

Donyelle C. McCray. *Is it a Sermon?: Art, Activism, and Genre Fluidity in African American Preaching*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2024. 166 pages. \$28.00

In her stimulating book, *Is it a Sermon?: Art, Activism, and Genre Fluidity in African American Preaching*, Donyelle C. McCray challenges traditional and contemporary perceptions of the sermonic genre. Seminarians and professors of preaching will find this book to be a pivotal discussion piece centered around powerfully effective alternatives within sermonic proclamation. McCray argues for sermon fluidity and centers the African American church as the home of these sermonic expressions. By fluidity, McCray communicates that sermonic genre is not monolithic or static; sermons are fluid, with movement and a variety of performance expressions. She sets the stage for an argument that stretches our imagination, fosters proclamatory inclusion, and empowers the body of Christ, particularly those who have been historically silenced and marginalized. McCray suggests that this book is about “the shoreline of homiletics, the place where preaching laps up against other forms of expression” (1).

In the introduction, McCray’s very writing reflects resistance, as she challenges the normative and conventional hermeneutical and homiletical definitions of the sermon. She offers a homiletical treatise that confronts those who often limit Christian proclamation to Sunday morning oratory from the pulpit. This traditional site of preaching, largely derived from dominant and conservative ecclesial and academic voices, attempts to legitimize “who” is authorized to preach and “how” the sermon should sound. To challenge this, McCray invites the reader to ask these poignant questions: “What modes of preaching get overlooked due to genre classification? What types of proclamation go unrecognized because they don’t meet our expectation for what a sermon is supposed to look like?” (2).

McCray organizes this seminal text in five chapters, each one focusing on an African American who engages in “genre-bending preaching” in their own improvisational and boundary-expanding proclamatory practice. True to the title of the text, McCray explores the artistry of dance in Thea Bowman, the melodic lyrics of Mahalia Jackson, the mystical contemplative practices of Howard Thurman, the literary genius of Toni Morrison, and the sacred skillful quilt making of Harriet Powers. These examples assert that artistic expression is, in fact, a form of preaching that transcends a stationary and static Sunday sermon.

Each chapter follows a consistent structure. First, a brief, but attention-gripping biographical sketch invites readers into the important details that shaped the inner lives of each “preacher.” After these personal portraits, McCray explains why and how the expressions of each of these artists and activists legitimately function as a sermon. She makes a compelling case that preaching in the African American church tradition is a bodily, sacred performance that requires mental and physical exertion. Of Mahalia Jackson, McCray states, “The emphasis on embodied wisdom turns on the assumption that a sermon is less like a speech and more like a performance of a biblical text or a performance of Christian truth” (22).

Three components make this text vital reading for upper-level graduate students looking to become more effective scholar-practitioners. First, McCray anchors her argument within the African American preaching tradition by identifying familiar artistic modes within the Black community and church as valid and bona fide acts of proclamation. For example, McCray rightly states, “African American women’s quilting has been an embodied practice that has often transferred cultural knowledge” (26). In similar fashion, the art of dancing and singing, represented here through Jackson and Bowman, respectively, are as foundational to worship in the Black church as preaching.

The second noteworthy strength is McCray's privileging and prioritizing of women as equally powerful partners of proclamation alongside their male colleagues. Four of the five preachers in the book are women. Black women have long struggled to find agency within the Black church, all while being ardent and powerful supporters. By featuring Jackson, Bowman, Morrison, and Harriet Powers (and fellow quilter Rosa Lee Tompkins) within their own autonomy and power, she demonstrates that these women are exemplars in their respective artistic medium, totally independent from male assistance and permission. The book includes various options for contemporary application, including, "Legacy and Practical Insights," stimulating questions for contemporary audiences, and challenges to identify other wordless ways of preaching (24).

While McCray mentions other possible examples of art and activism in the introduction, one or two more exemplars could have strengthened her argument and provided even more possibilities for exploration and reflection. Nevertheless, *Is it a Sermon* makes an important contribution to the field of homiletics by inviting us to think expansively and creatively about the forms and instantiations of preaching.

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