

## **In Search of Our Mothers' Healings: Holistic Wellbeing, Black Women, and Preaching**

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**Abstract:** *The lives of black women in North America, historically, converge with socio-economic conditions, creating health disparities between black women and other demographic groups. These health disparities co-exist alongside narratives about black women that contribute to rendering the bodies, and subsequently the health, of black women invisible or nonessential. Many traditional approaches to preaching healing texts advocate for treating the human body as incidental to a greater aim of the text. In contrast, preaching with the lives of black women in view requires a hermeneutic that recovers the significance of the physical body, as it is grounded in theological frameworks that espouse communal belonging in conjunction with holistic existence. This essay explores the preaching of Baby Suggs, holy, from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, as a prototype for such a hermeneutic at work within preaching that makes way for healing and wholeness as real possibilities in contemporary contexts.*

For various reasons, many preachers and homileticsians approach discussions about preaching that focus on biblical healing and miracle stories with care and caution. Haphazard approaches to these texts undermine concerns of pastoral care and responsibilities to listeners who live with disabilities or illnesses. With these issues in mind and some best practices, homileticsians must pay careful attention to the many pitfalls associated with preaching healing narratives. These pitfalls include confused understandings of healing and cure that equate individual sin, shortcomings, and disabilities with an individual's lack of faith and prevention of desired healing.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, preachers and homileticsians too often are hesitant to preach these texts as genuine accounts of the miraculous. Instead, preachers and homileticsians turn toward rational or non-supernatural explanations of these narratives. This practice may occur because these preachers and homileticsians may consider these encounters and phenomena as events of a different era and time. While the qualifications related to preaching about healing increase, the tendency to ignore or only briefly to engage the role of the human body in healing stories also increases.

Because of minimal engagement with the bodies present in these narratives and the healing they experience, healing and the human body become a foil in the plot of larger theological themes or moral platitudes. Subsequently, those who will preach sacred texts that claim divine healing may render this phenomenon incidental and make an attempt to find other objectives. If this occurs, those preachers may potentially reinforce contemporary narratives that distance the significance of the body and the need for healing as real possibilities in present contexts. This unintended consequence requires preachers to consider interpretive frameworks that retain the body as a critical entity while also attending to "best practices" ethics in preaching about healing. In considering the lives and health of black women in the United States and a hope for their holistic wellbeing within a theological vision of preaching healing, I offer an

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<sup>1</sup> See Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic: Preaching and Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); Kathy Black, "A Perspective of the Disabled: Transforming Images of God, Interdependence, and Healing" in *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Christine Smith (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998).

alternative interpretive framework with implications to support my claims. What follows then is not a method of exegesis but instead a proposed hermeneutic.

Black women's wellbeing and lack thereof in the U.S. is connected to narratives that rely upon the destruction, distancing, or denial of the body's fragility for the sake of economic gain and flourishing. Race and economics, as factors that intersect with gender and sexuality, have had immediate impact on the historical and contemporary state of black women's health. History has demanded that black women become conjurers of their own healing in pursuit of thriving amidst ongoing assaults on their bodies. This self-reliant pursuit of health in conjunction with faith convictions has fostered both survival and reinforcement of narratives that distance the body. Black women's own pursuit of their wellbeing, as a practice of faith, is a viable conversation partner for frameworks of preaching healing that remains accountable to the body. To this end, Baby Suggs, *holy*, the spiritualist preacher in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, is a prototype for both the practice of preaching and a hermeneutic that attends to one's wellbeing in contexts that marginalize bodies on the basis of race and economics.

In this essay, I argue that the recovery of the human body in preaching, in sacred texts, and in contemporary literature creates the greatest opportunity for healing to occur in our time. This recovery is a hermeneutic of reversal amidst contexts and interpretive practices that erase the human body, as such a recovery claims the significance of the physical body instead of its insignificance. Moreover, such a recovery emphasizes a theological framework of communal-connectedness and aligns preaching practices with historical work related to health and wellness in black communities of faith. The lives and wisdom of black women in conversation with homiletic theory, provide a wider interpretative framework and theological vision for preaching that espouses healing as a contemporary possibility.

