

Southern Appalachian Woman Preachers and Their Sermons

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This article inquires into how the maintenance of the residual practice of inspired preaching broadcast over the radio by Southern Appalachian Pentecostals, offers an accepted means by which women gain the power to articulate the conflicts, desires and contradictions of their culture. The democratic ethos of Pentecostalism declares that all people who feel the call to preach must be given that opportunity which opens a space of women's voices within the traditionally male "preacher culture." Because radio lacks the visual component, and inspired preaching is deemed valid by its effect of the body, women may preach over the radio without the potential for sexual display that could arouse men visually. By examining the content and delivery of women's sermons using studies in melodrama, the article explores the nature and articulation of dramatic conflicts, points of difference, and especially issues of the body as lived by the women of southern Appalachia. Thereby, the article locates sites of resistance and conflicts with power both within and without the region. Using Gramscian notions of hegemony, negotiation and consent, it explores how a particular culture successfully elaborates itself through language and how Appalachian women critique their culture without risk of dramatic change.

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The first woman preacher's sermon I'll examine is one of the most powerful I have in my collection. It was delivered by Sister Joyce Connolly out of Logan, West Virginia. Although both men and women preachers articulate Pentecostal preacher culture's primary themes, the women direct more energy into fuller articulations of ambivalence and conflicts surrounding the body, the family, and their relations with both.

Sister Joyce's sermon features a shattering critique of treatments and attitudes regarding the body. The body is both an embattled and a neglected site exacerbated by that contradiction. She interweaves an eternal turmoil with a disciplinary discourse and elaborations on the essential individuality of physical ailment. All this she combines into a melodramatic metaphor for the social and psychic terrain of her audience.

To begin, Sister Joyce warns her listeners about time. She uses the word three times in four lines as a grim reminder of what time actually means to Pentecostals: it is code for the Day of Judgement. This sermon begins with the contingency of God's power in each second of life; literally each breath she, her sisters in attendance and her listeners take. Sister Joyce is supported in her preaching by a group of women in the sound booth. They provide continuous responses of support, encouragement and validation. They are vocal, animated and strong-voiced themselves: something like a cross between a Greek chorus and a birthing center.

The power of God is foregrounded through articulations of total submission as it is in all the sermons. Through the powerlessness of submission, believers open themselves to divine inspiration and power. Sister

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Joyce's sermon eventually employs the palpatingly resonant biblical story of the woman with the issue of blood, from Luke 8:43-48, who touches the hem of Christ's garment and is healed: a folkloric allegory for the Pentecostal doctrinal equation of powerlessness as the means to achieve power.

The Body

Sister Joyce focuses on the particularities of human suffering and details many of the ills and mishaps of the body. Moreover, she individualizes pain and suffering not letting this human reality remain in the abstract. Individuals suffer in varieties of ways in Sister Joyce's articulation of the body paralleling the democratic doctrinal emphasis placed upon the individual. The individual can become a vessel of the divine, can prophesy, speak in tongues and heal: the individual can attain great power. So too, the individual suffers particular ills and pains, and no doubt her audience is able to recognize themselves and loved ones in her litany of affliction. Therefore, it's through address of the body that elaboration of individuality, central to preacher culture, is maintained as opposed to collective identity, the norm in large denominations and hierarchies.

Sister Joyce situates herself as a voice for those too ill to appeal for divine aid. Just as inspiration makes one a voice of the divine, Sister Joyce becomes, as well, the enraged voice for her female audience. This shifts into her retelling of the biblical story of "the little woman with the issue of blood." This story is one I have heard many times from many different women from different classes. It resonates with concerns about the problematic female body. Health care in rural Appalachia is poor enough as is, and the particular problems of women's reproductive systems with their hormonal changes and so on are particularly acute and elusive, still harboring the mysteriousness of unspeakables.

This episode in religious folklore serves to perfectly articulate the conflicts, struggles and boundaries surrounding social formations of the body by exemplifying an over-determination of gender roles: it is a woman's body suffering "female trouble." In this case boundaries and differences rest in the female body in its relations with both medicine and economics. Both can be exploitative domains together. Medicine is a particularly problematic site in Appalachia because of the series of pressures and controls placed first by the coal companies on their own doctors, then by the doctors against the medicinal common sense, organic intellectuals and folklore of the people, particularly the women healers, midwives, "grannies" and "yarb" or herb doctors (Frazier, 1992, p. 57). Then, during the struggles over black lung, the coal company doctors testified against the miners in their claim that it actually exists and is an occupational hazard; something acknowledged in Britain in the 1930's.

