



DYNAMICS OF CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

FOREWORD BY JEREMY BEGBIE



## SERMONS THAT SING

**MUSIC AND THE PRACTICE  
OF PREACHING**

NOEL A. SNYDER



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

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# THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN MUSIC AND PREACHING

## FOUR MODELS

RECENTLY ON SOCIAL MEDIA, a friend of mine admitted his initial insecurity as a younger preacher in a predominantly African American church because he did not practice the traditional Black church preaching techniques of “whooping” or “tuning up.” He said that he eventually came to accept that preaching with authenticity and clarity would serve him better than trying to mimic those traditional homiletical norms, which he did not feel he could embody authentically. Of course, since musicality is perhaps the most distinctive quality of the techniques my friend referenced, his preaching may seem less “musical” without them. Yet I wonder if there may still be a healthy measure of musicality in my friend’s preaching despite his eschewal of some of the more overtly musical phenomena that characterize the predominant homiletical style of his ecclesial tradition. Perhaps my friend has more musical instincts than he knows, if only he were given more tools to identify them.

This chapter will explore a variety of musical-homiletical methods, situating the phenomenon of “whooping” among a much wider range of options for integrating musicality into preaching. Preachers should find inspiration in knowing that there is more than one model for integrating musical instincts into the practice of preaching.

### PREACHING AND THE ARTS

The practice of Christian preaching has a long history of dialoguing with other artistic disciplines. The most popular and longstanding conversation partner

is most certainly the art of rhetoric, chiefly as developed in the ancient Greco-Roman oratorical tradition.<sup>1</sup> Ever since Augustine rigorously defended the use of rhetoric in his classic homiletics textbook, *On Christian Doctrine*, preachers have been urged to carefully consider not only what to say but also how to say it. This necessarily involves artistic considerations and aesthetic judgments.<sup>2</sup> If one is to admit the necessity of “arming oneself,” as Augustine so vividly pictures it, to defend truth against falsehood through aesthetic training,<sup>3</sup> then a flourishing of dialogue between homiletics and other artistic disciplines seems almost inevitable.

However, as Lucy Lind Hogan notes, the practice of preaching has not always had an easy relationship with art and aesthetics, for at least three reasons. The first reason, according to Hogan, is the enduring opinion that the truth of the gospel should be so compelling in and of itself that it should not need artful presentation. Secondly, there is often a distrust of imagination and creativity, which are seen as dangerous tools in the hands of a fallen humanity. The third reason, Hogan writes, is the fear of paying too much attention to the desires of the listener, which could lead to an erosion of respect for God’s revelation.<sup>4</sup> Influential voices of modern times have voiced similar concerns about artistic considerations factoring too prominently in the

<sup>1</sup>See O. C. Edwards Jr., *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 11-14. Lucy Lind Hogan notes a division of the discipline of rhetoric from that of poetics in the classical world, with rhetoric traditionally referring to “the rational, intellectual, and logical dimensions of speech and language,” while poetics traditionally “dealt with poetry, drama, and literature; with the aesthetic and emotive or affective dimensions of language and form.” Over the centuries, however, the two have become one: “While rhetoric was originally conceived as the preparation of persuasive arguments, it eventually came to be equated with a more poetic disposition. . . . Oratory was no longer viewed as political persuasion; rather it was seen as a fine art, as poetics.” Hogan, “Poetics and the Context of Preaching,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 173-74.

<sup>2</sup>Hogan subsumes artistic considerations under the general oratorical category of *poetics*. See Hogan, “Poetics,” 174-75. It is important to note, however, that the separation of form and content—the *what* and the *how* of preaching—is ultimately artificial and unsustainable. As G. Lee Ramsey writes, “Influenced by recent language studies, it is almost a homiletical truism that form and content are inseparable.” G. Lee Ramsey, *Care-full Preaching: From Sermon to Caring Community* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 69.

<sup>3</sup>Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 4.2. The translation of the Latin title, *De doctrina christiana*, as *On Christian Doctrine*, is somewhat misleading, and may perhaps more accurately be translated, *Teaching Christianity*. See Edwards, *History of Preaching*, 106.

