

Frank A. Thomas. *Introduction to the Practice of African American Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016. 190 pages. \$23.

Writing with a deep passion and commitment to the particular practice of African American Preaching, Thomas has provided a work that perhaps may better be described as an introduction both to the practice and study of African American preaching. While making a case for the inherent rhetorical and theological nature of African American preaching, Thomas also offers a rationale for African American preaching to have its own place within the theological academy. As the director of the Academy of Celebration and Preaching at Christian Theological seminary, the first academy dedicated solely to the practice of African American preaching, Thomas is committed both to preserving the rich African American preaching tradition and working toward its continued development. This work demonstrates this mission as it offers strong reflection on the history of African American preaching as well as offering potential roadmaps for the future of African American preaching. Ever the teacher, Thomas leaves peppered throughout this work what might be called “research breadcrumbs” as indicators to future students of places within the field of African American preaching where there could be future research.

Chapter one begins with a “bus tour” of the study of African American preaching, demonstrating how this practice transitioned from a primarily oral practice to an oral/written tradition. Here Thomas addresses the relationship between folk preaching and educated preaching as well as the changes in the study of African American Preaching before and after Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Chapter two makes the most explicit case for African American preaching as an inherently theological and rhetorical practice. After a brief history on the connections between the study of homiletics and rhetoric, Thomas argues that “rhetorical processes are fundamental to African American preaching, and not something that one adds on after the preacher has figured out the rational content of what to say” (69). Thomas invokes both Zora Neale Hurston’s work on African American preaching and Gates’ seminal work *Signifying Monkey* to help demonstrate the marriage between the rhetorical and theological in African American Preaching. Chapter three offers Gardener C. Taylor’s “In His Own Clothes” as a paradigmatic sermon within the African American tradition. The rhetorical analysis of this sermon also allows Thomas to offer his thoughts on what makes African American preaching distinctive from other preaching forms. In Chapter four Thomas brings in rapper Jay-Z as a conversation partner, not only to discuss his work on existentially authentic performance (keeping it real) but also because Thomas believes that the blurring of the lines between the sacred and the secular in African American culture calls for studying “whenever and wherever powerful oral communicative expression is uttered” (9). Chapter five talks about the issues of race and economics within African American preaching, paying special attention to challenge of preaching to Black millennials who desire social justice action from the church. The final chapter written by Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright serves as afterword for the text and is a reflection on his seven decades of experiencing African American preaching.

This work lays a strong foundation for thinking of and studying African American preaching as its own distinct practice. Thomas’ depth of experience as pastor, scholar, and lover of African American preaching comes through these pages, providing a survey of different ways that African American preaching can be studied and demonstrating the depth of this practice. Its import stretches beyond information on African American preaching, as all students and teachers of preaching would find this work useful. While clearly written in conversation with scholars and

practitioners of Black preaching, Thomas' work offers a new and substantive entry into the African American preaching library while also providing an exciting preview of the work that will come from students at the Academy of Preaching and Celebration.

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