

Making New Spaces in Between: A Post-Reflective Essay Weaving Postcolonial Threads into North American Homiletics

Yohan Go, David Schnasa Jacobsen, and Duse Lee
Boston University School of Theology

Introduction

This post-reflective essay is intended to take up and weave common threads from the consultation papers for the sake of making new spaces in contemporary North American homiletics. However, it should be noted that, though we weave these threads, they are themselves also porous, hybrid, and changing. The threads that we identified thematically in the papers for our homiletical reflections here include hybridity and identity, Third Space, loss and memory, performance, context, postcolonial hermeneutics/imagination, and self-reflexivity. Why these thematic threads in particular? We diverse editors believe these threads can be woven in the following way. First, hybrid identity is closely related with the notion of Third Space, since postcolonial preaching envisions a Third Space where hybrid identity is forged. Second, that which was “lost” under the influence of neo/colonialism, different subjugated memories of the past, can be recovered for the sake of constructing identities homiletically going forward. Third, forged and recovered identities call for performance elements as a means of broadening our homiletical focus to not only how and what to preach but also where and therefore with whom to preach. Fourth, by virtue of this changing where and who of preaching, postcolonial understandings of context invite us to embrace both synchronic and diachronic views of context, which means understanding the inherent power dynamics within them. Fifth, the thread of postcolonial hermeneutics/imagination is needed to revision reality in ways that are truly historical, dialogical, and diasporic. Finally, the thread of self-reflexivity helps to open up the possibility of moving beyond the reproduction of colonial discourse in preaching.

Yet because we are weaving, it is just as important for us to acknowledge, as do several of the essays above, that these postcolonial threads connect deeply with ongoing themes and threads in contemporary homiletic theory in North America as well. Along the way, we hope to show the warp and woof of this new, more explicit relationship between homiletics and postcolonial theory and theology, to see how this weaving might further develop the discourses of identity, memory, performance, context, imagination, and participation that are already at the heart of our field. In the process, we hope to open up new critical spaces in between for preaching in intercultural contexts.

A. Hybridity and Identity

A postcolonial understanding of hybridity and identity offers fresh insights for the field of homiletics, particularly in understanding not only the identity of preacher and hearers, but preaching’s task of identity formation in a community. With the exception of some postmodern visions of preaching, other approaches such as traditional deductive preaching, inductive preaching, and narrative preaching largely assume the homogeneity of the church and symmetrical relationships between preachers and listeners as the foundation for the communication in preaching. These approaches often explicitly or implicitly aim to develop a univocal identity of the community that relies on shared cultural, racial or ecclesial experiences and commonality. From the post-liberal perspective, for example, one of preaching’s primary goals is to create a distinctive ecclesial identity that is co-constitutive with Jesus’s identity

rendered in the gospel narratives.¹ Thus, preaching aims at building up a univocal and self-enclosed identity of the church based on the gospel narratives. The effort to build up a homogeneous identity of the faith community often ends up in a binary logic that differentiates between “us” and “them.” This coheres with the inner logic of colonial discourse. Unless this unconsciously employed colonial logic is overcome, preachers may unintentionally contribute to sustaining colonial discourse and serve the empire.²

The postcolonial concept of hybrid identity—which is not fixed, but fluid, porous, and constantly shifting—challenges the myths of homogeneous identity. In postcolonial perspective, building up a self-enclosed, univocal identity of the faith community by means of preaching is problematic. Rather postcolonial preaching, as Kwok defines it, seeks to create a Third Space where different cultures and identities meet and hybrid identity is forged. Instead of aiming at the development of some univocal identity of the community, preachers must destabilize hearers from the “common sense” of colonial identities by naming colonialism as a present reality and challenge the binary logic of empire by revealing an ambiguous postcolonial reality where one can be both the colonized and the colonizer simultaneously. Hence, the identity of the faith community should not move toward becoming a self-enclosed univocal identity, but to open-ended and fluid senses of identity.