In Appalachia, medicine retains both its threat and its reputation of ineffectiveness and hypocrisy due largely to the abandonment and betrayal by the medical community during the struggles for compensation and safer work environments. Combine that history with the female body, poverty and rurality and you've a powerful site of overlapping contingencies that continue to this day as evidenced in this and many other sermons. Even men use this bloody Lukan story in their sermons indicating that it functions on an abstractly inclusive symbolic level representing a hopelessness and additional loss of faith in hierarchies of power and knowledge.

This especially popular and broadly applicable example of biblical folklore also offers a way of examining relations between the sexes in Appalachian mountain religious culture. In this story, Christ stops her issue of blood and relieves her pain and debilitation, and also probably no small amount of embarrassment and self-consciousness considering the illness is located in the reproductive system of the female body. Thus, the story situates Christ, the son of God the father, as the healer of the woman, doubtless too, a mother. The

primary male, the father god, did not help her any more than the doctors: they were powerless for all their learning, stature and manhood.

Sister Joyce alludes to this aspect of the story in the second section of her sermon which is delivered in a breathless, messianic, constant stream of words. Her re-telling of the story vacillates between past and present, folkloric phrenology and common sense detail; but, it remains essentially and primarily a powerfully harsh critique of traditional, hierarchical male power.

His people that reach out just like the little woman that had the issue of blood, she just reached out, said, "If I can just touch the hem of his garment, just the hem of his garment, that's all." She had faith, she pressed her way, no doubt she was very weak, she'd been sick for over twelve years, and she went to the doctors all those times and spent all she had, but she had the strength, "If I can just press my way through this crowd." No doubt she may even crawl around to get between the people, but when she touched the Lord, the Lord said, "Who touched me?" (The Bible, "Gospel According to Luke", 8:45)

The power of female sexuality and reproduction is matched by that of its mysteriousness and complexity which still challenges the largely male medical community. In addition, it points to the ingenious and irresistible loophole in that hegemonic control of men in Appalachian inspired preaching. When asked his opinion of female preachers, Brother Carlos Lewis, director of programming at WJLC in Beckley, West Virginia, replied "There is no such thing. But they believe they are called by the Holy Spirit to preach and I feel that they all who so believe deserve air time."

The tenet of divine inspiration provides the shadow of self-doubt within men and women who don't support women preachers. Because the Lord is omnipotent and must always be approached in utter and total submission as acknowledgement of that power, few would risk second guessing the power that will imminently bring the Second Coming. If the divine is truly all powerful then He has every right and possibility of such a gender-based contradiction: calling a woman to preach. It is a convenient system too in that the populist ethos of the religion characterized by experience and testimony is only further elaborated and maintained with the contributions of the women, few though they may be in comparison with the males.

The loophole may also assuage the egos of male preachers in that they must always already be in submission to God. Therefore, there is no loss of manhood in the allowance of women preachers: the possibility of a divine test of faith in the form of the "calling" of a woman to preach is enough of a justification and rationalization. In addition, the consistently lower numbers of women preachers prevents their being too much of a threat even in a culture of overdetermined social and gender roles.

Ultimately, women who choose to preach may do so in keeping with and, thereby, maintaining a democratic theology and populist ethos. Their contributions to articulation, elaboration and cultural maintenance give voice to the particular conflicts, struggles, repressions and moral and psychic victories, i.e. powers, of women. This means that women preachers offer elaboration of double particularity: particularity of preacher culture and particularity of gender.

Sister Loretta Taylor: Preacher and Pastor

Sister Loretta Taylor is unique in preacher culture. She is both a woman preacher as well as a pastor. She has pastored her own church for over a decade, preaches most of its sermons and preaches weekly over WJLC in Beckley which is where I met her. She and the Pentecostal branch of my family have known one another for many years, so it is natural to assume that there is a network of relations between radio preachers and the numberless family-sized mountain religion congregations throughout the Appalachian highlands.

Sister Loretta's sermons offer a view into the conflicts that women encounter when they reach through the loophole of divinely inspired preaching toward extra leadership roles. A pastor is a very important role in preacher culture and comes the closest to any system of hierarchy in its inner relations. This woman preacher and pastor's sermons provide a view into the struggles and conflicts involving transgression of overdetermined gender roles as well as insight into how women continue to subvert repression of their participation in intra cultural political power; how the act of preaching helps to elaborate further women into these positions; how forms of spiritual common sense reinforce both men and women's determination and belief in their "call"; how empirical proof for their beliefs is finessed from all domains.

