

Introduction

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BACKGROUND: UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN AMERICAN RHETORIC IN THE FIELD OF COMMUNICATION

The study of African American rhetoric as orature has been a significant advance in the field of communication, though relatively few scholars of African American rhetoric in speech communication have integrated African American rhetorical theories and methods to encase discussions of this culturally unique set of rhetorical experiences. Instead, a large number of African American rhetorical studies, textbooks, and monographs tend to offer engaging intellectual treatments of African American rhetoric within the limited purview of public address. Although several of these volumes are exciting to read, they contribute to a narrow understanding of African American rhetorical traditions laced in everyday discourse and leave the less knowledgeable reader with the impression that European and European American culturally generic paradigms are fully sufficient tools for examining culturally specific phenomena and artifacts. There is clearly a place for dramatistic, narrative, neo-Aristotelian, and postmodern rhetorical approaches, among other such paradigms. Alongside these proven methods, there must also be intellectual spaces for culture-centered rhetorical critics and criticism. This book claims one such space for African American rhetoric.

Daniel (1995) explains that in the late 1960s, the National Communication Association (formerly Speech Association of America) convened an "Open Meeting on Social Relevance," out of which emerged a heightened consciousness among some White scholars of the need for African American intellectual and political participation in the discipline. Even after this genesis, there were persistent verbal harassment and death threats from those who would rather espouse the White racial separatism so characteristic of the 1960s than embrace the possibilities of a diversified intellectual front. Despite this, scholars such as Charles Hurst, Molefi Asante, Jack Daniel, Dorthy Pennington, Lucia Hawthorne, and Lyndrey Niles began to conceptualize the Black Rhetoric Institute, an entity that would be dedicated to rhetorical inquiry by, for, and about Black people throughout the diaspora. Although

their mission was intentionally exclusionary for political reasons, Daniel (1995) explains, it quickly became apparent that the study of Black rhetoric needed to extend beyond the proposed institute. The scholar-teachers of the institute would need to teach Black rhetoric to Whites who attended their respective universities and also would need to influence how scholars studied Black discourse throughout the profession. Consequently, African-derived concepts such as *nommo* (the generative power of the spoken word) were introduced to make sense of Black orature. Daniel (1995, 12) asserts, "Instead of analyzing Malcolm X's discourse with modifications of Aristotle's categories, we proposed to teach African American graduate students the role of 'nommo' in Malcolm X's discourse." The Black Rhetoric Institute was underfunded and understaffed; therefore, it never became a reality. Soon after, the Black Caucus became a unit of what was then called the Speech Association of America and is now named the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association Black Caucus still remains today.

Fortunately, almost all of the founders of the Black Caucus are still very active with the unit itself and with the National Communication Association. We are even more fortunate to have essays by several of the founders and subsequent presidents of the Black Caucus in the present volume. This is significant, because this book seeks to facilitate the realization of a vision they set forth in the mid- to late twentieth century. In many ways, this book is a celebration of their early endeavors to institutionalize the study of African American rhetorical and communicative experiences. Although up until November 2001 there was still no journal in communication dedicated exclusively to culture and rhetorical research, there is now one forming that will accent critical studies of rhetoric; it will be the first of its kind in the field of communication. This important historical moment, at which point this culturally focused book emerges alongside the first issues of the nascent critical-cultural communication studies journal, is very important and only reinforces the timeliness of this volume. The writers of the insightful and refreshing essays you will read in *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations*, whether well known already or neophytes in their respective fields, are part of a growing contingent of scholars writing on the major themes of African American rhetoric: ethics, history, spirituality, language, politics, nationality, religion, gender, popular culture, law, and aesthetics.

PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

The title *Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations* purports to accent the retentive nature of this volume. African American rhetoric, by nature, is interdisciplinary. We acknowledge that speech communication has no monopoly over the broad range of African American rhetorical studies, and this book does not pretend to survey the full range of African American rhetoric—only as it pertains to how African American rhetoric is conceptualized in communication studies. With this in mind, it must be noted here that there are several scholars outside of communication who are contributors to this volume. Sociolinguists, African American and Africana studies scholars, and English studies scholars provide us with a grounding in African American rhetorical history, ethics, literature, and other interdisciplinary perspectives. Their role is very significant, since African American rhetoric, no matter the disciplinary angle, still inherits conceptual and

methodological imports from several disciplines. For us, this is necessary, not problematic, because it defuses the presumption of linearity so common in extant rhetorical studies in communication. It is important to note that, given the limited scope of this volume, we define African American rhetoric as it relates to Black African descendants and their experiences in the United States of America. In other words, this book does not specifically address or offer any scholarly treatment of the rhetorical legacies of African descendants living in Central or South America or Canada, though we recommend that future book-length scholarly manuscripts fill this void with an equally rigorous set of analyses.

By exploring ancestral and rhetorical, discursive and linguistic continuities and traditions present in African American orature, several of the contributing authors here facilitate the reconnaissance of ancient African rhetorical perspectives. Although it is not the intent of this book to present a full discussion of Ebonics or African American language issues, several of these issues are discussed within the realm of rhetorical studies. That is, since rhetorical studies in the communicological tradition refer to the conceptual and analytic dimensions of oratorical character, verbal *and* nonverbal features, and ultimate delivery of the spoken word, it is necessarily distinct from, and yet adjacent to, linguistics. Several authors of essays account for that adjacency in this volume without portending an exhaustive analysis of language studies pertaining to African Americans. Meanwhile, other authors introduce, develop, or expound upon contemporary innovations that shape the study of African American rhetoric.

In many ways, it is unfortunate that a volume of this nature is just now appearing; however, it is also timely, especially since most contemporary scholars seem prepared to agree that rhetoric coincides with the existence and civilization of a people and is a primary vehicle of communicating culture, meaning, and traditions. If that is an agreeable point of entry into our discussion of rhetoric, then as Cheikh Anta Diop (1974) and others remind us, we must examine discursive activity during the origins of humankind in order to gain access to truly classical rhetorical systems. Diop and others (Asante, in this volume; Karenga, in this volume; Williams 1987) have explained that rhetoric must be at least 6,500 years old, since the estimated birth of human civilization has been dated at 4500 B.C. With this in mind, the Greek and Roman classic rhetorical paradigms can no longer occupy a restrictive space of anteriority, since there are clearly civilizations, cultures, and traditions that existed before the Greeks and Romans. As Asante (1999, 84) has persistently argued in an effort to clarify the objectives of Afrocentricity and to assuage the fears of Greek classicists:

It is not true that Afrocentrists have replaced White Greeks with Black Egyptians; we do not mind everyone standing in his or her own ground. The Greeks can remain firmly in control of whatever cultural legacy they bring to the world. We simply believe that is important to demonstrate that ancient Egyptians must be seen in the correct light. . . . Historical correctness is better than political posturing.

African American rhetoric, along with its ancestral traditions, has been dislodged from our purview of what rhetoric is and how it gets defined. Hence, it is fortunate that there is at least this formal attempt to rescue African American orature from its arrested agency, from its seeming inability to be studied alone as a legitimate line of inquiry independent of classical Greek philosophy.

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FURTHER EXPLORATION OF THE "CLASSICS"

According to James (1992), Diop (1974), and Williams (1987), Greek philosophy, which dominates the intellectual landscape in classical rhetorical studies, began around 640 B.C. with the Persian conquests. In fact, there is only one "classical rhetoric" that is ever mentioned, and it refers to Greek and Roman traditions. Naturally, if the genealogy of classical rhetoric begins in 640 B.C.E. and human civilization began in 4500 B.C.E., almost four thousand years of rhetorical innovations have gone largely unexplored by present-day rhetorical scholars. It is impossible for any one book to promise a complete compilation of analytic works that systematically survey and examine all of the rhetorical innovations within that four-thousand-year interval. Within this edited volume, we seek only to introduce and demonstrate definitions, paradigms, and analyses of African American rhetoric. Although many of the contributors in this book use Africological and Afrocentric ideas to frame their arguments, each of the chapters represents a commitment to and is exemplary of historical retentions and/or contemporary innovations in the study of African American rhetoric.

