

4 Rhetorical Theory

Increasingly, African-American rhetoric is being studied and discussed in colleges and universities. We cannot yet account for all of the ways that these activities transpire. Teaching methods vary, and course content and extracurricular conversation range across a wide discursive territory. However, it is still meaningful to outline several influential theories and theoretical gestures that circulate in academic circles about African-American rhetoric. Obviously, these are not the only strands of thinking that are relevant, but they have proven to be especially generative.

Afrocentric Ideas

Molefi Kete Asante, originally known as Arthur Lee Smith, has provided the most comprehensive scholarly discussion of African-American rhetoric. Although formal study of Black rhetoric dates back to the nineteenth century, it is Asante's work as a rhetoric scholar and cultural analyst since he earned a doctoral degree in communication studies from UCLA in 1968 that anchors the field. All serious students of African-American rhetoric who have emerged during the past five decades have had to engage his scholarship, an oeuvre that includes *Rhetoric of Black Revolution* (1969); *The Voice of Black Rhetoric* (1971); *Language, Communication, and Rhetoric in Black America* (1972); *The Afrocentric Idea* (1998); *Race, Rhetoric, and Identity* (2005); and *Lynching Barack Obama* (2016). Of these, *The Afrocentric Idea* is the most important. He declares in the introduction his commitment to the "systematic exposition of communication and cultural behaviors as they are articulated in the African world" (1998, p. xv). By *African world* he means both the continent of Africa and the diaspora. In short, he has sought to establish an analytic framework capacious enough to speak to all aspects of African-derived rhetorical culture.

Although the term *Afrocentric* conjures up for some visions of isolationism and essentialism, the actual Afrocentric rhetorical project described by Asante is quite the opposite. In his view, "rhetoric must transcend ideologies, whether political or racial, in order to perform the task of continuous reconciliation" (p. 183). In other words, Afrocentric rhetoric confronts and extends beyond the negations imposed by Western society in which Eurocentric ideals have

often stood atop knowledge and culture hierarchies with the result that the Black difference typically has been construed as deficiency. Afrocentric rhetoric, to the contrary, promotes a humanistic vision that confirms the worth of other cultures and imagines nonhierarchical coexistence among them. It aims to unite people based on mutual recognition and respect (p. xi). As Asante phrases the matter,

Afrocentricity's response certainly is not to impose its own particularity as a universal, as Eurocentricity has often done. But hearing the voice of African American culture with all of its attendant parts is one way of creating a more sane society and one model for a more humane world.

(p. 23)

The Afrocentric conception and its practical politics are explicitly antiracist, antisexist, and anticlassist (p. 42). It is, Asante announces, the "productive thrust of language into the unknown in an attempt to create harmony and balance in the midst of disharmony and indecision" (p. 46)

Concerning the essential characteristics of Afrocentric rhetoric, Asante asserts that they are reflective of the "internal mythic clock, the epic memory, the psychic stain" of Africa in the spirits of African Americans (p. 59). This is a line that flirts with essentialism, but it is not the positing of a transhistorical, immutable, mystical essence as the explanation for a particular communicative style. Asante knows the impossibility of drawing lengthy straight lines of causation or direct connections through mazes of intertwining cultural histories. Furthermore, he grasps the nature of historical cultural diversity in Africa and the reality that history is open ended. African Americans are heirs to all traditions. But what Asante is stressing are the lived core experiences of African societies that have been passed along for centuries both on the continent and in the diaspora (p. 13). Thus, African-American culture contains African retentions. But retentions do not make it unique among cultures. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it is African-sourced in the United States. Its essence is that it is a repository of influences of which African ones are defining. Otherwise there would be no field of African-American rhetoric for it would lack an object of study.

To consider the effects of cultural difference on rhetorical practice more closely, while keeping in mind the idea of proportions as opposed to absolutes, let us turn, as Asante occasionally does, to Aristotle's definition of rhetoric, that is, "an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" (2006, p. 37). This is still probably the most familiar definition of rhetoric among academics and students, one that indicates, Asante notes, a clear conceptual separation in the meaning-making functions of speaker and listener or writer and reader. Rather than emphasizing the audience participation and the co-creation of meaning that are more characteristic of African verbal culture with its prevalent call-and-response modality, the classic Aristotelian formulation suggests people independently manipulating

"means" to persuade others through "delivery." This conception of emitter and receiver, according to Asante, is a "Euro-linear construction, situated in a stimulus-response ideology" (1998, p. 28). On the other hand, in Afrocentric rhetoric, the speaker consciously operates under guidance from the audience, and effective performance cannot be ascertained apart from audience participation or, more precisely, audience demands relative to expressions, gestures, and tone (p. 52). If Black audiences are moved to assent, they don't simply say, "We agree." They are apt to holler, "Teach!" The degree of direction is beyond something as passive as a "response." In some instances, the speaker sets in motion certain aspects of the monitoring system to co-create the message or what might be more accurately called a *message event*. Both on numerous religious and sacred occasions a speaker will exclaim, "Can I get an Amen?"

The call-and-response dynamic is so pervasive in African-American culture that one could hardly test Black verbal soil and not discover it.¹ Generations have attended soul music concerts where the entertainer asks "all the ladies" and "all the fellas" to participate in the show. Sometimes the groups are face-tiously pitted against one another with the aim of making the show a more vibrant experience for all in attendance.

A classic recorded example of call-and-response is provided by old-school rapper Kurtis Blow on the magisterial "The Breaks" (1980). The recording is more than a rap song; it is a party. The sound of revelers is heard in the background throughout and some respond to Blow's serial statements of misfortune by concurring, "That's the breaks. That's the breaks." At one point, the rapper initiates the following exchange:

Somebody say all right.
all ri-ght.
Say Ho-o!
Ho-o!
You don't stop. Now somebody scream.

Everyone in the house does, solidifying the communication.

Later on the track, Kurtis Blow commands rhythmically, "Just do it, just do it, just do it, do it, do it!" It is not a directive because the audience is not being requested to perform any particular action. The gesture they make is to echo Kurtis Blow's cry.

A similar scenario is presented in the recent movie *Straight Outta Compton* (2015). As the Ice Cube character leads N.W.A. on a rendition of the 1998 song, "Dopeman," he declares, "Do that shit, do that shit, do it!" The audience, including the group's white manager, gets the spirit and repeats the chant. The performance also involves, as on "The Breaks," an invitation to the audience to scream, which it does. In addition, the film shows the now-familiar move of a rapper extending the microphone toward the crowd so the audience members can spit some of the lyrics.

Or consider Kirk Franklin's (1997) recording in another genre as he queries his collaborators, the gospel choir God's Property:

GP are you wit me?
Oh yeah. We having church; we ain't going nowhere.
GP are you wit me?
Oh yeah. We having church; we ain't going nowhere.
GP are you wit me?
Oh yeah. We having church; we ain't going nowhere.

A fine example of call-and-response in an audio (and video) recording, "Stomp" sublimely rearticulates Asante's observation that the African oral tradition features polyrhythms, talk back, hand clapping, and other affirmations as speaker and audience push toward unity (Asante, 1998, p. 59).

