

Black Preaching in Brown Places: Towards the Development of a Black Mestizo Homiletic

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Abstract: *Many Black neighborhoods across the United States are becoming increasingly Latin@. Black churches in these neighborhoods will need to adjust their ministry practices in order to build community amongst this changing demographic. Borrowing Elizondo's notion of mestizo as one who can operate as both insider and outsider in different cultural locations, this paper begins to reimagine Black preaching in the churches that serve these changing neighborhoods. Using the postcolonial themes of marginality, hybridity, and self-reflexivity, this paper proposes the beginnings of a Black Mestizo homiletic that looks to merge Black and Latin@ preaching traditions in order to form congregations representative of the community.*

The Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles, CA, has served its community faithfully since it was founded in 1885. The oldest Black church in Los Angeles, Second Baptist played a very important role in the Civil Rights Movement and actually became the west coast pulpit of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during the movement. While ministering at Second Baptist, Dr. King preached messages about serving the community and building the “beloved community” for all people. The challenge of preaching in this “beloved community” has changed in recent years for Second Baptist’s current Pastor, Rev. William Epps, as there have been major shifts in the demographics of Second Baptist’s neighborhood. A community that was once comprised of mixed income African Americans, has now become “a very low-income, largely Latino immigrant community.”¹ While the church continues to be primarily African American, made up of members that commute in from other areas, there is a new challenge of preaching in ways that promote the idea of serving this newly Latino community. As the community surrounding this Black Church changes how will preaching within the church change in order to continue to encourage service to this new community? How might the rich tradition of Black Preaching, to paraphrase Rev. Epps, serve the community “without losing its identity or history?”²

Furthermore, current demographic trends in the country suggest that the challenge Rev. Epps and the Second Baptist Church face are not unique to him and their location but that many black churches will see a significant increase in the Latin@³ population of their neighborhoods. As such, many Black pastors will be challenged to develop new homiletic strategies in order to preach effectively to these Black congregations in changing neighborhoods. This paper will describe potential homiletic options for this context. After a brief description of the rationale for focusing on preaching in these shifting congregational settings, postcolonial theory will be the critical method used to develop a new homiletic for this emerging Black and Latin@ context.

¹ Veronica Terriquez and Vanessa Carter, “Celebrating the Legacy, Embracing the Future: A Neighborhood Study for Second Baptist Church” http://csii.usc.edu/documents/2nd_Bapt_Report_web.pdf

² Jennifer Medina, *In Years Since the Riots, a Changed Complexion in South Central* NY Times online, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/25/us/in-south-los-angeles-a-changed-complexion-since-the-riots.html?_r=4&pagewanted=all&

³ For the purposes of this paper Latin@ and Hispanic will be interchangeable terms when referring to a people group or when used as a descriptor.

More specifically, by putting some of the major themes of postcolonial theory in conversation with tenets of Black and Latin@ preaching, this paper will offer suggestions on the creation of a *Black Mestizo* homiletic.⁴

Why Preaching?

For the Black church, especially those churches that reside in the urban centers of our country, this demographic shift will prove to be a great challenge. Pastors who were used to preaching to congregations of people who share a common culture and history will now be forced to address congregations with less obvious similarities. There are many aspects of church life that will be affected by these demographics shifts but the place where most change can be affected in the congregation is through the sermon. Black preaching is a special practice to the Black church, one that is central to its life. In their seminal work, “The Black Church in the African American Experience,” Lincoln and Mamiya say that “the sermon or, more accurately, preaching is the focal point of worship in the Black church, and all other activities find their place in some subsidiary relationship.”⁵ If the Black church is going to find a way to welcome new Latin@ neighbors into the congregation, the pathway will have to be forged by the sermon. It is through the preaching moment that the congregation will be able to be prepared to better receive a new population and it will also be through the sermon that any new community would be able to be maintained. It is imperative that the preached word be capable of transmitting a message of community and unity to a changing congregation. Postcolonial theory can greatly aid in this intercultural congregational development.

Marginality

Postcolonial theory is a relatively recent conversation partner with the field of homiletics but it seems especially appropriate to help develop a way of preaching in intercultural contexts. Postcolonial thought challenges the imperialistic ways of “first world” countries in their constructions and representations of the people of “third world” countries and racially oppressed peoples of the world. Edward Said, one of postcolonial theory’s early writers, suggested that postcolonial criticism investigates those “system[s] of discourse by which the ‘world’ is divided, administered, plundered, by which humanity is thrust into pigeonholes, by which ‘we’ are ‘human’ and ‘they’ are not.”⁶ Postcolonial theory addresses the ways in which peoples are able to develop their story and how communities are formed in oppressive contexts. This is a theme already prevalent within Black and Hispanic preaching traditions.