<sup>4</sup>Hogan, “Poetics,” 174. For a thoughtful response to the fear that aesthetic considerations will lead to idolatry, see Thomas H. Troeger, *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14-18.

practice of preaching. For instance, in an 1866 lecture on what it takes to be a great preacher, the theologian Horace Bushnell stated, “In preaching . . . the artistic air kills everything.”<sup>5</sup> A more contemporary homiletician, David Buttrick, is similarly reticent to label preaching an art, preferring the term “craft” instead.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these lingering concerns, however, many North American preachers and homileticians have warmed considerably in recent years with respect to homiletical appropriations of the arts. Some credit for this greater openness is likely due to H. Grady Davis’s influential preaching manual, *Design for Preaching*, which compares novice preachers to novices of any other art form and counsels them to cultivate “all the sense and skill [they] can” in developing into skillful practitioners of the art of preaching.<sup>7</sup> The sermon itself, Davis argued, should be regarded as a “living organism” that springs naturally from the material at hand, “showing nothing but its own unfolding parts.”<sup>8</sup> Championing this “organic” understanding of sermon form, Davis freely compared preaching to other arts, especially those arts that unfold as a movement in time: music, drama, and storytelling.<sup>9</sup>

Inspired by such comparisons, and with a renewed commitment to an artistic understanding of preaching, an interdisciplinary conversation has emerged among homileticians who are eager to apply the study of other arts to homiletical theory.<sup>10</sup> For instance, in *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre*, Jana Childers draws on dramatic theory and selected dramatic performance practices in order to develop a more “lively” homiletic.<sup>11</sup> Alyce

<sup>5</sup>Horace Bushnell, “Pulpit Talent,” in *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching from Augustine to the Present*, ed. Richard Lisher (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 88.

<sup>6</sup>“Preaching is always more craft than art.” David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 193. This statement seems to assume that “art” is ultimately self-referential, created “for its own sake,” whereas “craft” is necessarily directed toward some end outside of itself. For a more positive view of the purpose of art, especially in relation to worship and preaching, see Clayton J. Schmit, *Too Deep for Words: A Theology of Liturgical Expression* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 23-25. For a rebuttal of Buttrick and a defense of beauty and aesthetics in preaching, see also Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 11-14.

<sup>7</sup>H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 12-13.

<sup>8</sup>Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 15.

<sup>9</sup>Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 163-64.

<sup>10</sup>For a contemporary defense of understanding preaching as an art, see Schmit, *Too Deep for Words*, 84-86. See also Charles L. Rice, *The Embodied Word: Preaching as Art and Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

<sup>11</sup>Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

McKenzie and Sondra Willobe have similarly ventured into the world of creative writing in search of insights that can help nurture the artful use of language in preaching.<sup>12</sup> Charles Bartow and Clayton Schmit have explored the power of poetic devices for deepening the artistic potential of homiletics,<sup>13</sup> and Thomas Long and Mike Graves have proposed homiletical strategies drawn from the study of the literary and generic forms of the Bible.<sup>14</sup> These many conversations between homiletics and other artistic disciplines have borne much homiletical fruit in recent decades.<sup>15</sup>

## PREACHING AND MUSIC

If, as this book argues, musicality is a powerful yet underappreciated aspect of the overall aesthetic, rhetorical, and theological import of sermons, one might also expect to find a burgeoning dialogue between music and preaching, which is indeed the case.<sup>16</sup> Several studies comparing music and preaching have emerged in recent years, and each represents a unique methodological approach to this interdisciplinary conversation. While each methodology has certain advantages, there are also unique challenges and drawbacks to be noted. The remainder of this chapter will assess the current state of the conversation by examining eight major contributions to the musical-homiletical conversation, grouping them into four major methodologies—or four models. This will provide a starting point for the musical homiletic developed in subsequent chapters of this book. An examination of existing studies will help to identify some of the most prominent themes and insights that emerge when comparing the art of music to the art of preaching.

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<sup>12</sup>Alyce M. McKenzie, *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), and Sondra B. Willobe, *The Write Stuff: Crafting Sermons that Capture and Convince* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

<sup>13</sup>Charles L. Bartow, *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), and Schmit, *Too Deep for Words*, chap. 5. See also Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 1-11.

<sup>14</sup>Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), and Mike Graves, *The Sermon as Symphony: Preaching the Literary Forms of the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997).

<sup>15</sup>For a recent treatment of preaching in relation to the visual arts, see also Daniel Louw, "Preaching as Art (Imaging the Unseen) and Art as Homiletics (Verbalizing the Unseen): Towards the Aesthetics of Iconic Thinking and Poetic Communication in Homiletics," HTS 72.2 (December 2016): 125-33.

<sup>16</sup>The attraction of these two disciplines is not difficult to understand, given the prominence of both music and preaching in ecclesial life, and especially the centrality of each in Protestant worship. Moreover, since music is a performing art, possibilities abound for its relation to performance in preaching.

