On African-American Rhetoric

On African-American Rhetoric traces the arc of strategic language use by African Americans from rhetorical forms such as slave narratives and the spirituals to Black digital expression and contemporary activism. The governing idea is to illustrate the basic call-response process of African-American culture and to demonstrate how this dynamic has been and continues to be central to the language used by African Americans to make collective cultural and political statements. Ranging across genres and disciplines, including rhetorical theory, poetry, fiction, folklore, speeches, music, film, pedagogy, and memes, Gilyard and Banks consider language developments that have occurred both inside and outside of organizations and institutions. Along with paying attention to recent events, this book incorporates discussion of important forerunners who have carried the rhetorical baton. These include Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Toni Cade Bambara, Molefi Asante, Alice Walker, and Geneva Smitherman. Written for students and professionals alike, this book is powerful and instructive regarding the long African-American quest for freedom and dignity.

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For the students, teachers, scholars, and everyday folk by whom the tradition lives
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We look at Miss Moore and she lookin at us, waiting for I dunno what” (92). Sylvia, the headstrong narrator of Toni Cade Bambara’s dexterous 1960s-era short story “The Lesson,” sums up a predicament at F.A.O. Schwarz, the high-end toy store in ritzy midtown Manhattan to which she and seven other Harlem children have been escorted on a summertime field trip by a benevolent neighbor. Amid the stunning show of privilege, dramatized most starkly by a toy sailboat in the display window bearing a price tag of $1,195, the children begin consciously to consider wealth disparity in the United States and how economic imbalance is mapped onto ethnicities. Contemplating the sailboat, Sylvia thinks, “For some reason this pisses me off” (92). It is at this point that she and the other children—her cousin Sugar, Flyboy, Fat Butt, Junebug, Q.T., Rosie Giraffe, and Mercedes—exchange looks with their guide, who nudges them into the store for further exploration. Once inside, the usually confident Sylvia becomes shy, experiences shame, and then becomes enraged. As Sugar runs a finger over the sailboat, Sylvia muses, “And I’m jealous and want to hit her. Maybe not her, but I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth” (94). Although she generally avoids conversing directly with Miss Moore, because she does not want to validate fully Moore’s educational project, she asks why she and the others had been brought to the store. Miss Moore declines to answer, replying instead, “You sound angry, Sylvia. Are you mad about something?” (94). Sylvia refuses to give the satisfaction of an answer, moping around the store instead until she convinces the other children to call a halt to the adventure.

On the subway ride back uptown, our protagonist ponders the lives of people who can afford the extravagance exhibited in midtown: “What kinda work they do and how they live and how come we ain’t in on it?” (94). She is mainly ignorant concerning the larger world but has become conscious that she needs to learn a lot more about how it operates. Most important, and this is the realization animating her by the end of the story, her crucial issue is to figure out how not to let that world suppress her and leave her behind.

Although Sylvia would have to wait years to be able to understand the matter in sophisticated terms, she and the other children are steeped in the discourse of a racist and capitalist system. In fact, most of Harlem is. This
system promotes economic winners and losers and ensures that Black people lose at a disproportionate rate. But the system does even more than this. It thrives on and supports language that makes all of the winning and losing seem normal and even fair. So the children supposedly are in their proper place as well as thinking and acting as waywardly and, ultimately, as subserviently as they should. Books convey the message of inferiority. Myths. Television. Movies. This language structures thought, and children can only transcend it through intervention. Indeed, the aptly named Miss Moore performs the necessary action. She brings more information. By gathering the children outside of school, outside of the official channels of communication, as well as outside of their comfortable spatial-linguistic environs, she provides generative contrast.