⁴ I use *mestizo* in the way that Virgil Elizondo and other Latin@ theologians have as a reference to one who resides on the border between different cultures. A *mestizo*, in this usage, is one who does not fit easily within a particular cultural group but instead sits as an insider and outsider in different cultural backgrounds. A *mestizo* is able to operate in different cultural worlds with both understanding and some distance. A *Black Mestizo* homiletic would then take seriously the “borderland” urban communities that I am envisioning for this project, which see a mix of Black and Latin@ people. This type of homiletic is being imagined for communities that are on the border, and that have to learn to operate between these different cultural identities. For further reading see Virgilio Elizondo, “Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection,” in *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, ed. Allan Figueroa Deck (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 104–23. See also, Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

⁵ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 346.

⁶ Raka Shome, “Postcolonial Interventions in the Rhetorical Canon: An ‘Other’ View” *Communication Theory*, February 1996, 1, 40–59, 51

Black preaching is distinctively socially located; it is birthed through the sociocultural lens of marginalization and struggle. For Black preachers, the Bible demonstrates “God’s mighty actions on behalf of the marginalized and oppressed.”⁷ LaRue argues that the heart of black preaching is the distinct interpretative key that is produced for Black preachers as they consider the sociocultural context of an oppressed people and the way that God is believed to be present in scripture.⁸ He suggests that Black preaching choreographs an intricate but accessible dance between Scripture and experience. For Larue, the core of Black preaching is the unique way that the exposition of scripture and the life experiences of blacks encounter, inform, and affect one another.⁹ Latin@ preaching forms also have been shaped through an experience of marginalization.

In *Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching*, González and Jiménez describe the hermeneutic that much of Hispanic preaching uses to interpret the Bible. The entry point for this hermeneutic is the idea of marginality.¹⁰ The way to access the liberating power of God for Hispanic people is by beginning with an examination of the marginalized and oppressed social location of Latino people in the US. Secondly and similarly to the process to what Larue describes in Black preaching, there are points of contact found in the biblical narrative for the current social location of the Hispanic community.¹¹ Both Black and Hispanic preaching traditions already encourage reading the Bible from a place and perspective of marginality for preaching. These traditions already have what could be described as postcolonial leanings as both African American and Hispanics exist as oppressed people groups within the United States.

Naming the shared oppressed condition may be one influence of postcolonial theory on Black preaching. This sentiment or including this type of analysis in preparation for preaching in these Black and Hispanic communities could go a long way towards promoting a unified community. Both Black and Hispanic people have felt the sting of being “othered” and naming that experience is a point of connection for the two merging communities. And while this begins a movement towards a Black Mestizo Homiletic more must be said about how these changing congregations can begin to see themselves as one community. Here Postcolonial notions of identity are useful.

Hybridity

Postcolonial thought emphasizes the idea of hybridity and the space between cultures. This theory resists the urge to “totalize” cultural understanding and seeks to deal with what happens when cultures merge together. A homiletic for the kind of church environment imagined for this paper will have to engage the idea of hybridity and in order to speak to the new kind of community that is being imagined. When Rev. Epps says that they must serve their community without losing their history, he seems to be intimating a concern that developing this new intercultural context poses a danger to cultural formation. This may prove one of the largest hurdles for preaching and forming congregations made of Black and Hispanic people; both Black and Hispanic Preaching traditions have a major impact on their respective racial formation.

⁷ Cleophus LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster Knox, 2000), 15.

⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁹ Ibid, 14.

¹⁰ Justo L. González and Pablo A. Jiménez, *Púlpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 44.

¹¹ Ibid.

A more recent take on Black preaching is found in *Practical Theology for the Black Church*, by Dale Andrews. While formulating a practical theology for the Black church that links popular folk religion and Black theology, Andrews affirms the commonly held notion that Black preaching is a communal event that ultimately creates a dialogue between preacher and congregation hearers. But Andrews also notes that within its communal function, Black preaching “nurtures black personhood within the biblical revelation of God’s activity in spiritual and historical liberation.”¹² The faith identity and racial identity of the congregation is forged through the preached word. Preaching then in Black congregational contexts is helping people learn who they are in God, but also who they are as Black people in the world.