Sister Loretta's First Sermon: "The Unseen Guest"

Sister Loretta's sermons first and foremost articulate conflicts with power. This sermon I call "The Unseen Guest," and it is a wonderful example of a self-conscious, auteuristic use of an embattled position involving gender elaborated into allegory and exempli of other embattled cultural and spiritual positions. The sermon opens with the theme of Christ as the unseen guest which she elaborates through a dialogue between a believer and Christ. She employs fear of damnation which democratically unites as well as levels all people in the eyes of the divine. This populist doctrine of inclusiveness has its darker side as well: divine judgement awaits everyone regardless of constructed difference.

Sister Loretta surfaces the conflict always already inherent in being a woman preacher but does so immediately after stating the democratic assessment of souls that all Pentecostals acknowledge as their imminent fate. She ventures further into her embattled position and begins to develop it as a parallel for that of her listeners, and chooses the popular biblical folklore of the flight out of Egypt as the parallel for oppression, struggle and battle, and she embellishes it as well with democratic features.

The next section relocates resistance to her gender and other boundaries of socially constructed difference onto the religious doctrine of personal responsibility for one's soul. This serves to infer, of course, that too much attention to difference and socially constructed roles endangers one's own soul. Tend your own garden, in other words. The final judgement of each person's actions rests with the divine; since judgement is always already imminent, then attention to one's own soul is always already an immediate imperative.

Sister Loretta characterized Christ, the unseen guest, in Orwellian terms. He watches, hears and takes down "on your record" all sins, even those that are done or said in physical pain, and here she begins to interweave the body into her critique. She uses exempli that span the range of culpability and includes herself with her audience as do the men in their sermons. No one is without sin. This central doctrinal fact she reapplies in an inclusive gesture recasts her opening, as well as her preaching, as common, normal and natural in believers' relations with the divine. This clever self-justification works like a trap: reach in for commonality and find it is inflected with a feminist agenda (though she'd never admitted it).

The next passage gives clues to intrapersonal as well as interpersonal conflicts surrounding the gender specific notions of womanhood and motherhood. She is peace maker, pleaser, supporter and self-doubting hyper responsible maintainer of family. The repressed conflicts and desires of this socially essential role Sister Loretta describes in blistering style. Her battles with received and reinforced repression are fought openly as though she were using preaching as a form of self-analysis toward ultimate self-acceptance, self-realization and release from guilt and shame. She accuses and acquits herself while doing the same for others: this mode of preaching resonates with the audience by situating the preacher within and amongst its struggles and conflicts.

Sister Loretta is both an individual embattled soul and a representative of all others. Her accusation and following self-justification to preach preempts that of her audience, especially those not entirely comfortable with women preachers, aligns herself beside and within her audience, and ensures the acquittal they desire as well as she. How many women in her audience must identify with the crushing responsibility of multiple roles: compliant peacemaker responsible for the feelings of others as well as their domestic wellbeing and family traditions.

Her critique of this gender specific role by way of exemplar shows her brilliant technique for bypassing gender related conflict over her preaching so as to unite women while proving her shared experience through testimony. Here is an example of the populist ethos applied to and for women. And here must also lie the threat that women preachers pose to the larger preacher culture: they surface the embattled position of women within an embattled culture. Sister Loretta further elaborates this populist rhetoric in terms of ways of knowing and common sense.

As she moves from spiritual ways of knowing into the reward of eternal life she offers a view into the severity of oppression experienced by the women of her region. Within these few lines are thinly veiled references to debilitating depression and even suicide. And the seemingly sole source of strength for this specific audience is not the family, it is Jesus Christ. Indeed, she immediately begins a scathing critique of the family with descriptions of how painful and lastingly damaging intrafamily dynamics can be for women.

If teasing is socialized aggression, then this sermon hints that it is a common experience and thus a common form of the expression of aggression, conflict and hostility within families. Moreover, it is known and meant to be hurtful: emotional sadism. Typical of the family melodrama, this sermon offers insights into the family as a site of the social and cultural displacement of political concerns onto the terrain of family life. The historical fact of the loss of power by highland Appalachians pretty much ensures that the family be a site of conflict.

But the loophole of inspired preaching grants women, so often the brunt of displaced male anger, the opportunity to acknowledge and critique their embattled position and validate the conflicts, wounds and repressions of their domestic realities through experiential and biblical exempli. Thereby they may validate the pressures of the contradictions within their lives. So, too, considering the seemingly essential hierarchicalizing imperative in the male psyche, there are doubtless some men in her audience who can also identify with the hurt of misplaced aggression.

She continues on to focus attention on family conflicts as she moves into a segment directed at the struggles with power involved in raising children. Never romanticizing childrearing, she describes it in terms and images very different from that of mass culture. If this isn't common sense, I don't know what is. This segment provoked enormous response from her studio brethren. One said they themselves would not be there, others laughed while others cheered. This is a very telling moment in the sermon and it exemplifies the differences between men and women preachers. The men don't focus so pointedly on particular characteristics of the family dynamic, much less on the conflicts and anxieties of child rearing. It's interesting too that the person who remarked that none of them would be there if stoning of children were still law was a man.