The call-and-response dynamic also has implications for political analysis and action. If the contrast between vertical speaker-audience manifestations and the antiphonal, horizontal quality of Afrocentric speaker-audience interaction reflects deep cultural preferences, then vertical or horizontal social relations will flourish where these respective styles predominate. At least this is an easy theoretical leap for Asante to make. Addressing the broad cultural character of rhetoric, he observes, "There are therefore speaker and listener societies—a plethora of possibilities to keep the 'oppressed' in their places and the oppressors in theirs" (p. 180). It becomes "natural," therefore, that some groups or nations should speak while others listen. This is not to argue that communicative styles determine all oppressive social arrangements, but it is to suggest that progressive movements are bound to falter to the extent that they are inattentive to the various constructions of speaker and audience—Asante even prefers the term *hearership* to *audience* because to him the former term suggests greater agency. Hearerships hold authority accountable.

Whatever the preferred term, the more that audience members are self-aware about their functioning and about the structural form of other discourses, the better. Participants who reflect critically on the overarching language structures in which they operate can make more informed choices or assessments concerning their involvement. What Asante calls a *rhetoric of structure* dictates foregone conclusions unless disrupted. "It does not matter," the argument goes, "if the language of the imperative is polite and gentle, so long as the imperative structure endures; a social environment has been created where one, for instance, gives orders, and the other is expected to obey" (p. 31). This reminds us of being called by our parents from some activity we thought pressing and asked to do chores or run errands. *Would you mop the kitchen floor for me? Do you want to go to the store for me? We never misunderstood these utterances to be questions rather than commands. Obviously, it was not in our collective best interest to rebel. We would later have our chances. We are merely trying to drive home the point. If you comply*

completely with the terms of the discourse, you are stuck with the outcomes. Afrocentric rhetoric, given the salient feature of call-and-response and the enhanced role for hearers, provides a way, in political realms both small and large, to disidentify, as Asante terms it, from controlling structures. Recall the interaction of Willie Ricks and the audience in Greenwood mentioned in the last chapter.

Although the call-and-response dynamic is a hallmark, there is much more to the system of Afrocentric rhetoric. In fact, call-and-response is but one way to express *Nommo*, the intense African belief in the potency of the word. Smitherman (1977) explains in *Talkin and Testifyin*:

All activities of men, and all movements in nature, rest on the word, on the productive power of the word, which is water and heat and seed and *Nommo*, that is, life force itself. . . . In traditional African culture, a newborn is a mere thing until his father gives and speaks his name. No medicine, potion, or magic of any sort is considered effective without accompanying words. So strong is the African belief in the power and absolute necessity of *Nommo* that all craftsmanship must be accompanied by speech.

(p. 78)

Or as Toni Morrison remarked in a conversation with writer and critic Thomas LeClair, "It [the language] is the thing that black people love so much—the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It's a love, a passion" (LeClair, 1981, p. 27).

Call-and-response is the communal invocation of "word-force" to establish harmony. As indicated, its polyphonic, improvisational, rhythmic nature accounts for the inventiveness, indeed the invention, of verbal styles from Black pulpit oratory to hip hop. Speaking of contemporary African-American preachers and rappers, Asante observes that they know what their African ancestors knew with their use of *Nommo*, that is, "that all magic is word magic" (1998, p. 60).

Nommo, then, infuses *orature*, which is defined as the "comprehensive body of oral discourse on every subject and in every genre of expression produced by a people" (p. 96). This is a more elaborate idea than *oratory*, which denotes the practice of eloquent public speaking; *Orature* includes vocality, drumming, storytelling, praise singing, naming, sermons, lectures, raps, the dozens, poetry, and humor (pp. 72, 96). Speakers in the tradition emphasize lyricism and style; they favor the poetic over strict lecturing. The goal is to fascinate as much as to instruct (p. 91). They employ prototypical tales, which in turn become *mythoforms* that produce variations to demonstrate the possibility of exerting control over social circumstances and prospects for a better future (pp. 108, 112). Myth and mythoforms are perhaps the most powerful resources that speakers in the tradition command, "the all-encompassing deep generator[s] of ideas and concepts in our living relations with our peers,

friends, and ancestors" (p. 108). Principal myths, as Asante would label them, include Shine, Flying Africans, and Stagolee.

For example, consider the poet Etheridge Knight's rendition of the myth of Shine, a survivor of the ill-fated Titanic:

And, yeah, brother,
while white/America sings about the unsink
able molly brown
(who was hustling the titanic
when it went down)
I sing to thee of Shine
the stoker who was hip
enough to flee the fucking ship
and let the white folks drown
with screams on their lips
jumped his black ass into the dark sea, Shine did
broke free from the straining steel.
yeah, I sing of Shine
and how the millionaire banker stood on the deck
and pulled from his pocket a million dollar check
saying Shine Shine save poor me
and I'll give you all the money a black boy needs—
how Shine looked at the money and then at the sea
and said jump in muthafucka and swim like me—
and Shine swam on—Shine swam on—
how the banker's daughter ran naked on the deck
with her pinktits trembling and her pants round her neck
screaming Shine Shine save poor me
and I'll give you all the cunt a black boy needs—
how Shine said now cunt is good and that's no jive
but you got to swim not fuck to stay alive—
then Shine swam past a preacher afloat on a board
crying save me nigger Shine in the name of the Lord—
how the preacher grabbed Shine's arm and broke his stroke—
how Shine pulled his shank and cut the preacher's throat—
and Shine swam on—all alone.
And when news hit the shore that the titanic had sunk
Shine was up in Harlem damn near drunk—
and dancing in the streets.
yeah, damn near drunk and dancing in the streets.

(1968/2004, pp. 377-8)

As with all literature, the myth of Shine is open to several interpretations. It can be read as an instance of divine judgment on Jim Crow or as an expression of the ultimate superiority of black intelligence and self-reliance in the face of

insensitive and foolish technocrats. Asante reads it as a story of self-discovery amid chaos (1998, p. 114). As he explains,

In the moment of crisis, Shine recognizes that his condition was normally one of second-class status, although *he* could swim. This discovery gives him a power over the white and wealthy that he would never have achieved if it had not been for the sinking of the *Titanic*. The moral is not lost on the African American community: crisis has a way of equalizing everyone.

(pp. 114–15)

The myth of Flying Africans likely originates from an Igbo rebellion on St. Simons Island in 1803. After being purchased in Savannah by agents representing John Couper and Thomas Spalding, the enslaved were put aboard ship for transport to St. Simons. During the trip they rebelled and chased the agents into the sea. Upon landing, the Igbo hid in the swamp and apparently died in Dunbar Creek. It is unclear, of course, how the historical tale of flight on land was transformed into a myth of aerial flight, but the story has endured in numerous variations. In the 1930s, when Wallace Quarterman was interviewed by members of the Federal Writers Project, he offered, “Ain’t you heard about them? Well, at that time Mr. Blue he was the overseer and . . . Mr. Blue he go down one morning with a long whip for to whip them good. . . . Anyway, he whipped them good and they got together and stuck that hoe in the field and then . . . rose up in the sky and turned themselves into buzzards and flew right back to Africa. . . . Everybody knows about them” (Powell and Dobbs, 2017). Since Quarterman’s time, there have been additional versions of the myth, including Virginia Hamilton’s *The People Could Fly* (1985/2004) and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977).

