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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Cultivating Your Sound in a Time of Despair

Willie James Jennings, *Yale Divinity School*

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The following is adapted from a talk given by Dr. Jennings during the 2024 Wabash Center's BIPOC Faculty Luncheon at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL).

You sound

What do you sound like in the rain,

Standing between claps of thunder and

lighting strikes, untamed and terrifying?

Silence, though wise, is not an option

given your task of directing toward

shelter, while rain drops clean your

*face including your teeth, as if it
were their right and duty.*

*Storm time covers your time, threatening
to last as long as your will to communicate,
your willing locked into battle against blowing wind,
promising many episodes, several seasons.*

*But what do you sound like? Does your
sound collapse under the weight of the
elements, reduced to a shouting whisper,
only inches from your inner voice?*

Or

*Have you found a bullhorn with fresh
batteries that give your sound that
familiar grabbed sound indistinguishable
from anyone else seeking quick victory?*

*Choices must be made in the storm, since
you are yet directing and eyes blurred
with much wet are still watching,
straining to hear.*

But maybe the question to dis-cover the sound

of your voice is what do you hear in it?

One of the most challenging tasks of life in the academy, especially for people of color, is cultivating one's own voice—and within that cultivation, to know one's own sound. Voice and sound here, as I am using them, are thick metaphors that bring together the one and the many, the self and the institution.

Voice in this regard is your self-witness, the testimonies you give, big and small; the pieces, the fragments of yourself you present; your showing and telling, depending on what you need or want to communicate in this world—in this academic world. Your sound is *your way with your voice*. At one level, your sound is your style inside your drama to speak and to tell. It is your bend with your pen as you write your own story page after page. But at another level, your sound is how you hear others hearing you. Your sound is your awareness of other voices and the way you weave in and out of other sounds.

My friends, in the academy being heard (having voice) *and* being able to hear (knowing your sound) is still frontier work for us. I named two things here, voice and sound—being heard and being able to hear.

Being heard and finding our voice in the academy is a challenge in the best of times. As I have written about this, it is the struggle against white self-sufficient masculinist form—that suffocating form of self-presentation and self-articulation around which flows the evaluative ecology and reward systems of the academy. We struggle against the pull to mimic the voice of that man, the finished man, who shows he has mastery, control, and possession of his knowledge. That struggle comes at us from outside of us and from inside. Outside, from the forms of formal and informal evaluation layered across our bodies. Inside, from the often-severe voices that we have internalized; those voice which place on us a quest for unattainable excellence. Inside and outside, forces bound to our will to survive—for our own sake and for the sake of our peoples.

We know, however, its possible to resist that voice and find your own voice. We stand in the legacy of people who have, and are, doing just that. There is a poem in my book, *After Whiteness*, that tells the true story of how one sister helped another sister begin her journey toward her voice in the academy. It begins with the elder sister's recognition of the struggle:

*My voice trembles
 always at the sound
 of your voice, which began
 for me so long ago, gently
 guiding me to what was
 good, great, weak, strong,
 straight into the vise,
 tightening ever so slowly
 that I mistake the hurting
 for stability, constrictions
 for conscientiousness I learn
 labored breathing, tighter thinking
 until I make the sound for help
 with every sound I make. But I
 think, this will not be forever.
 I will break free even if I must
 tear skin from my flesh to
 loose your stability.*

*Sara saved her, took Joan
 from the other voice
 and placed her inside.
 She knew how, having lost
 enough skin to form a womb
 outside her body - the mindbodywomb -
 where bathing light would cover
 Joan's thinking, protecting her
 from glaring light - light against
 light - knitting truth into
 her inward being before it
 could be snatched away by
 the other voice, until she emerged
 from Sara's wombbodymind intact,
 and hearing none, the i passed
 unharmed into Joan's voice flowing
 like refreshing waters ready to
 heal torn skin and cracked voices.[i]*

Finding voice is a constant work of abolition, of freeing your voice from *his* voice. But I have come to realize that the work of finding voice carries within it *the task of learning to hear your sound*. Over the years, I have met too many scholars, especially BIPOC folk, who do not know their sound. What do I mean by not knowing their sound? On the one hand, they have very little idea of what they sound like, they do not hear others hearing them. And on the other hand, they do not know how to move in sound and let the sounds of others flow through them.

Let me tell you a story: There was this scholar who always spoke truth to power. He had made it up the rough side of the mountain. He knew what needed to be said in every setting, to every individual, every administrator, every colleague, and every student. Right, bright, brilliant, and insightful, he claimed his voice in white spaces, announced his present freedom to speak and his commitment to the struggle. His voice was and is urgent, vital, and necessary, but his colleagues have longed for his absence. They can't stand him.

Without knowing more details, you might say that he was simply being prophetic, marking the journey of so many BIPOC folks struggling against white hegemony. But in this case, the desire for his absence is unanimous among everyone, including BIPOC folk. He cannot hear himself which means he cannot hear others hearing him. He closed himself off from the sounds of others, and turned his own voice, aimed toward freedom, into his own prison. He is alone, bitter, and convinced he is too controversial and radical for the academy. He may be too controversial and radical for the academy. But, he is also bound to the voice of the white self-sufficient man even as he articulates freedom. What is missing from this scholar's voice is the working with sound.

Allow me to return to the first poem and add a few words:

*Choices must be made in the storm, since
you are yet directing and eyes blurred
with much wet are still watching,
straining to hear.*

*So maybe the question to dis-cover the sound
of your voice is what do you hear in it?*

*Do you hear others dreaming out here
exposed to the elements, sharing in
feeling fragile flesh, turning their bodies
this way and that to negotiate with the
wind?*

*Do you hear the thunder calling you
to join its rhythms, the lighting awakening
you to surprise, pulling toward oneness with
flashing light, accepting the risk of free air? Do you
sense the rain as your support,
your pips to your Gladys Knight,
moving when you move even at midnight.*

The key here, my friends, is delight, delighting in the sounds, allowing the sounds to move through us, never seeking to possess them but to give witness to a hearing that is without end. Every musician knows, the character of your voice and the power of your sound depends on your ability to hear and keep hearing. What is critical in cultivating your voice is your ability to hear in ways that free you from being pulled toward mimicking the white self-sufficient masculinist voice even as you assert your freedom.

How do we *sound freedom* even amid despair? This is the urgent question we face as we navigate Trump 2.0. The temptation at this moment is to give into the despair and allow that despair to hollow out our voices. However, we will need to speak prophetically. We must speak powerfully and urgently, speak truth to power. Our speaking must show our hearing, or our voices will reveal that we have closed ourselves off to the sounds around us.

For the sake of our students, our communities, and for the sake of our scholarly work, we need to attend to our sound and show both our delight and our freedom for others in, and through, our voices. The sounds of many need to flow through us, merging and weaving in slices and pieces inside our own speaking, thinking, and writing, inside our own self-testimony. If not, we run the great danger of our having our own voices turned against us, weaponized and made dismally predictable in how they do not show a lively hearing.

Allow me to close with just another stanza from this poem:

*If you hear, they will hear in
your sound, glimpses of their sounds,
then and there you will know your sound,
directing toward shelter, announcing
a free place.*

Notes & Bibliography

[i] *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 119.

<https://wabash.center/2025/06/cultivating-your-sound-in-a-time-of-despair/>