The musical homiletic advanced in this book will draw on many of the themes and insights of these extant works, but will ultimately pursue a unique course.

***Music in preaching: Thomas Troeger and Luke Powery.*** Methodologically speaking, perhaps the most straightforward method for framing the conversation between music and preaching is that of Thomas Troeger, developed most fully in *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry*.<sup>17</sup> This method involves the inclusion of performed music—with or without texts—in the sermon itself, and therefore might be referred to as the *music in preaching* method.<sup>18</sup> The driving issue behind Troeger’s method is the “spiritual barrenness of a church that is without art,” having needlessly repudiated the spiritual and religious roots of beauty.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Troeger proposes a method by which preachers can reawaken wonder in the lives of their congregants, helping people to “intuit and experience anew the divine realities to which the Bible gives witness” through the inclusion of hymns and music in the actual preaching event.<sup>20</sup>

The *music in preaching* method advocated by Troeger goes beyond the oft-used homiletical technique of quoting hymns or other musical works for the purpose of illustration. Rather, Troeger presents “a particular way of using these arts as a resource for the very substance of what a preacher says.”<sup>21</sup> Hymns and musical compositions can thus “serve as the ‘text’ for a sermon in the same way that preachers regularly use a passage or theme from the Bible.”<sup>22</sup> Not only might this method serve as a vital means of reawakening wonder in a spiritually starved church; it might also help the Western church to become reacquainted with “its own treasure house of great artworks that are inspired by the gospel and alive with the Spirit.”<sup>23</sup> These works are too often ignored, Troeger believes, although they represent a vital source of

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<sup>17</sup>Thomas Troeger, *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>18</sup>For a summary of this general method, see also Thomas Troeger, “Arts,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 177-79.

<sup>19</sup>Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 18.

<sup>20</sup>Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 24.

<sup>21</sup>Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 23.

<sup>22</sup>Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 23.

<sup>23</sup>Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 26. Recent empirical research shows the apparent benefits of such an approach, correlating the resilience of faith communities in the United States, in part, with the value they place on the arts. See Robert Wuthnow, *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

spiritual insight. Incorporation of hymns and musical compositions into preaching can help reacquaint the church with its own spiritual resources, and more importantly, can ultimately teach both the preacher and the congregation how to be more attuned to the movement of the Spirit in the soundscape of their lives.<sup>24</sup>

One of the many examples Troeger provides of this approach is an original sermon based on two “texts,” a biblical text (Jer 8:22-9:1) and an African American spiritual (“There Is a Balm in Gilead”). The sermon begins by lamenting the contemporary state of our world, with its religious violence and spiritual hunger. From there, Troeger examines features of the text from Jeremiah, with its haunting question, “Is there no balm in Gilead?” Troeger then uses the spiritual “There Is a Balm in Gilead” itself as a sort of musical midrash, an interpretive key for answering the question raised by the Jeremiah text.<sup>25</sup> Noting the oppressive conditions in which the spiritual arose, Troeger presents this as an example of “the ability of enslaved Africans to transform sorrow into joy.”<sup>26</sup> This then leads into a concluding section in which a single voice or instrument begins to sound the melody of “There Is a Balm in Gilead,” while Troeger speaks over the music, demonstrating the possibility of moving from the question (“Is there a balm in Gilead?”) to the affirmation (“There is a balm in Gilead.”) in our contemporary context. At the conclusion of the sermon, the whole congregation joins together in singing the spiritual.<sup>27</sup> Music and preaching are thus paired in the most concrete possible way, with the inclusion of performed music in the sermon itself. Troeger’s text includes many other examples of this *music in preaching* method, with the musical selections deriving mostly from the corpus of Western classical, “sacred” music.<sup>28</sup>

A similar method to Troeger’s is found in Luke Powery’s *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope*.<sup>29</sup> However, whereas Troeger incorporates a

<sup>24</sup>Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 85.

<sup>25</sup>On the similarities of Christian hymns and the postbiblical rabbinic tradition of midrash, see Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 30-34. Troeger presents a cogent argument for understanding hymns as midrashim.

<sup>26</sup>Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 46, quoting Arthur C. Jones.

<sup>27</sup>Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 42-48.

<sup>28</sup>In chapter 3, Troeger demonstrates the possibility of preaching on certain features of music itself, noting, for example, the musical idioms through which J. S. Bach conveys certain theological themes by interweaving the performance of several Bach pieces with Scripture and sermon. An excerpt from this sermon will be included at the end of this chapter.