Moore/more information constitutes an epistemic break. For theorist and rhetorician Michel Foucault (1969/1972), epistemes were concepts that counted as legitimate knowledge, and they were circulated and reproduced by means of related and regulated discursive practices (pp. 191–2). Sylvia is governed by a discourse that spurs and justifies her ignorance, and, as such, she initially resists the interruption of Miss Moore, whom she quite unoriginally reduces to a “nappy-head bitch and her goddamn college degree” (“The Lesson,” p. 88). In her mind, she equates her would-be mentor to the annoying winos who piss up the parks and hallways of the neighborhood. Nonetheless, Miss Moore, aided by the guardians who entrust their children to her, begins to orchestrate the break. Her lectures have little effect, as Sylvia reveals at the outset of the trip: “So we heading down the street and she’s boring us silly about what things cost and what our parents make and how much goes for rent and how money ain’t divided up right in this country” (p. 89). She would rather think about meeting some cute boys. But Miss Moore, in the manner of the great educator Paulo Freire (1970), comprehends that the teacher-dominant, overly narrative approach is inefficient and relatively ineffective. The children need not another sermon from an adult. They need field experience. Sylvia, for example, whose name literally means “one who lives in the woods,” her forest being not so much Harlem but her state of mind, has to be led physically to greater awareness. The break will be complete when she and the other children merge more information with the felt sense of their excursion and exclusion as they fashion a counter narrative.

Back in the neighborhood at the mailbox (where messages are sent), which is the site from which the trip originated, we witness some of the results of Miss Moore’s efforts. The pressure gets to Sylvia during the debriefing; she “got a headache for thinkin so hard” (p. 95). To her disliking, her cousin is fully attentive, sounding like a little Miss Moore and offering the astute remarks, “I think that this is not much of a democracy if you ask me. Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal crack at the dough, don’t it?” (p. 95). Miss Moore then fixes her gaze on Sylvia, who feels that something “weird” is transpiring, palpable in her chest (p. 95). Still somewhat defiant, she will not contribute
when Miss Moore asks if anyone besides Sugar has learned anything that day. Instead she storms off and seeks solitude.

Understandings no longer align easily for Sylvia. Concepts do not match perceptions. Matters are incongruous, which, ironically, is the key to her development. According to Kenneth Burke (1984), perspective by incongruity occurs when “a word belongs by custom to a certain category—and by rational planning you wrench it loose and metaphorically apply it to a different category. . . . It is designed to ‘remoralize’ by accurately naming a situation already demoralized by inaccuracy” (pp. 308–9). Justice, for example, as Sylvia will come to know, cannot be attached to a system in which toy sailboats for some cost more than the combined monthly rent paid by the families of Ms. Moore’s charges. The word justice has to be detached from oppressive arrangements and, in Burke’s parlance, remoralized. The term cannot sanction capitalism, racism, and their manifestations. Nor can democracy, as Sugar knows. By extension, as Miss Moore has already discerned, an entire discourse of opportunity and uplift has to be remoralized if it is to serve the purpose of Black liberation. Alternative viewpoints are no guarantee that an exploitative social order will be replaced, but no such societal arrangement can, in fact, be achieved without alternative viewpoints. Sylvia ultimately promises to embody fresh perspectives as she sheds part of her old identity. Miss Moore, although surely cognizant of the psychic pain that could accompany Sylvia’s growth, does not want it any other way.

Moore/more information illustrates the fundamental nature of African-American rhetoric, which for present purposes is defined as the art of persuasion fused with African-American ways of knowing in attempts to achieve in public realms personhood, dignity, and respect, as scholar Deborah Atwater (2009) put it, for African-American people (p. 1). Of course, this definition is elastic but not exhaustive. No specific political perspective predominates, and much strategic verbal behavior occurs in private, interpersonal contexts and in broad displays of play and entertainment. But from old exhortations to New World Africans that, in essence, their lives were Black to recent declarations that Black lives matter, a major strand of African-American appeal has aimed to persuade American society to live up to its expressed ideals about equality and rights. Books, journals, audiovisual materials, and digital archives contain vast storehouses of essays, speeches, and artistic performances as well as related analyses. We no doubt are interested in all of these artifacts. Notwithstanding, our focused interest currently is on a sampling of how African-American rhetors have consciously employed African-American rhetoric as a critical method, in other words, how they have demonstrated meta-awareness that the tropes and texts emergent from African-American culture and integral to it comprise a usable code. However, by code we do not mean a body of rules established only by academic or scholarly theorists. As Jennifer Richards (2008) notes, “we might also describe as ‘rhetorical’ those writings which are not informed by formal training in rhetoric, but which engage their readers in a process of deliberation on different sides” (14). Conceived this way,
African-American rhetoric is as much about trading in story as it is about the application of schemata.

