73] Teresa Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*, 13.
[74]Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts,* 16.
[75] Yabge Onilu, "Aje=Witch: Elders of the Night," *Chief Yagbe Awolowo Onilu,"* July 27, 2015 accessed January 29, 2016, http://www.yagbeonilu.com/aje-witches-elders-of-the-night/.
[76] Onilu, "Aje=Witch: Elders of the Night."

Unfortunately, the intensity of this power that brings words and intentions to life and is the demise of exclusionary systems has been erroneously referred to as witchcraft and the Mothers as witches. Washington identified the cause of this disapproving labeling as the "Euro-phallogocentric construction of African witchcraft."[77] She articulated,

> Many scholars use the terms "witch" and Àjé as if they are synonymous. The erroneous translation of Àjé and the misguided assumption that complex African concepts can and must be defined by false European language equivalents has led to much confusion and impeded a true understanding of Àjé and similar powers. [78]

Wande Abimbola, J. Omosade Awolalu and Awo Fatunmbi illumine Washington's point. In *Sixteen Great Ifa Divination Poems,* Abimbola argued, "the Àjé represent a negation of all that human beings cherish."[79] In *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rites* J. Awolalu asserted, "Witches [wielding Àjé] are seen as the personification of evil, as innately wicked people who work harm against others. They are capable of their nefarious deeds through their possession of mysterious powers unknown and unavailable to ordinary people."[80] Fatunmbi offered a similar description. He noted that anthropologist also usually translate Àjé to mean "witch." Like Washington, Fatunmbi also disagreed with this designation. He concluded that this "inaccuracy has caused serious confusion regarding the theological foundation of *Ifá.*"[81] Ifà is the religion of the Yoruba people of West Africa.

Washington blamed the translation inaccuracy on the "upheaval caused by the European social, economic, and ideological colonization of Africa which led to the social construction of

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[77] Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts,* 5.
[78] Ibid, 8.
[79] Wande Abimbola, *Sixteen Great Ifà Divination Poems* (Lagos: UNESCO, 1975), 293, in Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts,* 5.
[80] J. Omosade Awolalu *Yoruba Beliefs and Sacrificial Rights* (Essex: Longman, 1979), 80, in Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts,* 5.
[81] Awo Falokun Fatunmbi *Iwa-pele,* 38-39, in Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts,* 17.

African witchcraft."[82] Washington explained that "in order to solidify the mental slavery and social death of Africans and facilitate territorial expansion and economic control, European colonizers slated traditional African spiritual systems and their devotees for eradication."[83] Fatunmbi validated Washington's assertion when he offered the following:

> When the British colonized the Yoruba Nation, they made a deliberate effort to ridicule and abolish indigenous forms of religion. The effects of that campaign are still apparent in modern day Nigeria. Missionary groups provide much of the available education outside of the large cities. Indoctrination against Ifà is a part of the curriculum in many of the Christian Schools.[84]

European colonizers were threatened by Àjé and Ifà spiritualists because of their surreptitious and indigenous and radical works.[85] The idea of African witchcraft was constructed by European colonizers and was also spread by African religious zealots rooted in patriarchy. According to Washington, "these Continental 'witch hunters' focused largely, but not exclusively, on spiritual entities and objects of a particular gender."[86]

Imperialist and patriarchal indoctrination imposed a binary opposition of evil female "witches" and good male "wizards."[87] Àjé appears to be a respectable force in the hands of men but when issued by women, the original owners, it is rendered as evil. In "A Comparison of the Western 'Witch' with the Yoruba Àjé: Spiritual Powers on Personality Types," Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Sodipo's stated that the "popular stereotype Àjé is that it is ènìyàn burúkú—a malicious, extremely secretive person whose aim is to [harass] or to do serious injury to usually innocent

[82] Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*, 7.
[83] Ibid, 6.
[84] Awo Falokun Fatunmbi *Iwa-pele*, 97 in
[85] Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*, 6.
[86] Ibid, 6.
[87] Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*, 6. Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*,

victims."[88] The problem with this connotation is that women with spiritual power are portrayed as spiritual and social deviants whose goal is to wreak havoc via the power of the word, conjure, etc. on an unsuspecting victim. Siegfried F. Nadel argued that "African witches are commonly perceived to be abnormal social deviants. A woman acting in such a manner is one who belies the common precepts and ideals of conduct; she is ill conditioned, eccentric, atypical and must then be a witch."[89] According to Washington, Nadel "also finds the African witch to constitute the enemy of men and of male authority; she seeks to dominate men…and her evilness is often directed against a husband and his kin."[90] However, "assertions about evil women reveal more about the aberrations of a patriarchal society than about a particular type of [spiritually empowered] woman."[91] Oracular utterance is feared for its ability to create and re-create. It is through the power of the word that Àjé brings balance to dehumanizing interlocking oppressive systems.

Washington and Diedre Badejo retrieved Àjé from the imprecise designation of African witch. Washington suggested that "rather than continue to attempt to find definitive meaning in the terms and tongues of others, Àjé deserves to exercise its ability to define itself, speak its own piece."[92] Badejo made necessary strides in reclaiming the linguistic and conceptual value of Àjé. She wrote:

> Some writers have interpreted the *àjé* as witches, which connotes a negative use of power only. However, the *àjé,* as we find in the cosmology of *Osun* and in the *Ifá* corpus, are given this power by *Olódùmarè* and it is used variously. My colleagues and informants made it clear that any person of ability, insight, leadership or other forms of observable power can be considered *àjé.*

[88] Barry Hallen and J. Olubi Sodipo, "A Comparison of the Western 'Witch' with the Yoruba Àjé: Spiritual Powers or Personality Types?" *Ife: Annals of the Institute of Cultural Studies* 1 (1986): 3.
[89] S.F. Nadel, *Nupe Religion* (London: Routledge, 1954), 170-171.
[90] Ibid, 174.
[91] Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts,* 7.
[92]Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts,* 8.

> Consequently, the translation, "witch", is singularly misleading and conceptually incorrect.[93]

Àjé "has many significant attributes and roles in society. Women of Àjé are bestowed with spiritual vision, divine authority, power of the word, and Asé the power to bring desires and ideas into being."[94] Manifestations of Àjé far exceed indigenous religious traditions such as Ifà. As Africans were forced into exile and enslavement, they took Àjé with them and continued its work of creating, destroying barriers, and healing in the New World"[95] In Yoruba cosmology we are able to get a sense of the way women use their bodies and the way Spirit uses women's bodies to create and effect social change. I look to locate this Àjé power in the homiletical practices of Black women. I argue that Black preaching women display Àjé –esque forces. As an analytical tool, Àjé helps to elucidate often overlooked but profoundly important aspects of Black women's approaches to sacred and just proclamation.

Spiritual Power, Itineracy and Black Preaching Women

Black women's preaching bodies deploy spiritual power, summons desires into reality and possess divine authority reminiscent of Àjé. The review of literature revealed that these attributes are readily visible in the itinerant witness of early Black preaching women. The arrival of the Second Great Awakening is a historical and contextual backdrop for 19th century Black women's religious conversion and itinerant ministry. The revivals encouraged and affirmed sacred embodiment visible through physical and spiritual transformation. The revivals are also a location where Black women's bodies are situated not as commodities but as conduits of spiritual liberation. Access to God is mediated through the body inclusive of Black women's bodies.

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[93]Diedre Badejo*, Ọṣun Ṣèègèsí* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996), 27 italics original.
[94] Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts*, 14.
[95] Ibid, 14.

Itinerant Preaching

Itinerant preaching is the practice of traveling between locations within specific geographic territories to evangelize and/or organize congregations. A tool of the early Methodist church in America, itinerant preaching was mainly practiced in rural areas to reach those beyond the immediate circle of believers. This evangelistic tool contributed to Methodism's growth in new colonies. Prior to the American Revolution, itinerant preaching was mainly a White male undertaking. Historians of the modern United Methodist church contended that African Americans "participated actively in groundbreaking and formational initiatives of the church."[96] However, little biographical data is available about these individuals.

The autobiographical narratives of John Jea and George White inform the discussion of itinerant preaching. In *Black Itinerants of the Gospel,* Graham Russell Hodges insisted that free Black itinerant preachers who emerged after the American Revolution were "caught up in a three-fold intellectual transformation then sweeping American culture: the rise of Methodism, the emergence of radical republicanism, and the creation of separate African American denominations."[97] Jea and White faced considerable racial discrimination from White church officials as well as the broader society. Hodges revealed that both Jea and White "responded by fusing their piety and their preaching with the quest for freedom and the urge to build separate institutions. Although Black Methodism was primarily an urban phenomenon in the post-revolutionary decades, itinerants such as Jea and White carried their evangelicalism and their

[96]"Roots (1736-1816)," United Methodist Church, Accessed September 24, 2015. http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/roots.

[97] Finkenbine, Roy E., Review of *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White* by Graham Russell Hodges. *The Journal of American History* 81 no. 2 (Sept, 1994): 679

abolitionism into rural areas in the broader Atlantic world. Through itinerant preaching, they helped shape the nascent African American denominations in the North."[98]

The African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) is an example of the crucial role itinerant preaching played in the development of Black theological thought and the evolution of Black independent denominations. Richard Allen, founder of the AME Church, was converted to Methodism at age 17 by a White itinerant preacher who railed against slavery. [99] In 1787, Allen and others walked out of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia because they were "frustrated with the limitations the church placed on Black parishioners."[100] The walk out had a trickle-down effect and ultimately lead to the creation of other Black Methodist denominations e.g., African Methodist Episcopal Zion and Christian Methodist Episcopal. Interestingly, while Allen used itinerancy as a tool to fight racial oppression, in the coming years, he would also use it as a tool to deny Black women like Jarena Lee the right to preach. An African Episcopal congregation was also founded by Absalom Jones. Both Allen and Jones were the first African Americans to be fully ordained in the United States. Blacks used itinerant preaching as a tool for religious expression and liberation. While the struggle for racial equality produced institutional and spiritual agency, Black women's desire for itinerant ministry was often undervalued and overlooked by male clergy leadership.

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[98] Ibid, 679
[99] Biography.com editors. *Richard Allen.* The Biology.com Website. www.biography.com/people/richard-allen-21056735 Access date September 23, 2015 publisher A&E Television Networks.
[100] Ibid.

Itinerant Black Preaching Women

Women played a crucial role in itinerancy: "Between 1790 and 1845 more than one hundred women crisscrossed the country as itinerant preachers."[101] Black women claimed to be divinely inspired to preach, insisting that "God could choose anyone—even the poor, uneducated, enslaved or female."[102] Mainline denominations used both Black and White preaching women to facilitate and help manage the growth of small sects into burgeoning denominations. The 19th century brand of evangelism influenced by the colony-wide revivals was charged as disrespectful. The process of conversion and sanctification exemplified in the unbridled emotion of attendees, via women's preaching bodies, was seen by many as a declination of the proper function of women. As a result, Catherine Brekus posited, "most Protestant churches in the early 19th century opposed female preaching on the grounds that it violated the Pauline injunction to let the women keep silent in the church (I Corinthians 14:34-35, NRSV)."[103] A woman's place was in the domestic realm, not behind the pulpit. Brekus noted that in the "19th century the word 'promiscuous' was often used to describe mixed audiences of men and women, but the word also suggested sexual immorality and licentiousness."[104] She further noted, "Many ministers argued that Christian women who invited men to stare at them in public, even to proclaim the gospel were not better than prostitutes."[105] By daring to stand in the male space of the pulpit, itinerant preaching women violated the rules of female modesty and usurped male authority.[106]

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[101] Catherine Brekus, *Female Preaching in Early Nineteenth Century America* (Texas: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2009), 21.
[102] Ibid, 21.
[103] Ibid, 21.
[104] Ibid, 21.
[105] Ibid, 21.
[106] Ibid, 21.

Female modesty was a complex landscape for itinerant Black preaching women to navigate. Their anatomy made them female, but societal views on womanhood excluded them. Unlike their White female counterparts, many Black preaching women struggled to acknowledge their call to preach. In their spiritual autobiographical accounts, it is clear that the women experience cognitive dissonance when trying to see their despised bodies as divine instruments through which God would speak. The cult of domesticity protected only White women. This ideological perspective was designated for White women and "sought to assert that womanly virtue resided in piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity."[107] Black preaching women had to combat the negative views about their vocation from their husbands and other women.

Black preaching women were plagued by dehumanizing othering from those who considered themselves to be racially superior. O.C. Edwards avowed that itinerant Black preaching women "suffered from racial bigotry, from prejudice against women in preaching, and from resentment of evangelism."[108] They traveled many difficult miles enduring great hardships and dangers from the threat of being sold into slavery to sustained absence from their families.[109] Despite adversities Black preaching women believed they were following God's call to travel from place to place. Their actions may have been opposed by a select group, but their exhortation to repent began first with themselves and then with the world. Nothing was greater than God's agenda, and there was no better medium than the use of what others believed to be loathed—Black female bodies in motion.

[107] Gourdine, "*Fashioning the body as politic in Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust,"* 2004
[108] O.C., Edwards, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 565.
[109] Ibid, 565.\

The Womanist Preacher

The womanist paradigm privileges the everyday experiences of Black women as essential to the knowledge production process.[110] Foregrounding the importance of womanist hermeneutics in preaching, Katie Cannon asserted "that in African American preaching, the Word of God focuses on the word made flesh that dwells with us as the living God rather than the words of canonized scripture."[111] Similar to Àjé, the womanist preacher embraces the body as a source of revelatory knowledge. The body is the central location through which God's Word comes into fruition. As previously noted, the womanist preacher's body then is a conduit of liberation that bridges the sacred and the mundane. Her flesh becomes the vehicle through which the power of the feminine and female divinity converges. Aside from utilizing the body as hermeneutical agent, the womanist preacher grounds her preaching in four key principles: (1) radical subjectivity, (2) traditional communalism, (3) redemptive self-love, and (4) critical engagement.[112] One, the womanist preacher displays radical subjectivity in her ability to name

[110]Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi Womanist **1.** From *womanish*. (Opp. Of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "you trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. **2.** *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black? Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." **3.** Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. **4.** Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

[111]Katie Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul o of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum Press, 1995)326-337. Cannon was cited by Teresa Fry Brown in her lecture on "A Womanist Model for Proclamation of the Good News." I accessed the lecture on September 25, 2015 on www.africanamericanlectionary.org

[112] Teresa Fry Brown elucidated these principles in her lecture *"A Womanist Model of Proclamation…"* Fry Brown cited the works of Cannon and Stacey Floyd Thomas as outlining and expanding the basic tenets of Womanism and Womanist Discourse. The works she cites are as follows: Cannon, Katie. *Black Womanist Ethics,* (Atlanta: Scholars press, 1988); Floyd-Thomas, Stacey, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics,* (Cleveland: Pilgrim

one's self and one's experience for one's self. She is the primary subject of power in a world where she is often objectified because of her race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, etc. Two, the womanist preacher is not a separatist but is "committed to the survival of an entire people—male and female."[113] Three, redemptive self-love is the apex of womanist preaching. Speaking through her character Nanny Crawford in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neal Hurston exclaimed that Black women are the mules of the world.[114] Mules represent labor. Historically, Black women have labored under the weight of patriarchy and racism, working as the figurative mules of men and White people. The womanist preacher regains possession of her self-hood from oppressive systems by affirming love of God, self and others—regardless. Four, the womanist preacher critically engages the biblical and non-biblical in search of "emancipatory knowledge."[115] Fry Brown observed, "Although the Bible has been used to marginalize Black women, they continue to use it by widening the gaps."[116] Fry Brown cited Cannon who posited, "African American women must open the Bible wide enough to see themselves in the text. Then seek egalitarian, inclusive readings of the texts watching for what is submerged inside and outside the traditional expression of White male hegemony."[117]

African-Centered Preaching

African-centered preaching is stylistically rooted in the Black preaching tradition yet ideologically and theologically more expansive. Simmons and Thomas maintained that Black preaching operates from five core principles: (1) the centrality of the Bible, (2) the Bible is made

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Press, 2006) Chapter 1 and *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society,* (New York: NYU Pres, 2006)8.
[113] Walker, xi.
[114] Zora Neal Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978, 1991), 29.
[115] Fry Brown, p.8.
[116] Ibid, 8.
[117] Ibid, 8.

to come literally alive by means of an eyewitness style of picture painting and narration, (3) existential exegesis, (4) dependence on a greater power, and (5) celebration—a celebratory conclusion that gives reinforcement to the Biblical text and primary purpose of the sermon.[118] One, the Bible is the primary source for understanding God's action in the world. Two, the presentation of the Biblical account is vivid and highly imaginative. Three, "a reason for such profound sermonic insights is the cultural habit of the close observation of life which yields a rich storehouse of interesting trues stories illustrative of biblical precepts with which the hearer may identify."[119] Four, "preachers believe that their words ultimately come from the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe who has shaped them and delivers messages through the preacher's careful and thorough discipline.[120] Five, Simmons and Thomas stated, "The typical Black sermon ends in a joyful celebration, not a challenge for hearers to do this or that.[121] Like womanist preaching, African-centered preaching is a radically subjective endeavor.

This specialized form of proclamation privileges the lived realities of African diasporic people in the U.S. by embracing and acknowledging the value of African spirituality. African-centered preaching is an act of Sankofa, "the West African notion of sacred knowing and reclaiming the past as a way to heal and move forward to create the future or there is no harm go back and fetch what was lost."[122] African centered preaching gives primary consideration to ancient African histories, cultures, and spiritual practices as a pathway to redemptive self-love.

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[118]Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, eds. *Preaching with Sacred Fire* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 7-8.
[119] Ibid, 7-8.
[120] Ibid, 8.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Thee Smith, "Sankofa Liturgy for Abbeville, SC Lynchings of 1882-1919" Personal Notes on Program Book (September, 2016), Document p. 9; photocopy p. 5); Christel Temple, The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History. Journal of Black Studies, Vol.41. No.1 (September 2010), pp. 127-150; Stephanie Mitchem, "Sankofa: Black Theologies" *Cross Currents*, Spring/Summer pp. 177-184.

African-centered preaching supports African American duality by affirming our indigenous reality and simultaneously giving us the capacity to exist and radically examine another. African-centered preaching also utilizes the body as a primary source and location for sacred experience. Finally, African-centered preaching is not always a conscious undertaking. Those who preach within Black liberation or womanist conventions may center Christianity "as the religious anchor of African Americans without realizing that it often co-exists with unacknowledged retentions."[123] An example is attributing Black spiritual power only to Christianity. Black spirituality is grounded in pre-Christian African belief systems. Enslaved Africans underwent a spiritual transformation that necessitated a negotiation of Africanity and Christianity.[124]

Black Women's Preaching Bodies as Àjé

Àjé "is not only the power of the feminine, of female divinity and women, but Àjé is also the women themselves who exercise this power."[125] Àjé's latent power commands witness in evolutionary ways. Àjé challenges the western knowledge validation process by de-centering the gaze of the dominant, which is usually White and/or male. Àjé "underpins the concepts of creation and creativity, but as a force of justice and retribution, Àjé is essential to social harmony and balance. This spiritual dynamism is thought to be inherent in Africana women.[126] Thus, the Sacred Empowered Mother's, the source of the energy, reach across the waters of the Atlantic as

[123] Elizabeth West, *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction: Threaded Visions of Memory,* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), 45.
[124] Ibid, 45.
[125] Annette Lynn Williams. "Our Mysterious Mothers: The Primordial Feminine Power of Àjé in the Cosmology, Mythology and Historical Reality of the West African, Yoruba." (Ph.D. diss, California Institute of Integral Studies, 2014), ix.
[126] Teresa Washington, "The Mother-Daughter Àjé Relationship in Toni Morrison's Beloved," *African American Review* 39, no.1-2 (Spring-Summer 2005): 171-188.

the often referred to male and Christian Holy Spirit endowing Black women with spiritual power to transform. As an innate power, Àjé's capabilities are present but never fully utilized. Whether in the pulpit or other self-defined sacred space, Black preaching women used their platform to address racial, gender and class injustice in the church and broader society. Black preaching women's bodies are the personification of the Mother's conscious engagement with the Divine. By receiving and answering the call to preach Black women awaken to this intrinsic force and deploy it against interlocking oppressive systems by not only exemplifying characteristics of but actually embodying Àjé. The following preaching women from the 19th century through today exemplify African-centered womanist oratory. Each is the embodiment of the role of Àjé identified in popular vernacular as Black girl magic in spiritual formation.

Jarena Lee

In 1809 Jarena Lee approached Richard Allen to ask for permission to preach. Allen expressed to Lee that there were no provisions for women in the AME Church. [127] Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) because there were no provisions for Black bodies in the White Methodist Church he attended. Allen's rejection of Lee revealed that while Protestant revivalism in the late nineteenth century gave the appearance of acceptance, in most churches and meeting spaces the pulpit remained off limits to black women's bodies. Lee opined:

> O how careful ought we be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear nowadays, for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? Seeing the Savior died for the woman as well as the man. If the man may preach, because the Savior died for

[127]Jarena Lee, *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee: Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Printed and Published for the Author, 1849), 11.

> him, why not the woman? Seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Savior, instead of a half one? As those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach would seem to make it appear…Did not Mary first preach the Risen Savior? If so preach the gospel, by the gift of heaven, only comes by inspiration solely, is God straightened; must [God] take the man exclusively? As for me I am fully persuaded that the Lord called me to labor according to what I received in this vineyard. If [God] has not, how could [God] consistently hear testimony in favor of my labors in awakening and converting sinners…through God's poor female instrument.[128]

Allen had not authorized Lee to preach. She could only hold prayer meetings in her home. However, placing her faith in God, Lee entered ministry without denominational support.[129] Circa, 1817, Lee was present at Bethel AME Church when a visiting preacher faltered in his preaching. Lee recalls, "The Rev. Richard Williams was to preach. He entered the pulpit, gave out the hymn which was sung and approached the throne of grace; took his text, passed through the exordium and commenced to expound upon it. He proceeded to have lost spirit."[130]

As on other occasions in her memoir, Lee articulated being filled at that point with the power of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost was both a supernatural and practical power that resulted in clarity of thought, precise explication of scripture, and sometimes high emotion. Rev. Williams may have faltered in any three of these areas. "At once," Lee said, "I sprang up, as by altogether super natural impulse I was guided to give exhortation."[131] Allen publically recognized Lee's calling to preach at that service, and Lee embarked on a long career as an itinerant preacher.[132]

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[128] Lee, 11-13.
[129] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder.* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 44.
[130] Lee, 17.
[131] Ibid, 17.
[132] Westfield, N. Lynne, The Foolish Woman Grows Angry Because They Teach Her: Influences of Sexism in Black Church Worship, in *"Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora," (*New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 38.

By the time Lee was forty-four she is reported to have walked 2,325 miles and delivered 178 sermons. Much of that distance Lee covered on foot, the rest by wagon, ferry boat, and carriage. Chanta Heyward identified 19th century itinerant Black preaching women's mode of transportation as "prophetic journeying," a type of prophetic proclamation.[133] It was an embodied God-inspired critique of social and religious systems that limited opportunities for Black preaching women based on their gender and race. Traveling was a dangerous feat, and Lee mostly traveled alone. Though Lee was a free woman, there was always the threat of being harassed or far worse captured by slave holding states. Lee's ability to see her body as an instrument for God's use provided her with an uncanny zeal to travel beyond what she could see in order to spread the gospel.

Zilpha Elaw

Lee's contemporary Zilpha Elaw attended her first revival camp meeting around the same time Lee received permission to exhort.[134] Having already been converted at a young age, she received her call to preach through her sister who "near death became possessed with the Holy Ghost and in a vision saw Jesus and was informed to tell Elaw that she must preach the gospel."[135] After Elaw preached at a second revival camp meeting, it was made clear to her that indeed she must preach the gospel. Although her husband objected, Elaw's conviction to preach became her primary concern. Authorized by God, Elaw set her own itinerary. She "renounced her Methodist affiliation and put aside all concerns for husband, daughter, family and friends and immersed herself in her mission."[136] The spiritual autobiographies of other Black preaching

[133]Chanta Heyward, *Prophesying Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word 1823-1913,* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003)19.
[134] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder,* 46.
[135] Ibid, 46.
[136] Ibid, 47.

women like Sojourner Truth, Rebecca Cox Jackson, Amanda Berry Smith or Julia Foote point to similar struggles for acceptance and adamant resolve to preach the gospel despite oppressive barriers.

Julia Foote

The daughter of former slaves, Julia Foote was born in Schenectady, New York. Foote's parents were religious and showed allegiance to the Methodist church. As a result of her parents' rearing and devout faith, Foote experienced conversion as a child and soon thereafter sanctification—the process whereby Christians are totally freed from sin because of their confessed faith in Christ and disciplined life style. In her autobiography *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*, Foote testifies about her experience and new found understanding. Her body is the central communicative site through which she experiences and disseminates spiritual power. On several occasions she talks about "being filled with the Glory of God."[137]

Foote regularly shared her faith with all who would listen. She revealed later that God called her "to do a distinct work," which was to preach.[138] She struggled to say yes. By her own admission, "she'd always been opposed to the preaching of women."[139] Foote moved forward in trepidation of the weight of the assignment. As was the order of the day for Black preaching women, Foote was met with resistance by her husband and her pastor. She wrote:

> From this time the opposition to my life work commenced, instigated by the minister, Mr. Beman. Many in the church were anxious to have me preach in the hall, where our meetings were held at that time, and were not a little astonished at the minister's cool treatment of me. Two of the trustees got some of the elder sisters to call on the minister and ask him to let me preach. His answer was: "No; she can't preach her holiness stuff here, and I am astonished that you should ask it

[137] Julia Foote, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire*, p. 47
[138] Ibid, 66.
[139] Ibid, 68.

> of me." The sisters said he seemed to be in quite a rage, although he said he was not angry."[140]

Women were not expected to undertake public leadership. However, "Foote knew that a woman who claimed a divine calling to the ministry challenged Christian tradition and American social prejudice."[141] Foote "believed Christianity made her the spiritual equal to men and thus authorized her to lead in the church."[142] In 1894 Foote was the first woman to be ordained a Deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the second woman to be ordained an Elder in 1900 within the same denomination.

Rosa Horn

Some 19th century Black preaching women sought the approval of male clergy; others carved their own paths to ministerial embodiment. This is evidenced in Black preaching women during the great migration. Wallace Best informs us that "migration era preaching women developed inventive strategies to subvert and manipulate conventional gender expectations and to deflect attention away from their bodies, sex and sexuality and rendered themselves sexually ambiguous or entirely ensconced in a female sacred world of being beyond the reach of male perspectives of power."[143] Two Black preaching women who exemplified Bests' assertion are Rosa Horn and Ida B. Robinson.

As an evangelist in the Pentecostal church, Horn countered resistance to her female body in the masculine rhetorical pulpit by subverting it altogether. Collier-Thomas reported that

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[140] Ibid, 73.
[141] William L. Andrews. *Julia A.J. Foote.* Cengage Learning Website. http://college.cengage.com/english/lauter/heath/4e/students/author_pages/late_nineteenth/foote_ju.html. Access date November 30, 2015.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Best, *The Holy Ghost is a Male Spirit: African American Preaching Women and the Paradoxes of Gender*,102.