<sup>29</sup>Luke A. Powery, *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).



moderate range of musical genres, from J. S. Bach to African American spirituals, Powery focuses exclusively on the spirituals as a resource for homiletics. Powery's primary thesis is that the African American spirituals, understood as "musical sermons," can provide an antidote to the "candy theology" of so much contemporary preaching in which the reality of death is either ignored or denied.<sup>30</sup> The incorporation of the spirituals into one's preaching life, Powery maintains, is one way to keep preachers grounded and instruct them on the spiritual dynamics of hope. Not surprisingly—and therefore true to the name *spiritual*—Powery's homiletical method incorporates much pneumatology, paying special attention to the resurrection imagery found in Ezekiel 37, in which the Spirit breathes new life into the dry bones of exiled Israel.<sup>31</sup>

Our daily existence, Powery writes, is full of "little deaths," which preachers deny at their own peril.<sup>32</sup> As a model for telling the "gospel truth" in such a spiritual climate, Powery undertakes a textual analysis of the spirituals, while also remaining "sensitive to their musical soundscape."<sup>33</sup> Like Troeger, Powery sees great potential for "enhancing the theory and practice of preaching" by integrating the music of the spirituals into preaching, even viewing them as "musical sermons" in their own right and thus valuing them as "a significant theological and cultural resource for contemporary preaching."<sup>34</sup>

Though Powery focuses mainly on the texts of the spirituals, rather than their musical qualities, and analyzes them primarily in order to demonstrate strategies for engendering hope in the midst of intense suffering and death, he also notes a fascinating connection between the spirituals themselves and the Black preaching tradition. Indeed, as Powery explains, it is highly probable that many of the spirituals arose in the context of the intoned slave sermon.<sup>35</sup> He writes,

The creation of the spirituals through the extemporaneous musical sermonic delivery of preachers in conjunction with the congregational responses was apparently a common feature. Through the call and response of preacher and

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<sup>30</sup>Powery, *Dem Dry Bones*, 2-6.

<sup>31</sup>For a more comprehensive pneumatology for preaching, see also Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

<sup>32</sup>Powery, *Dem Dry Bones*, 3. Powery borrows this phrase from Gordon Lathrop.

<sup>33</sup>Powery, *Dem Dry Bones*, 13.

<sup>34</sup>Powery, *Dem Dry Bones*, 13.

<sup>35</sup>Powery, *Dem Dry Bones*, 22.

congregation, a song arose that I would argue is itself sermonic; musicologist Eileen Southern names this class of spirituals “the homiletical spirituals.” Other accounts suggest that the spiritual originated when a song leader was so moved by a preacher’s sermon that he or she interrupted the sermon by answering him with a song. Nonetheless, the spiritual was rooted in the preaching moment.<sup>36</sup>

Powery notes strong scholarly suspicions that the slave preachers themselves were the main creators of the spirituals. With such a significant degree of overlap, Powery argues, the spirituals can be a powerful homiletical resource for deepening the gospel-shaped spirituality of preacher and listeners alike.

***The musicality of preaching: William Turner and Martha Simmons.*** Though Powery’s main engagement with spirituals is through their texts, his research on the connection of spirituals to the Black preaching tradition, along with his counsel regarding the use of spirituals in developing a truly *spiritual* homiletic, takes him a step beyond Troeger’s *music in preaching* method to a closely related method in the music and preaching conversation, the *musicality of preaching* method. In this method, preaching itself is seen as music—or at least, as having musical qualities—and is analyzed as such. Indeed, Powery straddles this line himself, not only in his own analysis, but also in his own homiletical practice, in which he has been known to break into song at various points, interweaving music and the spoken word throughout his sermons. Powery’s own homiletical theory, however, remains more focused on spirituals as a musical resource to be used in preaching than it does on the musicality of preaching itself.

Another homiletician, William C. Turner, has developed the other emphasis, focusing more on the musical qualities of sermons themselves. In a chapter titled “The Musicality of Black Preaching,”<sup>37</sup> Turner notes the historical biases that have prevented researchers from understanding the performative aspects of Black preaching. Quite unfairly, Turner writes, Black preachers have often been viewed as being devoid of intellect and training.<sup>38</sup> However, drawing on Evans Crawford’s concept of “bifformation” (i.e., formation on

<sup>36</sup>Powery, *Dem Dry Bones*, 22.

<sup>37</sup>William C. Turner, “The Musicality of Black Preaching: Performing the Word” in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 191-209.

