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## Review Of "The Sermon And The African-American Literary Imagination" By D. Hubbard

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**Indiana State University**

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The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination. by Dolan Hubbard

Review by: Yvonne Chireau

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Carby encourages cultural critics to “begin to acknowledge the complexity of [their] discursive displacement of contemporary conflict and cultural transformation in the search for black cultural authenticity.” For Carby, such a focus on the vernacular as an expression of “black cultural authenticity” is particularly problematic during a time when we ought to be concerned with the contradictions, antagonisms, and rich complexity of African American life.

In contrast, the eloquent “On Burke and the Vernacular: Ralph Ellison’s Boomerang of History” by Robert O’Meally offers an alternative perspective. Tracing Kenneth Burke’s influence on Ralph Ellison, O’Meally argues that “Ellison’s critique is not only of a vulgarly Marxian concept of history . . . but of any deterministic or easy schematic tracing of history.” In what appears to be a direct engagement of Carby, O’Meally argues that the vernacular is not

a romanticized or ideological construct. Rather, it is the inversive and inventive edge of African-American culture, constantly in search of newly turned forms. . . . In this sense, U.S. black vernacular forms, as conservative as they can be, also are fueled by an aggressive impulse to change, not only “to make it new” but to make what they do uncopyably different.

This new, changing dynamic of African American culture and of the scholarship that makes this culture the focus of its investigation is certainly evident in this important contribution to African American Studies.

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Dolan Hubbard. *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1994. 192 pp. \$29.95.

Reviewed by

Yvonne Chireau  
*Swarthmore College*

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Professor Dolan Hubbard has written a sophisticated study of the sermon and its numerous appropriations in black American literature. Exploring the relationships between the black preaching tradition and the themes, styles, and structures of the sermon as they appear in African American writing from the nineteenth century to the present, Hubbard elucidates the prominent cultural and aesthetic values reflected in black religion and spirituality. As a historian, I found his analysis illuminating, brimming with promise for those of us who have given attention to the resources provided in African American sacred traditions through interdisciplinary analysis of religious language, symbolism, ritual, and myth. In the black experience in the United States the

sermon has historically stood at the center of the Christian apprehension of a sacred self, both as text and as worldview. The sermon functions as a source of meaning for members of the community of faith and for those outside of the fellowship of believers, for its power reaches beyond the church. As a unique product of African American culture, the sermon is the locus for the articulation of an authentic black voice, an expressive and creative medium that conveys the substance of black existentiality. Within literature, finds Hubbard, the sermon has also provided a touchstone by which writers have deeply probed the heart and soul of an African American ethos.

The sermon is the “heroic voice” of the African American artist, and Hubbard explores the numerous modalities of this voice as it is evoked in the black sacred tradition and employed through powerful oral and aural modes of expression that are utilized by the preacher. These aspects of ritual expression are transformed and articulated within the African American scribal tradition by writers, who place the sermon, in all of its profound resonances, at the center of their narrative structure. Hubbard notes that, as an artistic and inspirational form, the sermon is a “unifying

document" that explicates a value system that draws its impetus from the historical condition of the black community, a community that continues "to grapple with what it means to be black in the west, to engage the twin problems of articulating the self and imagining freedom" (146). The sermon is sculpted and crafted from the resilient clay of African American life. The preacher, as the spiritual mediator between the community and the sacred, speaks for those who share in his vision, affirming the divine presence and vocalizing the community's anger, faith, and love, all the while calling for salvation, freedom, and justice—merging transcendent and immanent visions of redemption and hope. Tapping a cultural continuum with ancestral roots that reach back to traditional African religious sources, the preacher provides a link between the mythical past, the temporal present, and the immanent future by "creating a world," a symbolic universe where history is extended and transcended, where vital but often dormant cultural values are awakened that would lift those who would hear beyond their mundane context and vision.