### **Shalom: Preaching and Healing**

There are a few assumptions that undergird my reflection on preaching about healing that I assert are associated with the lives and faith of black women. First, I engage healing with an understanding of wholeness or wellness in the presence of chaos. This wholeness is not necessarily the absence of distress but rather a specific state of being in the presence of chaos, a type of *shalom*. Second, I consider preaching to be a faith practice. Thus, preaching brings forth new possibilities, visionary possibilities within the community's midst, while inviting the community to participate in such visionary possibilities.<sup>2</sup> Preaching does not simply engage texts on its own terms. Instead a message contains a type of veracity for the community in which it takes place. In this regard, preaching as a faith practice has the ability to create or recreate a vision of what wholeness is and brings forth a vision in which wholeness is accessible. Here, as it intersects with preaching, healing is not a longed for impossibility that is restricted to the particular instance and time of biblical narratives and beliefs.

Preaching healing, with the lives and contexts of black women in view, requires one to consider the actual conditions that breed a lack of healing and wholeness for their bodies. As we consider that history, this approach necessitates preaching healing as a viable possibility that

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<sup>2</sup> Here I am framing preaching as a practice with its own theological and ethical aims. Part of this understanding of preaching draws upon both Walter Brueggemann's work related to "counternarratives" as components of prophetic imagination in preaching and to an understanding of preaching from within frameworks of social practice; See Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012); Thomas G. Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, eds. *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Lisa L. Thompson, "'Now That's Preaching!': Disruptive and Generative Preaching Practices," *Practical Matters Journal*, no. 8 (2015).

actively recovers the bodies located in texts and the bodies located in our world. Such pursuit of recovery creates opportunities for the in-breaking of alternative visions that possess Sacred quality for the ongoing lives of black women.

### **(In)Significant Bodies**

In the United States, black women's health, including their thriving and survival, is not disconnected from the ways economics and race influence their lives in an ongoing manner. The history of black women entails bodies literally being captured and caged for profit. These historical facts parallel the transatlantic slave trade founded on economic and racial structures not intended to profit black women but to profit others. The commodification of the bodies of black women has taken various forms including: breeding grounds of slave quarters and auction blocks, laborers in fields and factories, domestic servants, and 21st century working poor.<sup>3</sup> While the forms of commodification have varied, the results across these forms have continuity—namely, the dismissal of black women's bodies, which includes their health and wellbeing. The intersection of race and economics in a capitalist empire controls the perceived and felt erasure and invisibility of black women's bodies.<sup>4</sup>

Even as black women have been bartered and traded as stock shares, our societal structures simultaneously have advanced cultural narratives of bodily insignificance. These narratives are contributing factors to health disparities between black women and other demographic groups; and they jeopardize the lives of black women while reinforcing the reality that their health and wellbeing are privileged luxuries. This means that the black female body is incidental to the larger enterprise. When bodies are used as the brick and mortar of an empire, they cannot be viewed as entities that bleed, cry, have cancer, live with depression, dream, or hope. When these cultural narratives of bodily insignificance intersect with theological narratives

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<sup>3</sup> In *White Woman's Christ, Black Woman's Jesus*, Grant argues that the historical realities of slavery and black women in domestic service most adequately demonstrate the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in the lives of black women; Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 6. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins notes that black women's oppression has entailed a system of social control, which consists of economic, political, and ideological dimensions that result in black women being kept in an "assigned, subordinate place." Collins describes the economic, political, and ideological dimensions of this system of social control in the following way: a) The economic dimension entails "the exploitation of Black women's labor essential to U.S. capitalism, . . . the 'iron pots and kettles' symbolizing Black women's long-standing ghettoization in service occupations—represents the economic dimensions of oppression"; b) "The political dimension of oppression has denied African-American women the rights and privileges routinely extended to White male citizens"; c) The ideological dimension is described as "controlling images applied to Black women that originated during the slave era [that] attest to the ideological dimensions of U.S. Black women's oppression (i.e. mammy, jezebel, & breeder)"; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Rev. 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4–5.