In 1926, in the decade before Bambara’s birth, W.E.B. Du Bois opined famously in “Criteria of Negro Art” that, “despite the wailing of purists,” he rejected the notion of art-for-art’s sake and considered all art to be politically instrumental (p. 296.) He added, “I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (p. 296). Bambara, who would co-author a script for a documentary about Du Bois, fulfills his prescription in “The Lesson,” a story instructive for her ideal audience. As are the characters in the story, we readers are asked to consider which discourses are hegemonic and why. Moreover, Bambara pushes us to contest some of those discourses as she did as an author and activist, and she points to Black possibility. The story reveals the essential beauty of the “black as hell” Miss Moore (p. 87). It shows that African-American youth in urban communities are reachable and teachable if there is collective will to do so and we consider them to be valuable members of the community. The children’s parents, although they talk behind Miss Moore’s back “like a dog,” contribute mightily (pp. 87–8). They not only make the kids presentable, they in fact present them to Miss Moore. The implied question is whether there will always be enough Miss Moores available to receive them.

Du Bois had hinted at this problem in “Of the Coming of John,” the only fiction selection in The Souls of Black Folk (1903/1994). The character John Jones, forerunner to both Sylvia and Miss Moore, experiences an epiphany on completing his education at Wells Institute:

He looked now for the first time sharply about him, and wondered he had seen so little before. He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh. He felt angry now when men did not call him “Mister,” he clenched his hands at the “Jim Crow” cars and chafed at the color-line that hemmed in him and his. A tinge of sarcasm crept into his speech, and a vague bitterness into his life; and he sat long hours wondering and planning a way around these crooked things. (pp. 144–5)

After graduation, John eventually returns after an absence of seven years to the segregated town of Altamaha, Georgia, where he resolves to impact the community by teaching at the Negro school. To undertake this task he must seek the permission of town patriarch Judge Henderson, who has no use for liberal ideas when it comes to African Americans. As Henderson interrogates, “Now, John, the question is, are you, with your education and Northern notions, going to accept the situation and teach the darkies to be faithful servants and laborers
as your fathers were” (p. 150). The judge informs John that he knew his father, who had belonged to the judge’s brother and was a “good Nigger” (p. 150). Then he rephrases and presses home the central question: “Well, are you going to be like him, or are you going to try to put fool ideas of rising and equality into these folks’ heads, and make them discontented and unhappy?” (p. 150).

John agrees to accept the status quo but cannot abide by the decision because the epistemic break that he has experienced at Wells Institute has been too profound. His cold seriousness has replaced the jovial demeanor of years past, and he hardly fits in among the African Americans of Altamaha. Yet he fully accepts the consequences of his education, as he conveys to his sister Jennie:

"John," she said, “does it make every one—unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?"

He paused and smiled. “I’m afraid it does,” he said.

“And, John, are you glad you studied?”

“Yes,” came the answer, slowly but positively.

(p. 149)

John shares with his students some of the lessons that he has learned, including ideas about social equality and matters such as the French Revolution. Later, after complaints by the some of the town’s White citizens that John failed to conform to expectations, Henderson closes the school. John’s life immediately takes a disastrous turn when, defending his sister from being sexually assaulted, he kills Henderson’s son and is hunted in return. He becomes a tragic torch-bearer in the struggle to combat ignorance and maintain dignity.

John is resurrected in Bambara’s hands. Moreover, she not only created Miss Moore in art, she publicly embraced the role of artist as instructor. For example, before lectures and readings, Bambara often used her dialogue “The Golden Bandit,” a revision of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” to remind people to scrutinize official versions and authorized tales (“Golden Bandit,” 1995, p. 207). The narrator and interlocutors conclude their exchange about that “burglar-chile-vandal-thief,” who will not confess to her exploits or take responsibility for them, choosing instead to frame the bears:

Did she elicit the help of her parents, presumably grown-ups, presumably grown and capable of analyzing the normative values of their tribe/community/household that have given rise to the sociopathic behavior of their little warped offspring—in short, Good People, did this retrograde little heifer seize the time and engage in principled self-criticism?

None of that, naw.

She said some bears were chasing her.

A liar on top of everything else.
Introduction

Well, err, rahhh, I heard tell that this little yellow-haired gal was a childhood hero of yours.

