Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for February 2008. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Kimberly Connor, Dolan Hubbard, Carolyn Jones, and Teresa Stricklen.

To leave your own question or response to M. Cooper Harriss's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

In Montgomery, Alabama The Civil Rights Memorial symbolically illustrates the fluid relationship between community and individual that Mr. Harriss explores in his analysis of the writing of Zora Neale Hurston. Maya Lin designed the memorial to encompass the whole civil rights movement, recognizing that while it was very much a people's movement, it was made possible by the contributions and sacrifices of many particular individuals.

Furthermore, one component of the black granite memorial unwittingly underscores the complicated interplay of oral and literary traditions that characterizes African American “speakerly” texts. Inscribed on a nine-foot-high wall are words from the Book of Amos, publicly spoken by Martin Luther King on two historic occasions--the start of the
Montgomery bus boycott and the March on Washington: "We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." The biblical text, however, is attributed to Dr. King, not to Amos, visually illustrating the borrowing, sampling, and free range of biblical adaptation and liturgical interaction found in African American writing.

Harriss observes that the community functions as a kind of moral arbiter on the performance of African American sermonizing. From Hurston, we also know that to show that "the apostles walked and talked like section hands," is not a transgressive exploitation of sacred text, but a creative adaptation inspired by the text, performed by the preacher, and encouraged by the community. Thus, to Harriss’s observations I would add that, critical to his understanding of a speakerly text or preacherly voice is an appreciation of the playful, performative, and even competitive nature of African American sermonizing.

In addition to the rubrics applied by Mr. Harriss is the ever-present “will to adorn,” which Hurston cites in “The Sanctified Church.” The criteria applied to the preacherly voice are not simply hermeneutical, but also aesthetic. The performance must also (using modifiers applied to jazz by Albert Murray), “extend, elaborate, and refine” the cultural moment or product. Making meaning also involves creating beauty; they work in tandem. Murray’s formulation of “stomping the blues” also applies in theological terms—the Saturday night abandon that leads one to stomp the inevitable blues characterizing African American life is followed by Sunday morning worship and eventually a return to dreary work on Monday morning. The complete ritual performance, therefore, extends before and after the sermonizing on Sunday; all are necessary for a full appreciation of the call and response ethic between individual and community, the insatiable will to adorn, the inevitable need to stomp the blues.

One of the energizing tensions of African American literature writ large, but especially its autobiographical tradition, is the way in which extraordinary individuals try to convince their readers that they are ordinary, just like them. For example, "Black Boy" relates experiences that may be characteristic of ordinary black lives, but establishes that how the author responds makes him extraordinary. This tension still holds out for the ordinary the hope that they, too, can be extraordinary.

I hope that Harris takes his method and applies it to "Moses, Man of the Mountain," because I think in many complicated and disarming ways this text illustrates the thesis he is trying to advance. Here, the anthropological material "performs," rather than "illustrates," a crucial distinction Harris makes in interpreting "Their Eyes Were Watching God." I would advise, however, that this valuable insight be coupled with an appreciation for the context in which Hurston was writing. She and her anthropological contemporaries, Herskovits in particular, were
finally dispelling Frazier’s notion that slavery had erased African survivals from black culture. Indeed, her texts of all genres are among the few period documents we have that validate certain folkways, retentions, and customs not identified elsewhere.

I might also put forth my reservations about a critical approach that actually distances the reader from the very point one is trying to make. For example, consider Harriss’s observation: “On a semiotic level, this liturgical reaction is not entirely unjustified. If the sermonic even embodies social interaction rituals, then the introduction of a racial dynamic signals a radical moment of semiotic disjuncture.” Huh? I think he means to say that the black folk don’t like it when the preacher speaks like a cracker.

Okay, obviously I exaggerate. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that perhaps in our academic work we should be mindful of the same imperatives we observe and interpret in African American discourse. The excessively jargonistic and systemically derived language of academia can become the opposite of the playful and signifying language of the blues—it commodifies African American culture to speak to and serve a largely white academic audience while speaking across the very population it seeks to interpret. And since we are already remarking on irony, is it possible that the Martin Marty Center chose to feature Harriss’s essay in February because that is Black History Month? If so, then the Center would indeed be offering an example of a “culturally authoritative speakerly rhetoric.”