Culture is also an important component of Hispanic preaching. Though there is a sense that Hispanics belong to a distinct culture, in another sense there are within this community many different cultures representing many distinct countries. “And yet, when compared with the dominant Anglo culture of the United States, all these various cultures have much in common, and therefore can properly be seen as a single culture¹³.” Hispanic preaching must hold this unique cultural situation in consideration while also being tasked with preserving and defending culture.¹⁴ Here in lies a potential non sequitur; if one of Black preaching’s primary goals is to shape Black identity, and one of Hispanic preaching’s primary goals is to shape Hispanic identity, it may be impossible for preaching to occur Black and Hispanic intercultural settings that is able to shape each of these individual racial identities. But what postcolonial thought suggests is the notion of a hybrid identity, whereby preaching in this newly imagined environment might lead to the formation of a new kind of racialized identity. More specifically, a postcolonial concept already within the Hispanic preaching tradition offers a useful model. Hispanic theologians have devised to help make sense of this unique cultural situation is the idea of *mestizo*. This concept speaks to the great mixture among Latino people and the way that God uses this mixture to bring about a beautiful new creation.

Mestizo theology celebrates the mixing of cultures and life on the borders that can prove as fertile ground for God’s creative acts. Though originally a reference to the new race of people that resulted from the mixing of Mexicans and Spanish Catholics, Virgilio Elizondo and other theologians have reinterpreted the term as one that acknowledges the aesthetic appeal of mixing different people together.¹⁵ In his book *Galilean Journey*, Elizondo claims that Jesus was a *mestizo* in every way as one who lived in the borderlands of Galilee and had regular contact with a diverse group of people.¹⁶ This *mestizo* ethic along with the theories of hybridity mentioned in postcolonial thought may provide a starting place to cross what may be the largest hurdle for the production of a Black and Hispanic homiletic, namely how can people be formed culturally in these mixed group settings.

Black pastors’ embrace of *mestizo* theology would allow them to produce sermons that not only celebrate the newfound diversity in the congregation and neighborhood, but also sermons that would resonate with the cultural sensibilities of the Hispanic people present in these contexts as well. The task for preachers is to begin their hermeneutical analysis of the Bible with a mixed community of marginalized people in mind, that of both Black and Hispanic people. The

¹² Dale Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 23.

¹³ González and Jiménez, 28.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang, and Gary A. Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 92

¹⁶ Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican American Promise* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 55.

movements of Black and Hispanic preaching are similar enough that it seems a creative inclusion of a new audience can serve as a beginning step into crafting what could be called a *Black Mestizo homiletic*.

This concept of *mestizo* should ring familiar with Black people as there are already within Black culture mechanisms that allow for unity amidst diversity. One example of a pastor with these sensibilities is Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, III of the Trinity United Church of Christ. In an article written for The Huffington Post entitled “Why I am Unashamed and Unapologetic about My Faith,” Moss says that he has a “jazz homiletic” that democratically appreciates the many different voices, or instruments, represented in the congregation. In that same article he describes Black religious culture as being “creole” because of its “gumbo ingredient flavor” of African American religious life. He states that “We are not ‘pure Africans’ nor are we European, but we are an amalgamation of rich traditions, and narratives shaped and formed in a kettle of Africanity.”¹⁷ Moss’ point is that Black culture, and by implication black preaching, is already adept at holding together a mix of different subcultures. Though not named as such in the article, this is certainly a postcolonial way of operating. There is much in the black church tradition, already present, that would lend itself to this kind of hybridized congregation.

In *We Have Been Believers* James Evans sets out to produce a comprehensive ecclesiology of the black church. For Evans, the maintenance of community is one of the primary markers of this great institution. He argues that unlike many other ecclesial bodies, the Black church emerged out of “deep seated cultural tendencies toward solidarity and association among African Americans.”¹⁸ The Black church was formed in order to create community in the face of unjust conditions. With a society that treated Black people as less than human, the Black church was able to provide a safe place to belong. Black people have always been a very heterogeneous population but one of the unifying agents of this group has been the joint experience of oppression that the community has faced over the years.¹⁹ Other ethnic groups have been welcome within the Black church but the focus of the preaching, worship, and ministry has been to aid Black people.

