2 Historical Overview of African-American Rhetoric

From the Greek *rhētorikē*, meaning the art of speaking, *rhetoric* as a particular body of work about strategic language use has a 2,500-year history in the West, although *rhetorical activity*, which we also generally refer to as *rhetoric*, is much older of course and more geographically dispersed. People have been using language strategically everywhere about as long as they have been strategizing and, if you will, languaging. Thus, rhetoric is more substantive and serious, and in many instances more honorable and worthy of study, than suggested in contemporary descriptions, particularly those in the media. Typically, when pundits ridicule articulations opposing theirs as *just rhetoric* or think that they are moving conversations forward by declaring *enough of the rhetoric*, they are really signaling that they privilege *their own dismissive rhetoric*. They are not operating outside of rhetorical behavior. At any rate, rhetoric has set in motion too many positive actions by African Americans for them to belittle the art categorically, or at least that should be the case.

It is not that African Americans require a complex Greek labeling system. There is no straight line from the ruminations of Aristotle to modern Black thought and verbal output. We incorporate figures and tropes into our culture without necessarily realizing their classical names. For example, it is doubtful that African-American songwriters Freddie Perren and Keni St. Lewis were influenced by the terms *syllogism* or *enthymeme* when they penned "Heaven Must Be Missing an Angel" for the singing group Tavares (1976). Yet we understand the logic of their artistic world:

1. Angels live in heaven. (implied major premise)
2. You are (an angel) here with me. (implied minor premise)
3. Therefore, heaven must be missing an angel. (conclusion)[1]

Moreover, the *African* in African-American linguistic experiences, as researchers have attested, cannot be rightfully denied (Turner 1949; Dalby 1972; Holloway and Vass 1993). We most likely want to retain all of our *bads* that mean *good*, constructions derived from West African languages, as linguist Geneva Smitherman informs us (1977, pp. 59–60). In Mandingo, the phrase *a ka nyi ko-jugu* literally means "it is good badly" or, in other words, "it is very good"

(Smitherman, 1977, p. 44). The attraction, then, to the Greek classical art is most productively expressed as an embrace of its ethical dimensions.

The tale of origins is familiar. Rhetoric in the Western world formed as a discipline in the aftermath of dissolved monarchies in the fifth century BCE. Citizens of a fledgling democracy had to learn to make legal claims on redistributed lands and to conduct civic business overall. Informal training and formal academies fostered development of the required skills, which led to eloquent and compelling displays of reasoning in public forums. It also led to the oft-cited criticism of rhetoric by Plato contained in *Gorgias*, in which the virtues of the truth-seeking philosopher are posed against the wily rhetorician who shamefully only "aims at what is pleasant, ignoring the good" (247). In any event, Greek rhetoric mainly flourished as an art and, subsequently, as a body of rules, and it morphed into, among other varieties, Roman, British, and American traditions.

Because the African-American saga intersected with the historical movement sketched above primarily through the institution of enslavement, the rhetoric of African Americans, before they were even named such, evinced broader imperatives than Platonic thought. Some Black people certainly needed to speak well in public and legal forums, but most desired to do more, namely, obtain the legal status of being free. They felt no need to theorize away the potency of verbal skills that could aid a politically liberating process. When one considers *Gorgias* alongside the attack in *Phaedrus* on literacy (pp. 519–21) and the denigrating of poetry in *Republic* (pp. 821–33), one realizes that some of the strongest currents in Plato's work theoretically surge against rhetoricians and against a historical Black agenda, for education, literacy, freedom, and poetry are unbreakably linked for African Americans.

For example, many African Americans valued the nineteenth-century poet James Whitfield (1853/1998). Writing during the antebellum period, Whitfield expresses, in "America," the desire to abolish slavery:

> But in the sacred name of peace,
> Of justice, virtue, love and truth,
> We pray, and never mean to cease,
> Till weak old age and fiery youth
> In freedom's cause their voices raise,
> And burst the bonds of every slave;
> Till, north and south, and east and west,
> The wrongs we bear shall be redressed.
> (p. 381)

Thus, Whitfield makes an argument through verse for a better conception and practice of nationhood. Rather than adhering to any injunction against poetry, he protests through poetry in the name of truth and *as* the truth. His work is reflective of *Nommo*, the traditional African belief in the visionary, creative,

and community-building capacity of the performed word (Asante and Robb, 1971, p. 2; Asante, 1972, pp. 371–2; Smitherman, 1977, p. 78).

The existential gestures in the folk lyrics of "Wild Negro Bill" make a similar point, though in a less genteel and more badman or gangsta-like manner:

> I'se wild Nigger Bill
> Frum Redpepper Hill.
> I never did wo'k, an' I never will.
>
> I'se done killed de Boss.
> I'se knocked down de hoss.
> I eats up raw goose widout apple sauce!
>
> I'se Run-a-way Bill,
> I knows dey mought kill;
> But ole Mosser hain't cotch me, an' he never will!
> (p. 7)

Furthermore, the academically expressed suspicions or devaluations of rhetoric, mainly deconstructionist fare about the arbitrariness of the sign, the instability of language, the impossibility of language representing agency and conveying immutably specified meaning, and the superiority of science could never gain more than a tentative foothold in Black strivings.[3] The play of language, its vibrant quality, has always been essential to African Americans, and we have never been overly disturbed by the ideas that language constructs us and is subjective. We have known that language is not the *only* thing that constructs us, and we have taken language subjectivity as a given to be engaged by means of the agency that we know that we possess.