<sup>4</sup> In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers traces the absorption of the African American gendered-female in American discourse, in view of the history of the transatlantic slave trade and its reverberations on a once "free" people and their captors in "historically ordained discourse." As a captive people, Black bodies, male and female, equated to "slave," "livestock," and "property" without human, social, or sexual difference. Spillers notes that the narrative of African American women is one of "mother and mother-dispossessed." This places her "out of the traditional symbols of female gender," making her a "different social subject." The African American woman exists as a different female gendered being than women of the dominant culture as it relates to her presence in American discourse and history. See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

of bodily insignificance, it creates a dangerous, if not deadly paradigm for the lives of black women.

### *Converging Narratives: Too Strong, Too Lazy*

Narratives that consider the body as incidental to a larger enterprise are projected onto black women who too often internalize these flawed narratives. Albeit, the internalization of such narratives is often for survival while their projection is primarily to reinforce the status of empire. These narratives cover two primary ends of a continuum. On one end of the continuum is superior-tenacity, which is present in the trope of the *StrongBlackWoman*.<sup>5</sup> On the other end of the continuum is inferior-morality, often used to dismiss the needs of poor black women. In short, these narratives range from too strong to too lazy, with both characterizations currently impacting the state of black women's wellbeing. Likewise, both narratives are connected to sociopolitics that make demands on the lives of black women and their attempts to thrive in such contexts.

Walker-Barnes in *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* describes the *StrongBlackWoman* as an "archetype, performance, and ideology."<sup>6</sup> This mythical woman is characterized "by extraordinary capacities for caregiving and for suffering without complaint" as she is always available to others but never to/for herself.<sup>7</sup> In short, this "defines and confines ways of being in the world for women of African descent."<sup>8</sup> Caregiving, independence, and emotional strength are lauded features of this woman.<sup>9</sup> She is a historical result. In Black women's history, she has learned to survive and thrive by living out of, within, and alongside the politics of class, race, gender, and sexuality. She is the burden placed upon black women to show strength, deny the physiological and psychological fragilities of the body, and deny the need for interdependence within community. Walker-Barnes contends that this masking of black women's vulnerabilities via mythical strength contributes to the ignored health crises facing black women. Namely, black women in the U.S. are facing widespread rates of obesity, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, anxiety, constant mild to chronic depression, and hypertension. In addition, black women "have higher morbidity and mortality rates than any other racial-gender group for nearly every major cause of death."<sup>10</sup>

What is more, strong narratives require a tax of black women's emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing. The ongoing socio-economic realities create health care disparities between black women and other demographic groups. In addition, an internal and external adoption of this superior-tenacity narrative incubates conditions that ignore ramifications and strains and burdens of strength placed upon black women. Society perpetuates this myth. Communities to which black women belong also perpetuate this myth, while their bodies break under these narratives. In this framework, black women help but are not helped. And if they need help, their

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<sup>5</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, in *Too Heavy a Yoke*, interrogates the dangerous myth of the *StrongBlackWoman* and the toll it takes on the physical, emotional, and mental health of black women. The connotation of black women as strong and the fluid connection between the association of black womanhood and strength is Walker-Barnes' rationale for eliminating any hyphenation or space between strong, black, and woman. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014 ).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> Walker-Barnes draws these statistics from the 2005 National Health Interview Survey conducted by the Center for Disease Control; *ibid.*, 44.

faith and God are the sources of that help. Self-reliant and God-reliant theologies often serve to reinforce narratives of superior-tenacity