Africology refers to the systematized study of the African continent, with its multiple civilizations, traditions, ideals, and contributions to humanity. Afrocentricity can be defined as a cosmological, axiological, aesthetic, ideological, or generally philosophical orientation toward the world (Asante and Abarry 1996; Jackson, 1995). When rhetorically examining phenomena via Afrocentric lenses, one approaches and apprehends the critical object by encasing one's analysis from the standpoint of African ancestral traditions, mores, and ideals in an effort to ascertain the possibilities of human potential and liberation. Each essay in this volume seeks to demonstrate the presence and utility of epistemes indicative of African-derived African American orature, and to that end many of the contributors can be said to have, if not an Afrocentric orientation, a liberation-centered one. The fact that many of the essays here are Afrocentric is testament to the significance of Afrocentricity as a conceptual and methodological tool; it also indicates a collective thirst for new paradigms to encapsulate a diversified set of rhetorical and discursive experiences too frequently ignored or misunderstood.

Jack Daniel's classic *Changing the Players and the Game* chronicles the development of the National Communication Association's Black Caucus, and in doing so, it also maps the genesis of African American communication scholarship. Although there are those who would like to believe that African American communicology, and more specifically African American rhetoric, began in the 1960s, several studies have proven otherwise (Asante 1996, 1998; Hamlet 1998; Niles 1995). Clearly, the composite body of scholarship often referred to as African American rhetoric is a derivative of ancestral oral traditions, discursive practices, and cultural nuances. Just as it is critical to contextualize the twentieth-century revision of Aristotelian canons by revisiting the original text and context of Greece from 366 B.C. to 322 B.C., it is also necessary to contextualize contemporary paradigmatic revisions of African oratorical traditions found within African American rhetoric by revisiting ancient African sources and concepts such as the Egyptian texts of Ptah Hotep and the Dogon concepts of nommo and magara.

THE LAYOUT

Understanding African American Rhetoric: Classical Origins to Contemporary Innovations is organized, as the subtitle suggests, so that the reader acquires a grasp of the breadth and scope of African American rhetoric. There is a conceptual and coherent logic to this arrangement. It is our belief as co-editors of this volume that any book entitled *Understanding African American Rhetoric* must systematically examine the historical origins, daily manifestations, definitions, intellectual politics, critical analyses, trends, and innovations as well as future directions of African American rhetorical inquiry. Moreover, a volume of this nature must feature some of the most brilliant intellectuals who, in their establishment of heuristic ideas concerning African American rhetoric, succumb neither to tactical relativism nor to uninformed skepticism; instead, they must be courageous and visionary, steadfast and critical, progressive and humanistic. That is the volume you hold in your hands, and the contributing authors have assisted in bringing it to fruition. From the beginning chapters discussing classical origins of Egyptian rhetoric to the final remarks from Molefi Asante and Dorothy Pennington on the future of rhetoric, the scholarship here represents much of the subdisciplinary pulse of African American rhetorical inquiry.

There are six sections in this book: "Classical Egyptian Origins of African American Rhetoric," "Manifestations of African American Rhetoric and Orality," "Politics of Defining African American Rhetoric," "African American Rhetorical Analyses of Struggle and Resistance," "Trends and Innovations in Analyzing Contemporary African American Rhetoric," and "Visions for Research in African American Rhetoric."

Section One offers a historical context for the grounding of rhetorical investigations. This section has two essays, authored by Maulana Karenga and Adisa A. Alkebulan. Karenga returns skillfully to Egyptian texts and autobiographies to introduce classical Egyptian foundations of rhetoric, which accent ethics as the means through which we acquire a fundamental understanding of the power of the spoken word. Alkebulan continues the conversation on ethics as one of seven virtues of Maat, which means truth, balance, justice, and right thinking. He also assembles the ideas concerning *nommo* and Maat in a cohesive framework that engages the relationship between language, rhetoric, and spirituality.

Section Two combines rhetoric and orality in an attempt to highlight the underlying commonalities and subtle distinctions between the two. Thurmon Garner and Carolyn Calloway Thomas offer a nice segue into this section of the book by tending to the nuances between rhetoric, which is traditionally understood in speech communication as the art of persuasion, and orality, which is immersed in the culturally based oral features of language and tropes of discourse. Melbourne S. Cummings and Judi Moore Latta follow up on this idea and demonstrate how rhetoric and orality are manifested in a church context. Finally, Deborah F. Atwater and Sandra L. Herndon conclude the section with a discussion of how cultural museums are rhetorical artifacts that stimulate public and collective memory.