In "John in Jail," a tale in the well-known John-and-Old-Master genre, we encounter the following scenario:

> One time Old Boss get a call from the sheriff, say that John was in jail and did Old Boss want him out on bail. Old Boss, he was mad that John give him so much trouble, but he got to get John out cause they was work to be done. So he went down to the sheriff's place and put ten dollars on the line, sign some papers and take John home with him.
>
> "How come they put you in jail?" the Boss say.
>
> "'Spect it was 'count of Miss Elizabeth's petunias," John say.
>
> "Old Elizabeth Grant? What's her petunias got to do with it?" Old Boss say.
>
> "I hear tell Miss Elizabeth want a man to trim up her petunia garden," John say. "I got a little time now and then between workin' in the field, so I went up there to Miss Elizabeth's place to see could she use me. I knock on the back door and Miss Elizabeth come and ask me what I want. I tell her I'm the man to work in her petunia garden. She ask to see my testimonials, and that's when I make my mistake."
> (p. 440)

But perhaps John has not erred. As he flirts with a racial and sexual taboo, the ambiguity of language and his manipulation of it, along with his status as a valued worker, afford him safety despite his misstep in asserting manhood. Strangely enough, *testimonial* and *testicle* both stem from the Latin word *testis*. Perhaps John understands the system after all. He would be credible claiming confusion and a lack of linguistic command. He benefits from the slipperiness of interpretation.

Novelist Walter Mosley (2008) also illustrates that African Americans are not unduly disturbed about the instability of language. In *The Right Mistake*, the third installment of his Socrates Fortlow series, Socrates hosts a weekly Thinkers' Meeting at his home, a venue dubbed The Big Nickel. At one of the evening gatherings, Socrates initiates a discussion about identity politics that lasts beyond 5:00 AM the next morning. During the heated exchange, punctuated with the different views of group members about what defines Blackness, Socrates argues that Blackness is merely a social construction: "There's ain't no black men and women, no African-Americans in this room, there's just people with names and ages and features" (220). But in the morning, when one of the participants, Mustafa Ali, asks Socrates why, given Socrates's position, he still uses the labels *black people* and *white people*. "Because," Socrates replies, "them words is still usin' me, Brother Ali. They usin' me like a mothafuckah" (222). The streetwise Socrates acknowledges both the complexity and material power of language, as well as some of the contradictions that arise.

At a more formal level, Frederick Douglass, as have legions of lawyers and judges, understood that the very Constitution could be interpreted in various ways. When he was an uncompromising abolitionist in the mold of William Lloyd Garrison, Douglass considered the Constitution to be strictly a pro-slavery document given several provisions: 1) the phrase "three fifths of all other Persons" (Article 1, Section 2), by which 60 percent of the enslaved population was counted relative to the apportioning of seats in the House of Representatives; 2) "calling forth the Militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress insurrections and repel invasions" (Article 1, Section 8), said by many to refer directly to slave uprisings; 3) "the Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight" (Article 1, Section 9), which effectively extended the slave trade twenty years; and 4) "no Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due" (Article 4, Section 2), which mandated the return of fugitive slaves on the demand of slaveholders.

At a convention in 1850, Douglass asserted, "I hold that to swear to support a constitution which requires us to put down slave insurrections and send back fugitive slaves is a sin. It is a sin to swear to support that which is sin—which can require us to sin ("Is the Constitution Pro-Slavery?" p. 221). He declared further, "To say that the constitution is Anti-Slavery is an assumption against an overwhelming array of testimony and against the Constitution itself" (p. 231). To Douglass, it was "*irresistibly clear*" that the Constitution, partly written by slaveholders, promoted slavery in spirit and substance. He evoked the religious doctrine of transubstantiation to argue that although the word *slave* was not mentioned in the Constitution, the legitimation of slavery existed there in reality (p. 232).[3]

As time went on, Douglass became keenly interested in and supportive of the anti-slavery advocacy unfolding inside the Free Soil and Republican parties. He then regarded the Constitution as an anti-slavery instrument because he believed that linking it to the moral high ground and then siding with it made his own anti-slavery argument more acceptable to the public that he addressed (Howard-Pitney, 1990, p. 41). Eschewing the Garrisonian line, Douglass no longer saw advantage in railing against the Constitution. In his 1860 speech in Glasgow titled "The American Constitution and the Slave," he put positive spins on the alleged pro-slavery clauses. For example, the three-fifths compromise became reasonable to him because it meant fewer congressional representatives for slaveholding states than if the enslaved were counted as full persons. He averred,

> instead of encouraging slavery, the constitution encourages freedom, by *holding out to every slaveholding State the inducement of an increase of two-fifths of political power by becoming a free State*. So much for the three-fifths clause; taking it at its worst, it still leans to freedom, not to slavery.
>
> (p. 352, emphasis original)

Concerning the so-called provision for quelling slave insurrections, Douglass argued that the language of Section 8 of Article 1 is not specific to slave rebellions but speaks to riots or insurrections in general. Thus, in his view, no such thing as a slave-insurrection clause actually exists in the Constitution (pp. 354–5). Similarly, Douglass contended that the framers of the Constitution were following the conventional wisdom that the slave trade was the lifeblood of the institution of slavery and, therefore, intended for slavery to end rather than to be perpetuated after the abolishment of the slave trade. The Founding Fathers, the logic unfolded, planned for the more perfect union to be slave free; indeed, ratifying the abolition clause was the price of admission (pp. 353–4). Moreover, Douglass pointed out, nothing in the Constitution forbade the abolishing of slavery altogether (p. 365).