Ironically, an independent self-resilient motif, which renders the bodies of black women insignificant, is connected with neoliberal ideals that link individual tenacity to one's ability to thrive economically. Keri Day, in *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America*, attends to the ways in which poor black women in particular are left behind and marginalized due to the explicit role of class and economic systems in their ongoing impoverishment and deprivation.<sup>11</sup> She contends that poor black women qualitatively suffer differently than middle to upper class black women and poor women of other racial-ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup> This qualitative difference is due to the explicit history of racial and gendered discrimination in the lives of black women in a capitalistic society.<sup>13</sup> Too often, society easily adopts tropes of personal irresponsibility when attending to the realities of poor black women, while ignoring the ways in which a post-industrial economy and social policies are hostile toward black women and how inequity in employment opportunities contribute to intergenerational cycles of desperation and poverty.<sup>14</sup>

Cultural messaging of poverty either ignores the portrait of black women's poverty or casts it as a condition of personal irresponsibility. This signaling relies upon narratives of inferior-morality. In other words, black women are too weak to "make the cut" in a free market and are creators of their own impoverishment. Narratives of inferior-morality rely on assumptions of individualism, isolation, and the depth of one's willpower; and yet again, enable the dismissal of black women's mental, emotional, and physiological wellbeing.

Seemingly, a tragic paradox occurs; both narratives of black women being too strong and too lazy actually converge as bodily insignificance. This convergence leads toward flawed assumptions of individuality, isolation, and one being solely responsible for her wellbeing or lack thereof. At their foundations, both narratives demand a counternarrative or alternative vision if we are to offer a holistic way forward.

### *Renegotiating Body and Self, Amidst Empire*

The burden upon black religious life and religious experience is to help facilitate alternative visions, narratives, and hopes for the relationship of black women to their bodies. And most importantly, the burden involves reaffirming the capacity and right of black women to claim and define this significance while renegotiating the relationship of their bodies, within their immediate communal and familial relationships, and to the wider social sphere. This renegotiation of self and body is an act of black women's spirituality; and at its core, it is an act of healing.

In *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, Marla Frederick explores the ways in which black women in a rural and disenfranchised county in North Carolina engage faith as a means for navigating everyday encounters that meet them at the intersections of social location.<sup>15</sup> Frederick lifts up the agentive capacity of black women expressed in their actions on both personal and public levels. One dimension entails black women's claim of

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<sup>11</sup> Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 56–57.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 58, 62, 64, 148.

<sup>15</sup> Marla Faye Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 15.

authority over their bodies as a practice of the renegotiation of self. In particular, Frederick highlights negotiations related to narratives of intimacy in a capitalist empire that has exploited the bodies of black women through sex for economic gain and racialized control.<sup>16</sup> Frederick contends that this renegotiation of self often happens on a private level in both personal actions and theological convictions while not seeking direct impact on the public sphere, yet reverberating outward into the public and cultural sphere. Such renegotiations of one's relationship to her body are often connected to spirituality for women of faith.

Practices of negotiation of self are not new. In fact, redefining and re-scripting the self and one's body in the midst of economic and racial demoralizing conditions have been the work of black women, historically. These acts of renegotiation are connected to personal thriving and wellbeing and these are the ways in which women have been conjurers of and participants in their own healing. In this work I find possibilities for a hermeneutic that continues to recover black women's bodies in ways that promote healing, wellness, and thriving as acts of faith.

### **In Search of Our Mothers' Healings**

How one makes listeners aware of bodies present in their preaching about healing and how this kind of preaching intersects with the ongoing work and practice of black women renegotiating self and their relationships to their bodies are important factors. These practices of renegotiation impact matters of health and wellness for women who live in ongoing cultural systems that leave their bodies depraved and invisible. Thus, the need to explore how one faithfully engages in proclamation that offers an alternative vision of a holistically-integrated life in the body. In earnest, the work of preaching that considers the wellbeing of black women requires a hermeneutic of reversal. This hermeneutic of reversal emphasizes communal belonging, affirms the fragility of bodily existence, and promotes healing as a real possibility.

