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The Prophetic and Black and Pentecostal Voice: A Review of Shoutin' in the Fire

Abstract

"*Shoutin' in the Fire* is a series of personal essays with elements of memoir to them, but from the start, Stewart finds his voice in others' voices."

Posting about the book *Shoutin' in the Fire* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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The Prophetic and Black and Pentecostal Voice: A Review of *Shoutin' in the Fire*

Howard Schaap

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“Find your voice.” This was perhaps the earliest advice I was given about being a writer, a line that sounded mysterious and writerly—like a kind of vision quest I must undergo. “How does one go about finding one’s voice?” is the necessary follow-up question, and the answer is anything but mystical: “Read other writers.” At first blush, that advice seems counter-intuitive. Won’t my own voice get lost in the melee of other voices out there?

Hold that thought.

Like many college literature professors, I teach Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s 1895 poem “We Wear the Mask” to my classes every year. “We wear the mask that grins and lies,” the poem begins.

“It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—

this debt we pay to human guile;

With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,

and mouth with myriad subtleties.”

Admittedly, I bait my predominantly white classes, don’t tell them anything about the author or context, which is the point of the lesson, that context matters. Students like the poem, attempt to read it from their own experiences. “This reminds me of people in society who wear masks when they’re in pain,” they’ll say about the poem. Then I reveal that Dunbar was a Black poet during Jim Crow, that the “we” he’s talking about are a people, Black people. “We smile, but oh the clay is vile beneath our feet, and long the mile,” the poem goes on, illustrating that this is

not about the white college student experience, that white readers don't get to just own this poem.

In the first chapter of *Shoutin' in the Fire*, Dante Stewart recalls talking to his Clemson football coach. Things have not been going well on the field, Stewart has been missing workouts, and so his coach asks what's bothering him. "I gave some answers about how I was struggling with school or something," Stewart writes. "I knew how to maneuver my face and change my voice to make people feel bad for me. It wasn't my first time lying. I knew how to wear the mask" ("Wages"). The channeling of Dunbar is unmistakable, and it signaled to me where the powerful currents I had already felt in *Shoutin' in the Fire* were coming from.

There are many reasons to read Dante Stewart's new book *Shoutin' in the Fire*, but for me the most powerful reason is voice. One might argue that *Shoutin' in the Fire: An American Epistle* is about Dante Stewart finding his voice—or, more specifically, about losing his voice within white evangelical spaces, finding it again in Black, rural, Pentecostal spaces and in Black literature, and then using that voice to pen a love letter to Black people.

From the very first lines of his introduction, "Fire," Stewart's sentences carry you along. "There's an old King James Version Bible sitting on my bookshelf," Stewart begins. "It is black, rugged; the gold lining on the pages shines as light hits it. The jacket is missing, and the threads have unloosened from one another over the years. It has been tried. It has traveled across the South, across time." It's a lovely beginning, but Stewart is about to get a whole lot more specific. "When I open up this old Bible, dusty words emerge, conjuring up memories of poetic sermons and sweaty mics smelling of old stank breath." Throughout *Shoutin' in the Fire*, Stewart reminds us of his South Carolina, Pentecostal roots, of "livers and hot sauce" and sweaty church services that run late into the night. That's another thing about voice: it isn't generic, it's specific, located in the details of the place.

But voice is not just something individualized, either—it's not about you. *Shoutin' in the Fire* is a series of personal essays with elements of memoir to them, but from the start, Stewart finds his voice in others' voices. For example, his mother's voice: "When she recited scripture, she spoke it poetically, adding the old *eth* at the end of words like the King James Version did...This was her language," he insists. "It was the language of my grandmother, the language of her mother, the language of all the Black folk between our yellow house, my grandma's red brick house, and the white-stained brick church that told us we were somebody" ("Fire").

Stewart, who has written for *The Washington Post*, *Christianity Today*, *Comment Magazine*, and *The Witness: a Black Collective*, is also a talented preacher. That preaching background is also on display in *Shoutin' in the Fire*, especially in his use of repetition and parallel structure to make a repeated point, the way a boxer lands regular, loaded body blows: "So I return to this old King James Bible," Stewart writes in the introduction,

...and our Black prayers, and Black sermons, and Black songs, and Black poems, and all the ways Black folk have learned how to live in a country that doesn't not love us. I return because I have so much more to learn about love—and how to love in ways that are honest, and brutal, and beautiful. I return because there is something to be said to me. I don't go to that old Bible and our Black books and words to convince myself that the terrible things will eventually get better. No. I return because I know there is something about these words that the old Black country folk held onto in the burning. ("Fire")

Then, there in chapter one is the reference to Dunbar, and from there, the voice only gets deeper and more complex as it weaves in so many voices from Black culture and literature: Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and many other authors which are influences in Stewart's voice and shape the book. This is the secret to the memorable voice of *Shoutin' in the Fire*, it contains multitudes—or, better, as the chapter "Flooding" explains via reference to a Toni Morrison essay on memory, voice that comes "from the ancestors," like this has deep, river-like channels.

Notoriously, memoir can be self-aggrandizing, a trap Stewart avoids by making himself anything but the hero in *Shoutin' in the Fire*. "Wages" and "Terror" tell the story of Stewart's rise within white, evangelical, Reformed churches, a story in which he plays the part of an anti-hero. Along the way, Stewart denigrates his Black Pentecostal upbringing in the most painful terms, becoming convinced "that Black Pentecostals like us were not really saved," and even doubting his own baptism, announcing to his mother that he will get rebaptized because he didn't feel they "did it right" ("Wages").

Of this time in his life, Stewart reflects, "The more I pursued white Jesus and his disciples, the more I learned about what felt like the 'right' kind of Christianity. The more I learned how to get into arguments to pick apart someone else's experience. The more I learned to distrust others" ("Wages").