Discussing the putative fugitive-slave clause, Douglass believed that it only applied to indentured servants and apprentices. Enslaved workers were not legally able to enter into contracts; therefore, they could not owe any labor contractually. He concluded that slaves were legally exempt from the clause (pp. 355–9).

Once Douglass had settled on his revised positions, which he had done prior to his appearance in Glasgow, he ironically insisted on literal readings of the Constitution. He declared, "It is no vague, indefinite, floating, unsubstantial something, called, according to any man's fancy, now a weasel, now a whale. But it is something substantial. It is a plainly written document; not in Hebrew nor Greek, but in English" (pp. 346–7). He no longer talked about transubstantiation or of properly engaging the text to render meaning beyond restricted representations, and he made a distinction between a bad government and a good governing document (pp. 345, 349).

We will not adjudicate the matter of earlier Douglass versus later Douglass. Obviously, intelligent arguments can still be made on both sides of the issue. Our point is to emphasize, through presenting a set of transactions by an extremely astute practitioner of rhetoric and literacy, the African-American investment in strategic language and to suggest that Africans Americans generally understand rhetorical and/or literate practices to be competitive arenas and have been more disposed to participate in them enthusiastically than to ruminate philosophically about the inadequacy of verbal forms. They start with the understanding that, for example, *perfect day* connotes something different for everyone. Or as Douglass (1857/1985) said when challenged to a debate by the fabulously talented Black orator Charles Lenox Remond, "It will give me infinite pleasure to meet Mr. Remond in debate on the question. Coffee and pistols for two!" (p. 150).

Beyond relishing and mastering various modes of folkloric expression and debate, Blacks made three distinctive and stupendous rhetorical contributions by the end of the nineteenth century. They had generated hundreds of slave narratives, tales that undergird the entire tradition of African-American literature. They had verbally constituted the group of people known as African Americans, a crucial development in political progress. In addition, they had created a musical tradition rooted in spirituals and blues that formed a stirring articulation of Black yearnings and has served as an eloquent and enduring argument for Black humanity.

Narrating Black Freedom

Approximately 100 life stories written or dictated by fugitive or former slaves were published between 1760 and the end of the Civil War in 1865. They powerfully linked the ideas of being, literacy, and freedom. Over time, as Bernard Bell (1987) pointed out, speeches on the lecture platform at anti-slavery meetings become remodeled as written renditions such as Frederick Douglass' popular and influential *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). Bell explained:

> Most knew that antislavery meetings would generally begin with introductory remarks by a local abolitionist in preparation for the appearance of a seasoned guest lecturer like Garrison or a fugitive like Douglass to provide

a dramatic account of life in bondage. This performance would be followed by an impassioned, critical analysis of the evils of the Peculiar Institution and, on occasion, either a few songs or poems. Finally, a collection for the cause would be taken up, abolition publications sold, and the meeting adjourned.

(Bell, p. 28)

James Olney (1985) provided a related six-part outline:

1. a portrait signed by the narrator;
2. a title page featuring the actual phrase or some variant of "written by himself;"
3. testimonials, prefaces, or introductions by white abolitionists, amanuenses, or editors verifying that the tale is truthful though perhaps an understatement regarding the horrors of enslavement;
4. a poetic epigraph;
5. the narrative proper, which includes stock features such as an opening assertion "I was born," a brief and sometimes vague account of parentage, details of authoritarian cruelty, descriptions of both failed and successful escape attempts, the taking of a new surname, and reflections on the system of enslavement;
6. appended documentary material such as bills of sale and newspaper clippings, further reflections, appeals to readers for moral and financial support for anti-slavery initiatives, as well as the inclusion of poems, speeches, and sermons.

(pp. 152–3)

In addition, a salient feature of antebellum slave narratives is the trope of the talking book/silent book, a development treated most fully by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1998). Books announce, authorize, and mark communities, speaking to masters and remaining mum toward the enslaved. The prototypical example occurs in Gronniosaw's *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukasaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince, as Related by Himself* (1770/1998):

> [My master] used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my whole life as when I saw the book talk to my master; for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips—I wished it would do so to me.—As soon as my master had done reading I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it would say something to me; but I was very sorry and greatly disappointed when I found it would not speak; this thought immediately presented itself to me, that everybody and everything despised me because I was black.
>
> (pp. 40–1)

Ironically, for Gronniosaw, the prayer book acted as Plato said it would. It was unable to represent itself. To the philosopher, the slave should not have been disappointed because there was no true knowledge to be gained from a non-dialogic string of words. Even if Plato granted the possibility that true knowledge could exist in such a book—a likely concession on his part that would indicate, as language scholar James Paul Gee notes in "Legacies of Literacy" (1988, pp. 199–201), the basic contradiction in Plato's thinking—he would not necessarily have trusted Gronniosaw, a slave presumably fitted by nature to be one, to grasp it. But Gronniosaw has no patience for such ideas, and books become central to his journey.

