

Response to Trey Clark

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After reading Professor Trey Clark's 2022 essay on Black contemplative preaching, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Reclaiming the Witness and Wisdom of Black Contemplative Preachers," I was eager to read more of his reflections and "Spirit, Spoken Word, and the Search for Common Ground: Amanda Gorman as Contemplative Preacher" does not disappoint. The paper offers a full buffet of wisdom on the homiletical dynamics in "The Hill We Climb" and I see bridges to other exhortative poems like Richard Wright's "I Have Seen Black Hands," Margaret Walker's "For My People," and Pauli Murray's "Dark Testament."

If I can take off my academic cap and speak with a bit more candor, Trey, I want to say that I began reading as your homiletical colleague but increasingly found myself reading as a hungry soul. Your paper spoke to that part of me that longs for a different relationship to Christianity—one that will do more loosening than binding, pierce my idealized self, and more effectively bear the weariness of "this present darkness" (Eph 6:12). This is a long way of saying I am increasingly mindful of the distorting effects of my faith and thinking of Amanda Gorman as a preacher refreshed me. Her poetic dreaming put me in a crowd on a hillside and reminded me that we are climbing towards a future none of us can fully see.

Like every strong essay, your paper raised questions for me—but the kind I want to savor rather than slake with ready answers. The poetic lines that first came to me—and it seems fitting to draw on poetry here—were from Alice Walker's poem "Reassurance." She speaks of savoring questions without rushing to resolution, being willing to stay in limbo, and consequently experiencing expansion. Flourishing becomes possible when "Time" does not "squeeze" the discovery process.¹

What is a Poem?

As Alice Walker speaks of living with questions, your essay similarly dislodges and jostles some basic assumptions. First, what is a poem? Surely, like a sermon, a poem is a conduit of divine revelation. And perhaps a poem is a tool specially fit for fostering the unity the triune God longs for. You describe "The Hill We Climb" as an "example of Spirit-inspired proclamation outside the traditional pulpit" and a word purposefully embodied, inquisitive, "prayerful" in its "orientation," and "informed by Christian scripture." More, the poem has "healing" capacities. I couldn't help noticing how these features resonate with Audre Lorde's expansive description of poetry as "a revelatory distillation of experience" rather than "sterile word play."² "Poetry," she goes on to say, "is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives."³ Lorde alludes to the visionary propensities of poetry when she observes that it "is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives."⁴

There is a dailiness that grounds poetry even as a more ethereal quality gives it life. Reading your essay, Trey, I sense that like Nathaniel Mackey, you want to point us away from

¹ Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism* (New York: Ballantine, 1997), 97.

² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

“poems as discrete pieces of writing—the sealed-off odes that we are taught in school,” towards something more mysterious and active—poems as channels of divine energy.⁵

Where Do Poems Come From?

Building on the first question inspired by your work is a related question: Where do poems come from? I ask, again, not so much because I expect an answer but more as an attempt to marvel at *how* poems like “The Hill We Climb” come to be and how they seem to point to the ineffable.

Gorman takes us beyond the patina of beautiful words, beyond abstractions and self-satisfied speech, and lights a flame of possibility. And you note that Gorman’s poem is not the mere fruit of individual effort or mastery but something *received*. This question of origin also arises with sermons. We preachers *hope* our Sunday sermon comes from God—at least some of it, if not the whole! Do inspired poems like Gorman’s tell us anything about that mysterious well of truth from which so much Black sacred discourse descends?

I think Fred Craddock plays with this question when he describes sermons and short stories as “first cousins.”⁶ If this is true, then I’d say sermons and poems are siblings—perhaps sisters like Black feminism and womanism as one scholar puts it.⁷ Both are mothered by truth and mystery, and both are sometimes destined to move through a world that is not prepared for their gifts. Your paper sits these sisters next to one another so we can see the family resemblance. I wish they sat side by side more often within and beyond Christian liturgies.

How are Preachers like Gorman Nurtured?

Third, within what frames does Black contemplative preaching flourish? You make a compelling case for seeing Gorman as a Black contemplative preacher and “The Hill We Climb” as a Black contemplative sermon. What would it mean to nurture preachers like Gorman and cultivate fertile ground for their sermons? What are the vital elements of the formation process?

When Gorman read her poem on the steps of the capitol, some of us experienced church. I’m not talking about a heavy super-imposition of dogma in a purportedly secular space, but an energy—what William Stringfellow describes as eventfulness, a flash, an ephemeral happening in which we had new registers of perception.⁸ Though fleeting, the experience had a lasting effect on our consciousness, leaving us suppler and strangely open to newness. There was a glimpse of Jesus preaching on the hillside, or, for those of us with ears to hear, an immersion in the “Clearing.”⁹ In Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, her character, Baby Suggs, holy invites the newly freed to laugh, dance, and weep during her sermon given in an open space surrounded by witnessing trees called the “Clearing.” The space is known only to her community, those who felled the trees, and a few deer.¹⁰

⁵ Hua Hsu, “Nathaniel Mackey’s Long Song,” *The New Yorker*, April 5, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/12/nathaniel-mackeys-long-song>.