"following the death of her husband during the early years of the Great Migration, Horn moved to Illinois and then to Indiana."[144] Once in Indiana, she became affiliated with the Fire Baptized Pentecostal Church. Horn's preaching ministry was affirmed neither by Black or White males but by a woman, "the nationally renowned White healing evangelist Mary Woodworth Etter."[145]

In 1926 Horn organized the Pentecostal Faith Church in Harlem. While some pulpits remained off limits to women, in 1933 Horn accepted an invitation from the radio station WHN in New York City to commence a ministry. It was successful and drew a large following of southern immigrants. Even with the physical distance created by broadcasting her sermons, male preachers, nonetheless—rejected her preaching activities. Her body was contested. Horn exhibited a remarkable ability to excel despite scant evangelical support. According to Jonathon Walton, "the popularity of Horn's broadcast caused conflict with the ubiquitous ministries of both Father Divine and Elder Micheaux."[146] The radio station sued Father Divine, "accusing the Harlem-based deity of intimidation in attempts to run Mother Horn and her congregation out of Harlem."[147] Their concerted effort to destroy Horn's ministry strengthened her following and resulted in a radio ministry, spanned thirty years.[148]

Ida Robinson

Ida Robinson was publicly ordained by Bishop Henry L. Fisher "who along with other officials of the United Holy Church had recognized her ability as a gospel preacher."[149] In 1919 she was commissioned as pastor of Mt. Olive, a small church affiliated with the United Holy

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[144] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 173.
[145] Jonathan Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 43.
[146] Ibid, 43.
[147] Ibid, 43.
[148] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 176.
[149] www.mtsinaiholychurch.org/images/Ida.pdf Accessed September 28, 2015

Church denomination. Robinson "stressed and preached holiness as a divine requirement, holiness as the work of the Holy Ghost, and holiness as a condition to seeing God."[150] Though she was senior pastor, women in ministry still struggled to gain approval from male ministerial leaders. In 1924 God appeared to Robinson in a series of visions and dreams informing her that she was to be God's instrument and start a church that would allow full clergy rights to women.[151] Later that year, the State of Pennsylvania granted Robinson a charter for Mt. Sinai Holy Churches of America, of which she became the first presiding bishop. Robinson's church was peculiar because it was conceived to be a space for women to gain equal footing.

In *Black Gods of the Metropolis,* Arthur Fauset stated, "Mt. Sinai is distinctive among the cults considered here in the extent and degree of female participation. Many of the elders are women, as are a large number of the preachers."[152] In her capacity as bishop, Robinson ordained women throughout the United States.[153] Robinson used her body to create uniformity within the denomination by instituting plain dress and forbidding make-up, straightened hair, and finger nail polish. In so doing, Robinson deployed sanctification as spiritual armor to counter the cultural views of Black females bodies as useful commodity or sexually licentious. Holiness was a symbol of God's presence and was necessary to exude spiritual power. A Black woman's preaching body held Divine power that was used to affect spiritual, emotional, and social change.

Fauset provides several accounts of members of Mt. Sinai who tell stories of being healed as result of Robinson's and other women authorities and spiritual powers gifted through the discipline of holiness. One member credits Robinson with healing his wife's inability to carry

[150] www.mtsinaiholychurch.org/images/Ida.pdf Accessed September 28, 2015.
[151] www.mtsinaiholychurch.org/images/Ida.pdf. Accessed on September 28, 2015,
[152] Arthur Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), 13.
[153] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder,* 194.

children to full term. He claimed that his wife was always sickly and since joining Mt. Sinai, she hadn't needed a doctor in sixteen years. Horn and Robinson's use of sanctification as a disciplinary practice to re-present Black female bodies as powerful texts that wield spiritual power helped to usher in a new terrain upon which Black women's preaching bodies would be shaped by the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement shifted Black preaching women's attention away from individual freedoms and personal inequity to collective liberation and communal responsibility.

Prathia Hall

By the 20th century Black women's preaching bodies are visible on the political front. True to form, Black preaching women prove that they don't need a pulpit from which to preach or affect change. Continuing the legacy of itinerant Black preaching women of the 19th century, women like Hall traveled from the comforts of her northern homestead to the south where Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan reigned supreme. Once there, Hall joined the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC was instrumental in challenging discriminatory laws in the Deep South. Hall became coordinator for the freedom rides in southwest Georgia. This is another example of 'prophetic journeying,' and the use of God-inspired traveling as a form of ministry and social critique.[154] Like her predecessors, in spite of both seen and unseen dangers, Hall's resolve was steadfast. Her brand of holiness included social activism.

Hall believed that "God intended for African Americans to be free and empowers us in the struggle for freedom compelling us to have freedom faith."[155] Hall expressed that it was "the

[154] See footnote 31.
[155] Prathia Hall: *Witness to Faith in Episode 4: Freedom Faith, is part of the This Far by Faith: African American Spiritual Journeys series* and is a co-production of Blackside Inc. (Eyes on the Prize, America's War on Poverty, and Malcolm X: Make it Plain) and The Faith Project, Inc. in association with the Independent Television Service. It

stories of our history as African Americans that helped her to understand that we were called to be activists in this struggle for freedom."[156] Camp meetings turned into lunch counter sit-ins and bus rides to demand equal treatment. As another self-proclaimed instrument of God, Hall's preaching female body went from protest to protest preaching (i.e., preaching the wholeness of an entire people). She attributed her ability to embody and affect change to being "possessed by God."[157] In 1977 Hall was ordained to preach and called to pastor her father's church, the Mt. Sharon Baptist Church in Philadelphia and later went on to earn a doctorate in Social Ethics and taught at Boston Divinity School.

Teresa Fry Brown

In the 21st century Black women's itinerant ministry has expanded to include executive level denominational wide positions and distinguished chairs within academic institutions. In 2012 Fry Brown was elected historiographer and executive director of research and scholarship of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She is the first woman to hold this position and only the third woman to serve as a general officer of the AME church.

A native of Independence, Missouri, Fry Brown is revered in both the church and the Academy. She charted the path for Black preaching women to write both autobiographical and academic books that ultimately have shaped the field of homiletics. In her text, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women Proclaiming God's Word* Fry Brown, she penned,

> My preaching is liberation for all of God's people. Social and individual transformation permeates every sermon I have preached in the past twenty years. As I began to preach more and more, I understood the intense vulnerability of the preaching moment. I became aware of the transparent nature of preaching as one displayed her beliefs, preparation, and personality before a listening congregation

is presented on PBS by WGBH and ITVS (2003). Videocassette and DVD of Episode 4: Freedom Faith was produced, written, and directed by Alice Markowitz.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Ibid.

> of believers and unbelievers. One may be weary because of resistance to her or his call but has to be able to sing a song of God's justice, mercy, love and grace in that mysterious meeting of dust and divinity called preaching.[158]

Black lives continue to weather the liminal space of questionable existence and certain death. More specifically, Black preaching women's bodies remain contested terrain upon which racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, homophobia, capitalism and militarism wreak debilitating havoc. To this end, Teresa Fry Brown embodies what Cannon identifies as an emancipatory historiography by preaching truth to power to the very systems that work to dehumanize Black lives and disavow the Black experience. Symbolically carrying the community of believers upon her back through her teaching in the academy and church, Fry Brown has waded through the biblical textual waters filled with skewed hermeneutical approaches and hegemonic homiletical processes to set the captives of dehumanizing othering free. In spite of weary throats that accompany truth to power speakers, Dr. Fry Brown has composed new songs in the church and the academy that incite intellectual freedom and spiritual depth.

The Devaluation of Black Bodies

Marcus Rediker's, *The Slave Ship: A Human History,* Daniel Mannix and Malcom Cowley's *Black Cargoes,* Gustavus Vassa's, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African—Volume One,* and Anthony Pinn's, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* exposed the middle passage as the stage upon which utilization of Black women's bodies as texts begins. From the moment a Black woman was captured on the shores of the continent of Africa

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[158] Fry Brown, *Weary Throats and New Songs: Black Women P roclaiming God's Word* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 15-16.

her body was no longer a free standing mass in the universe but that of a foreign epistemological agent. In *Terror and Triumph* Pinn asserted the following:

> No one sensitive to the historical facts of the Middle Passage—beginning with the actual capture of Africans, including the barracoon (or dungeon) experience, and concluding with the ocean voyage—can deny the way it shaped the Americas and such ideas connected to the notions of identity and being as citizenship, nationality, the "foreigner," and the "other. [159]

Ideas of the "other" being Black bodies are shaped on the slave ship and solidified during the long voyage across the transatlantic. Pinn expounded upon this notion of re-creation and identity by citing the findings of historian Michel Gomez. Gomez theorized the middle passage as a symbol of death and rebirth. Gomez wrote:

> The Middle Passage was a birth canal, launching a prolonged struggle between slaveholder and enslaved over the rights of definition…But the Middle Passage was also a death canal, baptismal waters of a different kind. At the very least, the African died to what was and to what could have been. The experience would leave an indelible impression upon the African's soul, long remembered by sons and daughters. It is the memory of ultimate rupture…The Middle Passage was one of the New World's most crucial and formative phases.[160]

In the middle passage Black bodies are the physical site upon which the horrific is imagined and enacted. It is during the Middle Passage or the Maafa, the great suffering that Black bodies are read as commodified wretches and not human beings with valid and highly complex cultural and spiritual systems. The slave ship, the vehicle used to transport said bodies, exemplified the highest form of terror. Gustavus Vassa, "was the first person to write extensively about the slave trade from the perspective of the enslaved."[161] According to Rediker, Vassa "penned what was at the

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[159]Anthony Pinn. *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 27-28.
[160] Michel Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 13-14-158. Cited in Pinn's *Terror and Triumph*, 28.
[161]Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History.* (New York: Penguin, 2007) 109.

time perhaps the greatest literary work of the abolitionist movement and what has in recent years become history's most famous description of the slave ship and the Middle Passage."[162]

In his narrative Vassa also known as Olaudah Equiano wrote about the systematic use of terror on the slaver i.e., the ship.[163] He penned, "The Whites looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never even seen among any people instances of brutal cruelty as occurred regularly aboard the ship."[164] Terrified of the foreign edifice, after having survived the journey from the interior to the coast, men, women and children were forced upon slavers bound by ankle, neck and wrist chains. For the enslaved, captivity was not a new phenomenon. Local villages and regions often enslaved victims of lesser strength. However, the heinous act of chattel slavery, the resignation to dungeons and months long stays docked as more Black cargo filled the bowels of the ship in rancid conditions was not known to captives. African bodies were now read as goods to be sold, inanimate objects or soulless beings.[165] Reporting history through Vassa's lenses Rediker described the dreadful scene wherein the enslaved suffered extreme heat and poor ventilation "copious perspirations", and seasickness. The stench, which was already loathsome, became "absolutely pestilential" as the sweat, the vomit, the blood and the "necessary tubs" full of excrement almost suffocated the captured. He closed the scene adding, "the shrieks of the terrified mingled in cacophony with the groans of the dying."[166]

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[162] Ibid, 109.
[163] Ibid, 118.
[164]Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano* with an introduction edited by Robert J. Ellison. (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 55-57.
[165]Rediker, 77. "Slavery was an ancient and widely accepted institution throughout the larger societies of the region, usually reserved for war captives and criminals. Slave trading had gone on for centuries. From the seventh century to the nineteenth, more than nine million souls were carried northward in the trans-Saharan trade organized by Arab merchants in North Africa and their Islamic allies. Thes slaves were traded in highly developed commercial markets. In many areas, when European slave traders arrived on the coast, they simply entered preexisting circuits of exchange and did not immediately alter them." For more see Manning. *African Diaspora;* Eric Wolfe, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 206.
[166] Quotations in this section appear in Equiano, *Interesting Narrative,* 58-89 and are cited in Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 120.

In *Black Cargoes* Daniel Mannix also gave an account of the horrid conditions and inhumane treatment of Black bodies. Mannix informed, "From the beginning to the end of the trade was a denial of any standards except those of profit and loss."[167] Hence, profit and loss was the force behind the slave trade and the impetus for meeting the demand for human labor with a pristine supply. However, the experience of the Middle Passage often proved to be too rancid for the strongest captive. The living and the dead fastened together in a position of liminality. Void of personal space and dignity, captives lay packed closely side by side, naked and metaphorically alone. While both men and women experienced the dismay of the Middle Passage, the men usually remained chained below and the women were given more freedom above deck. Rediker illuminated not only the relationship between Black bodies and the vessel but also between sailors and enslaved. He wrote, "The relationship between the sailors and the slaves—predicated on vicious forced feedings, whippings, casual violence of all kinds, and the rape of women captives."[168] While it is clear that Black men and women's bodies were subjected to an unthinkable existence while on the slave ship during the Middle Passage, the difference is that on the ship Black women's bodies were circumscribed as the primary utility of a capitalist market space both for pleasure and production.

Mannix explained, "The women were usually regarded as fair prey for the sailors—and the children were allowed to wander by day almost anywhere on the vessel, though they spent the night between decks in other rooms than men."[169] Mannix described the plight of terror faced by Black women on a slave ship called the Sable Venus. He depicted the following:

> …if she was a living woman borne from Angola to the West Indies, was roaming the deck of a ship that stank of excrement…She had been torn from her husband

[167]Daniel Mannix, and Malcom Crowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of Atlantic Slave Trade 1518-1865.* (New York: Viking Press, 1962) xi.
[168]Rediker, *The Slave Ship,* 7.
[169]Mannix, *Black Cargoes,* 104.

> and her children, she had been branded on the left buttock, and she had been carried to the ship bound hand and foot, lying in the bilge at the bottom of a dugout canoe. Now she was the prey of the ship's officers, in danger of being flogged to death if she resisted them. Her reward if she yielded was a handful of beads or a sailor's kerchief to tie around her waist.[170]

Pinn gave a similar report about the vulnerability of women and mistaken freedom on the decks of the slave ships:

> In preparation for the journey, captured Africans would have their heads shaved and their flesh branded with the owner's initials or coat of arms. Either shortly before reaching the slave ship or upon arrival, their clothing was removed to make it easier to keep their bodies clean. Once transported by smaller vessels to the ship, males were chained to prevent rebellious activities and escape attempts. They were held below deck and confined to a small space that limited movement. On some ships, women and children were left on deck because it was assumed they posed little threat of violence. But in other cases they too were held below…In addition to the hardships endured by all, women on these ships were often victims of rape by the crew and captain.[171]

These examples of African women's existence during the Middle Passage should not be viewed from a flat standpoint. While life on the slave ship was unspeakable and freedom of movement was relative; African women's bodies became sites of resistance to forced terror. Using the account of a sailor named William Butterworth recorded in his memoir *Three Years Adventures of a Minor in England, Africa and the West Indies, South Carolina and Georgia* Rediker introduced a young African woman who is given the name Sarah. The sailors and captains were smitten with her beauty and dancing abilities. She quickly became the favorite of the captain and "was likely shown greater favors than the rest, likely as small recompense for coerced sexual services."[172] The narrative reported that Sarah was "universally respected by the ship's company."[173] The recorder

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[170] Ibid, 113.
[171] Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 31-32.
[172] William Butterworth [Henry Schroder], *Three Years Adventures of a Minor, in England, Africa and the West Indies, South Carolina and Georgia* (Leeds: Edward Barnes, 1822), 80-81, 108-9, 111-12.
[173] Ibid.

recounted, "Soon the enslaved men on the *Hudibras* erupted in insurrection."[174] The massacre was interrupted however not without massive bloodshed and severe punishment. The captain and his crew suspected that "Sarah and her mother (who was also on board) were somehow involved, even though the women had not joined the men in the actual revolt. Sarah had likely used her privileged position as favorite and her great freedom of movement that this entailed, to help with planning and perhaps even to pass tools to the men, allowing them to hack off their shackles and manacles."[175] Butterworth recalled the story of another unnamed enslaved woman who after having survived the journey from the interior to the coast made an attempt to escape. A portion of her story follows:

> …She had traveled three moons from the interior, much of it by canoe down the rivers and through the swamps. Several times along the way she had been sold. In the canoe-house barracoon where she and dozens of others had been held for several days, she learned that this leg of the journey was nearing its end. Now she wiggled upward against the wet torso of another prostrate captive, then against the side of the canoe, so she could raise her head and peer above the bow. Ahead lay the dreaded *owbacoocoo*, the dreaded ship, made to cross the "big water." She had heard about it in the most heated threats made in the village, where to be sold to the white men and taken aboard the *owbacoocoo* was the worst punishment imaginable…To the left of the canoe she saw a sandbar and made a decision. She jumped over the side swimming furiously to escape her captors. She hurried her splashes as a couple of the canoemen jumped in after her.[176]

Black women's bodies are not only the vehicle upon which the unimaginable is rendered but also the site where liberation ensues despite the consequences. According to the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* as reported by Rediker, "Sarah survived the Middle Passage and whatever punishment she may have gotten for her involvement in the insurrection. When she went ashore, she carried

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[174] Ibid.
[175] David Eltis, Stephen D. Behrendt, David Richardson and Herbert S. Klein, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: A Database on CD-ROM* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). #81890
[176] *Three Years Adventures*, 81-83.

African traditions of dance, song and resistance with her."[177] The Middle Passage was a horrific occurrence. Black women's bodies were sexually exploited and branded as property. Pinn poignantly summarized my point. He proffered, "the Middle Passage was full of dread and humiliation, an experience that helped shape the sense of being as property or object synonymous with status as slave."[178] The middle passage is the seed upon which the utilization of Black women's bodies as text begins. This seed sprouts on the auction block.

Texts of Commodity

The auction block becomes the epitome of dehumanization for enslaved African bodies. The power of slavery lies in its ability to dehumanize the 'other.' The process of dehumanization or "thingafication," connotes an otherness of the Black body within the context of a world defined by white superiority.[179] Pinn apprised, that the effort to "objectify, to disfigure or transfix the body commences on the Middle Passage and is made complete on the auction block."[180] The physical site of the auction block is where Black bodies are placed on display and displayed upon. The slave auction is the space where difference in character and capability is solidified, subjectivity is denied and the status of nonbeing for enslaved African bodies is reified.

In chapter two of *Terror and Triumph* Pinn placed the slave auction in conversation with identity formation. He contended that it was the slave auction that constructed a debased position of inferiority and ability based on a politics of domination visible in the performance of European privilege which equated to superiority. On the auction block the identity of the enslaved is cemented from human to inhumane. They are being introduced to a new world and are quickly

[177] TSTD #81890.
[178]Pinn,*Terror and Triumph,* 33.
[179] For more on nonbeing, "otherness" or "thingafication," see Alice Walker's *The Color Purple,* Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks,* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy.*
[180]Pinn, *Terror and Triumph,* 36.

becoming aware of their place and role in it. Given no time to grieve the abrupt nature of their forced departure from the soil of their birth, they quickly move from subjects with souls to soulless commodified bodies—objects of the capitalist market place. Pinn described "slave auctions as a ritual of reference by means of which the identity of slaves as objects of history was given its most extreme affirmation."[181] He expounded upon the loss of subjectivity in the following:

> Perception of the African as property, we have seen, was owed to physical differences that eventually gave rise to an assumed difference in character and capability. Historical, psychological, legal and social mechanisms were put in place to safeguard this inferiority of the African and superiority of the European. In short, the ideological and structural arguments for African inferiority resulted in the creation of the 'negro.' The ramifications of this process were embodied in institutional practices and enacted in everyday folkways under varying circumstances and evolving conditions.[182]

Bodies, specifically, Black female slave bodies were read as texts of commodity. Slave buyers, male and white, are examining women's breasts, hands, mouths, etc. to try and figure out how to translate a Black woman's body into their economic commodification. More succinctly, slave auctioneers are making the correlation between Black women's breast size i.e., Black women's ability to produce, to lactate, to feed their own system and a healthy market place. To this point historian Walter Johnson illustrated the following about the objectification of Black bodies, "the shared communion in the rites of the slave market—the looking, stripping, touching, bantering, and evaluating—white men confirmed their commonality with the other men with whom they inspected the slaves."[183] The debasing display of Black flesh congealed the Africans as "both existentially and ontologically inferior."[184]

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[181]Ibid, 52.
[182] Ibid, 27.
[183] Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 149-50
[184]Pinn, *Terror and Triumph,* 47.

The enslaved Africans were forced to recognize their nonbeing status which according to Pinn, "promoted a sense of dread and terror."[185] High anxiety accompanied the bodies subdued to a marginal position. At any whim, Black bodies would be subject to sale. Thus, the reading of their fleshly texts suggests economic gain. Commodified bodies were subject to abject treatment. The conditions on the auction block were the same as the Middle Passage. Bound by neck, wrist, and ankle chains to prevent suicide or mutiny, Black bodies were succumbed to everyday trauma which consistently negated their humanity. To elucidate their status as objects, enslaved Africans were made to often times stand on a literal block in the middle of a designated area. The following is an account of slave auction logistics from a slave narrative:

> The slaves put in stalls like the pens used for cattle—a man and his wife with a child on each arm. And there's a curtain, sometimes just a sheet over the front of the stall, so the bidders can't see the "stock" too soon. The over-seer's standin' just outside with a big blacksnake whip and a pepperbox pistol in his belt. Across the square a little piece, there's a big platform with steps leadin' to it. Then, they pulls up the curtain, and the bidders is crowdin' around. Them in back can't see, so the overseer drives the slaves out to the platform…They have white gloves thee, and one of the bidders takes a pair of gloves and rubs his fingers over a man's teeth, and he says to the overseer, "You call this buck twenty years old"? Why there's cup worms in his teeth. He's forty years old, if he's a day.[186]

Enslavers used the practice of inspection to further demoralize Black flesh. Not only was oral health and overall physical wellness scrutinized during the slave auction but one's anatomy was also handled without sanctity of worth. As commodified texts, enslaved Black bodies were not their own. Pinn cites the story of one slave who spent a month in a market: "Monkeys would play with us and see if any boogies was in our heads. They would do pretty well if they found any, but if they didn't they would slap us."[187] This reveals just how low on the totem of human respect

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[185]Ibid.
[186] James Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember* (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 291.
[187] John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 74.

enslaved African bodies fared. Per Pinn, "the philosophical perspective was straightforward: slaves and animals were of the same constitution—creatures inferior to white humanity."[188]Animals were considered of equal or more value than Black bodies. This further underscores the debased status enslaved Black bodies held. Void of the opportunity to be considered a being the auction block served to humiliate, demean and substantiate their existence in the New World as other. The Middle Passage and the slave auction were necessary offenses if Black bodies were to remain relegated to the periphery of humanity. Slave auctions and auction blocks were more than everyday occurrences. To wield the level of dehumanization issued by this system required what Pinn described as a ritual expression.

Pinn posited, "The status imposed on enslaved Africans—as objects of history—requires actions such as auctions to reinforce this status. Therefore, slave auctions were a ritual by which the slave system enforced and celebrated the dehumanization of Africans."[189] Pinn designated this "ritual as a ritual of reference: it is repeated, systematic activity conducted in carefully selected locations that is intended to reinforce the enslaved status as object."[190]As already mentioned, the auction reifies Black bodies as a "thing." The relationship between the slave auction and 'being' could only pertain to European bodies. Pinn writes, "Auctions, as a ritual of reference, are important in that they made explicit through humiliation—and elaborate through display—the nonbeing of the African and the existential superiority of the European. The auction becomes something of a ceremony though which the making of the Negro as historical material is accomplished. It is through the display of the Black body on the auction block that the African in the New World became a new substance."[191] The slave auction separated the soul of the enslaved

[188]Pinn, *Terror and Triumph,* 45.
[189]Ibid, 49.
[190]Ibid.
[191]Ibid.

African from her flesh. Her eternal position as "other" colors the way Black bodies and particularly Black women's bodies are viewed as contested space i.e., a lesser form of life. The auction block attempted to destroy the humanity of the enslaved via a calculated system of moral bankruptcy. The seed of immorality, disregard and superiority continued on the plantation and is most visible in the first-hand accounts recorded in slave narratives.

Texts of Sexual Production

Black enslaved women's bodies were consigned to the whim of the plantation owner. While their bodies fueled the economic survival of the plantation Dubois and Dumenil informed, "Slaves were forbidden the basic elements of personal freedom—to live with their own families, to move about, to be educated, to marry and raise children—not to mention the loftier rights of citizenship."[192] Enslaved women and men were subjects of plantation patriarchy. Dubois and Dumenil defined plantation patriarchy as "a gender and family system, but one organized around racial difference and inequality. The structures and inequalities much like those of gender were so omnipresent as to seem natural and God-given."[193] Enslaved Africans were not given the benefit of having intellectual or spiritual depth. In fact, the opposite proved true wherein enslaved men and women solidified plantation patriarchy because "they were regarded by owners not just as workers but permanent children—amusing, guileless, but lacking in judgment and authority."[194] Racial difference coupled with gender difference exacerbated the problematic and dichotomous existence of Black enslaved women's lives. Black bodies literally supported the plantation system and were under constant threat of white impulse. Enslaved Black women contended not only with

[192] Carol Ellen DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents.* (Boston/New York: Bedford/St.Martin's, 2005), 155.
[193]Ibid., 157.
[194]Ibid.

the racial divide but also with a gender divide. Dumenil and Dubois conveyed that "While Black equaled slave and White equaled free despite slave society's insistence that the racial divide was absolute, the line that separated 'Black' from 'White' was constantly being breached."[195] Sexuality was used as a tool to conquer the absolutism of the racial divide. The stigma and fetishization of Black bodies fueled the misuse of Black enslaved women's bodies and solidified them as receptacles of production and pleasure under the plantation patriarchy system. Under this cautionary rubric the enslaved remained in constant threat of dismemberment of their bodies from their spirit via their overexposure to the domination of the plantation owners' sexual prowess. Dubois and Dumenil reported the following:

> White masters could—and certainly did—compel Black slave women to have sexual relations. When a slave gave birth to a master's child, how was the racial divide on which slave patriarchy was premised to be maintained? The legal answer was that the child followed the status of the mother, slave if she was slave, free if (far more rarely) if she was free. This simple legal answer to a complex set of social relations hidden within slave society had enormous implications for the lives of southern women, Black and White. While slavery is usually considered a system for organizing labor and producing profit, it was also a way of organizing and restraining sexual and reproductive relations, of controlling who could have sex—and legitimate children—with whom. In other words, managing race necessitated managing gender and sexuality.[196]

Sexuality and more important the control of Black sexuality was essential to American chattel slavery. Forcible breeding of children between enslaved men and women was a response to supply and demand. Not only were enslaved women subject to sharing their sexual beings with random enslaved men without consent likewise their bodies were readily available for the slave master to partake at any given moment. In *Black Sexual Politics* Patricia Hill Collins "explores historically how sexuality has been manipulated in defense of racism."[197] Hill Collins insisted that "scholars

[195]Ibid.
[196]Ibid.
[197]Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics.* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 87.

have long examined how what Cornel West identifies as 'White fear of Black sexuality' has been a basic ingredient of racism."[198] With a focus on Black women, sexuality and popular culture, sociologist Shayne Lee likewise contended that "slavery instituted a momentous assault on Black sexual identity."[199] Fear of Black sexuality is rooted in preexisting beliefs about the inferiority and evil nature of blackness. In an exploration of Yoruba traditions and African American Religious Nationalism, historian Tracey Hucks charted the making of Blackness as a debased existence. Hucks' called the roll of scholars such as Winthrop Jordan, Joseph Washington, Robert Hood, David Goldberg and Sylvester Johnson "that have documented the prevailing association of blackness with evil, the sinister, the fearful, the diabolic, the licentious, and the morally degenerate within English and English-American religious lore."[200] This questionable idea of blackness substantiated unwanted sexual advances from plantation masters wherein "slave owners relied upon an ideology of Black sexual deviance to regulate and exploit enslaved Africans."[201] Sexual exploitation of enslaved women further skewed the public's perception of their humanity. More specifically it placed them on the margins of the cult of true womanhood wherein "slave women of the South were not only ignored in all the sweeping generalizations of true womanhood but conceptually were excluded from the category of 'woman' altogether."[202] This is one of the myriad of ways enslaved women's lives were distinguished from those of enslaved men.

