

Black Feminist Triptych
Donyelle C. McCray
Assistant Professor of Homiletics
Yale Divinity School

Abstract: *Two driving features of Black feminism are care and collectivity. This article considers them as vectors for Christian preaching. I focus on a specific speech event that involves Alice Walker, Angela Davis, and June Jordan, and treat it as a case study for Black feminist preaching. Ultimately, I propose a triptych approach to preaching that entails layering sermon messages, accommodating dissonance, and foregrounding mutuality.*

On February 20, 1999, KPFA, a public radio station based in Berkeley, California, hosted a tribute for poet-activist June Jordan to celebrate the publication of her twenty-fifth book, *Affirmative Acts*. The event gathered a diverse group of friends, artists, writers, and community members in the Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School auditorium for a service of tributes, readings, and music. Alice Walker was not able to attend the gathering but composed a letter to Jordan that Angela Davis read aloud. In this reading, the affection among the three women surfaces. Walker reflects on meeting Jordan in Jackson, Mississippi, during the early 1970s. “June became my friend at that time, and in that place of great danger and loneliness. I will never forget it.”¹ Her gratitude seems to swell as the letter unfolds, first for Jordan’s careful listening, and then for her witness to the world. “The greatness of June’s art lies, I believe, in her ability to put love into righteous action and energy for change into written words. June’s words have flame inside them. The flame of caring deeply, of offering love” (emphasis in original).² After describing Jordan as “a friend to Life” and “the best friend that Love ever had,” Walker closes by saying, “June, I embrace you through the arms of this woman who has meant so much, and means so much, to the ongoing growth of consciousness in the world” (emphasis in original).³

As part of the tribute, Davis also shared a brief note by Toni Morrison, read Jordan’s “Poem for South African Women,” and celebrated Jordan’s upcoming teaching in Natal. Yet rhetorically, Davis’s reading of Walker’s letter stands out because it is a collaborative utterance and because the sisterly relationship among the three emerges through it. This speech event functions as a verbal embrace. In this article, I treat that embrace as a prism for Black feminist preaching.⁴ First, I reflect on the message given at the KPFA celebration as a source for

¹ Alice Walker, “For June,” Alice Walker Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ I anchor this article in “Black feminism” because I see it as the most fitting term to describe the intellectual and activist pursuits of June Jordan, Angela Davis, and Alice Walker. They each use this term at varying points to describe their work—work that resists sexism, racism, classicism, heterosexism, and is concerned about human liberation around the globe rather than only in the United States. While Alice Walker originated the term “womanism,” she explains in a 1988 letter to Audre Lorde that though she prefers womanist, she still uses “Black feminist.” “It was never either/or; always both/and, and I had hoped this could be easily comprehended.” Alice Walker, Letter to Audre Lorde 6 July 1988, Alice Walker Papers, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University. June Jordan describes herself as a Black feminist. June Jordan, *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays of June Jordan* (New York: Basic/Civitas, 2002), 259–265. Angela Davis has more ease with “feminism,” and is unwilling to cede the term to bourgeois, white women. She aligns herself with

homiletics, emphasizing its promise for thinking about Black feminist care and intimacy. Next, I discuss some of the rhetorical parallels in preaching, giving special attention to the significance of polyphony or multivocality. Then, I explore the possibilities that are opened with respect to sermon form and performance before homing in on two ethical commitments that guide preaching in this vein: collectivity and care.

This article contributes to a lively discussion on Black women's radical subjectivity and preaching.⁵ In *Towards a Womanist Homiletic: Katie Cannon, Alice Walker and Emancipatory Proclamation*, Donna E. Allen presents a rubric for examining sermons by womanist preachers and unveiling the womanist ethos in performance and content.⁶ More recently, in *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit*, Kimberly P. Johnson seeks to "transform/adapt the tenets of womanist thought to make it rhetorically viable in the church" and explore the associated gains and losses.⁷ Lisa L. Thompson examines the inventiveness Black women bring to the preaching venture in *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*.⁸ I have a more modest and exploratory aim in this article. Focusing on a specific Black feminist speech event in a pluralist setting, I tease out relational implications for Christian preaching. Key in this analysis is the relationship between preaching and Black feminist care.

How might Christian Preaching Participate in Black Feminist Care?