Although Asante does not make the connection explicitly, he would perhaps consider Flying Africans stories to be expressions of what he calls the return myth (p. 162) or “one of the significant motifs of the African American experience” (p. 169). Speaking to its enduring relevance, he reasons, “If the African’s initial reaction to bondage in a strange land was a persistent search for a way to return, decades of servitude and generations of discrimination have only reinforced the myth’s power” (p. 169). Asante sees this myth as having been operative in the work of the leading Back-to-Africa political activists, Marcus Garvey and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, and in the psychological embraces of African heritage.

The eve-of-the-millennium film *Belly* also illustrates the return myth. Trying to extract himself from a life of crime, Sincere (Nas) makes a suggestion to his wife Tionne (T-Boz):

“Yo, T. T, I feel like it’s time for us to, like, go up, go away from here. You know what I mean? I been thinking about it for a long time.”

“Where would we go?”

“T, let’s go to Africa.”

“Shit nigga please. Be for real.”

“Yo, I never been more serious in my life. I mean, we been at the islands. We been everywhere. Who says we can’t go to Africa?”

“I mean, but, I mean . . . I mean, I don’t know. Africa’s far.”

“So what? I’m saying, just think about us. That’s all we ever talk about. That’s our dream. To go to our homeland. Where our roots are. Fuck it, man. You know what I’m sayin? Like, forget about money. Fuck everything. It’s the chance of a lifetime. If me and you went, and the baby, yo. Just think. Maybe it’s the right thing to do. Maybe not.”

“Well, I’ll think about it. I will think about it.”

After a few more harrowing episodes of street life, including a home invasion and, in a separate incident, the wounding of Sincere, Tionne grows eager to depart. Sincere informs his friends and acquaintances about his upcoming journey, including his former crime partner, Tommy “Bundy” Brown (DMX), who is also apparently reconsidering his life’s path and is a sympathetic listener:

“Yo, I’m going to Africa.”

“Word?”

“Word.”

“I’m a take some time out to reflect on the things that’s happenin. You know, between you, me, the whole world.”

“That’s ill, Son. That’s ill. What can I say but, you know, congratulations. Good luck on your trip to the Motherland.”

Africa symbolizes the resolution of all problems. It is an unrealistic expectation, but the germane point is that the return myth is powerfully seductive, is deeply embedded in African-American culture, and has endured. At the end of the film, Sincere in a voiceover tells of his arrival in Africa, where “It felt right. It was harmony. It was like a whole new beginning.”

Sincere’s redirection is positive, but he does not reflect the rawest form of resistance in the Black psyche. That place is occupied by the Stagolee mythoform. Stagolee himself, according to Asante, “represents the radical impulse to challenge an authority that seeks to repress freedom, improvisation, and harmony” (p. 118). He is “an archetype of the rebel, the protest speaker, the revolutionary” (p. 122). Tough and uncensored, he is the leading badman of African-American culture. Rooted in the 1895 murder of Billy Lyons by hustler “Stag” Lee Shelton in St. Louis, Stagolee stories have proliferated in a wide array of forms. Here is one example:

And in walked the rollers [police];

They picked up Stag and carried him to court.

Judge told Stag, say, “Stag, I been wanting you for a long time.”

Say, “I’m gon’ give you twenty years.”

Stag looked up at the Judge, say, "twenty years! Twenty years ain't no time.
I got a brother in Sing Sing doing one ninety-nine."

And then a ho walked in and to the courtroom's surprise
She pulled out two long forty-fives.

Stag grabbed one and shot his way to the courtroom do',
Tipping his hat to all the ladies once mo'.

(Dance, 2002b, "Stagolee," p. 490)

"Ultimately, Asante writes, "we seek to effect the great opposition in discourse by calling upon this major mythoform" (1998, p. 122).

Yet the overall goal of Afrocentric rhetoric as a project beyond the Stagolee mythoform is expansion not opposition. Its prevailing gesture is a humanistic affirmation of cultures. It locates agency in the developers of African-American discourse and contributes to a fuller account of rhetoric in general and to, as indicated, an all-embracing humanistic vision.

A Tradition of Signifying

According to Google Scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988a) has been cited in text more than 4,000 times, making it over the past thirty years perhaps the most popular and relevant volume published about Black literature. But one should not be fooled by the restrictiveness implied by the subtitle. Along with its immediate predecessor, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial Self"* (1987), the book constitutes the central statement that Gates offers about rhetoric. Describing his work, Gates confides, "my movement, then, is from hermeneutics to rhetoric and semantics, only to return to hermeneutics once again" (1988a, p. 44). As prelude to his brilliant explications of works in the Black literary tradition, Gates theorizes what is "Black" in those texts aside from messages or the fact of their production by what might be considered Black bodies, both unreliable indicators to him of "Blackness." His book is thus an important rhetoric treatise for at least four reasons: 1) it describes a system of figurations, 2) it is an argument about the composition elements required if literary texts are to evince "Blackness, 3) it makes a case for how to write about the literature in question, and 4) it is a self-conscious testament to African-American humanity and creativity. In short, Gates, armed with a rhetoric of African-American literature, stands against the wholesale application of Euro-American critical theories to Black texts and against the sole reliance on extra-literary matters.

Gates settles on the Signifying Monkey as the "figure-of-figures" (p. xxi). This creature is related to Esu-Elegbara, who in Yoruba mythology is a trickster and a messenger of the gods, and is one who is proficient at interpretation, translation, and wordplay, including irony, indirection, double-entendre, and satire. Counterparts or derivations of Esu-Elegbara are Legba in Benin, Exu in Brazil, Papa Legba in Haiti, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, and Papa La Bas in the United States. Gates surmises that the Signifying Monkey descends directly

from Cuban mythology because Echu-Elegua is often depicted with a monkey at his side (1987, p. 238).