At once Black enslaved females were considered racially and gender inferior. Being omitted from the category of woman to the sub-human category of slave solidified enslaved women's existence beyond the cult of true womanhood. DuBois and Dumenil expounded upon the

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[198]Ibid.
[199] Shayne Lee, *Erotic Revolutionaries,* (New York: Hamilton, 2010).
[200]Tracey Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism.* (Albuquerque: New Mexico, 2012) 25.
[201] Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics.* 87.
[202] DuBois and Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes,* 161.

ideology of true womanhood in their research on the history of women in America. They explain the following:

> …The cult of true womanhood, the ideology of separate spheres, or simply domesticity…This system of ideas, which took hold in the early years of the nineteenth century just as the United States was coming into its own as an independent nation, treated men and women as complete and absolute opposites, with almost no common human traits that transcended the differences of gender. The ideology of true womanhood also saw the larger society as carved into complementary but mutually exclusive "spheres" of public and private concerns, work and home life, politics and family. Proponents of this ideology situated true women in an exclusively domestic realm of the home, family, childrearing and caretaking. They did not consider what women did as wives and mothers as work but as an effortless expression of their feminine nature.[203]

Since blackness was correlated with other/different/evil enslaved women were denied the ability to even have a nature at all let alone a feminine ideal. Black enslaved women were not privy to the pedestal southern White women were placed upon. DuBois and Dumenil confirmed the imbalance of the southern feminine ideal as it relates to Black enslaved women. They posited, "Elite white women in plantation society were elevated to a lofty pedestal that was the ideological inverse of the auction block on which slave women's fate was sealed. White women's purity was defined by its contrast to the condition of Black enslaved women."[204] In *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and Their Sermons, 1850-1979* Bettye Collier-Thomas illumined the effect of multiple oppressions based on race, sex, class and color in relation to true womanhood. Collier-Thomas recorded the following:

> Many White women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries revealed overt or implicit racist and classist assumptions. Drawing on the Victorian era's notion of "true womanhood" or on classical liberalism's notion of 'individual rights' to argue for elite white women's advancement in society, these women frequently suggested that Black women and lower-class women were the very antithesis of the "true woman.[205]

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[203]Ibid., 138.
[204]Ibid, 157-158.
[205] Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women and Their Sermons 1850-1979*, 9.

Slave narratives of Black women reveal their existence in an unremitting state of peril. A similar musing about admiration of White women and the degrading of Black women furthering their exclusion in the cult of true womanhood is offered by Harriet Jacobs in her autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* Jacobs recollected:

> That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave. I know that some are too much brutalized by slavery to feel the humiliation of their position; but many slaves feel it most acutely, and shrink from the memory of it. I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs nor how I am still pained by the retrospect.[206]

In another reflection highlighting the demure and privileged position of White women's bodies over and above enslaved women's Jacobs articulates this:

> Mrs. Fling, like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs' but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash.[207]

White women's sexuality and strength was to remain elusive. Their ability to stay chaste and pure solidified their position of superiority. Labor, recorded DuBois and Dumenil, was a mark of the slave. The labor of enslaved women not only played out in the domestic work of the master's house or in the rows of the cotton field but also in the laborious work of having to hide and choose whether to fight off the master's sexual advances, which proved to be a chore in and of itself. These women were not afforded the opportunity of an assuming sexual innocence. In the introduction to the reprinting of *Incidents* historian Nell Irvin Painter described this differentiation of treatment between enslaved women and men as "the gendered evils of slavery which were sexual in nature and usually passed over in silence."[208] The negation of enslaved women's

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[206] Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2000) 31.
[207]Ibid., 14.
[208] Nell Irvin Painter, "Introduction" in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* Jacbos, Harriet, (New York, NY: Penguin, 2000) xxii.

inclusion in the cult of true womanhood gave approval along with other factors for the vulnerabilities of their sex to be exploited. Exploitation was solidified in the legal, religious and social political ideology that Black bodies were created to be and consigned as property. The commodified bodies of enslaved women were for the literal taking at all times.

In 1813 Harriet Jacobs was born in North Carolina and owned as a slave. From the age of twelve Jacobs was sexually harassed by her owner who wanted her as his concubine. Initially, Harriet escaped without her children. Due to her love for her children she stayed close by hiding in her grandmother's attic for seven years until Jacobs and her daughter finally fled the South. Harriet's account of her life as a slave girl reifies the meager position of enslaved Black women. "One of God's most powerless creatures,"[209] Jacobs wrote, slave owners believed that enslaved Black women were made solely for their use. She recalled the following:

> He was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery are more than I can describe. They are greater than you would willingly believe.[210]

Outside of the protection of a just legal system, on the periphery of a moral ideological grouping such as "true womanhood," and her problematic existence as product, Jacobs' body is subscribed to ownership in perpetuity. The belief that the bodies of Black enslaved women were made for the use of slave owners was common. Black bodies were simultaneously reviled and revered as

[209] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 20.
[210] Ibid, 30-31.

chattel. Black women's ability to live outside of the hegemonic purview was disallowed. Harriet lived under an unceasing threat of sexual exploitation and the possible "isolation of concubinage" at the hands of her owner James Norcum. Norcum's voracious sexual desire for Harriet thwarted her attempts to escape his "obscene advances."[211] Painter elucidated Jacobs' situation as such:

> As a very young, enslaved, orphaned African American woman, Harriet was virtually powerless to resist the obscene advances of her leading-citizen, middle-aged, white male medical doctor owner. The close relationship between elder Norcum and Sawyer and their sons grew thornily incestuous around the person of young Harriet. James Norcom, at fifty-two, was trying to seduce thirteen-year-old Harriet, who lived in his house as a dependent. He dared not exercise one right against her—exiling her to the plantation where his son John lived—for fear John would possess her sexually. Harriet found herself in a common quandary, for during the nineteenth century, young girls of all races and sexes were regarded as little more than prey: men saw even the most privileged mainly as rich potential wives.[212]

In *Incidents* Jacobs said, "I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me…I saw wither all this was tending."[213] Painter confirmed this schism in her analysis of Jacobs' situation. She wrote, "Caught between two older stalkers, Harriet gave in to the younger evil."[214] Even in the presence of incessant dehumanization enslaved women used their bodies to enact and search for freedom. Similar to women who gave their bodies to the floor of the ocean by jumping overboard slave vessels in search of relief, Harriet and other enslaved women often found themselves in the crux of precarious choices. Employing agency Harriet uses her body to free herself from the nefarious inclinations of her owner.

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[211] Painter, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* xiv.
[212] Ibid., xv-xvi,
[213] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 61-62.
[214] Painter, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* xvi.

A History of Conquest

Black women's bodies signify a history of conquest, enslavement, lynching, and rape, and this history is marked on the body by contrary figures of triumph and terror, overexposure and invisibility.[215] From the arrival of Africans in America, African bodies were viewed as part of the wealth to be conquered.[216] Such thinking was visually constructed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when mapping makers used women's bodies as symbols for continents. This is unlike the other symbolized women, clothed as goddesses; "Africa" was depicted as a naked Black woman.[217] The Black body, in particular the Black female body was viewed as a material good in the eyes of the slave traders and a forfeiture of redemptive possibilities in the eyes of White Christian missionaries. Conquest and commodification dehumanized and separated the materiality of the body from the soul of the body. In this case, the Black female body was the apex of the economic pyramid during slavery. In *Tapping Power,* Stephanie Mitchem cites the work of Walter Johnson who described the process of people turning people into things or products. He noted, "From an early age slaves' bodies were shaped to their slavery…Through care and discipline, slaves' bodies were physically incorporated with their owners' standards of measure."[218] Within the context of the African communities' levels of risk, African women's bodies in the world of enslavement were defined in terms of their uses.[219] Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland points out, African women under enslavement were especially demeaned. Copeland reported, "the Black woman was reduced to body parts- which allowed white men pleasure, however unsettling; parts which afforded white men economic gain;

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[215]Gourdine, "*Fashioning the body as politic in Julie Dash's Daughters of the Dust." African American Review.* Fall, 2004
[216]Stephanie Mitchem, *African American Women Tapping Power and Spiritual Wellness* (Cleveland, OH;Pilgrim, 2004),5-7.
[217] Ibid, 5.
[218]Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Marke,* 20-21.
[219]Mitchem, *Tapping Spiritual Power,* 7.

parts which literally nursed the heirs to white racist supremacy."[220] As slavery came to an end a new social order began: freedom for Black bodies. Some Black women employed this new freedom through their own preaching bodies in forbidden spaces.

Specialized Knowledges

An analysis of the literature in Black Feminist and womanist thought, communications, and cultural anthropology revealed that Black preaching women's bodies are sites of specialized yet subjugated knowledges.[221] Michel Foucault coined the term 'subjugated knowledge' to "describe knowledge and ways of knowing that are left out, opposed or ignored by mainstreams of the dominant culture." [222] That is, Foucault understood subjugated knowledges to be "a whole set of knowledges that are either hidden behind more dominant knowledges but can be revealed by critique or have been explicitly disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated."[223] Knowledge from below i.e., not dominant normative, male, White, etc., is excluded and viewed as not valuable or illegitimate.[224] As a result, those in power have the authority in a society to determine what is true and what is false. Foucault suggested that there is danger in giving a great amount of authority to those who hold most of the power because it may lead to the production of alleged truths.[225]

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[220] Shawn M. Copeland, "Body, Representation, and Black Religious Discourse," in *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, ed. Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-Lan (New York: Routledge, 2002), 184

[221] On Black feminist or womanist debate, I concur with the sentiments of Janice Hamlet offered in her essay, *Assessing Womanist Thought. "*Although there exists public debate among African American female scholars as to which label, *Black feminist* or *womanist,* is more appropriate, I choose to use the terms interchangeably. Call it *Black Feminism* or *womanism*. This perspective is about the recognition of a distinct African American women's standpoint, intellectually and socially. Janice D. Hamlet. "*Assessing Womanist Thought: The Rhetoric of Susan L. Taylor,"* in The Womanist Reader ed. by Layli Phillips, (New York: Routledge, 2006) 230.

[222] "Subjugated Knowledge," Gaia University Glossary, accessed January 6, 2016, http://www.gaiauniversity.org/glossary-0.

[223] "Subjugated Knowledge," Dictionary for the Study of the Works of Foucault, last modified November 5, 2006, accessed January 20, 2016, http://www.postmoderntheories.com/foucau10.htm.

[224] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings* 1972-1977 ed. C. Gordon, L. Marshall, J. Mepham y K. Soper (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1980).

[225] Ibid.

This section of the literature review explores African-centered Black feminist or womanist epistemologies as specialized knowledges that affirm the divinity in Black embodiment. As per Patricia Hill Collins, "investigating the subjugated knowledge of subordinate groups requires more ingenuity than that needed to examine the standpoints and thoughts of dominant groups."[226] She added, "This is because subordinate groups (Black women in general and Black preaching women specifically) have long had to use alternative ways to create independent self-definitions and self-valuations and to articulate and to rearticulate them through our own specialists."[227] The evaluation of this literature is crucial to mining Black preaching women's self-actualization and bodily ways of gathering information.

Alternative Pulpits

Ultimately, Black preaching women honored their spiritual authority, which led to creation of their own sacred spheres and methodological approaches to proclaim the Word of God. The traditional preaching space of the pulpit is gendered to accommodate masculinity exclusively. To circumvent male authority which prevents female bodies from having a sustained presence in the pulpit, Black preaching women have historically located alternative spaces to proclaim their God given messages. Fry Brown affirmed, "African American women have preached on street corners, in prisons, by sick beds, in schools, in small groups, in Bible studies, in choirs, in homes, in prayer meetings and in any place they could say a word for the Lord."[228] Black preaching women have always engaged in truth telling from self-authorized spaces without sanction, but not without sanctuary.

[226] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 252.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Fry Brown, 10.

Hill Collins posited Black feminist thought as a necessary epistemological and methodological response to the Eurocentric knowledge validation process. Black feminist thought is a prescriptive to contest "white male interpretations of the world."[229] The result, "a self-defined stand point which can best be viewed as subjugated knowledge."[230] This study posits that Black preaching women's bodies are "generators, interpreters, and validators of knowledge particularly when that knowledge pertains to their own experience."[231] In doing so, the study contends that Black preaching women's experiences are real and true. Further, it supports that there is what Harding identified in her text *Remnants: A Memoir of Spirit, Activism and Mothering,* "a female centered, indigenous wisdom about the world."[232] Reflecting on lessons from her mother Rosemarie Harding penned the following:

> There are women in communities all over this country and around the globe, I'm sure, like my mother. I have met some of them. Women with original and powerful ways of understanding life, ways that come from the struggles and pleasures of their lived experience, but that may not find much expressed beyond their kitchen tables their market stalls or the crisis.[233]

Harding's reflections support Hill Collins notion that "the suppression of Black women's efforts for self-definition in traditional sites of knowledge has led Black women to use alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations and everyday behavior as important locations for articulating the core themes of a Black feminist consciousness."[234] This is also true for Black preaching women. Black preaching women's ability to confront and critically engage hegemony is not solely lodged in the pulpit. At kitchen tables, the formidable pulpits in Black women's consciousness Black girls were introduced to the verbal and embodied lexicon Black women exert

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[229] Ibid, 251.
[230] Ibid.
[231] Phillips and McCaskill, *Who's Schooling Who,* 1009.
[232] Rosemarie Freeny Harding with Rachel Elizabeth Harding, *Remnants* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 3.
[233] Ibid.
[234] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 251.

to stand firm over and against inequitable existence.[235] Fry Brown recalled her own experience at the kitchen table and how it informed her development as a Black preaching woman:

> I remembered the time spent at the kitchen table listening to my grandmother, mother, aunts, and female neighbors talking about life experiences, giving out remedies for illnesses, sharing recipes, sewing hand-me-downs, fixing hair, chastising, children, preaching the good news, crying, singing, laughing all while planning how to survive the ravages of racism and sexism. The kitchen was their pulpit, safe space, their network, and their classroom formal wisdom. The eldest member guided conversation, whether actively speaking out or through the use of assenting or rejecting body language and nonverbal cues. The kitchen was also the place where everyone felt they were somebody, one's gifts and graces were appreciated, and miracles seemed to take place…[236]

Kitchen tables have been the essential training ground for Black preaching women. The delivery of these embodied sermons produced knowledge not easily visible or readily acceptable by the privileged power structure and knowledge validation process in the study of preaching. In the holy space of the kitchen and from behind the pulpit of the kitchen table Black women link stories of wisdom, care, and healing to incite self-fashioning, resist forced silence from the matrix of domination and proclaim their humanity. The alternative pulpit "rejects psychosocial, economic and/or political control."[237] Black preaching women's ability and necessity to engender and validate knowledge from alternative locations exemplifies a Black feminist or womanist epistemological strategy of humanization. This strategy is used to interrogate constructed identities and negotiate sacred space.

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[235] The kitchen table in Black Women's vernacular is the meeting place for intergenerational transmission. Black girls and women gather around kitchen tables to generate, receive and exchange cultural values and spiritual wisdom. Black feminists and womanist use the kitchen table as a metaphor to validate alternate epistemological sites and methodologies. For conversations on how Black women talk about the kitchen table see Teresa Fry Brown's *God Don't Like Ugly: African American Women Handing on Spiritual Values* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 164; Olga Idriss Davis, "In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy through Safe Spaces of Resistance," *Western Journal of Communication* 63(1999): 364-81; Layli Phillips, *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xxvii; Barbara Smith and Beverly Smith, "Across the Kitchen Table: A Sister-to-Sister Dialogue," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981).

[236] Fry Brown, *God Don't Like Ugly: African American Women Handing on Spiritual Values,* 164.

[237] Pinn, *Terror and Triumph.*

Black Feminist/Womanist and Afrocentric Epistemology

In her essay *Assessing Womanist Thought,* womanist rhetorician Janice D. Hamlet maintained "that within the parameters of African American rhetoric, there has always existed a rich and diverse women's rhetoric that has traditionally been devalued if not ignored."[238] She explained:

> Through the sharing of common lived experiences and modes of expression, African American women have created ways that specifically address their realities and ways of knowing while also offering an antidote of mother wit (common sense) to the nation's ills. These modes of expression were not created out of a desire to be creative but out of deep necessity to survive, due to the fact that both historically and contemporaneously, African American women are perceived negatively in this country…The emergence and development of a womanist epistemology and methodology presents African American women and the scholarship about them as distinct subjects of the human family worthy of acknowledgement and study.[239]

Black preaching women's bodies deploy both a verbal and non-verbal rhetoric. Building from Hill Collins elaboration on a Black feminist cultural perspective, the literature yielded that the physical presence of Black preaching women's bodies in pulpits and alternative sites "refuses to reinforce the social relations of domination."[240] As such, "Black feminist or womanist preaching women challenges the public discourse about African American women by presenting themselves as they know themselves to be and not as others choose to see them."[241]

Hamlet explained that epistemology "refers to the study of the philosophical problems in concepts of truth."[242] She argued:

> "A womanist epistemology violates traditional epistemological thought and assumptions in the social sciences by incorporating specialized knowledge and

[238] Hamlet. "*Assessing Womanist Thought*, 213.
[239] Ibid.
[240] Ibid, 214.
[241] Ibid.
[242] Ibid, 218.

> experiences of African American women that are used as criteria for meaning, thereby challenging the knowledge validation system."[243]

Womanist epistemology disrupts the Eurocentric knowledge validation process. As a methodological approach, womanist epistemology unsettles dehumanizing social ordering visible in interlocking oppressive systems. One way it does this is by combining Afrocentric and Black feminist consciousness with the "uniqueness of African American female history, culture and experience."[244] Womanist epistemology consists of (1) the use of concrete experience as a criterion for meaning, rendering knowledge as subjective and relying on wisdom of African American women; (2) the use of humanizing dialogue that is rooted in the oral tradition of the African American culture and recognizes the connectedness as primary characteristic of women's ways of knowing; (3) an ethic of caring that emphasizes individual uniqueness, personal expressiveness, emotion and empathy; and (4) an ethic of personal accountability, whereby African American women assume full responsibility for the positions they take.[245]

Hill Collins provided a detailed description of the contours of an Afrocentric Feminist or womanist epistemology. She commenced by identifying an Afrocentric standpoint in which there are two fundamental elements. The first is that, "despite varying histories, Black societies reflect elements of a core African value system that existed prior to and independently of racial oppression."[246] The second vital component is a familiar experience of oppression. Hill Collins posited that "as a result of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, apartheid, and other systems of

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[243] Ibid.
[244] Ibid.
[245] Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment,* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[246] Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought,* 206. For more information on an Afrocentric standpoint and African values see John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy;* Cheikh Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization; Myth or Reality;* Dominique Zahan, *The Religion Spirituality and Thought of Traditional Africa;* and Asante, *The Arfrocentric Idea*

racial domination, Blacks share a common experience of oppression."[247] The Afrocentric consciousness permeates the shared history of people of African descent through the framework of a distinctive epistemology.[248] Cannon clarified that the development of a womanist and Afrocentric epistemology and methodology as an emancipatory survival tactic against oppressive forces is not:

> Merely to replace one set of elitist hegemonic texts that have traditionally ignored, dismissed, or flat out misunderstood the existential realities of women of the African Diaspora with another set of Afrocentric texts that had gotten short shrift and pushed to the margins of the learned societies. Rather, our objective is to use Walker's definition as a critical methodological framework for challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy as well as for being a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion.[249]

Generating knowledge from the everyday experiences of Black women affirms the Black experience in spite of centuries of white supremacist negation and highlights the embodied agency of Black preaching women. Here, Cannon revealed the two-ness inherent within the womanist and Afrocentric epistemological framework. This two-ness is operationalized as the ebb and flow of looking back and moving forward as a way to survive the gaze of multiple oppressions in the pulpit and beyond—Sankofa.

Sankofa is another necessary epistemological and methodological response to the Eurocentric knowledge validation process. Sankofa is a philosophical principle from the Akan. The Akan are ethnic group located in Ivory Coast and Ghana, West Africa. The principle is loosely

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[247] Ibid.
[248] Ibid, and see James E. Turner's "Foreword: Africana Studies and Epistemology: A Discourse in the Sociology of Knowledge." In *The Next Decade: Theoretical and Research Issues in Africana Studies,* edited by James E. Turner, v-xxv. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Africana Studies and Research Center, 1984).
[249] Katie Cannon, *The Womanist Theology Primer Remembering What We Never Knew: The Epistemology of Womanist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church (USA), 2001), 1.

translated as there is no harm in going back to fetch what was lost. Womanist religious educator and activist Itihari Toure defined Sankofa as the following:

> Sankofa is a socialization process from which the African and African Diaspora have effectively negotiated the two-ness of reality or double consciousness that informs how knowledge is constructed, what is worth knowing, what is meaningful, what is responsive, what is reconciling, what is generative and in many instances what is improvement. This type of radical examination is not new to African people and is not new to any group of people who exist in a marginalized and oppressed society. The lived experiences of the marginalized and oppressed require a way of being that reaffirms their indigenous reality while simultaneously giving them the capacity to exist in another, less they become ineffective or worse, casualties of the oppressive systems in which they must function.[250]

For Black preaching women, a Sankofan episteme functions as an embodied literacy that affirms their indigenous reality while providing them the capacity to exist in another. As a socialization process Sankofa "insists on the relevance of using African conceptual possibilities to define and characterize African life."[251] Sankofa is a combatant to the divisive and dehumanizing othering repeatedly displayed by dominant culture on Black bodies generally and Black women's preaching bodies specifically. Sankofa is relevant to this study and to African descended peoples in America because it preserves the utility of African diasporic ways of being within a culture that challenges and often repudiates Black embodiment. Moreover, Sankofa is germane to the study of embodied, African centered and womanist approaches to preaching because primary consideration of the histories, cultures, spiritual practices and values acknowledges the plight of being Black in America while also affirming the resilience of being Black in America.

Cultural productions of subjugated knowledge are not solely an epistemological project but also a material one. In *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought,* Pinn argued, that in Black and womanist theology, the body is a vaguely presented and defined idea, a metaphor

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[250] Itihari Toure, *Ministry and Context Handbook* (Atlanta, GA: Sankofa Center at the ITC, 2014), 10.
[251] Christel Temple, "The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History" *Journal of Black Studies,* Vol. 41. No. 1 (September, 2010), 128.

and a symbolic measuring stick used to debate the shape and purpose of social structures.[252] Thus, Black and womanist theology is rendered materially empty or bodiless. A counter-narrative that fails to consider Black preaching women's material realities signifies a troubled relationship with human flesh. The counter-narrative is charted through liberating acts of ritual presentation in the style of dress, hair style and even one's connection with the environment. Hence one's body is not only a symbol of the environment but is viable part of material culture. Pinn pointed out that the lack of attention to material bodies warps any true platform of liberation. The tenet of liberation is only viable upon material bodies. Essentially there is no liberation project without bodies to be liberated. Interlocking oppressions like racism and sexism become only theoretical without bodies or as Pinn said, "without attention to the physical racism becomes a phantom reality."[253]

Pinn's theory of embodiment seeks to eliminate the progression of phantom fallacies. If a womanist epistemological framework is to make a considerable offering to religious and theological education and the world it must take on the material body. Pinn would contend that to continue a strictly epistemological project forfeits the very enfleshment womanist and African centered approaches posit. Pinn would further suggest that the way Black liberation and womanist theologies have talked about Black bodies has been according to a white supremacist lens observation. In its demand for agency these theological perspectives relinquish the possibility because their desire for agency is based on a world view that something is inherently wrong with their embodiment. As such their scrutiny of racism is based on a power system. This system is rooted in the negative gaze of the dominant culture. Thus Black liberation and womanist theologians are fighting to retrieve a symbol of something that is inherently

[252] Anthony Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought.* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010).
[253] Ibid.

problematic instead of eradicating the symbol and starting with the material body under a new gaze instituted from the margins. Ultimately, Pinn desires to marry how Black bodies have been traditionally talked about as metaphor or as a symbol of the meaning of Blackness over and against Whiteness, with how Black bodies function on the ground. Failing to conjoin the two limits how the Black body performs and functions existentially.

Sociologist Brenda Farnell countered theoretical disembodiment with dynamic embodiment. Dynamic embodiment is body movement as both speech and action that are enacted forms of knowledge and understanding. In *Dynamic Embodiment for Social Theory* Farnell argued that "dynamically embodied signifying acts in symbolically rich environments are the dialogical, intersubjective means by which persons, social institutions and cultural knowledge are socially constructed, historically transmitted and revised, they are constructive of culture and self, and therefore at the heart of social action."[254] Religious architectural spaces like pulpits are symbolically rich environments. They represent a phallic symbol that overshadows and over powers Black women's bodies in an effort to remand their bodies to a liminal position. Dynamic embodiment suggests a bodily epistemology. An African centered and womanist epistemology that acknowledges the two-ness of Black preaching women's realities and "illumines the importance of the body as a hermeneutic, as a modality of interpretation useful in deconstructing and re-constructing life in the Americas."[255] Further, it substantiates our need to understand the body as an existential ground for cultural production rather than only a source of physical and metaphorical means for its expression.

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[254] Brenda Farnell, *Dynamic Embodiment of Social Theory and Moving Body: I Move Therefore I Am* (London and New York, 2012), 129.

[255] Anthony Pinn, "*Watch the Body with New Eyes: Womanist Thought's Contribution to a Humanist Notion of Ritual,"* 404-411.