Black feminist care encompasses a broad array of public and private practices of succor and mutual encouragement that cultivate delight, creativity, and self-definition in Black women. This mode of caring favors a candid, unsentimental engagement with the coalescing effects of race, class, gender, sexuality, and experiences of migration on human experience. A pluralist, nondogmatic sensibility is also necessary since Christianity and colonialism have functioned in tandem. As Walker explains, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of Black women."⁹ Black feminist care provides critical insights for black women who preach and listen to sermons and for all who seek to "decolonize their spirits."¹⁰

anti-racist feminisms and anti-capitalist feminisms, including Black feminism. Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 41, 46–47; Angela Y. Davis, interview by D. Wendy Greene, *Freedom: The Struggle Continues*, Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, June 19, 2020. In her introduction to *The Womanist Reader*, Layli Phillips discusses the problem of parsing womanism and Black feminism for the Western taxonomy, describing the two as "sisters" whose relationship is best understood through a familial paradigm. Layli Phillips, ed., *The Womanist Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), xxxii–xxxvi.

⁵ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas proffers four tenets of womanism: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 7.

⁶ Donna E. Allen, *Towards a Womanist Homiletic: Katie Cannon, Alice Walker and Emancipatory Proclamation*, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Studies in Religion, Culture, and Social Development (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 5.

⁷ Kimberly P. Johnson, *The Womanist Preacher: Proclaiming Womanist Rhetoric from the Pulpit*, Rhetoric, Race, and Religion (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), xxiii.

⁸ Lisa L. Thompson, *Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018).

⁹ Alice Walker, *Interviews with Black Writers*, ed., John O'Brien (New York: Liveright, 1973), 192.

¹⁰ Alice Walker, "The Only Reason You Want to Go to Heaven is That You've Been Driven Out of Your Mind (Off Your Land and Out of Your Lover's Arms) Clear Seeing Inherited Religion and Reclaiming the Pagan Self," *On the Issues: The Progressive Woman's Quarterly* 6:2 (Spring 1997), 54.

Black feminism, like Christian preaching, is propelled by vibrant love. This love encompasses all of “livingkind,” a term Taliba Sikudhani Olugbala uses to describe the whole of Creation, animate and inanimate.¹¹ While intersectionality has been treated as the principal theoretical contribution of Black feminist thought, Jennifer Nash explains that its visionary conception of love should not be overlooked.¹² Drawing on Alice Walker’s description of womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Nash sees love functioning as a theoretical paradigm as Walker describes a love for music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, food and roundness, struggle and Folk.¹³ Walker makes it clear that this is not a timid or homophobic vision.¹⁴ Nor is it fixed on romantic partners, family and friends, or the divine. Instead, love for oneself emanates outward in a spiral that connects the person to the community and the earth. This love is vigorous enough to drive speech, action, improvisation, and risk. It is not beholden to hierarchy or propriety. The commitment to love, to its mystical power and ethical demands, is an important bridge between Black feminist rhetoric and Christian preaching.

Alice Walker remembers being “kind of a little church mother in training” who was following in the footsteps of her own mother, Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker, a devout member of Wards Chapel AME Church in Eatonton, Georgia.¹⁵ Years after leaving Georgia, Walker holds a deep affinity for the Wards Chapel sanctuary, describing it as the place “where I first, before birth, encountered my beloved community. (I heard singing!) The simplicity and sweetness of this structure, and the warmth of the human relationships fashioned within its walls and yard, have influenced every aspect of my life.”¹⁶ The loving circle of relationships at Wards Chapel has an enduring impact even as Walker’s spirituality becomes Earth-centered.

Turning to February 20, 1999, the commitment to love is still evident. What Alice Walker offers to June Jordan through the person of Angela Davis is a layered tenderness. The best Christian theological comparisons are first to the sermon as *paraklesis*, an exhortation that encourages fidelity to Christian principles like love and courage, and second, to the sermon as *makarism*, a blessing that inspires gratitude and rejoicing.¹⁷ In these forms, care is an essential constituent of the preacher’s message and a critical aspect of the message’s telos.

Layering Sermonic Messages

How then, is care best communicated sermonically? Walker provides a clue in bringing Angela Davis into her message to June Jordan. The two “voices” generate an excess—an echoing or layering of the message that deepens its effect. In the Black church, I see a similar dynamic in Seven Last Words services held on Good Friday. In the better iterations of these, the seven sermons (each on selected words spoken by Jesus during the Passion), help listeners enter the depths of Jesus’ suffering. The crucifixion serves as the grounding focus, even though the preachers explore different texts. And, instead of competition among the preachers, there is a joint consciousness of the weight of the gospel and a sense that it takes all of them—indeed all of humankind and the creation itself—to proclaim the divine mysteries. The beauty in this

¹¹ Layli Phillips, *Womanist Reader*, xxvi.