When engaging sacred texts about healing, the primary questions to raise are, "What must I do with this body in the text?" and "What are the implications for the bodies in front of me?" These questions remain primary even when they are only implicitly engaged, or answered by how one does not engage the human body and the physicality of its restoration. Black women themselves have engaged these questions and the quest of holistic wellbeing while living amidst realities that contribute to their mental and physiological deterioration.

Black women's literature is a place where we might find the beginnings of a hermeneutic of reversal for preaching that faithfully considers the realities of black women's wellbeing. Literature written by black women, particularly literature that revisits the sites of slavery, is not only a resource for revisiting an often unwritten history, but Judylyn Ryan contends that it is a place that "allows a recognition of, and reaccess to, the spiritual resources needed (for a people) to withstand a continuing assault."<sup>17</sup> Here I return to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a site for witnessing the struggle for the renegotiation of self and the body in the preaching of Baby Suggs, *holy*. The preacher and her sermon engages the conditions that disenfranchise and dismember black women as it distances the fragility and vulnerability of black women's bodies through a narrative of inhumanity, moral bankruptcy, and the burden of strength. However, the preacher does so in a manner that focuses on the physical, mental, and emotional restoration of women alongside their wider community, including children and men.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 186–87.

<sup>17</sup> Judylyn S. Ryan, "Spirituality and/as Ideology in Black Women's Literature: The Preaching of Maria W. Stewart And Baby Suggs, Holy," in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. Beverly Mayne Kienzele & Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 274.

### *A Hermeneutic of Reversal*

*Beloved* draws upon the history of Blacks in the United States and their personal lives amidst the struggles of being an enslaved or once enslaved people. When Morrison shapes the narrative through the voices, visions, and memories (which she calls “rememory”) particularly of her female protagonists, the reader experiences the complexity of what existing as a community entails—struggling for wellbeing in the midst of contexts that deny its wellbeing. The opportunity for wellbeing in the midst of everything that denies it is the opportunity for healing and the miraculous, to which we give our attention in preaching.

The preacher makes proclamation for the conditions that pervade the lives of her listeners. *[H]oly*’s listeners live in a world that does not value their flesh, thus rendering their bodies secondary and disposable. They are individuals who must figure out how to live with the tension of being objects of someone else’s narrative and the subject of one’s own narrative. As individuals are the objects within the narratives of white slave owners and the systems that support the institution, their bodies, emotions, and struggles are subjugated or erased for the good and benefit of someone else. The social and political order of the world has forced fragmentation upon the physical bodies before the preacher. The fragmentation is a split between a self that acknowledges and expresses the breadth of its embodied capacity, and a self that must compartmentalize and deny the full spectrum of that capacity.

Morrison casts Baby Suggs, *holy*, as the unassuming yet fully authoritative preacher and wisdom bearer within her community. She is scripted as the one who draws the black community of Ohio into a clearing in the woods where she preaches. As she preaches, she invites the members of the community to experience the breadth of finitude, including their weakness and strength. Through the words of Baby Suggs, *holy*, the listener envisions black women as subjects and what it means to live as fully alive.

At the height of her proclamation, Baby Suggs, *holy*, declares a hermeneutic for healing, and wellness in the midst of constant assault. She declares,

let the children come! . . . let your mothers hear you laugh . . . let the grown men come . . . let your wives and your children see you dance!<sup>18</sup>

And to the women she declares,

Cry, . . . ‘for the living and the dead. Just cry.’<sup>19</sup>

The phrases are simple, unassuming, yet in the world of *holy* and her community: women are not afforded the vulnerability to weep for children that are bartered, sold, and traded as property; children are not afforded the possibility and delight of play and laughter, as they are field hands; and men are removed from the movement and connectedness that comes through the rhythm of dance. In a world that forces bodily denial through violent and traumatic means, giving in to the body and the vulnerability of its outward expressions are marks of fragility that threaten the survival of black flesh. And yet, *holy* proclaims “laugh . . . dance . . . cry,”<sup>20</sup> while echoing out

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<sup>18</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel*, 1st Vintage International ed. (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

that to be flesh that is black and thriving requires them to gather up the pieces that were forcibly scattered and attend to the body—that is, restoration.