Feeling the Body

Information gathering is as much a bodily endeavor as it is cognitive. In her womanist homiletic Allen cited the work of Ruth Finnegan, scholar of anthropology and communication.[256] According to Allen, in *Communicating: The Multiple Modes of Human Interconnection*, Finnegan "explores the diverse modes of communication and the multisensory resources that human beings use to communicate."[257] Allen explained, "Finnegan invites us to consider the five senses and bodily faculties like balance, pain, hunger, weight because they extend our analysis of communication beyond the audio-visual helping us to avoid over-emphasizing cognition and language."[258] Farnell affirmed, "the senses reveal that one's body is a locus of knowledge not merely Descartes, *res extensa* –corporeal substance which has only the property of extension."[259] Then, Black women's bodies preach via sensation and perception through movement—kinesthesia.[260] Consistent with Allen, "all people orient their body with kinesthesia but it is often not discussed because kinesthetic knowledge usually occurs at an unconscious level."[261]

In *Culture and the Senses*, Kathryn Lynn Geurts used an ethnographic lens to mine the domain of sensation and perception of the Anlo-Ewe people from Anlo land in Ghana, West Africa. She utilized "four broad claims concerning sensory orders, embodiment, identity, and well-being."[262] Geurts argued that "sensing, bodily ways of gathering information (knowing), is profoundly involved with a society's epistemology, the development of its cultural identity and

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[256] Allen, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic,* 33-40.
[257] Ruth Finnegan, *Communicating: The Multiple Modes of Human Interconnection* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 90 in Donna Allen's, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic,* 33-34.
[258] Allen, 34.
[259] Farnell, 133.
[260] Kathryn Lynn Geurts. *Culture and the Senses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 50 in in Donna Allen's, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic,* 34.
[261] Ibid.
[262] Geurts, *Culture and the Senses,* 127.

its forms of being in the world."[263] More pointedly, her study asserted the following: "physiological evidence suggests human bodies gain sensory information in a variety of ways; a Western model of five senses (hearing, sight, smell, touch, and taste) is a folk model; an Anlo-Ewe model is different, and it privileges balance, kinesthesia, and sound; and the impact of this approach can be seen in four areas, each of which affect the others."[264] The four areas are: "the use of language to describe sensorium; moral values embedded in child-rearing and social development; an Anlo-Ewe model of personhood; and ideas about illness and health."[265] The proposition suggesting that sensoria differ as a result of cultural tradition is most intriguing for this study. It is particularly advantageous when considering the utility of embodied African-centered womanist paradigms to preaching and exploring how Black women preach with their bodies as a performance of identity and spiritual formation.

My interest in how Black women preach with their bodies is less concerned with, "how we apprehend stimulus from objects outside of our bodies and then represent these sounds, textures, odors, and so on in our minds and to each other."[266] Guerts, a cultural anthropologist, proposed a contemporary Western Euro-American cultural model. That is, in this context, "sensing is directly tied to the idea that some thing, some object makes an impression on our sense organs, and we thereby become aware or conscious of various elements in our environment."[267] This knowledge transmission process is rooted in language and orality. The interests of this study are in the domain of feeling in the body—what the Anlo-Ewe call *seselelame,* how we apprehend stimulus from within the body and relate it to others. During her

[263] Ibid, 3.
[264] Ibid, 227.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid, 228.
[267] Ibid, 228.

fieldwork, Geurts learned that one discrete lexical term for "the senses" did not seem to exist in the Anlo-Ewe language.[268] She recalled, "The expression that seemed to be used most frequently was the very complicated and polysemous term *seselelame*."[269] Geurts cited Thomas Csordas who defined this idea of feeling the body as a "somatic mode of attention."[270] Geurts expounded that for Csordas, somatic modes of attention referred to "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" or "culturally *elaborated* attention to and with the body in the immediacy of an *intersubjective* milieu."[271] Csordas explained:

> Because we are not isolated subjectivities trapped within our bodies, but share an intersubjective milieu with others, we must also specify that a somatic mode of attention means not only attention to and with one's own body, but includes attention to the bodies of others. Our concern is the *cultural elaboration of sensory engagement,* not preoccupation with one's own body as an isolated phenomenon."[272]

Geurts illumined *seselelame* as an "ideal illustration of a culturally elaborated way in which many Anlo-speaking people attend to and read their own bodies while simultaneously orienting themselves to objects, to the environment, and to the bodies of those around them."[273] Fundamentally, *seselelame*, is how the Anlo-Ewe understand how humans process information. This process is governed by the way one's body moves in the world in relation to self and in relation to others. "In Anlo contexts, the cultural elaboration of the way one moves represents a way of being in the world that is socially

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[268] Ibid, 40.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid, 41.
[271] Thomas J. Csordas, "Somatic Modes of Attention" *Cultural Anthropology* 8 no.2 (1993):138-139, in Geurts, *Culture and Senses,* 41.
[272] Ibid
[273] Geurts, *Culture and the Senses,* 41.

reproduced and imbued with moral meaning."[274] Moral fortitude, a core component of Anlo, identity is embodied in the way one moves. [275]

Allen, Finnegan, and Guerts illumined the embodied ethical agency of Black preaching women employ in their commitment to the 'survival of an entire people.' Black women's bodies preach via particular culturally elaborated ways—womanist African-centered subjugated knowledges. That is, feeling the body, a kinesthetic realization of God, gives Black preaching women the capacity to "treble the weighted grips of overexposure and invisibility that restricts their breath and exacerbates traumas too deep to fully name."[276] How do Black women preach with their bodies? The literature formulates that Black women's preaching bodies "hold the oppression of their social location and through dynamic embodiment or movements of resistance transform the reality of race, class, and gender domination."[277]

African Spirituality in Black Women's Preaching Praxis

Fluid Boundaries

The Black preaching tradition is rooted in the traditional belief systems and rituals of communications of the fore parents of the Africans who were forcefully brought to the Americas during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. After they arrived in North America, they did not know how to make sense of life once separated from their tribal religions and Supreme Being. For instance, "The Yoruba of Nigeria came here believing in a high god named Olodumare, the

[274] Ibid, 84.
[275] Ibid, 76.
[276] Melva L. Sampson, *Black Lives Matter!: Making it Plain in Word and Deed Litany* (Atlanta: Black Religious Scholars Group, 2014).
[277] Allen, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic,* 36.

Yoruba term for omnipotent."[278] While they originally turned to their god for meaning and comfort, life in the Americas was so cruel and chaotic that they searched for the reigning local deity and sought to learn how that deity operated. Out of this spiritual necessity grew the slow and tedious process of creating Black North American religions out of the common practices of many African belief systems.

The idea that African spirituality in North America was destroyed is erroneous. In fact, the opposite occurred; African spirituality was transformed and became a fluid stream between African/slave religion and orthodox Black Christianity. Africana religious historian Tracey Hucks proffered, "the tendency among scholars has been to relegate African religious practices in African American religion to the early slave period, thus creating an artificial dichotomy between African/slave religion in the antebellum period and orthodox Black Christianity after emancipation and eclipsing the fluid boundaries that have existed and persisted within both periods." Hucks further explained, "The assumption is that the African "survivals" died out rather early or that practices related to African divinities quickly disintegrated in North America." Failure to acknowledge this fluidity led to questionable conceptual frameworks in the study of the Black church and African American religious experience. Faulty conceptual frameworks led to several problematic trends: that Christianity was blindly accepted and is thus the innate faith tradition of all Black people and constant deliberation about whether or not Black people had a viable past in Africa or created new practices in the new world.

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[278] "What is a Griot," *Griot Institute*, accessed on June 6, 2015, https://www.bucknell.edu/Documents/GriotInstitute/What%20is%20a%20Griot.pdf.

Double Consciousness

In *The Negro Church* and *The Souls of Black Folk,* W.E.B. DuBois laid the groundwork for the study of African derived religions in the U.S. and the institutionalization of Black religion. DuBois is the first scholar to valorize Black religion as a worthy sociological subject. In his explication of the Negro church, DuBois acknowledged the African in African American religion. He contended that the beginnings of the Negro church are not Christian by any means but survivals from Africa. The term Black church doesn't convey what Black people were doing spiritually. African American religious experiences in the antebellum era is identified as church not because it was Christian but because it was a conceptual notion that slave masters could understand. Black people were not doing Christian church but were performing African ritual, creating an unrehearsed and deeply moving response to Spirit. DuBois posits that church did so with many of the old customs reminiscent of African heritage intact. In fact, he emphasizes that "the Negro church of today bases itself upon the sole surviving social institution of the African fatherland."

African Americans had to perform their religions within the frame of what DuBois would later define as double consciousness and what Dianne Stewart later called "polyvalent theory of meaning making." Commencing with the Middle Passage until today, Africans in the Caribbean and North America attempted to force their philosophical, theological, and cultural conceptualizations into western frameworks as a way to camouflage the specificity and blunt the sharp edges of what they were doing while keeping the core intact. As time progressed, the church eventually adopted Christianity in its search for humanization and respectability. Blacks had to at once function within the binary construct of being African and being African in the new world. Black people had to live behind and in front of the mask wherein within the duality of their existence one thing is happening in terms of actual religious experience and another is being

performed in the public articulation of the performance. Black people were trying to practice faith as well as survive a racist terrain, and they used familiar terminology to conceal the scent of the African gods, thus the dichotomy only exists in front of the veil; behind the veil it disappears.

DuBois extended this idea by making three striking characterizations of the Negro church. He conceived that "the Preacher, the Music and the Frenzy are derived from the encounter between Africa and the American slave experience."[279] "The Preacher" (African priest) pointed to the complexity of Black religious leadership; the Music (African drum) to the legitimacy of Black musical expression and the Frenzy (African trance) to Black somatic experiences with the transcendent."[280] DuBois was clear that while Black people perfected the art of masking in the antebellum era by adopting Christianity, the Negro church was a characteristic expression of Africa. While hailed as the modern progenitor of empirical studies on Black religion, scholars that have followed in his footsteps have negligently overlooked DuBois' acknowledgment of the continuity of African expressive and religious culture in the new world. As a result, the church becomes a totalizing experience and Christianity as the intrinsic religion of Black people. Christianity becomes the humanizing agent to thwart Black inferiority. To combat scientific theories of Black deviance and inferiority, scholars became embattled in binary debates about African origins, retentions, survivals, and new group identity.

Myth of the Negro Past

Central to the conversation about African survivals are anthropologist Melville Herskovits and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. Herskovits disputed ideas of Black inferiority with theories of cultural continuity between Africans in America and highly developed African heritage. Railing

[279] W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk,* (New York: Dover, 1994), 115-125.
[280] Ibid.

against claims that Negros did not have a past, Herskovits responds with three key findings: 1) the Negro has a past beyond slavery; 2) the Negro's past is not inferior; and 3) a study of the Negro's past is important for an understanding of civilization as a whole.[281] Herskovits mapped old world Negro practices to new world Negro practices thus drawing the conclusion that social, cultural, and religious Africanisms survived the voyage across the Atlantic. Frazier disagreed and spent his career refuting African survivals. From the beginning, Frazier's work claimed that the cultural heritage and institutions of Negroes were formed in the United States. He concurred that the Negro did have a past. However, this past was held together by "scraps of memories" not a full blown traceable system.[282] In the realm of religion, antebellum free Negroes formed denominations that paralleled White denominations. Slaves stripped of their African religious background learned as much of Christianity as circumstances and masters permitted. Frazier saw the post-civil war period as furthering the process of acculturation. The Christianity of the slaves, the "invisible church," merged with the denominations of the free Negro forming the Negro Church. This church became the preeminent Black institution particularly in the south. Northern Afro-American religious development went even further towards assimilation. Frazier acknowledged the existence of a Black urban lower class but saw a developing Negro middle class as the wave of the future. Moreover, the integration of the Black middle class in the secular arena relegates the Negro church less amenable to integration and to a subordinate status within the Black community. Frazier attributed Black social difference and cultural distance from Africa to the dehumanization caused by slavery and racism. By way of institutionalization, the Negro church gave way to the Black church which also carried the plight of responding to the Negro's past or lack thereof.

[281] Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).
[282] E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 24 and *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 8-23.

Death of the African Gods

In the seminal text *Slave Religion*, religious historian Albert Raboteau declared the death of the African gods. The first to examine in detail the religious life of the enslaved, Raboteau contended that "while it is true that Africa influenced Black culture and religion, African ritual and theology did not endure to the extent they did in the Caribbean. In the United States the gods of Africa died."[283] Supporting Frazier's argument, Raboteau claimed that "the African gods were replaced with biblical figures."[284] African aesthetics was blended with European styles to create something new. The hybridization of religion and cultures left no room for African carry-overs. Frazier and Raboteau's position does not take into account the performance of double veiling or masking which ensure fluid boundaries between the antebellum south and post emancipation. Whether in folk practices of healing, methods of warding off evil spirits or ritual worship, African spiritual practices and values have not waned. The incorrect portrayal of slave religion is that Black people started out with a remnant of their culture and religion and emerged as Christians with minimal indigenous African and Islamic influence. However**,** orthodox Christianity emerges as a concealing agent wherein its practice becomes a container in which to shield African derived spiritual traditions in North America.

Transformed but not Extinguished

In *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction,* Elizabeth West revealed the survival of Africanity in early Black women's writings. West asserted that African spirituality in Black women's literary tradition was "transformed but not extinguished."[285] West acknowledged 19th century Black preaching women's spiritual autobiographies as a major part of this tradition. In

[283] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford Press, 2004), 47-48
[284] Ibid.
[285] Elizabeth West, *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction*, 43.

19th century Black itinerant preaching women's spiritual autobiographies, African spiritual values became submerged in dominant Anglo Christian rhetoric.[286] West evinced that "the exposure of Africanity to Anglo Christianity resulted in an emerging African American cosmology that muffled its African voice and assumed the discourse of Christianity."[287] A cursory view of 19th century Black preaching women's narratives suggests "that Black peaching women articulated a Christian worldview that made no claims to Africanity."[288] West proffered the following about Jarena Lee:

> The dominating biblical doctrine that informs Lee's religiosity can lead readers to hastily read the narratives as confirmation of an absent African spirituality. But as in the case of Lee, her contemporaries, and those who would carry on the tradition of Afro Christianity the prevailing deference to Christianity as the religious anchor for African Americans often co-existed with unacknowledged retentions of African spirituality. In general, this co-existence was possible because African carry-overs were not specifically identified as African, and in fact were often couched in Christian practices and discourse.[289]

Even though Lee and other 19th century Black preaching women "drew from conventions of the Anglo Christian conversion narrative to proclaim their equality and salvation, the cultural origins of their spiritual authority prevailed" wherein traditional African rituals, ideologies, and manifestations of spiritual power would remain part of Black oral culture most visible in Black preaching. [290] For instance, Lee heavily believed in prophecy and vision, a belief that West indicated "was common to both Africans and Christians."[291] West wrote:

> The primacy and authority that Lee awards visions and the Holy Spirit is consistent with traditional African spirituality. Lee's visionary experiences and her belief in the Christian Holy Spirit are consistent with African spiritual beliefs in the transmutability of states of being. The interaction of the carnal and the spiritual

[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Ibid, 45-46.
[290] West, *African Spirituality in Black Women's Fiction*, 43.
[291] Ibid, 46.

> worlds, that is, the ability for beings to cross over states of existences, was a commonly accepted concept among precolonial Africans. Lee echoes African beliefs in spirit possession and spiritual revelations that are transmitted via human vessels. Just as oracles in African societies are used by spirits to speak to those in the material world, Lee is used by spirit. The spirit speaks through Lee to her congregations and instructs her matters specific to her own life. [292]

Here Lee's Black and female body is not an affront to the spiritual enterprise but a necessary site to engage the Holy. Lee's body becomes a sacred portal through which the Divine speaks. That is, unlike the Anglo-Christian narrative that reads all flesh, and particularly Black flesh, as sinful, her acknowledgment and embodiment of the Holy Spirit suggests that something more complex is happening: "Lee's consciously constructed Anglo Christian cosmology did not totally disconnect her from remnants of an African rooted cosmology; she called on images and concepts of Africanity that lived in her memory."[293] Lee attributed the power of speech granted her at religious meetings and gatherings solely to the spirit of God/Holy Spirit. Powerful speech fueled by the Holy Spirit could be read as akin to the spiritual force Àjé. The authority she gave the Holy Spirit is likened to the witness of her Ase. Her preaching was indeed powerful speech and in fact when preached changed the material reality of its listeners.

In *The Spirit and the Word,* Georgene Bess Montgomery affirmed that "the recognition of certain symbols, ideas and images are passed down through stories and embodied experiences through what has been called 'deep well memory.'"[294] One way deepwell memory evidences itself in the bodies and experiences of Black preaching women is through the African American conjure tradition. Conjure is rooted in African spirituality and later African derived and slave religion practiced in the New World. Black preaching has deep roots in conjuration, and Black preaching women are conjurers. According to Thee Smith, "the conjurer is part of the "magical folk tradition

[292] Ibid, 46.
[293] Ibid, 49.
[294] Georgene Bess Montgomery, *The Spirit and the Word* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 14.

of Black North Americans…It is a magical means of transforming reality…the magic is ritual speech and action intended to perform what it expresses."[295] Donna Allen cited Thee Smith's groundbreaking scholarship on conjuring culture. In *Conjuring Culture,* Smith set out to unveil the complementarity of conjuring with Black Christian practices and beliefs. He clarified this complementarity by highlighting how written and oral uses of biblical figuralism can be taken to have an incantatory or mournful effect aimed at revising, if not totally reversing, distressed conditions that Black people endured. Smith did this by introducing an innovative archetype for the field of Black religious' studies. In lieu of a flat model, Smith presented a nuanced investigative approach to the study of Black religion by situating magic beside the Bible. Smith argued that Black Americans conjure the Bible in their culture. He delineated *conjuring* culture as the manipulation of biblical figures to heal or to harm others by the usage of incantations of supernatural powers visible in ritualized and symbolic performances, like, preaching for the re-envisioning and transformation of history and society. So conjure is not merely about magic but equally important is the centrality of transformation and, for the purposes of this study, healing. Smith's text invited the reader to explore how Black people initiated a magical rearrangement of history and culture through their use of the Bible. Smith theorized that the Bible of Western Civilization shows up as magical sourcebook for African Americans during and post slavery.

Incantation, chanted sermons for the purpose of affecting change, are central in Black women's homiletical processes. Such stylings point to a connection with African oral, ritual, and ideological traditions. African rituals and ideologies contributed to Black preaching the necessity

[295] Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 164.

of a serious embodied and verbal engagement with the audience in order to pass on holy wisdom (proverbs and other forms) and, most importantly, the presence of the unspeakable Presence. [296] The role of the Black preacher evolves from the Griot; the storyteller—the recorder of history the authority who went from village to village carrying the news. The Griot was the interpreter of the supernatural.[297] The Griots and Griottes, women who are Griots, are religious symbols among the people whose encounter with God is recognized and accepted by the people. Traditionally, "Griots specialized in history conveyed through the spoken word and Griottes specialized in singing."[298] Sub Saharan African cultures emphasis on oratory, imagery, drama, and tonality is akin to what became Black preaching in America. Two important elements of this style and skill of re-membering history: vivid narration and call and response. The indigenous renditions in the motherland had been at once entertaining and spiritually instructive, essentially intended to inform and teach the young in the traditions of African society. All of this served well the goals of preaching on North American shores.

Black preaching women like Lee often times unknowingly and sometimes knowingly used conjure as a subversive tactic to exorcise the white supremacist narratives that remain lethally linked to African American sacred discursive activity. They employed various allegories, imaginative language, creative imagery, and their bodies to deliver the message. Coupled with intent to redress evil, Black preaching women altered reality to deconstruct the conventional oppressive view of Black people as soulless and re-presented a liberating message that affirmed the value of Black and women's embodiment. The spiritual autobiographies of 19th century Black preaching women reveal an unconscious connection with African spirituality. Then and now

[296] Griot Institute, "What is a Griot."
[297] Ibid.
[298] Ibid.

African spiritual values remain a key component in African American Christian cosmology and Black women's homiletical performance.

Chapter Summary

This study explores how Black women's bodies preach. Moreover, the study examines what happens when an unconscious connection with African spirituality becomes conscious in Black women's preaching praxis. It further examines how a conscious connection with African spirituality affirms the worth Black embodiment. Ultimately, the study highlights Black preaching women's spiritual power and the usefulness of African centered and womanist approaches to preaching. This chapter reviewed literature in homiletics, history, sociology, anthropology, Africana religious studies, Black feminist, and womanist thought and rhetoric in search of how Black women's bodies are cast within White imagination. The results exposed the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade, the slave auction block, and the plantation as sites of exploitation and commodification of Black women's bodies. Unearthing the stories of enslaved Black women revealed the use of their bodies as sites of resistance and agency. The 19th century ushered in Black women seeking formal entry into Christian ministry. The literature showed that in spite of male dominated leadership in the church and skewed perceptions of Black and women's bodies, Black preaching women displayed specialized knowledge, including the use of alterative pulpits from which to speak truth to power. I traced this specialized knowledge by surveying the intellectual progression of talk of embodiment in homiletics. Kinesthesia and sensing emerged as embodied approaches to preaching. Finally, the literature revealed that African spirituality in Black women's preaching was not extinguished but submerged beneath an Anglo-Christian narrative. Even with an unacknowledged connection, traces of African spirituality were evident and witnesses of African influenced African American cosmology. Chapter three will present

the research design. The sample, process of data collection, operationalization of terms, measurement and assessment of the need for this study are likewise introduced.

Chapter III

RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN APPROPRIATENESS

"The connections between what we describe as social scientists and who we are personally and structurally need to be part of the way we design our methods as well as the way we analyze our data."
Deborah D'Amico-Samuels, *Undoing Fieldwork*

"Before I can speak your language, I have to sanctify the space with my own."
Anonymous

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the research design and includes a discussion of why auto-ethnography was selected as the most appropriate design for the inquiry. This discussion is followed by a discussion of the data collection strategy used in the study, a textual analysis of six sermons. The utility of the textual analysis and the coding process used are also outlined. Finally, this chapter concludes with reflections on the validity and reliability, researcher bias and assumptions.

Performance Auto/ethnography

In *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of* Faith cultural anthropologist Marla Frederick made a compelling case for the use of auto/ethnography as a viable research method. Drawing on "the experiences of her childhood and the dynamics of her own faith,"[299] Frederick's textualization of ethnographic experiences represents the "type of ethnographic work that women of color in anthropology have conducted for decades; part ethnography and part autobiography."[300] Frederick credited Irma McClaurin and other Black

[299] Marla Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 22.
[300] Ibid, 23.

female anthropologists in *Black Feminist Anthropology* for illumining that self, one's personal history/auto is and must be an integral component of one's politics, creativity and scholarship. Inclusion of self invites more socially responsible ethnographies and according to Frederick "takes seriously the life experiences of women of color in the United States and the African Diaspora."[301]

Similarly, Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang asserted that scholarship is inextricably connected to self-personal interest, experience, and familiarity.[302] I made use of auto/ethnography in the tradition of Black female anthropologists, "as a critical reflexive strategy."[303] This view owes much to Mary Louise Pratt whom McClaurin reported "discusses auto/ethnography as an intervention by "natives" who, having acquired cognitive and linguistic dexterity in the "master's tools," uses them to speak on behalf of their colonized brothers and sisters."[304] auto/ethnography provides an opportunity for the native researcher to serve as a cultural mediator. Cultural mediation is a type of performance. In this respect I expanded my

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[301] Ibid.

[302]F.W. Ngunjiri, K.C. Hernandez, & H. Chang, H., "Living Autoethnography: Connecting Life and Research [Editorial]. *Journal of Research Practice*, no.6 (2010): 1, accessed May 23, 2014 http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/241/186

[303]Lionnet-McCumber, Francoise, "Autobiographical Tongues: (Self-) Reading and (Self-) Writing in Augustine, Nietzsche, Maya Angelou, Marie Cardinal, and Marie-Therese Humbert (Metissage, Emancipation, Female Textuality, Self-Portraiture, Autoethnography)," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1986; Francoise Lionnet, "Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust Tracks on a Road,"* in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1990), 382-414; Trotter White, Ruth, "Autoethnography and the Sense of Self in the Novels of Toni Morrison," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1992, 12.; and McClaurin, Irma. ed., "Theorizing a Black Feminist Self in Anthropology: Toward an Autoethnographic Approach," in *Black Feminist Anthropology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 49-76.

[304]McClaurin cited, p. 65. Audre Lorde has questioned whether hegemonic tools can be disciplined to suit revolutionary or subversive purposes; she writes: "It is learning to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house.* They will allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (emphasis in original). Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays on Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 531.

research design to performance auto/ethnography as a critical analytic practice. The method of presentation was also a particular type of performance that challenged dominant epistemes.

In *The Call to Performance* Norman Denzin made a case for a "practical progressive politics of a performative cultural studies; an emancipatory discourse connectivity critical pedagogy with new ways of writing and performing culture."[305] Performance auto/ethnography required that I see myself both as writer and performer because the process required me to insert my experiences into the cultural performances being studied. This study "privileged performed experience as specialized knowledge, as a method of critical inquiry, and as a mode of understanding Black preaching women's spiritual power."[306] Denzin defined performed experiences as "sites where felt emotion, memory, desire and understanding come together."[307] So methodologically, I conceptualized, designed, and analyzed the research question from the intersections of my own lived experience as an African-centered womanist Black preaching woman and the performed experience of everyday Black women. As one who sits at the junction of both scholar and practitioner engaging self as subject and data source, performance auto/ethnography served as a direct response to the negation of Black lives caught within the paralysis of intertwining dehumanizing systems. Boylorn concurred. She posited, "That by inverting the ethnographic eye on the self, Auto/ethnographies are able to translate and story social and cultural experiences."[308] While the self is crucial to this particular research method, Auto/ethnography must also be "situated among others and framed theoretically and analytically."[309] Boylorn further expounded on this point by posing the following questions:

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[305]Norman K. Denzin, "The Call to Performance." *Symbolic Interaction.* Vol. 26 No. 1 (2003) p. 187-207.
[306] Ibid, 193.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Boylorn, *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience*, 9.
[309] Ibid.

> "For example, what does my auto/ethnographic story do? What does it accomplish? What makes my story unique or representative, and how can it be useful for understanding the lives of rural Black women? [310]

Like Boylorn, I am "invested in not only telling my story but also in making my story useful and meaningful for others."[311] auto/ethnography did not only illumine the self but "also contributed to others' stories and involves other participants."[312] I followed the path of many Black women scholars and added the slash to Auto/ethnography as a way to elucidate how the collective is embedded in the individual. Boylorn also stated that, "auto/ethnography acknowledges that truths, memories, and perspectives are subjective."[313] My experience as a Black preaching woman with an African-centered and womanist lens does not represent the totality of all Black preaching women and was not intended to over generalize or be exclusionary.