¹² Jennifer C. Nash, “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality,” *Meridians* 11:2 (2011): 9, <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

¹⁵ Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer’s Activism* (New York: Ballantine, 1997), 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1.

¹⁷ William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer, eds., *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 434.

polyphony is more compelling than any single message. Preachers are revealed to be collaborators rather than soloists.

Another example of layered proclamation arises in Christian funerals. Often the liturgy includes a funeral sermon given by a clergy person as well as reflections shared by a few people who knew the deceased well. These reflections may draw directly or indirectly on sacred texts and offer multiple perspectives on the deceased's life. In any event, it is the sum of the messages (clergy and lay, funeral sermon and reflections) that yield the full portrait of the deceased and offer all who are gathered the comfort they seek. The word, offered through multiple layers, consoles the listeners and knits them together.

The Gospels themselves are held together in the biblical canon in a similar way, yielding a multi-angled story that people of faith take on and embody together.¹⁸ Collectively, the Gospels have a "multifaceted, complex unity" and reveal the "polyphonous, even cacophonous, character of interpretation within the church."¹⁹ Sewn into a motley whole, the Gospels decenter Jesus because no singular angle on him stands alone.²⁰ No theory or community possesses the Resurrected One, and this miscellany of narratives enlivens the church. The multivocal Gospels underscore preaching's function as "a socializing force and a formative practice in a community."²¹ Similarly, Black feminism values the concerted venture, the work of the troupe, and the multivalent knowledge that emerges from different voices.

Striving for Polyphony

The import of polyphony has been valued in mainline homiletics for decades now, especially as a means to correct the power imbalance that inures from having one person preach regularly over long periods of time. John McClure's *Roundtable Pulpit*, for example, seeks to elicit congregational insights about the text to aid the preacher's composition process and yield a more inclusive message.²² McClure underscores the communal and theological rationales for drawing upon a range of voices. And, in *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Lucy Atkinson Rose encourages preachers to see their sermons as contributions to an ongoing congregational conversation about faith among equals.²³ For Rose, fostering a sense of mutuality and equality among the listeners serves as the chief aim of preaching and envisioning the sermon as teaching, persuading, or changing listeners presents a hurdle to this process.²⁴ A sermon functions more like a poem in that neither preachers nor poets control the outcome of their messages.²⁵

¹⁸ Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 55.

¹⁹ Ibid., 105. Campbell goes on to argue that the Gospels refuse "any single correct interpretation. Jesus simply cannot and will not become the possession of any interpretation, but continually interrupts and disrupts them all. The journey of the Christian community involves an ever-growing faithfulness to Jesus Christ, a continual wrestling with the narratives rendering his identity, but never a possessing or controlling of him. The fourfold gospel assures this kind of disequilibrium." Ibid., 110.

²⁰ Ibid., 109.

²¹ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 25.

²² Marlene Lorenson wonders how roundtable dialogue can become polyphonic preaching. Marlene Ringgaard Lorenson, *Dialogical Preaching: Bakhtin, Otherness and Homiletics* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 144.

²³ Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 96.

²⁴ Ibid., 90. Rose also leans on Dietrich Ritschl, who compares preaching to gathering people. Ibid., 93.

²⁵ Ibid., 92, citing Robert E. C. Browne, *The Ministry of the Word* (London: SCM, 1958).

Of course, due to the reliance on scripture, literature, history, and culture, all sermons carry a degree of polyphony, whether implicit or explicit.²⁶ Yet experientially, there is something powerful about having more than one preacher bear the good news in a single worship service. This is part of the reason why dialogue sermons had a burst of popularity during the latter part of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, these dialogue sermons often suffered in depth, or felt inordinately scripted, or ping-ponged the listener from one voice to another without fostering a sufficient connection with either (or any) of the preachers.

These barriers do not arise in the KPFA message and the problem is not simply resolved by having one audible speaker in Angela Davis. Greco-Roman epistolary theory is helpful in this case given the high regard attributed to the letter from a friend. In that context as well as this one, the letter from a friend is not merely paper and ink; it mediates the face, voice, and presence of the friend.²⁷ Much like a relic or love token, the letter is intended to make the author spiritually present. The reader, or in this case the audience, is given the opportunity to gaze into the author's soul.²⁸ This fuller understanding of the epistle is operative in the KPFA message, yielding a polyphonic message. Furthermore, instead of centering on a purely logical argument, Walker, Davis, and Jordan's voices cohere around an affective core. Mutuality is the through line that brings the voices together and draws the audience into their underlying justice-seeking ethos.