B. Third Space

Among the authors of the essays, Kwok strongly emphasizes the importance of the notion of the Third Space for postcolonial homiletics. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha’s understanding of hybridity and its in-between space as the Third Space as well as Christopher Baker’s application of them to the hybrid church, Kwok indicates that the Third Space disrupts a dominant binary logic and distinction in the postcolonial context by challenging narratives of modernity and any attempts to define the other. She suggests that postcolonial preaching is to “create a Third Space so that the faith community can imagine new ways of being in the world and encountering God’s salvific action for the oppressed and marginalized.”³ There are several key characteristics of the Third Space: consistency of multiple, fluid, porous, constantly shifting identities along with one’s translocality, openness to difference, mutual dialogue between hidden/marginalized voices and transformation, and thus living differently. In the field of homiletics, though it is relatively less attended, this Third Space has been proposed with different terms, such as Rebecca Chopp’s in-between space,⁴ Justo González’s marginal space,⁵ or most recently Charles Campbell and Johan Cilliers’s liminal space. It should be especially noted that the liminal space is closely related to Kwok’s, since it is a space where the distinctions between center and margins are disrupted and a creative change/transformation takes place—usually impossible in the structured society.⁶ In this sense, the notion of the Third Space is one of the core concepts that will be developed and expanded in the future discussion of postcolonial homiletics.

¹ See Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006), particularly in chapter 9.

² For the definition of empire, see Sarah Travis’s essay above.

³ Kwok, 2.

⁴ Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991), 62–66, 107–115.

⁵ Justo L. Gonzalez and Catherine G. Gonzalez, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1994), chapter 1; Justo L. Gonzalez and Pablo A. Jiménez, *Pulpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), chapters 2 and 3.

⁶ See, Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), particularly chapter 7.

C. Loss and Memory

One key thematic thread from the consultation on preaching and postcolonial theology is the notion of the connection of loss and memory. The role of memory has been regarded as crucial for the formation of individual and/or collective identities, even though they become more porous and shifting in postcolonial discourse. In relation to memory, Paul Connerton elucidates how the memory/identity of groups is conveyed and sustained through commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices.⁷ Both of them are inseparably related with each other, since commemorative ceremonies are embodied practices performed by the participants. Thus, memory is not only personal and cognitive but also socially habitual. However, a problem arises when memory is disrupted by colonialism. Willie James Jennings takes up and expands this notion and traces the history of colonialism/racialism, focusing on four historical personages and unearthing the interrelatedness of different losses: space, memory, language, and history, which provide the moral content of one's identity: "The loss indicates the destruction of the fine webs that held together memory, language, and place to moral action and ethical judgment."⁸ As a result, as Travis and Valle rightly indicate, both the colonized and the colonizers are under the control of colonization and are segregated, competing with each other and commonly experiencing loss. In this sense, postcolonial preaching should illumine loss in order to restore memory for the sake of reviving one's individual and collective identity. For this task, Kwok suggests that the preacher should evoke memory of the past and inculcate new values and understanding, using creative forms of the common folk and popular religiosity.⁹ Valle deals with how to reframe postcolonial preaching and worship by restoring and applying the lost memory/tradition of the pre-Columbian religion of the Taíno, in an effort to decolonize them from a Caribbean perspective. Although the thread of memory and loss is not totally new to homiletics, it is relatively undeveloped. Kwok's concern and Valle's ideas find echoes in John McClure's proposal of the need for "counter-memory" to encounter memory's others "by looking at the inscription of history on the marginalized body and reading backward to the countless lost events."¹⁰ Not only on a methodological level but also on an ontological level, the notion of loss needs continued illumination in postcolonial homiletics.