Olaudah Equiano, an acquaintance of Gronniosaw's, extended the trope of the talking book/silent book in the first slave narrative to receive wide international acclaim. In the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), he relates:

> I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I had been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.
>
> (p. 68)

Like Gronniosaw, Equiano transformed through literacy the dynamic of silence into a heralded quest for liberation. He does more than help to develop a textual trope and convey yearnings of individual freedom; he provides a text that self-consciously reflects the desire for social freedom. Although the free Equiano in his forties was not very African culturally (as an adult he never used the name Oaudah Equiano except in his book), he realized that much of the hardship he had suffered had to do with responses to his physical Africaness. Thus, as the leading Black abolitionist in England, he framed his book as an anti-slavery petition to the House of Parliament. His social consciousness was revealed in his first-person-plural descriptions of Africans:

1. We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets. (p. 34)
2. As our manners are simple, our luxuries are few. (p. 34)
3. Our manner of living is entirely plain. (p. 35)
4. In our buildings we study convenience rather than ornament. (p. 36)

The notable exception is when Equiano mentions religion. The convert to Christianity refers to what *natives* believe in—"a Creator who lives in the sun, and is girted round with a belt that he may never eat or drink; but, according to some, he smokes a pipe" (p. 40). Equiano takes himself out of that particular picture, but overall he has positioned himself rhetorically, in accord with the book's title, as African.

At the close of the narrative Equiano makes a direct appeal in letter form to Queen Charlotte of England: "Yet I do not solicit your royal pity for my own distress: my sufferings, although numerous, are in a measure forgotten. I supplicate your Majesty's compassion for millions of my African countrymen, who groan under the lash of tyranny in the West Indies" (p. 231). He signs his letter, "Gustavus Vassa, The Oppressed Ethiopian" (232). Despite being on his way to becoming a wealthy Briton, he intends his autobiography to undermine the slave trade and slavery itself. His *I* is ultimately a *we*.

Perhaps a direct offspring of *The Interesting Narrative*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861/1973) shares the strong sense of *we-ness* and the call for liberation. Her concern for community was so strong that she used a pseudonym (Linda Brent) and concealed names and places to protect others. Not wanting to seem self-important, she makes the same overture to humility that Equiano does. She describes herself as inadequate to the task and so forth, but she is also bold in her political pronouncements:

> I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering from what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is. Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is the pit of abominations. May the blessing of God rest on this imperfect on behalf of my persecuted people!
>
> (p. xiv)

Jacobs constructs a self that proffers a compelling vision of activism. And not leaving the narrative line open for just any interpretation, she habitually disrupts it to deliver lectures. For example, considering the constriction of Black girlhood in the slavocracy vis-à-vis the opportunities afforded to White girlhood, Jacobs asks, "In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right?" (p. 29).

Further expounding on morality, particularly the inadequate actions of religious institutions, she exhorts:

> They send the Bible to heathen abroad, and neglect the heathen at home. I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it is wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother. Tell them they are answerable to God for sealing up the Fountain of Life from souls that are thirsting for it.
>
> (pp. 75–6).

Along with her lectures, Jacobs remarks about some of the crafty Black rhetors that she encounters. One such person is Luke, whom she had known in South Carolina. When she runs into him up North, she wonders how he has obtained the funds to enact his plan of traveling to Canada. Luke assures her that he had the matter in hand:

> I'd bin workin all my days fur dem cussed whites, an got no pay but kicks and cuffs. So I tought dis nigger had a right to money nuff to bring him to de Free States. Massa Henry he lib till ebery body vish him dead; and ven he did die, I knowed de debbil would hab him, an vouldn't vant him to bring his money 'long too. So I tuk some of his bills, and put 'em in de pocket of his ole trousers. An ven he was buried, dis nigger ask fur dem ole trousers, an dey gub 'em to me. . . . You see I didn't *steal* it; dey *gub* it to me.
>
> (p. 198)

Luke was a forerunner in understanding the acute need for epistemic breaks, and he constructed a rhetorical world that balanced his moral sense, just as his moral sense also shaped his rhetorical outlook. As she editorializes, Jacobs endorses Luke's perspective:

> When a man has his wages stolen from him, year after year, and the laws sanction and enforce the theft, how can he be expected to have more regard for honesty that has the man that robs him? I have become somewhat enlightened, but I confess that I agree with poor, ignorant, much-abused Luke, in thinking he had a *right* to that money, as a portion of his unpaid wages.
>
> (p. 198)

Jacobs astutely assesses individual behavior in the context of the broader political and socioeconomic network of slavery. As a narrator, she continues to wield the social *I*.

Neo-slave narratives written decades, even more than a century, later evince a similar commitment to the social *I*. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965a) is a case in point. Malcolm sought to relate a story of his life, among several possible versions, that best showed his opposition to White supremacy and his allegiance to African Americans. He and his collaborator Alex Haley were

keenly aware of the social and selective nature of their work. After all, Malcolm had written in his notebook as a twelve-year-old schoolboy that he wanted to be a rhetorician, a less-told tale than the one about his being discouraged from being an attorney and encouraged to become a carpenter.[4]

One of the points of contention that arose between the two men occurred when Malcolm, after his highly-publicized separation from the Nation of Islam, wanted to revise early sections of the manuscript to diminish the impact in the story of Elijah Muhammad, giving him less credit for his, Malcolm's, spiritual and intellectual growth. Haley, in his epilogue, recounts their debate. He tried to change Malcolm's mind because Haley did not want the book to be a polemic against Elijah Muhammad. A gruff Malcolm asked at one juncture, "Whose book is this?" (p. 421). Haley prevailed, for the better we believe. But the point we want to emphasize is that Malcolm X did not ask, "Whose life is this?" No, he knew that the story—*whose book?*—had the potential for greater impact and was also a complicated matter unto itself. As he relates in "1965," the final chapter of the book, "I have given to this book so much of whatever time I have because I feel, and I hope, that if I honestly and fully tell my life's account, read objectively it might prove to be a testimony of some social value" (p. 386). That sentence is the book's great understatement, for it is hard to imagine that Malcolm's legacy would be as great as it is without *The Autobiography* and such statements as the following:

