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Book Review: The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces

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The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces. Roxanne Mountford. 2003. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. pp. 194. Includes index. \$45.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Alwen Bledsoe and Tammie Kennedy¹

The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces details the ministries of three feminist Christian preachers who discover new ways to use and create sacred space--a space that the Christian tradition has overwhelmingly constructed as an exclusively masculine space. In so doing they seek to establish credibility and create intimacy with their congregations, transcending skepticism about their ability to pastor a church, and bringing the body into the center of rhetorical performance and sacred space. Mountford's ethnographic study of these pastors offers much to both rhetoric and feminism as it ventures into new territory, exploring the frequently ignored borderlands between religion, feminism, ethnography, and rhetoric.

One of Mountford's most important achievements in this book is her detailed attention to the role of the body and space in performance. In studying preaching, one of the oldest and most neglected rhetorical arts, Mountford rehabilitates delivery as an essential part of the study of rhetoric. She thus focuses her attention on the body and on the gendered nature of spaces that must be refigured by women. Instead of focusing primarily on written texts, Mountford examines how these pastors use their bodies to deconstruct and transform an exclusively masculine space into a more inclusive space for themselves and their congregations. Further, in using ethnography as a methodology, Mountford suggests a means for scholars in various fields to study the body and space, and offers feminists a way to study contemporary women who might otherwise be overlooked. In studying female pastors, Mountford also brings into view a doubly ignored group--religious women--noting that even feminists have neglected to study the role of these women in advancing feminism and breaking down gender barriers.

The book begins with a personal account of Mountford's own rather severe religious upbringing full of revivals, fiery preaching, and dire warnings of what might happen if one was to be left behind at the second coming. Although Mountford writes that she left this sort of religion at the doors of academia, the personal disclosure sets the tone for the book's refreshing mixture of personal and academic, part of what makes the book accessible to lay readers as well as academics. Mountford also introduces her argument that "American Protestant spaces" such as church architecture and pulpits have been built in order to exclude women and their bodies by shaping themselves to

¹ Alwen Bledsoe and Tammie Kennedy are Graduate Teaching Associates in Rhetoric, Composition, and the Teaching of English, University of Arizona. While it might be unusual to collaborate on a book review, *The Gendered Pulpit* invites such an approach because of its appeal to a range of audiences and because of its use of a variety of perspectives to illuminate the embodied aspects of performance (both in and out of the pulpit). While we are both feminist academics in rhetoric with Protestant upbringings, Alwen was raised with an evangelical background that espoused sexist views about women in the pulpit; she is preparing to leave academia and enter the seminary. Tammie was raised in a church with a woman minister, and no longer attends church. We hope our collaboration captures the unique richness of the material.

accommodate only male bodies. Mountford thus sets up the premise for her book: Women are immediately faced with a “character problem” when they walk into a pulpit or other space designed for and anticipating a male body. Arguing that women’s bodies are often defamed and excluded when they attempt to enter public sacred spaces, Mountford traces the historic exclusion of women’s bodies in Western history, highlighting how they have been restricted in public and understood as dangerous, promiscuous, and even innately evil. Ultimately she asks the question that frames the book: “How does a woman earn the respect of an audience conditioned to regard her body itself as symbolic of lack (of authority, eloquence, power, substance)?” (13).

To address this question, Mountford first examines the pulpit itself, arguing that it is a “gendered location and therefore a rich site for exploring rhetorical space,” a claim that supposes that “rhetorical spaces carry the residue of history within them,” as well as serve as a “physical representation of relationships and ideas” (17). In chapter one, she explores how four novelists (Melville, Eliot, Morrison, and Walker) adapt the pulpits of their fictional preachers to amplify their characters’ genders. These literary examples make tangible the theories of gendered spaces she articulates. She then develops a full definition of rhetorical space, focusing on the cultural and material dimensions. This definition supports her argument that historically the pulpit has been associated with male authority and has served to physically separate the congregation and the minister. As feminists have long noted, these kinds of persistent cultural/social boundaries maintain the hierarchies that produce the “Other” in a variety of contexts. From this perspective, Mountford asks, “What options are available to women preachers who recognize the pulpit as space not built for them?” (39). Mountford tries to answer this question using ethnographic accounts of real pulpits and women preachers in later chapters.