Section Three is concerned with the politics and definitions of African American rhetoric. This is not to be mistaken for a set of essays that timidly approach the study

of African American rhetoric in order to appease some political agency such as the field of communication. Instead, the three authors in this section explore the parameters of African American rhetorical inquiry and note points of caution, for example, where scholars are not sure whether to characterize African American rhetoric as canonical, cosmological, and/or perspectival. Likewise, many scholars are unsure how to avoid being called essentialist as they attempt to discuss African American experiences. In this section, Richard Wright, Mark L. McPhail, and Ronald L. Jackson II offer definitions and direction for the novice reader and scholar of African American rhetoric with these issues in mind. Richard Wright begins this section with a remarkable exploration of the philosophical machinery that transforms, influences, and epistemically undergirds the spoken word. Through revisitation of several noteworthy essays and texts in African American rhetoric, Mark Lawrence McPhail contends that the discipline of rhetoric must prepare itself for the embrace of multiple and ideologically distinct African American rhetorical approaches. Ronald L. Jackson II's essay concludes this section and tends to the disciplinary pulse and paradigmatic tensions in defining African American rhetoric from an Afrocentric orientation while acknowledging that Afrocentricity has challenged the insular nature of rhetorical studies.

Section Four includes essays that analyze the rhetoric of African American struggle and resistance. Jeffrey Lynn Woodyard begins this section and seems to have heeded the call of the Black Rhetoric Institute. His essay is exactly what the institute had in mind, as previously noted—a discussion of *nommo* as the generative power of the spoken word in the context of Malcolm X's inspirational discourse of liberation. Ella Forbes follows Woodyard's essay with a riveting survey of resistance struggles for justice and equality from the nineteenth century to the present. Felicia M. Miyakawa continues this discussion by examining Black nationalistic messages of Five Percent rappers. Finally, Carlos D. Morrison offers a detailed analysis of the elegies of slain rapper Tupac Shakur in order to reveal a consistent theme of death and dying. His analysis demonstrates how resistance and resilience have become major themes in rap and hip-hop music.

Section Five introduces some of the cutting-edge trends and innovations in African American rhetorical inquiry from popular culture to Black hair to legal rhetoric and then the rhetoric of a mayor who is also a minister. This section transitions nicely from the last section as Celnisha L. Dangerfield discusses womanist themes in Lauryn Hill's award-winning album *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Her essay is followed by Regina E. Spellers' innovative exploration of Black women's hair as a rhetorical artifact. She examines Black women's discourse and attributed meanings concerning hair. Felicia R. Walker offers yet another innovation by conducting an Afrocentric analysis of Johnnie Cochran's closing arguments in the O.J. Simpson trial. Shauntae Brown-White's Afrocentric study also accomplishes something unique, as she critically analyzes the rhetoric of preacher and politician Emanuel Cleaver II. She closely examines his shifts in discourse and rhetorical style from the podium to the pulpit.

Section Six is the final section of the book and features two important essays that address future directions of African American rhetoric. Molefi K. Asante offers an insightful discussion of human and intellectual liberation. By exploring African American women archetypes, Dorothy Pennington thoroughly explains several everyday

epistemological facets of African American women's discourse and explores the intersections of that discourse and spirituality. Moreover, Pennington cogently articulates the significance of a richly diverse set of liberating and practical rhetorical experiences among African American women and also a need to access the power to define the range of perspectives, themes, and ideas that constitute the composite we have identified as African American rhetoric.

The ideological fragmentation that plagues the field of communication works to forcefully expunge non-European rhetorical traditions. This book is a recovery initiative; it is a comprehensive effort to reintroduce African American culture and humanity as manifested in African American rhetorical experiences. The challenge, since the 1960s, has been to offer such a volume in speech communication and have all of those who study African American rhetoric embrace it. We are confident that the intellectual legacies, traditions, and innovations we present here will be an important academic and practical resource that will contribute to our collective understanding of African American rhetoric for years to come.

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