And, to be clear, June Jordan is not a passive recipient in the triad. The speech event itself is an indication that her previously shared words have been internalized and have become part of the inner landscapes of Alice Walker and Angela Davis. The two publicly proclaim their love for Jordan and encourage her to continue her work. In other words, their message builds on and feeds Jordan's prophetic voice. And, by witnessing this intimacy, the audience members are encouraged to take up the work of bearing witness in their own ways.²⁹ So, the tenderness of the message expands, and, in keeping with an ethic of Black feminist care, draws others into its stream.

Rhetorical Triptych

Whether on the page or read aloud, June Jordan's writings draw readers into a rhythm. In a literal sense this rhythm undergirds her poetry and prose, but it might also be understood as the beat of the ineffable, as a rhythm that hints at cosmic wholeness or a rhythm that dances us into a realm of truth that cannot be articulated in language alone. This rhythm enchants Walker's tribute and Davis' embodiment and makes the KPFA message a triad. Three equally vibrant and distinct voices cohere.³⁰ In this respect, the verbal embrace at the KPFA celebration presents a case study for thinking about a trajectory of Black feminist preaching. I want to be clear in stating that mimicry—a message composed by one, delivered by another and addressed to a

²⁶ Bakhtin suggests thought itself is dialogical. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 120. Bakhtin also says, "The very being of man (both external and internal) is the *deepest communion. To be means to communicate.*" Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 287–288.

²⁷ Margaret Mary Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 48–49.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁹ Similarly, rather than being too directive, Eunjoo Mary Kim values letting the listeners connect the preacher's message to their own life experiences. Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching the Presence of God: A Homiletic from an Asian American Perspective* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1999), 109–110.

³⁰ This threefold approach to voice might also be imagined as an iteration of trivocal preaching because the voices are "mutually influential" and "synthesized." Walker, Davis, and Jordan each speak as prophet, priest, and sage. Kenyatta Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 11.

third—is not what I have in mind, but the notion of *layering* messages is compelling. The collective sermon is an essential strategy for Black feminist preaching.

What might it mean to preach a sermon that flourishes alongside other sermons rather than alone? One possibility for a collaborative message involves exchanging a thirty-minute sermon that would ordinarily be preached by a single preacher for a thirty-minute tripartite message—three preachers who each offer homilies as part of a rhetorical triptych. The “panels” of the triptych could all be the same length or varying lengths. What is central here is not identical time blocks but a shared commitment to the contiguity of the overall message. Each individual message is, to draw on the etymology of triptych, a “ptychē,” meaning “fold” or “layer.”³¹ While still addressed to the congregation, implicitly or explicitly the sister homilies reference one another. The interplay makes for a kaleidoscopic and coalitional vision of preaching.³²

This approach reflects the humility of a Seven Last Words sermon or a funeral address due to its collaborative impetus. In practice, the triptych sermon is also nimble enough to accommodate a range of options. In churches that use a lectionary, the triptych sermon might center on a single sacred text to reveal its depth. The homilists might explore a given text through the lenses of *didache*, exhortation, and anamnesis so that each preacher is drawing on a distinct register.³³ The assigned lectionary readings for a given Sunday do not always have an obvious or compelling connection, but when they do, the homilists might each focus on a different text and even integrate a shared refrain.

In faith communities that do not use a lectionary, the three homilists might explore a specific theological concept like joy or offer responses to the same question about God or the life of faith. They might all consider an issue like racism or environmental devastation through oracles of judgement, lament, and hope, respectively.³⁴ Distilling the truth this way could help the congregation embrace its identity as a prophetic community. Since memoir and autobiography are primary modes of relaying Black women’s experience, a wisdom message might be explored jointly as testimony, teaching, and parable or koan. Alternatively, as part of an effort to honor lay voices, the genre boundaries around the conception of the homily might be relaxed to accommodate sequential messages in the form of a song, a sermon, and visual art. One of the key advantages of this approach lies in its accommodation for more liminal forms of proclamation alongside traditional scriptural exegesis. As may be clear, the driving understanding of revelation in a triptych sermon is dialogical. Revelation unfolds as the faith community questions, celebrates, and remembers God together.