> I believe that it would be almost impossible to find anywhere in America a black man who has lived further down in the mud of human society than I have; or a black man who has been any more ignorant than I have been; or a black man who has suffered more anguish during his life than I have. But it is only after the deepest darkness that the greatest joy can come; it is only after slavery and prison that the sweetest appreciation of freedom can come.
>
> For the freedom of my 22 million black brothers and sisters here in America, I do believe that I have fought the best that I knew how, and the best that I know how, and the best that I could, with the shortcomings that I have. I know that my shortcomings are many.
>
> (p. 387)

One could even argue feasibly, given Malcolm's relative disregard for the danger he was in, that he began to shape his life to fit the story, to prepare for his death by preparing the most enduring tale of his life, replete with echoes of Olaudah Equiano and Harriet Jacobs.

Naming in the Dark

In addition to the publishing and reading of narratives, other everyday acts of rhetorical identification have been crucial to Black liberation efforts. Any Black person looking to claim a home in the United States has likely understood at

one time or another Malcolm X's startling use of the trope of chiasmus: "We didn't land on Plymouth Rock; the rock was landed on us" (1964).[5] Black location and identity have always been precarious. Rhetoric scholar Dexter B. Gordon (2003), without the specter of falling debris, addressed the question of identity formation:

> A ready example is the identity of "African American," which is constructed as the re-articulation of the "African," one belonging to the continent of Africa, and the "American," one belonging to the United States. This became necessary because the subject position of "African," while it affirmed a black heritage, made it difficult for blacks to claim a place in the United States. On the other hand, while "American" pointed to a subject belonging to the United States, its strong Anglo connotations implied a negation of the black heritage.
>
> (p. 35)

Similarly, Toni Morrison (1992) articulates, "Deep within the word "American" is its association with race. . . . American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen (p. 47).

But the association has been on the surface as well. White supremacist rhetoric such as Robert Walsh's pro-slavery tract *An Appeal from the Judgements of Great Britain Respecting the United States of America* (1819) circulated widely and was intended to normalize discursively the system of black enslavement. The rationale of such rhetoric consisted of what Gordon termed the "five tenets of oppression," namely:

1. constitution of a servile collective Black subject.
2. collective Black subject as white property.
3. slavery as an institution that developed the important value of liberty and property among citizens [with Blacks as property and as noncitizens].
4. slavery as a mechanism to foster [from a white supremacist perspective] the reform of Blacks.
5. slavery as a perpetual institution and Blacks as natural slaves.

(pp. 67–8).

Within this discursive territory, Black abolitionists forged a constitutive and countering rhetoric to spur Black collective action.

Blacks were not unfamiliar operating politically in concert with one another. After all, Gabriel Prosser reportedly organized almost a thousand slaves for a rebellion in 1800.[6] But they lacked in Gordon's view a broad sense of peoplehood. He understood that New World Africans possessed no significant sense of themselves as a homogenous group whether prior to or in the years of the early Republic. They shared a commonality of social conditions, widespread enslavement obviously being the most salient, but the facts

of servitude and suffering did not constitute a consciously realized political identity or result yet in the "birth of the black public subject" (p. 70). Thus, abolitionist rhetors began to appeal to the "essential" realities of Blackness: African ancestry and American enslavement. As a practice of rhetorical materialism, they used language to shape identity. Prototypical texts include Robert Alexander Young's *The Ethiopian Manifesto* (1829/2001). Establishing that his work required the attention of "those proceeding in descent from the Ethiopian or African people," he contended that way for them to secure the rights bestowed by God "exacts the convocation of ourselves in a body politic" 85–86). On the heels of Young, David Walker (1829/1965) pitched his *Appeal* to an audience he hoped would function as a unified group, namely, "the coloured citizens of the world," particularly those in the United States. Walker reminded his readers that the God of the Ethiopians is pleased by cries against racial oppression but that for deliverance the oppressed must be disposed to embrace freedom.

The references to Ethiopia, a term used synonymous with "Africa" by Young and Walker as well as by Equiano, who represented himself to Queen Charlotte as "the Oppressed Ethiopian," are expressions of an important trope of identity in African-American and Afro-Atlantic rhetoric. Spurred by biblical prophecy, most notably Psalms 68:31 with its declaration that "Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God," many in the African diaspora have viewed the idea of Ethiopia as a symbol of past African glory and as a prediction of Black resurgence or even conquest. In addition, many African Americans took pride in the fact that Ethiopia was the only African nation to repel a European military and remain sovereign while Europeans colonized most of the remaining continent. For some, in the 1930s, the invasion of Ethiopia by Italy was the most important international cause. The imperative to defeat Italian imperialism was linked intellectually and viscerally to the battle against anti-Black racism in the United States (Putnam, 2012).

Distinct from the religious movements or churches in Africa, particularly in South Africa, Ethiopianism in the West, according to Moses (1975),

> may be defined as the effort of the English-speaking Black or African person to view his past enslavement and present cultural dependency in terms of the broader history of civilization. It serves to remind him that this present scientific technological civilization, dominated by Western Europe for a scant four hundred years, will go under certainly—like all the empires of the past.
>
> (p. 416)

For Moses, then, Ethiopianism in African-American culture combines the Rising Africa Theme with a story about the Decline of the West (p. 414). We see both components evident in the work of Walker, who forecasts uplift by the God of the Ethiopians and also prophesizes the doom of the oppressors (p. 3).