This subplot within *Shoutin' in the Fire* could also be called "The Education of Dante Stewart," and it traces how different voices, from a Black coworker to his wife Jasamin, help return Stewart to his roots, to himself, and to a restored vision for life.

Key in the process is the death of Alton Sterling, one of the public executions of Black men that jars Stewart out of his enchantment with white evangelicalism. While interning at an evangelical Reformed church, Stewart is confronted with the execution of Alton Sterling on his phone:

"My social media feeds were flooded with a video of a man in a red polo, with a wrinkled white T-shirt underneath. His haircut reminded me of the cuts that my brother would give all my cousins when he became the hood barber. His cheeks were pronounced, his teeth gold and his gap as wide as his lips when he smiled. This man's shirt was oversized, the same way we used to

wear oversized white shirts with denim Girbauds, trying to see whose color-coded straps matched, like we were our own fashion show.” (“Terror”)

As he watches Sterling hit with “a defenseless hit,” tased, and then shot five times, the correlation is too much to bear, too close to home.

Out of this crisis, a “white brother” from church gives Stewart a book, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, *Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?* It is, he admits, the first book by a Black author he’s read. King, in turn, quotes James Baldwin, who especially opens up the Black literary universe for Stewart. “After I’d finished reading King and Baldwin,” Stewart notes, “I started to speak up differently about things I was seeing both in my church and in the country. People didn’t believe me, but that didn’t scare me anymore. This time, I knew what I was talking about. I had the voices of the ancestors with me” (“Rage”).

Of course, *Shoutin’ in the Fire* isn’t pure memoir. The essays are closer to interconnected personal essays, mixing memoir and theology. Stewart’s starting point is this question: What does it mean to be Black and Christian and American, especially when America is on fire? The book’s title takes its inspiration from the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, one of his mother’s favorite stories, “the three boys who endured unspeakable horrors, who had the audacity to live and dance and to shake off the chains.” These boys, Stewart goes on to explain, “underwent two fires: a physical burning in a furnace, and a prolonged burning, set ablaze by empire.”

Throughout the book, this image of being on fire is a flexible metaphor for Stewart. On the one hand, there is the fire of American violence against the Black body that stretches back to his forebears’ experience with Jim Crow to specific examples in the present, from Mike Brown through Alton Sterling and Philando Castile and so many others to George Floyd and beyond. On other hand, the response of “shoutin’” in that fire is a particularly Black, Pentecostal, and prophetic response. Here, Stewart conjures the figure of Bishop, his long-time pastor and the services in his Swansea, South Carolina, Pentecostal church: “The sermons that we heard were part poetic oration, part folk wisdom, part celebration. Each was meant to move our bodies and our hearts. Each was meant to make us burn with fire—the fire of the Holy Ghost, that is. We were meant to burn, like lamps in dark places, with our dark faces and beautiful bodies. The message that we received were that our bodies mattered” (“Back Roads”).

It’s this message, one of love for Black people, that ultimately gives the book its subtitle: “an American epistle.” Stewart’s story is of leaving the shallow “triumphalism” and blindness to history in white spaces and returning to his Black roots and Black Pentecostalism and Black literature. “I needed to give voice to being fully Black and fully Christian,” Stewart declares.

“The Jesus I preached must make us *free*, not quiet. Not just Christian but Black. I needed to be around other Black folk who knew about the apathy of white folk to dead Black bodies. Who knew about anointing oil, midnight tarrying services, pig feet and livers with hot sauce, praise

breaks and protest, because the people around me didn't see or know me, see or know us." ("American")

And so, Stewart sets out to write a love letter. "I must give myself and others something that will make us shout in the fire," he determines.

There's much more to be said about *Shoutin' in the Fire*, such as the book's discussion of triumphalism, memory and imagination, white nostalgia and empire, and hatred of the other in the form it takes against LGBTQ+ bodies. There's much more Baldwin and Toni Morrison and many other authors.

So, I recommend you read *Shoutin' in the Fire* at least three times. Once for the voice, a second time for the story, a third time for the ideas.

Then, read it again, for the voice again, the cadences.

Then read the writers he mentions, read Black literature. In times like these, as the world burns and as people look for simple answers, we need to engage the dance, the complexity of voices, to understand the fire, to understand how to survive the fire. The way that "Reformed" and "triumphal" are searing pain to Dante Stewart must not be lost on Reformed Christian readers of this review.

Just like my students reading "We Wear the Mask," it's a mistake to read *Shoutin' in the Fire* as primarily a critique on white evangelical spaces. *Shoutin' in the Fire* is something much more imaginative and prophetic and profound than that. And yet Stewart's critiques strike so close to home, I want him to sound the final note for a Reformed journal audience, to be a call for these spaces to be something more:

"Offering hope and meaning is a profoundly human task but it is a profoundly harmful task when it always tells an optimistic story. It is a profoundly Christian task as well. Faith and living can take but a few steps before crumbling if they are not tied to something with some weight to it. As a writer, I was learning how to lose this hope and find a better one. I knew that type of reality-blinding—or better yet, race-transcending—hope as a familiar mystery that had no revolutionary potential to it.

I learned to imitate white writers and their dishonest ways of talking about our country, our faith, and what material we all needed to somehow survive how terrible their lies were. The more I learned how to grow up, the more both my heart and my hands got weary of imitating their ways of being less terrible. I know neither their words nor their voices could imagine my words and my voice and the voices of the many that I carried in my body, to be words and voices that could be more than their limited ways of understanding us. They spoke to my soul, yes, even spoke to my mind, but they rarely took my body seriously enough." ("Pieces")