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Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion

Lerone A. Martin. New York: New York University Press, 2014.
xvii + 263 p. \$24 USD (paperback).

Lerone A. Martin's *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* refashions the study of twentieth-century black Protestantism according to the commodification of religious practices for mass consumption. Martin provides a portrait of "phonograph religion", the preservation of an "old-time style" preaching by black (mostly male) preachers who articulated on wax records an evangelical morality for modern urban living (3). The career of the African American minister and successful phonograph preacher James M. Gates often anchors Martin's work. However, Martin produces an engaging microhistory by using Gates's religious production to illuminate the consuming habits and economic access of African American Protestants in the interwar period.

Martin describes phonograph religion in six chapters: a discussion of the phonograph's rise in modern domestic culture; black mainline Protestant reactions to urban leisure culture and blues music; the recorded sermons of Calvin Dixon (popularly known as "Black Billy Sunday") and William Arthur White; the "folk" sermonic forms that male and female wax preachers (and their staged audiences) performed for the buying black populace, across denominational lines, to enjoy in their own homes and small worship communities; the use of commercial success by black ministers in the "New Negro" era to chart a path to social prominence, where the conspicuous consumption of luxury vehicles and homes in elite neighborhoods signaled racial respectability; and the evaluation wax preachers and consuming black audiences in light of the emerging "chain store" economy that threatened employment opportunities and the financial stability of local communities.

It is through the phonograph, a medium and messenger more economically accessible than radio for many black consumers, that Martin's central claim for rethinking African American Protestantism in the interwar period is made apparent as a challenge to centering the scholarly discussion on the religious work of the "black literati". As Martin claims in his introduction, the "renaissance" of African American Protestantism in the emerging

urban America was the work of “the folk” and their consumption of wax sermons, not the lettered black religious elite (which Martin refers to as the “Black Protestant Establishment”). Martin cautions, “chronicling the rise of professionally trained ministers and scholars, black institutional churches and schools, and the artistic musings of the black literati on ‘the folk’ does not tell the whole story,” because these unlettered African Americans were “busy crafting their own ideas and practices of religious revitalization.” (4)

With this claim of an African American folk production of religious revitalization, Martin’s scholarship sets up (and thereby demystifies) the rise of wealthy radio, televangelist and megachurch ministries by describing the emergence of black “celebrity preachers” of the interwar period who became popular “race leaders” in contrast to educated black clergymen (171-172). Previously, the post-civil rights emergence of black televangelists and mega ministries appeared to be a theological, social, and economic aberration from the black Protestant projects of “racial uplift” in the early century and the progressive social and political activism in the mid-century. Martin’s scholarly intervention with phonograph religion establishes another historical moment wherein prominent preachers with commercial ministries indulged the popular notions and consuming habits of celebrity and were received as “race leaders” by many African American Christians. Martin’s work demonstrates the concrete success (and relative financial wealth) of black ministers whose popular sermons a buying black public readily consumed in phonograph form. And these sermons replicated the enthusiastic religious practices and chanted sermons for many rural black migrants to enjoy in their new homes or small congregations in urban America.

As a concept, “phonograph religion” captures the intersection of charismatic preaching and musical styles by “low church” black Protestants and Holiness-Pentecostals at the nexus of consumerism in the interwar years before the rise of Gospel music produced a similar denominational fusion of charismatic tastes. To account for the rise of popular and wealthy megaministers at the end of the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first, the preexisting scholarly trajectory started with the birth of black Holiness/Pentecostal denominations in the early twentieth century, chronicled the spread of independent storefront ministries in urban black America, and arrived at the growth of nondenominational and “neo-Pentecostal” black congregations that appeared in suburban black America in the century’s

latter half. Martin's intervention adjusts this scholarly trajectory from a focus on religious institutions to a focus on the history of black religious consumerism. He thereby eliminates the need to prefix "neo" to any characterization of this black Protestant phenomenon. Instead, Martin offers historical continuity by tracing black popular appreciation of wealthy ministers and their "sacred wares" (2-3) from record to radio to television to streaming media and beyond.