Maria Stewart (1833/2001), the first African-American women to address a mixed audience of men and women in public, invoked the Rising Africa Theme as she spoke of the plight of her people:

> History informs us that we sprung from one of the most learned nations of the whole earth; from the seat, if not the parent of science; yes, poor, despised Africa was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations, was esteemed the school for learning, and the most illustrious men in Greece flocked thither for instruction, But it was our gross sink and abominations that provoked the Almighty to frown thus heavily upon us, and give our glory unto others. Sin and prodigality have caused the downfall of nations, kings and emperors; and were it not that God in wrath remembers mercy, we might indeed despair; but a promise is left us; "Ethiopia shall again stretch forth her hands unto God."
>
> (p. 124)

Stewart was less aggressive than Walker in charging European aggression with the moral crime of slavery, but she was nonetheless a fervent abolitionist and saw abolitionist activity as essential to redeeming the promise.

Prominent poets like Frances E. W. Harper (1854/1988), Paul Laurence Dunbar (1896/1993), and Langston Hughes (1920/1994) affirmed in verse the sentiments of Young, Walker, Stewart, and many others. In "Ethiopia," Harper writes:

> Yes! Ethiopia yet shall stretch
> Her bleeding hands abroad;
> Her cry of agony shall reach
> The burning throne of God.
>
> The tyrant's yoke from off her neck,
> His fetters from her soul
> The mighty hand of God shall break,
> And spurn the base control.
> ("Ethiopia," pp. 7–8)

Near the turn of the century, fellow poet Dunbar followed suit with "Ode to Ethiopia," and a generation later, Langston Hughes, though not using the term Ethiopia, paid tribute to Africa in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

In the twentieth century, Marcus Garvey was the person who most famously embodied the Rising Africa Theme. His embrace of not simply the legacy of the Ethiopian empire and the overarching African past but of the modern nation-state and its head, Haile Selassie, was crucial to the development of Rastafarianism, perhaps the most popular practice of Ethiopianism in the contemporary Afro-Atlantic world. In its strongest version, Rastafarianism posits Salassie, who visited Jamaica in 1966, as divine and Ethiopia as *the* homeland

to which a return is the most desirable goal. In a weaker version, the envisioned return is mental and cultural; pan-African solidarity is more the point. In either case, the ethos has been expressed by latter-day analogs to Harper and Dunbar, most famously Jamaican songwriter and singer Bob Marley with entries like "Africa Unite," which addresses glorious unification, or the Rising Africa Theme, and an exit from The Declining West, or as Marley phrases it, Babylon.

Spiritual and Blue

The more than 6,000 Negro Spirituals, as they are generally called, also powerfully express pain, hope, and faith. They brilliantly blend experiences in the American slavocracy, particularly the exposure to Protestant Christianity and the King James Bible, with structural patterns, sonic textures, and themes of African creative discourse. The remarkable achievement has inspired generations of African-American artists. Numerous songs, poems, plays, and fictional works rely on the spirituals and the related biblical stories for content, plot, and style.

No one assessment of the spirituals predominates; scholars and laypersons still debate vigorously the exact nature of their structure and import.[7] The precise advent of the spirituals is a matter of dispute as well.[8] But it can reasonably be argued that captured Africans were analyzing and commenting on their social plight, as well as melding expressive forms, from the beginnings of the Middle Passage. Certain is that they did not leave their African culture entirely behind. African epics and praise poems inform spirituals like "Go Down, Moses" (an epic) and "Joshua Fit de Battle of Jericho" (a praise poem). As the editors of *The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* explained, "the spirituals reflect the African heroic epic in form, content, and performance style. The African oral epic consists of long narrative recitations and songs interwoven with praise poems, chants, sermons, hymns, prayers and improvisations" (p. 35). "Go Down, Moses," the most popular spiritual and the first to be written down according to scholar Richard Newman (1998, p. 68), bears a strong structural resemblance to *Sunjata* (also spelled *Sundiata*), an epic poem from the Mandingo tradition. *Sunjata*, which dates back to the thirteenth century, describes the exploits of the hero who orchestrated the rise of the Mali Empire. Sunjata overcomes obstacles, neutralizes his archenemy, and ascends to prominence. As is typical in African epics, his triumph is made possible through sorcery, not simply brute strength. This is similar to Moses, who, favored by his God, can command plagues and part the waters. Thus, while stilled steeped in African culture and notwithstanding the fact that the Bible represented the religion of the enslavers, Africans were attracted to biblical heroes as well as to visions of an ultimately just God and of divine deliverance. The spirituals established the metaphor of the antebellum South as the American Egypt—with Blacks the chosen and enslaved people laboring under an evil Pharoah and, most important, capable of producing a Moses.

Although not all spirituals overtly encode politics like "Go Down, Moses," a notable number express politics nonetheless. The songs contain numerous coded messages about rebellion and escape. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" may have signaled the arrival of the Underground Railroad. "Steal Away to Jesus" may have similarly announced an escape attempt. It has been surmised that "God's Going to Trouble the Water" was employed by Harriet Tubman to caution runaways to travel by water as much as possible in order to confuse bloodhounds. Undeniably, all kinds of movement are conveyed in the songs—by way of chariots, trains, the Gospel ship, even foot—to suggest meaning beyond the concern of a soul's passage to heaven.