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I am a homiletician, a preacher teacher. I have studied rhetoric, literary theory, linguistics, semiotics, hermeneutics, narrative theory, aesthetics, poetics, performance theory, orality, philosophy of language, phenomenology, and metaphysics—in addition to and as part of my studies in theology, liturgics, ritual theory, Biblical studies, and homiletic history and theory. So I am greatly appreciative of M. Cooper Harriss’ work that recognizes the genius of preaching in practice and theory.

Harriss begins by adopting the argument of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in the “The Signifying Monkey,” pointing out that Gates missed an important oral tradition that shapes African-American life—preaching. Harriss then goes on to argue that preaching provides an added dimension of meaning as a framework literary critics can use. He proves this through an examination of the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and...
Harriss wisely begins with situating the African-American preaching tradition in worship. But he overlooks something important even as he alludes to the world of worship that the preacher symbolizes. The world of worship is a charged ritual space where the divine and human meet, opening onto a transcendent dimension that causes us to ask the big questions all human beings have in the face of the Mystery that holds our lives. This larger world worship is a window into is the sovereign world of God known as the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is not some pie-in-the-sky-in-the-sweet-by-and-by notion of where we go after death. As indicated by the Greek (basileia), the Kingdom is not a place but the sovereign activity of God for the good of the world. It is characterized by shalom--peace, justice, harmony, health, wholeness, and care for all people. God’s reign transcends our human categorical divisions and consequent power plays, focusing on a harmony of differences that are unified in our worshipful submission to God who loves all equally. The Kingdom of God transcends the notion of church and the human division into sacred and secular categories. It is something that is at hand now, in part, until such time as it is fully manifest in this world. So while it may seem as if we are staring dumbly at the dark mystery that surrounds Job-like human life, our eyes are watching God. This is the stance of Christian worshipers who believe, yet plead, “Help our unbelief.”

It seems to me that Hurston’s novels, like a preacherly text, open onto this ultimate world of all preachers’ texts, exploring what such living looks like in everyday life. Her novels are not just ethnographic narrative explorations; they are also theological. Through her biblical allusions and inclusion of preachers and sermons, Hurston also seems to be exploring what it means to be distinctly African-American without losing the transcendent dimension of the Kingdom world represented by all-too-human African-American preachers who are narratively employed to keep us in contact with God’s sovereignty that holds and judges all.

By keeping the preachers real as those with the shortcomings of sin, Hurston’s preachers cannot represent the holier-than-thou white Western metaphysical tradition that whitewashes all difference into the universalistic hegemony of modernity. Instead, they open all us sinners onto a world in which we are all judged by how well we care for one another in our unique, embodied existence here and now. By not talking more about the larger world (the Kingdom) that preachers and preaching signify, Harriss misses an opportunity for literary criticism to engage in deeper moral analysis than it often currently does instead of devolving into the inevitable conflict of interpretations.

After analyzing Hurston, Harriss calls for preaching, which partakes of literary criticism, to, in turn, nourish literary criticism as “a method of literary inquiry.” Why? Homileticians work with the same dialogue
partners as literary criticism, but we use them for different ends with differing metaphysical commitments. Does Harriss just want literary critics to be as forthright as preachers about the metaphysical assumptions underlying their work? There are larger hermeneutic issues here that also need further exploration: what is the written text's connection with the real world; which of the worlds represented in and referred to in texts is considered ultimately real; and how are judgments made about what is fitting and true among all these worlds? For preachers, the oral and written texts of all true language point to and partake of the power of the larger world of God’s sovereign reign which serves as the touchstone for discernment. Are literary critics willing to go there?

There has been much written on African-American preaching; the same is true of liturgical theological sources. Here would be fodder for further work.

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Anonymous
Post: 07 Feb 2008 22:47    Post subject: Dolan Hubbard’s response to Cooper Harriss

In his conclusion, M. Cooper Harris makes a trenchant observation that “literary scholars should find studies of liturgy, homiletics, and other disciplines among the 'ministerial arts' invaluable for articulating new modes of literary discourse that contribute to a broader understanding of vernacular literatures or, as Henry Louis Gates puts it, 'speakerly texts.' But also, as Hurston reminds us, preaching is to African-American literature what the Homeric tradition is to the Western canon. In all these ways, the implications of preaching as a method of literary inquiry may in fact extend beyond the provinces of African-American vernacular literature.”