<sup>38</sup>Turner, “Musicality,” 193-95.

two levels simultaneously), Turner demonstrates the manner in which the rhythm and intonation of Black preaching can work in conjunction with the intellectual content of the sermon, rather than against it, in order to feed both the mind and the spirit of the congregation.<sup>39</sup> Using a whole repertoire of musical-homiletical tools, Black preachers communicate with sonic authority and seek to achieve spiritual unity among the congregation. Crawford calls this phenomenon “the hum”: when the people and the preacher resonate together in the Spirit, and “the ether” pulsates with “mystic harmonies.”<sup>40</sup>

Noting Henry Mitchell’s strong resistance to the “toning down” of Black preachers through seminary education shaped by Enlightenment values, Turner seeks to reinforce the value of musicality in Black preaching, inasmuch as “the musicality of the African American sermon expresses what is beyond the literal word. It takes rational content and fires the imagination and stirs the heart.”<sup>41</sup> To strip the sermon of this musical quality would be to restrict its spiritual power and lessen its meaning, for “communication occurs not only through the meaning denoted by the words, but in the surplus that seeps up and through the spaces between the words.”<sup>42</sup> The musical signals delivered by the preacher “are below the threshold of formal syntax and grammar. Yet they are clear as crystal within the cultural matrix in which preaching is a musical moment.”<sup>43</sup>

While Turner’s chapter indeed describes several features of typical Black preaching that are best understood “musically,” nonetheless it serves perhaps more broadly as a defense of musicality in the production of meaning in Black preaching. With this as the central focus, less attention is given to analysis of the musical mechanisms themselves that might be operative in Black preaching or the ways in which those mechanisms might relate to the spoken word.<sup>44</sup> Yet with the emphasis placed on musicality as a significant element in preaching, Turner’s work might still be seen as complementary to that of Powery, as well as to the earlier work of Henry Mitchell and Evans Crawford.

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<sup>39</sup>Turner, “Musicality,” 196.

<sup>40</sup>Turner, “Musicality,” 196.

<sup>41</sup>Turner, “Musicality,” 199.

<sup>42</sup>Turner, “Musicality,” 207.

<sup>43</sup>Turner, “Musicality,” 208.

<sup>44</sup>Turner’s chapter does list many musical features used in Black preaching, such as expression, meter, cadence, rhythm, and musical style. However, it seems that the aim is not to catalog or analyze these musical sounds in themselves, but rather to reflect more broadly on the contextual meaning of these musical features. See Turner, “Musicality,” 197.

It is noteworthy, however, that despite the high degree of overlap between music and preaching observed by Powery and Turner, the work of these two homileticians subsequently focuses less on specific properties that are unique to musical sounds themselves, and more on the contextual, spiritual, and theological implications of musicality in preaching. In contrast to this emphasis, the work of Martha Simmons—another practitioner of the *musicality of preaching* method—places much greater emphasis on musical sounds themselves. In a chapter titled, “Whooping: The Musicality of African American Preaching Past and Present,”<sup>45</sup> Simmons examines the quality of *tonality* that has historically given African American preaching such a distinctive sound. More commonly known as “whooping,” this tonal quality of much African American preaching has other names as well, including “squalling, pulling it, intoning, humming, and zooming.”<sup>46</sup> Whatever term is used, this tonal/musical quality in preaching “remains dearly loved and sought after in a large proportion of African American churches.”<sup>47</sup>

Acknowledging the notorious difficulty of defining the phenomenon of whooping, Simmons nonetheless argues that it should be understood primarily as *melody*—itches that are “logically connected and have prescribed, punctuated rhythms that require certain modulations of the voice, and [are] often delineated by quasi-metrical phrasings.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, as Simmons explains, whooping should be distinguished from two other common phenomena in African American ecclesial settings, the practice of tuning (which is often used by laity during well-known, commonly used prayers) and the use of cadence (sometimes accompanied by rhyme).<sup>49</sup> Simmons offers a helpful perspective on the ongoing use of musicality in African American preaching by tracing the deep historical roots of the practice of whooping up to its present-day manifestations, from the tonally rich speech of West African slaves to the various uses of rhythmic tonality among contemporary African American preachers.

<sup>45</sup>Martha Simmons, “Whooping: The Musicality of African American Preaching Past and Present,” in *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*, ed. Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010).

<sup>46</sup>Simmons, “Whooping,” 864. Cf. Turner, “The Musicality of Black Preaching,” 197–98.

<sup>47</sup>Simmons, “Whooping,” 864.

<sup>48</sup>Simmons, “Whooping,” 865.

<sup>49</sup>Simmons, “Whooping,” 865–67.

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