The blues, a secular, raw, and sometimes profane counterpart to the spirituals, embrace the vicissitudes of life with special attention to the hard times. Not a music of resignation or ultimate despair, as some may imagine, the blues are better thought of as poignant and sobering recognition that there will always be more obstacles to overcome. Commenting on the blues, James Cone (1992) asserted, "they are not propositional truths *about* the Black experience. Rather they are the essential ingredients that define the *essence* of the Black experience. And to understand them, it is necessary to view the blues as *a state of mind in relation to the Truth of the Black experience*" (p. 102). Or as the narrator of James Baldwin's well-known short story "Sonny's Blues" (1957/1995) realizes when watching his piano-playing brother, who has battled drug addiction and from whom he has been estranged, perform in a club,

> while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness.
>
> (p. 139)

It is generally acknowledged that the blues originated on Southern plantations and derived from the spirituals, chants, work songs, and dance music. Whatever the specifics of the origin narrative, there no is debating the wide influence of the blues and its offshoots. For our purposes, the most relevant consideration is the rhetorical work that these forms of music do.

"What You Know About That, Melvin?"

Near the close of the film *Baby Boy* (2001), as the character Jody Summers leaves his mother's residence, he passes her boyfriend Melvin, who is in the driveway talking with a friend who helps him (Melvin) with his landscaping business. Jody and Melvin chat briefly:

> "How you doing, Baby Boy?"
> "Enjoying this California lifestyle. Take care of my mama."
> "I'm on the case."

This conversation is far more than a casual exchange of pleasantries. It signifies Jody's emergence into manhood, which puts him on par with other men. While a twenty-year-old mama's boy still living at home, he resisted the presence of Melvin, who moved into the home and undercut the relationship in which Jody was overly dependent on his mother Juanita and considered it her primary duty to attend to many of his wants. Meanwhile, Jody has felt free to father children—two sons—without making serious commitments to either of their mothers. One of them, Yvette, is his girlfriend, though he is not faithful to her. Jody does possess redeeming qualities; we see him hustling women's clothes to make money, spending time with his children, worrying about his mother's safety, and, after being tempted, rejecting a sexual invitation from one of Yvette's co-workers. And he is ultimately salvageable because he has not embraced the violence of thug life. But the balance of his disposition ledger clearly indicates immaturity and irresponsibility.

Jody frames his refusal to move out as fear that he will be killed like his elder brother, who met such fate after being forced from the home. No correlation seems to exist, however, between living in one's childhood home and avoiding death. In fact, Jody escapes an assassination attempt, and it would be far-fetched to attribute his survival to the fact that he still lived with his mother. Melvin favors a competing explanation, thinking in pop-psychological terms that Jody suffers from an Oedipus complex that he needs to outgrow. He purposely constricts Jody's comfort zone as much as he can. Although a flawed person himself, an ex-gangbanging felon with a history of domestic abuse, he is clearly repentant, kind to Juanita, and certainly no boy.

The tension between Jody and Melvin escalates into a one-punch TKO with Jody predictably on the losing end, but the two bond when Melvin subsequently helps Jody to deal with the aftermath of an explosive episode in the streets that resulted in the death of Rodney, a rival who had tormented Yvette, taken over her apartment, which could only have happened in Jody's absence, and made the aforementioned attempt on Jody's life. It is the acceptance of Melvin's counsel—manly counsel—that makes Jody a member of the club that Melvin would have him join. As a result, the two can converse as equals in the front yard. Jody is now only ironically Baby Boy, and his voice can be the voice of wisdom and instruction to other men.

After Jody starts the car, we hear GQ's "I Do Love You" (1979). He asks, "What you know about that, Melvin? This is grown folks music."

"That's what I'm talking about," responds Melvin while bobbing his head.

Jody is not really questioning his elder. When Melvin first heard the original version of the song, the classic Billy Stewart rendition (1965), he would have been about Jody's present age, and Jody would not even have been born. Jody is rhetorically affirming his newfound maturity through old-school rhythm and blues, music even more resonantly old-school than perhaps he realizes. He has evolved beyond being indifferent or hostile to his mother's advice—because it suggested mature love and happiness for her—to appreciate a crooning Marvin Gaye as typified by "Just to Keep You Satisfied" (1973). He has gone from sitting in his bedroom with a giant likeness of Tupac Shakur, definitely no rhythm-and-blues crooner, whatever admirable things he was, to embracing expressions of unfailing love and devotion that symbolize the best of a past, present, and future Black world. "I Do Love You" plays in the background and months transpire in filmic time as Jody displays his keys to the apartment he now shares with Yvette and their son JoJo, snuggles up to Yvette, eventually (off screen) marries her, fathers a third child (a reversal of the abortion scene near the beginning of the movie), and protectively takes Yvette and JoJo on an outing to a local park. With director John Singleton assuming the music controls, Jody continues to earn the song's stamp of approval, to live up to, in other words, the song's lyrics. Music historian Jonathan Friedman (2015) writes, "Lyrics give musical sounds a specific character, turning a notoriously abstract medium into a delivery system for potential crystal clarity . . . songs are uniquely adept at compressing, containing and conveying streamlined concepts" (pp. 73–4). Jody's manhood is calibrated not simply through acts of fatherhood and marriage but through the metered stanzas, recurring phrases, clichés, choruses, and rhyme of rhythm-and-blues rhetoric (74). Both character and director negotiate a Black urban landscape and transfigure elements of that environment into moments of Black love and Black triumph and into explanations of those triumphs, attestations about that love, and suggestions for growth. This is all standard work in the African-American rhetorical tradition.