Zora Neale Hurston’s work bears witness to the desire of black people to argue, live, love, and die in a place of their own creation and to center themselves in a universe independent of the tyranny of man-made states of oppression. To the extent that Hurston externalized through language the values of black culture, she saved the text—the cultural values around which black people organized their social reality.

In “The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination,” I show that as a direct result of their exclusion from full participation in American society, African Americans attempted to redefine themselves and their history through speech acts. “Grounded in the church and based to a large extent on improvisation, these speech acts, keyed to the preacher’s speech act, provided the aesthetic underpinnings for black oral expression. Forced to imagine creatively their face, black
people created a mythology to affirm their tradition as valid and meaningful for all people” (4).

The black sermon is the central proof-text of African American cultural production. The black preacher stands as the ultimate model for the articulation of a self in a society where the cultural script has rendered the community invisible. As virtuoso, the preacher brings all segments of his or her fragmented community together, for they are keyed to his voice, “God’s trombone.” Black America’s best writers—including W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Margaret A. Walker, and Toni Morrison, and this list is by no means exhaustive—have tapped into the preacher's ritual form of expression—the sermon—to tell the unresolved story of the struggle over race and rights in the United States, and, indeed, to poke fun at the preacher.

Hurston took her cue from generations of largely unlettered black preachers, those “black and unknown bards,” in the words of James Weldon Johnson, who polished the English language to a rhetorical brilliance—a poetry that could not be captured on the pages of a book but was written on the hearts of the community—that challenged those who followed in their proud shoes to bring their rhetorical “A” game or stay at home. In “Jonah’s Gourd Vine” and “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” Hurston both pays tribute to the black sermon as a culturally unifying document and celebrates the enduring legacy of this vibrant cultural heirloom that is an intergenerational bond.

Immersed in the “preacherly” tradition, a highly polished second language to her, Hurston, perhaps unconsciously, used the sermon as a platform in her anthropological studies (read as a proxy for ethnography) as evident in “Mules and Men” and “The Sanctified Church.” In “Jonah’s Gourd Vine,” her first depiction of the black preacher in literature, Hurston did not achieve success. Why? Rhetorically, as Harriss observes, she tried a verbatim translation. The result is that the text falls flat.

Of course, the untrained eye misses the verbal architecture-tronics that Hurston weaves into the structure of “Jonah’s Gourd Vine,” in her masterpiece, “Their Eyes,” and Nanny’s sermon (much in the same way Chinua Achebe reworked English to capture the tenor and tone of Ibo culture in “Things Fall Apart”). Hurston used her critical and creative powers to bring into being a new worldview in which her readers and characters could readily imagine freedom. She illuminated how people who spoke the same language existed in a parallel universe when it came to the meaning of freedom.

From the comfort of the castle of her skin as one who was both a product and a producer of the “preacherly” tradition, Hurston intuitively understood that generations of largely unlettered black preachers transformed a venerable form—the sermon—into the rhetorical linchpin of African American discourse. The African American sermon is a
testament to black people’s powers of conception, a suggestion that their abilities to create, grasp, and use symbols are just as valid as those who oppress and would deny them their humanity (expressed in song as “This Love I Have, the World Didn’t Give It to Me”). In the tradition of those “black and unknown bards,” Hurston presents the reader with a sterling example of signifying of the highest order in her work, especially in “Their Eyes.” It stands as a love supreme dedicated to how the people who walked in darkness not only saved the text, but also transformed the text (the Christian Bible) that was daily profaned in their midst into language in a new key. Let the church say “Amen.”

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Post subject: Carolyn Jones: The Preacher and the Practice of Countermemory

M. Cooper Harriss, in “The Preacher in the Text: Zora Neale Hurston and the Homiletics of Literature,” examines the role of the preacher and the sermon in Zora Neale Hurston’s writing. The preacher in the pulpit, Harriss argues, “supplies the foundation from which a culturally authoritative speakerly rhetoric emanates.” As a pivot at which integration or disintegration may take place, the sermon serves to anchor (or to set adrift) communal and individual identity. Given or denied the ability to speak, Hurston’s protagonists find or lose self.