The identity of the Black church, according to scholar J. Deotis Roberts “is best expressed in the images of exile rather than exodus, of institute rather than only event, and in terms of its structure rather than just its dynamic.”²⁰ Roberts is suggesting that the Black church is in a perpetual quest for stability within an oppressive context, a decidedly postcolonial idea. If Roberts is right, the Black church has been “postcolonial” since its inception, and the preaching that has maintained its identity in the midst of a society that seeks to oppress it has also always been postcolonial. And in the fight to maintain some identity and dignity there has always been a sense of solidarity with all who are oppressed.

This call for solidarity is further demonstrated by a walk through James Cone’s thoughts on the Black church and Black Theology. In a work focused more on Black church ecclesiology entitled *For My People*,²¹ Cone spends more time on the need for the Black church to be in solidarity with other oppressed groups. Here Cone suggests that the work of the oppressor is to

¹⁷ Otis Moss III, “Why I am Unashamed and Unapologetic About My Faith,” The Huffington Post, January 1, 2012 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-otis-moss-iii/christianity-faith_b_1178369.html

¹⁸ James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 120.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 121.

²⁰ Evans, 131.

²¹ The entire title is *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church: Where have we been and where are we going?*

keep the oppressed divided and fighting amongst one another in order to control them.²² Cone suggests that the oppressor wants different oppressed groups to be suspicious of each other in order to prevent collaborative justice efforts.²³ It is possible then, that another option for preaching in this imagined space is that instead of trying to form Black or Latin@ racial identity, or even trying to form a new hybridized identity, the preacher can preach in such a way that that solidarity is established between the two racial groups through the joint experience of oppression.

Earlier I mention that both communities experience the “sting of being othered” and that the preacher could potentially preach in a way that named this feeling among Black and Hispanic groups. But beyond simply naming this joint oppression, preaching in Black and Hispanic contexts may be a place that allows for these two distinct communities to imagine and experience each other’s story. Here I turn to Howard Thurman’s notion of imagination as a potential method for making this connection across ethnic groups. Thurman understood imagination to be “the angelos of God” that allowed one person “to establish a point of focus in another man’s spirit and from that vantage point so to blend with the other’s landscape that what he sees and feels is authentic, this is the great adventure in human relations.”²⁴ For Thurman, the imagination is a tool that can allow for people of different ethnic groups to be able to understand and experience each other’s story. Learning to wield the imagination in this way could possibly be a powerful tool for preachers in the Black and Hispanic congregations that are the subject of this paper.

In both Black and Hispanic preaching traditions the preacher is not alone in the creation of the sermon. The preacher works in concert with the community to deliver the word. In *Black Preaching: the Recovery of a Powerful Art*, Henry Mitchell situates Black preaching as a communal event forged through the interaction between preacher and congregation. Here it appropriate to quote Mitchell here at length:

Black preaching has been shaped by interaction with the listeners. If the Black preaching tradition is unique at all, then that uniqueness depends significantly upon the uniqueness of the Black congregation, which talks back to the preacher as a normal part of the pattern of worship.²⁵

The cacophony of “Amen” and “Hallelujahs” give rise to a communal sermonic event that captivates and inspires celebration amongst the entire congregation. Hispanic preaching is strikingly similar. For the Hispanic community, the sermon is not a sermon until it is actually preached. And even this preaching moment is a communal event as Hispanic preachers must be cognizant of a congregation’s audible and inaudible responses while they preach.²⁶ Hispanic congregations are known to shout “Amen” or “Hallelujah” or even wave a hand or handkerchief during the message to express their affirmation of what the preacher has to say. The preacher in a Hispanic setting must engage in a true give and take with the congregation in order to meet the needs of everyone assembled. In the communal construction of the sermon, the preacher in this new hybridized context would lean on the affirmation of the entire community, Black and

²² James Cone, *For My People* (New York: Orbis Book, 1984), 142.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 182–183.

²⁵ Mitchell, 100.

²⁶ González and Jiménez, 58.