D. Performance

Many of the authors of the above essays expand the understanding of preaching beyond its conventional definition, which refers to only delivering a sermon on the pulpit, transmitting truth by means of logical persuasion. A shared understanding of preaching among many of these authors is that preaching is a communally performed event. Lis Valle places preaching in a liturgical setting where worshipers communally participate in a movement from tension to connectedness and journeying imaginatively from lament to celebration. Timothy Jones describes both Black preaching and Hispanic preaching as communal events that consist of interaction between preachers and listeners. Preaching as a communal event presupposes the understanding of preaching as performative action. In other words, "the sermon is not a sermon until it is actually preached."¹¹ Kwok integrates performative dimensions of preaching in her

⁷ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁸ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁹ Kwok, 6.

¹⁰ John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 42–43.

¹¹ Timothy Jones, 5.

definition of postcolonial preaching as “conscious performance that seeks to create a Third Space.”¹² In this perspective, preaching does not refer only to the utterance of the preacher, but includes preachers, hearers, the performative act of preaching, liturgical setting, and a faith community within a particular socio-political context. Postcolonial preaching as performance seeks to construct new realities by consciously performing possible new identities, which destabilize any narrowly defined identity politics.¹³ If preaching is a communally performative act, the public gathering of the worshiping community itself can be a performative act of preaching for social and political change through repeated performances.

A postcolonial understanding of preaching as a communal and performative action challenges much North American white mainline homiletics to extend the scope of its work from a too-narrow focus on the activity of preachers. Homiletics need not be limited to the concerns of how and what to preach, but extended to the socio-political realms where the church takes its communal, performative act of preaching. Black preaching traditions provide rich resources in understanding of preaching as performance. In *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God*, Frank Thomas delineates the performative tradition of black preaching. A preacher performs tradition with a particular purpose and direction to accomplish some goal. No preacher as performer is an isolated agent, but always related to other elements such as music and liturgical contexts and tradition. Congregations’ feedback and improvisational response to the preacher are critical aspects of preaching.¹⁴ In Thomas’ holistic understanding of black preaching from a performative perspective, preaching acts, preaching agents, hearers, and preaching contexts are essential parts of the preaching event as a whole and cannot be separated. Like Black preaching, a postcolonial understanding of preaching as performance not only expands the scope of homiletics, but also challenges it to use more diverse forms of preaching beyond the traditional monological lecture style and integrating more performative elements into preaching itself.

E. Context

The emerging discussion of preaching and postcolonial theology also complexifies the thematic threads of context in contemporary North American homiletic theory. In her book, *Preaching in an Age of Globalization*, Eunjoo Mary Kim traces an important arc for the discussion of context in the field. Kim points out that much discussion of context in the field of homiletics has been limited to what she calls “intra-contextual” focus, that is, that context refers to the immediate environs within a congregation as a kind of synchronic, closed entity (Tisdale, Nieman/Rogers).¹⁵ Along with that, of course comes the problem of how context itself is described: is “context” a univocal reality? Kim’s transcontextual vision pushes back on both notions to render context with ever greater complexity and nuance. The impact for preaching is considerable. If context is a meeting place not just of a theological worldview of the preacher and one of the congregation, but a meeting in fact of multiple contextual realities and claims, the kind of conversation that preaching sponsors becomes much more open-ended and complex. It places, as Kim claims in her latest work, preaching in an inherently multicultural context.

Another thread of research around context embraces a more profoundly temporal and diachronic element into contextual reflection. In their book *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation*, David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Kelly add “situational” features to talk

¹² Kwok, 2.

¹³ Kwok, 3.

¹⁴ Frank Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2013), 6.

¹⁵ Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Preaching in an Age of Globalization* (Louisville, WJKP, 2010), XX.

about occasional preaching as a kind of *kairos* moment.¹⁶ In his recent Princeton dissertation, “Preaching as Sabotage: Power, Practice, and Proclamation,” Adam Hearlson expands on this notion to describe contexts and contending “fields” where, following the work of both Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau, preaching from the margins can become a kind of tactical moment of *kairos* in which persons come to speech as an act of resistance in practice.¹⁷ The result is a way of mapping congregational contexts and systems of power, and in such a way that strategic, transformative engagement becomes possible for interrupting precisely the ways in which power can reproduce itself in such contexts.