Methodology

Toward an Afro-centric Research Methodology

According to Reviere "the traditional Eurocentric research criteria of objectivity, reliability, and validity are inadequate and incorrect especially for research involving human experiences."[314] In *Toward an Afrocentric Research Methodology* Ruth Reviere posited Afrocentrism as a basis for the creation and interpretation of data.[315] Afrocentricity as defined by Molefe K. Asante "is a paradigm based on the idea that African people should re-assert a sense of agency in order to achieve sanity"[316] Asante writes,

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[310] Ibid.
[311] Ibid.
[312] Ibid.
[313]Ibid.
[314] Ruth Reviere, "Toward an Afrocentric Methodology," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 31, 6 (Jul., 2000), 709-728.
[315] Ibid, 709.
[316] Afrocentricity, Molefi K. Asante. www.asante.net/articles/1/afrocentricity. October 7, 2013

> "As a paradigm Afrocentricity enthrones the centrality of the African that is black ideals and values, as expressed in the highest forms of African culture and activates consciousness as a functional aspect of any revolutionary approach to phenomena."[317]

Hence, an Afrocentric paradigm contends that African people must see themselves as subjects in a world that so often objectifies them. To see oneself as subject means, first and foremost, that African descended people value their own humanity to the extent that the recovery, reclamation, preservation and pursuit of African people are primary commitments. Afrocentrism forces the subject and the object to always consider the history, current experiences and hopes of African descended people in contrast or relation to what is being posited by the dominant Eurocentric and colonialist view.

An Afrocentric methodology counters the undeclared assumption that only the experiences of White authorities' matter. Instead it theorizes agency by asserting the legitimacy of African and other non-European ideals, values and experiences as a valid frame of reference for intellectual inquiry.[318] To this end, Reviere identified five Afrocentric research criteria: unkweli, utulivu, uhaki, ujamma, and kujiota. These criteria are based on Asante's Afrocentric principles of Ma 'at and Nommo and are the measures against which research should be judged for the accuracy of the representativeness of the lived experiences of all people including Black people.[319] Ma 'at "is the quest for justice, truth and harmony."[320] In this research, Ma 'at "refers to the research exercise itself, in harmony with the researcher being used as a tool in the pursuit of truth and justice."[321] Finally, "the ultimate goal of Ma 'at is that of helping to create a fairer and just society."[322] Per

[317] Ibid
[318] Ibid. 719
[319] Molefi K. Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) and *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990).
[320]Reviere, "*Toward an Afrocentric Methodology*," 711.
[321] Ibid.
[322] Ibid.

Reviere "Nommo means the productive word."[323] Here it is also described as "the creation of knowledge as a vehicle for improvement in human relations."[324]

Unkweli "is defined as the groundedness of research in the experiences of the community being researched wherein these experiences are the ultimate authority in determining what is true and therefore are the final arbiter of the validity about their lives."[325] Utulivu "requires that the researcher actively avoid creating, exaggerating or sustaining any divisions between or within communities, but rather strive to create harmonious relationships between and within these groups."[326] Ujamaa characterizes the importance of human capital and the preservation of collective well-being. As a research method, ujamaa "rejects the researcher/participant separation."[327] Uhaki necessitates a research process that is fair to all participants.[328] Kujitoa, entails "that the researcher emphasize considerations of how knowledge is structured and used over the need for dispassion and objectivity."[329] These five criteria governed by my methodological approach.

Setting

The church is nestled eighteen miles outside of Atlanta in the suburb of Lithonia in Dekalb County. Dekalb County is the second most affluent county with a majority African American population in the country. Over fifty percent of the county population is Black or African American.[330] The church caters to a mostly middle class constituency of Black people

[323] Ibid.
[324] Ibid.
[325] Ibid, 712,
[326] Ibid, 717.
[327] Ibid, 719-720.
[328] Ibid, 720.
[329] Ibid, 716.
[330] "Dekalb County, GA," US Census, accessed June 26, 2015, http://www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13/13089.html.

representing the African Diaspora in North America. Forty percent of residents 25 or older held a bachelor's degree and the total number of Black owned firms was also reported as being forty percent.[331] The median household income from 2009-2013 was $50, 856 versus $49,179 in the entire state.[332]

First Afrikan is an aesthetically rich community of intellectuals, radicals, service workers and most importantly believers in the merit of Black life. The church's most attractive feature is its resolve to be an African centered Christian ministry that boldly embraces all African cultures. In her research on Yoruba traditions and African American religious nationalism, Tracey E. Hucks conveyed that "First Afrikan Church's liturgical and theological openness includes a reverence for traditional Black Christian rites while embracing traditional African spiritual and cultural sensibilities."[333] For this primary reason, First Afrikan naturally emerged as the appropriate setting for this study. Hucks cited the full length study of First Afrikan Church written by Andrea Abrams. Hucks informed that Abrams "uses the work of theologian James H. Cone to theorize the theological negotiation of African and Christian identities in the United States."[334]Abrams expounded, "According to Cone, it was the African side of Black religion that helped African Americans to see beyond the White distortions of the gospel and to discover its true meaning as God's liberation of the oppressed from bondage. It was the Christian element in Black religion that helped African Americans to reorient their African past so that it would

[331] Ibid
[332] Ibid
[333]Hucks, Tracey E. *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism,* 253
[334] Ibid.

become more useful in the struggle to survive with dignity in a society that they did not make."[335]

As an Afrocentric Christian Ministry, First Afrikan "utilizes the histories and cultures of African descended peoples as sources for biblical interpretation, ministry development and implementation in the community context where the church exists."[336] The result of this liberative praxis is a different epistemological standpoint that influences the initiation, reception and dissemination of knowledge. An alternative authoritative source found in an African-centered womanist Christian perspective shifts from an external locus of control to an internal one. The ability to name one's self as First Afrikan exemplifies spiritual vision, divine wisdom and power of the word in the face of dominating structures. First Afrikan is the most appropriate location to collect data because it refuses the binary of sacred or secular and profane or profound. First Afrikan is a rich setting to explore my own spiritual journey and the realization that Christianity is not my sole religious anchor.

Sample Selection and Criteria

Ellis describes Auto/ethnography as a style of autobiographical writing and qualitative research that explores an individual's unique life experiences in relationship to social and cultural institutions. Therefore, to center the research question in a way that privileges my experiences as a Black preaching woman, I used six of my sermons preached during a tumultuous period in the Black community.[337] Due to the nature of the study, I also gained informed consent from secondary participant to protect their identity. Secondary raters helped to

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[335]Andrea Abrams, *Who I Am and Whose I Am: Race, Class, Gender and Nation in an Afrocentric Church.* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Services, 2006), 66.
[336] Ibid, .3.
[337]C. Ellis, C., "Heartful Autoethnography" *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(5), (1999): 669-683. doi: 10.1177/104973299129122153 Hodgins, M, & Boydell, K. M. (2014).

ensure that the data was reliable and valid. The examination of Black women's preaching bodies as vessels of embodied knowledge used to generate and disseminate spiritual power from alternative pulpits that guard against harmful and unjust systems have historically been unaccounted for in the formalized tradition of homiletics. Placing myself and experience at the center of this process drew attention to a particular interpretive schema and epistemological framework employed in the public sphere. This method was most evident in the way Black preaching women retrieve their spiritual power and self-worth first via different spaces of epistemological authority i.e., kitchen tables, floors, nature, etc. This way of knowing showed up as a heuristic method in sermon contemplation and delivery. According to Mae Henderson's "simultaneity of discourses" theory, the preaching, performance and posture of Black women's bodies is a dialogue between self and society, between self and the psyche and between self and the sacred.[338] Thus the population and sample were representative of self, society and the sacred.

I preached six sermons between June 2013 and September 2014. Five sermons were preached at First Afrikan Church and one sermon was preached during a 25th anniversary celebration at Midway Missionary Baptist Church in College Park, GA. These sermons advocated for the humanization of Black people via African-centered consciousness and womanist oratory and revolved around six interrelated themes. From 2011 to 2014 the killing of unarmed Black men, women, and youth in the United States by law enforcement and other vigilantes was gaining attention. [339] Reprieve seemed distant and the blood of Black bodies continued to stain the streets. The community grew increasingly more frustrated with the failure

[338] Mae G. Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," *African American Literary Theory: A Reader,* ed. Winston Napier, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), 3.
[339] Rick Juzwiak and Alexksander Chan, "Unarmed People of Color killed by Police, 1999-2014," *The Gawker Blog,* December 8, 2014, accessed December 30, 1014, http://www.gawker.com/unarmed-people-of-color-killed-by-police-1999-2014-1666672349.

of the legal system to bring about justice. The sermons were an effort to address the growing community angst about the continued devaluation of Black life.

Constructs

Fetching and Àjé are the two overarching constructs measured in this study. Fetching is defined as the act of retrieving "old" or "indigenous" community practices in order to sustain one's current reality within interlocking oppressive systems. In this study fetching was revealed in four ways: as specialized knowledge radical examination, a ritual of re-membering and self-love. Àjé is a Yoruba term that portends a spiritual power of vast potential, as well as the human beings who exercise that power.[340] Succinctly, Àjé describes the capacity of creating and transforming people by way of powerful speech and divine authority. Àjé yields four domains: spiritual power, divine authority, power of the word, and Asé. Spiritual power is identified as the capacity to transform people, places and systems. Divine authority is the ability to issue balance to imbalanced interlocking oppressive systems. Power of the word identifies the capacity to pray effectively. Ase is the power to bring to desires into being. One way Àjé presented itself in the study was through tarrying, an embodied mediated act with mystical features.

Data Collection

I employed a combination of unstructured interviews, document analysis, narrative reflection/confessional writing, and participant observation to collect data. I examined sermon manuscripts in search of fetching and Àjé. Mixing detail rich narrative with critical theoretical analysis challenges the limiting definitions of knowledge within academic texts thus becoming more accessible to readers. From this perspective the research text is not presented as a final

[340] Washington, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts,* 14.

truth but as a starting point for conversation.[341] Nash contended that, "scholarly personal narratives" liberate researchers from abstract, impersonal writings and "touch readers' lives by informing their experiences."[342] Gergen and Gergen also suggested that, "In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing. One's unique voicing—complete with colloquialisms, reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness—is honored"[343] To this end, I blended confessional writing, storytelling, social media posts, dialogue and dreams as a map of my explorative journey coming of age as a Black woman, Black preaching woman and scholar of Black religions.

In *Ethnography Essentials* Julian Murchison asserts that crucial to offering a good ethnography is becoming attuned to the non-obvious.[344] Murchison further posits participant observation as the vehicle for capturing the non-obvious. I observed key components of the worship service i.e., the libation/call to worship, praise and worship, announcements, special leadership development trainings called Mbongi and sermon delivery. I paid particular attention to Dr. Itihari Toure who is affectionately called Mama Itihari throughout the community. Mama Itihari is an ordained Elder in the Presbyterian Church, USA, a curriculum specialist and a Pan African grass roots activist. Because of her public role in the community and her consistent stance of speaking against systems that marginalized oppressed people I identified her as a Black preaching woman. I apprenticed her as she developed communal rituals, theme specific programming and African-centered womanist curricula. I also conducted a minimum of three

[341] Van Maanen, 1998; Schultze, 1999; Ellis &Bochner, 2000, 2004
[342]Nash, R.J., *Liberating scholarly writing: the power of personal narrative*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 28.
[343] M Gergen & K. Gergen, K., "Ethnographic representation as relationship." *In:* A. Bochner& C. Ellis, eds. *Ethnographically speaking: autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics.* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2002) 11-33.
[344] Murchison, Julian. *Ethnography Essentials.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010) p. 26.

unstructured interviews with her. Serie McDougal states "using the unstructured approach, the interviewer develops interview questions as the interview progresses."[345] This method allowed the interview to unfold naturally and provided Mama Itihari the opportunity to "discuss the topic of spiritual power, fetching and embodied preaching as she deemed fit while relating them to her personal experiences."[346] The data collected from the interviews and observation added depth to the analysis and fortified the overall soundness of the research design.

Data Analysis

According to Patton, "qualitative analysis transforms data into findings."[347] Unlike in more positivist quantitative research, there is no clear cut difference in the time where data collection and analysis are conducted in qualitative inquiry. The two not only occur simultaneously, but data collection is also informed by the constant fluidity of the process.[348] As a result of this combined data collection and analysis phase, final analysis included not only an analysis of raw data collected during field work, but also the record of the many insights and enlightened interpretations that came to light as the data were being collected.

I employed three methods to analyze the data. First, I utilized the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss.[349] This method of analysis involves the researcher "constantly comparing" the data as it is collected. As per Patton, comparison is the key to this process and is used when looking at "bits of data to generate categories, or comparing categories

[345] Serie McDougal, *Research Methods in Africana Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 264.
[346] Ibid, 264.
[347] M. Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 432.
[348] Ibid.
[349] B. Glaser, and A Strauss, *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for Qualitative research*. (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1967).

in order to generate connections between them."[350] Charmaz suggested when conducting analysis it is important that the researcher not wait until the "analysis phase" to begin reviewing and making meaning of data.[351] There should be "constant comparison" of the data collected and analysis should be ongoing throughout the study.[352] As I collected data, I simultaneously performed data analysis tasks to increase understanding of the information prior to moving forward with more data collection. If clarification was needed after review of audio recordings, then I reviewed the sermon manuscript and/or vice versa for a better explanation.

Although constant comparative analysis was used to identify the themes in the sermons, an analysis of the messages characterized under each construct was done using the components of womanist epistemology.[353] As stated in chapter 2, womanist epistemology merges "Afrocentric and feminist consciousness with the uniqueness of African American female history, culture, and experiences. The following Black feminist tenets are rudimentary to a womanist epistemology and consists of (a) refusal to reinforce the social relations of domination. Her work is accessible to women from many walks of life while still being rigorous and well-researched; (b) does not privilege elites but rather recognizes that everyone has a privileged view from their own vantage point; (c) incorporates the everyday unapologetically; (d) rejects dualism and objectivity in favor of both/and perspectives; (e) actively challenges the existing notions of intellect as well as traditions of knowledge production and validation; and (f) places Black women experiences and ideas at the center of analysis. I registered the symbols that clustered

[350] Patton, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 88.
[351] K. Charmaz, "Qualitative Interviewing and Grounded Theory Analysis," in J. Gubrium & J. Holstein eds., *Handbook of Interview Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 675-694
[352] Ibid.
[353] A full definition of womanist epistemology is provided in chapter 2, 77-80.

around the primary views of Black feminist/womanist consciousness and epistemology in the sermons and personal narratives.

In *Conjuring Culture,* Theophus (Thee) Smith performed an analysis of the oratory style and sermonic content of Sojourner Truth.[354] Smith observed "that Truth was a shaman and a conjurer."[355] As mentioned in the literature review, Smith characterized conjure as part of the "magical folk tradition of Black North Americans. It is a magical means of transforming reality…the magic is ritual speech and action and intended to perform what it expresses."[356] The shaman represents "human dilemmas in bodily gesture."[357] As in the case of a preacher, "the shaman has the ability to dramatically embody the emotional problems and social tensions besetting their patrons."[358] I replicated Smith's schema which illumined how Truth used images of her marginalized womanhood to signify equality as a woman among white women.[359] To analyze my own rhetorical performance I examined images, the perception the images produced and the re-cognition.

Coding

To collect, code and analyze I used the cut and paste function in Microsoft Word computer software. I transcribed the sermons from audio to a word document. I then compared the transcription to the original manuscript before it was preached. Once each sermon was in a word document I read it through without assigning it a theme. I then read each sermon a second time. On the third read, of the first sermon, I analyzed and I began to attach the color coordinated

[354] Donna Allen used Smith's analysis to highlight how Truth performed and reinforced her identity as Black woman and as a Black preaching woman. *Toward a Womanist Homiletic* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 35-39.
[355] Ibid, 36.
[356] Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 4.
[357] Ibid, 161.
[358] Ibid.
[359] Ibid, 168-169.

themes: red signified fetching, purple indicated Àjé/spiritual power, yellow connoted divine authority and feminine power, blue pointed to speaking truth to power, green represented Asé—the ability to bring desires into being and gray designated imbalance. I proceeded by analyzing the rest of the sermons specifically seeking out portions of the written script that aligned with the themes and colors I assigned the first sermon. After all six sermons were color coded I performed a fourth layer of coding. I created separate files for each sermon. I assembled all the reds, blues, greens, yellows, grays, greens and purples of one sermon and placed them in their own colored file. I then sought out areas of convergence within each colored section. I reflected on each data pile one sermon at a time and one color at a time. After careful consideration, I affixed individual and collective meaning by identifying the concept yielding from particular colored theme to understand what each sermon shared. The importance of the key terms was determined on the basis of frequency and intensity. Frequency, "refers to how often something occurs within a text," for example, I did not intend to measure imbalance but it revealed itself as recurrent theme causally related to fetching.[360] The fifth level of analysis consisted of going back to my initial research questions to discover, if there was a conceptual relationship.

Inter-rater Reliability

I duplicated Payne's process of inter-rater reliability.[361] Three raters were selected to assist with establishing inter-rater reliability for this study. Two are ordained clergy women and serve historically Black churches in predominantly White denominations and all three are seminary trained. All of the women self-identify as womanist and two as African-centered Christians. The raters were emailed two separate sermon manuscripts. The first manuscript

[360] McDougal, *Research Methods in Africana Studies,* 171.
[361] Yasser Arafat Payne and Hanna H. Hamdi. *"Street Love": How Street Life Oriented U.S. Born African American Men Frame Giving Back to One Another and the Local Community.* Urban Rev (2009) 41:37.

totaled ten pages. Raters were instructed to highlight in a color of their choosing, all passages that revealed evidence of fetching, and Àjé. After completing coding on the first sermon, raters were emailed a second manuscript that totaled 12 pages. Raters were again instructed to highlight in a color of their choosing, all passages that matched my formal definition of fetching and Àjé along with its four domains.

I scored each rater's coded manuscript against the original manuscript I coded for each construct. In both rounds of coding each construct emerged. In the first manuscript where the raters used their own definitions the original themes were retained. The results were the same with only some nuanced differences when the raters used the definitions I provided to code the data. Three out of four women also classified imbalance as a visible theme and one woman's color codes for divine authority matched with the master manuscript. I made note of the fourth woman's rating and separated from the other three. This sole disparate rating did not affect the potential for error. It did however, indicate the diverse range of experiences between Black preaching women.

Validity and Reliability

Validity establishes that the findings of the study are credible. Patton asserted that, "validity and reliability are two factors which any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analyzing results and the judging the quality of the study."[362] Validity and reliability exist in qualitative research in an effort to understand the world as it is seen and experienced by participants in the study.[363] It is imperative that issues of validity and

[362] Patton, 2002 as cited in N, Golafashani, (2003). "Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research," *The Qualitative Report*, 894 (2003), 597-606. Retrieved June 15, 2015, from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR8-4/golafshani.pdf
[363] Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 2002

reliability be addressed so that readers can trust that a certain level of rigor has been met. This is even more important when it is hoped that findings will be used as a basis for change in practice that will directly impact consumers. Stakeholders can only trust that the end products of research are worth implementing in practice when some account for validity and reliability has been included.[364]

Internal Validity

Internal validity is the process by which I am able to say that the conclusions I made in the dissertation accurately reflect what I studied.[365] This study contended that African centered and womanist oratory becomes a means through Black women's bodies to generate and transmit spiritual power from alternative sources to unfetter themselves and their communities from the remaining vestiges of racial and gender disparities. To establish that the results of this study were credible, I employed five types of validity procedures. They included triangulation, researcher-reflexivity, thick description and peer debriefing.[366] Triangulation is, "a validity procedure where researchers' search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form categories or themes in a study."[367] Denzin identified four types of triangulation: (1) across data sources (participants); (2) theories; (3) methods (i.e., interviews, observations and documents) and (4) among different investigators.[368] Theories and methods were most applicable and were inherent in my research design. I used Afrocentric, Black feminist and womanist and performance theoretical frameworks to guide my inquiries. I then added components of

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[364]Rossman, G. & Rallis, S, *Learning in the field: An introduction to Qualitative Research* (2nd ed.). (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).
[365] www.dissertation.laerd.com/internal-validity.php. Retrieved June 22, 2014
[366] John W. Creswell and Dana L. Miller. "Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry." *Theory into Practice,* 39, no 3(2000): 124-130.
[367] Ibid, 126.
[368] Denzin, 1978 as cited in Creswell and Miller, 126.

womanist epistemology and critical discourse analysis to examine the data. I corroborated the evidence for specific types of rhetorical strategies through multiple methods. During the length of the study, I observed worship services, special leadership trainings, bible studies and informal gatherings. Document examination was crucial to my methodological approach. I investigated six sermons I preached over the course of one calendar year in an effort to mine an African-centered womanist response to unremitting displays of dehumanizing social othering in the U.S.

Researcher reflexivity "is the process whereby researchers report on personal beliefs, values and biases that may shape their inquiry."[369] Reflexivity was intrinsic within my research design. An Auto/ethnographic research design called for me to state my "entering beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand my position."[370] I also incorporated reflexivity by including a statement of research bias at the end of this chapter, including a section on the limitations of the study in chapter five, and used narrative interpretive commentary throughout the discussion of the findings. Along with reflexivity thick description is also an essential component of an Auto/ethnographic account. A detailed description, given in chapter four, helped to contextualize both the people and the site that was studied. Peer debriefing is the final procedure I used to ascertain the credibility of the study. According to Creswell and Miller, "a peer review or debriefing is the review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored."[371] I used members of my dissertation committee as peer reviewers by assisting in the review of raw data to identify themes and similarities, challenge my assumptions and make inquiries about methods

[369] Creswell and Miller, *Determining Validity,* 127.
[370] Ibid.
[371] Ibid, 129.

and interpretations. They were also asked to review the findings and give their own thoughts as to their authenticity.

External Validity

Within a qualitative research paradigm transferability is a foundational concept for establishing external validity. Transferability "refers to the degree to which the results can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings."[372] That is, can the findings of this study be applied to other African-centered and womanist preaching women specifically and Black preaching women in general? According to Merriam, reader generalizability is the most common way that external validity is addressed in qualitative inquiry. She goes on to note that "in this view, readers themselves determine the extent to which findings from a study can be applied to their context,"[373] It is not the researcher but the reader who determines if the findings of a study can be utilized in other situations. Providing a thick detailed description helped to establish internal validity and also aided in the enhancement of external validity. Ultimately, thick detail helps to make the reader feel that he or she experienced or could experience the events being described in the study. Another approach that I employed to validate the transferability of the study was to enlist the participation of four Black preaching women not affiliated with the study. I asked the women to observe me preaching a sermon and to consider the six overarching categories that emerged from the data collection during their analysis. I identified these women because of their social location, vocational and espoused womanist and African-centered ethics. A majority of the raw data fit within themes and properties of the research. I will provide a brief biographical sketch of each woman in chapter four.

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[372] www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/qualval.php. Retrieved on June 18, 2015.
[373] S. Merriam. *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002) 28.

Reliability

In research, "the term reliability means repeatability or consistency."[374] The central component of reliability in a positivist sense is the ability to replicate research findings. This is a purely quantitative approach to reliability.[375] The question of reliability is a question of whether or not the results make sense. The measure of reliability is more closely related to whether other researchers viewing the same data would agree with the results.[376] With that in mind, in qualitative research the issue of reliability is judged by the study's rigor and whether or not the results are dependable and consistent with the data collected. Many of the ways that I enhanced the internal validity of the study also helped to ensure its reliability. Triangulation, researcher reflexivity, thick description and peer debriefing helped to ensure that the study findings are dependable and assist in accurately conveying the rigor of the research. The inclusion of all of these components allowed consumers of this research to make a decision as to whether or not the study was well designed and conducted.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

There are a series of moments that fuel my interest in how not only Black women preach but how Black women who espouse an African-centered and womanist value system preach in the face of dehumanization. While I acknowledge this phenomenon is not new and certainly can be readily traced historically, my journey to womanism and African-centered consciousness is critical to my analytical, methodological and pedagogical lens. My consciousness also drives my passion for this subject matter. As a Black woman who preaches and teaches preaching, I assert

[374] www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/qualval.php. Retrieved on June 18, 2015.
[375] Merriam, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, 2002
[376] G, Rossman and S. Rallis. *Learning on the Field: An Introduction to Qualitative Research* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003).

that some Black preaching women have a particularized way of generating, receiving and transmitting sacred knowledge and that this way of knowing is visible in their performed experiences, influences of verbal and embodied rhetorical strategies used to resist dehumanizing social ordering the United States. Although I cannot eliminate my assumptions and biases from who I am I attempted to scrutinize them more closely by journaling and exercising reflexivity throughout this research process.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I introduced performance Auto/ethnography as a critical reflexive and qualitative research design by which I assessed the utility of embodied, African centered, and womanist approaches to preaching in order to affirm the value of Black life. I contended that this particular research design within a qualitative method was most appropriate for the study because it provided space for me as both researcher and practitioner. I did not have to observe the preaching practices of Black women from a distance nor did I have to wrestle with my native status. Instead, I was "able to use the materials of my personal life and lived experience to explain how and why I interpret things the way I do as a scholar of African-centered womanist preaching—*fetching.*"[377] Constant comparative analysis allowed me to engage the archive i.e., manuscript and audio recordings as well as the repertoire, stylized movement via participant observation. Document examination, confessional and/or narrative self-reflection writing and participant observation helped me to acknowledge the interdependence between the stationery (archive) and the fluid (repertoire). While my voice is central in this study it was equally important to introduce other voices to show the validity and reliability of the study. External

[377] Boylorn, *Sweetwater*, 9.

coders helped to strengthen the findings obtained from my inquiry by cross checking information. Chapter IV consists of an in-depth analysis of the messages categorized under each theme.

Chapter IV

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

"Here, she said, in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh."
Baby Suggs Holy, *Beloved*

INTRODUCTION

This study juxtaposes my vulnerabilities as a Black woman with my profound experience of being a Black woman who preaches. I draw attention to African-centered womanist oratory in homiletical development and delivery. I contend that through the carving out of sacred space, Black women preachers use the performed word to intentionally disrupt popular terrains where Black bodies are literally and metaphorically disembodied. In response to the research questions five correlating themes emerged: (1) fetching; (2) Àjé/spiritual power; (3) divine authority and feminine power; (4) power of the word; and (5) Asé. These themes, their associated properties and coinciding research questions can be found in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1 Themes and Properties

Research Question	**Themes and Properties**
How does a Black woman's body preach?	ÀJÉ/SPIRITUAL POWER The capacity to transform people places or systems. Self-determination and tarrying as embodied literacies of resistance.
What sermons does a Black woman's body preach in response to interlocking oppressive systems that affirm and celebrate Black life?	FETCHING The act of retrieving "old" or "indigenous" community practices in order to sustain one's current reality within interlocking oppressive systems; radical examination embodied and, ancestral memory (invocation as a tool of resistance and survival) and presence.

How does a Black woman's preaching body generate and transmit sacred truths from alternative pulpits that unfetters her and the larger community from the remaining vestiges of race and gender disparities?	DIVINE AUTHORITY AND FEMININE POWER The ability to restore balance to imbalanced interlocking oppressive systems; principle of unity, mother wit, and Gelede. POWER OF THE WORD AND ASE The capacity to bring one's desire to fruition once uttered.