Violent children grow up to be violent adults, and when they're male the transgressions admit no bounds. Sister Loretta begins a critique of intra cultural behavior and offers an example of the real dangers faced by rural Appalachians at the hands of their own. She relates that Sister Pam went alone to do something in their little church only to find it vandalized. Moreover, two cans of beer were left behind. Sister Loretta rails at this.

This passage offers an example of the negative and dangerous elements in rural Appalachia and illustrates that the region is not in consensus regarding religion, social expectation and even basic ethics. It is like most other places in that there are people who are violent, dangerous and harbor at least some of these feelings toward the church: they attacked, as it were, the church which is something of a symbol of the clan. Here she critiques the region's misfits: they are to be taken seriously. Moreover, this story communicates the unspoken danger of sexual assault. Sister Loretta names murder as a probable result of an encounter with characters straight out of "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

Sister Loretta represents this violence and disrespect as an emergent element of the relations between traditional social mores and modern individualism. However, violence combined with poverty, an alcoholic tradition and the boredom of a rural setting is another dangerous social cocktail. But, unlike the male preachers, Sister Loretta directly addresses this danger to both the symbolic and material domains of preacher culture and augments it with a woman's specific common sense and folkloric knowledge: the body is always at risk even in the house of the Lord.

She returns her indictment of a lack of empathy be it conscious or unconscious on the part of others. She feels that people know when others are in pain, but at the same time she recognizes the impossibility of another being able to reproduce or fully understand that pain. The articulation of such a sense of isolation and alienation within such a tightly knit and actively maintained family or clan-sized group is astounding. Perhaps that is the underside of the democratic theology and populist ethics of preacher culture: individuality carries with it individually unique pain as well as pleasure and inspirational affect.

With this passage, her time to preach runs out and an announcer begins to speak while the volume in the booth is lowered. Sister Loretta's voice retreats in aural distance while the audience is told the station name, call letters, dial setting and so on.

Sister Loretta Taylor establishes her identity and right to preach as a spiritual calling that if not acted upon would be a rejection of divine will and religious responsibility at once. She would be a sinner if she didn't preach: it's out of her hands. That is underscored by her divine inspirational doctrine: God's call is always already accompanied by the qualification to preach. This is another example of conflict surrounding the "right" or call to preach and appears to remain a site of conflict over gender.

Conclusion

Women's sermons bear witness to basic psychic and ethical truths in constant relations with numerous contingencies and residual and emergent elements: Gramscian notions of the contradictory aspects of consensus. Consensus includes variation: contradiction is elementary to the maintenance of inspired preaching for both genders. Moreover, Sister Loretta's preaching and pastoring is also the responsibility of an "elder" of the church, and she paraphrases biblical text to underscore that social role. "Elders" point to familial relations, the primary hierarchical social institution maintained and elaborated in preacher culture. An elder is a non-gendered term, and like Queen Elizabeth the First, Sister Loretta uses language to justify the use of power. Elizabeth referred to herself as a "prince."

Sister Loretta exemplifies Christine Gledhill's observation of melodrama's lack of programmatic change. But, it would not be melodrama if social change were encouraged: what is encouraged is maintenance on all levels and domains and with all contingencies. Sister Loretta also exemplifies Gledhill's assertion that melodrama acknowledges the way things are in a given social conjuncture and the desires and resistance

contained within it. Marcia Landy's assertion of melodrama as speaking in a language of conflicting attitudes and values is clearly evident in sermon content (Landy, 1991). And, again, all require continual negotiation. The preachers I've examined prove that continued negotiation results in continued consent, and maintenance of culture. The preachers', especially the women's, use of melodrama's themes and characteristics shows how hegemonic negotiation can continue both in spite of and by way of the spaces for resistance created by its characteristic over-determinations: an intersection between cultural studies and melodrama.

Pentecostal doctrine provides a justification for women's voices, social and economic pressures of a regional culture fuel and inform the sermons, radio removes the problematic female body, and the result: earthy, ecstatic arias that sing the continued relationship between the experience of cultural specificity and biblical text from the woman's point of view. The sermon songs pass on to the next generation particular ways of thinking, structures of feeling and belief, archaic and idiosyncratic language, and a tradition of powerful individual expression concerning these domains, again from a woman's point of view. This is how southern highland Appalachian Pentecostal women preachers participate in the maintenance of its cultural specificity; they use its own oral traditions and keep preaching.

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