Witness the African-American incarnation of Esu-Elegbara in action in one of numerous versions:

The Monkey and the Lion got to talkin' one day.
Monkey say, "There's a bad cat livin' down your way."
He say, "You take this fellow to be your friend,
But the way he talks about you is a sin;
He say folks say you king, and that may be true,
But he can whip the daylight outta you.
And somethin' else I forgot to say:
He talks about your mother in a hell of a way."
Monkey say, "His name is Elephant, and he's not your friend."
Lion say, "He don't need to be 'cause today will be his end."
Say like a ball of fire and a streak of heat,
The old Lion went rolling down the street.
That Lion let out a terrible sneeze,
And knocked the damn giraffe to his everlastin' knees.
Now he saw Elephant sittin' under a tree,
And he say, "Now you bring your big black butt to me."
The Elephant looked at 'im out the corner of his eyes,
And say, "Now little punk, go play with somebody your size."
The Lion let out a roar and reared up six feet tall,
Elephant just kicked him in the belly and laughed to see him fall.
Now they fought all night and they fought all day;
And I don't know how in hell that Lion ever got away.
But the Lion was draggin' back through the jungle more dead than
alive,
And that's when that Monkey start that signifying.
He say, "Hey-y-y, Mr. Lion, you don't look so swell;
Look to me like you caught a whole lotta hell!
You call yourself a king and a ace,
It's gon' take ninety yards o' sailcloth to patch yo' face.
Now git on out from under my tree,
Before I decide to drop my drawers and pee.
Stop, don't let me hear you roar,
or I'll come down outta this tree and beat your tail some more.
Say the damn old Lion was sitting down there crying,
And the Monkey just *kept* signifying.
And then Monkey started jumpin' around
And his foot slipped and he fell down.
Like a ball of fire and a streak of heat,
The old Lion was on him with all four feet.
Say the Monkey looked up with tears in his eyes,
And say, "Mr. Lion, I apologize!

Now, good buddy, in this jungle friends are few;
 You know I was only playin' wit' you."
 Monkey looked at Lion and saw he wasn't gon' get away,
 So he decided to think of a bold damn play.
 He say, "Mr. Lion, you ain't raisin' no hell,
 Everybody in the jungle saw me when I fell.
 Now if you let me up like a real man should,
 I'll kick your butt all over these woods." The old Lion looked at 'im and
 jumped back for a hell of a fight
 And in a split second the Monkey was damn near outta sight.
 He jumped up in a tree higher than any human eye can see,
 And say, "You dumb mammyjammer, don't you ever mess wid me!"
 ("The Signifying Monkey," pp. 492-4)

The monkey lacks the lion's physical power, but he definitely has something for a lion if necessary. He has elephants at his disposal. This trickster is a metaphor for how one grasps the totality of power dynamics in a given system and exerts a measure of control over circumstances despite operating at a physical or material disadvantage. It illustrates how the physically subordinate can get their meanings to matter by expertly using restricted codes in spaces where multiple codes operate. The lion remains disoriented, as well as in terrible shape, because in reading the monkey literally he cannot read him at all.

Gates posits that the Signifying Monkey is "the figure of a black rhetoric in the Afro-American speech community" and self-consciously embodies the speech characteristics of the Black vernacular (1988a, p. 53). Signifying is, therefore, in Black rhetoric, the "trope of tropes" (p. 51). To signify is to make meaning within a Black rhetorical world that exists alongside and in relation to a white one, a situation Gates describes as "parallel discursive universes" (p. 45). The same vocabulary items, *signify*, express fundamental opposition. For example, there is no way to indicate this difference with other terms. *Not sharp*, the opposite of *sharp*, can be communicated as *dull*. But one cannot label the opposite of *meaning* other than to say *not meaning*. Even *nonsense* and *meaningless* do not quite capture the distinction. The parallel words *signify* intriguingly look the same even as they index different rhetorical worlds. In the Black lexicon, to *signify* is to make meaning in Black.

This does not suggest the impossibility of translation, only a divide along a crucial linguistic marker that starkly epitomizes difference. Naturally, we can ascertain and discuss certain Black rhetorical production in relation to standard tropes, and Gates provides examples relative to the four master tropes so identified by Kenneth Burke (1941):

Your mama's a man	(metaphor)
Your daddy's one too	(irony)
They live in a tin can	(metonymy)
That smells like a zoo	(synecdoche) (In Gates, 1988a, p. 86)

But it is the ritual of Black signifying that calls these tropes, indeed all tropes, into being as Black subject matter.

The components of signification, according to Smitherman (1977), and then Gates (1988a), include the following traits:

1. indirect, circumlocution
2. metaphorical-imagistic (but images rooted in the everyday, real world)
3. humorous, ironic
4. rhythmic fluency and sound
5. teachy but not preachy
6. directed at person or persons usually present in the situational context
7. punning, play on words
8. introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected.

(Smitherman, p. 118; Gates, p. 94)

All of these features are on display in this passage from Chester Himes's novel, *Blind Man with a Pistol* (1969/1989), when those famous African-American police officers, Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, explain a situation in Harlem to their white supervisor Anderson. Smitherman used the excerpt in *Talkin and Testifyin* and Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*:²

"I take it you've discovered who started the riot," Anderson said.

"We knew who it was all along," Grave Digger said.

"It's nothing we can do to him," Coffin Ed echoed.

"Why not, for God's sake?"

"He's dead," Coffin Ed said.

"Who?"

"Lincoln," Grave Digger said.

"He hadn't ought to freed us if he didn't want to make provisions to feed us," Coffin Ed said. "Anyone could have told him that."

"All right, all right, lots of us have wondered what he might have thought of the consequences," Anderson admitted. "But it's too late to charge him now."

Coffin Ed and Grave Digger continue to talk around, yet to, Anderson:

"Couldn't have convicted him anyway," Grave Digger said.

"All he'd have to do would be to plead good intentions," Coffin Ed elaborated. "Never was a white man convicted as long as he plead good intentions."

"All right, all right, who's the culprit this night here, in Harlem? Who's inciting these people to this senseless anarchy?"

"Skin," Grave Digger said.

(Himes, p. 135)

Smitherman, who obviously was a significant influence on Gates, as was anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan (1971), also analyzes the exchange relative to the eight characteristics listed above:

Coffin Ed and Grave Digger show skillful use of indirection [1] to convey their message that rioting is caused by historical conditions of enslavement and white oppression. . . . The method of circumlocution [1] is used to teach Anderson but not in a sermonizing way. The *siggin* is directed at Anderson as a representative white liberal type in the Lincoln tradition, and thus it's being run on him to his face, not behind his back [6]. The two detectives are obviously introducing the unexpected [8], both in a logical and semantic sense. (Lincoln should have kept us enslaved if he wasn't going to make any provisions for us other than the many Harlems of the United States; thus eating as a slave is better than starving as a free man. Further, Anderson has asked a perfectly normal whodunit investigatory type question and instead gets a surprise sociological explanation [8].) There is rhythmic fluency [4] in the use of "freed us/feed us." The extended metaphor [2] of a mock trial is used to indict Lincoln and White America generally, as if to say they should be on trial and not the rioters. (Note courtroom terms like "charge him," "plead," and "convicted.") Further there is the metaphorical allusion [2] to the old saying, "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions." Finally, Grave Digger and Coffin Ed use metaphor, irony, and play on words [2, 3, 7] with their final *circumlocutory* response [1] that "skin" is responsible for the "senseless anarchy." By "skin" they are suggesting color, oppression, Lincoln, white liberal attitudes—in short, giving the same answer [5] they have been giving all along, in a different way and in one word. Like I said, they is baad!