In this auto/ethnography**,** I engage personal narrative and sermons as data and analyze each respectively. The personal narratives, which appear in italics, provide a contextual lens from which to analyze the sermonic content and ultimately explain how and why the sermons materialized. The personal narratives appear in italics and follow the sermon excerpts and analysis. The selected sermon passages appear in block style indentations and are labeled 1-10. The excerpts and personal narratives coincide thematically. That is, the narrative and the sermons are directly tied to the themes that emerged from the data and are analyzed accordingly.

I focused on six sermons preached between June 2013 and September 2014. Five sermons were delivered during the regular morning Sunday worship service at First Afrikan Church. One sermon was delivered during the 25th anniversary celebration of the founding of Midway Missionary Baptist Church in College Park, Georgia. I chose these specific sermons because of the time frame in which they take place. Black religious bodies were again faced with how to mobilize their communities to affirm the value of Black life. The sermons, *Exile or Compromise, Willfully Persist, Fight the Power, Restoring our Past, Refining our Future, On the Threshold of Change*, and *You Can Survive This,* were in response to social unrest caused by the effects of unjust systems that render certain bodies to the margins. Further, the sermons advocated resistance to and liberation from forces of domination.

Similar to the means David Carless describes songwriting and auto/ethnography is my connection to sermon writing and ultimately preaching. Sermon writing "has brought me understandings and insights and perhaps, allowed me to create personal stories which map my life and more closely fit my experience."[378] Sermon writing is a form of auto/ethnography which involves "setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among the mundane and the profound, experience and theory, evocation and explanation…and then letting go hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives."[379] The sermonic content and personal narrative interweave with one another to create a sacred performance of embodied African-centered womanist oratory that upholds the sanctity of Black lives as a divine imperative. Following is an African-centered womanist analysis of the interrelated themes identified in the sermons' properties.

Fetching:
Radical Examination, Rituals of Re-Membering and Loving Ourselves Regardless

Radical Examination

Fetching, a derivative of Sankofa, which means to go back and get it, emerged as both a verbal and non-verbal rhetorical African-centered strategy I used to counter interlocking oppressive systems that pose a constant threat to Black embodiment. Retrieving old and indigenous community practices of survival and resistance through radical examination counteracted the injurious effects of cultural and spiritual amnesia and moral disintegration. Rooted in the African oral tradition, the sermons I wrote and preached developed as humanizing

[378] Tessa Muncey, *Creating Autoethnographies* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2010), 133.
[379] Holman Jones, "Autoethnography: Making the Personal Political in *Handbook on Qualitative Research* 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 765.

dialogue. Concurrent with the literature, fetching is a specialized knowledge, a way of being and practice. According to Itihari Toure, "it causes and facilitates remembering while presenting opportunities for realignment with the *being* and subsequent attunement with the Spirit."[380] The following sermon excerpt points to this way of being:

Excerpt 1

> Many of our African ancestors like the Bambara, the Mende, the Ewe, the Akan, the Kimbundi, the Zulu, the Hausa, and the Teso tribes survived being exiled to the turbulent seas and rancid conditions during the Middle Passage. The same women and men survived the brutal exile of chattel slavery and some revolted thus refusing to accept permanent captivity. Our foremothers and forefathers survived…the exile of imposed by the pride of the powerful…Remember those who chose exile over compromise for us. (*Exile or Compromise,* June 2013)

Here, as specialized knowledge, fetching affirmed Black embodiment by recognizing the significance of weighing the utility of our past upon how we carefully, cautiously position our future in balance with our present realities. In other words, we cannot use our past to imagine our future without engaging our present context. Fetching then is a radically examined backward gaze that brings memory into our presence instead of remaining fixed in our mind. Engaging the process of bringing memory into our presence is akin to bringing the person, event, and/or situation into the present to examine their actions and outcomes. Invoking the names of African tribes likely to have been captured and enslaved in the Americas situated fetching via radical examination of memory as a communal practice. It further revealed a legacy of re-membering that called attention to the Spirit—the source and benefactor of all life and existence—and clarified how this source of life has been and is at work in bodies who live under the constant weight of dehumanizing social ordering.

[380] Itihari Toure, "Ancestral Walks: A Model of the Sacred" Paper presented at the annual Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, Houston, TX , February 16, 2016.

Mending the Broken Calabash: A Ritual of Re-Membering

Fetching not only materialized as specialized knowledge used to radically examine disparate social systems that challenge the livelihood of Black life but it also surfaced as a ritual practice of re-membering. In *The Healing Wisdom of Africa,* Malidoma Somé explains the centrality of ritual in the maintenance of communal health. Somé posited that ritual is the cornerstone and the spiritual substance around which all life evolves. In traditional African communities there is a ritual response to every phenomenon: birth, death, marriage, trauma, and natural occurrences. Ritual is the context through which all life experiences are negotiated. Somé, conveys that the point of ritual is to unite the living with the already lived. He contended that ritual fuels healing of the psyche and the body. This indigenous perspective proposes that individuals would be whole and functional in society if they engaged in communal rituals because ritual is a stabilizing action.[381]

Ritually speaking, fetching helps us to address our internalization of White supremacy, gender and cultural hegemony which translates our fear into the lives of others and objectifies 'the other.'[382] Toure maintains that, "rituals of fetching can interrupt those toxic behaviors we have adopted to relieve the pain of oppression and pragmatized fear."[383] We accept being co-opted by these toxic behaviors because we no longer remember our absolute relation to Spirit. We no longer dream. As our memory further degenerates, we are no longer able to contain the pain and the fear, we become a sieve. Fetching reminds us of both sufficiency of the Spirit and the proficiency it gives us through memory whereby we rely on the capacities of our ancestors to overcome.

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[381] Malidoma Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual and Community* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998).
[382] Toure, "Ancestral Walks: A Model of the Sacred."
[383] Ibid.

The ancestral walk ritual, *Mending the Calabash,* illumines the value of fetching sacred memory. Convened by First Afrikan, the ancestral walk comprised of five stations. Each station represented the unjust conditions people of the African diaspora in general and specifically Black people in America currently face. The first station acknowledged the shattering of the calabash. The calabash, one of the archetypal African artifacts, symbolizes the African diaspora. In the tradition of the Yoruba people of West Africa when the gourd is cracked or opened it symbolizes chaos, misfortune and underlying troubles. The same is true today. The metaphor of the broken calabash is the starting point for many of us in search of our cultural heritage, our fetching, as we seek to understand it in the context of traumatic historical experience—the Maafa. A water libation joined the spirit world with the physical world by praying for guidance in the process of reclamation. In order to restore our past, as a community we have to first admit that we are lost. The second station recognized the broken pieces of the gourd and proffered that whatever we have lost, forgotten, forgone or been stripped of can be retrieved, revived, preserved, and perpetuated. Station three signified cultural memory as the mending ingredient at the crossroads of oppression and resistance. As the community encountered the fourth station of dis-memberment, we also recalled pieces that are understood fragments and those that may not have been understood while holding on to a small whole gourd/calabash to have in our memory the feel, the look and the touch of being whole. envisioned wholeness. The fifth station symbolized Ubuntu (wholeness) as communion with Spirit, community and ancestors. At this station we recognized that both the brokenness, the creative mending, and our wholeness is in our hands. It always is. It always will be.

Fetching as a practice of radical examination and ritual of re-membering nurtures collective healing. The re-membering of the gourd exemplifies how Black people have

collectively and individually endured. Fetching, interrupts the narrative of the debasing Black body. Instead it calls us to embrace our flesh even when larger society will not and acknowledge that radical examination bores a radical love of self.

Loving Ourselves Regardless

To love one's self regardless of external stimuli is a major tenet of the womanist ideological framework. To do so requires critical thought about the ways Black embodiment is viewed and experienced. Loving ourselves regardless commands us to challenge negative constructions of our Black bodies and to develop strategies that will produce better images. Loving ourselves regardless requires us to fetch healing wisdom that expands beyond only the "contributions of our wisest and most courageous leaders."[384] Fetching as a path to loving ourselves regardless materialized in sermonic form as also our willingness to take up the struggles of our wisest and most courageous leaders.

Excerpt 2

> We have inherited a divine covenant through our spiritual ancestors which is that whatever the loss, the disappointment or sadness we are still in divine relationship with the one who shows us the path to recovery and restoration. (*You Can Survive This,* September 2014)

Excerpt 3

> A history complete with stony roads and chastening rods, a people deemed not a people singing their song in a strange land, and the descendants of racist personification in the form of sharecroppers, slaves, domestic and factory workers—ours is a story cloaked in an indelible faith. It is our responsibility to not shrink back…We come from a heritage of men, women and children who were undaunted by the fight for freedom. Our history is not filled with people who were silent but it is filled with people who spoke up and out. Audre Lorde was correct when she told us that our silence would not protect us. Harriet Tubman was right when she said, she could have freed hundreds more men and women if only they'd known that they were enslaved. We can willfully persist

[384] Uhuru Hotep, "African Centered Leadership-Followership: Foundational Principles, Precepts and Essential Practices," *Journal of Pan African Studies,* 3 no. 6 (March, 2010)

> with bounties on our backs because Marcus Garvey, Queen Mother Moore and so many more did so with far less. (*Willfully Persist,* August 2013)

Loving ourselves regardless demands that we acknowledge the legacy and continue the work of dismantling dehumanizing and interlocking oppressive systems. For instance, not only must we know of Audre Lorde, but we must entwine her life work of authentic and embodied living. Uhuru Hotep said, "not only must we know of Marcus Garvey's and Queen Mother Moore's contributions to our nation building tradition, we must also embrace their nation building mission."[385] To fetch Harriet Tubman means far more than simply knowing her life story; it also means embracing her life work of African rescue and redemption.[386] This is our inheritance. Keeping this covenant requires that we restore any severed connections with our ancestors. Hotep further informed that "Indigenous African cosmology teaches that our departed leaders who wisely and courageously served our people while on earth if properly invoked will continue their service once they take up residence in the spiritual realm. Reviving the ancient African science of ancestor veneration, which uses ritual to invoke the guidance and protection of our Ancestors, is an important function."[387] The following reflection exemplifies fetching as radical examination, illumines the ritual of dance as a performance of re-membering and ancestral memory as an instrument of self-determination.

Wholly Holy

During the late seventies through the mid-eighties it was not uncommon to hear young Black girls in my neighborhood chanting what some might deem sexually charged affirmations also known as street cheers. Cheers like Ms. Lucy, Give Me Body and Hollywood Swinging were

[385] Ibid.
[386] Ibid.
[387] Ibid.

filled with edgy directives and required rhythmic movement that, according to many, was suggestive of adult experiences. Our favorite place to congregate was the small rear parking lot patio at Second Baptist Church. We were well aware, to some extent, of the flesh/spirit conversation, typically expressed as "get somewhere and sit down," drawing attention to yourself, moving and gyrating like some loose woman. As a child, I vividly remember this particular call that my prepubescent girl friends and I would sing together in our budding community of womanish girls. There was something that happened when we caught the spirit and switched our less than developed derrières to the hand clapping and foot stomping of invisible rhythmic drums we could only hear in unison. It was a summoning of sorts, the conjuring of a power too deep to name and to broad to confine.

This childhood ritual performance introduced me to my oddly shaped but burgeoning body. Yet in the most awkward time of a young girl's life, in retrospect, I remember feeling sensual, sexual, and empowered as if I knew I had a sacred treasure deep within. I imagine that if I had known what sexuality was at that age then I could say, I had tapped into the holies of holies within my being—the secret garden of possibilities. Switching and swaying, twisting and turning, I had already learned what Ntozake Shange gave to us as golden rule in For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf. That is, I had found God in myself and I loved her/I loved her fiercely. Void of guilt, shame, or stereotypical historical references, I was in an organic space of being sensual, sexual, and basking in flesh that was home to caramel colored skin, ashy knees, long legs, raisins for breast, and eyes that my mama said, "could stare a grown woman down." In those moments of my early youth I had not yet become consciously imprisoned by patriarchal and racist or future negative iconography of my soon to be commodified body. I had not yet begun to struggle with Euro-American imposed value

contradictions and a White racist redemption requirement, which redeemed my soul and left my body steeped in the muck and mire of systemic injustices.[388] *I had not yet encountered the reprobate mentality of rogue bureaucracies that killed unarmed Black men, women and youth. Immersed in the Black Baptist church tradition I would one day learn that living an embodied life and loving myself regardless as the womanist directive demands would become more than a notion.*

Over time, the male dominated Black Baptist and Pentecostal pulpit almost obliterated my sense of self by imposing a disembodied theology that left me wanting. Sermons directed at women whose anatomy was viewed as a bastion of temptation instead of as a conduit of spiritual power left me confused. In the search for wholeness, independence, spiritual and physical empowerment my Black and female body was caught within the binaries of anti-body dualism rooted in racism, patriarchy, and heterosexism. I was unable to fully embrace a life which unified the Spirit with the physical body. It became increasingly clear that Black enfleshment is marked as deviant and other and is perceived in church and society as an endangerment to the safe keeping of White privileged and male society. It was not until seminary that I encountered John Mbiti's African Religions and Philosophy and the idea that there is no "formal distinction between the sacred and secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life."[389] *That is, God permeates all areas of life and being. The formal knowledge that God also pervaded my Black and female body that in many ways had been conceptually marginalized since arriving to the New World was liberating.*

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[388] Riggins Earl, *"Loving our Black Bodies as God's Luminously Dark Temples: The Quest for Black Restoration,"* Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic, ed. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 251.
[389] Mbiti, *African Religious Philosophy*, 2.

Long gone, for me, are the days of carefree embodiment characterized by sassy chants on the small rear church parking lot. They have been replaced with a steadied awareness that Black girls and women have to constantly create and re-create spaces for the survival of the entire community even when that space is our bodies. From Jarena Lee to Maria Stewart who admonished Black people to awake, arise and act; to Fannie Lou Hamer who grew weary of being sick and tired and testified before the Democratic National Convention in 1964 requesting that the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party be seated; to Ella Baker who knew that until the killing of Black mothers' sons became equally as important as the killing of White mothers' sons that we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes, the import of the sacred feminine performance to counter hegemony within and from the contexts of the Black church offered a lens through which to radically examine, perform rituals of re-membering and love myself regardless as an embodied practice of resistance and survival and display of spiritual power.

Spiritual Power

A primary attribute of Àjé is spiritual power—the capacity to transform people, places, or systems. I implemented Thee Smith's description of Black preaching women as shaman and conjurer to define spiritual power. In this study, spiritual power is a "supernatural means of transforming reality."[390] The supernatural is operationalized as "ritual speech and action intended to perform what it expresses."[391] Ritual speech and action materialized as survival. Methods of survival manifested as somatic literacies i.e., tarrying, fighting the power, releasing the weight, and interrogating unjust systems. When evoked, survival became a symbolic means of spiritual power. Following is an explication of the three minor themes: tarrying, fighting the power and

[390] Smith, *Conjuring Culture,* 4.
[391] Smith, *Conjuring Culture,* 4.

interrogating unjust systems. The section concludes with a narrative reflection that illumines tarrying as an embodied mediated action that results in the spiritual, physical and emotional transformation of Black life.

Tarrying as a display of spiritual power bears shamanic features and roots in conjuration. Tarrying "erases any rigid demarcation between the natural and supernatural."[392] Scriptural origins of tarrying can be traced to Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4. In both instances the followers of Jesus were told to wait for the power that was promised—the Holy Spirit—would soon come. This secondary level of initiation would provide comfort to bear the oppressive forces of the empire and power to resist religious and social improprieties. Tarrying in Luke is an embodied response to oppression. Tarrying is both a vehicle to spiritual power and the manifestation of spiritual power. The act of tarrying finds its historical foundation in the 1906 Azusa Street Pentecostal Revival in Los Angeles, CA. Attendees who desired to be baptized in the Holy Ghost would go to a designated room. In this room, people lingered with the hopes of receiving spiritual power. When I was girl, the room was replaced by a bench. I remember the elders, usually women, who would remind believers that the mourner's bench was always open. Men, women, and children would go to this bench for a number reasons. One reason was to repent of their sins. Another reason was to receive spiritual power. Customarily one could not symbolically leave the bench until baptism of the Holy Spirit was evident, usually by way of 'speaking in tongues.'

To tarry here is not solely a contemplative act accompanied by stillness. It is the very opposite. To tarry in killing season is also to actively listen i.e., *listening differently, listening before acting, speaking and teaching, and listening for clarity.* Listening, then, is an intentional

[392] Gayraud S.Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism,* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 3.

process of questioning and probing while in motion. In this moment the mourner's bench representing solemnity and desolation is replaced by both verbal and nonverbal petitions for intervention from a supernatural source. The acknowledgement of humanity is conferred by the Spirit wherein one becomes the recipient and the bearer of spiritual power. Therefore, tarrying is a dance between the sublime and the mundane. In an explication of embodied knowledge inherent in dance, Yvonne Daniel illuminated the role of repetition. Daniel asserted "repetition is critical. It is necessary to build and intensify each body part's involvement."[393] She avowed:

> It is through repetition that dancing worshippers harness and display all the energy possible in a given set of movements. At first the pattern is consciously discernable, but with maximum repetition, the dancing worshiper is fully confident, engrossed in the muscular movement, articulating every nuance in every part of the body. The mind is submerged in the dancing, and the music, discerning mysteries. Both the body and the mind transcend.[394]

Comparatively, Black and female tarrying bodies harness a sacred feminine power. This power is called forth through repetition. Repetition is visible in the recurrent assault upon as well as the response to the assault upon Black bodies. The assault initiates the call—the need to invoke spiritual power through patterned movements, gestures, and rhythms—tarrying of which the results bear a particular collective or deepwell memory. Similar to Daniel's description of Orisha dance movements, when tarrying is performed "it provides for historical catharsis, contemporary release, and meaningful social action."[395] Tarrying then becomes a performance of "human resilience that is both displayed visually and experienced physically as persistence, deliberation,

[393] Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuba Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble,"* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 249.
[394] Ibid.
[395] Ibid, 252.

dedication, reliability, strength, and endurance."[396] Daniel offered a poignant example of the dance for the Orisha Oyá, the Yoruba deity:

> Oyá's dance is full of independent woman power, but also fierce fighting power for the community. Transformed as Oyá, for example, the worshipping dancer soars through space and time on the coronal plane of existence. She reestablishes those maintenance patterns that have repeatedly confronted and resisted the magnetized dehumanizing elements within contemporary situations.[397]

Tarrying corresponds to the dance of Oyá. Each time Black flesh is assaulted unjustly by being denied full humanity, Black preaching women have tarried. As expressed in the sermons and spiritual autobiographies of early 19th century preaching women, the reliance and use of one's body to transform reality by confronting dehumanization visible in oppressive systems was and remains common. Through tarrying, "the social body experiences the remembered patterns that constitute a balance of each interfacing realm of knowledge and integrates those experiences into daily routine and critical situations."[398] By way of resilient and powerful ritual performance, tarrying embodies memory and perseverance and in the end inspires and supports survival.

Radical Subjectivity in Killing Season

Survival is intimately tied to tarrying. Tarrying evokes spiritual power and survival emits spiritual power. As a form of spiritual power, survival surfaced as kujichagulia. Kujichagulia is Swahili for self-determination. The term is most identified with the Nguzo Saba (seven principles) and the African American cultural celebration, Kwanzaa. Self-determination posits the ability to define one's self for one's self, speak for one's self and create for one's self. In *Fight the Power* and *Exile or Compromise*, my Black woman's preaching body educed spiritual power by means of radical subjectivity to counter the continual and systemic devaluation of

[396] Ibid.
[397] Ibid, 249 and 252.
[398] Ibid, 253.

Black lives. In this manner, my preaching, female, and marginalized body became what hooks' referred to as the space of radical possibility and hence the center for the production of a counterhegemonic discourse."[399] The following passages reveal that Black women's preaching bodies generate and transmit truths from figurative and literal margins. Subsequently, from the margins, Black women embody and preach sermons that hegemonic pulpits have disallowed. The next excerpts highlight this point:

Excerpt 4

> Fight the power! Fight the power, so that the soil upon which we stand is no longer saturated with the salty tears of our community's best ingathering. Fight the power so that the fruit of our wombs cease from frequently and prematurely becoming our ancestors. Fight the power so that the terror that accompanies not being able to treble the weighted grips of overexposure and invisibility will no longer restrict our breath and exacerbate traumas too deep to fully name. (*Fight the Power,* February 2014)

Excerpt 5

> Vashti's retort "no" serves as a display of righteous indignation toward any being, system, or institution that seeks to minimize Black women's contributions to the building and maintain of complex political, cultural and spiritual infrastructures by requesting a debasing display. Vashti's refusal to display her splendor is both an example to be celebrated and an indictment to ponder. (*Exile or Compromise,* June 2013)

In *The Kink Factor: A Womanist Discourse Analysis of African American Mother/Daughter Perspectives on Negotiating Black Hair Politics,* Regina Spellers acknowledged that the body is a sign-emitting text.[400] Stern and Henderson asserted that "the idea that the body can be viewed

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[399] bell hooks, "Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Openness," in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Culture Politics,* (Boston: South End, 1990), 150-151.

[400] Regina E. Spellers, "The Kink Factor: A Womanist Discourse Analysis of African American Mother/Daughter Perspectives on Negotiating Black Hair Politics," *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations* ed., Ronald L. Jackson and Elaine B. Richardson (New York: Routledge, 2003), 223-243. Also see Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight; Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*,10th ed. (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1993, 2003); A. Tretheway, "Disciplined Bodies: Women's Embodied Identities at Work," *Organization Studies* 10, (1999) 3:423-50; C Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 1993); E. Goffman, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*(New York: anchor Books, 1958); E. Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1963); E. Goffman, *Stigma: Notes*

as a readable text is particularly important when seeking to understand the choices individuals make as they construct their aesthetic image."[401] The selected passages operate as directives for negotiating body politics, "practices and policies through which powers of society regulate the human body, as well as the struggle with the degree of individual and social control."[402] The selections also provide instruction against further objectification of the gendered and raced body. By this means, Black and female bodies are liberated within the margins and not from the margins of a society that devalue and dehumanize their embodiment because of their race, gender, and often times class.

A primary issue of separation between White Evangelicals and Black Evangelicals was the "existence of chattel slavery in a nation that claimed to be Christian, and the use of Christianity to justify enslavement."[403] Conversion for Black Evangelicals resulted in a shift in consciousness and location. Conversion catapulted enslaved Black bodies from non-being to being. Conversion fundamentally denied the claim that Black bodies are inferior. As a self-determining act, Black Evangelicals linked the movement toward freedom to spiritual conversion for the purposes of transformation. Thus, internal transformation precluded societal transformation.

Speller emphasized that "in negotiating the body politic, African American women have to learn how to employ certain strategies in order to survive in a culture that devalues their womanhood."[404] Simply put, Black preaching women have to move between two opposing world

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of the Management of Spoiled Identity (Harmondsworth; Penguin , 1968); and E. Goffman, "The Interaction Order," *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983), 1-17.

[401] C.S. Stern and B. Henderson, *Black Family at the Crossroads,* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bates, 1993).

[402] "Body Politics: Feminism and Racial," Encyclopedia J Rank, accessed April, 5, 2016. http://www.encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/6016/Body-Politics.html">Body Politics - FEMINISM AND, RACIAL

[403] Ibid.

[404] Spellers, *The Kink Factor*, 228.

views: "the Eurocentric worldview, which underscores control over nature, competition, and individualism, and the Afrocentric worldview, which values cooperation, interdependence and collective responsibility.[405] Collins averred that "self-definition/determination and self-valuation are two key strategies employed by African American women as a way to resist dehumanizing systems of domination."[406] Self-definition/determination "involves questioning who has the authority to define as well as the act of interrogating or critically examining the very politics underlying the process of definition."[407] Collins also posited "that, in contrast to self-definition, self-valuation involves addressing the actual content of Black women's self-definition."[408]

As a site of spiritual power, my body becomes a sign of resistance and liberation. The phrase *fight the power* served to preserve and affirm Black life by appropriating the power from the controlling body i.e., sexism, racism, mass incarceration, poverty, etc., and redistributing it back to a marginal center. The declarative *fight the power* heard alongside the Old Testament figure Vashti's response of *"no"* to come before the king is self-determining. According to Raboteau, Black Americans, slave and free, Southern and Northern, began to convert to Christianity in large numbers during the 18th century. Raboteau reported that "the type of Christianity that Black Americans joined and continued to join in mounting numbers during the next century was experiential, revivalistic, and biblically oriented."[409] Further, "this faith expression placed serious importance upon the necessity of an inward conversion experience for Christian salvation; it institutionalized the revival as a means of converting sinners, extending

[405] Ibid.
[406] Ibid.
[407] Ibid.
[408] Ibid.
[409] Albert J. Raboteau, "The Black Experience in American Evangelicalism," in *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture* eds. Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 91-92

church membership, and reforming society; and finally, it read the Bible literally and interpreted the destiny of America accordingly."[410]

Liberation is tied to an inner change. To *fight the power so that the soil upon which we stand is no longer saturated with the salty tears of our community's best ingathering* or to say *"no"* to the controlling body is to disregard the mores of a White supremacist episteme and to rupture dehumanizing social ordering as normative. Each require a shift in consciousness with a goal of communal transformation. Transformation happens in exile. Here exile means a voluntary separation as a sign of protest, as activism, as a sign of self-identification, a sign of liberating practice. Exile appeared in the form of speaking revolutionary truth to corrupt power i.e. *fight the power* and *"no."* Fight the power is the ritual speech, and exile is the action it performs—spiritual power.

Black preaching women's ability to confront and critically engage interlocking systems of oppression does not begin with our presence or acceptance in the North American Protestant pulpit. The data reveal that Black preaching women's proficiency to resist patriarchal rule, racist redemption requirements that redeem the soul and not the body, and other modes of dehumanizing social ordering is a result of our capacity to fight the power by resisting the temptation to do nothing. Preaching sermons that hegemonic pulpits disallow is not always done with words. Symbols, gestures, and rhythms preached even when the circumstances of killing season restricted my breath. The clergy vestments I donned when I preached 'fight the power' consisted of a red fitted t-shirt with a raised Black fist in the center. I was intentional. Red is the color attributed to the Orisha Shango, the deity of thunder. The raised fist symbolizes radical

[410] Ibid.

subjectivity. I stood behind the masculine rhetorical pulpit—a Black woman, silent but loudly speaking. I placed my feet square on the ground and slowly raised my clenched right fist into the air. The communal response grew louder and louder the longer I remained silent. I shifted my weight between my left and right side and the energy in the sanctuary did the same. Murmurs of acknowledgment grew into shrills. A portal opened and the Spirit made itself known by jumping on one of the female parishioners. Her body also became a conduit. Shango, a male divinity, made himself visible in the body of a Black woman. Shango's gestures became her gestures. He too raised his fist and pumped it into the air while he spoke clearly to the congregants about how to survive red hot critical times. We tarried and we preached.

Tarrying in Killing Season

I once had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a talented young man. While we never had the opportunity to enter into deep and sacred conversation with one another, I grew to expect his presence. For the last year or so, he's been in place, serving his community by offering his gift to the body of believers. This young man, very much like Jesus, could be found listening to and engaging the wisdom of the elders about faith, calling and how to navigate the world as a marginalized body. He, too, was light in a world trapped beneath the veil of darkness. He had much to give. John Smith, 23 years old, son, father, brother, cousin, and friend. The drummer in our music ministry at First Afrikan Presbyterian Church was senselessly shot and killed yesterday after he and his mother interrupted a home invasion.