In many ways a postcolonial view of context begins to hold these two aspects, the synchronic and the more diachronic view of context *together*. Here with postcolonial theology context is more richly synchronic in terms of its reality as a plurivocal, intercultural space. Instead of trying to engage hearers as exemplars of a univocal monoculture, it envisions the relationship of preachers and hearers in a much more dynamic way. Because of postcolonial theory’s attention to *power* and differentials, it becomes possible to unpack precisely those reproductive forces of power that over time re-inscribe monolithic and binary colonial identities. The result is a much more discerning and mixed way of perceiving cultures and identities at play in the preaching moment—and in way that joins together synchronic and diachronic views of contexts. At this point, postcolonial theology engages homiletic theory to weave both the synchronic and diachronic threads more deeply into its contextual work.

F. Postcolonial Hermeneutics/Imagination

The notion of the postcolonial imagination is important for Kwok’s vision of postcolonial theology and practice. This postcolonial imagination can enrich the texture of the already rich conversation around imagination in the field of homiletics. It invites persons to a kind of revisioning of reality and in three crucial dimensions: the historical, the dialogical, and the diasporic.¹⁸

The Historical. History embodies a perspectival memory that requires putting multiple elements together, a notion that Kwok compares to quilt making. These kinds of historical moves stand in contrast to power discourses which foreclose subjectivity for those lacking status and documents and largely ascribes to others roles of “victim” or “hero(ine).” The importance of the historical in postcolonial hermeneutics and the imagination is that as remembering “in public” it makes memory survivable. In this way history is not written by the winners.

The Dialogical. For Kwok dialogical imagination is important because of the different religious and cultural traditions in Asia and other parts of the world. Such a dialogical imagination is important not just for sponsoring dialogical hermeneutics of the likes of Kaufmann and Gadamer, but also to *resist* a desire for imagination that tries to see things whole: especially identities of cultural traditions—which only lead to reification and the collapse of difference. At the same time, the alienation of life problematizes all readings and makes the need for a dialogical imagination and hermeneutic all the stronger, especially in a way that accounts for power differences among dialogue partners.

¹⁶David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert A. Kelly, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009).

¹⁷ Adam Hearlson, “Preaching as Sabotage: Power, Practice, and Proclamation.” PhD Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2013.

¹⁸ What follows is our thumbnail sketch of Kwok’s work in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: WJKP, 2005), chapter 1.

The Diasporic. Here the diasporic does not mean for Kwok an idealized, essentialized, or historically resolved sense, as with certain twentieth century interpretations of the Jewish diaspora, but in a sense both de-centered and multicentered through experiences of immigration and commuting between “home” and the “place of work” in Western metropolitan centers. This diasporic space is where the negotiation of multiple loyalties and identities takes place. For Kwok this means storytelling and weaving of traditions to work through an unfinished diasporic identity. What do “home” and “roots” mean given the diasporic imagination? For this reason, the diasporic sponsors a kind of *intercultural* discourse.

This threefold notion of the postcolonial imagination has already had a powerful impact on homiletics. With her new book, Sarah Travis has begun to explore its importance for communities in various realities of intertwined identities of the colonizers and the colonized.¹⁹ Yet the reach extends further. At the level of preaching and the act of representation the need for a postcolonial imagination has become painfully clear. Justo and Catherine González have also pushed imagination to include the poor who are “not present.”²⁰ Most importantly, however, the notion of using imagination to *resist* seeing things whole represents a new challenge to a field long drawn to the category of imagination in preaching. For this reason alone, the postcolonial imagination will continue to occupy a more important position within the field going forward. It may even be pushing homiletics to develop a new kind of rhetoric or poetic of the plural and multivocal.