Notes

1. In *Prior Analytics*, Aristotle discusses the syllogism as a form of deductive reasoning (pp. 4–9). There are several forms of the syllogism, but it is often represented as three related propositions in a major premise-minor premise-conclusion format. If the major and minor premises are both true and properly aligned, the conclusion is valid, as in our example. The enthymeme, which is discussed by Aristotle in *On Rhetoric* (pp. 33–4), is essentially a syllogism in which premises might be unstated. The actual enthymeme in the Tavares song is "Heaven must be missin' an angel/ Missin' one angel, child/'Cause you're here with me right now." That all angels live in heaven and that "you" are one are propositions that, as indicated, are implied.
2. Jennifer Richards (2008, pp. 114–56) examines these issues in a far-ranging discussion that includes reviewing key positions by I. A. Richards (1936); Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1966); Gérard Genette (1982); Roland Barthes (1988); Jacques Derrida (2004); and Paul de Man (1979, 1982, 1986).
3. Transubstantiation, a controversial idea even in Christian circles, is the belief that consecrated bread and wine are not merely symbolic of Christ's body and blood but are in fact the real presence of that body and blood. The passage from the Bible most often linked with transubstantiation and its justification is John 6:32–58.
4. On a page titled "Career Chart," Malcolm did write a list of what he called basic terminal jobs. Those were lawyer, district attorney, and politician. He also constructed a list of related jobs. Orator was at the top of that list, followed by jobs in banking, real estate, trust companies, and the Department of Justice. MSS1117 Malcolm X Papers, Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History.
5. Malcolm X made the statement in a speech titled "The Ballot or Bullet" given at the Audubon Ballroom in Washington Heights, New York, New York on March 29, 1964. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffqVJWP5OeU (accessed 6/26/17). The

address was given three days after he had encountered and been photographed with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Washington, DC. The more elaborate and more famous version of "The Ballot or the Bullet" was delivered on April 3, 1964, at Cory Methodist Church in Cleveland. The published version of that speech does not contain the phrase. It is possible that Malcolm X adapted the phrase from Cole Porter's (1934) song "Anything Goes," written for his musical of the same title. The song begins, "Times have changed/And we've often rewound the clock/Since the Puritans got a shock/When they landed on Plymouth Rock/If today/Any shock they should try to stem/'Stead of landing on Plymouth Rock/Plymouth Rock would land on them." Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and Tony Bennett, among others, recorded the song in the 1950s.

6. The twenty-four-year-old Prosser intended to launch his rebellion near Richmond, Virginia, on August 30, but inclement weather caused him to change plans. Before he could reorganize, two slaves betrayed him. Prosser escaped immediate capture but eventually was tracked down in Norfolk by authorities, after being betrayed again. He and twenty-five followers, including his brothers Solomon and Martin, were hanged. In the aftermath, the Virginia Assembly increased restrictions on the movements of slaves and free Blacks.
7. Newman (1998) wisely favors a variety of intentions. He agrees that the spirituals are essentially religious songs but also acknowledges that their political aspect is perhaps most important (pp. 23–4). Appropriately, he divided his collection of the spirituals in four categories: songs of faith, songs of freedom, songs of hope, and songs of the spirit.
8. The debate has been intense at least as far back as the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Intellectuals like Alain Locke in "The New Negro" (1925, p. 4) claimed the spirituals to be a unique African-American contribution, while a line of White critics, exemplified by musicologist George Pullen Jackson (1932) have considered the spirituals to be mere imitations of white folk hymnody. The most compelling scholarship, says Southern (1997), supports Locke's view.

3 Jeremiads and Manifestoes

Imperio in Imperium by Sutton Griggs, published in 1899, is perhaps the classic "rhetoric novel" in African-American literature given its high degree of self-reflexivity about the role of rhetoric and oratory in social movements. Moreover, rhetoric and oratorical contests are central to the plot. More than one-fourth of the novel consists of orations, comments about orations, letters, and written resolutions as friends and rivals Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave strive to enact their educational and political visions.

Opening in northwestern Virginia during the early stages of Reconstruction, the story reveals that eight-year-old Belton begins school with unbridled enthusiasm and determination despite the fact that his white teacher regards him with disdain. Belton is poor, ragged, and dark-complexioned. His counterpart Bernard, a year older, is a financially privileged mulatto of mysterious circumstances. Not surprisingly, he is the teacher's pet. However, both boys excel and become over the course of twelve years the two best students in the school. They study rhetoric formally and develop widespread reputations as "brilliant students and eloquent speakers" (1899/2003, p. 25). Griggs even depicts them as "oratorical gladiators" (p. 27). As part of commencement exercises, the two engage in a public-speaking contest. Foreshadowing their ultimate political commitments, Belton speaks on the contributions of Anglo-Saxons to liberty while Bernard holds forth on Robert Emmett, the Irish nationalist and noted orator who was executed for leading a rebellion against British rule. By consensus, Belton is the better performer, but the gold medal is given to Bernard, leaving Belton an "uncrowned king" (p. 10).

Fortuitously, Belton soon meets a real King, a newspaper editor named V. M. King, who agrees to sponsor his education at Stowe University in Nashville. In return, King asks only that Belton always appeal to the good side of people's character (pp. 37–8). Belton manages to do so despite numerous and sometimes harrowing travails, and he matures to become the epitome of the New Negro, a confident and assertive "race man" and advocate for equal rights.[1]

In the meantime, the more privileged Bernard is shuffled off to Harvard University, where he becomes class president and valedictorian. Upon graduation, he discovers that he is the son of a United States senator and grandson