I'm feeling some kind of way about being a minister in a time like this. I haven't quite put my finger on it, probably because my hand isn't big enough to tag all of what's getting conjured in me. But it does tap something in me that makes me think hard and deep about what it means to be called to be a minister who teaches, preaches, and cares today. The pain and terror aren't

new, but my awareness and engagement of it seems to be getting different. Not quite sure about all of what's changing, but I feel it. I'm listening differently to it. Listening before acting, speaking, teaching and preaching. Listening for clarity on the action I'm called to take and live into. I think they call this tarrying.

My mouth became increasingly dry as if I had been chewing on cotton. My knees buckled, and my temple pulsated rapidly. The words moving across the bottom of the television screen could not be correct. They read: Dunn convicted of attempted second degree murder; hung jury on murder in loud music trial. I was in the middle of writing my sermon for the following morning. Not long after Trayvon Martin was murdered in Florida by a neighborhood vigilante was Jordan Davis shot dead in a car by Dunn who said he felt threatened because of Davis' loud playing music.

First Afrikan was erupt with loud music. The rhythms of the Hammond B-3 organ and the Djembe, African drum, bounced off of walls adorned with Adinkra symbols and Black folk art. The dancers danced. The choir sang with wild abandon: "it's a new season, it's a new day. A fresh anointing coming way. A season of power and prosperity, it's a new season coming to me." Women and men genuflected at the foot of the altar. Others stood up right with bowed heads and hands raised high into the air. Only it wasn't a new season in the sense of moving from a perpetual state of tribulation to triumph. It was killing season and to the naked eye we were dancing, singing, and celebrating. To the more seasoned saint, a term used to identify a mature believer, we were tarrying in the spirit, invoking, and interceding with our bodies and altering the outcome of dehumanization with our word.

Divine Authority and Feminine Power

Another aspect of Àjé is divine authority. In this study divine authority surfaced as feminine power which is the ability to restore balance to imbalanced interlocking oppressive systems. Imbalance was defined as a lack of equity in the material realities, political capital and mental, economic, physical and spiritual health of African diasporic people. Subsequently, divine authority, here, most visible in the embodiment of feminine power was revealed by three means: mothering, principle of unity and Gelede. Passages from the sermons *You Can Survive This* and *Restoring our Past, Refining our Future* best displayed divine authority through the witness of feminine power.

A Church and Community Mother

In African cosmology, the Sacred Empowered Mothers represent both feminine power and are female divinity. For instance, the Yoruba/Orisha concept of 'the Mothers' attribute what Velma Love described as "an unspeakable power—shape shifting, signifying, hoodooing, conjuring culture power."[411] Enslaved men and women held on to this notion in the Americas. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes evinced that "aspects of the Black religious and political experience in the United States reflects elements of a West African ethic of family hood." [412] Within this ethic "great importance is assigned to the role of the Mothers."[413] Townsend Gilkes further articulated:

> In both sacred and secular community settings, there are powerful and respected older women addressed by title, "Mother." In secular settings, such mothers are often the heads of Black women's organizations and hold positions of power and authority in more broadly based community and civil rights organizations. In sacred places, particularly the churches, they are occasionally pastors, sometimes evangelists, more often pastors wives and widows but most often leaders of organized church women (missionaries, deaconess, mothers' board, etc.).[414]

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[411] Love, *Divining the Self*, 80.
[412] Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If it Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*, (New York: Orbis, 2001), 61.
[413] Ibid.
[414] Ibid.

More specifically, church mothers "are women within the congregation who act as advisers to the pastors, as disciplinarians of wayward church members, and as spiritual avatars to the congregation."[415] This is similarly true for community mothers. Historically, community mothers have "carried on the roles of elders in traditional West African societies where accumulated wisdom is power."[416] Church and community mothers function as griottes. They are the keepers of our collective spiritual and communal stories. At First Afrikan, it is Dr. Itihari Toure who bears witness as both a church and community mother.

Mama Itihari has fond memories of growing up in southern California. She recalls being a teenager and the youngest of five siblings, when members of the Black Panther Party literally took her off the street to keep her out of trouble. Eventually she went on to work with the Black Panther Party Breakfast Program which provided sustenance for children in the community. This was her entrance into the Black Liberation Movement in the U.S. She has spent the last forty years working in the trenches for causes such as anti-apartheid in South Africa. To counter a corrupt public education system in the U.S., Mama Itihari taught in the classroom and served on the boards of independent African-centered schools. She is a rare human resource who, without pause, loves African people. At sixty years old, her salt and pepper colored loc'd hair, usually styled away from her face, reveal her accumulated wisdom. Initiatives, organizations, and institutions have benefited from her strategic and spiritual guidance. Whether working with the Malcom X Grassroots Movement, the Office of Black Women, Church and Society at the Interdenominational Theological Center, or the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, Mama

[415] Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ Making a Sanctified World,"* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 12.
[416] Townsed Gilkes, *If it Wasn't for the Women,* 66.

Itihari is recognized as a sagacious mother. As a community and church member, I have watched her 'mother' the collective by always reminding us of our self-worth. Hers is a humanely divine body that performs intercession between the supernatural realm and Black people's material reality by issuing balance to imbalance by acknowledging and calling forth her own powerful feminine energy. Through hoodooing, conjuring culture, and signifying, her brand of divine authority carries weight not only in the community but also in the church.

Toure is not the lone communal appointed 'mother' at First Afrikan; however, she is probably the most visible. Toure reflects that prior to joining First Afrikan, she was a member of a woman led church where according to her, "she was following her path by directing a women's ministry at an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church." One day, she remembered, while sitting in church, she was overcome by the feeling of not being there. She experienced an outpouring of emotion. Mama Itihari attributes her deeply seated feeling to a directive driven by ancestral guides urging her to move on to her next assignment. After meeting Rev. Mark Lomax, the pastor of First Afrikan, and being impressed by his honesty about ministry commitments she joined the church in 2000 and in 2004 she became the director of the Center for Afrikan Biblical Studies, the church's educational division. Mama Itihari is also the resident ritualist. She ensures that ritual accompanies every practice in an effort to keep the community balanced with the supernatural realm. One profound ritual practice she brought to the First Afrikan community is the principle of unity.

Principle of Unity

The principle of unity is a component of truth finding within a system of African-centered leadership and followership embraced by First Afrikan.[417] As the church's educator, ritualist, and Queen Mother, Mama Itihari encouraged First Afrikan to search for African models of leadership that preserved the integrity of indigenous ways of being and knowing over and above Western derived and influenced systems. During a 2014 leadership meeting, Mama Itihari presented the Mbongi system and the concept of principle of unity as an example of an African-centered epistemological framework to be mirrored. She explained Mbongi as the following:

> Mbongi is a Kikongo word meaning—learning place. It reflects a system of governance of the Kongo-Bantu people, which covers a significant portion of the African continent when identifying the language origins of African people. The Mbongi is a gathering together of the dead (their radiated spiritual presence) and the living community members to regulate and balance the community's and the country's problems. The Mbongi is a multi-faceted institution that embodies community, spirituality, politics, education, economics and leadership. Components of the Mbongi include: Kisinsi (local systems/customs), Kanda-communal authority, Kinzonzi—the art of truth finding (wise elders), Education of Kalunga (balance), Community Testimonies, Youth Initiates—initiation of youth into the art of decision making, and Nzonzi-shepherd who shapes the political philosophy—a wise person skillful in matters and questions of justice. Mbongi recognizes that there will be conflicts in any community. Mbongi protects order, justice, reciprocity, love and harmony, the principles of Ma 'at, by providing a governed structure. In an Mbongi we learn that what is spiritual is not always religious.[418]

In this context, the deployment of the term and process of Mbongi is not a flat aesthetic or linguistic exchange but an intentional epistemological shift. The Mbongi is the container through which imbalance caused by the absence of truth and justice is sifted out and principle of unity is the practice.

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[417] Hotep, *African Centered Leadership-Follwership: Foundational Principles, Precepts and Essential Practices*, 17
[418] Itihari Toure, "Afrikan Centered Leadership as Followership," *2014 First Afrikan Leaderhip Mbongi Manual* (Lithonia, GA: Center for Afrikan Biblical Studies, 2014), 4-5.

According to Mama Itihari, the principle of unity is attributed to Amilicar Cabral, "the man who conceptualized and led the liberation movement that brought Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde national independence from Portuguese colonial domination."[419] Black liberation seekers in the U.S. were heavily influenced by Cabral's theoretical lens and praxis. Reflecting on her movement days, Mama Itihari imparted that the principle of unity developed because Cabral saw that participants in the movement were becoming mentally, spiritually, and emotionally broken by the chaos of oppression. I asked Mama Itihari if there was anything special that feminine divinity added to the principle of unity. She responded, "unequivocally, yes." Mama Itihari conceived that the involvement of women and feminine power ushered a focus on more heart concepts. Cabral's model was focused on political objectification and was in many ways patriarchal in its approach. Per Mama Itihari, participants in the freedom movement instituted the principle of unity around work related tasks but failed to consider how one's heart is effected by the havoc the chaos of oppression creates. At First Afrikan, we identify this chaos of oppression as red hot critical times. Mama Itihari responded to the imbalance of red hot critical times by exacting divine authority. She proffered, "that as we continue to struggle for the complete liberation of our people, we are able to survive the most heinous because we know either first hand or through the experiences of others that the living Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer goes before us, works in us and will meet us on the path of liberation even when the death of something or someone precedes us." Issued with the incarnate spiritual power of the *Iyami*, the principle of unity provides both a corrective and alternative to chaos resulting from insidious takers of unarmed Black life. Mama Itihari advanced, "The principle of unity focuses on a new way of being rather than focusing on the old way of being that disavows Black embodiment."

[419] Raymond A. Almeida, "Cabral: The Man and the Struggle," accessed on April 13, 2016, http://www1.umassd.edu/specialprograms/caboverde/racabral.html.

The deployment of principle of unity is not concerned with repairing the old system because the old system thrives off of commodified and dehumanized Black bodies. Creating a new agreement based on equitable and humane treatment is the work of social and spiritual reparation. Presented from a Black and female body, in this work, the principle of unity is a witness of divine authority and feminine power that helps oppressed people to find a new way to exist when the weight of being Black in America is too heavy of a burden to bear. The subsequent narrative reflection about the mothers of slain Black sons, sermon excerpts and discussion exemplifies this well.

The day before Michael Brown's funeral, the unarmed teen shot dead by police in August, 2014 in Ferguson, MO, CNN anchor Don Lemon interviewed three grieving mothers: Lesley McSpadden, mother of Michael Brown, Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin, and Valerie Bell, mother of Sean Bell. Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, each mother had stood at the foot of their children's crosses as they involuntarily gave up the ghost and commended their spirits to God. Lemon said to McSpadden, "I'm sure it doesn't seem real to you, but these ladies are an example that YOU CAN SURVIVE THIS." I was moved to tears. Once again, I sat wondering, what happens when the fruit of your womb unceremoniously becomes your ancestor? As I watched the interview, the women's bodies read like pages from a well-worn text. Theirs was a familiar story line amidst racially marginalized people and unfortunately it had a predictable ending—Black lives do not matter. I again had the task of preaching against the backdrop of injustice. I again, had the task of speaking truth to power.

Excerpt 5

> For many parents of Black and marginalized women, men and youth there is always a meandering thought of what will happen if the authorities have an unlikely encounter with my loved one…I imagine that like the grieving women, there were no words to express the depth of sorrow Mary, the mother of Jesus and her

> companions, experienced in the moment of his state sanctioned death. From Golgotha to Ferguson and from New York to Sanford, Florida, the common question emerged: how will we move beyond this traumatic possession of murder and will we really survive this? (*You Can Survive This,* September 2014)

How does one return to life as regularly scheduled after having suffered great loss? I read the explanation of the new season; return/victorious more than three times: "…through the Holy Spirit, we are transformed from a deadly state of indifference toward the oppression and death we see around us into living anointed and committed disciples…" I turned again to the interview of Black lamenting women. Each had stood at the base of their sons' bodies trying to figure out how they would put the pieces of their lives back together again. They spoke candidly from a place that one could only speak less she's had to eat the sorrow brewed in hell's kitchen. When asked if they believed they could ever be whole again after experiencing such loss, Valerie Bell responded, "My body remembers." Bell explains further, "Losing my son is like losing a part of your body. You remember what that part of your body has done for you. Like if you lose your arm your body knows what that arm did. So my thing is keeping the memories that carry on." Trayvon Martin's mother Sybrina says, "I don't think it's a matter of being whole. What I think is that it is a matter of a new life and this is the new life. I can never go back to what I was and who I was because I'm missing something very precious in my life." One of the mothers of the church, a petite woman of Jamaican heritage, with long dreadlocks cried out, "help us Jah, help us Jah!" The air in the sanctuary was thick enough to cut. Other women sat with clasped hands rocking vigorously from left to right. Men struggled to withhold the flow of tears while others allowed the salty stream of unrestrained tears to break forth.

Sybrina Fulton's and Valerie Bell's embodiment of divine authority and use of principle of unity are visible in their response to the realization that life will never be the same due to the killing of their unarmed sons by law enforcement. Therefore, they have to conjure a new reality.

The grieving women personified Àjé-esque qualities by withholding a quid pro quo of cheap and empty grace to those personally and systemically responsible for killing their children. Their righteously indignant and unified stance revealed both an unmatched and unwanted strength. For Fulton, wholeness is not the destination but learning to exist within a skewed reality while simultaneously demanding a new reality for marginalized bodies to live without fear of annihilation is the goal. Bell's realization is that grief is not only emotional but embodied. Her own raced and gendered body tells a story of loss too deep to fully articulate. Bell's description points toward a somatic literacy. According to Kristie Fleckenstein, "somatic literacy concerns how we construct and participate in the world through our bodies and how we come to know the world as bodies positioned in specific sites."[420] Divine authority, then, is constructed and transferred from each woman's body, from feminine to feminine. The lamenting women become a transformative source of healing and renewal for one another. Creating and accepting new reality where all bodies are humanized is an act of survival. Survival in the midst of red hot critical times is remedied with divine authority. The Gelede is another display of divine authority and feminine power.

Gelede

The Gelede Society of Atlanta defined Gelede as "a powerful celebration which is honored in the nations of Nigeria, Benin, Togo and Burkina Faso. It honors the sacred empowered Mothers and recognizes the spiritual powers Black women have in societies." In this study, Gelede is understood as an entity, an event and a process or state of being. As an entity Gelede is the containment of feminine power summoned annually to bring about social harmony. The Gelede, in its performance, shares with the community a diagnosis of the problem(s) confronting the

[420] Kristie Fleckenstein, *Embodied Literacies: ImageWord and a Poetics of Teaching,* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 79.

community; it prescribes the "medicine to cure the dis-ease/illness, and assists in administering the medicine, creating healing/wellness. Gelede is not something that can only be brought out by Orisha devotees. Customarily Gelede is called forth by members of the community. The energy of Gelede is not allocated to any one spiritual tradition and, therefore, there's no assignment that you have to follow a particular faith practice to access or benefit from Gelede's display and dispersal of divine authority. Gelede's message comes to incite hearers to take heed of the diagnosis by administering a curative prescription. Gelede's consistent and general message is always to return to the Mothers for guidance. Gelede is also an event. Communities in the Americas and in West Africa organize a festival to mark the change in season, receive directives for the forthcoming year and salute the Sacred Empowered Mothers. During the 2013 festival Gelede's missive directed us to salute warrior women—a way of being. The premise of the message was that Afrikan women in their capacity as "warriors" have never been invisible:

> Their contributions throughout history have been monumental. However, history books have been nearly silent consciously because of the patriarchal behaviors of men of all races and nationalities. As Afrikan people we have fought diligently to correct the omissions of our collective contributions to world history and as a result of these efforts there have been more notations of women to balance our collective narratives. Because of the centuries of male domination there is little recorded evidence available. Researchers must be creative to uncover data to draw conclusions on the contributions of women.[421]

Warrior Women, Always Present served as a clarion call announcing our collective work for independence and self-determination for African diasporic people. An excerpt from the sermon *Restoring our Past, Refining our Future* exemplifies how Gelede's divine authority is harnessed and delivered through me in the form of ritual speech:

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[421] Kwame-Osagyefo Kalimara, "Warrior Women, Always Present: A Message from Gelede," *United Nation of Ifa-Orisa-Vodun & Gelede Society Gelede Festival 2013 Program Book* (Atlanta, GA: UNIOV, 2013), 10. Kalimara is a devotee of the Sacred Mothers' and is charged annually with delivering the Gelede message. This message comes as a result of engaging in ritual meditation to hear what the Mothers' through Gelede desire to communicate to the community.

Excerpt 6

> How do you convince a people that they have no spiritual power? You do so by teaching them that their Gods and worship are evil. African Americans were an enslaved people and one of the first things that the Christian slave capturers did was attack our spiritual consciousness. They convinced us that the deities that we had known for millennia were barbaric or hedonistic and some of us bought it and continue to buy it. After creating a great vacuum, they filled it with their image of God and spiritual consciousness so that we now see and worship White Jesus all while rendering our ancestors to the status of sinful nature. Thus, by failing to honor our ancestors, we turn against ourselves and do not do what is best for us because it is not endorsed by the folk who gave us their notion of God. (*Restoring our Past, Refining our Future*, March 2014)

This passage points to an egregious imbalance, one from which many in the Black community have fallen victim to. That is, the belief that Black people lack a profoundly rich and complex spiritual and cultural system. That Black people only accepted the God of their oppressors is another incongruent belief. The final inharmonious act is the degree to which White supremacy challenged the validity of African Gods and cast them as evil. Posing the question: *How do you convince a people that they have no spiritual power* confronts the chaos that accompanies spiritual and cultural amnesia. Here interrogation is a useful rhetorical strategy that displays divine authority. While I am asking listeners to consider the roots of their spiritual power, I am also confronting the matrix of domination which undoubtedly has and continues to benefit from the manufactured image of Africa and African/Africana spiritual consciousness as primitive, powerless, and immoral. I placed White Jesus in tension with Black collective ancestors particularly those who knew the depth of an indigenous spiritual system. So, White Jesus mimics the values of American capitalism and greed wherein Black and other bodies work hard to be restored from the depths of darkness into the snow-like light.

The remedy to *not doing what is best for us because it is not endorsed by the folk who gave Black people their notion of God* is to restore our past and refine our future. According to the

excerpt, this requires an unlearning of western and Euro-centered images of God in order to retrieve the authenticity of our being. Further, it calls for us to be militant in believing and affirming Black embodiment. In so doing we bear witness to the sacred worth of Black embodiment and the utility of African-centered spiritual consciousness. Principle of unity and Gelede offered insight to what happens when an unconscious connection to African-centered spiritual values and feminine becomes conscious. Divine authority as witnessed in and experienced through feminine power is an act of self and communal recuperation. Black women's bodies and the feminine energy we wield are redemptive. Divine authority strengthens our collective resolve to break through that which is considered impossible in order to create something new.

New Afrikan Womanist

I am a New Afrikan womanist! Baba Kwame Kalimara exclaimed as he stood within our circle of women dressed in all white. New Afrikan womanism is entrenched in and cannot be separated from African nationalism—a political movement for the unification of Africans that also promotes an ethic of self-determination. My head was uncovered. Another woman handed me a white cloth to cover my head to protect my Ori—my head/spiritual intuition. While I had never assembled with this particular group, my spirit knew this gathering. About twenty or so of us gathered in the heavily wooded grove of First Afrikan to participate in a ritual of preparation for the annual Gelede Festival. We were there to invoke and retrieve the power associated with the Sacred Empowered Mothers. We all assembled at the base of the great tree symbolic of the Mothers. One of the Iya's, a spiritual designation denoting a female priest of Ifa, charged us to cool our energy. She said, "Because you never approach the Great Mother with hot energy." Gelede would soon come.

We kneeled down to offer salutations, food, and other elements. We asked for assistance in restoring balance to our community. I felt the overwhelming urge to wail for the wombs of Black women. I could hear others around me crying, moaning and wailing too. After some time, one by one, the sojourners began to rise to their feet at the leading of her own spirit. We filed out of the grove as we had entered--in one line. "You have entered a contractual agreement with the Great Mother and she expects you to fulfill the contracting by bringing balance to our community and to ourselves, Baba Gelede told us as we emerged from the secluded area into the clearing.

Power of the Word / Asé

Power of the word /Asé are the final features of Àjé—spiritually empowered women—that emerged in the data. Power of the word, the ability to pray effectively is a manifestation of the mystical force Asé resulting in a quality in our personality which makes our words once uttered come true and draw into existence in mind, body and physical being. In this project, power of the word /Asé is gifted by 'the Mothers' to create social balance and harmony. A prayer, then, is only effective based on the force with which it is prayed and believed to come forth. In the prayer for grieving mothers the words bring social and spiritual consequences from the Sacred Empowered Mothers:

Excerpt 7

> Cause, I wanna be free! Fight the power! For crying mothers in Gaza, Iraq, Ferguson, Nigeria and Chicago may your sorrow fuel a movement that the world will see. Let your rage catch fire inciting the revolution elders' prophesied about—fire next time. Let your sullenness convict all at the sight of your lifeless fruit bleeding out from the root. Let justice roll down and dissipate the fears of a million Black men, who are never certain if they'll make it home at night. Let the white hot heat of your wrath wreak havoc upon those who have refused to see the sanctity of your daughters' Black flesh. Fight the power! Black and brown mothers wail with wild abandon. Let the world see and feel your grief. (*Fight the Power,* February 2014)

This prayer demonstrates spiritual power undergirded by the desire for justice and retribution. Prayer coupled with my Asé becomes an "essential ally in spurring insurrections, soothing shattered souls and reminding the disposed of their inherent divinity."[422] The image of c*rying mothers* humanized Black female bodies. It cast Black women not as weak and emotional but as determined and strong. Their *tears fueled a movement* requiring the matrix of domination to take note that the death of their children would not send them quietly into the night without but that their ability to grieve was an act of justice. That is, social balance and harmony will not come without reckoning with the tears of Black mothers and acknowledging the value of Black life. Justice then is disseminated from a Black woman's body to *dissipate the fears of a million Black men* and *sanctify the bodies of our daughters'.*

Destiny Sees Victory

After meeting with my spouse and me for some time, the babalawo threw his shells and paused. "You have been recognized by the Mothers as one of their own," he said. "Your ancestors placed you on the path because they looked into your heart and saw an abundance of love," he continued. "They felt the fire and knew you would struggle for the dignity and sovereignty of our nation. Destiny sees victory," he concluded.[423] I wasn't totally sure what it meant to be recognized by the Mothers. Immediately, I began to ask clarifying questions: What is my responsibility? What am I supposed to do? The babalawo responded, "You're already doing it." "Keep praying, asking for guidance from the Mothers and your Asé will carry you where you need to go and bring to pass

[422] Kwame-Osagyefo Kalimara, "Sacred Empowered Mothers Rising: A Message from Gelede," *United Nation of Ifa-Orisa-Vodun & Gelede Society Gelede Festival 2016 Program Book* (Atlanta, GA: UNIOV, 2013), 9.
[423] Field notes from a participant observation scene at the ile of Babalawo Kwame Kalimara, June 10, 2014. Here I was client receiving a spiritual reading to find out my destiny.

all you desire to have happen," he replied.[424] To be called by the Mothers meant that "I had a very powerful will and should be careful about my thoughts because they have the power to make things happen."[425]

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I used the Yoruba concept of Àjé as a lens through which to view spiritually empowered preaching women and their sermons as a counter to White supremacy, patriarchy and hegemony. Subsequently I analyzed data from six sermons along with personal narratives to elucidate the presence of African-centered and womanist preaching that works to affirm all people. Five sub-themes emerged as characteristics of Àjé visible within my preaching praxis and epistemological framework: fetching, spiritual power, divine authority, power of the word and Asé. In chapter five, I will discuss the conclusions drawn from the findings, expound on the implications this study will have on the study and practice of homiletics, and provide recommendations for future research.

[424] Ibid.
[425] Love, *Divining the Self*, 81.

Chapter V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"Grandmother the alchemist, you spun gold out of this hard life. Conjured beauty from the things left behind. Found healing where it did not live. Discovered the antidote in your own kitchen. Broke the course with your own two hands. You passed these instructions down to your daughter, who then passed it down to her daughter."

Warsan Shire, *Teaching my Mother how to Give Birth*

INTRODUCTION

In chapter one, I provided the impetus for this study which was one issue with five aspects. One, Black bodies have been and continue to be devalued. Two, cultural beliefs about Black female bodies. Three, the pulpit represents a problematic rhetorical space for Black female bodies because it simulates male power. Four, homiletical tradition is at its core logocentric, privileging words and language as fundamental expression. Five, Black women's preaching bodies situated in an African-centered and womanist epistemological framework have been unaccounted for in the study of homiletics. This looming problem prompted me to explore how I, a Black preaching woman, employ liberating approaches to proclamation to affirm Black life. I used two concepts to tease out the features of my own liberation preaching: fetching and Àjé. Fetching is the act of retrieving "old" or "indigenous" community practices in order to sustain one's current reality within interlocking oppressive systems. Tied to the principle of fetching is Àjé, the Yoruba principle that describes the capacity of creating and transforming people by way of powerful speech and divine authority. Chapter two presented a review of the literature and prompted the following research questions: how do Black women's bodies preach? What sermons do Black women's bodies preach in response to interlocking oppressive systems that affirm and celebrate Black life? How do Black women's preaching bodies generate and

transmit sacred truths from alternative pulpits? Chapter three offered an overview of the research design and included a discussion of why Auto-ethnography was selected as the most appropriate design for the inquiry. Chapter four was my completed analysis of my deconstructed data. My analysis in chapter four illuminated the unseen and unconscious connections between African American cosmology and religions of the African Diaspora, which are made manifest in the sacred preaching forms drawn upon by black women preachers. It also presented the possibility of Black women's bodies being communicative agents that disseminate powerful messages via specialized knowledge. In chapter five three things are coming together: my research questions, the voices that informed my research question (literature review) and my interpretation of it all. Chapter five includes the conclusions drawn from the data, limitations of the study, implications for the study, recommendations for future research and a chapter summary.

Conclusions and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the data three general conclusions were drawn from the findings. These conclusions and coinciding research questions can be found in Table 5.1 below:

Table 5.1 Research Questions and Conclusions

Research Question	**Conclusions**
How does a Black woman's body preach?	Black women's bodies, clergy and non-clergy, preach in culturally elaborated ways as spiritually powerful sign emitting texts that attend to their body and the embodied presence of others.
What sermons does a Black woman's body preach in response to interlocking oppressive systems that affirm and celebrate Black life?	A Black woman's body preaches self-and communal recuperative sermons to affirm and celebrate Black life and to dismantle interlocking oppressive systems.
How does a Black women's preaching body generate and transmit sacred truths from alternative pulpits that unfetters her and the	African-centered womanist oratory is the means by which my Black and female body generated and transmitted truths from

larger community from the remaining vestiges of racial and gender disparities?	alternative sources to unfetter myself and the larger community from the remaining vestiges of racial and gender disparities.