G. Self-Reflexivity

Postcolonial reality is complex and ambiguous. There is no clear cut distinction between the former colonizer and the colonized in the postcolonial context. One can be both colonizer and colonized at the same time. Therefore, a critical self-reflexivity is essential for preachers in order to avoid unconsciously reproducing colonial discourse and serving the system of the empire through preaching. By means of self-reflexivity, a preacher can recognize “an invisible framework on which our lives are built and within which our identities are constructed,”²¹ namely the empire, and examine one’s own connection with the empire. One of the important tasks of decolonizing preaching is helping those with relative power realize their own captivity to empire and need for liberation. For those without power, such a realization should help them to develop a self-awareness of the oppressive situation and how their minds and bodies have also been dominated by the empire.

In the *Liberating Pulpit*, Justo González criticizes the fact that liberal theologians and liberal churches do not recognize their own oppression because most of them see themselves as free despite being captive to socio-economic structures. Without recognizing their own captivity, González argues, they cannot understand liberation theology.²² To be really free, recognizing one’s own captive status through critical self-reflectivity is essential.

In a similar sense, preachers should critically reflect on their own preaching practices—such as the use of images, symbols, and interpretation of the Scripture—for vestiges of colonialism and elements of empire. Jones, for one, provides Katie Cannon’s womanist critique of Black preaching as a postcolonial move of self-reflexivity in Black preaching, through which

¹⁹ Sarah Travis, *Decolonizing Preaching: The Pulpit as Postcolonial Space* (Eugene: Cascade, 2014).

²⁰ Justo L. González and Catherine G. González, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980) 100.

²¹ Sarah Travis, 1.

²² Justo González and Catherine González, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1994), 25–26.

Cannon places the task of a self-reflective critique of preaching on hearers who have the ability to critique the use of the rhetoric in the sermon. The postcolonial task of self-reflexivity is not the solitary task of a preacher, but is a communal task. Thus, the community of faith as a self-reflexive hearing community critically engages with and participates in the preaching event.

The task of communal self-reflexivity in a postcolonial homiletic might be understood as the critical mode of congregation's participation in preaching, which can profitably be related to the idea of congregation's participation in preaching event in the new homiletic. For example, Fred Craddock contends that a faith community is not only a pastoral context, but also an active participant in a preaching event. Listeners do not passively hear and receive what the preacher proclaims at the pulpit. Rather they actively participate in the preaching event by filling in the details of images in the sermon and finishing an open-ended sermon.²³ For Lucy Rose, conversational preaching is a mode of conversation within the local community of faith. In conversational preaching, the preacher and the local community of faith gather symbolically at a round table, exploring together the Word of God for their lives and the life of the church and the world.²⁴ Through this ongoing communal conversation around the Word, the central conversations of the local church are shaped and reshaped. The local community of faith, including both the preacher and congregation members, communally and self-reflexively engages with diverse matters of faith and life in preaching event. In this sense, developing a way of nurturing the local community of faith that is capable of being self-critical and self-reflexive is a task of conversational preaching and invites weaving into the task of contemporary homiletic theory.

Conclusion

We editors, as homileticians, have sought to weave the thematic threads of the Consultation on Preaching and Postcolonial Theology more carefully into the world of contemporary North American homiletic theory. We think the unique ways in which postcolonial theology has engaged the intercultural context of contemporary preaching offers new modes of conversation within homiletics and between homiletics and other fields. Because homiletics itself is already being shaped by many different postmodern currents, including postcolonial theory and theology, it is uniquely situated to take up the task of both weaving and making space in between for new ways of thinking about the practice of preaching for our time. Our hope as editors is that this consultation's conversation, and the weaving that emerged out of it, offers a deeper and more profound hope of making new spaces "in between," a means of perhaps decolonizing homiletics itself.

²³ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 53.

²⁴ Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 4.