(1977, pp. 123–4)

Signifying also involves repetitions and reversals. In Black literary texts, for example, it reveals itself "as explicit theme, as implicit rhetorical strategy, and as a principle of literary history" (Gates, 1988a, p. 89). One illustration of the point is Gates's comparison of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison:

Ellison in his fictions Signifies upon Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures through repetition and difference. One can readily suggest the complexities of the parodying. The play of language, the Signifyin(g), starts with the titles. Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, titles connoting race, self, and presence, Ellison tropes with *Invisible Man*, with *invisibility* as an ironic response of absence to the would-be presence of blacks and natives, while *man* suggests a more mature and stronger status than either *son* or *boy*. Ellison Signifies upon Wright's distinctive version of naturalism with a complex rendering of modernism; Wright's re-acting protagonist, voiceless to the last, Ellison Signifies upon with a nameless protagonist. Ellison's character is nothing *but* voice, since it is he who shapes, edits, and

narrates his own tale, thereby combining action with the representation of action and defining reality by its representation. This unity of presence and representation is perhaps Ellison's most subtle reversal of Wright's theory of the novel as exemplified in *Native Son*. Bigger's voicelessness and powerlessness to act (as opposed to react) signify an absence, despite the metaphor presence found in the novel's title; the reverse obtains in *Invisible Man*, where the absence implied by invisibility is undermined by the presence of the narrator as the author of his own text.

(p. 106)

Of course, we can lengthen the chain of signification. Himes, for example, in his 1945 novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, reverses Bigger Thomas before Ellison does by creating the character Bob Jones. In fact, Jones, the first-person narrator, discusses Bigger explicitly:

"I think Richard Wright is naïve," Polly said.

"Aren't we all?" I said.

"*Native Son* turned my stomach," Arline said. "It just proved what the white Southerner has always said about us; that our men are rapists and murderers."

"Well, I will agree that the selection of Bigger Thomas to prove the point of Negro oppression was an unfortunate choice," Leighton said.

"What do you think, Mr. Jones?" Cleo asked.

I said, "Well, you couldn't pick a better person than Bigger Thomas to prove the point. But after you prove it, then what? Most white people I know are quite proud of having made Negroes into Bigger Thomases."

(1945/2002, p. 88)

Moreover, *Native Son's* influence on Lorraine Hansberry's (1959) play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, is unmistakable. The Youngers, like the Thomases, live on the south side of Chicago. Walter Lee Younger, like Bigger, works as a chauffeur. The difference in age between Bigger (20) and Walter Lee (35) is virtually the same as the time span between the publication of Wright's novel (1940) and the setting (1956) of Hansberry's play. So Bigger would be Walter Lee's age had he lived. Both the novel and the play open early in the morning. The first sounds in both are the ringing of an alarm clock and the urgent voice of a domineering woman. The similarities don't end there, but the point is made. Hansberry avoids the tragic ending and focuses on family triumph, on thriving in an environment instead of succumbing to it.

We see echoes of Bigger in present-day cultural productions such as the television series *Power*. Shawn is a chauffeur—dresses almost exclusively in the one chauffeur's suit given to him—and shares Bigger's penchant for abysmal decision-making. He pursues a romantic relationship with the wife of his boss and pledges allegiance to his own corrupt father. Not quite as ineloquent as Bigger, he nonetheless never speaks effectively back to authority, particularly

the authority of his father, who, ironically, betrays him and becomes his executioner (Jackson, Macedon, and McKay, 2015).

Gates's discussion of the African-American literary tradition is compelling overall but gives rhetoricians concerned with more than formalism a few disconcerting pauses. He asserts, "a poem above all is atemporal" (1987, p. 33). But in fact poems are multi-temporal; their meanings are not fixed but are, rather, open across generations. Peculiarly, he claims for a poem—static, transhistorical status—what he would not claim for any subject who writes a poem. Furthermore, he opines that poetry does not preach well (p. 32) and that "the black poet is far more than a mere point of consciousness of the community . . . he or she is the point of consciousness of the language" (p. 178). However, poetry as a genre is perfectly suited to conveying preachments, exhortation, or instruction, though individual poets may or may not excel in this regard. And it is the case that some people do not like or privilege poetry that preaches, but that is a different matter. The relationship of the poet to community consciousness is often stronger than signaled by the adjective *mere*. It is preferable to view the poet both as the point of consciousness of the community *and* as the point of consciousness of the language.

Similarly, when Gates endorses the premise of professors at a Yale conference that "Afro-American literature is above all an act of language" (Gates, 1987, p. 44), we respond that it is, rather, an act of language *along with* everything else it is, including being social and political commentary.¹ The writers that Gates theorizes about respond not only to language as language but to political positions and to arguments about identity and representation. Having conceded the social basis of Black rhetoric, one cannot logically reduce Black rhetoric to a linguistic game apart from social and political grounding. Gates's proclamations are certainly understandable given the critical practices he counters, that is, the reduction of Black texts to message vehicles or social sciences studies with little or no attention to technical achievements or even structural genius. But he may have gone overboard in reaction, perhaps partly because he wanted to throw shade on politics left of his own liberalism. However, there is no denying his impressive interpretive contributions or his major role in conceptualizing and promoting the study of African-American rhetoric.

Rhetorics of Black Feminism

Spirited semantic work accompanies discussions of Black feminism. The concept refers generally to identity formation and initiatives for social change fueled by the experiences and perspectives of Black women. Naturally, within this paradigm exists a cluster of ideologies. So while in our view Black feminism remains a useful and convenient descriptor, it does not, as we shall see, precisely label the thinking of everyone we would include in the framework.

The term Black feminism dates back to the 1960s. Feelings of exclusion formed in response to the sexism inside Black political movements and the racism inside white feminist groups motivated some African-American women

to create their own alliances such as the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), founded in New York City in 1973 by the likes of Doris Wright, Flo Kennedy, Faith Ringgold, and Michele Wallace. Regarding her experience at an early meeting of the NBFO, Alice Walker wrote in 1974,

We sat together and talked and knew no one would think, or say, 'Your thoughts are dangerous to black unity and a threat to black men.' Instead, all the women understood that we gathered together to assure understanding among black women, and that understanding among women is not a threat to anyone who intends to treat women fairly.

(1974/1984, p. 273)

However, some NBFO delegates sought a more radical economic agenda than was deducible from the dominant tone in the organization, which was moderate. Moreover, these delegates wanted to shine a spotlight on the specific issues confronting Black lesbians. As a result, Barbara Smith, Demita Frazier, and others established the Combahee River Collective in Boston in 1974 to clarify further their politics and activism. As the group stipulated in their most famous document, "A Black Feminist Statement," composed in 1978,

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As black women we see black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.

(1978/2009, p. 3)

As the 1970s extended into the hip-hop era and the hip-hop era extended into the 1980s and beyond, cultural critics such as Joan Morgan (1999) and Aisha Durham (2007) added *hip-hop feminism* to the common lexicon to announce the presence of those who are inclined toward feminism and also view hip-hop culture as essential to their sense of themselves and to how they function. Author of *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost. . . My Life as a Hip-Hop Feminist*," Morgan recounts her acceptance of the term *feminist* during a contentious discussion with three men:

It's simple. I love black men like I love no other. And I'm not talking sex or aesthetics, I'm talking about loving y'all enough to be down for the drama—stomping anything that threatens your existence. Now only a fool loves that hard without asking for the same in return. So yeah, I demand that black men fight sexism with the same passion they battle racism. I want you to annihilate anything that endangers sista's welfare—including violence against women—because my

survival walks hand in hand with yours. So, my brotha, if loving y'all fiercely and wanting it back makes me a feminist then I'm a feminist. So be it.