Hubbard exposes many of the rhetorical strategies deployed in imaginative literatures that appropriate the preaching tradition in both sacred and secular localities operative within texts, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, and others. In their prose, these writers have engaged motifs drawn from the black spiritual heritage, skillfully orienting their imagery and language around an aesthetic center that is defined by the sermon and its preacher. Nowhere is this perspective on the sermon as an aesthetic construct more fully epitomized than in the work of James Baldwin, whose semi-autobiographical *Go Tell It On the Mountain* generates narrative configurations that derive from the sermonic structure itself, especially "the rich oral tradition, the antiphonal call and response, biblical influences and references, vivid imagery, and beautiful metaphors and synonyms" (95) that are utilized to *tell* the story of a single life and family as well as *preach* the story in the familiar styles and language of African American religion. Baldwin privileges the idiom and grammar of the black church in order to affirm the struggle, the overcoming, and the redemption of John Grimes's soul-weary, world-battered kin and community, thereby relating a family history of the Afro-American people as well. Implanted within Baldwin's work and that of other contemporary African American authors is a texture and dynamic exchange that is present within sermonic discourse, the ritual structure by which the preacher creates a view of history that the community shares in and engages with through responsive dialogue. Even as the preacher's voice ritualizes space and time through performance and expressive orality, the black writer is also able to "transform historical consciousness into art" by embracing this worldview. Black artists thus evoke the power of dynamic exchange between preacher and audience by capturing the aural/oral nexus in their narratives—as, for example, in Ralph Ellison's storefront preacher's sermon "The Blackness of Blackness," the poetic centerpiece of his novel *Invisible Man*. Building upon the work of literary critic Hortense Spillers, Hubbard finds a creative center which is the source of both sermonic and literary discourse: In the hands of black writers the preacher/sermon is both trope and structure. Even as the sermon is delivered in order to "create, communicate, and transform" reality by the preacher, so also do writers whose narratives resituate African American sacred culture within the narrative discourses of a black literary tradition.

The form of the black sermon, in its structural and rhetorical modes, occupies both holy and profane contexts, true to its character as the product of African-derived philosophical and religious conceptions that envelop all aspects of being, including the political, the social, the sensual, the psychic. These modes of expression may be manifest within multiple aspects of black life, even as they originate in a worldview that does not sharply distinguish between the boundaries of the sacred and the secular worlds. Though generated by a religious worldview, the literary imagination may or may not draw upon obviously sacred themes as it engages the



sermonic voice. Appropriating historian of religion Charles Long's model of "church and extrachurch" orientations, Hubbard notes that the various construals of religious meanings are not exhausted by Christian permutations, institutional or otherwise. The secular vision that issues forth from the blues and blues culture, for instance, is contained by and often merges with the sermonic tradition. Even as the spirituals become an essential paradigm for conveying the cultural vernacular of black sacred life, so too do the blues as a secular creation, "the sermon without limit" (75) that draws meaning from suffering, and expressively forges freedom out of pain. In literature, as well as in the black experience, sacred and secular modes interact and help to formulate cultural meaning, even as they engender a tension between the religious and worldly orientations for the literary artist.

Some of the earliest sermonic hermeneutics are evidenced in the slave autobiographical tradition in the work of writers such as Frederick Douglass and in nineteenth-century scribes such as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Yet, while Douglass appropriates the sermon and its attendant forms and biblical motifs as a creative source of authority, other early black writers truncated their vision, producing an "uninspired depiction" of African American experience, unable or unwilling to translate the oral and expressive culture represented by the sermon into literary "art." The tensions between cultural ambivalence and critical self-consciousness in relation to a culture of the "folk" are resolved in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, whose protagonist Janie, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, expounds her own sermon and testimony with language that "creates a world," that powerfully brings forth the emergent sacred voice of a black woman in a male-dominated universe.

This important study anticipates future critical work, with the historical texts and writings that document the meanings of African American life by their appropriation of the religious language of sacred rights and liberty. This may include some of the earliest written sermons by blacks, or the published jeremiads of David Walker, Maria Stewart, and other clergy, theologians, and lay intellectuals who forged some of the first sermonic discourses in African American literature. Dolan Hubbard's *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* is a passionate venture into new analytical territory that troves the creative spaces in which black artists have discovered and reformulated the rich spiritual and expressive resources provided by the African American oratorical tradition.

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Joyce Ann Joyce. *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests: Defining African-Centered Literary Criticism*. Chicago: Third World P, 1994. 311 pp. \$16.95.

Reviewed by

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Joyce Ann Joyce's *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests: Defining African-Centered Literary Criticism* is significant as the first book-length effort to formulate the theoretical and methodological principles of Afrocentric literary criticism. The thirteen essays that comprise the book are unified by Joyce's determination to fuse aesthetics and politics, and to develop an academic literary criticism responsive to the needs of a wider African-American community. The opening essay of *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests*, which I shall consider at some length below, presents a rationale and a theoretical framework for Afrocentric literary criticism. The next ten essays, which focus on a wide range of writers (Richard Wright, Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Gwendolyn

Brooks, Arthur Davis, James Baldwin, Sonia Sanchez, E. Ethelbert Miller, Terry McMillan, and Ishmael Reed), exemplify the practical application of the theory articulated in the opening essay. Joyce selects these particular writers not because they