It is important to note that novelty is not the aim here. What is pivotal is the polyphony. On a practical level, this approach requires collaborative effort on the part of the preachers and clarity about the seams that bring the three together. One dimension of the Holy Spirit’s work is drawing people together and uniting their wills for divine endeavors. So, an essential aspect of the sermon’s pneumatology involves discerning these seams with clarity and creativity but without rigidity. And, clearly a triptych sermon would have implications for the rest of the liturgy. Though it may scramble a liturgy’s reliance on a dominant voice, a triptych message

³¹ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v., “triptych,” accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/triptych>.

³² Shireen Roshanravan uses the kaleidoscope to describe the fusion of insights that emerge when three women’s perspectives are explored together. Shireen Roshanravan, “Motivating Coalition: Women of Color and Epistemic Disobedience,” *Hypatia* 29:1 (2014), 43, 49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12057>.

³³ Willimon and Lischer, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 433–434.

³⁴ I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. Ruthanna B. Hooke for this example.

could underscore the sermon as the acme in those traditions that understand preaching as the ascendant point in the service or just as easily imbed the preaching in those traditions that elevate the Eucharist or another aspect of worship. In any case, the triptych approach carries the potential of awakening collective consciousness and gelling the community.³⁵

This is not to say that the approach is foolproof. One can imagine, for instance, homilists who seem to compete rather than collaborate, or a sham in which there only *appear* to be three voices because one person has clandestinely coopted the message. One can imagine a redundant trio that foregrounds the same kind of voice, like three high-octane extroverts. Genuine commitment to the communal ethos is crucial, as is respect for mutually agreed upon time limits. Since some faith communities have a limited number of willing preachers, this model may prove practical only on a very occasional basis. Yet, even if used infrequently, there is potential for expanding the congregation's conception of preaching so that it aligns more with that of a chorus than a solo venture. Preaching becomes a ministry of helping people reflect on Christian life together.³⁶ And, in keeping with Black feminist care, preaching functions as a means of layering messages of hope.

The Centrality of Collectivity

One of the core premises of Black feminist care is a high respect for collectivity. This means concern for the wellbeing of the group rather than solely the individual. Collectivity grows out of the sense that African American women have a shared destiny and our survival depends in large part on vigilant care for one another. Creating and sustaining healthy communal networks is essential to thriving. Preaching addresses this aim when it uplifts the community while at the same time naming and disrupting the individualism infecting American culture.

Aesthetically, collectivity is illumined by Black women's quilting. Within the long and varied tradition of African American women's quilting, there is a history of juxtaposing vibrant patterns and allowing the clashes to speak. Dissonance has value.³⁷ There is a similar power in layering messages and letting the convergences speak without trying to resolve them. This dynamic might best be described as "plurilogue," a Bakhtinian term Ella Shohat uses to describe "a dissonant polyphony" that results from revealing contradictions among "different yet co-implicated constituencies and arenas of struggle."³⁸ Rather than covering over or smoothing out differences, plurilogue allows them to sit in the light. Along this line, Shireen Roshanravan sees plurilogue as a means of pursuing dissimilarities to disrupt the erasure of women's varied experiences and nurture coalitional consciousness.³⁹ And, by refusing to sand down the variation of women's experience, mutuality is fostered. Listeners develop and rely on "differential consciousness," the ability to link seemingly disparate parts into a whole.⁴⁰ "Difference," as Audre Lorde explains, "must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities

³⁵ In this sense, the triptych sermon is consistent with other-wise preaching because it is a collaborative approach that "involves decisive, existential caring" within which the hegemonies of the world are put "under erasure." Liberating patterns for human relationship are developed and reclaimed. John S. McClure, *Otherwise Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 134–135. Yet, my analysis is informed largely by Bakhtinian dialogue.

³⁶ Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 95.

³⁷ In African American worship, the ring shout serves as an example of audible voices unrestrained by external orchestration. Emilie Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1993), 72.

³⁸ Ella Shohat, *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminisms in Transnational Age* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 2; Roshanravan, "Motivating Coalition," 42.

³⁹ Roshanravan, "Motivating Coalition," 42; Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 109.

⁴⁰ Roshanravan, "Motivating Coalition," 43, citing Chela Sandoval.

between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.”⁴¹ This spark is essential because group identity erases and isolates as easily as it unifies.