(pp. 44–5)

Durham, for her part, defines hip-hop feminism as

a socio-cultural, intellectual and political movement grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color from the post-Civil Rights generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist, and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation. (pp. 304–5)

Over the years, some thinkers have preferred to dispense with the marker *feminism* altogether. Walker, for example, coined the now-popular term *womanism*, which is synonymous with *Black feminism* but suggests different cultural shading. The locution derives, Walker explains,

from the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: 'You trying to be grown.' Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

(1984, p. xi)

Clenora Hudson-Weems (1994) ranges a bit farther semantically in coining the term *Africana womanism*. Walker does not reject *Black feminism* in her definition; Hudson-Weems does, judging that the word *feminist* essentially means the concerns of white women. Moreover, she intends the label *Africana* to convey a strong link to African culture and thus explicitly align her conception with Afrocentrism.

Other neologisms are sure to follow. But above or perhaps despite the issues of definition, four grounding tropes seem to exist in what we consider Black-feminist rhetoric:

1. the self-conscious verbal assertion of requisite Black female presence
2. commentary about the exercise of a Black female voice speaking against male domination
3. the ironic assertion of high-achieving Black womanhood, and
4. the positing of triple exploitation.

The first two tropes are exemplified in Anna Julia Cooper's remarkable 1892 text *A Voice from the South*. Reflecting on Martin Delaney, the estimable African-American activist who died seven years prior, Cooper recalled that when Delaney, a "race man," appeared at special state functions, he would proclaim

that the Black race attended with him. Cooper, however, reasoned that a man could not authentically represent African Americans on the whole. Therefore, she articulated one of her signature dictums: "Only the Black WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me'" (1892/1988, p. 31, emphasis original). The understanding is that no social or political project could adequately express African-American aspirations unless the full presence of African-American women was central. One could argue that Cooper erred in reading Delany's metaphorical expression literally. Furthermore, "quiet" might not be the most effective pitch to make today to many feminist or pro-feminist audiences. Nonetheless, Cooper hit the mark with her conclusion. Her comment was actually not so much about Delany; he was but provocation. She correctly spoke to the great gender imbalance among established African-American leadership. In any case, her pronouncement has resonated ever since and is a powerful composing tool for speakers and writers. This is signaled most markedly by the title and epigraph of Paula Giddings's 1984 *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*.

Giddings's book also contains examples of what we may now call the when-and-where-I-enter trope, some of which predate Cooper's memorable phrasing. Giddings points out, for example, that, in 1849, Black women threatened to boycott a Black convention in Ohio if not given a prominent role. Six years later, at a Black convention in Philadelphia, Mary Ann Shadd Cary gained admission after she protested vigorously (p. 59). In both cases, Black women deemed the political gathering illegitimate if it lacked their significant involvement. The National Association of Colored Women (NACW), founded in 1896, represents another self-conscious expression of "entry." Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin explained at a national convention in Boston that led to the establishment of the NACW, "We are not alienating or withdrawing. We are only coming to the front" (Giddings, 1984, p. 95).⁴ She announced the group's self-determining participation, including of course their physical presence, in the public sphere.

Closely connected to physical presence is vocal display. One not only must show up, one must show out. As Cooper assessed the matter, "'tis women's strongest vindication for speaking that *the world needs to hear her voice*. It would be subversive of every human interest if the cry of one-half the human family be stifled" (p. 121, emphasis original). Without using the term *rhetoric*, Cooper nonetheless made the case for rhetorical culture, the consideration and negotiation of provisional truths by individuals and groups in free-flowing civil exchange. Such conduct was, in her view, the essence of democracy. She adduced,

No one belief can be supreme in America. All interests must be consulted, all claims conciliated. Exchange among many putting forth their argumentative best is the best defense against tyranny. Compromise and

concession, liberality and toleration were the conditions of the nation's founding and are the *sine qua non* of its continued existence.

(pp. 164–5)

Cooper pointed out that even oligarchs have to pretend that service and not supremacy is their aim, which is certainly an instance, though unfortunately not an unfamiliar one, of rhetoric being used in bad faith (pp. 165–8).

Perhaps the classic comment on the role of a Black female voice belongs to Zora Neale Hurston. In her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's voyage to "voice" is one of the central dynamics. Her second husband, Joe Starks, had always desired to be a "big voice," but he harbors no desire to see his wife become one as well (1937/1978, p. 48). He severely limits her opportunities to speak in public. He does not let her address crowds and keeps her from kibitzing with some of the town's great raconteurs, who gather on the porch of his store. For her years of acquiescence, Janie is maintained in material comfort. She is no match for her husband in verbal jousting anyway until she spends years learning to decipher him (p. 120). As she approaches forty, she no longer holds him in awe and deposes him with words, the showdown occurring when he attempts to embarrass her in front of customers simply because she improperly cut some chewing tobacco. However, unlike in the past, she startles him with her aggressiveness and skill:

"I god amighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!"

A big laugh started off in the store but people got to thinking and stopped. It was funny if you looked at it right quick, but it got pitiful if you thought about it awhile. It was like somebody snatched off part of a woman's clothes while she wasn't looking and the streets were crowded. Then too, Janie took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's face, and that was something that hadn't been done before.

"Stop mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin' me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not."

"Wha—whut's dat you say—Janie? You must be out yo' head."

"Naw, Ah ain't outa mah head neither."

"You must be. Talkin' any such language as dat."

"You de one started talkin' under people's clothes. Not me."

"Whut's the matter wid you, nohow? You ain't no young girl to be getting' insulted 'bout yo' looks. You ain't no young courtin' gal. You'se uh ole woman, nearly forty."

(pp. 121–2)

Caught off guard, Joe is ill equipped to handle his wife on this occasion. They exchange a few barbs about each other's age and general appearance before Janie delivers the *coup de grace*:

You big-bellies round here and put on a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life.

(p. 123)

The stunned audience immediately grasps the import of Janie's assault:

"Great God from Zion!" Sam Watson gasped. "Y'all really playin' de dozens tuhnight."

"Wha—whut's dat you said?" Joe challenged, hoping his ears had fooled him.

"You heard her, you ain't blind," Walter taunted.

"Ah ruther be shot with tacks than tuh hear dat 'bout mahself," Lige Moss commiserated.

(p. 123)

Joe stands before the town humiliated, a pitiable figure in a place where he has long been a dominant figure. Having lost control over his own tongue and over Janie's, he strikes her. Eventually, he moves out of the bedroom and more or less ignores his wife, though he is still reeling from her surprising offensive. A decline in health mirrors his rhetorical fall, and he soon expires. Janie with her now-strong voice is on the path to a much more empowered life.