Through her words the preacher recovers the body, in both its significance and vulnerability. However, through her words, she also recovers the body's connectedness to the larger community. In this community, even the proclaimer herself, a black woman who exudes strength, does not carry the entire burden of the community's healing and thriving solely on her shoulders; but instead with the busted "legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue" that slavery gave her, she's described as standing up with her "twisted hip" and dancing right along with the other women, children, and men.<sup>21</sup> This is not a go-it-alone motif of individuality. The preacher creates the space for personal burdens and joys to find a resting place within the connectedness of community.

After Baby Suggs, *holy's* words of bidding and invitation the narrator describes, "without covering their eyes the women let loose... and then it got mixed up."<sup>22</sup> And when it got mixed up, the community comes to end of something more.

Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the clearing damp and gasping for breath.<sup>23</sup>

In the clearing amidst worship and the sermon is a momentary in-breaking of a holistically-integrated life, one in which the body is not incidental but central to one's life and wellbeing. And each body present experiences this in-breaking.

The preacher does not shrink back, but instead, assumes the risky gap between a moment that ushers the fullness of life as the threshold of death awaits outside of the clearing and attempts to crouch upon it. The preacher calls out and pushes toward wholeness in the midst of everything that denies wholeness. Ultimately, this is the simple yet complex and risky work of preaching healing. Somehow *holy's* affirmation of flesh and call to love black flesh cannot be untangled from the recognition of the hate of black flesh. In this understanding her utterances attend to the presence of narratives and counternarratives. In this community, proclamation occurs, physiological and psychological burdens are shared, the body is recovered, the community enters in, and healing begins.

Here, . . . 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.<sup>24</sup>

### **Preaching a Hermeneutic of Reversal**

Preaching via a hermeneutic of reversal goes against individual heroines and has its foundation in communal connectedness as it attends to the fragility of what it means to live in a body. Healing is dislodged from esoteric non-concrete possibilities while there is the encouragement of mutual participation in healing's realization in a community's midst. The preacher offers the community an opportunity to participate in a reality they have not readily known and/or has not been fully accessible to them. The invitation makes possible the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 103–04.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

community's ability to conjure a different type of life in its midst. In this regard, what and how the preacher names in connection with healing as it relates to the lives of black women is significant.

Most importantly, in order to recover the body, and the bodies of black women, texts about healing cannot be treated solely as foils for God's ultimate story in terms of rushing past and over the role of bodies in the texts. These texts indeed contain theological visions that are after something about the Sacred. However, these theological visions are wrapped up, around, and interacting with physical bodies. Bodies and their vulnerability matter in the narratives, for they matter in our world. Healing stories attend to something about the preference for life over death and the preference for thriving over decay and decline—in association with physical bodies.

Furthermore, in order to claim healing as a real possibility, which is brought about through connectedness and communal participation, preaching healing entails locating places in which healing relates to communal belonging or at minimum locates the site through which the community enters the struggle for healing. As we locate the places of communal participation, we subvert a passive response that waits alone on an intervening God, and we also resist the heroine who is strong and unyielding while “gritting down, going it alone, and deteriorating” along the way. Instead, we create the clearings in our midst for healing to be realized, even amidst the ongoing demoralizing circumstances of our socio-economic frameworks.

### *Wellbeing, Faith Practices, and Black Communities*

There are long-existing paradigms within black communities of faith for struggling together to make a way for health and wellbeing. This history is based on both economic disenfranchisement and theological conviction. And often, this history has constituted more attention to physical health than mental health. Nonetheless, a basis exists for collective work related to bodily wellness. Historically, economic and racial discrimination contributed to a lack of access to health care and health care facilities within black communities, while simultaneously members of these communities were banned from admissions to medical programs that trained healthcare providers.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, aspects of faith practice within black communities have included civic action and intervention for members' own health care needs including the presence of church nurses, free clinics, and wellness check-ins.<sup>26</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these initiatives have increased alongside initiatives of healthcare reform. In varying degrees, black communities of faith participate in health initiatives as healing interventions through increased advocacy of exercise, healthier diet and nutrition, mental health care, or justice seeking measures that limit health disparities.