Chapter two further explores the history that has produced the “gendered pulpit” through examining an array of nineteenth century preaching manuals that establish masculinity as a primary means of shoring up a preacher’s authority. Mountford argues that as religion lost its national status in the nineteenth century, preachers also lost their unquestioned authority as national leaders and turned to the “cult of masculinity” to regain it. The result was a “muscular Christianity,” which conflated salvation of the soul and a strong, physically active body. This gender ideology found its way into the national religious imagination through organizations in Britain and the U.S. that bought into and propagated the “cult of manliness”--the Young Man’s Christian Association, Campus Crusade for Christ, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and, more recently, the Promise Keepers. Each of these organizations was founded “on the idea that, as Billy Sunday put it, ‘the manliest man is the man who will acknowledge Jesus Christ’” (45). Mountford ends the chapter by showing that though the male body may no longer be so relentlessly pushed forward as the only proper preaching body; the white male body is still considered the norm, creating a credibility problem for any female who enters the pulpit.

“*Sermo Corporis*” is the first of Mountford’s ethnographic studies. In this chapter Mountford studies the Rev. Patricia O’Connor of St. John’s Lutheran Church, who for the first time in nine years was leading the church herself during the sabbatical of the overbearing senior pastor. In this chapter Mountford defines *ethos* as a part of delivery--“the presentation of the self in a form that will be acceptable to the audience” (69)--and begins to show how three different women used their bodies to transgress rigid boundaries between sacred and ordinary space to fashion a new sort of ethos for

themselves “outside of the context of institutional masculinity” (66). The chapter illustrates how Rev. Patricia O’Connor, in contrast to the removed and authoritative senior pastor, established her credibility by creating *intimacy* with her congregation through dialogue, self-disclosure, and through leaving the pulpit to walk the church aisles. In this way she succeeded in rearranging the hierarchical, masculinist space created by history and the senior pastor, redefining the boundaries between pastor and congregation, sacred and ordinary space.

In “Engendering the Black Jeremiad” Mountford provides a portrait of Reverend Barbara Hill, a minister at Eastside United Church of Christ, who employs narrative style and prophetic utterance in the tradition of black preaching to address gender bias and institute change in her congregation and their communities. Mountford provides an overview of the art of black preaching and the structure for sermons, illustrating how this style embodies a form of masculine discourse. She chronicles how Reverend Barb overcame the prejudices of her congregation against a woman preaching and how her style differs from the preferred African American male style. More than “preaching,” Reverend Barb considers her approach as “talk” that highlights issues of empowerment that are grounded in local needs and the social and political climate of the nation. She maintains an intimacy with the congregation by employing a “womanist” narrative that focuses both on African American and personal experiences, especially her relationship to God. Her act of walking the aisles of her congregation and her particular kind of storytelling redrew the boundaries between priest and people, helping her congregation “rethink relations between men and women, between African Americans and the dominant culture, between parents and children, between church and the neighborhood” (125).

Chapter five, “Disputed Geographies and the Woman Preacher,” the final case study, details the experiences of Pastor Janet Moore and her struggles at Victory Hills United Methodist Church, where the fractured congregation could not be united. Mountford argues that both Janet and Barb “enacted a transformation of the art of preaching in two key ways: by transgressing sacred space and by engaging in a local, populist theology” (129). However, Janet’s experiences serve as a counterpoint to Barb’s, underscoring the fluidity of gender ideology as well as how it manifests itself in different contexts. While both delivered sermons that focused on solidarity and community and came down from the pulpit in order to gain more intimacy with their congregations, their “success” was not the same. Pastor Janet, who articulated a liberal point of view, focusing on issues of diversity and inclusion, was met with resistance. While her message appealed to gay and lesbian members and the urban professionals who were moving into a once-working class neighborhood, the older, established white members rebuked her efforts. She was never able to overcome the class boundaries that separated her and core members of the congregation; she left the church to pursue a different kind of ministry. However, both women illustrate how *ethos* was “established through a rearrangement of sacred space, wherein they attempted to move across boundaries, bringing what status they had as ordained ministers... to the people. They were admired for their transgressions...and for preaching as women, not as ‘a man in a dress’” (150).

Mountford says that as she was writing *The Gendered Pulpit* many were skeptical about bringing such seemingly disparate fields together in one study. She is, though, in many ways, the perfect person to do it, as she demonstrated in her own debut as a visiting

preacher at a progressive Episcopal church in Tucson. An academic in the white robes of an Episcopal priest, she embodied a wonderful epilogue to her book. One wonders if the echoes of the Reverends Patricia, Barb, and Janet could be heard in that sermon, marked as it was by self-disclosure and an attempt to bring herself and her congregation into sacred space often reserved for men and conservative religion.

Just as Mountford, draped in priest's robes, crossed many rigidly defined lines that day--academia and church, feminism and religious studies--so too does her book. In bringing these fields together in new ways, her book provides us with valuable insights into the gendered nature of sacred spaces, the way women's bodies have been excluded from those spaces, and how women are now finding creative ways to explode those barriers and redefine sacred space and rhetorical performance.