Hispanic, to attempt to deliver a word for everyone present. And while a reliance on the Spirit in the moment of preaching could aid in the formation of word that would speak to a Black and Brown congregation, there may be some communal methodological techniques that could prove useful in the sermon writing process to ensure that all of the voices of the community are heard. One such method is the “Roundtable Pulpit” developed by John McClure. This method implores preachers to “ask others for sermonic input, empowering them as biblical interpreters and practical theologians through collaborative pre-sermon brainstorming and feedback sessions.”²⁷ The idea is that the preacher engages different members of the congregation as homiletic conversation partners. While this is a concept somewhat foreign to Black and Hispanic contexts, it could prove quite useful for preacher tasked with preaching in an intercultural context, specifically the Black and Brown context that has been imagined for this paper. The preacher can guard against a cultural blind spot in their preaching than by having a conversation with a representative cross section of the church during the sermon creation process. Another method that might allow a better grasp on this hybridized congregation is the type of homiletical ethnography called for by Nora Tisdale in *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. Tisdale calls for preachers to be ethnographers of their congregation. She wants preachers to produce sermons that “not only give serious attention to the interpretation of biblical texts, but which give equally serious attention to the interpretation of congregations and their sociocultural contexts; preaching which not only aims toward greater ‘faithfulness’ to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but which also aims toward greater ‘fittingness’ for a particular congregational gathering of hearers.”²⁸ To craft these sermons, preachers will have to have an intimate understanding of their congregations and the conflicts and viewpoints that exist within them. Tisdale provides practical tools for doing this work in Chapter 3 of her work entitled “Exegeting the Congregation.” With a congregation that is ethnically diverse and theoretically hybridized, the kind of ethnographic work that Tisdale call for would prove quite useful for the creation of sermons that spoke to the entire congregation.

Self-Reflexivity

A final major theme from postcolonial theory that seems appropriate to bring to a Black and Hispanic homiletic is the idea of Self-Reflexivity. Postcolonial theory challenges its theorists to analyze themselves, and to question their own motives and connections to empire. This means that in examining one’s own practice, the postcolonial critique must ask, “to what extent do my scholarly do [my] scholarly practices... legitimize the hegemony of Western power structures.”²⁹ Black preaching practice needs to go through this critique. In the development of a homiletic that will be more welcoming and formational to a changing congregation, Black preaching practitioners will need to interrogate Black preaching in search of elements of empire.

In “*Toward a Womanist Homiletic: Katie Cannon, Alice Walker and Emancipatory Proclamation*,” Donna Allen offers a model of this kind of self-reflexivity as she critiques the Black preaching tradition through a womanist lens. In developing this womanist lens of analysis, Allen leans heavily on Katie Cannon’s critique of Black preaching. Cannon suggests that rhetorical criticism would need to be a part of the womanist preaching event.³⁰ In other words,

²⁷ John McClure, *Otherwise Preaching: A Postmodern Ethic for Homiletics* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 61.

²⁸ Nora Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 32–33.

²⁹ Shome, 45.

³⁰ Donna Allen, “*Toward a Womanist Homiletic: Katie Canon, Alice Walker and Emancipatory Proclamation*.” New York: Peter Lang, 2013, 10.

listeners would need to be able to critically engage the rhetoric of the sermon. Cannon envisions congregations where the people have the ability to name and critique the rhetorical tools that are used within a sermon. Instead of merely telling the pastor “good sermon” or “you really touched me today,” Canon is arguing for developing congregations that have the kind of skill to analyze the rhetoric in the sermon. She believes this is necessary to unmask within the sermon what she calls “linguistic violence.”³¹ Canon is quite critical of Black preaching and believes that there are many sexist and racist social contradictions “housed in the sacred rhetoric of Black preaching that gives women a zero-image of [themselves].”³² Canon’s notion of bringing rhetorical analysis to the sermon listening process would help guard against the patriarchy that is currently present. Using a womanist homiletic to bring light to the negative aspects of Black preaching is a postcolonial move of self-reflexivity and an example of the kind of process that would greatly benefit this preaching tradition in intercultural contexts.

Towards a Black Mestizo Homiletic

Rev. Epps and the Second Baptist Church of Los Angeles, and other pastors across the country are blazing a trail by proactively responding to the increase of Latin@ people in their neighborhood. As they turn their minds towards how their preaching should evolve to speak to these new contexts, postcolonial thought has offered some viable strategies for reimagining the preaching task in an emerging Black and Latin@ congregational context. A Black Mestizo homiletic, as discussed here, would take seriously the idea of Black and Latin@ solidarity as oppressed peoples, hybridized identity and self-reflexivity. This research has the potential to serve as a model not only for Black churches in increasingly Hispanic neighborhoods, but for any church that is experiencing a shift in its community demographics. The rhetoric of the preacher shapes the world of the congregation. Preachers of all ethnicities will need to remain open to new homiletic strategies for the formation of the world as the world around the churches continue to change.

³¹ Ibid, 15.

³² Ibid, 18.