In chapter one *Fetching Spiritual Power* preaching was defined as a sacred communicative act that affirms and celebrates Black embodiment. The data and the literature aligned together both positing that "within the context of the religious Black women's bodies functioned as a means of communication and the purpose of the communication involved challenges to dominant structures."[426] A Black preaching woman was expressed as one who proclaimed the value of Black life and female divinity. Therefore, a Black a woman's preaching body was explained as a site of revelatory knowledge and a conduit of divine authority. Within a masculine and racist world of rhetorical performance, Black women's bodies, clergy and non-clergy, preached in culturally elaborated ways as spiritually powerful sign emitting texts that attended to their body and the embodied presence of others. The personal narratives and sermonic excerpts underscored how these dynamic symbolic and material bodily texts, displayed Black preaching women's capacity to transform people, places or systems as sites of resistance against forced terror and as mouthpieces of divinity.

Wholly Holy and *Tarrying in Killing Season* in chapter four are concrete examples of how Black women's bodies preach in culturally elaborated ways, are displayed as symbolic and material texts, and attend to the bodies around them to counter exclusionary systems of power. The literature made clear that the first place Black bodies are read as problematic is during the transatlantic slave trade. The data revealed that the first place a Black girl's body is read as

[426] Anthony Pinn, *Black Religion and Aesthetics: Religious Thought and Life in Africa and the African Diaspora.* (New York, New York: Palgrave, 2009)

humanely divine is in the company of other Black girls. Chanting street cheers with friends on the church parking lot, at once, my body was both interlocutor and sacred text challenging the physical and architectural space of the pulpit. I was already creating alternative spaces from which to bear my sacred embodiment. The speech act of chanting self-affirming cheers was not just cognitive but bodily. In *Excitable Speech* Judith Butler posited that "the body is the blind spot of speech that which acts in excess of what is said, but which also acts in and through what is said." Butler continued that in a speech act "there is what is said, and then there is a kind of saying that the bodily "instrument" of the utterance performs." Coupled with rhythmic movement the charge 'give me body,' produced a counter narrative to the history of conquest inscribed upon Black bodies overall and Black girls and women's bodies pointedly. To have the audacity to 'switch, stomp feet, clap hands,' to some appeared antithetical to sacred embodiment. On the contrary, it was liberative praxis of humanization.

Tarrying is another culturally elaborate way Black women's bodies preached. In a general context tarry means to wait or to linger. When placed within the culturally rich setting of the Black church tarrying became an embodied mediated act with shamanic features. Just as Geurts argued in *Culture and the Senses* that "sensing, bodily ways of gathering information (knowing), is profoundly involved with a society's epistemology, the development of its cultural identity and its forms of being in the world," the data revealed that this is also true for tarrying.[427] Tarrying emerged as an extension of sensing wherein one's relationship to the body was not external waiting for some thing or some object to make an impression on my sense organs, and in order for me to become aware of various elements in my environment, like the

[427] Kathryn Lynn Geurts. *Culture and the Senses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 50 in in Donna Allen's, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic,* 34.

fact that it was killing season."[428] Tarrying disrupted the Western model of knowledge transmissions that is rooted in language in orality. Black women's bodies transmitted knowledge by feeling the body—apprehending stimulus from within the body and relating it to others. Tarrying materialized in the data as active listening. Tarrying is listening for the Spirit and feeling the Spirit, whereby, Black women's tarrying bodies harness feminine divinity in order to bring balance to the entire community.

To these conclusions, Anthony Pinn would give great criticism. Pinn believes that womanist theological thought is empty because it fails to consider the material reality of Black women's bodies. Pinn theorized that as long as Black women's bodies remain symbols or in the case of this study sign emitting texts then a troubled relationship with Black flesh will endure. I maintain that Black women's preaching bodies display specialized knowledge ultimately used to present Black and female bodies as each body knows itself to be, not as others choose to see them. This is not solely an epistemological project as Pinn would suggest. Black women's symbolic and material preaching bodies are interdependent and "illumine the importance of the body as a hermeneutic, as a modality of interpretation useful in deconstructing and re-constructing life in the Americas."[429] Preaching bodies thus are performing bodies. Highlighting the performing body as hermeneutical agency is a means to engage history, culture, and human expression. *Fetching Spiritual Power* is an intervention in the study of homiletics. It shifts attention from static models focused only on the oral/aural sensorium and deductive reasoning. In this work, the performance of Black women's preaching bodies should be viewed as "vital acts of transfer that transmit social knowledge, memory and a sense of identity through reiterated

[428] Ibid, 228.
[429] Pinn, Anthony. "Watch the Body with New Eyes: Womanist Thought's Contribution to a Humanist Notion of Ritual," in *Cross Currents*.2007, vol. 57, pp. 404-411.

twice-behaved behavior."[430] This is the view of early scholars in homiletics such as John Broadus. His discussion of embodiment in preaching noted the material body as the prime instrument of preaching however his conversation about the experience of preaching i.e., gesture and the physicality of preaching was overshadowed by his propositional deductive reasoning approach to preaching. Broadus was enthralled with the rhetorical method of speaking persuasively. Acknowledging the body as conceptual paradigm in the act of proclamation was of lackluster interest for Broadus and his contemporaries. Epistemological claims buttressed the body, even the white male heterosexual body. In doing so, black women's preaching bodies failed to be viewed as mediating and transmitting life forces that yield a transformative narrative that is commensurate with scriptural authority and hegemonic epistemological frameworks.

Black sermonic performative narratives have been termed a "pharmacopeic" tradition, "healing for the soul", and "codified discourse."[431] A second conclusion drawn by the research was that I preached self and communal recuperative sermons to dismantle oppressive systems and affirm the value of Black lives. Hence, individual and collective healing is achieved through preaching bodies. In this case, Black women's preaching bodies served as intermediaries between the supernatural and the natural. The sermon *Fight the Power* in chapter four revealed the socio-political-spiritual and medicinal intentions rooted in Black women's embodied proclamation. Alexis Pauline Gumbs identified this curative performance as Black feminist combat breathing.[432] Gumbs attributed the concept to Ntozake Shange who "drew the term

[430] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.
[431] Teresa Fry Brown developed this statement as a part of my comprehensive examinations on Black preaching as a conjurational performance.
[432] Alexis Pauline Gumbs, "That Transformative Dark Thing," *The New Inquiry,* May 19, 2015, accessed May 20, 2016, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/that-transformative-dark-thing/.

combat breathing from Frantz Fanon's description of the embattled breathing of Algerian prisoners of war":

> There is no occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of final destruction. Under this condition, the individual's breathing is an observed and occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing.[433]

According to Gumbs, "Shange redefined this breathing as "the living response / the drive to reconcile the irreconcilable / the Black and white of what we live and where. In other words, the combat edge of Black feminist breathing is a form of radical presence in the face of multiple forms of violence."[434] To this end, I "used breath to chant, repeat and remember Black feminist/womanist wisdom for myself and my community as a form of radical presence in the face of multiple forms of violence."[435] At the heart of radical presence is recuperation. My occupied Black and female body became what hooks called a "space of radical possibility and hence the center for the production of a counterhegemonic discourse," wherein healing took place from within the margin and not on the margin.[436] Moreover, my Black and female body preached sermons that hegemonic pulpits disallow.

"Fight the power" served as a healing mantra. Mountford noted that spaces retain and evoke memory. Reciting "fight the power" from the architectural space of the masculine rhetorical pulpit offered a new memory where Black and female bodies 'speak truth to power.' With every breath, I did what Tinsley described as "tapping into the supernatural powers to right wrongs in an effort to continue Africana feminist legacies of protest against social justice."[437]

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[433] Ibid.
[434] Ibid.
[435] Ibid.
[436] hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Culture Politics,* 150-151.
[437] Tinsley, *Time,* 1.

Fight the power conjured the memory of that legacy in myself and the community that made the witness of women who fought the power before us clear. In the midst of perpetual disfiguration and disregard for Black life, Black feminist/womanist combat breath usurped the authority from the controlling body of power i.e., sexism, racism, mass incarceration, poverty, and redistributed its own center. As a result, we are able to heal the trauma we hold in our bodies by using our bodies as vehicles of liberation

Summary findings of the study are that African-centered womanist oratory is the means by which Black women's bodies generated and transmitted sacred truths from alternative sources to unfetter myself and the larger community from the remaining vestiges of racial and gender disparities. In the study African-centered and womanist consciousness were deployed as theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. As theoretical lenses both illumined and privileged the lived realities of African diasporic people in the U.S. Each provided a schema from which to consider not only the experiences of raced but also gendered bodies. An African-centered and womanist framework theorized spiritual agency and embodiment in homiletics by asserting the legitimacy of African and other non-European and patriarchal ideals, values and experiences as a valid frame of reference for intellectual inquiry. In this rich soil of African-centered and womanist homiletical possibilities the seeds of an emancipatory practice emerged: African-centered womanist oratory. African-centered oratory bears five prominent features: no separation between sacred and secular; belief in tribal survival; the generative power of the word; and harmony and balance. Womanist oratory is the praxis of womanist epistemology. As addressed in the review of literature, it disrupts the Euro-centric knowledge validation process by combining African-centered and womanist consciousness with the uniqueness of African American female history. The four foundational tenets of womanism have been noted throughout

the study. For the purposes of clarity, they warrant reiteration: radical subjectivity, redemptive self-love, traditional communalism and critical engagement. Below the features of both ideological perspectives are merged together to form an African-centered womanist oratory.

No Separation between Sacred and Secular (I Found God in Myself)

At the heart of many African indigenous religious systems is the belief that the Sacred is infused within all areas of one's life. That is wherever one finds her/his self the Sacred is also present.[438] The Sacred resides in the public square with raised fist and in the church. The fight for social justice is a holy endeavor. Therefore, there is no separation between personal piety and communal responsibility. This unified understanding of self and sacred also affirmed the value of Black embodiment. Throughout this study I have raised the notion that my body is a mode of expression through which the Sacred works and resides. In the personal narrative *Give Me Body,* I recalled that the childhood ritual performance of chanting cheers in the parking lot awakened me to both the contours of my body and the Divine. I wrote: s*witching and swaying, twisting and turning, I had already learned what Ntozake Shange gave to us as golden rule in For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf. That is, I had found God in myself and I loved her/I loved her fiercely.* Even though, I would eventually become imprisoned by patriarchal and racist negative iconography of my commodified Black and female body, acknowledging the sacred worth of by prepubescent body helped me to struggle against then and now, *Euro-American imposed value contradictions and a White racist redemption requirement, which redeemed my soul and left my body steeped in the muck and mire of systemic injustices.* No separation between symbol and material deems Black enfleshment wholly holy.

[438] John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy,* (Oxford: Heinermann, 1969).

We Can Survive This

African-centered and womanist oratory hold the 'survival of the entire tribe (community) in high regard. This finding was most visible in the sermon *You Can Survive This* which highlighted the witness of three women grieving the murder of their sons by law enforcement officers and a neighborhood watchperson. When Jesus' othered body was dying on the cross the biblical text accounted that his mother Mary and three other women stood watching with great grief. The text read: "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."[439] *Each mother had stood at the foot of their children's crosses as they involuntarily gave up the ghost and commended their spirits to God.* The finding here is that collective grief is a key component to community survival. Grieving embattled Black bodies required the participation of the entire community. By preaching this sermon, I learned that if collective grief is an act of justice then communal survival is restitution. Here again, our bodies were humanized by our grief. The care the women gave to one another coupled with the protest that took place globally affirmed Black lives as worthy in spite of White supremacy. Survival looked like Ubuntu. Ubuntu is an ethical and philosophical view that has its origins in of the Bantu languages of Southern Africa. It means humanity to others or I am what I am because we all are.

Nommo and Ma 'at

Nommo represents the generative power of the word and Ma 'at "is the quest for justice, truth and harmony."[440] Hamlet cited Smith and Asante when she noted that "the function of

[439] John 19:25-28 (NRSV)
[440] Reviere, "Toward an Afrocentric Methodology," 711.

nommo is generative because it leads us a sense of collectivity."[441] She articulated further, "nommo was believed necessary to actualize life and give people mastery over things."[442] Finally, Hamlet informed that "Nommo was not restricted to the spoken word in public forum. It encompassed all communication situations."[443] Across tribes, regions and dialects, African people "found power in dance, rhythm of the drums, and the mysticism and dramatism of stories." Like Àjé, in the study, "nommo operated as a spiritual force that helped me and other preaching women achieve harmony and balance known in traditional African culture as Ma 'at."[444] To reiterate from chapter three, "The ultimate goal of Ma 'at is that of helping to create a fairer and just society."[445]

In *Fetching Spiritual Power,* Black women's preaching bodies were performative and became nommo and instruments of Ma 'at. My body performed the word of God made flesh by not simply communicating via speech but to consummate the communication in action. I not only spoke the words *Fight the Power, Willfully Persist, Exile or Compromise, You Can Survive This,* and *Restoring our Past, Refining our Future* but I performed them. A common example used in performance studies to explain the performative nature of communication is the act of saying "I pronounce you spouses" by an ordained minister or court official before two people who are prepared to wed or "I do" by one of those people upon being asked whether they take their partner in marriage. Therefore, fight the power is a speech act that also performs what it demands. With my body serving as the alternative yet authoritative location of sacred truth, I performed, the act, by fighting the powers of interlocking oppressive systems.

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[441] Janice Hamlet, "Understanding African American Oratory," *Afrocentric Visions: Studies in Culture and Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 91-92.
[442] Ibid.
[443] Ibid.
[444] Ibid.
[445] Reviere, "Toward an Afrocentric Methodology," 711.

At the root of imbalance is the absence of justice. In the study imbalance materialized as a lack of equality in the material realities, political capital, and mental, economic, physical and spiritual health of African diasporic people. Uhuru Hotep informed that in Kemetic society Ma ‘at was used as a recuperative tool to re-center and restore public confidence, and bolster the psychological and fiscal well-being of the people.[446] He further posited that “when this national re-focusing on truth, justice, order, harmony and balance infused every strata of Kemetic society and reached critical mass, it always set in motion a whmmsw, a ‘repetition of the birth’ (or what in English is called a renaissance) increasing peace, prosperity and happiness for all. Ma ‘at was deployed as both a rhetorical strategy and a way of being in the world. Justice and liberation as rhetorical trope is visible throughout the project. From sermon excerpts to personal narratives and the spiritual autobiographies of 19th century preaching women, Black women have preached the principles of Ma ‘at even if under an unacknowledged consciousness. Subjective to our bodies, our experiences and our witness, living justly and laying our bodies on the line in word and deed revealed our spiritual power to challenge and disrupt systems of terror and degradation.

Limitations of the Study

I addressed the scope limitations and delimitations of the study in chapter one. At the conclusion of the study the limitations remain consistent with my earlier assessment. The limitation of the research rest in the methods employed in conducting the study. The findings may have been affected by having a singular perspective. The project utilized secondary data sources in the form of one on one conversations with community member. However, my experience as a Black woman preacher served as the primary source. Measures were put in place

[446] Uhuru Hotep, “African Centered Leadership-Follwership: Foundational Principles, Precepts and Essential Practices,” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3(2010): 17; Oba T’shaka, *Integration Trap: Generation Gap Caused by a Choice between Two Cultures.* (Oakland: Pan African Publishing, 2004).

to insure that the autobiographical portion of the study did not overshadow the ethnographic observation of the First Afrikan Church community i.e., confessional writing and peer review. Yet, the very nature of qualitative research methods challenges subjectivity by centering one's lived experiences. This raises concerns of essentialism. Essentialism is the philosophy that there are innate essential characteristics of one group and another group. It could be posited that this study is essentialist because I privilege the lived experiences of Black and preaching women. However, I postulated a particularized rather than an essential difference. This is because one's process of identity formation coupled with race and gender shapes a particular experience that is different from privileged bodies. I am aware that critics may see the lack of generalizability as a limitation.

Implications for the Study of Homiletics in American Religion and Raising Womanish Girls

Center Space

Fetching Spiritual Power brings Black and preaching women's bodies to the center of homiletical possibilities and methodological approaches. A shift in methodological approaches to the study of religion in America inclusive of homiletics makes space for new knowledge claims about Black preaching women. According to Reviere a shift of this nature "reexamines knowledge construction from a new orientation."[447] Historically, Black preaching women have been presented as one-dimensional, monolithic figures whose bodies were used by some eternal force acting upon them. Instead, this study asserts that while Black women's bodies have indeed been used, they have also been utilized as a spiritual conduit for the Black community when

[447] Reviere, "Toward an Afrocentric Research Methodology," 710.

other epistemological sources were deemed illegitimate. Indeed, when the Black woman's body speaks, everyone is invited to salvation, for her body is not relegated to a particular ideology, but rather seeks to invite others to find God on their own terms. This is the paradigm of her own experience. And this model respects difference of viewpoint while insisting that Black women's spiritual matrix can offer healing and knowledge of God, whether one's vantage point is the church or not. The beauty and complexity of the black woman's preaching body is that it needs no pulpit; actually, it is its own raised structure in the center of a people seeking and needing something more fluid than traditional patriarchal religious verbiage. Portrayals of 19th century Black preaching women inferred that they were reckless in leaving behind everything to preach the gospel in spaces where they were unwelcomed. However, without shifting our attention to their material reality scholars fail to see what it means for a Black woman to have agency over her body and use the trope of traveling as an acknowledgment of sacred knowing within what society history writes are conflicted bodies.

This research uses homiletics as a lens to enhance the vitality of American religious life by validating the sacred worth of Black women and their peculiar relationship to spirit and spiritual knowledge and power in America via the African diaspora. It also works to pry apart the seemingly airtight theologies that have governed the American consciousness since its inception wherein Black bodies are considered as insignificant other. Said differently, an African-centered and womanist homiletic introduces to American divinity perspectives and possibilities, such as that of God as a birth-giving, field-working, protest inciting, yet continuously nurturing and compassionate reality whose desire is for everyone to be free—regardless of what they believe. Put simply, an African-centered womanist homiletic does not proselytize. Rather, it expands possibilities and teaches that all can be liberated from the fear of

othering and being othered even if we take opposing epistemological positions. It makes homiletics accessible to every knowing.

Raising Womanish Girls

This study is as much about survival as it is about transformation through powerful speech, sacred embodiment, and spiritual power. Audre Lorde wrote, "Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish."[448] As such, the implications for this study surpass the academy to the everyday lives of Black women and Black girls. *Fetching Spiritual Power* is more than an Africana feminist/womanist theorization. It is an examination of one Black woman's lived experience as preacher espousing African-centered and womanist principles.

My goal was to capture what Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley called the "matrilineal connection between generations of Black women."[449] While pondering the illogic of White supremacy and its blatant disregard for Black life, I was consistently confronted with the thought of my own daughters. How will I pass on to my girls, the ability to fetch spiritual power to combat dehumanizing social ordering? Further, how do I teach my daughters to resist the temptation to uphold a posture which devalues their everyday experiences, their bodies as fully present and their intellectual aptitude as credible while simultaneously preparing them to "dismantle the master's house with the master's tools?" To this end, the study aided in re-imaging or re-engineering not only what it means to be a Black preaching woman in the age of Black Lives Matter but what it means to be a womanish girl fetching for the survival of her entire

[448] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Feminist Colonial Theory: A Reader*, 25 (2003), 27.
[449] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Beyonce's Lemonade is Black Woman Magic," *Time,* April 25, 2016 accessed on April 26, 2016, www.time.com/4306316/beyonce-lemondade-blackwoman-magic/?iid=sr-link1

community. *Fetching Spiritual Power* is in many ways a reparative work for Black women. Simultaneously *Fetching* also becomes a powerful tool used to shift the focus from reparative to empowering womanish girls whose perspective and purview is wider because they have not yet accepted the limitations of a liminal space. Fetching spiritual power, plants the seed of womanism and African-centeredness. It is a short-sided people who do not believe that the girls are going to become women. So fetching plants, a seed for the hope not of the seed but of the harvest.

Recommendations for Future Research

New Homiletical Possibilities

The study of the science of preaching has like many academic disciplines been heavily influenced by a singular perspective usually White, male and heterosexual. In light of the historical and contemporary marginalization of gendered, raced, queer, differently abled and classed bodies in the U.S., the question remains how do particular groups develop and deliver sermons to combat "interlocking oppressive systems" and affirm the value of their humanity? Future research in homiletics must be enthusiastic about creating new homiletical paradigms that center non-privileged bodies as viable message bearers. Further, future research in homiletics must illuminate preaching from and on the margins as "radical spaces of openness" instead of combative locations of othering. Only spaces of openness are conducive for transformational preaching and listening. This being said it is imperative that attention be given to broadening the study and practice of preaching in general and Africana womanist preaching specifically. Prospective research should develop a formal African-centered and womanist homiletic that embraces and acknowledges the value of Africana spirituality by giving consideration to

continental African histories, cultures and spiritual practices as a pathway to redemptive self-love, traditional communalism, critical engagement and radical subjectivity.

New homiletical possibilities will also require an interdisciplinary approach. Africana religious studies, historical studies, and performance studies are disciplines that would prove insightful in the study of preaching. Each area would provide new categories from which to consider Black women's sacred rhetoric and Black embodiment. Africana religious studies expands the homiletical purview beyond Christianity by finding new epistemological locations to survey. Africana religious studies would also offer a critical methodological turn in the field of homiletics which is necessary in order to progress "beyond religious traditions in Diasporas formed by enslaved populations in the Western hemisphere."[450] Black women's sacred rhetoric and African –centered and womanist oratory are not intrinsic to Christianity. A historical research methodology will provide access to primary archival sources that offer a view of injustice, unfairness and struggle that may not normally be considered in traditional studies of preaching. Future research in homiletics that employs a performance lens will be useful in engaging preaching bodies and alternative sites of proclamation. Performance theory situates the body as a conceptual paradigm. In the future, I will use a performance analysis to emphasize the role of the performing body as a hermeneutical agency.[451] Performance is a generative force and a critical dynamic within human behavior and social processes.[452] Performance Studies documents, analyzes and theorizes cultural rituals, public identities and political positions. Beyond an artistic act, performance is a means for engaging history, culture and human expression. Upon turning the

[450] Dianne M. Stewart and Tracey E. Hucks, "Toward a Transdisciplinary Agenda in an Emerging Field," *Journal of Africana Religions* Vol. 1, No.1 92013), 28-77.
[451] Victor Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 28-29.
[452] Soyini D. Madison and Judith Hamera, *"Performance Studies at the Intersections,"* The Sage Handbook of Performance Studies, ed. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2006), xii.

dissertation into a book length manuscript, I plan to utilize each of these methodological lenses to interrogate discourses around mediated and/or manipulated divine encounters in religious performance. I anticipate a second book project tentatively titled, *Fluid Boundaries: African Spirituality in Africana Christian Women's Sacred Rhetoric.* I plan to investigate the use of Ifa and Christian spiritual values as a humanizing strategy in Black women's oratory and sacred embodiment.

Chapter Summary

I this chapter, I presented the conclusions derived from the findings, expounded on the implications the study will have on the study and practice of homiletics and provided recommendations for future research. The study drew three conclusions about Black women's preaching bodies and the rhetorical strategies used to resist the inhumane systems of power. The first conclusion was that Black women's bodies, clergy and non-clergy, preached in culturally elaborated ways as spiritually powerful sign emitting texts that attended to their body and the embodied presence of others. The second conclusion drawn was that a Black woman's body preaches self-and communal recuperative sermons to affirm and celebrate Black life to dismantle interlocking oppressive systems. The third conclusion posited that African-centered and womanist oratory was the means by which my Black and female body generated and transmitted truths from alternative sources to unfetter myself and the larger community from the remaining vestiges of racial and gender disparities. Western and Euro-centered homiletical theory fails to account for Black women's spiritual power and its utility in sermon development, delivery and analysis. Thus the implications and recommendations for future research were clear. To progress

as a viable and inclusive field, Black preaching women's experiences need to move from the margins to the center as a powerful example and source of spiritual agency.

EPILOGUE

FETCHING SPIRITUAL POWER TO WAKE UP!

In summer 2015, I was summoned by an intergenerational group of women representing various parts of the African diaspora to what I thought was a casual meeting. Upon my arrival, I learned that this gathering was anything but casual. After a few moments of catching up one of the elder women directed us into her beautiful shrine room. This was holy ground complete with offerings to the Orisha Shango, Osun and Obatala. Carved wooden African artifacts adorned the wall and the floor and colors of red, white and gold were strewn across tables designated as altars. Bottles of gin, cigars and honey along with loose dollar bills were also ritually placed at the base of the shrine. We filed into the space one at a time. The elder began to offer what I assumed to be a prayer in Yoruba. She sanctified our feet and body with Florida water and other elemental ingredients. Another sister led the libation. While I didn't understand all of the words being used my spirit was calm. It was eerily familiar. I was asked to step forward. I did. The elder woman with a strikingly beautiful dark brown hue and markings on both sides of her face spoke first. She said, "The Mothers have been watching you. We have been watching you. You possess a great power that you can't learn about in school." "This power is passed down and through," she said. "The Mothers honor your warrior spirit and passion challenging White supremacy and patriarchy by aiding in the development of spiritually and culturally conscious women, men and children." She continued, "It is evident in the way you raise your daughters," she continued. One by one the other women assembled began to bear witness to me about my spiritual legacy. The most senior of the women in the room, born in the rural south and raised in the urban Midwest said, "Over the years' external forces have dummied down our awareness of feminine divinity." As a result, she uttered, "We have forgotten what we are capable of doing.

We have to wake up. That means coming to grips with and understanding who you are," she proclaimed. I was presented with an eleke—sacred beads devoted to the spirit force that called you—in my case the Sacred Empowered Mothers. The unacknowledged connection of African spiritual values was now acknowledged.

This study was called forth by the *Iyami,* the Sacred Empowered Mothers, by my own mother, by grieving mothers and womanish girls who will one day be mothers in one form or fashion if they so choose. The Mothers are the personification of Black women preaching, healing, transforming bodies as they make the conscious engagement with the Divine. The legacy of spiritual power and protest runs deep through my individual and collective lineage. It is this force that I now know Black women have called upon throughout history to negate the imbalance of dehumanization. Black preaching women summoned through bodily movement and moans and groans too deep in order to decipher feminine divinity by conjuring and fashioning for ourselves justice when it escaped us at the hands of nocuous systems. This justice affirmed our Black enfleshement. This study was an examination and celebration of my African-centered womanist spiritual formation rather than an abstract exercise of the mind. This work traversed the landscape of spiritually powerful women who disrupted when necessary, created when what was needed did not exist and nurtured Black bodies back to life. In the words of Katie Cannon, "it was the work my soul had to have." It is the path that I agreed to take prior to making my entrance onto this plane of consciousness—to fetch spiritual power in order to remain awake!

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