Conversely, many black Christian traditions in North American contexts implicitly retain aspects of spiritualist traditions and religious beliefs that are a part of their diaspora histories. These are traditions that assume connectivity between the supernatural and medicinal. These traditions also include healers, gurus, and medicine doctors as figures whose work is interwoven right alongside narratives of a Christian God.<sup>27</sup> What is more, these are narratives of God infused with Trinitarian constructs that assume the Spirit is an active and robust person right alongside

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<sup>25</sup> Larry G. Murphy, “African American Churches, Health Care, and the Health Care Reform Debate,” in *From Every Mountainside: Black Churches and the Broad Terrain of Civil Rights*, ed. R. Drew Smith (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2013), 204–06.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

the Creator and Jesus.<sup>28</sup> In short, the option of possibility in the face of the naturally implausible, including healing, is a tenant that undergirds faith practices in black communities. And most importantly, the plausibility of the miraculous relies upon the interlocking work of individual, collective, and divine agency.

As healing holds real possibilities in the lived religion of black women, we are challenged to retain conceptual possibilities of healing when preachers engage biblical narratives. We create an increased synergy between theology proclaimed and the theology lived within black communities of faith, when we employ interpretive frameworks that recover the individual body and communal connectedness and place these alongside divine agency. These frameworks espouse bodily restoration and wellbeing. Moreover, these interpretive moves hold potential to offer alternative visions to the dangerous narratives that threaten the wellbeing of black women in a culture that still regulates their livelihoods.

So, how might these strategies look in practice? As the Shunammite woman of 2 Kings carries the distress and burden of her child's death and seeks resurrection, where Elisha enters, the community enters. As the woman who is hemorrhaging in Luke touches the garment hem of Jesus, where Jesus turns with a response of healing and peace, the community enters. Similarly, as the Canaanite woman of Matthew pushes through opposition to verbally spar with Jesus for her demon-possessed daughter, where Jesus enters, the community enters. While sharing the load, the community wrestles with the fragilities of the body entering into the distress, despair, and struggle for the miraculous and healing. Together the individual and the community enter the struggle in those ways that seek to name and pursue healing for themselves. For black women, the site of healing and restoration is at the place where the divine, individual body, and the collective body intersect.

## Conclusion

Preachers need not distance the human body to preach healing or healing texts responsibly. Instead, preachers may recover the body and its significance in preaching healing. More specifically, greater attention to hermeneutics and preaching ethics recovers the relationship between bodies and the pursuit of wellbeing. Such preaching operates within a hermeneutic of reversal, particularly for the lives of black women whose overall wellbeing remains connected to the effects of racial, economic, and gendered discrimination. This hermeneutic of reversal emphasizes communal belonging, affirms the fragility of the body, and promotes wholeness as a real possibility. This interpretive framework is all the more viable when one considers the lives of those constantly deprived by historical narratives that promote disembodiment and distance bodily fragility and vulnerability.

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<sup>28</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explains a Spirit theology as the impetus for the preaching of black women in history. This Spirit theology is grounded in the normative and accepted understanding of the Holy Spirit and power of the Spirit within some black faith communities. Historically, within these faith communities there has been interdependence between the community and the Spirit. The Spirit is not a later appendage but an actively engaged helper in the life of believers. See Cheryl Gilkes, "There Is a Work for Each One of Us: The Socio Theology of the Rev Florence Spearing Randolph," in *How Long This Road: Race, Religion, and the Legacy of C. Eric Lincoln*, ed. Alton B. Pollard and L. H. Whelchel (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 138–39.