The ironic assertion of high-achieving Black womanhood was most succinctly expressed by Sojourner Truth. At an 1851 woman's rights convention in Akron, the secretary, Marius Robinson, captured part of her performance:

I want to say a few words about this matter. I am a woman's rights [sic]. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now.

(Foner and Branham, 1998, p. 228)

Another account, written years later by Frances Dana Gage, who presided over the conference, added the phrase "arn't I a woman?":

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And arn't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And arn't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And arn't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off into slavery, and

when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And
arn't I a woman?

(Foner and Branham, 1998, pp. 227–8)

Neither account is a literal transcript, but the second account is of added interest to rhetoric scholars because of the refrain. Sojourner's question, assuming she posed it, is not a genuine interrogative.⁵ The brilliant rhetorical question is actually the insistence on recognition of the fact that she was, indeed, marvelously and irrefutably a woman. She linked the shortest statement of subjectivity in the English language—I—with limitless Black female possibility. She ironically succeeded as a "man"—in the field and on the platform—to make a case for women. Her words, like Cooper's, are reflected in the title of a Black-feminist volume, in this case, bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman?* published in 1981. Truth's words have even crossed over onto the cover of a historical study, Deborah Gray White's 1987 *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slave in the Plantation South*, as well as Ilona Linthwaite's multicultural poetry anthology, the 1988 *Ain't I a Woman: A Book of Poetry from around the World*.

Walker noted how she was pleased when she realized that Sojourner Truth was also her name, meaning that *Sojourner* equals *Walker* and *Alice* is a word for truth in Old Greek (1989, pp. 97–8). Not surprisingly, Walker presents in fiction a character strikingly similar to Sojourner Truth. Early in the short story "Everyday Use" (1973), the first-person narrator, Mrs. Johnson, thinks wishfully about being a petite, witty woman who appears on television with Dee, who is the elder of her two daughters, the one better educated and more glamorous. However, Mrs. Johnson abruptly shifts to an accurate self-description:

In real life I am a large, big-boned woman with rough, man-working hands. In the winter I wear flannel nightgowns to bed and overalls during the day. I can kill and clean a hog as mercilessly as any man. My fat keeps me hot in zero weather. I can work outside all day, breaking ice to get water for washing; I can eat pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog. One winter I knocked a bull calf straight in the brain between the eyes with a sledge hammer and had the meat hung up to chill before nightfall.

(p. 48)

The double irony in her statement is that although she would acknowledge "I was always better at a man's job" (p. 50), she is a remarkable woman in the same mold as Sojourner Truth and, despite possessing only a second-grade education, she is a wiser mother than any version of herself about which she dreamed. When Dee, now a worldly cultural nationalist who had changed her name to Wangero, visits her and Maggie at their home in rural Georgia, Dee seeks to collect artifacts that are symbols of her heritage. Her intended haul includes two quilts made largely from some of her grandmother's dresses. But Mrs. Johnson had been saving the quilts to give to Maggie as a wedding present.

As Dee grows more insistent, Maggie, accustomed to losing to Dee in nearly every way, concedes the latest prize: "She can have them. . . . I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts" (p. 58).

Mrs. Johnson rejects Maggie's proposition:

I looked at her hard. She had filled her bottom lip with checkerberry snuff and it gave her face a kind of hangdog look. It was Grandma Dee and Big Dee [her aunt] who taught her how to quilt herself. She stood there with her scarred hands hidden in the folds of her skirt. She looked at her sister with something like fear but she wasn't mad at her. This was Maggie's portion. This was the way she knew God to work.

When I looked at her like that something hit me in the top of my head and ran down to the soles of my feet. Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout. I did something I never had done before: hugged Maggie to me, then dragged her on into the room, snatched the quilts out of Miss Wangero's hands and dumped them into Maggie's lap. Maggie just sat there on my bed with her mouth open.
(p. 58)

Mrs. Johnson had once saved Maggie from a fire, one that had scarred her daughter. Inspired by religious revelation in the same manner as Sojourner Truth, she again protects Maggie and affirms her at a critical psychological moment.

The popularization of the construct of triple exploitation, also called triple jeopardy or triple oppression, is traceable to two Black female radicals: Louise Thompson Patterson and Claudia Jones. As a delegate to the founding convention of the National Negro Congress in February 1936, Patterson attended a session on Black women and labor. A resolution to unionize domestic workers, promote housewives' leagues, and organize women's groups into a united front was offered and adopted. In the preamble, the proposers noted that Black women were subjected to "three-fold exploitation as women, as workers, and as Negroes." Reflecting on the conference for the magazine *The Woman Today*, Patterson (1936), writing then as Louise Thompson, penned, "Over the whole land, Negro women meet this triple exploitation—as workers, as women, and as Negroes. About 85 per cent of all Negro women workers are domestics, two-thirds of the two million domestic workers in the United States" (p. 14). She theoretically linked the plight of Black Southern domestic workers and field hands to the circumstances of the Black women who gathered daily in Bronx Park to be chosen for day labor at 10 or 15 cents per hour, a practice, known as the Bronx Slave Market, that recently had been exposed in the *Crisis* by Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke (1935).

If Louise Thompson Patterson was, as Du Bois declared in 1934, "the leading colored woman in the Communist movement in this country" (p. 327), Jones, perpetually hounded by government authorities, precariously assumed that mantle in the 1940s. In 1949, she published an influential essay in *Political*

Affairs titled “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!” Employing a variation of the when-and-where-I-enter trope, Jones wrote,

The bourgeoisie is fearful of the militancy of the Negro woman, and for good reason. The capitalists know, far better than many progressives seem to know, that once Negro women undertake action, the militancy of the whole Negro people, and thus of the anti-imperialist coalition, is greatly enhanced.

(p. 3)

Then, turning to the idea of triple exploitation, Jones proceeded to argue, “Negro women—as workers, as negroes, and as women—are the most oppressed stratum of the whole population” (p. 4). During her far-reaching discussion of labor-market discrimination, white-chauvinist stereotypes, and justice-system racism, Jones reiterated, regarding Black women, “the special oppression she faces as Negro, as woman, and as worker” (p. 6). Following the lead of Patterson and Jones, the concept of triple exploitation has become a staple of Black-feminist discourse, indeed of all discourse that has as its aim a serious discussion of the political situation of African-American women.

Scholars continue to deepen our tropological understanding. One noteworthy example is Gwendolyn Pough’s discussion of *wreck*. Contemplating “Black womanist traditions and a Hip-Hop present,” (p. 13), Pough (2004) is concerned with the

ways the rhetorical practices of Black women participants in Hip-Hop culture bring wreck—that is, moments when Black women’s discourses disrupt dominant masculine discourses, break into the public sphere, and in some way impact or influence the U.S. imaginary, even if that influence is fleeting.

