Intro. to Practice of AA Preaching – Frank Thomas

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From Chapter Two:

Negro Expression, Signifying, and the Rhetoric of African American Preaching

Zora Neale Hurston (1901–1960) was a civil rights activist, folklorist, novelist, anthropologist, ethnographer, and “Genius of the South.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Based upon extensive anthropological research and compilations of Southern black oral traditions, she became a critical interpreter of black culture and black ways of being in America. Hurston argues that black people in America, deriving from a cultural history originating in West Africa, have a legacy of an oral tradition, that is, the spoken word and oral transmission of tales, music, dance, proverbs, beliefs, sermons, and so on. This is different than the cultural history of the Western world, which is principally preserved and transmitted based upon the written word, and hence could be called textual.

To contrast oral and textual worldviews, Hurston suggests that language is analogous to money. In primitive communities, actual goods were bartered and exchanged for what one wanted. This finally evolved into a coin. The coin is not real wealth, but a symbol of wealth. Eventually, the coin was abandoned for legal tender, paper money, and then later checks. People with highly developed textual languages have words structured as detached ideas to describe things—“that which we squat on” becomes “chair” and then in scholarly circles, “chair”

becomes even further abstracted to “chairness.” In textual language, words are often abstracted to describe reality, such as “ideation” and “pleonastic.” Hurston calls this “legal tender,” and scholarly words are an example of “check words,” as well as great literature, such as *Paradise Lost* and *Sartar Resartus.*

Hurston suggests that the words of African Americans are action words and not principally abstractions. The African American’s very interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures, which results in rich metaphor and simile. She believes that pictures are easier to explain because “action came before speech.” The oral tradition of African Americans uses words that are “close-fitting”—words that action must be added to, such as “sitting-chair,” or “cook-pot,” because according to Hurston, every speaker has in their mind the picture of the object in use. Hurston admits that much of this has been influenced by the acculturation of African Americans into mainstream American life, but oral traditions still heavily remain in black culture. For Hurston, Western culture thinks in a written language, and African Americans think in word pictures like the hieroglyphics of Ancient Egypt.

According to Hurston, the Negro is famous world over for “imitation” and “mimicry.” This mimicry is not based in feelings of inferiority, as so many have argued, and does not harm the Negro’s standing as an original. Imitation is fundamental to all great art, and indeed is the nature of all art—even Shakespeare. Negro mimicry is, then, the evidence of something that permeates the Negro self, “drama.” . . . Whenever black people act in their own interest, and as an expression of the conscious black self, the action is embellished. Therefore, she suggests that black religious services are “prose poetry,” and the “prayers and sermons are polished until they are true works of art. . . . The beauty of the Old Testament does not exceed that of a Negro prayer.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Drama is a natural and inherent part of African American life in America, and therefore African American life and expression is naturally and inherently performative and rhetorical.

Hurston articulates a theory of black narration, inclusive of all oral telling, including black preaching, and identifies components of this artistry by setting forth, what she calls “characteristics of Negro expression.” Preaching is our main focus, and therefore, I have set Hurston’s characteristics in terms of preaching. First, she identifies “drama”—the preacher’s words are action words and interpretations of the English language in terms of pictures. Second, “illustration”—the preacher uses vivid illustration because it is easier to illustrate than explain because action came before speech. Thirdly, “the will to adorn”—the preacher decorates and embroiders narration with figurative language with the intent to satisfy “the desire for beauty” in the preacher’s and congregation’s soul. In the will to adorn, Hurston argues that black people’s greatest contribution to the English language is the making over of the English language through the use of metaphor and simile.

1. In 1973, the words “Novelist,” “Folklorist,” and “A Genius of the South” were placed on the marker erected at Zora Neale Hurston’s grave in Eatonville, Florida, by Alice Walker. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 54.

   Excerpt From

   Chapter Five

   The Truth Is Always Relevant:

   Race and Economics in Contemporary African American Preaching

   The aforementioned hip-hop and business mogul Jay-Z, in his critically acclaimed and surprisingly exegetical tour de force, *Decoded*,makes this penetrating statement: “. . . for hip hop to grow to its potential and stay relevant for another generation we have to keep pushing deeper and deeper into the biggest subjects and doing it with real honesty. The truth is always relevant.”

   The context of Jay-Z’s comments is that he believes that musical genres can die because they lose their “signature and vitality,” and other musical forms “steal their fire.” From Jay-Z’s perspective, ultimately these genres will experience demise and go the way of disco and the blues. Some would debate the demise of the blues, but his point is if hip-hop is to stay relevant to another generation, it must push deeper and deeper into the biggest subjects with real honesty. Jay-Z’s insightful maxim is that facing the biggest subjects with real depth and honesty brings truth, and truth is always relevant.

   As a teacher of preaching, I have applied Jay-Z’s statement to churches, seminaries, and denominations who are trying to figure out how to stay relevant amidst the painful decline of mainline churches and religious institutions in a postmodern culture that is increasingly secular, diverse, and non-traditional. For many Millennials and Gen-Xers, the church is not a priority, and as a result, white American Millennials are nonaffiliating in alarmingly large numbers. My paraphrase of Jay-Z is to suggest that churches, seminaries, and denominations must push deeper and deeper into the biggest subjects, with real honesty. If not, then religious institutions will be pushed further to the fringe of culture and society, and eventually to the place of anachronism and irrelevancy.

   If this occurs, that is, religious institutions are pushed to the fringe, then some of the lack of relevancy will be expressed in and as a result of the preaching. If preaching does not engage the biggest subjects with real depth and honesty, then preaching itself will go the way of disco and the blues. Black preaching will go the way of the comedic caricatures from television shows and movies characterizing black preaching, such as in the classic film *The Blues Brothers*. Preaching and preachers will be respected for their comedic entertainment value as emotional relief, or ceremonial chaplains for invocations, weddings, funerals, dire emergencies, and in time of national crisis such as war, mass shootings, and terrorism. But they will not be consulted and valued for the most important ongoing civic, social, political, economic, and spiritual issues of the lives of young people. If the church does not move from exclusion to inclusion and diversity, from insistence on gradualism and patience to sensing, in Martin Luther King Jr.’s words, “the fierce urgency of now,” then the church will not be pertinent in the lives of young people. . . . The church will be a relic and holdover from an old worldview that refuses to face new twenty-first-century flattened hierarchies and consensus-building social media reality.

   After witnessing the killing of so many unarmed young black men and women by police, and in several cases non-police, young people are saying clearly and loudly, “Enough is enough.” They have formed their own dispersed movement, most visibly known as Black Lives Matter, but with many other coalitions and organizations as well, such as Dream Defenders, Coalition Against Police Violence, Black Youth Project 100, Tribe X, and Lost Voices. And not just within the borders of the United States. Black Lives Matter has become a global movement stretching to Palestine, Canada, and Ghana, as Janaya Khan says: “Black Lives Matter has become a transformative outlet for all black people from different historical, cultural, socioeconomic and political identities. It is a source of solidarity for the survivors of colonization, exploitation, capitalism and police brutality.”

   Are religious institutions—inclusive of churches, denominations, and seminaries—relevant to these organizations? Are religious institutions—inclusive of churches, denominations, and seminaries—relevant to these organizations? How relevant is our preaching in black churches to this movement? And, if a preacher wants to be relevant to this movement, how and what would the preacher preach? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)