The embrace of twentieth-century popular culture within the study of African American religion, driven by rigorous archival research, is essential work that Martin's book affords, connecting cultural production to the lives of the black populaces migrating to urban landscapes (and modifying urban soundscapes). This permits a discussion of industries catering to the perceived tastes of commercial audiences, revealing the racialized thought processes that business executives employed in selecting which African American ministers and sermonic styles to record and produce—and when to limit their criticism of marketplace practices, such as in the decision not to promote Gates's criticism of chain stores owned by distant Wall Street speculators who removed competition, financial resources, and employment opportunities from local communities. But Martin also provides essential descriptions to depict a more salient image of African American Christianity as mass product and practice: the manufacturing of wax sermon records for mass production; record company advertising, marketing, and distribution strategies to sell wax records to black religious audiences; religious debates over leisure culture and the use of blues and jazz instrumentation in worship music; and even the salaries of prominent black clergy and religious academics.

If there are useful criticisms of Martin's "phonograph religion," they may involve the generalized category of the "Black Protestant Establishment" the author offers in contrast to the work of rural black migrants like Gates and the working class consumers of his sermons. Martin makes clear the historical worth of these subjects and their critical importance to the study of African American religion; however, for Martin to engage with the religious literature and newspapers of the established mainline black denominations as they debated their social ministries and political voices during the interwar era would have greatly bolstered this category (because his study of the secular black press and record industry literature is fascinating). The "racial uplift" articulations of these groups were so

pronounced at times because many editorial outlets, like the African Methodist Episcopal Zion's Star of Zion, were heavily invested in addressing the era's lynching crisis and pursued interracial Protestant alliances in the effort to enforce the passage of state and federal anti-lynching laws. Their elitist "uplift" practices, in light of this project to pursue both interracial Protestant fellowship and legislative change, may be read as the effort to appear religiously similar in worship style and "intellectual" preaching as white American Protestants in order to combat racist arguments that black religiosity was essentially anti-modern and that the recognition and regard for African American humanity was never secure. To call these black Protestants the "establishment", although useful for illuminating the lives of the rural migrants who opposed their elitist cultural projects, may obfuscate their fundamental exclusion, as religious and racial minorities, from the white Protestant establishment in Jim Crow America.

Additionally, designating the discussion of contemporary celebrity preachers as the lineage of "black (mostly male) evangelicals" (173) leaves little room to consider theological differences in popular black sermonic content over time. This trajectory must account for the rise of "New Thought" teachings in popular ministries that preach "transactional" relationships between Christian believers and God, sermonic variations on the "chanted" style alongside the embrace of the less charismatic "intellectual" preaching mode, and a shift away from broadcasting sermon messages that focus on evangelical cautions against sin and damnation. Martin claims convincingly that contemporary popular religious consumption among African American Christians has a heritage in the interwar era; however, phonograph religion does not account entirely for the religious appreciation of financial wealth and celebrity status among black religious consumers beyond black evangelicalism, the shift away from recording and broadcasting sermons in the "old-time" fashion, or the muting of messages advocating individual repentance and salvation.

A thoroughly enjoyable text, *Preaching on Wax* is excellent for introducing undergraduates to the study of twentieth century African American religious history. The conversion of wages, prices, contracts, record royalties, and even ministers' salaries to 2012 American dollar values (xvii) elucidates for contemporary readers the scope of popularity for recorded black culture as well as the relative financial means of leading black figures and consuming black audiences. The NYU Press teaching guide (http://nyupress.org/teachguide/martin_preach_guide.pdf) complements the text's accessibility

to an undergraduate humanities course, providing discussion questions as well as links to performances, sermon recordings, and relevant literature. Martin makes apparent his scholarship's connections to established works on the Great Migration, independent Holiness-Pentecostal ministries, and popular religious media in the twentieth century by scholars like Wallace Best, Anthea Butler, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Milton Sernett, Jonathan Walton, and Judith Weisenfeld. Additionally, Martin contributes to the history of African American preaching as collected in volumes like Bettye Collier-Thomas' *Daughters of Thunder*, and Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas' *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons 1750 to the Present*. Martin's third and fourth chapters also contribute to the analysis of preaching alongside Albert Raboteau's "The Chanted Sermon" in *A Fire in the Bones*, and Martha Simmons' "Whooping: The Musicality of African American Preaching Past and Present" in *Preaching With Sacred Fire*. Lastly, instructors may also benefit from pairing Martin's work with Barbara D. Savage's *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* in order to juxtapose two richly researched discussions of political activism and cultural production among Protestants in twentieth century African American religious history.

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