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 79.

⁷ Layli Phillips, “Womanism: On Its Own” in *The Womanist Reader*, ed. Layli Phillips (New York: Routledge, 2006), xxxiv. Phillips also describes womanism and Black feminism as cousins. *Ibid.*, xxxiii.

⁸ William Stringfellow, *William Stringfellow: Essential Writings*, Selected with Introduction by Bill Wylie-Kellermann (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 124–125.

⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, With a new foreword by the author (New York: Vintage, 2004), 102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

Gorman creates a similar Clearing with her words. She speaks into being, to quote Morrison, a “wide-open place.”¹¹ One might say Gorman creates a rhetorical space for her own words and for the listeners’ reception of those words. As I thought about this dynamic, I wondered whether, in a womanist frame, preaching is an act of clearing or an act of speaking into a clearing? In any case, I would link this “wide-open” rhetorical space to Thurman’s vision of “common ground.”¹² After reading your paper, I became more curious about the different contemporary manifestations of Thurman’s common ground today. Can it be created in a static form or is it necessarily evanescent—appearing only to those with eyes to see and ears to hear? And how might we, like Gorman (and Zilpha Elaw?), develop more polyvalent speech? One potential example drawn from nineteenth-century African American preaching is John Jasper, who wove oblique or clandestine messages into sermons that he preached to audiences that included whites and African Americans and both enslaved people and slaveholders.¹³

Questions on Scripture and Violence

What does Amanda Gorman teach us about the role of scripture in the public square? I experienced preaching as deeply embedded in the poem, but not driving it in a heavy-handed way. And I felt that, in this case, it flourished in the back seat.

What is the relationship between the contemplative poet-preacher-dreamer and the reality of violence? One of the compelling moments in your paper arose in your reflection on Gorman’s liveliness—her bright yellow jacket and red headband-tiara or “crown.” Indeed, she stood in cinematic contrast to the capitol’s grey stone and the crowd of dignitaries in business or military attire. Watching the video, I noticed Gorman’s dance-like gestures and rhythmic delivery. She brought vibrant colors, dance, and music into the staid atmosphere of the Inauguration.

At the same time, deathliness surrounded the reading of the poem—not just on January 6th but in the wave of rhetoric that followed. And as radiant and joyous as she was, when I read your paper, I could not help juxtaposing her—a buoyant young poet who is small of stature—with the mob. The comparison reminded me of how lonely preaching can be. Her personal mantra seems crucial in counteracting loneliness and vulnerability, reminding Gorman of the ancestral cloud of witnesses who speak to and through her.

I was also reminded of how our words hold both Pauline weakness and divine power (2 Cor 12:9). Gorman’s embodied vitality in the face of death provides a vivid image of the ministry of preaching. Her liveliness and charisma touched something in her audience and generated a body of listeners who can tolerate ambiguity and seek tenderness. This dual longing is a gift in our polarized rhetorical landscape.

Threats of Celebrity and Acquisition

And this leads me to my last question about celebrity. Though each person in our Consultation focuses on a forward-looking figure, you are the only one in our group who writes about someone who is still alive. Gorman is alive literally and metaphorically in that she is not letting the wretchedness of celebrity culture squelch her life.

What do we make of Black contemplative thought as yet one more potential acquisition in the market? Clearly, even Black contemplative preachers cannot entirely escape the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (Richmond, IN: Friends United, 1971), xiv, 2–3.

¹³ Richard Lischer, “John Jasper” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, eds. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 278–279.

commodifying effects of celebrity culture, but Trey, I was grateful for your reflection on Gorman's solidity amid these dynamics. By noting that she was not an instant success, she challenges America's worship of the fast and the grand.

Her assertions about her success taking a "lifetime" and a "village" indicate her spiritual depth. I hope these responses will encourage preachers who seek to emulate her not to do so by merely attempting to perfect their language but instead by growing as *listeners*—that is, listening to God, the Ancestors, and Creation as she does.

Closing Thoughts

Looking back on his teenage years, Howard Thurman tells a story about a time when he opened his mother's bedroom door without knocking and found her praying.¹⁴ Yet, he was the one who was stunned because she was radiant. The serenity and glow he saw in her was an arresting indication of the power of prayer. But as I see it, the "light" seemed to be both in his mother's face *and his recognition of it*. And the same might be said of Trey and Amanda Gorman. They are both light bearers who shine forth with homiletical wisdom and I look forward to reading new works from you both.

Participating in the Homiletical Theology Project was one of the most rewarding experiences in my academic career. From the start, the climate of warmth and openness facilitated true collaboration. There was room to struggle, doubt, and be honest about the many ways that our current historical context challenges long-held paradigms. The depth of conversation we had is rare in academic spaces. At some point, and I am not sure when, our group gelled in such a way that our communal work seemed to supersede our individual contributions. As a result, I left Boston with more than fresh ideas; I left with new friends.

¹⁴ Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 15.