(p. 76)

She cites, among others, Queen Latifah (1993) and Eve (1999) as exemplars who have brought wreck (Pough, p. 101). Pough describes a *rhetoric of wreck* (pp. 75–92), a hip-hop extension of speech acts associated with Black women, such as *talking back*, a voiced resistance against the marginalization of Black women (p. 80); *going off*, an expression of rage, a controlled expression, in Pough’s formulation, for speaking back to power to effect change (pp. 80–1); *turning it out*, a verbal strategy that when fused with *bringing wreck* is a carefully constructed response to stereotypes and disrespect regarding Black women (p. 81); having a niggerbitch fit, a public and strategic expression of indignation, best done collectively (pp. 81–2); and *being a diva*, being a hip-hop version of someone committed to the uplift of herself and others (pp. 82–3). Although not always in the service of expressly feminist politics, *wreck* is an insightful way to frame various interventions inside an overall Black-feminist rhetorical project.

Other recent contributions are also worth mentioning. The Crunk Feminist Collective (Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn, 2017) offers a trio of incisive terms. *Hip hop generation feminism* is

our riff on the term ‘hip hop feminism’ coined by Joan Morgan in 1999. We add the term ‘generation’ to reflect the fact that we grew up as members of the hip hop generation and are shaped by the terms of this historical and cultural moment. Unlike hip hop feminism, hip hop generation feminism does not demand any particular allegiance to hip hop culture beyond acknowledging how the moment has shaped our politics and worldview.

(p. 326)

Crunk feminism denotes “our brand of hip hop (generation) feminism, which centers the high-energy and percussive nature of crunk music⁶ together with a clear commitment to dismantling patriarchy” (pp. 325–6). *Ratchet feminism* was coined by CFC member Britney Cooper to refer to “critiques of sexism and patriarchy that happen in otherwise ‘ratchet’ spaces.⁷ Also refers to unlikely female friendships forged in the midst of complicated romantic relationship situations (e. g., between a man’s girlfriend and his ‘baby mama’” (p. 328).

Moya Bailey (2010) proposes the term *misogynoir*, a portmanteau combining the English word *misogyny* with the French word for *black*, that is, *noir*, to describe acts of contempt or prejudice directed specifically at Black women. The word entered the mainstream in August 2016 when singer Katy Perry incorporated it into an expression of support on Twitter for actress/comedian Leslie Jones, who had become the victim of racist and sexist cyber attacks. Bailey did not view Perry’s usage as a negative development, but she did have reservations:

We see allies getting a lot of points for using terminology that marginalized communities have been using for a while, like when men talk about feminism or white people talk about racism. . . . There’s a real celebration of those instances as opposed to a willingness to listen to the people most affected.

(Solis, 2016)

Yet, Bailey’s coinage seems destined to remain a valuable item in an ever-expanding Black-feminist rhetorical toolbox. As she suggests,

I think we have to refine language in a lot of different ways so we can actually come up with solutions that help the communities we want to address. . . . When you use language that’s generic or unspecific you can get at some of the problem, but not all of it.

(Solis, 2016)

Notes

1. Linguist Geneva Smitherman considers call-and-response, or call-response, to be one of the four Black Modes of Discourse, along with signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing (1977, pp. 101–66).
2. *Talkin and Testifyin*, pp. 122–3; *Signifying Monkey*, pp. 96–7.
3. This refers to the two-week seminar, “Afro-American Literature: From Critical Approach to Course Design,” funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and directed by Robert B. Stepto. The statement that Gates quotes appears in the follow-up volume, *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (Fisher and Stepto, 1979, p. 234).
4. At the convention in Boston in Boston, delegates founded the National Federation of Afro-American Women and chose Margaret Murray Washington to be president. The following year, at a meeting in Washington, DC, the Federation merged with the National League of Colored Women, headed by Mary Church Terrell, to form the National Association of Colored Women. Terrell was chosen to be president.
5. Philip S. Foner and Robert James Branham addressed the controversy about the various accounts of the speech: “The four extant contemporary transcriptions of Truth’s speech differ substantially from Gage’s text; none of the four, most notably, includes the famous phrase ‘Ar’n’t I a Woman?’ (changed to ‘A’n’t’ by [Elizabeth Cady] Stanton) by which the speech has come to be known, although all contain similar sentiments, and Truth may have used the phrase in reference to the familiar abolitionist slogan, ‘Am I not a woman and a sister?’” (1998, p. 227).
6. Brittney Cooper, Susana Morris, and Robin Boylorn (2017) define crunk: “A Southern hip hop term originally used beginning in the 1990s by Lil Jon and the East Side Boyz. Refers to excitability, hyperness, and high energy. Some argue that the word is a mash-up of ‘crazy’ and ‘drunk.’ It also refers to the high energy of cranking something up” (p. 325).
7. Brittney Cooper, Susana Morris, and Robin Boylorn (2017) define ratchet(ness): “Refers to a Southern working-class mode of both play and resistance that is unconcerned with social propriety, often engages in profane social behaviors (like overtly sexual dancing or unapologetic use of profanity), and adamantly refuses the aspiration to be respectable. The term in its current iteration was first used by Anthony Mandigo of Shreveport, Louisiana, in a 1999 song called “Do da Ratchet,” but has in the ensuing years been taken up as a class-inflected slang term characterizing behaviors that lack respectability or decorum” (p. 327).

5 Technology and African-American Rhetoric

In the allegorical novel *Invisible Man* (1952/1995), the unnamed narrator takes a job at Liberty Paints, where the best-selling product is Optic White, a brilliant shade of paint that is produced by stirring several drops of a black fluid into every can. Workers perform this task as the product is prepped for shipment. However, the key to the overall production of Optic White is the engineering skill of an elderly African-American, Lucius Brockway, a self-taught practitioner who expertly cooks raw materials in high-pressure tanks in the basement of one of the plant’s buildings. He is the indispensable “*machine inside the machine*” (p. 217). The narrator is tasked with assisting him, which includes the crucial task of monitoring the pressure gauges on the tanks. During an altercation between the narrator and Brockway, which erupted because the hidebound Brockway suspects the narrator of associating with unionists and threatens his life, they ignore the gauges. At least one of the tanks explodes, and the narrator is badly injured. After a stay in the factory hospital, where he is subjected to shock therapy and cannot recall his identity, the narrator eventually is released.

In these episodes, the author Ralph Ellison artfully speaks to the fact that African-American experiences have always been technologized. After all, 100 million New World Africans did not *swim* across the Atlantic Ocean. And the most dramatic increase in the slave population in the United States was spurred by the invention of the cotton gin.¹ It is not surprising, then, that Ellison explores the idea that White supremacy is fundamentally related to technological control. Moreover, questioning and sometimes contesting technological control is essential to the evolution of Black consciousness, though the journey is never easy, as the narrator knows:

I fell to plotting ways of short-circuiting the machine. Perhaps if I shifted my body about so that the two nodes would come together—No, not only was there no room but it might electrocute me. I shuddered. Whoever else I was, I was no Samson. I had no desire to destroy myself even if it destroyed the machine; I wanted freedom, not destruction. It was exhausting, for no matter what scheme I conceived, there was one constant flaw—myself. There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than I could think