Through word and performance, preaching enacts a belief about what authority is and how it is to be held.⁴² Too often, this vision of authority is haunted by the specter of a singular male authority figure who holds power over listeners stemming from his charisma, institutional rank, and some degree of special knowledge about scripture or theology. Contemporary American culture and political contexts exacerbate this problem. Consciously or not, contemporary preaching participates in a rhetorical landscape that has been skewed by warped visions of power. And here, I am focusing less on the content of preaching and more on what is performed. Which norms of sermon performance, despite our best efforts, constitute tacit approval of the myth of individualism that terrorizes the current rhetorical landscape? How might preaching more effectively resist or dethrone twisted conceptions of power? Building appreciation for the kind of wisdom that arises when multiple voices weigh in seems foundational to answering these questions. The triptych sermon interrupts the patterns of talking at or past people that typify self-satisfied speech.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that there is no role for the solo preacher or that such preaching is *de facto* oppressive. Presumably, each preacher of the triptych sermon would speak as an individual and this is vital. Blackness has historically accompanied a struggle to be heard and seen in one’s complexity amid the forces of white reduction. Nor am I arguing that a trio of preachers magically resolves the problem. I am trying to trouble the easy relationship between preaching and individualism, to challenge the word that wants to stand alone and excel on the same terms as a political speech or scholarly lecture. This insistence—this preference for achieving and acquiring over relating—reveals the embedded whiteness in preaching. The triptych sermon, by contrast, refuses a master voice and involves distinct voices yearning toward communion.

The Contours of Care

Ultimately, the triptych sermon model is not chiefly geared towards power-sharing; it centers on care. In the KPFA message, three Black women serve as witnesses for one another and invite an audience into the experience of care. This form of care makes invisible labor visible and affirms capaciousness and belovedness. In an American social context plagued by mundane violence, this form of care amounts to resistance and reveals the heroism demanded by everyday life.⁴³ Such care does not blossom in a vacuum. Audre Lorde underscores the importance of nurturing relationships among and between Black women:

We have the stories of Black women who healed each other’s wounds, raised each other’s children, fought each other’s battles, tilled each other’s earth, and eased each other’s passage into life and into death...But connections between Black women are not automatic by virtue of our similarities, and the possibilities of genuine communication between us are not easily achieved.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1984), 111.

⁴² Donyelle McCray, *The Censored Pulpit: Julian of Norwich as Preacher* (Lanham: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2019), 3.

⁴³ Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 121; Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

⁴⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 152–153.

Preaching together is a way to work toward that mutuality while building up the congregation. This preaching hastens the death of the ego (individual, social, and historical) and enacts healthy new possibilities for relating.⁴⁵

Care is not static. It is helpful to note that the care I envision here is open and improvisational in nature. To go back to the KPFA celebration, the live moment of Angela Davis reading Alice Walker's words is an open moment. Walker's letter is not simply a finished product read aloud. Performance yields a happening. A new thing emerges in the performance that neither Alice Walker nor Angela Davis nor any of the listeners can anticipate. Lucy Rose explains this phenomenon, "Meaning, divorced from a fixed message, becomes multilayered and open. And the process of creating and interpreting becomes heuristic, yielding unexpected discoveries."⁴⁶ An element of improvisation is at work insofar as the impact of the message cannot be controlled. Similarly, in the triptych sermon, the preachers' synergy provides an inherent flux. This turbulence does not keep the larger message from being focused or impactful. Improvisation generates energy and immediacy.

As noted at the outset, the triptych sermon is just one of many possibilities for Black feminist preaching. Yet, it is a method that coheres with the church's peculiar call to mutuality. The church is formed by those who are called out of the idolatry of individualism into a life-giving relationship centered on the Trinity. And, in a historical moment when cooperation and equality are essential for human and planetary survival, patterns of "sacred" speech that objectify and dominate are profane. In the end, Christian practices do not simply express Christianity, they constitute Christianity.⁴⁷ Or, to draw on Fred Craddock, "The method is the message... *how* one preaches is to a large extent *what* one preaches."⁴⁸

In her poem, "Calling on All Silent Minorities," June Jordan summons a community for a meeting at a tree that has not yet been planted.⁴⁹ By coming together, they will a new future into being. The triptych sermon is a similarly audacious gesture. It prizes collectivity and care over convention and practicality. It resists the individualism that dominates the contemporary American rhetorical landscape and privileges the kind of divine revelation that emerges in the interplay of voices. Rather than insisting on a thin unity, the triptych makes space for harmony and atonality. Drawing on Black feminist rhetoric, the triptych sermon is a helpful means of enacting a new and liberating future.

⁴⁵ Suzi Gablik drawing on David Michael Levin. Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991; repr., New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 144.

⁴⁶ Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 113.

⁴⁷ Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 102.

⁴⁸ Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 44.

⁴⁹ June Jordan, *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*, eds. Jan Heller Levi and Sara Miles (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2005), 110.