No way. Puhleeze. I'll admit it, but I was young and foolish at the time.

Well, then, do you think it is hip, healthy, or wise to inflict little children with the official version of the golden bandit before we have assumed the necessary task of encouraging and equipping the young in a critical habit?

No, no, no.

A critical habit is crucial, wouldn't you say, afflicted as we are every day with err, rahhh . . .


Are you saying, Good People, that an official text is often a context?

Got that right.

That's exactly what the three convicted bears and their lawyer claimed on appeal. The end.

(pp. 209–10)

And with her narrator's summation, Bambara cemented her legacy as an important figure, as is Du Bois, in African-American rhetoric studies.

On African-American Rhetoric continues to trace the arc of strategic language use by African Americans as incorporated in rhetorical forms such as slave narratives, the spirituals, poetry, fiction, folklore, speeches, music, film, and memes. A principal idea is to illustrate the basic call-response process (Du Bois-Bambara) of African-American communities and to demonstrate how this dynamic has been and continues to be central to the language used by African Americans to make individual and collective statements about politics and culture. This book is not a definitive presentation; the field is too large and varied to accomplish that in one project. No volume could fully account for the range of aims, audiences, arguments, appeals, and aesthetics that we find in even a single day of Black rhetorical production, especially in this era of information overload. Any study could only itself be a call that hopes for response. So, as indicated, we have collected representative anecdotes and texts to describe the critical and methodical nature of the African-American rhetorical tradition—rhetorical because it is a body of work that in its self-reflection stresses the various sides of issues and a tradition because it is held together even in all of its variety by particular textual maneuvers.

Amiri Baraka’s notion of the “changing same” is instructive. He coined the term in 1966 to name the dialectic between jazz and racist oppression, observing that the music evolved stylistically while always managing to challenge shifting forms of domination (1966/1991, pp. 203–9). Or as Erik Mortenson (2010) explains,
What changes is both the means by which oppression does its work as well as the form of the response that African American music takes to address that oppression. What remains the same is both the continual assault on African American freedom in the form of racism as well as the consistent attitude of rebellion in the face of such assault.

(p. 68)

Baraka’s “changing same” keeps us attuned to history and to social context. For example, Black Twitter demonstrates a “changing same” in African-American rhetoric: built on modes of discourse and persuasive strategies rooted in African-American oral traditions and yet constantly shifting more quickly than software and updated passwords. It operates within fissures of history, ideas, and technologies, and it creates further ruptures or breaks.

But first a closer look at those roots. Chapter 2 highlights some of the major achievements of African-American rhetors over the course of American history, including the creation of the slave narrative, the verbal constitution of a group known as “African Americans,” and the formation of a musical tradition rooted in the spirituals and the blues. All of these rhetorical forms remain stirring articulations of Black yearnings and eloquent arguments for Black humanity. Individuals discussed include Olaudah Equiano, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Malcolm X. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that African Americans on the whole always have understood rhetorical and/or literate practices to be competitive arenas and have relished the opportunities to participate in them. Not much time in the tradition has been spent in contemplative angst about philosophy-rhetoric splits of the kind indicated by Plato in Gorgias (c. 387 BCE)—the philosopher seeking Truth and the rhetorician seeking to win an argument at any cost (p. 247). Nor have African-American scholars seriously questioned the value of rhetoric. They have not been bogged down in questions of whether rhetoric is merely spin or specious talk or an art or indeterminate linguistic practice or a repressive system or even dead (as in eclipsed by scientific reasoning). The focus has been on the quest for freedom and on those who have struggled for freedom—as well as sought “small t” truths—with the tool of rhetoric.

Chapter 3 addresses the major pendulum swing of African-American rhetoric. Harold Cruse noted in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual that African Americans have always oscillated between the integrationist strain and the separatist strain, a tension that some refer to as the push-pull dynamic of African-American culture ((1967/1984, pp. 4–6). The most celebrated rhetorical expression of the integrationist strain has been through the African-American jeremiad, whose celebrated practitioners have included David Walker, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Michelle Alexander. Notable separatist arguments have been made by Du Bois (because the oscillation is very real), Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, and Malcolm X. Using as a starting point Sutton Griggs’s Imperio in Imperium