Here, I want to address the formation of memory in Hurston’s texts and Harris’s final comments on the uses of literature in homiletics, a practical art. The sermon, I would argue, is a site of memory, individual, collective, and cultural. The call and response, the interaction between preacher and congregation that, as Harriss shows, actually forms text—testimony—produces a countermemory, an enabling and freeing force in the face of oppressive metanarratives.

I take the distinctions between memories and memory, testifying and testimony from the works of Paul Ricoeur and Moses Moore, Jr. In “Memory, History, and Forgetting,” Ricoeur writes that testimony is the transition structure between memory and history and that every memory is an element in a quest. In “‘Testifying’ and ‘Testimony’: Autobiographical Narratives and African American Religions,” Moore observes that testifying “alludes to the confessional tradition within the black religious experience,” while testimony has more “‘factual’ connotations” and is subject to “the traditional canons of critical historical assessment.”

Harriss shows how Hurston demonstrates the power of the sermon to
raise local concerns (testifying) of African Americans to the level of testimony, (in)forming African American and American identity. More simply put, the “sanctified church,” is the space in which the preacher, whose individuality is directed by the congregation, generates an “interpretative hermeneutic” of his audience. It is a double action: the preacher forms a countermemory faithful to the experience of the congregation, who holds the preacher up, and simultaneously integrates the community and individual stories into the larger, received metanarrative (Christianity).

As Harriss demonstrates, Hurston moves the sermonic tradition beyond the church itself. The world becomes church, sanctified through the capacity to generate countermemory. The preacher is portrayed as both hero and scoundrel in Hurston’s work, but also as, above all, protagonist—a “player,” one who can contend; one who is a central actor. When Janie weaves the memories of life into testimony for Phoebe, she both claims her identity, as Harriss indicates, and helps Phoebe to shape hers. That action is sermonic and religious. That Hurston’s text ends with Janie facing—indeed, as part of—the cosmos as a woman who is whole and at peace shows us the scale of Hurston’s religious vision.

Harriss’ essay is very helpful for understanding, as he sets out to do, “the vernacular mode of American culture.” I believe Paul Gilroy, as critic, most fully thinks through African American artistic cultures. In “The Black Atlantic,” Gilroy reminds us that the one form African Americans were allowed to practice in slavery was art. Art was both useful (as with quilts) and entertaining (as with music) for the master class. But within performance was subversion and signification. Hurston’s insights about African American originality as a mode of signification, “the re-interpretation of extant material,” reflect this. In one sense, this performative/practical dimension of African American culture has made it integral to—and transformative of—American culture in general.

In my experience of the black church, church and culture are closer than one might like to think. The cadences of the preacher, like the poetical sermon Harriss cites from “Jonah’s Gourd Vine,” are the cadences of African American music and speech. I think of how easily Sam Cooke moved from church to secular stage, though he suffered for it. Or how Marvin Gaye used religious imagery in his erotic lyrics. The boundaries between secular and sacred are more permeable than we often think, particularly in performance.

Like Harriss, I mourn that the “practical” disciplines in Religious Studies are often seen as less serious. I think this will change. To go back to where I began—the construction of memory, I suggest that the postmodern turn to ethics, to practice—as in Foucault’s “Care of the Self”—is moving us towards a sense that religion is not just something we only think or believe internally, but is something we do, we practice, and necessarily with others.
The practice of selfhood of African Americans is incredibly influential globally. We see Homi Bhabha using Toni Morrison’s work forcefully in his sociological theory. In my department, students from Tunisia and Japan study African American literature and culture. Why? Because African Americans have developed strategies for dealing with fractured subjectivity that are informative for other postcolonial cultures.

These strategies are evident not just in thought but in the practices that emerge from the black community—of which a particular sermonic tradition is one. The double consciousness is addressed—and perhaps, undone—by embracing a more fluid identity, and putting it into practice. This has been described in various metaphors: as a fluid or performative self, or as a jazz or blues identity, to name a few. The doing is both individual and communal; the self is not a self without others. Harriss’s examination of Hurston offers insights into potential models for (re)thinking sermonic practice as a way into community and self-understanding. Alice Walker uses a line from Stevie Wonder as an epigraph to "The Color Purple": "Show me how to do what you do/Show me how to be like you." Maybe the doing is the way to bridge not only disciplines, as Harriss suggests, but also academy and culture.

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